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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BERT WILSON IN THE ROCKIES ***

BERT WILSON IN THE ROCKIES

BY J. W. DUFFIELD

AUTHOR OF "BERT WILSON AT THE WHEEL," "WIRELESS OPERATOR," "FADEAWAY BALL,"
"MARATHON WINNER," "AT PANAMA."

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BERT WILSON IN THE ROCKIES

CHAPTER I

A DESPERATE ENCOUNTER

A shower of glass from the shattered windowpane fell over the floor and seats, and a bullet embedded itself in the woodwork of an upper berth. There was a shriek from the women passengers in the crowded Pullman, and the men looked at each other in consternation. From the platform came the sound of a scuffle, interspersed with oaths. Then, through the narrow corridor that bordered the smoking-room, hurried two men, pushing the terrified negro porter ahead of them. Each of the intruders wore a black cloth tied over the lower part of his face, and before the bewildered passengers knew what had happened they found themselves looking along the blue-black barrels of two ugly revolvers.

It was a startling break in an uneventful day. For several hours the Overland Limited had hummed along over the boundless prairies that stretched away on either side with scarcely a break to the horizon. They had time to make up, and on these open spaces the engineer had let it out to the limit. So swiftly and smoothly had it sped along that the "click, click" as it struck each separate rail had merged into one droning "song of the road."

There had been no rain for a week past, and the dust lay thick on the grass and cactus. The motion of the train drew it up in clouds that made it impossible to keep the windows raised, and the sun, beating down pitilessly from a brazen sky, added to the general discomfort. Cooling drinks were at a premium, and the porters were kept busy making trips to the buffet car, from which they returned with tinkling glasses and cooling ices. Collars wilted and conversation languished. Women glanced listlessly over the pages of the magazines. Men drew their traveling caps over their eyes and settled down for a doze. Here and there a commercial traveler jotted down some item or wondered how far he dared to "pad" his expense account so that it would "get by" the lynx-eyed head of the firm. In the smoking-room a languid game of cards was being played, in an effort to beguile the tedious monotony of the trip. Over all there brooded a spirit of somnolence and relaxation.

If there was life to be discerned anywhere, it was in a group of three young fellows seated near the middle of the car. They would have drawn more than a passing glance wherever seen. Tall, well set up, muscular, they served as splendid types of young American manhood. None of them were over twenty, and their lean, bronzed faces, as well as the lithe alertness of their movements, spoke of a life spent largely in the open. They were brimming with life and high spirits. Exuberant vitality shone through their eyes and betrayed itself in every gesture. That they were friends of long standing was evident from the utter absence of ceremony and the free and easy comradeship with which they chaffed each other.

From the beginning of the trip they had been full of fun and merriment. Their college year had just closed, and they were like frolicsome colts turned out to pasture. There was hardly an incident of the journey that did not furnish to their keen, unjaded senses something of interest and amusement. Their cup of life was full and they drained it in great draughts.

But just now even their effervescence was calmed somewhat by the heat and spirit of drowsiness that hovered over the car.

"Gee," yawned the youngest of the three, stretching out lazily. "Isn't it nearly twelve o'clock? I wonder when that dusky gentleman will come along with the call to dinner."

"Always hungry," laughed one of the others. "The rest of us eat to live, but Tom lives to eat."

"You've struck it there, Dick," assented the third. "You know they say that no one has ever been able to eat a quail a day for thirty days hand running, but I'd be willing to back Tom to do it."

"Well, I wouldn't quail at the prospect," began Tom complacently, and then ducked as Dick made a pass at him.

"Even at that, I haven't got anything on you fellows," he went on, in an aggrieved tone. "When you disciples of 'plain living and high thinking' get at the dinner table, I notice that it soon becomes a case of high living and plain thinking."

"Such low-brow insinuations deserve no answer," said Dick severely. "Anyway," consulting his watch, "it's only half-past eleven, so you'll have to curb the promptings of your grosser nature."

"No later than that?" groaned Tom. "I don't know when a morning has seemed so long in passing."

"It *is* a little slow. I suppose it's this blistering heat and the long distance between stations. It's about time something happened to break the monotony."

"Don't raise false hopes, Bert," said Tom, cynically. "Nothing ever happens nowadays."

"Oh, I don't know," laughed Bert. "How about the Mexican bandits and the Chinese pirates? Something certainly happened when we ran up against those rascals."

"They were lively scraps, all right," admitted Tom, "but we had to go out of the country to get them. In the little old United States, we've got too much civilization. Everything is cut and dried and pared and polished, until there are no rough edges left. Think of the fellows that made this

trip across the continent sixty years ago in their prairie schooners, getting cross-eyed from looking for buffalo with one eye and Indians with the other, feeling their scalp every five minutes to make sure they still had it. That was life."

"Or death," put in Dick skeptically.

"Then look at us," went on Tom, not deigning to notice the interruption, "rolling along smoothly at fifty miles an hour in a car that's like a palace, with its cushioned seats and electric lights and library and bath and soft beds and rich food and servants to wait upon us. We're pampered children of luxury, all right, but I'm willing to bet that those 'horny-handed sons of toil' had it on us when it came to the real joy of living."

"Tom was born too late?" chaffed Bert. "He doesn't really belong in the twentieth century. He ought to have lived in the time of Ivanhoe, or Young Lochinvar, or the Three Musketeers, or Robin Hood. I can see him bending a bow in Nottingham Forest or breaking a lance in a tournament or storming a fortress by day, and at night twanging a guitar beneath a castle window or writing a sonnet to his lady's eyebrow."

"Well, anyhow," defended Tom, "those fellows of the olden time had good red blood in their veins."

"Yes," assented Dick drily, "but it didn't stay there long. There were too many sword points ready to let it out."

And yet, despite their good-natured "joshing" of Tom, they, quite as much as he, were eager for excitement and adventure. In the fullest sense they were "birds of a feather." In earlier and ruder days they would have been soldiers of fortune, cutting their ways through unknown forests, facing without flinching savage beasts and equally savage men, looking ever for new worlds to conquer. Even in these "piping days of peace" that they so much deplored, they had shown an almost uncanny ability to get into scrapes of various kinds, from which sometimes they had narrowly escaped with a whole skin. Again and again their courage had been severely tried, and had stood the test. At home and abroad, on land and sea, they had come face to face with danger and death. But the fortune that "favors the brave" had not deserted them, even in moments of deadliest peril. They were accustomed to refer to themselves laughingly as "lucky," but those who knew them best preferred to call them plucky. A stout heart and a quick wit had "many a time and oft" extricated them from positions where luck alone would have failed them.

And most of their adventures had been shared in company. The tie of friendship that bound them together as closely as brothers was of long standing. Beginning at a summer camp, five years earlier, where chance had thrown them together, it had grown increasingly stronger with every year that passed. A subtle free masonry had from the start made each recognize the others as kindred spirits. Since this first meeting their paths had seldom diverged. Together they had gone to college, where their athletic prowess had put them in the first rank in sports and made them popular among their comrades. On the baseball diamond they had played their positions in brilliant fashion, and on the football gridiron they had added to their laurels. When Bert had been chosen to go to the Olympic games abroad, his "pals" had gone with him and exulted in his glorious victory, when, in the Marathon race, he had beaten the crack runners of the world. Nor were they to be denied, when his duty as wireless operator had carried him over the Pacific to meet with thrilling experiences among the yellow men of Asia. In every time of storm and stress they had stood with him shoulder to shoulder, and faced life and death with eyes wide open and unafraid. They were worthy lieutenants of a brave and intrepid leader.

For, that he was their leader, they themselves would have been the first to admit, although he would have modestly disclaimed it. He never asserted leadership, but it sought him out of its own accord. He had the instinct, the initiative, the quick decision, the magnetic personality that marks the born captain. It was not merely that he was endowed with strength of muscle and fleetness of foot and power of endurance that placed him in a class by himself. He might have had all these, and still been only a superb specimen of the "human animal." But, above and controlling these qualities, was the indomitable will, the unflinching courage, the gallant audacity that made him the idol of his comrades.

The college year just ended had been a notable one, marked by victories on track and field. Together with the high rank he had reached and held in his studies, with which, unlike many athletes, he never allowed sport to interfere, it had taxed him heavily in mind and body. And it was with unfeigned delight that he now looked forward to a long season of recreation and adventure on the ranch in Montana, toward which he and his friends were speeding.

Mr. Melton, the owner of the ranch, was a Western cattleman of the old type, now rapidly disappearing. Bluff, rough and ready, generous and courageous, his sterling qualities had won the admiration and affection of the boys from the date of their first meeting the year before.

That meeting had taken place under extraordinary circumstances. The "Three Guardsmen"—so called in joke, because they were always together—journeying to the opening of the Panama Canal had found themselves on the same train with Melton, as it wound its way through Central Mexico. A broken trestle had made it necessary for the train to halt for an hour or two, and during this enforced stop Dick had carelessly wandered away on a stroll through the woods, tempted by the beauty of the day and the novelty of his surroundings. At a turn in the road he had suddenly found himself in the presence of twenty or more guerillas, headed by the notorious El Tigre, whose name was spoken with a shudder throughout Mexico. They had bound him and

carried him off to their mountain retreat. Bert and Tom, an hour later, discovered the cause of his absence and immediately started in pursuit, determined to save their comrade or die with him. But first they had disclosed the situation to Melton, who had sworn in his rage to follow after them and aid them in the rescue. How faithfully he had kept his word, how skillfully and daringly he had led them on and rushed the camp just as Dick was steeling himself to undergo the rattlesnake torture that the bandit chief had planned for him, was engraven indelibly on the memories of the boys. Until the day of their death they could never forget how the old war horse, with everything to lose and nothing to gain, had come to their assistance simply because they were Americans and in dire need of help.

And on Melton's part the feeling was equally warm. He had taken an instantaneous liking to these young countrymen of his who had played their part so gallantly. They recalled to him the days of his own stormy youth, when he had ridden the range and when his life had depended on his iron nerve and his quickness with the trigger. Though older than they by forty years, they were all cut on the same pattern of sturdy, self-reliant American manhood, and it was with the utmost cordiality that he had crushed their hands in his strong grip and urged them to visit him at his ranch in the Rockies. Since then he had been East on a business trip and had been present on that memorable day when Bert, with the ball tucked under his arm, had torn down the field in the great race for the goal that won the game in the last minute of play. Then he had renewed the invitation with redoubled earnestness, and promised them the time of their lives. They needed no urging to do a thing that accorded so well with their own inclinations, and from that time on until the opening of the summer had shaped everything with that end in view. Now they were actually launched upon their journey. That it held for them a new and delightful experience they did not doubt. How much of danger and excitement and hairbreadth escape it also held, they did not even dream.

"Bully old boy, Melton," commented Tom, playing lazily with a heavy paperweight he had bought at a curio shop at their last stopping place.

"A diamond in the rough," assented Dick.

"All wool and a yard wide," declared Bert, emphatically. "I wonder if he—Great Scott, what's that?" as a bullet whizzed through the window of the Pullman.

The question was quickly answered when their eyes fell on the robbers, who, with leveled pistols, dominated the car. And the threat of the weapons themselves was not more sinister than the purpose that glinted in the ferocious eyes above the improvised masks. There was no mere bluff and bluster in that steady gaze. They were ready to shoot and shoot to kill. Their lives were already forfeit to the law, anyway, and in that rough country they would get "a short shrift and a long rope" if their plans went astray. They might as well be hung for murder as robbery, and, while they did not mean to kill unless driven to it, they were perfectly ready to do so at the first hint of resistance.

The paralyzing moment of surprise passed, there was a stir among the passengers. The first instinct was to hide their valuables or drop them on the floor. But this was checked instantly by the outlaws.

"Hands up," shouted one of them with an oath. "I'll kill the first man that makes a move."

His pistol ranged over the car, flickering like the tongue of a snake, seeming to cover every passenger at once. Beneath its deadly insistence, hands were upraised one after the other. Resistance at that moment meant instant death. The unwritten law of the West had to be obeyed. He "had the drop" on them.

The leader grinned malignantly and spoke to his companion, without for an instant turning his gaze.

"Now, Bill," he growled, "I've got these mavericks covered. Pass round the hat. These gents—and ladies," he leered—"will hand over their coin and jewelry, and God help the one who tries to renig. He won't never need money no more."

Taking his old sombrero from his head, the one addressed as Bill started in to collect from the front of the car.

"Only one hand down at a time to get your money," shouted his companion. "And mind," he added ominously, "I'm watchin' that hand."

Pocket books and rings and watches dropped into the hat. Women were sobbing hysterically and men were cursing under their breath.

"Stung," groaned Tom disgustedly.

"And our pistols in our bags," growled Dick.

Bert's mind had been working like lightning. He was always at his best when danger threatened. Now his body grew taut and his eyes gleamed.

"Be ready, you fellows," he said in low tones, scarcely moving his lips. "Dick, back me up when I make a move. Tom, got that paperweight handy?"

"Right alongside on the window ledge," muttered Tom.

Still keeping his eyes in an innocent stare on the outlaw captain, Bert murmured a few words. They caught his meaning on the instant and were ready.

The man with the hat was getting nearer. There had been no sign of resistance and the leader relaxed his caution ever so slightly. This was easier than they had dared to hope.

The sombrero was sagging now with the unwilling wealth poured into it, and the collector, relying on the vigilance of his companion, was compelled to use both hands to keep the contents from spilling on the floor.

He held it out in front of Bert and Dick.

"Your turn now," he snarled. "Fork over."

They lowered their hands as though to get out their money. Then something happened.

Like a flash, Dick grabbed the pistol hand of the collector, while Bert's fist shot up in a tremendous smashing uppercut. The man staggered back, and Bert and Dick were on him like a pair of wildcats.

At the same instant, with all the power of his trained baseball arm, Tom had hurled the heavy paperweight straight at the outlaw captain. It caught him full between the eyes. His pistol fell from his hand, going off as it did so, and he crumpled up and went down to the floor in a heap.

It was all over in a second. The whole thing had been so perfectly timed, brain and hand had worked in such absolute unison that disaster had come on the outlaws like a bolt from the blue. It was "team work" of the finest kind.

The first surprise over, the other men in the car came crowding to the assistance of the chief actors in the scrimmage. But the danger was past. The leader was unconscious, and the other, badly beaten and cursing horribly, was helpless in the grasp of the victors. Train men, rushing in, took charge of the prisoners and trussed them up securely.

A posse was hastily organized among the passengers and, heavily armed, swarmed from the train in quest of the two remaining members of the band, who had been left to guard the engineer and fireman. The miscreants saw them coming, however, and realized that the game was up. They emptied their pistols and then flung themselves upon their horses and galloped off, secure for the time from further pursuit.

The conductor, still pale and shaken from excitement, gave the signal. There was a scramble to get aboard, the whistle tooted and the train once more got under way.

In the Pullman there was a wild turmoil, as the relieved passengers crowded around the boys and wrung their hands in congratulation. They couldn't say enough in praise of the courage and presence of mind that had turned the tables so swiftly and gallantly. The spoils were retrieved and distributed among the rightful owners, and then, with a bow of mock politeness, the old sombrero, empty now, was clapped on the head of the baffled collector, who received it with a new string of blasphemies.

By this time the victim of Tom's unerring aim had gradually struggled back to consciousness. His arms and feet had been securely tied and his remaining revolver had been taken from his belt. Of a stronger mold than his accomplice, he disdained to vent his rage in useless imprecations and relapsed into silence as stoical as an Indian's. But, if looks could kill, the boys would have been blasted by the brooding hate that shot from under his jutting brows.

"I'm glad it didn't kill him, anyway," said Tom, as, after the tumult had somewhat subsided, they once more were seated and the train was flying along at full speed.

"It's a wonder it didn't," responded Dick. "It was a fearful crack."

"Tom hasn't forgotten the way he used to shoot them down from third base to first," laughed Bert. "That right wing of his is certainly a dandy."

"It's lucky it is," said the conductor, who had just returned from giving directions concerning the prisoners; "and talking about wings," he added, turning to Bert, "there's no discount on yours. That fist hit like a sledgehammer. The way you fellows piled into him was a crime. I never saw a prettier bit of rough house."

"But the beauty of it all," he went on, "was the way you worked together. If any one of you hadn't 'come through' at the same second, the jig would have been up. Who figured it out?"

"Here's the slow thinker that did it," said Dick, clapping Bert on the shoulder.

"That's the bonehead, sure enough," echoed Tom.

"Oh, come off," growled Bert, flushing a little and fidgeting uneasily in his seat. "There was a whole lot of luck about it, anyway. If we hadn't had the paperweight, all the thinking in the world wouldn't have done us a bit of good."

"If you hadn't had the thinking, all the paperweights in the world wouldn't have done us a bit of good," corrected Tom.

"Well, there's glory enough for all," smiled the conductor. "The main point is that you fellows

have put me and the company under a load of gratitude and obligation that we can never repay. Call it quick thinking, quick acting, or both—you turned the trick."

"It had to be a case of 'the quick or the dead,'" grinned Tom.

"Sure thing," assented the conductor. "You were the quick and those two rascals are the dead. Or will be before long," he added grimly. "I'll turn them over to the sheriff at the next station. There's a hand bill in the baggage car describing a band of outlaws that the authorities of three States have been after for a long time for robbery and murder, and two of the descriptions fit these fellows to a dot. There's a price on their heads, dead or alive, and I guess they've reached the end of their rope in more senses than one."

He passed on and the boys relaxed in their seats. They were still under the nervous strain of the stirring scene in which they had been the chief actors. Tom's breath was coming fast and his eyes were shining.

Bert looked at him for a moment and then nudged Dick.

"Didn't I hear some one say a little while ago," he asked slyly, "that in this little old United States there was too much civilization?"

"Yes," replied Dick, still quoting, "nothing ever happens nowadays."

CHAPTER II

THE RANCH IN THE ROCKIES

With a great roar and rattle and clangor of bells, the train drew up at the little station where the boys were to descend. Their long rail journey of nearly three thousand miles was over, but they still had a forty-mile drive before they would reach the ranch.

For a half hour previous they had been gathering their traps together and saying good-by to their friends on the train. These last included all of the travelers, who, since the capture of the robbers, had insisted on making heroes of the boys. In vain they had protested that the thanks were out of all proportion to the service rendered. The passengers themselves knew better. And it was amid a chorus of the friendliest farewells and good wishes that they had stepped to the rude platform of the station.

"Not much of a metropolis about this," said Tom as they looked around.

"Hardly," agreed Dick. "The principal thing here is space. You can cross the street without the help of a traffic cop."

"And only one street to cross, at that," added Bert.

It was the typical small town of the Western plains. The one crooked street parallel with the track stretched on either side of the station for perhaps half a mile, lined with houses at irregular intervals. There was no pretence of a sidewalk and even fences were conspicuous by their absence. The business part of the town consisted of a general store that served also as a post office, a blacksmith shop and three saloons, to one of which a dance hall was attached. Business seemed brisk in these, judging from the many mustangs that were tied to rails outside, patiently waiting for their masters who were "tanking up" within and accumulating their daily quota of "nose paint." A Mexican in a tattered serape was sitting on the steps of the store rolling a cigarette, while an Indian, huddled in a greasy blanket and evidently much the worse for fire water, sat crouched against the shack that served as baggage-room at the left end of the station.

Down the platform came hustling a big burly form that they recognized in an instant.

"Mr. Melton," they cried in chorus as they rushed with extended hands to meet him.

"Sure thing," he responded, his face beaming with delight at their hearty greeting. "Did you think I'd send one of my men to meet you? Not on your life. Nothing less than a broken leg would have kept me from coming to give you the first welcome to old Montana. Came down yesterday so that the horses could have a good rest before starting back again. Come right along now and tumble into the buckboard. One of my men will look after your duds and bring them along later."

All talking at once, they came to the farther end of the platform, where a big mountain wagon was waiting. It was drawn by a pair of wiry mustangs that champed impatiently at the bit.

"Not very pretty to look at," said Melton, "but they're holy terrors when it comes to traveling. Jump in."

They all piled in and Melton gathered up the reins. He chirped to the horses and they started off at a rate that justified all he had said as to their speed. But he held them in check and subdued them to a trot that, while moderate in appearance, ate up the miles amazingly.

"Pure grit and iron, those little sinners," he commented. "But they've got a long way to go, and we're sure even at this rate to get home in plenty of time for supper. Now, tell me all about

yourselves."

Which they proceeded to do in detail, not neglecting the attempted hold-up on the train. He listened with the keenest interest.

"So you got the best of 'Red' Thompson and 'Shag' Leary," he exclaimed in astonishment. "The toughest nuts we've had to crack in this section for years. A good many people will breathe easier now that they're trapped. They're 'bad men' through and through, and if their pistol butts had a notch on them for every man they've killed, they'd look like saws. And with nothing but a paperweight and bare fists," he chuckled. "They sure must feel sore. What was done with them?"

"Oh, the conductor handed them over to the sheriff at one of the stations," answered Bert. "I suppose they'll be tried before long."

"Maybe," said Melton a little dubiously. "My own private hunch, though, is that Judge Lynch will invite them to a little necktie party. They've lived a heap sight too long already, and there won't be much formality wasted on them."

"You boys sure have the nerve," he went on. "You got away with it all right, but you took an awful chance."

"Yes," quoted Dick:

'An inch to the left or an inch to the right,
And we wouldn't be maundering here to-night.'"

"Those born to be hung will never be shot," laughed Tom. "I guess that explains our escape so far."

"It beats the Dutch the faculty you fellows have of getting into scrapes and out again," commented Melton. "I believe you'd smell a scrap a mile away. You'd rather fight than eat."

"You won't think so when you see what we'll do to that supper of yours to-night," retorted Tom. "Gee, but this air does give you an appetite."

"The one thing above all others that Tom doesn't need," chaffed Dick. "But he's right, just the same. The way I feel I could make a wolf look like thirty cents."

"You can't scare me with that kind of talk," challenged Melton. "Let out your belts to the last notch and I'll guarantee they'll be tight when you get up from the table."

"That listens good," said Tom. "I'm perfectly willing you should call my bluff."

With jest and laughter the afternoon wore on and the shadows cast by the declining sun began to lengthen. After their long confinement on the train, the boys felt as though they had been released from prison. They had been so accustomed to a free, unfettered life that they had chafed at the three days' detention, where the only chance they had to stretch their limbs had been afforded by the few minutes wait at stations. Now they enjoyed to the full the sense of release that came to them in their new surroundings. The West, as seen from a car window, was a vastly different thing when viewed from the seat of a buckboard going at a spanking gait over the limitless plains.

For that they were limitless was the impression conveyed by the unbroken skyline that seemed to be a thousand miles away. Only in the northwest did mountains loom. They had never before had such an impression of the immensity of space. It seemed as though the whole expanse had been created for them, and them alone. For many miles they saw no human figure except that of a solitary cowboy, who passed them at a gallop on his way to the town. The country was slightly rolling and richly grassed, affording pasturage for thousands of cattle that roamed over it at will, almost as free as though in a wild state, except at the time of the round-up. They crossed numerous small rivers, none so deep that they could not be forded, although in one case the water flowed over the body of the wagon.

"That's the Little Big Horn River," said Melton as they drew out on the other side. "Perhaps you fellows remember something that happened here a good many years ago."

"What," cried Bert. "You don't mean the Custer Massacre?"

"That's what," returned Melton. "Right over there where the river bends was the place where Sitting Bull was encamped when Custer led the charge on that June morning. I've got to breathe the horses for twenty minutes or so, and, if you like, we'll look over the field."

If they would like! The boys thrilled at the thought. They had read again and again of that gallant and hopeless fight, where a thousand American cavalymen led by Custer, the idol of the army, had attacked nine thousand Indians, and fighting against these fearful odds had been wiped out to the last man. In all the nation's history no one, except perhaps Phil Sheridan and Stonewall Jackson, had so appealed to the imagination of the country's youth as Custer, the reckless, yellow-haired leader in a hundred fights, the hero of Cedar Creek and Waynesboro and Five Forks, the Chevalier Bayard of modern times, "without fear and without reproach," who met his death at last as he would have wished to meet it, in that mad glorious dash that has made his name immortal, going down as he had lived with his face to the foe. To these ardent young patriots the place was holy ground, and their pulses leaped and their hearts swelled as Melton

pointed out the features of the field and narrated some of the incidents of that awful, but magnificent, fight. It was with intense reluctance that, warned by the gathering shadows, they tore themselves away.

"Can't wait any longer now," said Melton as they retraced their steps to the place where the horses were browsing; "but some day soon we'll come down here early and spend the whole day. It won't be any too long to get a clear idea of the fight and all that led up to it."

The mustangs, refreshed by the rest, and feeling too that they were on the last stretch of their journey, needed no urging, and Melton gave them their head.

"Must be pretty near your place now, I suppose," said Tom.

"Well, yes," answered Melton, with a twinkle in his eyes; "been traveling on my lands for the last eight miles. House not more than five miles ahead."

The boys gasped. It was something new to them to hear one speak as carelessly of miles as a farmer back East would speak of acres. Now they were getting some idea of what was meant when one spoke of the "boundless West."

"Got to have room to stretch my arms without hitting anything," went on Melton. "Of course, I don't use much of it for farming. Just raise enough to take care of the table and the stock. But for grazing there ain't any better pasture for cattle in the whole State of Montana."

"Then all the cattle we've seen grazing by thousands for the last few miles belong to you?" asked Dick, as soon as he had recovered from his surprise.

"Sure thing," returned their host, "and they're only a few of them. It would take a cowboy the better part of a day to start at one end of the ranch and circle around it. And there's plenty of ranches in the State bigger than mine."

Now the going was steadily uphill and the horses subsided to a walk. They were in the foothills of the Rockies. In the gathering dusk they could see ahead of them the mighty peaks in the background rising to a height of many thousand feet. Higher and higher they went, until they were as much as six hundred feet above sea level. If they had had no other proof they would have found it in the increasing rarity of the air and the slightly greater difficulty in breathing.

"You'll soon get used to that," said Melton. "After a day or two you won't notice any difference. I could of course have built on a lower level, and in some ways that would have been an advantage. But when I settled here I made up my mind that I wanted air that was washed clean by the mountain breezes, and I planted my stakes according."

Soon they reached a broad, level plateau, and, a little way off, could see the lights coming from a low-lying group of buildings. Several dogs came rushing down with barks of welcome, and a couple of men lounging near one of the corrals removed the bars of a huge gate, from which the path led up to the largest of the buildings. It was a rambling structure only two stories in height, but covering a vast extent of ground and suggestive of homely comfort and hospitality. A broad veranda extended along three sides of the house, and in front a well-kept flower garden bordered the path that led to the door.

