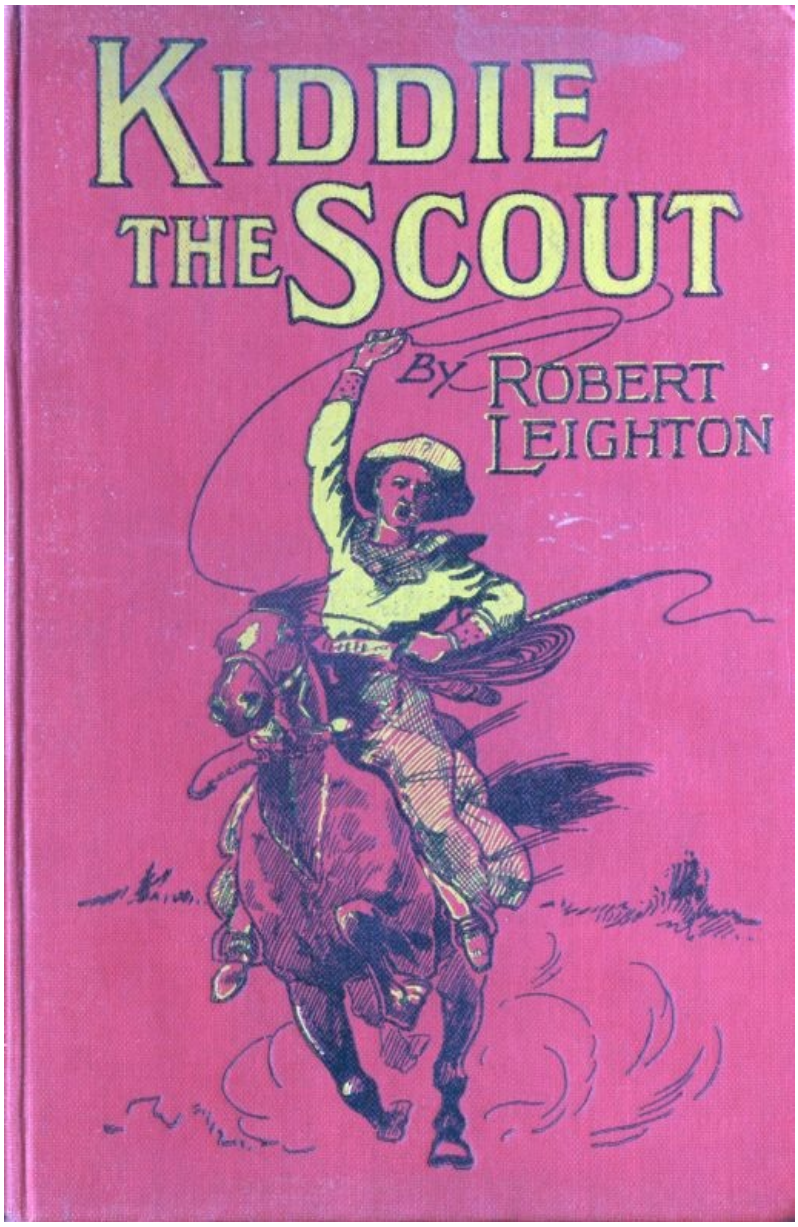
Title: Kiddie the Scout

Author: Robert Leighton
Illustrator: Frank R. Grey

Release date: December 19, 2007 [eBook #23924]

Language: English

E-text prepared by Al Haines



Cover art

Frontispiece.] "That's the way of it," he said. [*See page 153.*

"That's the way of it," he said.

KIDDIE THE SCOUT

BY

ROBERT LEIGHTON

Author of

"Kiddie of the Camp,"
"Gildersley's Tenderfoot,"
"Cooee,"
"Rattlesnake Ranch," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY FRANK R. GREY

London
C. Arthur Pearson, Ltd.
18 Henrietta Street, W.C. 2
1920

TO BERNARD EVERETT, Esq.

My dear Everett,—It was you who suggested this continuation of the story of Kiddie, and it is my pleasure to inscribe the volume with your name.

R. L.

CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER I

THE MYSTERIOUS SNIPER

"A pity Kiddie ain't here along of us, to help. He'd sure tell us if thar's Injuns prowlin' around. My old eyes ain't just what they used ter be for spottin' a crawlin' Redskin from afar. Now, Kiddie had eyes like spy-glasses, hadn't he, Isa? As for his sense of hearin'—well, I allow he c'd 'most hear the grass a-growin'."