As they approached, heralded by the noisy greeting of the dogs, the door was thrown wide open and Mrs. Melton appeared in the flood of light that streamed from within.

She was a pleasant-faced, motherly-looking woman, and she welcomed the boys with open arms. There was no mistaking the warmth and sincerity of her greeting. They felt at home at once and in a few minutes were chatting and laughing as easily as though they had known her for years. Perhaps the memory of her own two boys, dead long since, but who would have been just about the age of the newcomers had they lived, added to the hearty cordiality with which she took them under her wing.

"We oughtn't to need any introduction at all," she beamed, "because Mr. Melton has done nothing but talk about you ever since he came back from that last trip to Mexico. I wouldn't dare to tell you all he said, for fear of making you conceited. I really think the last trip he made East was more to see you than anything else. He said he was going on business, but I have my own opinion about that."

"Well, if it hadn't been for him we wouldn't have been there to see," said Bert warmly. "The vultures would have had us long ago, if he hadn't risked his own life to help us out of trouble."

"Nothing at all, nothing at all," deprecated Melton. "You gave me a chance for a lovely scrap, just when I was beginning to wonder whether I'd forgotten how to fight. I've felt ten years younger ever since."

"You don't need to get any younger," retorted his wife in affectionate reproach. "You're just as much of a boy as you ever were. I declare," she laughed, turning to her guests; "I ought to call him Peter Pan. He'll never grow up."

"Well, he's a pretty husky youngster," grinned Tom, looking admiringly at his host's two hundred and forty pounds of bone and muscle.

But now Mrs. Melton's housewifely instincts asserted themselves, and she shooed the boys off to their rooms to rid themselves of the dust of the journey, while she bustled round to get supper on

the table.

A few minutes later and they were gathered at supper in the brightly-lighted, well-furnished dining-room of the ranch. It was a jolly party, where every one radiated happiness and good nature. There was not a particle of stiffness or pretence in that wholesome environment. The delight of their hosts in having them there found an echo in the hearts of the boys, and they were soon on as genial and friendly a footing as though they had known them all their lives.

And that supper! To the hungry boys, with their naturally keen appetites still further sharpened by the long ride, it seemed a feast fit for the Gods. The table fairly groaned beneath the weight of good things placed upon it. Crisp trout freshly taken from the mountain brook, a delicious roast flanked by snowy mounds of potatoes and vegetables just plucked from the garden patch, luscious berries warm with the sun, deluged with rich cream, and pastries "such as mother used to make" offered a challenge to the boys that they gleefully accepted. They ate like famished wolves, while Mrs. Melton bridled with pride at the tribute paid to her cooking; and, when at last they had fairly cleared the board, they sat back with a sigh of content at duty well performed.

"How about those belts?" laughed Melton, as he lighted his pipe.

"Tight as a drum," Tom answered for all. "You called my bluff, all right."

"Sallie certainly knows how to cook," said Mr. Melton, patting his wife's hand.

"You mustn't give me all the credit," smiled Mrs. Melton, smoothing out her apron. "That Chinese cook you brought back with you the last time you went to Helena is certainly a treasure. I don't know how I'd get along now without him."

"That reminds me," said Melton, with a quick glance at his wife. "Just send him in here for a minute, will you?"

She went into the kitchen and a moment later returned, followed by a Chinaman, who shuffled along in his heelless slippers.

The boys glanced at him indifferently for a moment. Then a startled recognition leaped into their eyes.

"Wah Lee," they cried in chorus, jumping to their feet.

"That same old yellow sinner," confirmed Melton complacently.

The Chinaman himself was shocked for a moment out of his Oriental stolidity. A delighted smile spread over his face and he broke into an excited jargon of "pidgin English," of which the refrain was:

"Velly glad slee. Wah Lee velly glad slee."

Then in a burst of grateful memory he threw himself to the floor and tried to put their feet upon his head, as a token that he was their slave for life. But they jerked him upright in a torrent of eager questioning.

"You old rascal."

"How did you ever get here?"

"I thought you were back in China by this time."

But Wah Lee's smile was more expansive than his vocabulary was extensive.

"Him tell," he said, pointing to Mr. Melton.

"I thought it would be a surprise party," that worthy chuckled as he refilled his pipe. "So I didn't tell you anything about it nor did I tell the Chink that you were coming. It was a surprise, all right," and he chuckled again.

"It won't take very long to explain," he went on when his pipe was drawing well. "You remember that after you got back from your trip to the Canal you gave him money enough to go West and start a little laundry business wherever he might choose to settle down. It seems he drifted out to Helena, where there's quite a colony of Chinks, and started in to wash and iron. As nearly as I can understand his gibberish, he was doing pretty well, too, until he got mixed up in one of those secret society feuds that play hob among those fellows. It seems that he belonged to the On Leong clan and the Hip Son Tong got after him. They sent on to 'Frisco for some highbinders—those professional killers, you know—and Wah Lee got wind of the fact that he was one of the victims marked for slaughter. Naturally, he was in a fearful stew about it, and just when things were at their worst I happened to be in Helena on business and ran across him. Of course, I'd never have known him, for all Chinks look alike to me, but he recognized me in a minute and begged me by all his gods to help him out. He knew it wouldn't do any good to go from one city to another, because they'd get him sure, and his only chance was to be smuggled off into some country place where they might lose track of him. It seemed rather hard lines for the old fellow, and though I didn't care much to mix up in the rescue stunt, I didn't have the heart to turn him down. So he sold out his shop to one of his own society, and I brought him out at night. I didn't know just what I'd do with him, but it turns out that he is a dandy cook, and Mrs. Melton insists that my running across him was a rare streak of luck."

"It certainly was for him, anyway," said Bert. "I'd hate to have anything happen to the old boy. He had a pretty rough deal in Mexico."

"He did, for a fact," agreed Melton reminiscently, "and he hasn't gotten over it yet. A little while ago one of my men brought in a snake that he had killed on his way back from town. The boys were looking at it when the Chink happened to come along, and one of them, in a joke, threw it at him. You never saw a fellow so scared. I thought for a minute he was going to throw a fit."

"I don't wonder," said Dick soberly.

For he, as well as Wah Lee, would never look upon one of those hideous reptiles without a shudder. As clearly as though it were yesterday, he saw again that morning in the Mexican hills, when, tied to a tree, he had looked upon the monster rattlesnake that was to torture him, and prayed that he might have courage to die without disgracing his manhood. Wah Lee, his companion in captivity, had been brought out first, thrown flat on the ground and fastened securely to stakes. Just out of reach, a rattlesnake, with a buckskin thong passed through its tail, was tied to a stake. Tortured by rage and pain, the reptile struck at the Chinaman's face, but couldn't quite make the distance. Then water was poured on the thong and it began to stretch. With each spring the awful fangs came nearer, and it was only a question of minutes before they would be embedded in the victim's flesh. Then, from the woods, Melton's bowie knife had whizzed, slicing the snake's head from his body, and the next instant in a rain of bullets the rescuing party had burst into the clearing.

Later on, they had found Wah Lee on their hands, and at his earnest entreaties had taken him with them to Panama. There he had found employment in the house of a wealthy Japanese landholder, and by the merest chance had been able to convey to Bert a hint of the conspiracy to destroy the Canal. The plot had been frustrated by Bert's daring exploit, and on the return of the party to America Wah Lee had again accompanied them. When they had provided for him and sent him West they never thought that again their paths would cross. Yet here he was, as bland and smiling as ever, on this remote ranch in the Rocky Mountains. The world was only a small place, after all.

For a long time after he had trotted away again to his duties in the kitchen they sat discussing the exciting events that his reappearance had brought back to their minds. Then, at last, Melton arose and shook the ashes from his pipe.

"I reckon you youngsters are about ready to turn in," he said. "You've had a long ride and it's getting pretty late. We'll have plenty of time to chin before the summer's over. For I give you fair warning," he added with his genial smile, "I've got you roped now and I ain't going to let you go in a hurry."

He took them up to their rooms, cool, spacious and provided with every comfort. There with a cordial good-night he left them.

Their windows faced toward the north and commanded a magnificent view of the mountains. Tall, solemn, majestic, they towered upward in wild and rugged beauty. The moon had risen and the distant peaks were flooded with light. It was a scene to delight the soul of an artist and the boys lingered under the spell.

"Just such a night as when we crouched in the shadow of that big rock in the Mexican forest," murmured Bert. "Do you remember, Tom?"

"Yes," answered Tom; "but I don't think the moon will ever again see us in such a desperate fix as we were in that night."

Which showed that Tom had not the gift of prophecy.

CHAPTER III

"BUSTING" A BRONCHO

The boys slept that night the dreamless sleep of wholesome fatigue and perfect health, and awoke the next morning as fresh as daisies. Life is astir early on a ranch, and the day's work had fairly begun when they came down to breakfast. The smell of hot coffee and frying bacon had whetted their appetites, and they needed no urging from their hosts to do full justice to the ample meal that awaited them. Then they hurried outdoors to make acquaintance with this new life that they had looked forward to so impatiently.

It was a glorious morning. There was not a cloud in the sky and a light breeze tempered the heat of the sun. At that high level it was seldom sultry, and the contrast to the heat of the sun-baked plains below was refreshing. It amply justified, in the boys' opinion, Mr. Melton's wisdom in the choice of this airy plateau as a location for his home.

The mountains hemmed them in on the north, but on the west and east and south stretched grassy plains and rolling slopes as far as the eye could reach. Great herds of cattle dotted the expanse, and here and there could be seen a mounted cowboy, winding in and out among the

stock. Dark lines at short intervals marked the course of artificial canals, that were fed by a series of pipes from brooks back in the mountains. There was an inexhaustible supply of sparkling water, and it was evident that the fortunate owner of this ranch was forever secure against drought—that scourge of the Western plains.

"It must have cost a mint of money to do all that piping and digging," suggested Bert as his eyes took in the vast extent of the operations.

"Yes, a good many thousands," assented his host, "but it pays to do things right. I've already got back a good many times over all that it cost. A single hot barren summer would destroy thousands of head of cattle, to say nothing of the suffering of the poor brutes. And those that didn't die would be so worn to skin and bone that they'd hardly pay the expense of shipping them to market. The only way to make money in ranching nowadays is to do things on a big scale and take advantage of all up-to-date ideas.

"A good many people," he went on, "have an idea that if a man has a good ranch and a few thousand head of stock he's found a short and easy way to riches. That doesn't follow at all. There are just as many chances, just as many ups and downs as in any other business. I know lots of men that once were prosperous ranchers who to-day are down and out, and that too through no fault of their own. Sometimes it's a disease that comes along and sweeps away half of your herd at a single stroke. The drought gets them in summer and a blizzard covers them up in winter. Then, too, there are the cattle rustlers that, in the course of a season, often get away with hundreds of them, change the brand and send them away to their confederates. Many of them are stung by rattlesnakes. The wolves, in a hard winter, pull down a lot of the cows, and sometimes, though not so often, the grizzlies get after them. Take all these things into account, figure up the payroll for the help, the freight charges on your shipments, and it's no wonder that many a man finds a balance on the wrong side of the ledger in lean seasons. No, it isn't all 'peaches and cream' in ranching."

"You spoke of grizzlies a minute ago," said Dick, whose sporting blood had tingled at mention of the name. "Are there many of those fellows around here?"

"Not so many as there used to be," replied Mr. Melton. "They're being pushed further and further north as the country gets more settled. Still there are enough around to make it advisable to keep your eye peeled for trouble whenever you get a little way further up in the mountains. Every once in a while we find the body of a steer partly eaten, and we can always tell when a grizzly has pulled it down."

"How's that?" asked Tom.

"By the way he covers it up," answered Melton. "He always heaps up a pile of brush or dried grass over the carcass. I reckon it's his sign manual to tell other animals who may be skulking around that it's his kill, and that there'll be trouble if any of them go monkeying around it. At any rate, they don't fool with it. They know he's king in these parts. Wherever the grizzly sits is the head of the table."

"Are they really as savage as they are cracked up to be?" asked Bert. "If so, it must be great sport hunting them."

"Are they savage?" echoed their host pityingly. "Say, son, there's nothing on four feet as full of hate and poison, unless perhaps a gorilla. And if it ever came to a tussle between them two, my money would go on the grizzly every time.

"As to it's being great sport hunting them, it's the grizzly that usually does the hunting. For myself, I haven't any ambition that way. I'm perfectly willing to give him his full half of the road whenever we meet. And we won't meet at all, if I see him first. I've had more than one tussle with an old silver-tip, and I've got a few hides up at the house to serve as reminders. But it's always been when it was more dangerous to run than it was to stay and fight it out. There ain't many things on four feet or two that I'd go far out of my way to keep from meeting, but when it comes to a grizzly I haven't any pride at all. There are less exciting forms of amusement. No, my boy, if you're thinking of tackling a grizzly, take a fool's advice and don't do it."

"But a bullet in the right place would stop them as surely as it would anything else, I should think," ventured Tom.

"That's just the point," said Melton. "It's mighty hard to put a bullet in the right place. If you're on horseback, your horse is so mortally scared at sight of the brute that he won't let you get a steady aim. There's nothing on earth that a mustang fears so much as a bear. And, if you're on foot, he moves so swiftly and dodges so cleverly, that it's hard to pick out the right spot to plunk him. And all the time, you know that, if you miss, it's probably all up with you. Even if you get him in the heart, his strength and vitality are such that he may get to you in time enough to take you along with him over the great divide. And it isn't a pleasant way of dying. He just hugs you up in those front paws of his, lifts up his hind paw with claws six inches long, and with one great sweep rips you to pieces. There's no need of a post-mortem to find out how a man has died when a grizzly has got through with him. I've come across such sights at times, and I didn't have any appetite for a day or two afterward.

"But there's no use warning you young rascals, I suppose," he grinned. "You're the kind that looks for trouble as naturally as a bee hunts for clover. I'll bet at this very minute you're honing to get

after a silver-tip. Own up, now, ain't you?"

The boys laughed and flushed a little self-consciously.

"Hardly that, perhaps," answered Bert. "But if you should happen by any chance to come across one, I wouldn't mind being along."

"Righto," said Dick emphatically.

"Same here," echoed Tom.

"Hopeless cases," said Mr. Melton quizzically, shaking his head. "I suppose there's no use arguing with you. I was that way once myself, but I've learned now to keep out of trouble as much as I can."

"Just as you did down in Mexico," suggested Dick slyly.

The boys roared and Melton looked a little sheepish.

"You scored on me that time," he laughed. "But come along now down to the bunk house and meet some of the boys. A good many are away riding herd, but the foreman is here and two or three of the others, and a lot more will come in when it's time for grub."

"How many men do you need to run the ranch?" asked Dick.

"Oh, about twenty, more or less," answered Melton. "In the busiest season I usually take on a few more to help out, especially when I'm getting ready to ship the stock."

"Pretty good set of fellows I have now," he went on as he led the way toward the men's quarters. "Not a trouble maker in the bunch, except a half breed that I'm not particularly stuck on, and that I'm going to get rid of as soon as work gets slack. But take them all together I haven't got any kick coming."

"Of course," he qualified as he stopped to light his pipe, "they ain't what you could call angels, by a long shot. If any one's looking for anything like that, they won't find it on a ranch. Some pretty rough specimens drift out here from the East, who perhaps have had reasons for making a quick getaway. But as long as a man does his work and does it right, we don't ask any more about their past than they care to tell. It ain't etiquette out here to do that, and then too it sometimes leads to a man getting shot full of holes if he's too curious. Their language isn't apt to be any too refined and their table manners leave a lot to be desired. When pay day comes, most of their money goes to the saloons and dance halls in the towns. They're usually a pretty moody and useless bunch for a day or two after that. But in the main they're brave and square and friendly, and they sure do work hard for their forty-five a month and found. And if you get into a scrap they're a mighty handy lot of fellows to have at your back."

By this time they had reached the bunk house. As its name implied, it served as sleeping quarters for the men. It was a long one-story building covering a large area of ground. All one end of it was partitioned off into bunks to the number of thirty or more. The other half was used as a dining and living room. A long table, spread with oilcloth, extended down the center, with a row of chairs on either side. The walls were decorated with gaudy lithographs, circus posters and colored sheets taken from the Sunday papers that occasionally drifted out that way. On a side table were a number of well-thumbed magazines that Mrs. Melton had sent down for the men to read in their rare moments of leisure. Saddles and harness and lariats were hung on nails driven into the logs. Everything was rude and simple, but scrupulously clean. The floor had been recently swept and the oilcloth on the table was shining.

In a little extension at the southern end of the shack the cook was clearing away the dishes from breakfast and making ready for the noon-day meal. A couple of great dogs basked in the sunshine that streamed through the open door. They jumped to their feet as their owner approached and capered about him joyously in a manner that bespoke their attachment.

A lank, muscular man at this moment came around a corner of the house. His face was tanned to the color of mahogany and around his eyes were the tiny wrinkles that come to men accustomed to peer into the wide spaces. He had on a pair of sheepskin trousers with the fleece still adhering, and his long legs had the slight crook that spoke of a life spent almost entirely in the saddle. A buckskin shirt, a handkerchief knotted loosely around his neck and a broad slouch hat with a rattlesnake skin encircling it for a band completed his costume. There was about him the air of a man accustomed to be obeyed, and yet there was no swagger or truculence in his bearing. His glance was singularly fearless and direct, and the boys warmed to him at first sight.

"Just the man I wanted to see, Sandy," said his employer. "I want you to meet these three young friends of mine."

As their names were spoken the boys stepped forward and shook hands heartily.

"Mr. Clinch is one of the best foremen that ever rode the range or roped a steer," went on Melton, "and what he don't know about a ranch isn't worth knowing. I've got to go up to the house now to look over some accounts and I'm going to leave you in his care. You remember, Sandy, that little scrap in Mexico I told you about? Well, these are the boys that stood at my back. They've got a knack for getting into a shindy on the slightest provocation and I look to you to keep them out of trouble. I warn you though that it is a man's job."

"I guess I'm up to it, boss," grinned Sandy. "There ain't much chance for trouble round here, anyhow. There may be a look in if those ornery rustlers don't quit fooling with our cattle. But just at this minute things is plumb peaceful. I'm going up to the corral where the wranglers are breaking in some of the young horses, and perhaps these young fellers would like to come along."

Nothing possibly could suit them better, and while Mr. Melton retraced his steps to the house they followed the foreman to the corral.

There everything was animation and apparent confusion. The clatter of hoofs, the swish of lariats, the shouts of the "wranglers" as they sought to bring their wayward charges under control, while a matter of everyday routine to the cowboys themselves were entirely new to the boys, who leaned against the log fence and watched the proceedings with breathless interest.

There were two corrals of almost equal size, each covering several acres of ground, and a broad gate connected the two. In one of them were forty or more young horses who up to now had been running wild on the range. They had never known the touch of a whip or a spur, nor felt the weight of a rider. The nearest approach to constraint they had ever experienced was that furnished by the encircling fence of the corral into which they had been driven yesterday. That this was irksome and even terrifying was evident by their dilated nostrils, their wild expression, and the way they pawed at the bars and at times measured the height of the fence, as though contemplating a leap over it into the wide spaces beyond. But their instinct told them that they could not make it, and they ran around restlessly or pawed the ground uneasily, waiting their turn to be roped and broken.

When the boys reached the outer fence, one of them had just been caught by a whirling lariat and dragged, stubbornly protesting, into the adjoining corral. Once there he made a wild dash to escape and lashed out fiercely with his heels at the men who held him. But with a skill born of long experience they eluded him, and one of them, watching his chance, suddenly leaped on his back. The men, on either side, relinquished their hold, and retreated to a safe position on the fence.

Then commenced the most exciting struggle for mastery between brute and man that the boys had ever seen.

For a moment the broncho stood stock still, paralyzed with surprise and fright. Then he gave a mighty leap into the air in a vain endeavor to unseat the rider. This failing, he snapped viciously at the horseman's leg, which was instantly thrown up out of reach. Then the maddened brute rushed against the bars of the corral in an effort to crush the rider. But again the uplifted leg foiled the maneuver, and the severe scraping that the horse himself received took away from him all desire of repeating that particular trick.

All this time the cowboy showed the most extreme nonchalance. If anything, he seemed rather bored. And yet, despite his apparent stolidity, the boys noticed that he watched his mount like a hawk and always discounted each trick a second in advance. It was a fight between brute strength and human intelligence and the struggle was unequal. Barring accidents the latter was bound to win.

Like a flash the horse changed his tactics and went to the ground, intending to roll over and crush his rider. The movement was almost too quick to be followed by the eye. But the man was off at a bound and, when the astonished broncho struggled to his feet, his tormentor had again sprung on his back and was lashing him with the end of the rope that served as a halter.

Then the pony tried his last resource. Springing into the air he came down with all four feet held closely together. It would have jarred a novice out of his seat at once. But the superb horsemanship of the man on his back absorbed the shock with his tightly gripped legs as he descended, and he settled into his seat with the lightness of a feather.

For half an hour the battle was prolonged, and, to the breathlessly watching boys, it seemed that the daring rider escaped death a dozen times almost by a miracle. All that they had ever seen in Wild West shows seemed pale and weak by comparison with this fight out in the open, where nothing was prearranged and where both parties to the combat were in deadly earnest. It was life "in the raw" and it stirred them to the depths.

And now the horse was "all in." His flanks heaved with his tremendous exertions, and he was dripping with sweat and foam. He had made a gallant fight, but the odds were against him. His ears were no longer flattened viciously against his head, but drooped forward piteously, and into his eyes came the look that spelled surrender. He had learned the hard and pathetic lesson of the brute creation, that man was the master. This strange being, who so easily defied his strength and thwarted his cunning, was stronger than he, and at last he knew it.

The rider, now that he had won, could afford to be kind. He patted his mount's head and spoke to him soothingly. Then he drove him without demur a few times more about the corral and dismounted. A stable attendant led the conquered brute to a stall, and the victor, breathing a little hard, but bearing no other traces of the struggle, repaired to the fence, squatted on the top rail and lighted a cigarette.

"That was horsemanship, all right," breathed Tom in admiration.

"You bet it was," said Dick. "If I'd been insuring that fellow's life I'd have wanted a premium of ninety-nine per cent."

"He earns his money," remarked Bert. "A man hasn't any chance to 'soldier' on a job like that."

Another cowboy took the place of the first one, and the scene was repeated, in each case with variations that kept the interest of the boys at fever heat. The time slipped by so rapidly that they were genuinely astonished when the blowing of a horn announced that it was time for dinner.

Sandy approached them as they were turning away reluctantly.

"I'd shore like to have you young fellers take dinner with us at the bunkhouse, if you care to," he said. "I'd like to have the boys get acquainted with yer. Maybe we won't have all the trimmin's that you'd get at the boss's table, but I guess we can manage to fill yer up."

"That's a pretty big contract, Sandy," laughed Bert; "but we'll be only too glad to come. Just let me speak to Mrs. Melton, so that she won't wait for us and we'll be with you in a jiffy."

Mrs. Melton smilingly acquiesced, and Melton himself, who knew how much of the boys' enjoyment of their visit would depend upon friendly relations with the men about the ranch, gave his hearty approval.

A dozen or more of the cowboys were at the house when they arrived, all ravenous for "grub." Outside of the door was a broad bench on which was a basin, which the men in turn replenished from a hogshead standing near, and in which they plunged their hands and faces, emerging dripping to dry themselves on a roller towel behind the door. The boys did the same, and as they came in were introduced by Sandy to the rest of the men. There was a breezy absence of formality that was most refreshing after the more or less artificial life of the East, and the boys warmed at once toward these hardy specimens of manhood, who looked them straight in the eyes and crushed their hands in their hearty grip. This wild, free spirit of the plains was akin to their own, and although their mode of life had been so different, a subtle free masonry told them that in substance they were members of the same brotherhood.

The cowboys also were "sizing up" the newcomers. Physically they had no criticism to make. These stalwart, athletic young fellows were splendid specimens, who looked as though they were fully capable of giving a good account of themselves in a tussle. Most of them had heard in a more or less fragmentary way about the adventure in Mexico, and Melton's unstinted praise of them had gone a long way in their favor. Still, that had been a scrap with "greasers," and the contemptuous attitude that most of them held toward the men south of the Rio Grande, led them to attach less value to the exploit. Then, too, when all was said and done, these visitors were "tender-feet," and as such would bear watching. So that, while perfectly free and friendly and admitting that they were a "likely bunch," they were inclined to reserve judgment, and observe them further, before admitting them fully into their fraternity.

The meal proceeded amid a clatter of dishes and a buzz of conversation, abounding in rough jests and repartee. The boys took their part in frank, good fellowship and were hearty in their praises of the hard riding they had seen that morning. The ranchmen deprecated this as only "part of the day's work," but were pleased none the less at the sincere appreciation.

The meal, although, as Sandy had hinted, wanting in "frills," was well cooked and abundant, and the food disappeared before those healthy appetites in a way that would have struck terror to the heart of a boarding-house keeper. Before it was quite over, a belated cowboy galloped in from town. He dismounted, threw his saddlebags on the bench, and, after sousing his heated face in the friendly basin, sat down to the table and proceeded to make amends for lost time.

"Bring a paper with you, Pete?" asked one of his friends as he pushed back his chair and lighted his pipe.

"Yes," answered Pete between mouthfuls. "Got a copy of the Helena 'Record.' You'll find it in the saddlebag."

The first speaker rose leisurely, hunted up the newspaper and seated himself on the step of the bunkhouse. He looked over it carelessly for a moment and then a headline caught his attention. He read on for a few lines and then called to his mates.

"Look here, fellows," he exclaimed. "I see that they've jugged 'Red' Thompson and 'Shag' Leary. Caught them trying to hold up a train."

There was a stir at this and they crowded round the speaker.

"Tell us about it," they begged excitedly, for all of them knew of the evil fame and numerous exploits of these celebrated ruffians.

"I knew the sheriff would bag them fellers before long," said one.

"Sheriff nuthin," snorted Pete disgustedly. "Them guys ain't good fur nuthin but to wear tin stars and put up a bluff. It was a bunch of tender-feet that nabbed 'em."

"Have a heart," said "Buck" Evans incredulously. "Don't fill us up with anything like that."

"Them newspaper fellers is awful liars," sagely commented "Chip" Bennett.

"But it gives the names," persisted Pete. "They wouldn't go as far as that if it wasn't so. Let's see," he went on as his stubbed finger moved slowly over the lines. "Here they are—Wilson, Trent, Henderson—say," he exclaimed with a quick look at the boys, "ain't them the handles you

fellers carries?"

All eyes were fixed in astonishment on the visitors, who blushed as though they had been detected in a fault. Their embarrassment carried conviction. The paper was thrown aside and the men gathered about them in a chorus of eager questionings. They made them tell in every detail the story of the fight, which the boys tried to minimize as much as possible.

"And yer never said a word about it," commented Pete when they had extracted the last scrap of information.

"Why should we?" retorted Dick. "As you said about the broncho busting, it was 'all in the day's work.'"

They tore themselves away at last, leaving the cowboys grouped about the door and looking after them with eyes from which the last vestige of distrust and reserve had vanished.

"Not a maverick in the bunch," commented Pete.

"Every one of them carries the man brand," added Chip.

"They shore can warm their beans at my fire," concluded Buck.

CHAPTER IV

A FOREST TERROR

"A dandy day for fishing," remarked Bert as he was dressing a few mornings later.

"Just right for the speckled beauties to bite," acquiesced Dick as he looked out of the window and saw the clouds that obscured the sun.

"What do you say to trying it?" suggested Tom, who was an enthusiast on the subject. "I'd like nothing better than to whip some of these mountain streams for trout."

"Or troll for pickerel in the lake Mr. Melton was telling us about," amended Bert. "He says there are some whopping big fellows up there. We'll find plenty of bass, too, and they're fighters from way back."

At breakfast the matter was broached and met with the hearty approval of Mr. Melton.

"I don't think it will rain before night," he said, "and on a hazy day like this they'll keep you busy pulling them in. How about tackle? Did you bring any along?"

"Plenty," answered Bert. "Each of us has a rod and reel. The pike and pickerel will bite at the spoon, and we can get plenty of bait for the bass right out here in the garden. Let's hurry up, fellows, and get busy," he continued, pushing his chair away from the table. "Won't you go along, Mr. Melton."

"Like to," said their host. "Nothing would suit me better than to pull in some of the sockdolagers you'll find in that lake. But I've got a date with a horse dealer to-day, who's coming up to look at some of my bronchos, and I can't get off. Don't catch them all to-day," he laughed, "and some day soon I'll go with you. Of course, you'll take your guns along."

"Why, yes, if you think it necessary," replied Bert. "But we'll be pretty well loaded with tackle and fish if we have any luck."

"Never mind the load," he adjured emphatically. "Never go into the mountains without your gun. Of course, you may have no use for it. Chances are that you won't. But it's a mighty wise thing to have a good rifle along wherever you go in this country. And if you need it at all, you'll need it mighty bad and mighty quick."

So that when the boys left the house a half hour later, they took with them not only all that was necessary to lure the finny prey from their lurking places, but each as well carried on his shoulder a Winchester repeating rifle and around his waist a well-stored cartridge belt.

Mr. Melton gave them explicit directions as to the route they were to follow to find the lake, which lay in the hollow of a broad plateau about five miles back in the mountains.

"You'll find a canoe hidden in the bushes near a big clump of trees on the east shore," he said. "That is, if nobody has swiped it. But I covered it up pretty well the last time I was there, and I guess it's safe enough. If not, you'll have to take your chance in fishing from the shore. There's an island a little way out in the lake, and you'll find the pike thick around there if you can get out to it. And don't wait too long before starting for home. That mountain trail is hard enough to follow in the daytime, but you'd find your work cut out for you if you tried it in the dark."

They promised not to forget the time in their enthusiasm for the sport, and, stowing away in their basket the toothsome and abundant lunch put up by Mrs. Melton, they started off gaily on their trip.

For a little distance from the house the road was fairly level. Then it began to ascend and soon the trees that clothed the slopes shut them in, and they lost sight of the ranch and of everything that spoke of civilization.

"This is the forest primeval," quoted Dick.

"The murmuring pines and the hemlocks," added Tom.

"Primeval's the word," said Bert as he looked in awe at the giant trees, towering in some instances to a height of two hundred feet. "I suppose this looked just as it does now ten thousand years ago. The only thing that suggests man is this trail we're following, and that gets fainter and fainter as we keep climbing. This is sure enough 'God's out-of-doors.'"

The balsam of the pines was in their nostrils and the path was carpeted by the fragrant needles. Squirrels chattered in the trees and chipmunks slipped like shadows between the trunks. As they were passing a monster oak, Bert's observant eye noted something that brought him to a sudden halt.

"Look there, fellows," and he pointed to a place on the bark about fifteen feet from the ground.

"Well, what about it?" demanded Tom.

"Those scratches on the trunk," said Bert. "What made them?"

They looked more closely and saw two rows of scratches that had torn deeply into the bark. Each row consisted of five marks at an equal distance apart. It was as though two gigantic rakes had been drawn along the rough surface, each tooth of the rakes peeling off a long vertical strip.

The boys looked at each other in wonder. Then they peered into the surrounding woods a little uneasily.

"Some animal made those marks," said Bert at last. "And, what's more, there's only one animal that could have done it."

"And that's a grizzly bear," said Dick.

Again the boys looked at each other, and it almost seemed as though they could hear the beating of their hearts. Then Tom measured again with his eye the distance from the ground to where the scratches began.

"Sixteen feet if it's an inch," he decided. "Nonsense," he went on, with a tone of relief in his voice. "There's nothing that walks on four feet could do it. A horse even couldn't stand on his hind legs and strike with his fore hoofs the place where those scratches begin. Some of those pre-historic monsters, whose skeletons we see in the museums, might have done it, but nothing that walks the earth nowadays. You'll have to guess again, Bert."

"They might have been made by some animal in climbing," suggested Dick. "He might have slipped in coming down and torn off those strips in trying to hold on."

"But grizzlies don't climb," objected Bert.

"Who said it was a grizzly?" retorted Tom. "It might have been a black or brown bear. You've got grizzlies on the brain. The very biggest don't measure more than nine or ten feet from the nose to the root of the tail. Allowing a couple of feet more for his reach, and you have eleven or twelve altogether. How do you account for the other four or five? Unless," he went on with elaborate sarcasm, "you figure out that this pet of yours is about fourteen feet long."

The argument certainly seemed to be with Tom, but Bert, although he had no answer to it, still felt unconvinced.

"The scratches are too deep to have been made by any animal slipping," he persisted. "The beast, whatever it was, had a tremendous purchase to dig so deep. And he couldn't have got such a purchase except by standing on his hind legs."

"Marvelous," mocked Tom. "A regular Sherlock Holmes! Perhaps he stood on a ladder or a chair. I've heard that grizzlies carry such things about with them when strolling in the woods. Come along, old man," he bantered, "or these squirrels will think you're a nut and carry you off. There's nothing this side of a nightmare that'll fit your theory, and you'd better give it up and come along with us sensible people."

"But what did do it, then?" asked Bert obstinately.

"Search me," answered Tom flippantly. "I don't have to know. I'm not cursed with curiosity so much as some people I could mention. What I do know is that we're losing time and that I'm fairly aching to bait my hook and fling it into the water. We've promised Mrs. Melton a big mess of fish for supper, and we've got to get busy, or she'll think we're a lot of four-flushers."

They picked up their traps that they had laid aside while they were studying the bark. Tom and Dick kept up a steady fire of jokes, their spirits lightened by the evidence that the "ghost" of the grizzly had been "laid." But Bert answered only in monosyllables. He would have been as relieved as they had he been able to convince himself that he was wrong. He "hadn't lost any bear," and was not particularly anxious to "meet up" with one, especially a monster of the size indicated. Suddenly he dropped the basket.

"I've got it," he exclaimed eagerly.

"No, you haven't," contradicted Dick. "You've just dropped it."

"What have you got?" mocked Tom. "A fit?"

"The answer," said Bert.

"Prove it," challenged Dick.

"I'm from Missouri," said Tom skeptically.

"Why, it's this way," hurried on Bert, too engrossed in his solution to retort in kind. "Sandy was telling me a little while ago about the habits of grizzlies, and he mentioned especially the trick they have of standing on their hind legs and clawing at trees as high as they could reach. But I remember he said they did this only in the spring. They've just come out of winter quarters and they feel the need of stretching their muscles that have got cramped during their long sleep. In the spring, the early spring. Don't you see?"

"Not exactly," confessed Dick.

"No, Sherlock," murmured Tom, "I don't follow you."

"Why," said Bert impatiently, "don't you boobs realize that up in the mountains here the snow is often four or five feet deep in the early spring? How could the grizzly reach that high? *Because he stood on a snowbank.*"

"By Jove," exclaimed Tom, all his self-assurance vanishing, "I believe you're right."

"You've hit the bull's-eye," cried Dick. "Bert, old man, you're a wonder."

"Of course," Bert went on, too generous to gloat over their discomfiture, "that only proves that he was here then. He may be a hundred miles off by this time. Still, it won't do a bit of harm to keep our eyes peeled and make sure that our guns are in good working order. He's probably got a perpetual grrouch, and he might be peevish if he should turn up and find us poaching on his hunting grounds."

They moved along, a little more soberly now, and their eyes narrowly scanned the trees ahead as though at any moment through the forest aisles they might discover a giant form lumbering down upon them. They did not think it at all likely, as there had been no rumors for some time past of a grizzly having been seen in the locality, nor had the mutilated body of some luckless steer borne traces of his handiwork. Still it was "better to be safe than sorry," and their vigilance did not relax until they came out of the thicker forest onto a more scantily wooded plateau and saw before them the shining waters of the lake that marked the goal of their journey.

Under the cloudy sky the waters had the steel-gray luster of quicksilver. It seemed to be about three miles in length, although this they could not clearly determine, owing to a curve at the upper end, which concealed its limits in that direction. It was not more than three-quarters of a mile wide, and the expanse was broken by a small wooded island about half way across. Nothing living was in sight, except a huge fish hawk that waited expectantly on a dead branch overhanging the water. Even while they looked, it darted downward, cleaving the air and water like an arrow, and reappeared a moment later with a large fish struggling in its jaws. Resuming its seat upon the branch it tossed the fish in the air, caught it cleverly as it came down, and swallowed it at a gulp.

"Talk about juggling," laughed Tom. "That fellow would make a hit upon the vaudeville stage."

"I'd like first rate to have him at the end of a cord," said Dick.

"Like those natives we saw in China, eh?" suggested Bert. "Do you remember how they used to fasten a ring about the throat so that they couldn't swallow them? It always seemed to me a low-down game to make them fork over as soon as they caught the fish."

"Well, at any rate, that fellow has shown us that there are fish to be had for the taking," said Tom. "I'll hunt up that canoe while you get the rods and reels ready. What are you going to try for first, pickerel or bass?"

"Suppose we take a hack at both," suggested Dick. "I'll get out the spoon bait and try for pike and pickerel. You and Bert can use the live bait and see what luck you have with the bass."

A careful search revealed the canoe, so cunningly hidden by its owner under a heap of brush and sedge-grass, that only the explicit directions they had received enabled them to find it. It was in good condition, about eighteen feet in length and two paddles lay in the bottom. Tom got in, pushed off from the shore, and with deft strokes brought the slender craft down to where his friends were waiting.

Bert eyed the frail boat dubiously.

"A canoe is a dandy thing for cruising in, especially if you want to get somewhere in a hurry, but it was never meant for a fishing party," he commented. "We'd have to be so careful in moving about that we couldn't keep our mind on the sport. You couldn't play a bass from one without danger of upsetting. I tell you what we'd better do. Let one of us fish from the shore for bass, while the two others in the canoe troll for pickerel. Two lines can be put out over the stern and

one can paddle gently while the other keeps a sharp eye on the lines. Between us all we ought to get a mess in less than no time. We'll toss up to see which shall do the lonesome act while the others use the canoe. At noontime we'll have a fish fry right here on the shore to help us out with the lunch. The one who catches the first fish gets out of doing any of the work. The one who gets the next will have to do the cooking and the one that trails in last will have to clean the fish. What do you say?"

There was no dissenting voice, and the spinning coin decreed that Tom and Dick should do the trolling, while Bert remained on shore and tried for bass.

With the polished spoons twinkling in the water behind, the canoe shot out to the center of the lake. Bert carefully baited his hook and cast it far out from shore. Then, with the happy optimism of the average fisherman, he settled back and waited for results.

Contrary to the usual experience, those results were not long in coming. Tom was the first to score. The spoon at the end of his line dipped violently, and, hauling it in rapidly, he yanked in a big pickerel. He did not dare to shout, for fear of scaring the wary denizens of the lake, but he held it up for Bert to see, and the latter responded with a wave of the hand in congratulation.

The next instant he had to grab his own rod with both hands, while the cord whistled out over the reel. He had made a "strike," and the frantic plunges at the other end of the line told that he had hooked a fighter. Back and forth he darted, until it seemed as though the slender rod would break under the strain. Bert's fighting blood responded to the challenge, and he played his opponent with all the skill and judgment in which he was a past master. It was fully ten minutes before, carefully shortening his line, he was able to land on the bank a magnificent striped bass.

From that time on, the sport was fast and furious. The lake was full of fish, and it had been visited so rarely that they had not learned the danger of the bait that trailed so temptingly before them. In half an hour they had caught more than they could eat and carry home, and Tom, whose appalling appetite was clamoring for satisfaction, suggested that they wind up and pull for shore. Dick was nothing loath, and the canoe, more heavily loaded than when they had started out, glided shoreward until its nose touched the bank where Bert was standing, surrounded by a host of finny beauties that bore witness to his skill.

They fastened the boat securely and spent a few minutes comparing their catches. Then they gathered a heap of dry brush and burned it until they had a glowing bed of embers. They had no frying pan, but Bert improvised an ingenious skillet of tough oaken twigs, that, held high enough above the fire, promised to broil the fish to a turn.

Tom, who, in accordance with the agreement, had nothing to do, stretched himself out luxuriously and "bossed the job."

"See that you don't burn the fish, my man," he said to Bert, affecting a languid drawl. "And you, my good fellow," he added, turning to Dick, "be sure and clean them thoroughly."

He dodged just in time to avoid a fish head that Dick threw at him. It whizzed by his ear, and his quick duck detracted somewhat from his dignity.

"The growing insolence of the lower classes," he muttered, regaining his equilibrium. "You're fired," he roared, glaring at Dick.

"All right," said Dick, throwing down his knife.

"No, no," corrected Tom hurriedly, "not till after dinner."

Before long the fish were sputtering merrily over the fire and the appetizing smell was full of promise. It even induced Tom to abandon his leisurely attitude and "rustle" the good things out of the basket. They made a royal meal and feasted so full and long that, when at last old Nature simply balked at more, they had no desire to do anything but lie back lazily and revel in the sheer delight of living.

"If I've an enemy on earth, I forgive him," sighed Dick blissfully.

"Old Walt Whitman's my favorite poet," said Tom. "Isn't he the fellow that tells you to 'loaf and invite your soul'?"

"Soul," grunted Bert disdainfully. "You haven't any soul. Just now you're all body."

"Always pickin' on me," groaned Tom resignedly.

In complete abandonment to their sense of well being they drew their hats over their eyes and stretched out under the shadow of the trees that came down almost to the water's edge. A brooding peace enveloped them, and the droning of insects and the faint lapping of the water on the shore lulled them into drowsiness. Insensibly they lapsed into slumber.

A half hour passed before Bert started up and rubbed his eyes. It took him a moment to realize where he was. His eyes fell on his sleeping companions, and he made a movement as though to awake them. Then he checked the impulse.

"What's the use?" he said to himself. "There's plenty of time before we need to start for home."

He yawned and lay back again. But now the desire for sleep had left him. After a moment he sat

up again.

"I haven't tried the canoe yet," he thought. "I'll take a little spin across to the island. They'll be awake by the time I get back."

Noiselessly he walked down to the water's edge, unfastened the canoe and took up the paddle.

There was scarcely a ripple on the lake except that made by the sharp bow of the canoe. There was an exhilarating sense of flying as his light craft shot away from the shore. Almost before he knew it he had covered the distance and was drawing up the canoe on the sloping beach of the island.

It was larger than he had thought, at a distance, and toward the center was heavily wooded. There was a dense tangle of undergrowth, and in order to avoid this he skirted the shore, intending to make a complete circuit before returning to the canoe.

His surprise was great when on reaching the further side he found that it was not an island at all. A narrow strip of land connected it with the mainland beyond. It was not over a hundred feet in width, but he noticed that there was a very distinct path that had been beaten through the undergrowth. The discovery for a moment startled him. Then he realized that the woods were, of course, full of all sorts of harmless animals, who had to come down to the water to drink. This would explain the beaten path, and in some measure it reassured him.

Still his gait was quicker as he sped along, intent on regaining the canoe. It would have perhaps been just as well if he had put his rifle in when he started. He listened attentively now as he hurried on, but not a sound broke the stillness of the woods.

And now his pulses began to drum with that subtle sixth sense of his that warned of danger. Again and again in his adventurous career he had felt it, and it had never misled him. It was something like the second sight of the Highlander. His nature was so highly organized that like a sensitive camera it registered impressions that others overlooked. Now some "coming event" was casting "its shadow before," and the mysterious monitor warned him to be on his guard.

It was with a feeling of intense relief that he came again in sight of the canoe and saw that it was undisturbed. He looked across and saw his friends waving at him. He waved back and stooped to unfasten the canoe.

Then something that struck him as odd in their salutation caused him to look again. It was not simply a friendly greeting. There was terror, panic, wild anxiety. And now they were shouting and pointing to something behind him.

He turned like a flash. And what he saw made his heart almost leap from his body.

CHAPTER V

THE GRIZZLY AT BAY

Tearing down upon him in a rapid, lumbering gallop was a monstrous bear. It needed no second glance to tell that it was a grizzly. The little eyes incandescent with rage, the big hump just back of the ears, the enormous size and bulk could belong to none other than this dreaded king of the Rockies.

For an instant every drop of blood in Bert's body seemed to rush to his head. It suffused his eyes with a red film and sounded like thunder in his ears. Then the flood receded and left him cold as ice. He was himself again, cool, self-reliant, with his mental processes working like lightning.

He had no time to unfasten the canoe. Long before he could get in and push off, the bear would have been on top of him. The beast was not more than thirty feet away and two or three more lunges would bring him to the water's edge.

Bert's first impulse was to dive into the lake and seek to escape by swimming. But this he discarded at once. Fast as he was, he knew that the grizzly could outswim him.

With a quick turn to the left, he plunged into the woods, running like a deer. The bear lost a second or two in trying to check his momentum. Then he turned also and went crashing through the underbrush in pursuit.

Had the going been open Bert might have made good his escape. His legs and wind had once won him a Marathon from the fleetest flyers of the world. But here conditions were against him. Vines reached out to trip him. Impenetrable thickets turned him aside. He had to dodge and twist and squirm his way through the undergrowth.

But the bear had no such handicaps. His great body crashed straight through all obstacles. The fearful padding of those monstrous feet came nearer and nearer. Bert's legs worked like piston rods, but to no avail. The distance between them steadily decreased, and now he could hear the labored breathing of his enraged pursuer close on his heels. It was like a hideous nightmare, and gradually the conviction began to force itself upon him that he was running his last race. Once in

the grip of that monster, nothing could save him from a frightful death.

But he would not give up. The old "never say die" spirit that had carried him through so many tight places still persisted. On, on, he ran, putting every ounce of speed and strength in one last spurt. He could feel the hot breath of the grizzly and the padding feet were terribly near. Then, just as the beast was ready to hurl its huge bulk against him, Bert swung on his heel like a pivot, doubled in his tracks and flashed back past his pursuer, just escaping a lunge from the outstretched paw. But that marvelous swaying motion of the hips that had eluded so many tacklers on the football field stood him in stead, and he just grazed the enormous claw that tried to stop him.

That strategy proved his salvation. The grizzly plunged along for many feet before he could turn, and in that instant's respite Bert saw his chance.

Right in front of him was a tall oak whose lowest branch was full twenty feet from the ground. Like a streak Bert reached it, whirled around to the farther side and swarmed up it like a monkey. He reached the fork and swung himself out on the branch with not a second to spare. The grizzly, frothing with rage and hate, had hurled himself against the tree and his up-reaching claw had torn the bark in a vain attempt to clutch the leg that he only missed by inches.

But he was balked. He could not climb, and the tree was too big for him to tear down, as he might have done had it been slenderer or younger. By the narrowest of margins he had failed to add one more victim to those who had already fallen before his ferocity.

Not that he had relinquished hope. He had lost in the open attack, but he still had the resource of a siege. Soon or late he was sure his victim would have to descend. His victory was only deferred. Back and forth and round and round the tree he paced, growling fiercely, at times rearing himself on his hind legs and tearing savagely at the trunk. His open jaws, slavering with foam and showing his great yellow fangs, were full of fearful menace, and his wicked eyes glowed like a furnace. His temper, evil at all times, had been rendered worse by the fury of the chase and disappointment at his failure. Baffled rage bristled in every hair of his shaggy hide. At that moment he would have charged a regiment.

Bert settled himself in the crotch of the tree and gazed at his thwarted enemy with a sensation of indescribable relief. He was drenched with sweat, his clothes were torn by that wild race through the brush, his breath came in gasps that were almost sobs, and his heart was beating like a triphammer. He had looked into the very eyes of death and almost by a miracle had escaped. For the present, at least, he was safe. His giant adversary could not reach him.

Had he been entirely alone in this wild section of the mountains, or had his whereabouts been unknown, his situation would have been hopeless. The bear might settle down to a siege of many days, and he had powerful allies in sleep and hunger. If wearied nature should assert her rights and Bert in a moment of drowsiness topple from his perch, or if, driven by starvation, he should make a last despairing effort to escape, the chances would be all against him. The instinct of the grizzly told him that, if not interfered with, time alone was all that was necessary to bring his foe within his grasp.

But there were Dick and Tom to be reckoned with, and beyond them was Melton, who would surely organize a party and come to his aid. He knew that his comrades would not leave him in the lurch and that they would risk their lives to save him from his perilous position. No doubt but at that moment they were working with might and main to devise some plan of rescue.

But what could they do? He had taken the canoe and they had no means of getting over to him. Had they known of the narrow peninsula on the farther side, they might have worked their way around the end of the lake. But they thought the place was an island, only to be reached by water. Both were strong swimmers and could easily win their way over. But they couldn't do that and keep their guns dry, and without weapons they could do nothing.

In the wild dash through the woods he had described almost a perfect circle, and the tree in which he was sheltered commanded a view of the canoe and the shimmering water beyond. It maddened him to see the boat rocking there idly, as useless to him at that moment as though it were a thousand miles away.

If he had only brought his rifle with him! How thoughtless of him to take such a chance! The words of Mr. Melton at the breakfast table recurred to him and he fairly writhed in an agony of self-reproach.

The grizzly had by this time realized that nothing could be done for the present but wait. He ceased his restless swaying to and fro and squatted down on his haunches, his murderous eyes never leaving Bert for an instant.

On the other side of the lake Dick and Tom were working with feverish energy, almost beside themselves with fear at their comrade's terrible plight.

They had awakened soon after Bert's departure, and had been startled for a moment at finding him gone. The absence of the canoe, however, followed by a glimpse of it on the shore across the water, had reassured them, and they had waited more or less patiently for his reappearance.

Suddenly Dick started to his feet.

"What's that?" he cried, pointing to the woods near the water's edge.

"Where?" exclaimed Tom, startled out of his usual calm by the evident alarm in Dick's voice.

"In that big clump of trees over to the right," was the answer, and then his voice rose to a shout: "Great Scott! It's a grizzly."

"And there comes Bert," yelled Tom. "Bert, Bert," they shouted wildly, rushing down to the shore and waving their hands frantically.

They had seen Bert dart off into the woods with the bear in hot pursuit, but the outcome of the chase had been hidden from their view. They did not dare to think of what might have happened, and they looked at each other in helpless anguish.

"Quick!" yelled Dick, wrenching himself loose from the paralysis that had seized him. "A raft. We've got to get over there with the guns. We've got a paddle left and we can push ourselves over. Oh, Bert, Bert!" he groaned.

But Tom intervened.

"No good," he said hurriedly. "It'll take too long to make it and we'd be too slow in getting across. The canoe's our only chance. You get the guns ready."

He kicked off his shoes, tore off his clothes, dived head foremost into the lake, and with long, powerful strokes headed for the farther shore.

He had an almost amphibious love for the water and the task he had set for himself was easy. But his fear for Bert and his impatience at the delay before he could help him made it seem to him as though he were going at a snail's pace, although in reality he was cleaving the water like a fish.

Bert, looking out from his perch in the tree, suddenly had his attention attracted by something on the smooth surface. He thought at first that it was a water fowl. Then he looked more closely, and his heart gave a great bound as he recognized that it was one of his comrades, although he could not tell which one at that distance. He saw that the swimmer was headed straight for the canoe, and he surmised the plan in an instant.

"Good old Dick and Tom," he exulted to himself. "They're two pals in a thousand. I knew they'd get me out of this or die in the trying."

But the bear, too, seemed to realize that something was happening. His scent was phenomenally keen, and the wind was blowing directly toward him from the lake. He sniffed the air for a moment and then, with a threatening growl, looked toward the water. Then he rose slowly and backed in that direction, still keeping an eye on Bert.

The latter took alarm at once. Here was a new complication. If the bear should discover the swimmer, who was now nearing the shore, it might be fatal. At all events his attention must be distracted.

With Bert, to think was to act. He grasped the branch tightly and swung himself down at full length, so that his dangling feet were almost within the bear's reach. The grizzly, with an exultant "whuff," galloped clumsily back to the tree and made a ferocious swipe at his enemy, who pulled himself up just in time. Snarling and mouthing horribly, the bear once more moved toward the lake, torn between the desire to investigate and the fear that his victim might escape. Once more Bert worked the same maneuver and again the bear "fell" for it.

But the crisis was past. There was no need now to repeat. Tom had reached the canoe, climbed into it, and with powerful strokes of the paddle sent it flying toward the mainland. Not, however, till his heart had been thrilled with joy by Bert's yell that rang far out on the water.

"I'm up a tree, old man," called the voice that Tom had feared he might never hear again, "but I'm all right."

"Thank God," answered Tom, and tried to add something else, but couldn't.

Once more on shore he jubilantly reported to Dick, whose delight at the news of Bert's present safety passed all bounds.

The first rejoicing over, they hastily laid their plans.