Old Man Birkenshaw was peering searchingly through the dim light of the early dawn, expecting at any moment to see the feathered head of a stealthy Indian warrior moving among the deep shadows. From where he lay on the dewy grass beside the crowded horse-corral, with his repeating rifle across his arm, he searched into the darkness of the larch woods and down the misty slopes to the thick line of bushes bordering the hidden creek.

"Yes," he went on, speaking in a cautious undertone, "Kiddie was a marvel."

"That's so," agreed the man stationed next to him, "a marvel for scoutin', he was. Like a cat, too."

"A cat?"

"Yes," Isa Blagg nodded, "allus fell on his feet, didn't he? He allus came out on top. I never knew such a one fer turnin' up right on the spot whenever there was danger hangin' around."

"Wonder where he is now?" sighed Gideon Birkenshaw.

"Why, away in England, of course," drawled Isa. "In England without a doubt, occupyin' that thar comfortable seat of his in the House of Lords, wearin' a gold coronet an' a gold watch an' chain, an' a robe trimmed round with ermine skins; livin' in the grand style with all them high an' mighty aristocratic friends of his; never givin' a thought ter this yer camp here in the wilds of Wyoming, or to Laramie Peak, or to you, or to me."

"Mebbe so—mebbe so," mused Gideon. "I allow it's a long, long while since I'd a letter from him—not since that time when he sent me the Arab mare. Seems as if he'd clean forgotten me, though I never reckoned as Kiddie would ever forget. He ain't that sort."

"Hullo!" Isa Blagg was suddenly alert. "What's that? Listen! D'ye hear it, Gid—a horse gallopin' along the trail—comin' this way? Listen!"

The two men lay perfectly still and silent. From afar they could hear the unmistakable sound of a horse's hoofs, becoming momentarily more distinct.

"Injuns?" questioned Birkenshaw. He glanced about to assure himself that his men were all at their appointed posts.

"No," Isa answered. "'Tain't no prairie cayuse. I c'n make out the ring of its shoes on the hard trail. 'Tain't the Pony Express, neither. Guess it's just one of the boys from Red Buttes comin' along in advance to lend us a neighbourly hand. We c'n do well with another gun, Gid—allowin' that young Rube Carter's information was correct; allowin' that Broken Feather and his braves are sure out on a horse raidin' stunt."

"Young Rube ain't anyways liable to be in error in a serious case like this," Gideon assured his companion. "And if Broken Feather's shapin' ter steal horses, why, nat'rally he'll calculate on findin' what he covets right here—the best herd within fifty miles, ter say nothin' of that Arab mare, which he's had his eye on for a while back. No, Young Rube's warnin' ain't no false alarm. I'm figurin' that the Redskins are in ambush down there among the willows. It's likely they've been there all through the night. They'll attack before sunrise; and they'll approach by way of the hollow yonder, where they c'n

tread quiet on the marshy ground."

"Say, that rider's wastin' no time, Gid," Isa interrupted, "Guess he's in some hurry by the way he's poundin' along."

"We ought ter catch a view of him as he gallops over the ridge," reflected Gideon. "Might even be Broken Feather himself. He's cute enough ter come along in disguise, ridin' a saddled pony that's decently shod."

The old man raised himself on an elbow and glanced along the line of men whom he had posted at equal intervals behind the defence of a wide grassy bank commanding the front of the threatened horse corral. Next to himself was Isa Blagg, then Jake Paterson and Tom Lippincott. Between Lippincott and the man at the end station, Abe Harum, was young Rube Carter. There were six guns in all, not counting revolvers.

Gideon beckoned to young Rube, and the boy crept cautiously towards him, treading softly in his moccasined feet, carrying his rifle under his arm and taking good cover.

"Crawl down towards the shack, Rube, an' get a sight of the rider that's comin' along the trail," Gideon ordered. "Just see who he is as he tops the risin' ground, and then get right back to your place an' be ready ter open fire when I give the sign."

Rube was not absent very long. When he returned he passed close behind the Boss, so silently that Gideon was not aware of his presence until a hand was pressed on his spurred heel.

"He's a stranger, Boss," Rube reported in a whisper. "I don't reco'nize him, nor his pony neither. It don't look as he means comin' here to our camp, or he'd sure have turned in at the new gate."

"Didn't hear him crossin' the wooden bridge," said Gideon, "and his mount ain't wearin' soft moccasins."

"Seems to me he's come to a halt," added Isa Blagg.