"Are the guns ready?" asked Tom as he got into his clothes.

"They're all right," answered Dick. "To make sure, I unloaded and filled them up with new cartridges. Everything's in perfect shape."

They did not underestimate the task before them. They were taking their lives in their hands in attacking this monster of the wilds. But had he been ten times as big or ten times as savage they would not have hesitated an instant, with Bert's life as the stake.

Knowing that the wind was blowing toward the bear from where they were, they deemed it wise, as a plan of campaign, to paddle to the other side of the island and come upon the foe from the rear. If they could take him unawares, and pump a bullet or two into his great carcass before he had time to charge, their chances of success would be immensely greater.

Moving as warily as Indians, they dipped their paddles in the water and made for the upper end of the supposed island. They rounded the point and disembarked. Clutching their guns firmly and straining their eyes, as they gazed into the dark green recesses of the woods, they advanced, scarcely daring to breathe.

"I'm going to signal," whispered Dick. "That'll warn Bert that we're coming and he'll keep the bear busy." And the next instant the mournful cry of the whippoorwill floated through the forest.

It was an accomplishment that the boys had frequently practised, and the counterfeit was perfect enough to deceive the birds themselves.

They waited an instant, and then they heard Bert's answering "whippoorwill."

The bear paid no attention to the familiar sound, and it was evident that his suspicions had not been aroused.

Guiding themselves by the repetition of the cry Dick and Tom pressed forward, their guns ready for instant use at the first sight of the enemy.

Bert had promptly grasped the meaning of the signal. It was imperative that the bear's attention should be centered on himself alone. The only thing he found in his pocket was a jack-knife, but he threw this with such precision that it struck the bear full on the point of the nose and evoked a roar of fury. A shower of twigs and branches added insult to injury, until the great beast was beside himself with rage. He had no thought or eyes or ears for anything but Bert.

And now the whippoorwill was close at hand.

Two spurts of flame leaped from the forest on the right. With a ferocious snarl the grizzly whirled about in the direction of the shots. As he did so two more bullets plowed their way into his breast. He tore savagely at the wounds, and then plunged fiercely in the direction of his unseen foes.

But his hour had struck. Another volley halted him in his tracks. He sagged, coughed, and fell in a crumpled mass to the ground.

With a wild hurrah, Dick and Tom broke from cover, dropped their guns and threw their arms about Bert, who had slid down to the foot of the tree.

The strain had been so great and the reaction was so tremendous that none of them for a moment knew what he was doing. They shouted, laughed and grasped each others' hands, too excited for coherent speech. They had been through many perils together, but none so great and terrible as this. And now all three were together again, safe and sound, and the grizzly—

"Look out," screamed Bert, his face going white.

They jumped as though they had been shot.

Not ten feet away was the grizzly coming down on them like a locomotive. His mouth was open, his eyes blazing, and with the blood flowing from his wounds he made a hideous picture as he rushed forward. They had forgotten to reckon with the wonderful tenacity of life that makes a grizzly bear the hardest thing in the world to kill. Six bullets were embedded in his carcass and his life was ebbing. But his fiendish ferocity was unimpaired, and he had gathered himself together for one last onslaught.

There was no time to think, no chance to resist. The guns were on the ground, and merely to stoop for them meant that the bear would be upon them before they could rise. With one bound the boys leaped aside, and scattered through the woods at the top of their speed.

The bear hesitated a second, as though undecided whom to follow, and then put after Bert.

But it was a very different race this time from that of an hour before. Then the odds had been against the fugitive; now they were with him. The rage of the bear was greater, but his speed and strength were failing. Bert easily increased his distance, and as he ran his quick mind formed a plan of action.

Running in a circle, he gradually drew his pursuer around to the tree where he had sought refuge. He had figured on grabbing one of the guns and shinning up to the friendly crotch, there to despatch his foe at leisure. But as he rose with the rifle in his hand he saw that there was no time for this.

Dropping on one knee he took careful aim, and as the grizzly rose on its hind legs to grasp him, fired point blank at the spot just below the fore leg that marked the heart. Then he jumped aside.

The bear spun around once, toppled and fell with a tremendous crash on the spot where Bert had been a moment before.

Once more Bert raised his rifle, looking narrowly for any sign of life. But the last bullet had done the work. A convulsive shudder ran through the bear's enormous length. Then he stiffened out and a glaze crept over the wicked eyes. He had fought his last fight.

And as Bert looked down at him, his relief and exultation were tempered by a feeling of respect for the brute's courage. Never for a moment had he shown the white feather. He had fought gallantly and gone down fighting.

Tom and Dick, who had now rejoined him, shared his feeling.

"Nothing 'yellow' about that old rascal but his hide," commented Dick.

"A fighter from Fightersville," added Tom.

When their jubilation had somewhat subsided, they measured their quarry.

"Ten feet four inches, from the tip of the nose to the root of the tail," announced Tom. "Gee, but he's a monster."

"The daddy of them all," said Dick.

"He must weigh over half a ton," judged Bert.

They looked with a shudder at the terrible claws and fangs.

"They say that a grizzly has forty-two teeth," remarked Tom, "but I thought he had forty-two thousand when he was bearing down upon us with his mouth open."

"Well, now the question is what are we going to do with him," said Dick.

"That's a pleasant way to put it," laughed Bert. "A little while ago the question was what was he going to do with us."

"I don't know," he mused, "what we can do. We can't skin him, because we haven't the proper knives, and then, too, it takes an expert to get that hide off without spoiling it. On the other hand, we can't leave it here and expect to find it in the morning. The other animals will feast on the carcass, and the skin won't be any good when they've got through tearing it. If it were a deer we could hang it up out of reach. But we couldn't even move this mountain, let alone lift it."

"Of course we can come back and get the teeth and claws, anyway," put in Dick. "But I hate like thunder to lose the skin."

"I tell you what," suggested Bert. "Let's hustle around and get as many big stones as we can find. We'll pile up a sort of funeral mound around him that the animals can't work through or pull away. Then in the morning we'll get some of the boys from the ranch to come up with us and get the hide. It may not work, but I think it will, and, anyway, we've got to take the chance."

Luckily for the carrying out of the plan, big stones abounded in the vicinity and a few minutes of hard work sufficed to gather together enough to make it probable that the body would remain undisturbed till they came for it.

"And now, fellows," said Bert, gazing at the sun, "it's the quick sneak for us if we want to get back to the ranch before dark. Forward, march."

With a last look at the scene of their thrilling experience, they boarded the canoe, shot across the lake, and, packing up their traps, set out for the ranch. They made quick time of it, as the road was now familiar and led downhill all the way. Yet, despite their speed, dusk was settling down when they reached the house, to receive a hearty greeting from their hosts, who were becoming a little anxious at the delay.

Mrs. Melton paled as she heard the story of their frightful danger, and Melton himself was deeply stirred at their narrow escape. He, better than any one else, realized all the horror of the case had victory declared on the side of the bear.

"You'll never be nearer death than you were to-day, my boys," he said gravely; "and a kind of death that I don't care to think about. I'll send Sandy and some of the men up to-morrow to get the skin, and I hope that hide will be the nearest you ever come to seeing a grizzly again. You came through all right to-day, but it's the kind of stunt a man doesn't get way with twice. But now," he added more lightly, "I'll bet that you're hungry enough to eat nails. Hurry up and wash and get down to the table."

"By the way," said Mrs. Melton, her eyes twinkling, "where are those fish you promised me for supper?"

The boys looked at each other in consternation.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Bert. "We forgot to bring them."

CHAPTER VI

THE "RINGER'S" DOWNFALL

After the boys had been on the ranch some two or three weeks a new topic of interest came up. It seemed that every Fourth of July a great celebration was held in Helena, in which cowboys and ranchmen from many miles around took part. All sorts of competitions were held, such as roping, throwing, target shooting, and so on. As the day drew near, it became the chief topic of conversation about the ranch, and everybody, with the exception of two or three who would have

to stay to take care of the stock, intended to go and take part in the festivities.

Quite a feature of the present celebration was to be a one-mile running race. As a rule ranchmen and cowboys are not noted for their running abilities, generally being more at home upon the back of a horse than upon their own feet. But among the neighboring ranches there were several fair runners, and among the townspeople there were others. The last year or two a hot rivalry had existed between the ranchmen and "townies" over the outcome of the running race, for in this event everybody, no matter what his daily occupation, could be interested.

The last year one of the men from the Bar X Ranch had taken the prize money, and the ranchers had all been jubilant. They imagined they had a fair chance to win this year's event with the same runner, and Mr. Melton's men thought so too. But one day late in June Chip returned from a trip to town with clouded brow.

"What do yuh think them low-down Piutes that calls themselves citizens of Helena has been an' done now?"

"What's bitin' yuh, Chip?" asked Sandy. "Did somebody get your wad, or what?"

"No, nothin' like that," answered Chip. "I'll tell it to you jest the way one o' the boys handed it to me. He says t' me, 'Waal, Chip, I reckon you boys on the ranches hereabouts won't pick off the prize money this year in the footrace, will yuh?'"

"'Oh, I don't know,' I answers him. 'Yuh never kin tell what's going to happen, but we-all have a sneakin' idea that our man is jest goin' to run away from any shorthorn you guys kin put up.'"

"'Oh, is that so?' he jeers, real triumphant-like, 'well, I got a little piece o' change that I'm willin' to put up on our man. How do yuh feel?'"

"'Waal, I wasn't goin' to let the guy bluff me, so I covers his money to the tune o' fifty bucks. 'I s'pose Jenkins, the feller that nearly pulled down the prize last year, is goin' to run fer you, ain't he' I asks, never suspicionin' that he'd say anythin' but 'yes.'"

"'Not any,' he answers, grinnin' satisfied like; 'we've got another man this year, an' a streak o' greased lightnin' is plumb slow an' ploddin' alongside him.'"

"'An' who is this yere maverick?' I asks him, feelin' like somebody'd hit me when I wasn't lookin'."

"'Johnson is his brand,' says the sport; 'stick around a while an' I'll point him out t' yuh. There he is now,' he says sudden-like, pointin' to a guy amblin' along the sidewalk with half a dozen kids taggin' at his heels, 'there's the guy what's goin' to make your runners look like candidates from a young ladies' finishing school. Take a good look at him, Chip, so yuh'll know him the next time yuh see him.'"

"'Waal, boys, I took a good look, as this sport suggests, and I'm a pop-eyed tenderfoot if I didn't recognize the guy right off. I couldn't jest place him at first, but in a few seconds I remembered where I'd seen him last.'"

"'An' where was that?' questioned Sandy, while everybody listened eagerly for his answer.

"'It was at a function that come near bein' a lynchin' party,'" answered Chip. "I was up in a little town over the Canada border at the time, an' they had jest had a race like this yere one we-all has on the Fourth o' July, only they ain't no sech institution there, them folks bein' nothin' but benighted Britishers and Frenchmen. Howsum-ever, they'd had a race, and this maverick what's pointed out to me in Helena had won the race, together with most o' the loose change in the town. Suddenly a guy in the crowd yells out: 'That feller's a 'ringer.' I seen him run in an Eastern professional race onct.'"

"'Waal, that was like puttin' a match to powder, and them people was goin' to string the guy up, only the sheriff came along jest then and stopped the proceedin's. So that's when I see this party last.'"

"'Yes, but he might not have been a 'ringer,'" suggested Bert, who had come up and joined the group while Chip was speaking. "He might have been square, but the man that accused him probably had lost money, and may have accused him just to get even. You don't have to prove much to an angry mob when they want to believe what you're telling them, anyway.'"

"'Yes, I thought o' that,'" replied Chip, "but a few weeks arterward I come across an old newspaper with this party's picture engraved on the sportin' page, an' underneath it said, 'Albert Summers, the well-known professional one-mile runner,' or words meanin' the same thing. I'd clean forgot about it, though, until I sees this yere hoss thief paradin' the streets o' Helena followed by the admirin' glances o' the populace.'"

The cowboys exchanged indignant glances, and Sandy said, "Mebbe the folks in Helena don't know this maverick's a professional."

"I suppose most o' them don't," replied Chip, "but the officials that have charge o' the race are wise, all right. It looks as though I was goin' to be out fifty hard-earned dollars, but it will keep the rest o' yuh boys from losin' any o' your money, anyhow.'"

"Seems t' me it's up to us t' give this here shell game away," remarked Buck; "it riles me plumb fierce t' think of anybody puttin' over a game like that an' gettin' away with it.'"

"The best thing to do, I should think," remarked Bert, "would be to let this Summers, or Johnson, or whatever his name is, run, and get somebody to beat him. That would be doing things artistically, as you might say."

"What do yuh mean?" queried Sandy, speaking for his surprised companions, "yuh think we ought t' get a 'ringer' on our own account to beat this professional sharp?"

"Not at all," said Bert with a grin. "I don't want to seem to boast, but I've done a little running myself at times, and I think if I entered against this 'profesh' I might be able to give him a run for his money."

The cowboys looked somewhat incredulous, and Chip said, "I seen this feller run, m' lad, and he sure is fast, I got to admit that much. Have yuh ever done much runnin'?"

"Quite some," replied Bert with a curious little smile. "The next time you talk to Trent or Henderson ask them about it, if you don't believe me."

He strolled off, and after he had gone the men held a consultation. Chip was openly skeptical regarding Bert's offer to run. "He's a fine lad an' all that," he opined, "but it takes more than an amateur to beat this sharp. The boy would be out of his class, I reckon, if he came up against this yere sprinter."

The others seemed inclined to agree with Chip's view of the matter, but Sandy demurred. "I've been watchin' that lad," he said, "an' I've noticed he don't usually go around shootin' off his mouth about nothin'. Seems t' me before we pass up his proposition it might be a good idea to look up his friends an' see what they say about it."

"Waal, thet's only fair," remarked one of the cowboys known to his mates only as "Bud." "I vote we make Sandy an' Chip a committee o' two to see Trent an' Henderson an' question them on this yere p'int. Yuh don't want to fergit thet if we *could* find somebody thet could beat this Helena candidate we'd have it on them effete citizens so bad they'd wear mournin' fer a year."

This consideration had great weight with the others, and they all assented to Bud's proposition. It was agreed that at the first opportunity Sandy and Chip should question Tom and Dick on the subject of Bert's running abilities, and so the matter was dropped for the present.

The "committee," however, kept it in mind, and when, as they were returning to the bunkhouse that same evening, Chip and Sandy espied Dick and Tom at no great distance, riding along in leisurely fashion, they immediately hailed them.

On hearing their names called the two friends looked around, and, seeing the ranchmen beckoning to them, cantered over in their direction, and quickly reached the spot on which they were standing.

"What's up?" questioned Dick, "anything wrong?"

"No, not 'specially," answered Sandy, slightly at a loss as to the best way to bring up the subject. "Yuh see, it's this way. Some o' the boys has heard thet your pal, Wilson, is somethin' of a runner, and we was jest cur'ous to know ef it was so. Can you wise us up on this yere mooted p'int?"

Dick looked over at Tom and grinned. "You tell 'em, Tom," he said; "tell them whether Bert can run or not."

"Well," said Tom, "Bert isn't such an awful good runner, no. He's never done a thing in that line except win the Marathon run at the last Olympic games, break every college record from one to twenty-five miles, and set up a new world's record for the five mile distance. Outside of that he can't run worth a cent, can he, Dick?"

For a moment Dick was too amused watching the faces of the two ranchmen to answer. "Wh-what are yuh tryin' t' hand us, anyhow," demanded Chip. "Do yuh really mean he's the same Wilson thet won the big Marathon race?"

"Straight goods," answered Dick; "if you don't believe it, ask Melton."

"Whoop-ee!" yelled Sandy, throwing his sombrero high in the air and catching it deftly as it descended. "No wonder he seemed so confident when he offered to run fer us. At thet time I kind a' thought he was jest stringin' us along."

"You'll find that when Bert says a thing he generally means it," remarked Dick, "but what is it all about, anyway? What was it that he offered to run in?"

Sandy then proceeded to explain all that had occurred that morning, and when he had finished both Tom and Dick gave a long whistle.

"So that's how the land lies, is it?" exclaimed Dick; "the old sinner's never satisfied unless he's winning something or other, is he?"

"You said something that time," acquiesced Tom, a note of pride in his voice; "if excitement won't come to him, he goes looking for it. That's his style, every time."

The two cowboys did not stop to hear any more, but hurried off excitedly to take the news to their companions. They burst into the bunkhouse, where the men had already sat down to supper.

"Boys, we're all a bunch o' locoed Piutes," yelled Sandy. "Do you know who this boy Wilson is, eh? He's the feller that won the Marathon fer Uncle Sam at the Olympic games, an' we never knew it. Somebody kindly make the remarks fer me thet 're approp'rite on sech an occasion."

For a few seconds, astonished exclamations of a very forceful character filled the air, but soon the cowboys quieted down somewhat, and began to discuss the surprising news in every detail. Everybody was jubilant, and already they could picture the chagrin of the townspeople when their favorite was beaten.

"But we don't want to be too certain of winnin', at that," cautioned Bud; "arter all, that Helena runner is a professional, an' Wilson is only an amateur, no matter how good he may be. A feller thet makes a livin' out of a thing is likely to do it better than the sport thet does it fer fun, leastwise, thet's the way I figger it out."

"Thet's all right," spoke up Reddy, "but ef yuh can remember that far back, you'll rec-lect that his pals told us he held a world's record fer five miles. Waal, now, they must 'a' been lots o' professionals runnin' thet distance, and in spite of everythin' they never did no better'n thet. What've yuh got to say t' that, eh?"

Thus the discussion raged, and the cowboys stayed up much later than usual that night arguing every phase of the forthcoming race pro and con. As is usually the case in such discussions, they reached no decision, beyond unanimously agreeing that the best man would win, a proposition that few people would care to argue.

In the meantime the three comrades had met at Mr. Melton's hospitable board, and Dick and Tom recounted with great mirth the surprise of the cowboys on hearing of Bert's athletic prowess.

"It was better than a circus," laughed Dick. "I never saw two more surprised faces in my life."

"I either," said Tom. "I guess they must have thought Bert was champion of some hick village before they consulted us."

"I could see that was their idea when I offered to run," grinned Bert; "that's why I referred them to you."

"The boys place a lot of importance on the foot race," said Mr. Melton; "in the other events they're chiefly competing against each other, but in that they meet the townspeople on common ground, and it means a lot to them to win. And if the winner comes from their own particular ranch, that makes the victory all the more sweet."

"Well," remarked Bert, "if I do run in that race, as it seems very likely I shall, I'll certainly do my best to win for the ranch. I don't suppose there'll be much competition outside of this 'ringer,' anyway."

"No, I don't think there'll be much competition for *you*," smiled Mr. Melton, "but just the same there'll be some pretty fair runners in that race, and they may make you hustle a little at that."

"I hope they do," said Bert, "but the only thing I'm going in the race for is to show up that crooked runner. It's such fellows as he that give the sport a bad name. I'll do everything in my power to discourage it whenever I get the chance."

"That's the talk," encouraged Tom, "go to it, old boy, and show him up. Besides, it will put you in more solid than ever with the cowboys here. They've got a pretty good idea of you already, I imagine, and this will cinch matters."

"It will give me an awful black eye if I should happen to get licked," laughed Bert; "you never seem to think of that side of it."

"No, we'll have to admit that we don't take that into consideration much," said Dick; "you seem to have such an inveterate habit of winning that we rather take it as a matter of course."

"I don't take it as a matter of course, though, not by a long sight," said Bert; "many a fellow's got tripped up by being over-confident, and not waking up until it was too late. I go into anything like that with the idea that if I don't do my very best I *may* lose. And then, if a person does lose a race, that excuse of 'over-confidence' doesn't go a long way, I've noticed."

"No, it's better to be on the safe side, I guess," admitted Dick. "But are you going to train at all for this race?"

"Nothing to speak of," answered Bert. "The life we're living these days keeps a fellow about as fit as he can be, anyway. I feel as though I could start running at a minute's notice and give a good account of myself."

They talked over matters in this fashion until they had discussed the forthcoming event at every angle, and then separated for the night.

From that time on little else was thought or talked of about the ranch. Even the roping and riding contests were relegated to the background. News that the Bar Z boys had a promising candidate had been circulated among the neighboring ranches, and there was almost as much excitement rife on them as on Mr. Melton's. The cowboys were always questioning Dick and Tom in regard to Bert's "past performances," and never tired of hearing his exploits as told by his enthusiastic

friends.

Never was a day so looked forward to as the Fourth of July that year, and never did a day seem so long in coming. The last days of June were checked off one by one on a highly colored calendar suspended against the wall of the bunkhouse, and at last the impatient ranchers tore the June sheet off, or, as Chip put it, "took a month off."

Saddles were gone over, oiled and polished, and when at last the longed-for day arrived every preparation had been made to celebrate it fittingly. Everybody on the ranch was up before the sun, and after a hasty breakfast they sallied forth to town.

The three comrades rode with them, and the cowboys surrounded them as a sort of bodyguard. Mr. Melton was not able to accompany them, as he had some pressing business affairs to attend to, but he had promised to reach town before the running race, which was not to take place until the afternoon, was "pulled off."

It was a beautiful day and the ranchmen were in high spirits. They laughed and shouted and indulged in rough horse-play like a crowd of school-boys out for a lark, and the boys did their full share to add to the general gaiety. The long miles slipped unnoticed behind them, and the sun was not far above the eastern horizon when the party cantered into Helena.

The town was gaily bedecked in honor of the occasion. The houses were draped with flags and bunting, and in many cases long colored streamers fluttered from the windows and roofs.

The cowboys set spurs to their ponies, and swept down the street like a veritable cyclone. They met other parties who had just arrived, and exchanged greetings with the many friends among them. There was an air of merry-making and good-fellowship in the air that was infectious, and everybody seemed to be enjoying themselves.

"They certainly know how to have a good time," remarked Dick. "I guess it's because they have so few holidays that they enjoy them all the more when they do come."

Along the streets booths were lined, selling anything from a ten-cent pocket knife to a blue-barreled Colts revolver. The numerous saloons were going full blast, and were doing a profitable business. Nobody is more of a spendthrift than your true cowboy when he is out on pleasure bent, and the fakirs and saloon-keepers were taking full advantage of that fact.

The party from Melton's ranch, with the exception of the three boys, lost no time in slaking the thirst occasioned by their ride over the prairie, and then they all repaired to the scene of the first event on the entertainment programme, which proved to be a roping and tying contest. Chip entered this and narrowly missed winning the prize.

"Tough luck, old timer," consoled Sandy, "but better luck next time. You made a good stab at it, anyhow."

Other events were run off in quick succession, with the excitement running high and keeping everybody at fever heat. The boys from the home ranch won their share of the honors and a little over, and were proportionately jubilant. "An' ef Wilson wins that race this arfternoon," said Sandy, "the boys from the ranch will feel so dawgoned good thet they won't be able t' kick about nothin' fer a year t' come."

"Thet's a good one, thet is," jeered one of the townspeople who had overheard this remark. "Why, that guy Wilson ain't got even a look-in. Our champ will make him look like an also ran."

"Is that so?" replied Sandy sarcastically. "Well, yuh just stick around this arfternoon, an' yuh'll realize what a plumb egreg'us idjut a feller can become by livin' in town a spell. Why, yuh poor boob, the feller you're backin' to rake in the chips ain't got even a ghost of a show."

Others of the citizens began to join in the argument, and words were beginning to run high when Hotchkiss, the sheriff, galloped up on his horse. "Here, here, boys," he exclaimed, "no hard feelin' on the glorious Fourth. We're all here to have a good time, an' anybody that don't think so can talk to me."

"All right, Bill," said Sandy soothingly; "we warn't allowin' to have a scrap, but the people o' this yere town is got too big a idea o' themselves, thet's all."

"Come away, Sandy," advised Dick, laughing. "Maybe we'll take a little of the starch out of them this afternoon."

Sandy at last allowed himself to be persuaded, and the cowboys rode off. Soon afterward the three boys left them, for they had arranged with Mr. Melton to lunch with him at the principal hotel.

When they entered its doors he was waiting for them in the lobby, his genial face beaming.

"Well, my lads," he exclaimed, "how do you like the way we spend our holidays out here, eh?"

"Great!" exclaimed Bert, speaking for the others; "the boys certainly know how to make things hum when they get started. There's something doing every minute."

"Yes, they're a great lot," said Mr. Melton. "They're hot tempered and inclined to jump too quickly into a quarrel, but their hearts are always in the right place, and they're loyal to the core."

But how do you feel, Bert?" suddenly changing the subject. "Have you got your winged shoes on to-day?"

"Never felt more like running in my life," smiled Bert. "Anybody that beats me to-day will have to travel a little, I think."

"Good!" exclaimed the rancher, "that's the kind of talk I like to hear. Everybody I've talked to in the hotel here seems to think that this Johnson is going to have things all his own way, and I want you to give them the surprise of their lives."

The fact that Bert was a Marathon winner was not generally known, and everybody in town thought that their candidate would have an unknown runner pitted against him, whom he could easily vanquish. It was, therefore, with feelings of the utmost confidence that they streamed toward the place where the race was to be held. They bantered the cowboys they met unmercifully, but the latter kept their own counsel, and only smiled in a knowing fashion. Money was bet freely on both sides, and those who lost stood to lose heavily.

After the boys had finished luncheon, they and Mr. Melton repaired to the meeting place. The race was to be run around a one-mile oval track, and five men were entered as contestants. Besides Bert and Johnson, the winner of the previous race, Jed Barnes, was to race, and two other men from neighboring ranches. As soon as the boys and Mr. Melton reached the track they parted, the former seeking out the dressing room, and the latter securing a seat in the grand stand.

Bert got into his racing togs immediately, and his comrades left him and walked out to secure seats for themselves. This was soon done, and they settled themselves, waiting as best they could for the start.

The stand and field filled rapidly until at last, when the gates were closed, every available space was occupied by a tightly packed, expectant throng. Suddenly a whistle blew and a few seconds afterward the runners walked out and proceeded to draw lots for the choice of position. Bert drew third from the inside rail, Jed Barnes second, and Johnson secured the best place next to the rail.

"That makes a rather bad handicap for Bert," said Tom anxiously. "I wish he could have gotten a better position."

"Oh, well, it might be worse," said Dick, but it must be confessed he was a little worried also. Johnson was a well-built athlete, and seemed to be in the best of condition. Dick recalled that Bert had not gone through any special training, and was assailed with misgivings. However, he had not long to wait. The runners took their places, and the starter raised his pistol in the air.