There was an anxious spell of silent, watchful waiting. No sound or movement betrayed the presence of marauding Indians, and already the clouds in the east had taken on the rosy tinge of daybreak.

Gideon Birkenshaw was beginning to comfort himself in the belief that there would be no attack after all; that his horses were safe. He was even on the point of laying aside his Winchester and bidding his men return home with him for breakfast, when suddenly from the farther side of the corral there came the sharply startling ring of a rifle shot. It came from a direction in which none of his men had been stationed.

"Who fired that shot?" he cried in wondering surprise. "Whose gun was it? Anybody know?"

Abe Harum rose to his feet, and, bending his body forward, ran swiftly past the corral gate. Then he went down on his knees and elbows and crept along by the stout timbers of the stockade, screened by the long grass.

The corral was built in a circle, and there were no corners or buttresses behind which he could conceal himself. Neither could he yet see anything of the man who had fired the shot. What he did see, when he had crept a few yards beyond the gate, was a crowd of Indians gathered close against the palisade. One of them was in the act of climbing over the sharp-pointed rails. Some seemed already to have dropped on the inner side, for the ponies were running about the enclosure in wild alarm.

Abe levelled his rifle and fired at the Redskin now slinging a naked leg over the spikes.

The shot missed its mark, and the Indian, balancing himself as he gripped one of the rails, was preparing to jump within when he was struck by a bullet fired from beyond the other Indians and between them and the main trail.

Believing that some of the cowboys from Three Crossings had arrived, and were already at work defending Birkenshaw's property, Abe ran back to hasten Gideon and his mates.

He met all five of them before reaching the gate.

"Quick—quick!" he urged, "they're attacking on the far side. We been watchin' at the wrong place, and they've sneaked past through the long grass. Say, Gid, some of 'em have gotten inside the corral, over the rails. They're among the ponies right now. Hear 'em? Rube—" he added, turning to the boy, "you hang back thar outer the line of fire. Keep an eye on the corral gate."

Shots were being fired in rapid succession now from beyond the curve of the stockade. The Indians, assailed on both flanks, had scattered themselves to take cover behind boulders and bushes, and from their ambush they were aiming their arrows and firing with their repeating rifles.

An arrow took off Birkenshaw's hat, another grazed Tom Lippincott's cheek, but most of the Redskins were aiming down the slope in the direction from which the most effective fire was coming into their midst.

"Thar's a band of the boys from Three Crossings down yonder," Abe Harum announced. "See, they're pickin' off a Injun with 'most every shot!"

"I'm figurin' as thar's no more'n one gun down there," declared Isa Blagg with a wise headshake. "One gun alone. But the man that's behind it, he sure knows how to shoot. I'm curious t' know just who it c'n be. Eh? Yes, that's so; they're drawin' off. Guess they've had about enough. They didn't catch us sleepin', as they thought to."

The Redskins were retiring into the shelter of the neighbouring pine trees, clearly with the purpose of enticing the defenders away from the corral. Gideon Birkenshaw, falling into the snare, was planning to follow them up or to head them off on the farther side of the wood. He was rallying his forces to give each man his direction when Rube Carter ran towards him.

"Abe!—Gid!" the boy cried excitedly, "they've broke open the gate—from the inside! They're stampeding our ponies. Come back and stop 'em! Say, Gid, Broken Feather's gone off, mounted on your Arab mare!"

"Eh? What's that? Mounted on Sultana, is he?" Gideon ran back, refilling the magazine of his rifle as he went. Abe Harum, Tom Lippincott, and the rest of them followed him.

They found the stout double gate of the corral standing wide open. The horses had been driven out by the Indians, who moved about, hidden in their midst. Many of the animals were already at liberty, racing in close company in the direction taken by the Arab mare.

So dense was the pressing throng of horses at the entrance, that it was impossible for Gideon to push his way through in an attempt to shut the gate. Neither could he fire upon the Indians, for fear of injuring the animals.

The Indians, indeed, were going out under the cover of the horses, and as each brave passed the open gate he seized his chosen pony, tied an end of his lariat about its muzzle, and mounting, bare-backed, rode off.

At length Isa Blagg succeeded in reaching the gate and closing it. He flung the heavy bars across and secured them in their staples. Only a score or so of the ponies remained in the corral. Over a hundred had been driven off in the confused stampede.

When Isa returned to his companion there was not a live Redskin to be seen. Even the wounded had been carried away.

"Seems as how we've gotten the worst of it, this time," Isa Blagg regretted. "I'll allow that Broken Feather laid his plans real well. You made a mistake, Gideon, in plantin' us all together beside the gate, as if that was the only possible point of attack. Say, we oughter been distributed in pickets, same as Buckskin Jack allus recommended."

"We ain't none of us wounded," reflected Gideon, wiping a streak of blood from his face. "Leastways, not wounded serious. An' that sniper hidden in the bush yonder must ha' picked off quite a dozen of the Injuns. I'm hopin' he'll show up, now, an' let us know who he is."

"Meantime," interposed Abe Harum, "what's goin' ter happen 'bout our ponies? You can't afford ter lose that Arab mare, Gid. A valuable beast, anyhow, let alone her being a present from Kiddie."

"I'm figurin' out just how I'm to get her back," nodded Gideon. "I shall have her back, though I have to organize a special raid into their reservation' and enlist the help of the military from Fort Laramie. Rube," he called, "just slip down to the trail. Thar's a squad of the boys from Red Buttes just arrived. Tell 'em to come right here. Tell 'em as I'm plannin' to foller up them Redskins and round up my ponies before they're corralled."

There were seventeen frontiersmen in the squad, all of them disappointed in being too late to help in defending Birkenshaw's ponies, but all of them eager to join in the pursuit of Broken Feather and his braves.

Gideon yielded the leadership to Nick Undrell, a man of blemished reputation, a drunkard, a desperate gambler, and a convicted thief, but a magnificent horseman, a capable scout, and the hero of many an Indian fight.

Nick knew where the Indian village was situated, and which way Broken Feather was most likely to take.

"They're plumb sure ter pass through One Tree Gulch," he declared. "We c'n overtake them in the defile, goin' by way of Poison Spider Creek and the old Buffalo Trail, droppin' on 'em when they least expect us."

They saw no sign of the Indians for several miles; not even on the wide expanse of Laramie Plain. Here, however, Nick Undrell pointed to the dusty ground where the track of a horse crossed his path obliquely.

"See that, Mr. Birkenshaw?" he said, glancing along the distinct line of hoof marks. "That rider, whoever he is, wasn't dawdlin' none. Looks as if ho was makin' fer the far side of White Bull Ridge,

which ain't a thousand miles from Broken Feather's village. Anybody you know? Ridin' a big horse, he is, shod by a town blacksmith. Might have started from the neighbourhood of your camp just about the time you stopped shootin'."

"Don't know nothin' about him," returned Gideon. "He ain't one of our lot, anyhow. Push along, Nick. I'm frettin' considerable about my Arab mare. Wouldn't have exchanged her fer any hoss as ever chewed grass."

"No, and I'm figurin' as Broken Feather won't be a whole lot eager to part with her, now he's gotten a cinch on her," rejoined Nick.

"Gid!" Abe Harum called from behind, "thar's dust risin' from the mouth of One Tree Gulch. If we puts on a hustle we shall drop on 'em 'fore they gets out on the open prairie."

They spurred their ponies to the gallop. They raced at top speed into the gulch, caring nothing for the clatter of hoofs, knowing that there could be no escape for the mounted Redskins up the steep hillsides. Midway along the defile, where it widened beyond a projecting spur of cliff, they saw the Indians driving the stolen herd of horses before them, urging them with yells and stinging quirts.

Nick Undrell divided his forces into two companies, giving them instructions to ride forward, one on either flank of the enemy, with the endeavour to head them off. Nick himself, with Abe Harum, was to remain in the rear, as support, while Isa Blagg and Gideon Birkenshaw were, if possible, to work their way round to the captured ponies and cut them off from the Indians, to be rounded-up after the expected fight.

Gideon so far succeeded in his object as to get in advance of the Redskin rearguard. By riding obliquely down the slope towards them, he might now hope to place himself between them and his ponies.

He spurred his horse, holding his revolver ready for instant use. But as he rode forward he caught sight of Broken Feather, mounted on the Arab mare, and impulsively he resolved to recapture Sultana at all risks. He drew rein. On the instant his obedient pony swerved.

As it did so, Gideon, glancing forward to the farther mouth of the gulch, saw a strange horseman approaching at a full gallop. He came like a wild gust of wind, leaning over in his seat and slinging his supple lariat above his flapping hat as he came. He wore the usual red shirt and blue scarf of the frontiersman, and he was mounted on a splendid bay horse, that was less like a prairie mustang than a well-trained cavalry charger.