"Get set!" he called, and amid a breathless silence the racers crouched over, their fingers barely touching the ground.

Crack! went the pistol, and amid a roar from the spectators the five athletes sprang ahead as though released from a catapult. Elbows pressed against their sides, heads up, they made a thrilling picture, and the crowd cheered wildly. At first they kept well together, but they were setting a fast pace, and soon one of the men began to lag behind. But little attention was paid him, for interest was concentrated on Bert, Johnson and Barnes. Before they were half way around the oval the fourth man had dropped out, so the race had narrowed down to these three.

Suddenly Bert increased his stride a little, and spurred ahead. A wild shout went up from the spectators, and those who had not already done so leaped to their feet. "Wilson! Wilson!" chanted the cowboy contingent, while the townspeople no less vociferously reiterated the name of their favorite.

But the "ringer" was not to be shaken off, and he in turn put on a burst of speed that carried him into the lead. As the runners rounded the three-quarter mile mark he was still leading, and Barnes was lagging far to the rear, evidently done for as far as the race was concerned. Chip had said that Johnson could "move some," and the professional did not belie his reputation. Apparently, Bert was unable to close up the gap of nearly a yard that now separated him from his rival, and the yells and cheers of the citizens redoubled, while those of the cowboys died down. Mr. Melton chewed the end of his cigar fiercely, and swore softly to himself.

But Tom and Dick were not deceived. "The old reprobate's only stalling," yelled Dick into Tom's ear, at the same time pounding him frantically on the back. "He isn't going his limit, by a whole lot. Watch him, now, just watch——" but his words were drowned in the shrill cowboy yell that split the air. "Yi, yi, yi!" they shouted, half crazy with excitement. For Bert, their champion, suddenly seemed to be galvanized into furious action. He leaped ahead, seeming to dart through the air as though equipped with wings. Johnson gave a startled glance over his shoulder, and then exerted himself to the utmost. But he might as well have stood still as far as any good it did him was concerned. Bert was resolved to make a decisive finish, and show these doubting Westerners what a son of the East could do. Over the last hundred yards of the course he exerted every ounce of strength in him, and the result was as decisive as even Dick and Tom could desire. Amid a tremendous pandemonium he dashed down the stretch like a thunderbolt, and breasted the tape sixty feet in advance of his laboring rival.

Words fail to describe the uproar that then broke loose. A yelling mob of cowboys swept down onto the field, and, surrounding Bert, showered praise and congratulations. Swearing joyfully,

Reddy, Chip, Bud and several of the others of the cross diamond outfit elbowed their way through the crowd at one point, while Mr. Melton, Dick and Tom edged through at another.

"All right, boys," laughed Mr. Melton, "give him a chance to get his breath back, though, before you shake his hands off altogether. Let's work a path to the dressing room for him."

This was no sooner said than done. Dick and Tom, assisted by Reddy and the others, fought a path through the excited crowd, and at last got Bert into the dressing room under the grandstand.

"Waal, m' lad, yuh certainly put it all over that maverick," exulted Reddy; "one time there, though, we figgered he had you beaten to a stand-still. It was sure a treat the way yuh breezed past him at the finish, it sure was."

"I was worried some myself," admitted Mr. Melton, "but I suppose I ought to have known better."

Meanwhile Bert had taken a shower, and started to dress. In a few minutes he was ready to leave the dressing room, and they all started out. Just as Bert was going through the door Johnson, who had had a hard time getting through the crowd, entered. As they passed Bert said, "Maybe this will teach you to stick to straight racing, Summers. Take my advice and cut out the crooked stuff. It doesn't pay in the end."

The defeated athlete started, and muttered an oath. "I know who you are now," he exclaimed. "I recognized you first thing, but couldn't place you. It's just my luck," he continued bitterly. "If I'd had any idea who I was going to run against I'd have backed out. But I'll get even with you some day for queering my game, see if I don't."

"Do your worst," invited Bert. "So long," and he hastened after his friends, who had gone on slowly during this time. "What did he say?" inquired Tom, and Bert repeated the substance of the brief exchange of talk. "But I'm not worrying much over his threats," he finished. "I imagine he'll be a little more careful in the future."

They then repaired directly to the hotel, where they had supper. Afterward they went out again to view an elaborate display of fireworks given under the auspices of the town. Everywhere were hilarious cowboys, who as soon as they recognized Bert crowded about the party and made progress difficult. At last they struggled to a point of vantage where they could see everything going on, and spent an enjoyable evening.

About ten o'clock they returned to the hotel, and after securing their ponies set out on the long ride back to camp, accompanied by such of the ranchmen as could tear themselves away so early. They straggled in singly and in couples all the next day, and it was almost a week before the affairs of the ranch settled down into their usual well-ordered condition.

From that time on, the regard in which the three comrades were held by the rough Westerners never wavered, and the cowboys never wearied of discussing again and again the details of the great race that clipped the wings of the "townies."

CHAPTER VII

THE WOLF PACK

One evening not long after their arrival at the camp the three friends, wearied after a day of strenuous activity, were whiling away the time in reminiscences of some of their past adventures. Mr. Melton, who made one of the little group, listened in an interested fashion, and seemed little disposed to interrupt the draught of "memories' mellow vine."

After a while they ceased talking, and a short silence ensued, which was abruptly broken by Bert.

"Look here, fellows," he exclaimed, "here we are monopolizing the conversation, when we might be listening to some really interesting story from Mr. Melton. I vote we petition the boss of this outfit to spin us a yarn."

"Second the motion," shouted Tom and Dick, and the vote was carried.

"You fellows seem to think I have a story on tap all the time," he said with an indulgent smile, "but the fact is I've told you about all the exciting things that ever happened to me, or that I ever heard of. My memory is squeezed as dry as a lemon."

"Just the same, I'll bet if you think real hard you can think of something worth telling," said Bert; "try to, anyway, won't you?"

At first their host made no reply to this entreaty, but gazed ruminatively off into space. At last he spoke.

"I suppose you boys think," he said, "that this country is pretty wild and uncivilized. But take my word for it, it is so tame now that it eats out of your hand compared to what it once was. Why, now it's the rarest thing in the world that you ever see a wolf—that is, a real wolf," as Tom started to interrupt. "What I'm thinking of is a real timber wolf, not one of the slinking coyotes

you see every once in a while. There is no animal I'd go farther out of my way to avoid than a hungry timber wolf, and anybody else who knows anything at all about them will tell you the same thing.

"They are half as big again as a coyote, and twice as strong. Why, a full-grown timber wolf will throw a running steer. Man is the only thing in the world they're afraid of, and they're not afraid of him when they're very hungry or running in packs. When driven to it they'll tackle almost anything.

"I remember one time when I had occasion to go to Belford, a little trading station some twenty or thirty miles from our camp, to secure some much-needed supplies. It was the middle of winter, and an exceptionally cold and severe winter at that. Fresh meat was naturally very scarce, and the wolves were becoming bolder and more fearless every day. At night they used to prowl close about the camp, and howl until we got up and plugged one or two of their number, after which they generally dispersed for a time.

"Well, as I have said, it became necessary for me to take the journey for supplies, so one winter's morning I hitched up the team to a rude sort of home-made sled I had made and started off for Belford. The snow was quite deep and, needless to say, there had not been enough travel along the trail to pack it down. The horses made heavy going of it, but we got there at last, and glad enough I was to get inside the shack that served as the general store and warm my half frozen hands and feet at the red hot stove.

"After I was comfortable once more I made my purchases, and after loading them into the sleigh said good-bye to the boys and started out on the return journey.

"It was a mighty long trip for the horses, but they were a young team, full of fire and life, and I thought we could make back the same day without much trouble. And likely enough we would have, with time to spare, if it hadn't started to snow; lightly at first, but getting thicker all the time. The horses had started out toward home at a brisk trot, but they gradually slowed down to a walk, and once or twice I had to stop them altogether to let them gather fresh strength.

"What with the slow going and the stops, dusk overtook us while we were still some eight or ten miles from the camp. It couldn't have been later than four o'clock, but the short winter's day was even at that time drawing to a close, and the falling snow made it darker still.

"But no thought of danger entered my head, and I merely swore a little at the prospect of a late supper, for I was cold and hungry. Suddenly, however, the danger of my position was brought home to me in a very sudden manner. Away in the distance I heard the long drawn wolf-howl, than which I firmly believe there is no more blood-curdling sound in existence. The horses pricked up their ears nervously and hastened their lagging pace, and I myself felt a thrill go up my spine. It was not many seconds before the first howl was answered by a second, and then a third.

"'A little faster, my beauties,' I said to the horses, 'we're not so far from home now, and it's up to us to get there pretty pronto.'

"The faithful beasts seemed to understand my words, and strained forward in the harness. The snow had stopped by this time, but was pretty deep, and the sleigh was heavy. After trotting forward at a brisk pace for a way they dropped back into a walk again.

"By now the howls had merged into a general chorus, and looking back over the great expanse of open country over which we were traveling I could see numerous black specks traveling swiftly toward us, becoming larger every second.

"I saw that I was in a mighty tight place, so got out my Winchester repeater and made sure that it was loaded. Then I stationed myself in the back of the sleigh and waited for the enemy to approach.

"On they came, loping swiftly along, silent now that their quarry was in plain sight. I took careful aim at the foremost brute, and pulled the trigger. My shot took effect, for with an unearthly scream the animal dropped, and for a few brief seconds his comrades stopped in order to devour him. At the sound of the rifle shot and the scream of the stricken wolf the horses plunged forward, all thought of fatigue gone in their overwhelming terror. The wolves were not easily to be outdistanced, though, and were soon after us again. They gained on us as though we were standing still, and were soon close to the back of the sleigh. I pumped bullets into them as fast as I could work my repeater, but by this time they were so numerous that it seemed to have little effect. The horses were slowing down again, even their fear of death unable to force them onward. I saw it was a case of lighten the sleigh or go under, so I commenced throwing our precious supplies out of the sled. Bags of flour and sides of bacon flew through the air, and the wolves were momentarily checked while fighting over the prizes.

"I knew that presently they would be up with us again, however, and then, with every resource gone, it looked as though my chances would be slim, indeed. But suddenly an inspiration shot through my mind.

"I drew up the trembling horses, and with a few slashes of my hunting knife cut the harness that held them to the sleigh. Then, with my rifle in one hand, I swung onto the back of the larger of the two horses, and let the other go. He was off like a streak, with my mount a close second.

"I glanced back over my shoulder, hoping that we could gain a little ground before the wolves quit their wrangling over the supplies I had thrown out to them, but was disappointed. They were after us again in full cry, and my heart sank.

"I turned in the saddle and sent shot after shot into the racing pack, and succeeded in checking them a little, but not much. The horse was galloping at a good clip now, though, and I knew that if we could keep ahead for a short time longer we would reach the camp.

"The wolves overtook us without seeming effort, however, and were soon snapping about the horse's heels. My rifle was of little use now, and I drew my revolvers and blazed away at short range. Every shot took effect, but the wolves were nothing daunted. As I told you before, when the timber wolf gets his blood up he is absolutely fearless. No sooner did one of the great gray brutes drop than another leaped into his place, his green eyes glowing balefully and his jaws snapping.

"When both my revolvers were empty I clubbed my rifle, and lashed away at the long-pointed heads that were so close to me. Once or twice one would catch the butt of the gun in his teeth, and the marks are in the wood to this day.

"Well, I was so busy fighting off the wolves that I had no time to notice how near we were to camp. But suddenly my heart gave a great leap as I heard a yell in front of me and recognized the voice of my partner.

"I looked ahead and saw that I had almost reached our shack. My partner was standing in the doorway, rifle in hand, and even as I looked came running out toward me. In a few seconds the faithful horse had carried me almost to the shack, and I leaped to the ground. My partner took up a stand alongside me, and as the wolves came on we cleared a space about us with the clubbed rifles. We realized we couldn't keep that up long, though, so we retreated to the cabin. We backed in, but were unable to shut the door before one big gray brute squeezed inside. He was nothing dismayed at being separated from his companions, but leaped straight for us. I fetched him a stunning blow with the butt of my rifle, and before he could recover we both fell upon him and despatched him with our hunting knives. That was about as close a shave as I ever had," and as he finished his story Mr. Melton shook his head.

"I should think it must have been," said Bert, drawing a long breath, "but what did the rest of the wolves do when they found themselves shut out?"

"Oh, my partner and I shot at them from the window until we had killed over a dozen, and the rest, finding that they could not get at us, took themselves off."

"Did they kill the horses?" asked Tom.

"No," replied Mr. Melton, "for some reason they didn't chase them. The next morning we found them both outside the shack none the worse for their adventure. And a mighty lucky thing for us it was, because the loss of our horses then would have meant the failure of all our plans."

"I suppose you went back and got the sled the next day, didn't you?" inquired Dick.

"Oh, yes," replied his host, "we recovered it all right, but then we had to go back to the settlement for more grub, of course. But I was so happy at having escaped with my life that I didn't mind a little thing like that."

The three boys laughingly voted Mr. Melton's story a "curly wolf," and then, as it was getting late, trooped off to bed.

CHAPTER VIII

WITH TEETH AND HOOFS

One of the most important of the many industries of the ranch was the breeding of horses for the Eastern market. Mr. Melton had a number of fine horses, but the most valuable of all was Satan, a big black stallion. His pedigree was as long as his flowing tail, and physically he was a perfect specimen. His only drawback was a fiendish temper, which it seemed impossible to subdue. Strangers he would never tolerate, and Mr. Melton seemed to be the only man on the ranch that could go near him without running a chance of being badly kicked or bitten. Even he was always very careful to keep an eye out for mischief whenever in the neighborhood of the stallion.

All the cowboys hated Satan, and with good reason. More than one of them bore marks of the horse's sharp teeth, and all of them could tell stories of narrow escapes experienced while feeding him or otherwise going through duties that called them into the neighborhood of the beautiful but vicious animal.

He was pastured in lonely grandeur in a spacious corral, shunned by all, but apparently happy enough in spite of this. The three boys often watched him at a safe distance, and regretted that his evil temper made it impossible to be friendly with him. Satan often lost many a lump of sugar or delicious carrot that he would have gotten had he been of a more friendly nature, in this way

resembling many humans who build up a wall of reserve or ill-temper about them, and so lose many of the good things of life.

Soon after the arrival of the boys at the ranch Mr. Melton decided to purchase another stallion, as the demand for good horses at that time was exceptionally great. Accordingly, one day another horse made his appearance in a corral adjacent to that in which Satan was kept. The new horse was a good-sized bay, but not quite as large as Satan, although a little younger. The two corrals were separated by a double fence, so that, while the two horses could get within a few feet of each other, they could never get close enough to fight.

From the very beginning they exhibited a mutual hatred, and it was evident that if they ever got within striking distance of each other there would be trouble. Everybody on the ranch was strictly enjoined to keep the gates between the corrals securely fastened, however, and there seemed no possibility of the two rivals meeting.

"But if they ever should," one of the men had remarked, "there'd be some scrap, take it from me. There's nothing in the world worse than a fight between two stallions."

"Why, are they so vicious about it?" Bert, who was standing near, had asked.

"Vicious!" exclaimed the cowboy, "why, vicious ain't no word for it, nohow. They're just devils let loose, that's all."

It was only a few days after this that, as the boys were seated around the table in the ranch house eating luncheon, in company with their host, one of the cowboys dashed into the room, breathless and red of face.

"Satan an' the bay are fightin'," he cried; "somebody must 'a' left the gates open an'—"

But Mr. Melton did not wait to hear any more. Leaping to his feet he dashed through the door in the direction of the corrals. The three comrades followed close on his heels. As they reached the open they could hear shouts and cries and the thudding of hoofs. Mr. Melton increased his pace, and in a few moments they had reached the scene of action.

And it was a fearsome sight that met their eyes. The two big stallions, the black and the bay, were both in Satan's corral, fighting furiously, with a rage and viciousness that words are inadequate to describe. They circled rapidly about, biting at each other with their long yellow teeth, and lashing out with their hoofs. Each was quick as a flash of light, but every once in a while a sharp hoof would find its mark, or the deadly teeth would rip into the other's skin. Blood flowed freely, but neither seemed to notice the wounds that the other inflicted. They had longed to decide the question of supremacy ever since the newcomer's arrival, and now they were determined to settle the matter.

Satan was the stronger of the two, however, and probably in addition possessed a more evil temper than his rival. Biting, screaming, kicking, he circled about his enemy, his savage heart bent on the destruction of the upstart who had dared to invade his domains. As Mr. Melton and the boys dashed up, the black horse whirled like lightning and planted both hind hoofs with deadly effect. The bay horse staggered, but his spirit was still unconquered, and, recovering himself, he rushed for Satan with a ferocity almost as great as his.

"Stop them! separate them!" shouted Mr. Melton; "what are you standing around watching them for? One or the other of them will be killed soon, if we don't do something."

It was but a few moments since the horses had started fighting, although it had seemed much longer. At first the cowboys had seemed in a sort of stupor, so suddenly had the thing happened, but at Mr. Melton's words they sprang into activity. Some of them ran to get pitchforks, while others secured lariats from their saddles and hurried back to the scene of battle.

The bay horse was now getting much the worst of it, and it became evident that if the two infuriated animals were not separated soon the later arrival would either be killed or else so badly hurt that he would have to be shot eventually.

Some of the cowboys rushed into the corral and with shouts and cries endeavored to separate the combatants. The stallions took not the slightest notice of them, however, except to lash out savagely at them whenever they came within striking distance.

"They can't do anything that way," muttered Mr. Melton. "Here," he exclaimed, snatching a coiled lariat from one of his men, "I'll get in there myself and put an end to this business, or know the reason why."

Lasso in hand he rushed toward the corral, and in a few seconds was inside. Fortunately, just as he entered the inclosure, the stallions, exhausted with their efforts, drew apart and stood snorting and pawing the ground. Mr. Melton realized that here was his opportunity, and grasped it on the instant. Swinging the loop in great circles about his head he took careful aim and let go. The rope whizzed through the air, and the lithe coils settled about Satan's neck.

For a second the black stallion was taken by surprise. He rolled his bloodshot eyes toward his owner, but for a brief space made no move. Then with a loud snort of rage he rushed toward the ranchowner, his foam-flecked jaws gnashing and the breath whistling through his red nostrils. Mr. Melton stood quiet, but alert, every muscle tense. Then, when the infuriated stallion was almost upon him, with an agility that it seemed impossible one of his bulk could possess, he

leaped to one side, and started running backward.

At the same moment he threw the whirling, writhing coil of rope with such sure aim that it settled with beautiful precision over Satan's powerful shoulders. Before the rope could tighten, however, the black stallion had whirled, and was again making for the ranchman.

When the horse was almost upon him Mr. Melton once more leaped aside, and with a dexterous flick on the rope pulled the loop down over Satan's back. Before the horse could check his headlong speed Mr. Melton had worked the loop down about his legs. With a quick jerk he pulled it taut, and Satan, suddenly hobbled, fell to the earth with a crash.

Several of the cowboys ran up, and in a few seconds the stallion was securely trussed up. The bay stallion in the meantime had retreated to the farthest corner of the corral, and was standing there dejectedly, all the fight gone out of him. He was quickly secured and led back into his own inclosure. Very carefully Satan was then loosed a trifle, and allowed to struggle to his feet. He was still "hunting trouble," as one of the men expressed it, but with the confining ropes about his fetlocks was powerless. He was left hobbled, and the gate to his corral was fastened securely this time.

"That was sure a great ropin' stunt you pulled off, boss," said "Curley" to Mr. Melton. "I never seen the trick done neater, nohow."

"It was great!" Bert exclaimed. "I didn't know you were such an expert roper, Mr. Melton."

"It wasn't so bad for an old fellow," admitted his host with a smile; "it took some pretty quick sidestepping to get out of Satan's way, I'll admit. But when I was twenty years younger I used to rope cattle for a living, and narrow escapes were part of the business."

He turned and gave a few directions to the men, together with strict injunctions to keep the two gates between the corrals closed.

"If anything like this happens again," he warned, "somebody's going to get fired pretty pronto, savvy? And do all you can for the bay. I don't think he's seriously hurt, and if we're careful we can bring him back into shape all right."

After this, he and the boys returned to the ranch house, where they discussed the recent exciting happenings pro and con. The boys had planned to take an exploring expedition that afternoon, but all thought of this was banished from their minds. After a while they returned to the stables, where the stallions were having their wounds doctored. It appeared that, as Mr. Melton had surmised, neither was very badly injured physically, but the bay stallion's spirit seemed utterly broken. After many days, however, he regained the pride which had been so rudely shattered in his encounter with Satan, and proved to be a valuable horse. He was of a more gentle disposition also, and accepted the overtures of friendship that the boys made toward him, so that before their visit at the ranch came to a close they were on very good terms with him.

CHAPTER IX

THE INDIAN OUTBREAK

"They seem to be having trouble with the Indians on the reservation," remarked Mr. Milton one evening, just after his return from a trip to town; "everybody in Helena seems to be talking about it, and there was a big article in the 'Despatch' this morning, too."

"What kind of trouble?" asked Bert, his interest at once aroused. "You don't mean there's talk of an outbreak among them, do you?"

"That's exactly what I *do* mean," replied Mr. Melton seriously. "The young bucks are discontented, and are continually making 'war medicine.' Of course, the old men of the tribes do all they can to keep them within bounds, for they know how useless any outbreak would be. But the young men have never had the bitter experience of their fathers, and at present they seem very restless."

"But I thought the days of Indian outbreaks were over," exclaimed Tom excitedly; "why, they wouldn't have a ghost of a chance if they started anything now."

"Just the same there are enough of them to make trouble, if they ever got started," said Mr. Melton soberly. "Of course, as you say, the uprising would be suppressed quickly enough, but not perhaps without considerable bloodshed and loss of property. At any rate, the prospect of such an outbreak is enough to keep people living anywhere near the reservation boundary on the anxious seat."

"But I should think," remarked Dick, "that the authorities would make such preparations to subdue an uprising among the Indians that it would be crushed before they had a chance to get off the reservation."

"Well, the authorities *have* taken every possible precaution," replied Mr. Melton. "Jim Hotchkiss, the sheriff, told me that word had been passed to officers of the forts to have the troops in

readiness for instant action. But the 'noble red man' is cunning in his own way, and lays his plans carefully. And when he is ready to strike he strikes quickly, like the snake. A marauding band will attack and sack a farmhouse, and be forty miles away before the troops arrive on the scene. And in a country as large and wild as this it is something of a task to corner and subdue them."

"There hasn't been any trouble of the kind for a long time, has there?" asked Dick.

"No, not for a good many years," answered Mr. Melton; "and that inclines me all the more to take the present situation seriously. These uprisings come only at long intervals now, but it seems impossible to prevent them altogether. After an outbreak has been put down the Indians are very quiet for a time. They have probably suffered considerable loss of life, and been severely punished by the government. For years the memory of this lingers, but gradually it fades away, and the rising generation of young bucks, with the inherited lust of fight and warfare running riot in their blood, become restless and rebellious under the restraints of civilization and government. They hear stories of their ancestors' prowess from the lips of the old men of the tribe, and they long to go out and capture a few 'pale face' scalps on their own account. After a while they work themselves up to the required pitch, and some fine day a band of them sallies forth on the 'war path.' Then there is a brief time of plundering and murdering, until the troops can come up with them. Then there's a scrimmage, in which most of the band is exterminated, and the rest are herded back to the reservation, with most of the fight gone out of them."

"I should think a few experiences like that would teach them wisdom, and keep them from repeating the experiment," commented Bert.

"It would seem so," assented Melton, "but," with a smile, "youth is always prone to disregard what is told it by its elders, and to insist on finding out the why and wherefore of things by bitter experience."

"I hope there's nothing personal in that," grinned Dick.

"Oh, not at all," replied his host with an innocent expression on his face, but a twinkle in his eye. "I wonder what could have given you that idea."

"Nothing," replied Dick. "I just thought it barely possible, that's all."

"Oh, no," disclaimed Melton, "nothing could have been further from my thoughts."

Dick looked suspicious, and Tom and Bert laughed heartily.

After this little interruption, the talk went back to the subject of the threatened Indian uprising. After a time Mr. Melton said: "It might be a good idea for you boys to ride to town to-morrow and get the latest news. There'll be very little going on about the ranch to-morrow to interest you, and it will be a good way to spend the day. Besides, there are one or two things I forgot when in town, and while you are about it you can get them and bring them back with you."

This plan was received by the boys with acclamation, and they immediately set to making preparations. It was a considerable distance to the town, and they planned to make an early start, before the intense heat of the day set in.

They accordingly packed their "war-bags" that same evening, and before retiring had made every preparation for the morrow's trip.

The next morning they were up with the sun, and after a hasty breakfast leaped into their saddles and were off. It was a glorious day, and the exhilarating air made them feel "right up on their toes," as Tom expressed it. Bert felt called upon to reprove Tom for using this expression, for, as he gravely pointed out, they were not on their own toes at all, but on the horses', so to speak.

"Aw, forget it," retorted Tom flippantly; "it's toe bad about you, anyway."

Having delivered this shot Tom chirruped to his horse, and set off at a smart gallop, followed by Dick and Bert. The two latter hadn't decided what they would do to Tom when they caught him, but they were longing for a canter, anyway, and this gave them a good excuse. But after traveling in this rapid manner for a short distance they pulled in their steeds, for it would never do to tire them thus early in the journey. Tom, seeing that the pursuit had been abandoned, also reined in his horse, and allowed his companions to gain on him.

"Don't shoot," he called. "I'll promise to be good and never do it again—not till the next time, that is."

"All right," laughed Bert, "we'll suspend sentence this time, but at the next offense we won't be so lenient, will we, Dick?"

"Not by a long shot," said Dick; "we'll toe him along at the end of a lariat if he does, that's all." He grinned feebly as he got off this atrocious pun, but Bert and Tom refused to be beguiled into smiling.

"I never thought it of you, Dick, honest I didn't," mourned Bert, sadly shaking his head. "I naturally expect such things from Tom, but I had a better opinion of you. I suppose I'll have to let bygones be bygones, but just the same you deserve nothing less than ptomaine poisoning as punishment."

At this Tom and Dick gave utterance to a howl of execration that made their horses jump, and

two tightly rolled sombreros came flying toward Bert's head. But he ducked just in time, and then had a good laugh as Tom and Dick were forced to dismount and secure their misused headgear.

Soon his two friends were back in the saddle, however, and then they set off at a steady trot, discussing in a more serious vein the probability of such an uprising as Mr. Melton feared.