Watching him in astonishment, Gideon saw that he had singled out the Indian chief, and was riding down upon him. He saw the lariat shoot out from the uplifted hand like a wriggling snake. The wide loop opened like a wheel, grew suddenly tense and smaller. Then it dropped clean over Broken Feather's head and shoulders, and in an instant the chief's two arms were pinioned to his sides.

CHAPTER II

THE UNIFORM OF THE PLAINS

It was some five hours later when Gideon Birkenshaw, Abe Harum, and Isa Blagg returned to the camp at Sweetwater Bridge. After a sharp fight in the gulch, they had recovered the larger number of their stolen ponies, and the rest of their company were still out, rounding-up others abandoned by their captors.

Greatly to Gideon's annoyance, his precious Arab mare had not yet been restored to him, and he had no knowledge of what had happened to the Indian chief.

Leaving Abe and Isa to corral the horses, Gideon dismounted at the side of the trail and walked slowly and wearily up the woodland path to his homestead.

Abreast of the well in front of the veranda he came to an abrupt halt, staring with amazed eyes at a great bay horse that was tethered to the tie post. Young Rube had removed the saddle and was in the act of spreading a blanket over the animal's perspiring body.

"Where in thunder did that hoss come from?" Gideon demanded to know.

"A real beauty, ain't he?" said Rube. "A thoroughbred, sure. An' look at the saddle and bridle. Ain't they just wonderful?"

"It's the identical hoss that I seen in One Tree Gulch only a few hours ago," declared Gideon. "Thar's no mistakin' it."

"It's the same as I seen racin' down the trail just before the Indians came along," added Rube.

"But who brought it? Who rid it?" Gideon asked. "Who does it belong to?"

"Dunno," Rube answered, shaking his head in perplexity. "Can't make him out nohow. Never seen him before. He's just a stranger. A stranger, an' yet he seems ter know his way 'bout this yer camp most as well as I do meself. He's in the house right now, jawin' with mother. Seems he kinder knows her."

"Knows her? Knows your mother? Knows Mee-Mee? I'm amazed! Your mother ain't bin outer this yer camp, not for years an' years. How c'n any stranger know her? What's the man's name? Where does he come from?"

"Dunno, Boss; dunno." Rube shrugged his shoulders. "Guess th' best way fer you ter straighten out all them things is to step indoors an' 'vestigate."

Gideon straightened the wide rim of his hat, arranged his scarf, and tightened his belt. The horse's furnishings told him that the stranger was not a low-down prairie loafer. He strode to the veranda steps, and, crossing to the open door, looked furtively within the living-room.

Mee-Mee, Rube's Redskin mother, stood with her back to the cooking-stove, stirring a cup of steaming coffee as she smiled at the stranger, talking to him in the Pawnee tongue, which Gideon did not understand. The stranger sat on the edge of the table, facing her, boyishly swinging a loose leg. He took the proffered cup of coffee and rested it beside him on the table, almost touching his revolver.

Gideon noticed that the ivory butt of the revolver, projecting from its holster, was silver-mounted. He also noticed that the man's leather belt was new and brightly polished, that his red shirt was of very fine flannel, and his spotted blue scarf of fine soft silk. His short hair was black, and his complexion as dark as that of an Italian.

The stranger did not look round until Gideon was close up to him. Then he stood up from the table and turned.

"Well, Gid, old man," he said very quietly, "d'ye know me?"

Gideon drew back, staring into the stranger's handsome, clean-shaven face, trying to recognize it. His visitor smiled, showing his even white teeth. Then, dropping his hat on the floor, Gideon leapt forward with eager, outstretched hands.

"Kiddie!" he cried. "Kiddie!—you—back here! Here to th' old shack?"

Kiddie took the old man's head tenderly between his hands, drew it to him, and kissed the straggling grey hairs.

"Yes, Gid," he said. "It's me, sure; come back to the old shack and the old man—back like a wild coyote to its lair among the rocks."

"And it was you, then, as came gallopin' along the trail this mornin', time the Injuns crept up to the corral? It was you as fired all them shots from behind the willows? You that raced like mad inter One Tree Gulch an' dropped your lariat over Broken Feather? Oh, Kiddie, Kiddie, I might ha' known—I might ha' known. But I never thought, never guessed it c'd be you. My! how you've growed! how you've —improved! And you ain't wearin' your earl's coronet, nor your robe trimmed round with ermine skins? You've come just like one of ourselves."