"I don't want it to happen," summed up Bert at last, "but if it's got to happen anyway, I hope it does while we're out here. I feel like a small boy going to a fire. As long as the house has to burn anyway, he wants to be Johnny-on-the-spot."

In this manner the time passed quickly, and before eleven o'clock they were nearing the town. A few minutes later they were riding through its streets, alertly on the lookout for any signs of impending trouble. All seemed much the same as usual, though, except that about the telegraph and newspaper offices there seemed to be unwonted bustle and excitement. Here and there knots of men had congregated also, who appeared to be discussing some important matter.

The three boys rode until they reached the post office, and then, dismounting and hitching their horses, went inside. The post office also served as a telegraph station, and there were various news bulletins posted about the room.

They hastened to one of these, and their faces grew grave as they read. It appeared from the bulletin that the Indians were on the very eve of an outbreak, although they had made no actual hostile moves as yet. Troops had been summoned to the reservation, however, and were expected to reach Helena that evening. They were ordered to stay in the town overnight, and press on for the reservation the following morning.

"It begins to look like business now, all right," said Bert, after he and his friends had digested this information.

"It sure does," agreed Dick, "but likely as not it will all blow over before anything really serious happens."

"Oh, of course, there's always that chance," said Bert, "but let's go outside and find out what the opinion of the townspeople is. They must understand the situation pretty thoroughly, and we can soon find out whether or not they regard this as a false alarm. But it looks to me as though real trouble were brewing."

Bert's opinion seemed to be shared almost unanimously by the citizens. Everywhere men were getting out and overhauling their firearms, and there was a run on the ammunition stores.

"I'm glad we brought our revolvers," remarked Tom; "there seems to be a chance of our having use for them by and by."

"I'm mighty glad we did," acquiesced Bert, "and I brought something beside my revolver, too. Just before we left the ranch I packed my Winchester repeater inside my blankets. I wasn't even thinking of the Indians then, but I thought we might have a chance at a little game, and it would be just as well to pack it along. There's not a chance in a thousand that we'll need it, but you can't always tell."

"It's lucky you did," said Dick; "have you got plenty of ammunition for it?"

"None too much," replied Bert. "I think while we're here I'll buy a few boxes of cartridges."

Acting upon this thought, they bought the ammunition, together with some extra cartridges for their revolvers. This done they made the purchases for Mr. Melton that he had requested of them, and after a satisfying meal at the best hotel set out on their return journey.

It was about two o'clock as they jogged out of town, and as they knew they had ample time in which to reach the ranch before dark they let the horses set their own pace. They had many things to talk about, although the heat of the sultry afternoon made even conversation a task. But nothing could subdue their spirits, and with never a care in the world they rode gaily on.

"It's quite near stage time," Bert remarked suddenly, "we're pretty near the trail, and if we meet it we can get the latest developments of the reservation situation from Buck, the driver. He always has a supply of the latest news. He knows more than the local newspapers of what's going on, I believe."

"I'll bet that's the coach now," exclaimed Dick, pointing to a cloud of dust in the distance.

"Yes, I guess it is," returned Bert, gazing intently at the distant smirch against the clear blue background of sky; "come along, fellows. Ride hard and we'll reach the trail before the coach comes along."

Accordingly they set spurs to their horses and galloped rapidly over the sunburned prairie. In a short time they reached the travel-hardened trail, beating the coach by a good half mile. Then they drew rein, and waited impatiently for the lumbering vehicle to reach them.

With rattle of harness and creak of complaining axle-tree the coach toiled over the endless trail, drawn by four raw-boned mules. As it drew near, the boys waved their sombreros to the driver, who returned the salute with a flourish of his long snakeskin whip.

At last it reached them and the driver rumbled a hoarse greeting. "How goes it, pards," he said,

"an' what's the good word?"

"That's just what we were going to ask you," said Bert with a friendly smile. "We've been hearing a lot lately of the expected redskin uprising, and we wanted to know if you had a line on the real situation, Buck. Is there anything really doing, or is it all just talk?"

"I dunno," answered the driver, "some says yes an' some says no, but if you want my honest opinion I'd say thet the Injuns ain't got nerve enough to start trouble no more. Why, they're so all-fired meek an' lowly thet——"

Zip! A bullet whizzed through the sultry air and whirled the stage driver's slouch hat from his head. Zip! Zip! Zip! and the air was alive with the whine and drone of bullets.

"Hold-ups, by the 'tarnal," yelled the driver, accompanying his words with a whirl of oaths. "Down behind the coach, Sam!" addressing the guard, who always rode beside him on the box with loaded rifle; "we'll stand 'em off, or I'm a greaser."

The guard leaped down behind the coach at the same moment that Bert and Dick and Tom made for the same shelter. There were only two passengers in the coach, and they, pale of face and with chattering teeth, joined the little group.

"Them shots came from that bunch of chaparral over there," said Buck, "but it's an almighty queer way for road agents to go about a job. They ginerally——"

"Injuns!" shouted the guard, who had been peering cautiously around the end of the coach. "Injuns, by the Lord Harry, shoot me if they ain't!"

A thrill passed over the three comrades, and they looked warily forth in the direction in which the guard had pointed. Sure enough, over the top of the chapparal they could discern a number of hideously painted faces surmounted by tufts of eagle feathers. The guard, recovering from his first paralysis of astonishment, took careful aim at one of them and pulled the trigger. A yell of pain followed the report of his rifle, and a savage shout went up from the band of redskins. They answered with a volley that bored through the sides of the coach, and narrowly missed several of the little group gathered behind it.

"We got to turn the coach over," exclaimed Buck, "the top an' floor's a whole lot thicker than the sides, and besides, as it is there's nothin' to prevent the bullets from comin' in underneath. Lend a hand, everybody, and we'll get 'er over."

He crept in between the mules and commenced unharnessing them. Bert and his friends leaped to his assistance, although during the process they were much more exposed to the fire of the Indians. The latter were not slow to perceive this, and they opened a steady fire. But fortunately they were poor shots, and most of their bullets went wild. Several struck the mules, however, and the unfortunate animals plunged and kicked so wildly that the three friends and the driver stood in almost as much danger from them as from the bullets. Finally the traces were unfastened, and the mules, released from the harness, raced wildly away.

Bert and the others dodged nimbly back behind the coach, and then all hands set to the task of overturning it. By dint of exerting all their strength they finally managed to lift one side of the clumsy vehicle until it toppled over with a crash.

"There," exclaimed Buck, wiping the perspiration from his face with a big bandanna handkerchief; "so fur, so good, but we got to do more than that. Them Injuns will start to surround us as soon as they see they can't pick us off from the front, and we want to be ready for them."

"What do you think we'd better do?" asked Bert.

"Fust thing is t' get the trunks and mail bags out o' the coach and build a barricade with them," replied the driver, "an' it looks as though we stood a good chance o' gettin' shot full o' lead doin' it, too. If them Injuns hadn't been sech all-fired poor shots we'd a been winged before this, I reckon."

"Well, as long as it's got to be done, we might as well get it over with," said Dick; "come on, fellows, one, two——"

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Bert. "I think it would be a good plan for those of us who have rifles to be on the lookout and pick off any of the redskins who show themselves. Even if we don't get any, it will prevent them from taking good aim."

"We ain't got but one rifle, though," objected Buck. "Sam, here," motioning toward the guard, "is the only one in the bunch with a rifle."

"No, I've got one in my blanket roll," replied Bert, and before the driver could answer was busily engaged in undoing the tightly rolled blanket.

"I reckon you two had better get anythin' you want off your horses," said Buck, addressing Tom and Dick, "an' then set the critters loose. They ain't a mite o' good here, an' they only take up valuable space."

The boys were loath to act on this advice, but they saw the wisdom of it, and so did as the driver suggested. They knew that the horses, as soon as released, would make for the ranch, and they

had little fear of the Indians being able to catch them. Accordingly, a few minutes later the three trusty animals were turned loose, each receiving a smart slap to start it on its way. They galloped off across the plain, and were soon lost to sight in the distance.

Meantime the Indians had been keeping up a straggling fire in the direction of the stage coach, and Bert and the guard set themselves to the task of silencing it. Lying flat on the ground, and aiming their guns cautiously around each end of the coach, they fired with sure aim every time a dusky arm or leg was exposed by their attackers. They were both crack shots, and their bullets seldom failed to reach their mark. Gradually the fire from the enemy died down, and at last stopped almost altogether. The precision of the white men astonished them, and they drew behind cover and held a conference.

"Now's the time!" exclaimed Buck. "Into the coach, boys, and rustle out the baggage. Lively's the word!"

All the little party, with the exception of the passengers, who seemed too paralyzed with fright to move, dashed into the coach, and before the Indians realized what was happening returned, each staggering under some bulky article, trunk, or mail bag.

The savages sprang into life, and a hail of bullets struck against the coach. But they were too late, and the defenders set to work to construct a circular rampart, using the coach as part of it. After arranging the baggage to their satisfaction they dug up earth and covered the improvised ramparts with it.

"So far, so good," said Buck, when at last they stopped to draw breath. "That will hold the red devils off for a time, anyway. But unless we get help in some way I'm afraid we're done for, anyway. There's a big party o' bucks there, and chances are that more will join them before mornin'. Then they'll come at us in earnest, and it will only be a question o' how long we can stand them off. After that——" he ended with a silence more eloquent than words.

"Isn't there—isn't there some way to summon aid?" asked one of the passengers, with blanched cheeks.

"I don't see how," replied Buck; "it would be jest plain suicide fer one of us to make a break now. Besides, it's twenty miles to the nearest town, and the Injuns'll be on us long before anybody could get to town and bring back help, even supposin' the Injuns didn't pot him before he got fairly started. O' course, we couldn't do anythin' before dark, nohow."

"Don't you think they'll attack before that?" asked Dick.

"No, I don't," replied the driver; "they'll want to surround us first, an' they won't start to do that until after dark, 'cordin' to my way o' thinkin'. What do you say, Sam?"

"Them's my sentiments exactly," answered that individual. "There ain't a chance in the world o' their doin' anythin' before that."

As the opinions of these two veterans coincided the matter was regarded as settled, and the boys commenced overhauling their pistols to make sure they were in perfect shape.

There was no further movement on the part of their besiegers, but Buck and Sam knew full well that the Indians were far from giving up their attack. To them the respite was more ominous than an active sally, for they knew that the braves were hatching some scheme for their destruction.

"They're foxy as they make 'em," opined Sam grimly; "the critters are cookin' up some deep plan to circumvent us, or I'm a Dutchman. Jest wait an' see if they ain't."

"If anybody thinks them red devils ain't watching us closer than a cat watches a mouse," said Buck, "I'll just prove it to 'em mighty pronto."

He snatched his sombrero from his head, and placing it on the muzzle of the guard's rifle, held the piece up in the air so that the hat projected above the edge of the over-turned coach. Instantly a sharp fusillade broke from the Indian's position, and one bullet, better aimed than the majority, passed clean through the sombrero, whirling it off the rifle.

"I reckon that shows they ain't asleep," remarked Buck grimly; "ef they don't get our scalps it won't be from lack o' tryin'."

"We've got to figure out some way of getting word to town," exclaimed Bert fiercely. "There must be some way, if we could only think of it. I have it!" he shouted. "Listen! The new branch they've been putting through from the railroad is almost completed, and a foreman I was speaking to a few days ago said they had almost finished stringing the telegraph wires. They're probably up by now, and if I could only get to them I'd have help here in no time!"

"By all that's holy, the lad's right," exclaimed Buck, "an' it ain't far from here neither, considerin' jest the distance."

"But the chances are you'd never reach the railroad, Bert," said Dick anxiously; "they'd wing you before you got anywhere near it."

"I'll have to take a chance on that," responded Bert. "Besides, if I don't go our condition is hopeless, anyhow, so I might as well attempt it."

The two Westerners nodded their heads at this, and Buck said: "O' course, it's only a ragged chance, but it might go through at that. The best thing will be for him to make the try the first second after dark. The redskins won't start to surround us until then, and by quick work he might get out before they'd finished postin' a ring around us."

"But even if you get to the railroad how are you going to telegraph without an instrument?" inquired Tom.

"Leave that to me," replied Bert; "if I can only get that far I'll manage to telegraph all right, never fear."

By this time the sun was low in the west, and a short time afterward it dipped under the rim of the prairie. For a short time the sky was painted in vivid colors by its reflected rays, and then the sudden prairie twilight descended swiftly.

"Now's your time, son," said Buck; "are you all ready?"

"I'll start the first second you think it best," replied Bert, and then turning shook hands all around, ending up with Dick and Tom.

"We'd go with you, old friend, if it would do any good," said Dick, wringing Bert's hand. "I guess you know that without my saying it."

"I know it, all right," replied Bert; "but don't you worry about me. The Indian isn't born yet that can get my scalp."

As he finished speaking Buck said: "You'd better start now, my lad. It's so dark they can't see you, and I don't think they've had time to surround us yet. If you do get through and send the message make for town. Don't try to get back here, because you'd never make it, and if you did it would do no good. There's no use sacrificing your life along with ours."

"Well, I'll get there first," said Bert, "and then there'll be plenty of time to think about whether or not to come back." Needless to say, in his own mind there was little doubt that if it lay in his power he would return and fight, and if need be die at his comrades' side.

CHAPTER X

IN FEARFUL EXTREMITY

With the stealthy tread of a panther, Bert climbed over the improvised rampart, and a few seconds later his form merged into the enveloping darkness and was lost to the view of his anxious friends. They listened with straining ears for any sound of shot or struggle, but the deep silence of a prairie night remained unbroken.

Bert pursued his way swiftly, but at the same time he exercised all the knowledge that a life of adventure had given him to detect with ear or eye the presence of a lurking enemy. He had traveled several hundred yards when suddenly he heard what seemed to be a stealthy rustling, off somewhere to his right. He dropped to the ground like a flash, and, scarcely daring to breathe, peered through the velvety blackness, straining his eyes in an attempt to make out the cause of the sound.

For the space of perhaps a minute all was as still as the grave, and Bert had almost made up his mind that the noise must have been occasioned by a snake or lizard, when suddenly, within three feet of where he lay he made out the form of an Indian, a mere black splotch against the slightly lighter background of the sky. The savage did not move, and Bert knew that he had not been discovered as yet. But the dark form seemed to have no intention of going any further, and Bert came to the conclusion that the brave was one of the band that had been detailed to surround the devoted little party of whites.

Bert knew that it would be impossible for him to move without being discovered by the Indian, so he resolved on a swift, deadly attack as the only way out of the dilemma.

Gathering his muscles for the spring he suddenly launched himself like a thunderbolt at the Indian. With the same motion he drew his revolver and aimed a blow at the savage's head, for he knew that a single shot would give the alarm and frustrate all his plans.

But the wily redskin was not to be so easily caught off his guard. With a grunt of surprise he half turned to meet the attack, and the butt of Bert's revolver dealt him only a glancing blow. Before the savage had a chance to shout a warning, however, Bert had grasped him by the throat with one hand, while he rained blows from the clubbed revolver on him with the other. The Indian made a desperate attempt to loose his assailant's hold and secure the knife from his girdle, but Bert's attack was too fierce and deadly. In a few seconds the struggling form of the brave grew limp and fell to the earth.

Without giving him a moment's further notice, Bert started out over the desert at a swift run, guided by his almost instinctive sense of direction. He ran quickly and lightly with the speed and silence of a wolf, and he breathed a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving when he realized that he was

clear of the besiegers.

In a short time he reached the line of newly laid rails that marked one more stride of civilization into this far western country. He scrambled up the steep embankment, and was not long in locating a telegraph pole. He climbed this quickly and once securely seated in the crossbars made ready to send the message that meant life or death to himself and the little party back there by the over-turned stage coach, dependent on him for their very lives.

He drew from a pocket a pair of cutting pliers that he had secured from the coach's toolbox, and donned a pair of thick leather gloves that he had borrowed from the driver. With the pliers he severed the single telegraph wire, and grasped the two ends in his gloved fingers.

"Now," he thought, "if there's no current in the wire everything will have gone for nothing. But if there is——"

He brought the severed ends together, and was overjoyed to see a snapping little blue spark play about them.

"Great!" he shouted aloud, and then set himself to send the message. He was an expert telegrapher and knew the Morse code as well as he knew his own name. Of course, he had no means of telling whether or not anybody was receiving his sending, but had to go ahead on the chance that they were.

"Attacked by Indians," he sent. "Near stage-coach trail—twenty miles east of Helena. Send help, quick."

He repeated this message again and again, until he felt sure that somebody must have received it. Then he twisted the two ends of the wire together, and slid down the pole.

"Now to get back with Dick and Tom and the others," he thought. "It's going to be no easy matter, either. I have an idea it's going to be harder to get in than it was to get out."

He retraced his course with the utmost caution, until he judged that he must be nearing the Indian outposts. Then he dropped at full length on the ground and commenced crawling forward at a snail's pace, pausing every few yards to listen intently for any indication of danger. At one time he heard a murmur of guttural voices at no great distance, and proceeded with redoubled caution until he left the sound behind. Gradually he worked himself along until he knew he could be at no great distance from his friends. The danger of being caught by the Indians now seemed to be passed, but Bert realized that it would never do to approach his party without giving warning of his coming, as the chances were they would take him for an enemy and shoot before he could make himself known to them.

For a time he was at a loss to think of some signal that would be recognized by those within the improvised fort, but at last had an inspiration. Softly he whistled a bar of one of the old college songs. There was no reply at first, but he repeated the refrain a little louder this time, and was overjoyed to hear the tune taken up by a whistle that he recognized as Tom's. He waited a few minutes, to give Tom time to warn the others of his coming, and then ran swiftly forward until he reached the inclosure.

Dick and Tom almost hugged him in their joy at his safe return, and then questioned him anxiously as to whether he had sent the message.

"I got it through, all right," said Bert, "and I don't think there's much doubt that somebody received it. Now it's only a question of holding out until help comes."

"It'll have to come mighty soon," declared Buck, who had seemed much surprised at Bert's safe return; "at dawn or just before is the time the varmints will close in upon us."

The hours dragged on and, as Buck had predicted, just before dawn a hideous yell rent the air, and a shower of bullets whined over the heads of the besieged party.

They grasped their firearms and prepared for a desperate encounter. But for a few minutes after the outbreak all was silent as the grave, and in the slight respite the first pale streaks of dawn appeared in the eastern sky.

"Thank God for the light, anyway," exclaimed Dick fervently; "at least we'll be able to see what we're doing."

Before anybody could reply to this there was another shrill yell, and against the rapidly lightening sky the defenders could see a vague body of horsemen charging toward them.

"Shoot!" yelled Buck, suiting the action to the word. "Make every bullet tell." Outside of the two passengers, who were unarmed and could do little to aid the defense, there were five men behind the ramparts who were excellent marksmen. Dick's and Tom's revolvers barked viciously, and the deadly rifles wielded by Bert and the stage driver made havoc in the ranks of the attacking braves. Sam, the guard, wielded his heavy Colts with the skill and sure aim of a veteran, and the Indians broke ranks under the withering hail of bullets. They wheeled their horses off to either side of the stoutly defended fortification and galloped out of range, leaving a number of still figures on the ground.

"First blood for us," shouted Bert exultantly. "I guess we gave them a warmer reception than they figured on."

"Yes, but they'll be back pretty soon," said Buck. "There's a hundred of them if there's one, and they would never dare face the tribe again if they let themselves be beaten by half a dozen 'pale faces'."

Nothing could have suited the three comrades better, for their fighting blood was aroused, and all thought of danger was swallowed up in the primitive love of battle that is inherent in every man.

"Here they come," shouted Dick, and come they did, but more cautiously this time. They had learned their lesson, and realized how deadly was the white mans' aim. They hung low from the saddle, on the side farthest from the defenders, thus interposing the bodies of their horses as shields between themselves and the defenders.

In this fashion they galloped and wheeled back and forth in front of the breastworks, firing over and under their horses, and drawing ever a little closer, a little closer, until they should close on the devoted little band of whites and annihilate them.

Bert's unerring rifle never failed of its mark, and whenever an Indian raised his head ever so little over his horse's back the Winchester spoke and one more still form was added to the many already strewn over the ground. The revolvers barked steadily and terrible havoc was wrought among the ranks of the attacking redmen.

But now their savage blood was up, and death itself had lost its power to daunt them. Slowly the circle about the besieged constricted, and suddenly the attackers, at a given signal, abandoned their horses and, springing to the ground, rushed forward, shooting and emitting blood-curdling yells as they ran.

"Stand together, boys," yelled Buck, "we'll stand back to back and fight it out to the bitter end."

Nobody had time to answer, but they did as he suggested. The Indians were now close upon them, and with wild yells mounted the low embankment that had hitherto protected the white men. Rifles were useless at this short range, and Bert and the stage driver clubbed theirs and met the first savages over the embankment with death-dealing blows from the clubbed weapons. The savages pressed forward so fiercely and in such numbers that soon even this became of no avail, and they had recourse to their revolvers. The six-shooters barked steady streams of fire, doing fearful execution among the packed ranks of the attacking redmen.

The Indians were now fighting chiefly with knives, and the defenders began to suffer, too. One of the passengers dropped to the ground under a wicked thrust from the knife of a giant Indian, who seemed to be the leader. Then the big redskin, encouraging his fierce followers by voice and action, threw himself toward Dick, who happened to be nearest him. Dick had just fired the last shot from his revolver, and he had no time to reload. As the Indian sprang at him Dick clubbed his revolver, and made a terrific swing at the shaven head of his attacker. The savage dodged with the agility of a cat, and the blow merely glanced from his shoulder. With a yell of exultation the Indian raised his sharp knife, still dripping with the blood of its last victim. But before the weapon could descend, Bert's fist shot out like lightning, catching the redskin a terrific blow under the chin. The Indian's head snapped back, and he was almost lifted from the ground by the impact. Then he fell limply, and the fight waged on over his unconscious form.

The attackers, instead of being daunted by the fall of their leader, seemed spurred to an even greater pitch of ferocity, and fought like very demons. The whites, fighting silently and grimly, resolved to sell their lives as dearly as might be, presented a solid front and battled with the grim courage and ferocity of desperation. Bert and Dick and Tom fought as one unit, and again and again repelled the assaults of their swarming enemies.

But they were battling against overwhelming odds, and the end could not be far off. Sam, the guard, was down, whether dead or only wounded they did not know. All of them were wounded, and Tom's left arm hung useless at his side. They had no time to load their revolvers, and, with the last shot fired, drew their sharp hunting knives and fought like cornered wildcats. Eyes bloodshot, the odor of blood and sweat in their nostrils, they time and again flung back the leaping, yelling hordes pressing in on them.

But there is a limit to human endurance, and their arms were beginning to weaken, their aim to be less certain. Then suddenly the fierce attack wavered and weakened. To their dazed senses came the noise of rifle shots, and the sound of a bugle's strident note. Before they could realize that help had at last arrived the Indians had broken away and with wild yells were making for their horses. A detachment of cavalry set out in pursuit, while the commanding officer and his staff rode over to the exhausted defenders.

As they rode they looked wonderingly at the numbers of Indians scattered over the bloodsoaked ground. They galloped up to where the defenders, or what remained of them, lay panting on the ground, ringed about by a circle of those who had fallen by their hands.

"Well, boys!" exclaimed the captain, "I guess we came just in the nick of time. You were about at the last ditch, but from all the signs you must have put up a corking fight."

Before any one could answer, the surgeon, who had accompanied the rescuing party, arrived on the scene, and immediately took charge of the wounded men. One of the passengers was past all aid, and the other was badly wounded. The doctor shook his head when he examined the senseless but still breathing form of the guard, but finally announced that he had a chance to

recover. Among the three boys Tom's wounded arm was the most serious injury sustained, although they had all suffered cuts and slashes and were weak from loss of blood.

By the time their wounds had been dressed and bandaged the first of the pursuing cavalry returned with the prisoners they had captured. An hour later the last of them rode in, reporting that the braves who had escaped capture had scattered to the four points of the compass, making further pursuit useless.

"Very well," said Captain Graham, their leader; "we'll return to Helena with the prisoners. But you lads," he said, turning to the three friends, "where were you bound for when you were attacked?"

Bert told him, and the captain told off half a dozen troopers to escort them to the ranch. "You deserve the highest praise for the plucky fight you put up," he said, "and I don't want your lives put in jeopardy by any of the redskins who may return to this neighborhood after we leave. I imagine they've had all the fight taken out of them by this time, however, and they'll probably make a bee line for the reservation. But it is best to be on the safe side, at all events."

The boys thanked him heartily for his timely aid, and then, each mounted on a trooper's horse, they and the escort set off in the direction of the ranch, first shaking hands with Buck, the stage-coach driver.

"You're plucky lads," he exclaimed, wringing their hands, "and we all put up the scrap of our lives. I don't know about old Sam"—here a shadow passed over his face—"but he's a tough old sinner, an' I reckon he'll pull through all right. I hope I'll see you lads again some time, I sure do."

It was with real regret that the friends parted from him, and more than once they turned in their saddles and waved their hats to him, until his sturdy figure was swallowed up in the distance.

Shortly after this they descried an approaching dust-cloud in the distance, and the troopers, thinking it might be a new band of Indians or some of the survivors of the dispersed one, unslung their rifles and made preparations to give them a warm reception.

As the cloud drew nearer, however, figures began to emerge from it, and in a few minutes the boys were able to make out the familiar faces of the ranch cowboys, headed by Mr. Melton. They were all armed to the teeth, and were spurring their horses along at a gallop.

Soon they were within hailing distance, and as the cowboys recognized the three boys among the troopers they emitted joyful yells, and by way of salute many of them fired their revolvers in the air. Mr. Melton appeared more overjoyed than anybody else, however, and as the two parties met and drew rein he exclaimed:

"Thank the Lord you're safe! When your horses galloped in late last night without you I feared the worst. Tell me what has happened."

The cowboys crowded around, and listened eagerly while Bert gave an account of the attack by the Indians and its result. When he had finished, but before anybody had time to say anything, the corporal, who commanded the escort, broke in: "From the way he tells it," he said, "you might imagine that it had been a good deal less of a fight than it was. But we counted over twenty dead redskins, besides a lot that were more or less badly wounded. It must have been *some* shindy, take it from me."

"I'm sure proud of you boys," exclaimed Mr. Melton, with glistening eyes; "but I'm not so much surprised, after all. I always knew you were grit clear through, anyhow."

"Oh, there was nothing very wonderful about it," disclaimed Bert. "We had to fight, whether we wanted to or not. It wasn't a matter of choice."

"Well, we won't argue the matter," smiled Mr. Melton; "what you need now is food and rest and a little nursing. We'll ride back home just as soon as we can, where you'll get plenty of all three. I guess we won't need to trouble you any more," he continued, addressing the corporal commanding the detachment; "there's enough of us here to hold our own in case of an attack, I think."

"I reckon so," said the corporal, sizing up the score or more of lean, square-jawed cowboys, "and in that case we might just as well return to camp."

He took leave of the three comrades, who thanked him for his escort, and with the troopers at his heels galloped off.

On the trip to the ranch the cowboys crowded around the boys, and plied them with innumerable questions, which they answered to the best of their ability. On their arrival they were turned over to motherly Mrs. Melton, who insisted on redressing their wounds, and then, after they had made a hearty meal, packed them off to bed.

"Gee, boys!" exclaimed the foreman, before the cowboys dispersed to their allotted tasks, "those lads are sure *there* when it comes to deliverin' the goods, ain't they? An' to think that once in a moment of besotted ignorance I referred to them as 'tender-feet.' Why, it don't seem possible them boys can be Easterners at all. It seems like they jest *must* 'a' been born west o' the Rockies."

As this was the highest eulogium any of them could think of, they acquiesced in their foreman's

CHAPTER XI

WITHIN AN ACE

Work about the ranch went steadily on, and there were few interruptions to the daily course of events. But one day a small black cloud appeared on the western horizon, and grew larger with amazing rapidity. Soon it had so increased in size that it obscured the sun, and a gloomy twilight settled over the earth.

Bert and Dick and Tom were in the neighborhood of the branding pen, watching the men throw the cattle and brand them with Mr. Melton's mark. At first they did not notice the gathering storm, but as the sun grew dimmer and dimmer they looked up, as did many of the cowboys, and saw the ominous-looking cloud. The cattlemen gave it but one glance, and then quit their tasks and began to securely rope and tie the animals inside the corral and make everything trim and shipshape.

The boys were somewhat surprised to see such precautions being taken against what they thought was merely going to be a thunder shower, but they had gained experience enough to know that when anything was done on the ranch there was generally some good reason back of it, and they had also learned not to ask direct questions.

They wished to know the cause of the evident anxiety on the part of the ranchmen, however, so Bert set about getting the information in the manner they had learned by experience was best.

"Looks as though there were going to be something doing pretty soon, doesn't there?" he remarked to "Chip," one of the most experienced members of the working force.

"Somethin' doin'?" exclaimed Chip. "Waal, I reckon they will be somethin' doin', and mighty soon, too. We're goin' to beat it for the bunkhouse some soon, and you'd better come along with us. Chances are you won't have time to make the ranchhouse. When a norther once gets started, things happens pretty fast, so ef you don't want to get soaked an' run a good chance o' gettin' blown away you'd better come along with us, all three o' you."

A "norther!" The boys had heard tales of the fury of these storms, and now they would have an opportunity to judge for themselves the truth of these stories. They had always believed them exaggerated, but the haste and anxiety of the ranchmen told them that something out of the ordinary was expected.

The air was close and oppressive, and not a breath of wind rustled the dry prairie grass. The boys mopped their foreheads, and hurried along with the men. By this time the entire sky was overspread with a funeral pall, and it was so dark that they could hardly see. When they were within a few hundred yards of the bunkhouse they heard a weird whining noise far off over the prairie, and suddenly a little puff of cool air struck against their heated faces.

At this moment Sandy, followed by several cowboys, dashed up, and they all leaped from their horses. "We'll jest have time to make the bunkhouse," he said; "the wind will reach us in another minute. Lively's the word, boys."

He and the others with him who had horses dashed behind the bunkhouse, and tethered the frightened animals where they would be sheltered in some measure from the wind and rain. They dashed around the end of the building and ran through the door, preceded by the party with which the boys had started from the corral. The door of the bunkhouse was slammed shut just in the nick of time.

With a shriek and a roar the norther was upon them. The wind blew with terrific violence, and rain dashed in great sheets against the windows and drummed on the roof with a noise that made it difficult for the men to hear the sound of each other's voices. The building quivered and trembled as the fierce gusts shook it in their grasp, and it seemed as though it must be torn away from its foundations. But it had been stoutly built with an eye to resisting just such storms, and held firm. The air was filled with grass, bits of planking, and other wreckage that it had picked up in its furious course. The boys gazed out the windows, wondering mightily at the tremendous force of the gale, which closely approached that of a cyclone. They had been in storms at sea, and a gale was no new thing to them, but this surpassed anything of the kind they had ever seen.

"I'm mighty glad we weren't caught out in this," shouted Bert into the ears of Tom and Dick. "I never thought it *could* rain so."

And his astonishment was shared by his friends. "Rain" hardly seemed an adequate word to describe the torrents that poured down. The sky seemed fairly to open, and the rain descended in solid sheets. The ranchmen took it all calmly, however, and loafed lazily in their bunks, smoking pipes and gazing contemplatively up at the roof. Weather conditions they had learned to take as a matter of course, as all men do who earn a living in the open, and they accepted philosophically what Dame Nature meted out to them.

The fury of the storm continued unabated for perhaps half an hour, and then began to slacken perceptibly. The wind still tore at the rude building and the rain continued to fall heavily, but with less of their former violence. The rattle of the rain on the roof grew less deafening, and it became possible to make one's self heard without being under the necessity of shouting.

"I reckon the worst of it's over," remarked Sandy, after a time; "but this here rain ain't goin' to stop fer an hour or more, and I vote that to while away the ted-ium of this here interval some one o' you shorthorns tells us a yarn. You're all good liars, and yuh ought to be able to make somethin' up if yuh can't rec-lect nothin' thet really happened."

"Ef it comes t' that," exclaimed Chip in a resentful tone, "what's the matter with you goin' ahead and turnin' the trick. There ain't nobody here that knows better'n you how to keep the recordin' angel workin' double shifts."

There was a laugh at this, but when it subsided Sandy had his answer ready: "It ain't a question o' lyin' with me," he explained. "I've been in so many scrapes that only a man of extraordinary intelligence and iron nerve like myself could 'a' pulled out of, that there ain't no call for me to make up nothin'."

"That stuff sounds all right as long as you're sayin' it," said Chip skeptically; "but jest to prove it, supposin' you take the bit in your teeth an' spiel off one o' these here adventures o' yourn."

"Well, mebbe I will," replied Sandy thoughtfully, "mebbe I will." He paused reflectively a few moments while he filled and lighted his pipe. The rain still beat steadily against the roof and windows of the bunkhouse, but the wind now came only in fitful gusts.

Everybody, with the exception of the three boys, was smoking, and a blue fog drifted and eddied through the atmosphere. At last Sandy appeared to have collected his thoughts, and after a few vigorous puffs to get his pipe drawing well began his story.

"What I'm goin' to tell yuh about," he said, "happened before I became a cattle puncher. Then I was workin' in the lumber business up in the Michigan woods fer Dodd & Robertson, one o' the biggest concerns in the line. We'd had a pretty successful winter, the boys were all in good humor, an' the daily cuts averaged pretty high. But the weather was cold, mighty cold, I can tell yuh. We'd swing an axe until we had to take off our coats, and we'd be wet with sweat, but if we stopped work fer as much as a minute we had to skip back into our coats again, or our clothes would freeze on us as we stood there. Take it from me, boys, it was cold with a capital C.

"But all this ain't gettin' me any further along with my yarn. As I say, the winter was a bitter one, and the wild things, panthers an' wolves an' sech, were pretty hard put to it to rastle enough grub to keep them alive. Natchally, this made 'em plumb ferocious, and they used to come right into the clearin' around the camp, hopin', I suppose, to pick up somethin'. The cook had to watch out to keep the supply house closed up tight, or there'd 'a' been a famine in camp, sure.

"Waal, one day the foreman sent me out to look over a section of timber land some distance from the camp, an' I set off right after breakfast. I took my axe along, o' course; no lumberman ever thinks o' goin' anywhere without his axe, any more than you boys figure on travelin' around without packin' a six-gun with yuh. I took enough grub with me to last the day out, fer, as I said, it was a longish distance, an' I didn't reckon t' get back much before dark. It was the middle o' winter, an' the days up there in the woods were mighty short.

"The snow was pretty deep, but I traveled on snowshoes, an' didn't have much trouble gettin' along. I made tol'able time, an' made a rough survey o' the timber before I unpacked my grub. After eatin' I started back to camp, congratulatin' myself that I'd reach it with time an' to spare. But as some poetry sharp I once heard of says, 'Man proposes, but the Almighty disposes,' or words that mean the same thing. I'd gotten pretty well along on the return journey when suddenly I heard somethin' snap, and before I had time to even jump aside a big dead tree slams down, knockin' me over an' catchin' my left leg under it.

"Waal, I saw stars fer a few minutes, but as soon as my head cleared off a mite I tried to wriggle myself loose. But the tree couldn't seem to see it that way. It had me good an' tight, and appar'ntly meant to enjoy my company fer a spell. At first, though, I couldn't seem to understand that I was really caught hard an' fast, an' it took a little time fer the idea t' sink in. When it did filter through to me I pretty near went crazy, I guess. I remember turnin' and twistin' until my leg felt like it was goin' to break clean off, an' I almost wished it would. But after a while I pulled myself together a little, an' tried to think o' some way out. As soon as I lay still even fer a minute the cold began to gnaw through me, and I knew I'd have t' do whatever I was goin' to do mighty quick, or I'd freeze to death.

"An' that warn't the only danger, neither. It was beginnin' to get dark, and suddenly, 'way off to the north, I heard the yell of a painter (or a panther, as you lads might call it)," turning toward the three comrades, who were listening intently.

"Waal, when I heard that yell somethin' that seemed colder even than the icy air clutched at my heart. O' course, I didn't have any weapon with me, except as you might call my axe one. I looked around fer it, and saw that it had fallen about three feet farther than I could stretch, and lay half buried in the snow, only the haft stickin' out.

"I made up my mind that I'd have to have that axe, anyway, an' I set to work gettin' it. After thinkin' a few minutes I took off a long leather belt I was wearin' and made a loop by runnin' it

through the buckle. From where I was layin' it was an almighty hard job to throw that loop around the axe handle, an' I reckon I must 'a' tried twenty times before I finally made to throw it over. Then I started pullin' easy-like on the belt to tighten the loop, so it would hold on the slippery handle. The belt was a leetle stiff, though, an' the loop wouldn't tighten very close. When I tried to pull in on it, the axe stuck in the crust that covered the softer snow underneath, an' the belt slipped off the handle.

"Waal, boys, I've had my share o' disappointments in this world, I reckon, but I think that was the hardest o' them all to bear. Howsomever, I knew there was nothin' to do but to keep at it until I got that axe, so after a lot o' false throws I got the loop over the handle agin. This time it held better, and at last the head o' the axe broke through the snow crust an' then it was easy t' pull it up to me. When I felt the haft in my hand a little hope come back to me, an' I figgered there might be a chance t' cut myself loose. But I was lyin' in sech a way that I couldn't rightly get at the tree noway, an' finally I had to give up tryin'.

"I've hearn more'n once of wild animals caught in traps gnawin' their own feet off fer the sake o' goin' free, an' the thought come to me of tryin' to chop myself loose in the same way. I think the only thing that kept me from doin' it was the thought that I'd rather be dead than be a cripple, anyway. An' o' course, I knew that arter a while, when I didn't show up at camp, the boys would suspicion thet somethin' was wrong an' make up a searchin' party to look for me. There's somethin' in all of us, I reckon, that keeps right on hopin' up to the very minute that we cash in an' leaves this here vale o' tears.

"But the worst was yet to come, as the story-book fellers say. It had begun t' get real dark, when I thinks I hears a rustlin' sound in the dead underbrush. I grabbed my axe, an' made up my mind to die fightin', anyway. I knew sooner or later some hungry critter would come along an' find me laid out there nice an' invitin', without a chance o' protectin' myself, and I figgered that arter that the end wouldn't be a long ways off.

"In a few minutes I heard the rustlin' sound again, only this time nearer. I twisted as far around as I could, and then I saw what was makin' the noise. Not thirty feet from me one o' the biggest painters I ever laid eyes on was creepin' stealthily along, sizin' me up with his glistenin' green eyes as he went.

"When he saw thet I had spotted him he stopped, crouchin' down clost t' the ground, ready to fight or run, accordin' t' the way things looked to him. Chances are he was half minded t' run, anyway, fer all the wild critters is mighty shy of a man, an' as a rule will go the long way around to keep out o' his way. But this brute was hungry, as I could tell by his lean flanks, an' he didn't scare as easy as usual. I yelled at him, but he didn't move, jest sat there an' looked at me with them unwinkin' eyes, tryin' his best to figger out the way things stood. Every onct in a while his eyes would leave mine, an' he'd glance casual-like around him, but they always came back.

"I knew it wouldn't be long before he got next t' the fact that I was down an' out, an' I was right. I've hearn people say thet animals don't reason, but they're a long ways from hittin' the bull's-eye. It warn't long afore thet painter had everythin' settled in his own mind, an' had decided thet I was helpless fer some reason an' would be easy pickin's fer him. He got up on all fours, and began to growl a little an' switch his tail. I knew then that it wouldn't be long before he came fer me, an' I took a fresh grip on the axe. I knew I didn't have a chance, but I figgered on puttin' my mark on the critter before he did fer me, anyway.

"He crept closer an' closer, growlin' and spittin' away fer all the world like a big tomcat gettin' ready t' fight. I makes a swing at him with the axe, an' he jumps back a little, and fer a few seconds jest crouches an' glares at me, his eyes like two big, gleamin' emeralds. Then he gathers himself fer a spring, an' I gets ready fer what I knows is comin'.

"Suddenly he shot through the air, an' as he comes down I slams out at him with the axe. The critter dodges even while he's in the air, but he couldn't squirm aside altogether, an' the sharp axe caught him a gash that laid his shoulder open. He gives a great yell, and then all I can remember is his landin' on me like a cyclone, fetchin' me a blow on the side of the head with his paw that it's a wonder didn't do fer me then an' there. After that everythin' went dark, an' the next I knew I was lyin' in my bunk at camp, with my leg done up in splints, my left arm, that had been chawed by the painter, done up in bandages, an' my head so bound up that there wasn't much left out but my nose.

"The boys told me that when I didn't show up at supper-time they began to get anxious, and when I hadn't showed up an hour later they got up a searchin' party and set out to look fer me in the direction they knew I'd be comin' from. They'd gone quite a ways when they heard the yell the painter gave when I slashed him with the axe, and rushed over in the direction o' the sound. They got there jest in the nick o' time, too, I reckon. Two minutes more an' I'd 'a' been done fer, sure."

Sandy ceased speaking, and everybody drew a long breath. "Did they kill the panther?" inquired Bert.

"No, worse luck," replied Sandy; "it was dark, and when they got close the critter made off before they had a chance at a shot. But, say!" he exclaimed, "the storm's over an' the sun is out, an' here we are loafin' in here yet. Vamoose, boys! scatter!" and they all piled out into a fresh and made-over world. Everything was washed clean by the torrential rainfall, and, strange to say, comparatively little damage had been done by the terrific wind. The ranchmen set about repairing whatever had been destroyed, and the three comrades walked toward the ranchhouse,

discussing Sandy's tale as they went.

CHAPTER XII

QUICK ON THE DRAW

Sandy rode up to the house, threw himself from the saddle and went into that room of the ranch that served as Mr. Melton's library and business office combined.

His employer looked up from some accounts he was going over and motioned the foreman to a seat.

"Well, Sandy," he said, as he noted the worried look in the latter's eyes, "what seems to be the matter? Out with it and get it off your chest."

"It's about them derned rustlers," said Sandy, with his usual directness coming straight to the point. "I'm afraid they're gettin' away with a good many of our beeves."

Mr. Melton's brows met in a puzzled frown.

"What makes you think so?" he asked.

"A heap of things," was the reply. "In the first place, the boys have found a lot of motherless calves galloping around and bleating for their mas. Of course, we always look for a few of those, but lately the number's been beyond all reason. Then, too, there's been quite a bunch of ornery fellers that the boys has caught sight of hangin' round where they didn't seem to have no business to be. Of course, that doesn't prove anything against them, and aside from givin' them a pretty sharp lookin' over, we couldn't do nothin' just on suspicion."

He took another bite from his plug of tobacco and hitched his chair a little closer.

"But yesterday," he went on, "Buck was riding herd up in the north section, and he saw a place leadin' up a gully where the ground was trampled down in a way that made it look almost as if there had been a stampede. He could see that a big drove had passed through there and that it must have been goin' in an almighty hurry. He thought at first they might have got scared of a grizzly or somethin', but if that had 'a' been so, some one of them would 'a' been caught and pulled down and there wasn't any sign of anything like that. Then he looked a little closer at the trail and he could see the track of hosses. Somebody was drivin' that herd."

"He come in a flyin' with the report, but it was after midnight and I didn't want to wake you up."

"But there's one thing more," he added, "that makes me dead sure. Chip meandered in from town last night, a little the worse for wear. He'd been celebratin' some and lookin' upon the likker when it was red, and he was so far gone that I guess he'd have slept somewhere on the road if his broncho hadn't had more sense than him and brought him home. He was too soused to know his name, and he didn't need no urgin' to tumble into his bunk and sleep it off. He's got an awful head this mornin', too, but when he heard Buck talkin' at breakfast about what he seen, he called to mind somethin' that one of his pals that works on the Bar Y Ranch off toward the east told him about, when he was a boozin' with him last night."

"It seems that this feller was comin' back from a round-up to his ranch the other day, and he saw the body of a steer, a little off to the right. He rode over to look at it, and, lookin' close, saw that the first brand had been burned over by another one. Of course, he knows most of the brands in this section of the country, and after he studied it over a spell, he knew for sure that the first brand was ours. Knew it by the little curlicue in the top corner of the O. The second brand had been put on kinder careless, in a hurry, as if the fellers that did it wanted to mosey along right quick. Then, too, he could see that the steer had died from bein' overdriven."

Mr. Melton rose and paced the floor in growing anger as he pondered the situation.

Like all Westerners, he hated cattle rustlers only less than he hated a horse thief. In years past he had had frequent battles with them when they had tried to raid his stock, and the dire punishment that he inflicted had made them willing of late to leave his ranch alone. For several years he had had immunity and had been inclined to think that he would be henceforth free of that particular pest. When Sandy had first begun to speak, he had thought there might be some mistake, and that the depletion of his stock might be traced to other causes. The last incident, however, had furnished positive proof and it was evident that the miscreants were due for another lesson at his hands.

"Was there any clue on that steer, outside of the changing of the brand?" he demanded.

"No," replied Sandy, "except just this. Chip's pal said that he thought the feller that did the branding was left-handed. The edge that was deepest burned was on the other side from what it usually is when a right-hander does it. Course, on account of the brands bein' mixed up like, he couldn't say for sure, but that's the way it looked to him."

"Do you know of anybody round these parts that is left-handed?" asked his employer.

"Can't say as I do," replied Sandy after a little meditation, "leastways, on any of the ranches around here. I know some of the boys that is almost as good with their left hand as the right, but not what you could call p'intedly left-handed. And anyway them fellers is as straight as a string, and I know they wouldn't mix up with any dirty work like that."

"Who had been riding herd on that north range before Buck saw the trail of the drove?" asked Mr. Melton abruptly.

"Let me see," answered Sandy, cudgeling his memory. "Why," he said after a moment, "it was Pedro. He had been up there three days before Buck relieved him."

"Ah, Pedro," echoed Mr. Melton.

There was a significance in his voice that caused Sandy to look up quickly, and, as he caught the look in his employer's eyes, a sudden suspicion leaped into his own.

"What!" he exclaimed. "Do you mean that Pedro was in cahoots with the gang?"

"I don't mean anything—yet," replied Mr. Melton slowly. "I don't want to do any one an injustice, and I haven't a particle of evidence that Pedro isn't as innocent as a new-born babe. He's a good rider and a good herder, and we've never had any fault to find with the way he does his work. But you know as well as I do that we didn't know a thing about him when he came riding along looking for a job. We were short-handed then and needed men desperately, and so we hired him, but I made up my mind that as soon as things got slack, and we had to lay some of the men off, he'd be the first to go. There may be good Indians and good Mexicans, and it may be my misfortune that I never met them. But Pedro is a half-breed—half Mexican and half Indian—and I've always noticed that that kind is apt to have the worst qualities of both. I've never liked him, but I've set that down to prejudice, and always tried to treat him exactly like the rest of the men. Now, as I said, I may be entirely wrong, but somehow I've got the notion in my head that those rustlers knew just who was to be riding herd on that section when they made their raid. But don't breathe a word of this to any one till we've got something more to go on. Keep your eyes wide open and see too if you can pump anything more out of Chip about that steer. I'll think it all over, and after dinner we'll get together and fix on some plan to get after those infernal scoundrels."

Sandy took his departure, and Mr. Melton was left alone with his problem. That it was a perplexing one was evident from his knitted brows and air of intense concentration.

With the exception of Mrs. Melton and Bert, he was alone in the house. The other boys were absent, having started out soon after breakfast. Dick and Tom had gone off with Buck to have a little experience in "riding herd." Bert, who had intended to go with them, had found it necessary to go to town to make some purchases. He had just finished his preparations and brought his horse to the door, in order to say good-by to his host before starting. At the first glance he saw that something had disturbed Mr. Melton's usual composure.

To his anxious inquiry as to whether anything was wrong, the latter responded by telling him the news Sandy had brought, carefully refraining, however, from mentioning his suspicions about the half-breed.

"Of course, it's nothing very important in one way of looking at it," he said. "The mere fact that I've lost a few head of cattle doesn't worry me at all. They might take a thousand and I wouldn't miss them. But those rustlers are the rattlesnakes of the West, and no man steals from me and gets away with it until I'm weaker and older than I am now. I suppose the fact is that my pride is hurt more than anything else," he smiled grimly. "I'd rather flattered myself that I'd built up a reputation in these parts that would keep those vermin at a distance. It galls me horribly that they should have the nerve to come up and rustle my stock right under my very nose. But if they think that they are going to get by with it, they have another guess coming," and into the eyes of the old warhorse came the look that Bert had learned to know in Mexico.

"Are you going to organize a force and go after them?" asked Bert eagerly.

Mr. Melton's eyes twinkled.

"Hit it right the first time," he said. "I suppose I ain't far out in guessing that you'd like to go along."

"You bet I would," replied Bert emphatically.

"Well, we'll see about it," answered his host. "But you'd better get along now if you expect to be home before dark. You've got a long way to go, and you'll have to give your horse a good breathing space before you start back. I promise that we won't start out for the rustlers without you, if you're really bent on going."

Bert thanked him, touched his horse with the spur, and, with a last wave of his hand was off on his journey.

In due time he reached the town, hitched his horse to the rail in front of the general store, and went in to make his purchases. This consumed some time, and when he was through, his vigorous appetite reminded him that it was time for dinner. There was only one place in that primitive town where it could be obtained and that was in a little annex to the leading saloon. Drinks of course were the things chiefly dealt in, but a meal also could be obtained at any time desired, and Bert went in, seated himself at a table in the corner, and ordered steak and eggs and coffee.

While this was being prepared he had ample time to look about him. The building was a mere shack of the roughest kind. The bar took up one whole side of the room, and the bartender was kept busy most of the time in serving drinks to the crowd lined up before it. At a number of small tables, miners, prospectors and cowboys were seated, with piles of poker chips heaped up before them. Some of the men were already drunk and inclined to be ugly, but most of them at that early hour were sober enough, though drinking freely. All without exception were armed, and the weapons peeped from their holsters within easy reach. Among these reckless and, in many cases lawless, dwellers on the borderland of civilization, the difference of a fraction of a second in offense or defense might mean the difference between life and death.

Still, matters were proceeding peaceably enough at the moment, and there was no indication of impending trouble. Bert's food was brought to him after a considerable wait, and he "waded" into it with characteristic vigor. The cooking was none too good nor was the food itself of superlative quality. But "hunger is the best sauce," and he was not inclined to be critical. He had, moreover, been too much of a traveler not to be able to adapt himself philosophically to any condition in which he found himself.

He was about to pick up his hat and go to the bar to pay for his meal, when he was struck by the tones of a familiar voice. He looked about quickly and saw Pedro, the cowboy employed at the ranch. He was surprised at this, as he was sure Pedro was supposed at the time to be on herd duty. Had Mr. Melton intended that he should be in town, he would have suggested to Bert that the half-breed might do his commissions for him and save him the long journey.

Bert's first thought, therefore, was that Pedro was "lying down on his job" and shirking duty for the sake of a day's debauch in town. It roused his indignation, as he always hated anything that savored of sneaking or disloyalty. Still, it was not his affair and Pedro was safe as far as he was concerned. He would not act as talebearer.

He had never liked the half-breed from the moment that he had met him. There was a sullen reticence that checked advances, and although he had always tried to be friendly, Pedro had held him at a distance. He was tall and swarthy, and, for one of his mixed race, not bad looking. But there was a furtive shiftiness in his eyes that were set too close together, that awakened distrust, and although Bert reproached himself for it and never revealed it by word or look, he could not help an instinctive aversion.

His first impulse was to approach and speak to the man, who had not seen him as he came in and was now standing with his back partly toward him, tossing down a drink that he had poured out generously from the bottle the bartender placed before him.

Bert checked himself, however, as he saw that Pedro had just greeted a man who had risen from a table where he had been sitting apart from the others, as though waiting for some one. An almost imperceptible sign passed between them that aroused Bert's curiosity. Nor was this lessened when the newcomer took from his pocket a pouch, such as gold dust is usually carried in, and slipped it over to Pedro, who placed it carefully in the breast of his buckskin shirt.

Here was the beginning of a mystery. Why should this man be giving money to the half-breed? To be sure, it might be in payment of a loan or a gambling debt. But, if so, why the air of secrecy?

The conversation with Mr. Melton that morning recurred to him. He pulled his hat over his eyes, half turned in his seat, and, picking up a greasy pack of cards that lay on the table began to lay them out before him as in solitaire. But under the brim of his sombrero, his keen eyes stole frequent glances at the two, who had now adjourned to a table in the farther corner and were engaged in a low and earnest conversation.

The stranger had before him what seemed to be a diagram, drawn on the back of an old envelope, and both studied it with care, Pedro especially, as though seeking to engrave it on his memory. Then he nodded assent to what the other had been saying, and they shook hands, evidently in confirmation of a bargain. Once more they adjourned to the bar, gulped down several glasses of the fiery liquor that masqueraded as whiskey, and then Pedro, with a gesture of farewell, went outside. A moment later Bert heard the clatter of hoofs as he rode away.

There was no further need of concealment, and with exceeding care Bert studied the features of the man who he felt sure was involved in some plan that boded no good to Pedro's employer.

The fellow was tall and heavily built, and dressed in a more gaudy style than that usually affected by the cowboys. Bert could not remember having seen him among the employees of the neighboring ranches. His face bore traces of drink and dissipation and was seamed with evil passions. There was a lurid glow in his eyes that brought back to Bert the memory of the men who had tried to hold up the train. He seemed naturally to fall into that class. Instinctively Bert felt that in some way he was to be ranked with the outcasts that war upon society. A cruel mouth showed beneath a hawk-like nose that gave him the appearance of a bird of prey. To Bert he seemed a living embodiment of all that he had ever heard or read of the "bad man" of the Western frontier.

The stranger stood a little while longer at the bar. Then he strolled over to a table where four men were playing, and watched the game with the critical eye of an expert.

Soon one of the men kicked his chair back and rose with an oath.

"Busted," he growled. "Not a dinero left. That last hand cleaned me out."

"Aw, don't go yet, Jim," protested one of his companions. "Your credit's good and you can play on your I. O. U.'s."

"Yes," agreed another. "Or you can put up that Spanish saddle of yours. I've allers had a kind of hankerin' fur that. It's good fur eighty plunks in chips."

"Nuthin' doin'," announced the first emphatically. "Any time I hold four kings and still can't rake in the pot, it shore is my unlucky day. But I'll be here with bells on next pay day. So long," and he strode out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

The others were preparing to go on three-handed, when the stranger intervened.

"If it's an open game, gents, and you've no objections, I'll take a hand," he said.

As no one demurred, he slid into the vacant chair, bought a hundred dollars worth of chips and the game proceeded.

For a time Fortune seemed to divide her favors impartially, and the chips before each player remained about the same. Then the luck changed and the stranger began to win heavily. He raked in one pot after another, losing only occasionally, and then, generally, when the stakes were small. The atmosphere about the table became tense and feverish, and gradually most of the others in the room gathered about the players and watched the progress of the game.

It was the newcomer's deal. The pack had been cut, and he was dealing out the cards, when suddenly one of the players leaped to his feet.

"Foul play," he shouted. "You dealt that last card from the bottom of the pack." And at the same instant he threw over the table and reached for his gun.

But quick as he was, the stranger was quicker. Like a flash his revolver spoke, and his opponent fell to the floor. But the others now had started shooting and there was a fusillade. The spectators dropped behind anything that promised shelter and the bartender went out of sight under the counter. Only after the revolvers had been emptied did the firing cease.

When the smoke lifted, three were lying on the littered floor, one dead and two desperately wounded. The stranger was not to be seen, but the pounding of hoofs outside told of his escape. He had gone, but not till Bert had seen one thing that registered itself indelibly on his mind.

The stranger had drawn and shot *with his left hand*.

CHAPTER XIII

TRAILING THE OUTLAWS

For a few minutes the wildest confusion prevailed in the saloon. The noise of the shooting had emptied the other bar-rooms, as well as the houses of the little settlement, and from all quarters people came flocking to the scene of the tragedy. The dead man was removed to a room in the rear, and the wounds of the others were bound up with rude surgery, pending the arrival of a doctor, for whom one of the cowboys had ridden off post haste.

Bert's quick mind was busy piecing together the events of the past crowded hour. That the stranger was left-handed, although unusual in that region, proved nothing by itself. But the dead steer had borne the mark of a left-handed man—and Pedro was in charge of a part of Melton's stock—and he had sneaked away from his work to talk with this ruffian, apparently by appointment—and the latter had given the half-breed money. Had Bert known the additional fact that Pedro had been riding herd in the section where a large drove had recently disappeared, the conclusion would have been irresistible that he and the stranger had been in league to "rustle" Melton's cattle. But even without this last fact, the evidence was strong enough. All of these happenings, taken together, pointed unerringly toward the identity of one at least of the rustlers and gave the clue to the mystery.

His first impulse was to follow the fleeing murderer and either try to capture him or find out the rendezvous of the gang to which he belonged. But when he ran out to his horse, the fugitive had vanished, and there was nothing in the dusty road that gave any inkling of the direction he had taken.

Pursuit being impossible, there was but one thing left for him to do. He must get back to the ranch at once and reveal all he knew or guessed of the conspiracy. Pedro, at any rate, would be within reach, and a judicious application of the "third degree" could probably wring from him enough to put them on the track of the rustlers and bring the gang to justice. And his blood tingled at the thought of the fight that was probably coming, for the rustlers, brought to bay, would not surrender tamely. It was better to die from a bullet than dangle at the end of a rope, and they would battle with the fierceness of cornered rats.

He untied his horse, sprang into the saddle and set out for the ranch. His horse had had a good rest and was full of running, especially as his face was turned homeward. But, despite his own impatience, Bert subdued his mount to a trot that he could keep up indefinitely, and gave himself

up to reviewing the stirring scenes from which he had just emerged.

He was passing through a patch of woodland, from which a deep gully diverged to the right, when he heard the whinny of a horse. Instantly he clapped his hand over the nostrils of his own mount to keep him from answering. Then he slid to the ground, tied a rope around his horse's jaws to keep him quiet and secured him to a tree. On hands and knees he crept forward through the underbrush in the direction of the sound. He reached the bank of the gully and peered over.

A little brook ran over the stones at the bottom of the gulch. Stooping over it was a man with his back toward him. A horse was picketed near by, contentedly munching the grass that grew thick and lush on the border of the stream. The man's right arm was bared to the elbow, and he was dashing water on a wound just above the wrist. Then he tore a strip from his shirt and proceeded to bandage the arm as best he could, accompanying the action with groans and curses that told of the pain he was enduring.

Bert's first thought was to steal down upon the man and at the point of his revolver demand his surrender. He had the drop on him, and, quick as the ruffian had proved himself on the draw, he would be at too great a disadvantage to resist. But, after all, what right had he to arrest the man? As far as the shooting in the saloon was concerned, the dead man had started the fight, and the other had acted in self-defense. The question of cheating was an open one that could probably never be determined. It had not been a murder, but a duel, and the quicker hand and better shot had won. There was no call for Bert to interfere.

As to the charge of cattle rustling, he had absolutely no proof to go upon. He had the moral conviction that the man was mixed up in the affair, but not a scintilla of evidence that would stand for a moment in a court of law. It would be high-handed and indefensible to make this man a prisoner, and take him on to the ranch for questioning by Melton. He would simply stand on his rights and defy them to prove anything against him. They would be forced to let him go, and, being henceforth on his guard, it would be doubly difficult to trap him and his gang.

No, the waiting game was the only one to play under the circumstances, and Bert replaced the revolver that he had half drawn from his belt. But he had no intention of resuming his journey to the ranch. Fate had brought him in contact with this man, when he had given up all expectation of finding him, and he was too good a sportsman to overlook any point in the game. He would keep him in sight, hang on his flank, follow his trail wherever it led, in the hope of finding the rendezvous of the gang. Then he would ride with whip and spur to the ranch, Melton would gather his men together, and they would swoop down on the outlaws' camp and catch them red-handed with their booty.

While he was settling on this course of action as promising the best results, the man had completed the task of bandaging. Bert looked for him to unhobble his horse and resume his journey. But, to his surprise, the fellow stretched himself out on the grass as though in no particular hurry. Yet there was an air of expectancy about him, and it flashed across Bert that he was waiting for some one. And this impression was heightened by the glances he cast toward the upper end of the gully, and the way he lifted his head from time to time as though listening for a signal.

It came at last, a whistle three times repeated. Instantly he sent back an answering call, and a moment later two men emerged from the farther end of the ravine and rode their horses slowly toward their waiting companion.

They were dressed in ordinary cowboy fashion and rode as though they had been born to the saddle. In addition to the revolvers in their holsters, each carried a rifle slung in the hollow of the arm. One was of enormous bulk and a shock of flaming red hair showed beneath his sombrero. The other was of medium build, but wiry and quick as a cat in his movements. Both were of the same evil stamp as the first, although they lacked the look of authority that marked him as a natural leader.

They gave an exclamation of surprise as they saw the bandaged arm, and were off their horses in an instant.

"What's the matter, cap?" inquired the smaller man. "Did they get you bad?"

"Bad enough," snarled the other with a string of blasphemies. "I guess they've broken a bone in my wrist. But the feller that did it will never do no more shooting." And in fervid words, interrupted by curses as his sore arm gave a worse twinge than usual, he related the events leading up to the affray.

The others listened with perfunctory grunts of sympathy, although they seemed less concerned about him personally than over the changes the wounding might make in their plans.

"It's lucky it's the right arm, anyway," consoled one of them. "Yer'll still be able to shoot as well as ever until yer get all right again."

"Yes," assented the captain grudgingly, "it's the first time I've ever felt glad that I'm left-handed. And I'm shore glad that I fixed that deal up with the half-breed before the scrap came off. Handed him over his share of the last swag, and got it all settled to pull off another trick a week from tomorrow."

They gathered eagerly about him to learn the details, and Bert strained his ears to catch the

fragments of conversation that floated up to him. He could detect the name of "Melton" and "Pedro" as often recurring, but to his intense disappointment could get no coherent idea of the felony the rustlers had in view. Had he done so, his quest would have ended then and there. It would then be simply a matter of laying an ambush at the given time and place, into which the rascals would walk blindly, and from which there would be no escape. But when at last the conference was over, he was no wiser than before, except that his suspicions as to the half-breed had become a certainty.

The afternoon was well along now, and the captain, casting a glance at the sun, rose hastily to his feet.

"Come along," he growled. "We can do our chinning later on. We'll have all we can do now to get to camp before dark."

"Before dark." Bert looked at his watch. It was nearly six o'clock. It would not be fully dark until eight. That meant that the rendezvous of the gang was within two hours' ride. Allowing ten miles an hour, it meant a distance of perhaps twenty miles.

But that was assuming that they went on well-traveled roads, where the horses could be given their head. Bert felt sure that they would not do this. The conditions of their lawless life made it necessary for them to seek refuge in the wilds, where riding would be hard and slow. Their lair was doubtless in some secluded valley or coulee, where they could hide the stolen stock, secure from discovery until a favorable opportunity offered to drive it out at night far from the plundered ranches. The place, therefore, might not be more than fifteen miles distant. Otherwise the outlaws would hardly be able to make it in the time mentioned, over the rough trails they would probably follow. That this conjecture was correct was proved by the fact that, instead of returning to the broad road up which Bert had ridden, the men mounted their horses and turned their heads in the opposite direction up the ravine.

But how could he follow without detection? If he let them get too far ahead, he might lose track of them altogether. On the other hand, if he followed too closely they might hear the sound of his horse's feet, or, turning in the saddle, might see his figure outlined against the sky. In that case the game was up. It would be a matter of flight, or an encounter in which, against such odds, he could look for nothing but capture or death. And in either event, his plans for the breaking up of the band would come to nothing.

There was but one alternative. He must follow on foot.

He was in superb condition and could do it easily. Running was his game. He had taken the measure of the fleetest runners in the country, and had, by so doing, won the right to represent America in the Olympic Games. And when he had carried off the honors in the Marathon race over the crack flyers of all the world, he had made the distance of twenty-six miles, up hill and down, in a trifle over two hours and thirty minutes, or a sustained rate of more than ten miles an hour. To be sure, he was then trained to the hour and at the top of his form. But even now, although not strictly in training, his outdoor life and clean living had kept him in fine fettle, and he was fit to "run for a man's life." A horse could beat him in a sprint, but there were few mustangs on the ranch that he could not have worn down and beaten in a stretch of twenty miles.

It was with no lack of confidence, therefore, that he reached his decision.

He hurried back to his horse, tore a scrap of paper from his note-book and hastily scribbled a note to Dick. It was in cipher, so that if it fell into hostile hands no one else could understand its purport. He told him of his discovery and urged him to have Melton put Pedro under guard until his return. He adjured him not to worry, as he would probably be back before twenty-four hours.

A word of greeting to Tom and the Meltons, and he placed the paper securely under the saddle, with just an end protruding to attract notice. Then he released the horse, untied his jaws, gave him a smart slap on the back and sent him off toward home. The delighted broncho threw up his heels and set off at a pace that promised soon to get him to his well-filled manger. Then, with a last glance at his weapon, to see that it was in perfect trim, Bert vanished into the woods and set out upon the trail as silently and swiftly as an Indian.

CHAPTER XIV

THE RACE FOR LIFE

He could hear the crackling of the shrubbery as the horses of the outlaws pushed their way through to the higher ground, and it was not long before he caught sight of them, riding in single file, the captain leading the way.

With the utmost caution he followed, taking advantage of every bush and tree, ready to dodge behind them or fall to the ground as the case might demand. For a time they proceeded at a walk, owing to the rough going, but as soon as they got to more level ground they put the spurs to their horses and galloped on at a rapid gait. Bert drifted after them like a ghost, never letting them get more than half a mile a head, for fear that they might turn into some byroad and give him the

slip. Twice one of the men turned in the saddle and looked behind him, probably more as the result of habit than from any real fear that they might be followed, but each time Bert had discounted the movement and was lying flat on the ground.

As the latter had surmised, the most of the way lay through a genuine wilderness, over mountain trails and through ravines that lent themselves admirably to the lawless purposes of the outlaws. Probably since the old Indian days, no human feet beside their own had trodden these wilds that offered no temptations to the farmer or grazier.

Before long the sun had vanished over the western rim and twilight came on rapidly. This rendered Bert's task, easier by diminishing the chances of detection, and as the twilight deepened into dusk, he gradually decreased the distance until, when it was fully dark, he had ventured to draw so near that he could hear the jingle of their trappings and an occasional monosyllable that passed between the riders.

Suddenly, as they rode into a little valley, a light gleamed out from a shack half a mile distant. It was the first sign of a human habitation Bert had seen. At the sight, an oath of satisfaction broke from the leader, and the three urged on their horses, who responded willingly. It was evident that they had reached the end of their journey.

As they dashed into the clearing in front of the house, the door was thrown open and several men came out to greet the newcomers. The saddles were taken from the horses' backs and they were turned loose to graze. Then the party entered the house and the door was closed.

For a few minutes Bert remained perfectly motionless. There had been no barking of dogs, and, after listening intently, he became convinced that no living thing was out of doors in the vicinity of the shack. With infinite caution he wormed his way along the ground and, reaching a window in the rear of the house, drew himself to the sill and peered over the edge.

There were six men gathered about a table in the center of the room, upon which a seventh, who seemed to be the cook, was placing dishes of bacon and beans. The chief, whose arm had been bathed and rebound in a cotton bandage, was seated at the head of the table. A bottle of whiskey was passing from hand to hand as a preliminary to the more substantial part of the meal, and the men who had just arrived were evidently retailing to their fellow rascals the events that had led up to the shooting.

So engrossed was Bert in watching the outlaws, that he did not see or hear the approach of a dark figure stealing up behind him. An arm shot out and a pistol butt came down on his head with a crash. A myriad of sparks flashed before his eyes, there was the roar of a cataract in his ears, and he fell to the ground like a log.

When consciousness came back to him it was morning. He was lying on the floor of the shack and the hot sun was streaming in upon him. His head ached horribly, and for a moment he wondered where he was. Then gradually he recalled the events of the day before, the fracas in the saloon, the tracking of the rustlers, the looking in at the window. But then it was night, and now it was broad daylight. What had happened to him?

He put his hand to his head and felt that his hair was matted with blood. Then he tried to rise to his feet, but found that they were tied together, and sank back with a groan. The wall of the house was just behind him, and he edged painfully toward it, until he was able to sit up and have some support for his back. Then with swimming eyes he looked around him.

As his vision cleared, he saw that there were two men sitting in the center of the room. They had not spoken a word, but had watched with a sort of amused interest his gradual coming back to life. In one of them he recognized the outlaw captain, and the other was the burly, red-haired giant, whose trail he had followed the afternoon before. There was no trace of the others and they had evidently gone to attend to the stock, or on some errand connected with the operations of the band.

The leader's eyes fastened on Bert with a penetrating glare, as though he sought to read the secrets of his soul. The captive met his look calmly and defiantly, and for a moment there was a silent duel. But Bert's gaze remained level, and the captain, a little disconcerted at his failure to make his prisoner cringe, resorted to taunts.

"Feel kind o' wobbly, eh?" he jeered. "Got a bad little hangover from last night? Perhaps we were a little playful, but it's just our hearty way of welcomin' strangers. 'Specially when they come without an invitation and we ketches them peepin' through the winders. But we don't mean no harm, do we, Red?" and he leered at his companion, who grinned dutifully in response to his leader's humor.

Bert made no answer.

"Now look here, young feller," snapped the speaker, dropping his elaborate sarcasm and veering round to his natural ferocity, "you ain't tongue-tied, I reckon, and I want to know right quick, pronto, what you're doin' round these diggin's, anyhow. One of our men comin' in from the stables caught you spyin' through the winder. He gave yer one on the nob, and dragged yer in here. Now, who are yer, where do yer come from and what are yer doin' in these parts. Speak quick now, or by—" and he broke into a torrent of vile oaths and death-dealing threats, while he fingered nervously the knife that hung in his belt.

Before Bert could reply one of the band entered the room. He glanced at the prisoner, and a sudden recognition leaped to his eyes.

"I know that feller," he exclaimed excitedly, turning to his chief. "I couldn't just place him last night when his eyes was shut, but now I'm plumb sure of him. He's livin' over to the Melton ranch with a couple of pals of his'n. Seen him there more than once. Ain't that straight?" to Bert.

"Yes," said Bert boldly, "that's straight."

The man's identification was absolute and the time for silence or evasion was past. He was trapped and absolutely in their power. That they would kill him he had little doubt. A life more or less meant little to these ruthless scoundrels. But if he had to meet death, he would meet it unafraid.

The name of the ranch owner acted on the chief like an electric shock. He leaped to his feet with a curse.

"So Melton sent you to spy on us, did he?" he demanded furiously.

"He did not," answered Bert.

There was a conviction in the tone that checked the headlong rush that the captain had seemed about to make. He sat down again and pondered, his face working with rage and apprehension. At last he reached a decision, and Bert read in his eyes that his doom had been pronounced.

"It don't make no difference whether yer tellin' the truth or lyin'," he snarled. "Ye've learned too much fur me to let yer live. If I turned yer loose, ye'd have Melton and his bunch down on us in no time. Keep a close watch on him, Red," he commanded as he rose to his feet. "I've got some things to look after that'll keep me busy till dinner-time, and after that we'll put this maverick where he won't do no more spyin'."

"How about breakfast?" asked Bert coolly. "You're not going to starve me to death, are you?"

The outlaw looked at him with astonishment, not unmixed with a sort of grudging admiration.

"Ye're a cool one," he responded after a moment's hesitation. "Ye'd better be thinkin' of sayin' yer prayers instead of eatin'. Rustle a little grub fer 'im, Red, though it seems plumb sinful to waste good chuck on a feller that's as good as dead already." And with this ominous remark he went out, accompanied by the man who had identified the captive, leaving Bert alone with his jailer.

"Red" got together some cold meat and beans and placed them on the floor within Bert's reach. He ate heartily, knowing that above everything else he must preserve his strength. And while he ate his mind was busy.

At any rate, he had a little respite. It would be at least two hours before noontime, and many things might happen before then. He did not disguise from himself that his situation was desperate. But, though there might be but one chance in a thousand of escape, he was determined to find and seize that chance.

His feet had been tied in such a manner that while, if he stood up, he would be able to take steps a foot apart, he could by no possibility run away. The knot at each ankle was skillfully looped in cowboy fashion, and under the watchful eyes of "Red" there was no chance to unfasten them. His knife and pistol had been taken from him, as well as his watch and money. So thoroughly had he been "frisked" that, as he felt his pockets carelessly, he found that nothing had been left except a bunch of keys that the rustlers had disdained as booty, and a convex piece of glass that belonged to an old telescope that he had been taking apart a day or two before.

As his hand came in contact with it a thought sprang into his mind that sent his pulses leaping in wild delirium. Could he do it? Why not?

Without any pretence of concealment he drew it with the keys from his pocket and fingered it idly, looking out of the window as though his thoughts were far away. "Red" looked at the articles, recognized their harmless character, and with an indifferent grunt went on smoking.

The fierce sun of the dog days was coming hotly through the open window. Still handling the glass dreamily, Bert brought it in such a position that its convex surface gathered the rays of the sun into one blistering shaft. This he directed on the center of the rope that stretched between his feet.

Slowly but surely it began to darken. The tiny threads of which it was composed twisted and shriveled and broke. Bert hunched up his knees, and sat as though rapt in brooding contemplation, while all the time that tiny shaft bored deeper and deeper into the rope like a red hot iron.

For half an hour this continued until Bert was convinced that the rope was burned to the core, and that under a vigorous effort it would snap like thread.

He moved around uneasily, fidgeting and twisting with an occasional groan until "Red" unbent sufficiently from his surly indifference to ask him "what was eatin' of him."

"I'm in a fearfully cramped position," explained Bert, meekly. "Do you mind if I stand up for a minute and stretch?"

"Red" cogitated a moment.

"No law agin it, I reckon," he conceded ungraciously.

Bert labored painfully and clumsily to his feet, yawned wearily and stretched his arms above his head. Then with one quick jerk he burst the rope and went into "Red" like a thunderbolt. Before that crashing impact of bone and muscle that had triumphed on many a football field, the startled outlaw hit the floor with a tremendous thump, while Bert's sinewy hands tightened on his throat.

But there was no resistance, and after a moment Bert relaxed his grasp. The rustler's head had struck on the sill of the door and the blow had rendered him unconscious.

Springing to his feet, Bert grasped the knife that lay on the table, and sawed desperately at the ends of rope that dangled about his feet. A few minutes sufficed and he was free. Then he took the revolver from the belt of his fallen enemy, and, after a swift glance round the clearing, bolted for the woods like a deer.

He had almost reached cover when he heard a yell behind him and a bullet zipped past his head. He turned and saw one of the outlaws rushing from the corral behind the house, while others, attracted by the shot, were running to mount their horses. Then he dived into the woods and ran for his life.

Through the forest aisles he slipped like a shadow, and for a time he more than held his own. But his pursuers had the advantage of knowing the ground, while he had to choose his course on the spur of the moment. He lost precious seconds in dodging obstacles, and he could hear the clatter of horses coming nearer and nearer. At any moment a bullet might bring him down.

The wound in his head was bleeding now under his tremendous exertions, and he began to grow dizzy and faint. But, although his strength was ebbing, his heart was as high and his spirit as undaunted as ever. He would never surrender. As a last resource he had his revolver, and, if he had to die, he would take some of the outlaws with him. The thud of hoofs was nearer now, and bullets began to whiz past him. A voice that he knew was that of the leader of the gang shouted to him to halt. Before him was a thinning of the woods that indicated open country. On a level course they could never get him. His second wind was coming back and he would distance them yet. On, on, he went, running like the wind.

A few rods ahead the trail bent round in a sweeping curve, and as Bert approached it on flying feet, he heard horsemen coming from that direction. With a groan he halted. They had him surrounded, then. He had no chance. The game was up. He drew his revolver and dropped on his knee to aim.

And then round the curve with a rush and a roar, riding like fiends, came Melton, Dick and Tom, with twenty cowboys at their back.

There was a wild whoop when they caught sight of Bert, and his comrades flung themselves from the saddle and rushed toward him. Melton, without dismounting, reached over and gave him a bear grip that said more than words. Then he straightened up and rode on at the head of his men to meet the rustlers.

The latter, however, did not await his coming. They broke and ran, bending low over the necks of their horses. But Melton's blood was up and he rode them down relentlessly. Rifle and revolver shots merged into one crackling fusillade. The cornered outlaws fought to the last ditch when overtaken, and no one asked for quarter. And when at last the fight was over, five, including the captain, lay stretched lifeless upon the ground. One, by hard riding and his knowledge of the country, had escaped, and "Red," still looking dazed and foolish, was a prisoner.

The cowboys were for stringing him up on the spot, but Bert, who had swung up behind Dick and been in at the finish, pleaded hard that his life might be spared.

"You win," conceded Melton. "You've done too much for me to refuse you anything. We'll turn him over to the sheriff, and he'll have all the chance that's coming to him, which, between you and me, I think is mighty little."

Then he turned to Pedro, who, as Bert now noticed for the first time, was sitting tied upon his horse and guarded by two of the ranchmen.

"Cut his ropes," he commanded, "and turn him loose. I promised the hound his life if he led me to the rustlers' camp, and I keep my word."

Melton gathered his force together and they took up their march for home, jubilant at the success of the expedition.

"It's all due to you, you young dare-devil," said Melton, as he and the reunited comrades rode back at the head of the squad. "Sandy found your pony neighing to get in the corral, and brought your note to Dick. I nabbed Pedro and handled him some savage until the fellow wilted. Then we saddled and started out at the first sign of daybreak and you know the rest. And I guess, by thunder, that we got here just in time."

And when they reached the ranch, motherly Mrs. Melton folded him in her arms with tears in her eyes, unable to speak. She washed and bandaged the wound, which proved to be not serious, and sent him straightway off to bed. Bert laughingly protested, but he had to yield.

It was with immense regret, a few days later, that the boys parted from their warm-hearted host and hostess. But duty and the East were calling, and they had to go. They had passed a glorious summer, full of the excitement in which their adventurous souls delighted. Far out from the car windows they leaned and waved their hands, until the kindly figures on the platform were lost to sight.

The cowboys too had turned out in a body to bid their friends good-by, and, as the train started, they tossed their hats in the air and fired their six-shooters till their cartridges gave out. Then they wheeled their bronchos and headed for the ranch.

"No use talkin'," Sandy broke out suddenly that night as they were smoking their pipes in the bunkhouse, "that Wilson is the finest feller that ever wore shoe leather."

Buck, who was half asleep, roused himself.

"Oh, I wouldn't go quite so far as that," he drawled, mistaking the reference. "Still, he's makin' a pretty fair President."

"Shucks," snorted Sandy, "I didn't mean *him*. I was talkin' of Bert."

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BERT WILSON IN THE ROCKIES ***

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