"Yes," Kiddie laughed—"in the uniform of the plains, like a simple frontier scout, leaving all the useless fashionable fixings behind me in England."

"Didn't yer like it, then?" Gideon questioned. "Didn't yer cotton to it, bein' a English nobleman with a pile o' dollars an' vast estates? Didn't yer find that seat in the House of Lords altogether comfortable?"

Kiddie sipped at the cup of coffee.

"I never even entered the House of Lords," he explained. "It wasn't really necessary. As to my being an English nobleman—well, that was all right; nobody ever objected; everybody was tremendously kind and considerate. But somehow I didn't exactly cotton to it, Gid. I was never at my ease, except when out riding, or shooting, or yachting. You see, the blood of the wilds is in my veins. I didn't like the whirl and gaiety and excitement of London. It seemed somehow hollow and insincere. I yearned for the freedom and simplicity of life on the prairies; couldn't put myself on a level with men who had been to public schools and universities, or talk with elegant ladies who were maybe criticizing the way I ate and spoke and moved. I even felt myself inferior to my own valet, who addressed me as 'your lordship' while teaching me the proper way to wear my fine clothes."

"Ah!" sighed Gideon. "In them circumstances nat'rally you occasion'lly thought of the old trail here, an' of me an' the boys, eh?"

"Always," Kiddie answered him. "Always in the social rush of London I heard the dear old tune of the Sweetwater River, the musical murmur of the pine trees, and all the familiar voices of the wilds,

and they for ever called to me, 'Kiddie, Kiddie, come back, come back! This is the life for you, not that.' And so, old man, I've come back."

"And haven't delayed none in droppin' inter your old ways," added Gideon. "Hadn't been back in camp ten minutes 'fore you was at your old graft of shootin' law-breakin' Injuns."

"Did you recover your ponies?" Kiddie asked.

"Some," Gideon nodded. "But not the Arab mare—the best of the bunch. She's took."

"Oh, but the Arab is all right," smiled Kiddie. "You'll find her in the old stable back of the timber stack."

"Eh? You captured her? Then what about Broken Feather—the Injun that rode her? Did he give you the slip, or——?"

"Oh, he's captured, too," said Kiddie. "I towed him along in the loop of my lariat, and fixed him up in one of your lean-to sheds. He's in need of some sticking plaster for a cut on his leg. If you'll come along, we'll go and attend to him, while Mee-Mee gets ready the breakfast."

They went out to the shed. Kiddie loosened the padlock, flung open the door and looked within. The place was empty. Broken Feather had escaped.

CHAPTER III

A DANGEROUS ENEMY

Broken Feather had certainly made his escape. There could be no doubting it. With a quick glance Kiddie searched within the empty shed; he even exercised his sense of smell, sniffing inquiringly.

"Seems he's bunked," he said, turning round to Gideon. "I'm puzzled to know just how he managed it. The door was securely padlocked on the outside. There's no other exit." He looked at the ground for new tracks of the Indian's moccasined feet, but saw no sign.

"That's kind o' queer," reflected Gideon. "It's a strong shed. You helped ter build it yourself, years ago, as a storehouse for pelts and ammunition. Thar's no chimney, no winder; only the door. You may well ask how did he quit? Say"—the old man clutched Kiddie's arm in consternation—"d'you reckon he's vamoosed on th' Arab mare?"

Kiddie shook his head decisively.

"That's not possible," he averred. "For one thing, he could hardly have mounted her with that bullet wound in his leg. For another thing, the mare's still safe in the stable where I locked her. I heard her snorting as we passed, a minute ago. Here's the key, if you like to go and have a look at her."

"Then you figure he's gone away on foot?" pursued Gideon, ignoring the proffered key. "In that case he sure ain't very far off. We c'n foller on his tracks. Don't you worry 'bout the way he escaped."

"That is just what I am worrying about," returned Kiddie. "It's a problem that interests me a heap. He didn't go by the door, that's plumb certain. He didn't turn himself into air and escape through the cracks."

"Hold hard!" exclaimed Gideon. "I was forgettin'. The shed was strong as a prison when you an' me built it. But it ain't just the same as 'fore you quitted fer Europe. Young Rube Carter got mussin' around, usin' it as a kennel fer his bear cub. Amazin' fond of animals, that boy is; same as you was yourself at his age, Kiddie. Say, you didn't happen ter let out a bear cub, time you shoved Broken Feather inside, did yer?"

"No," Kiddie chuckled. "There was no bear there, only the rancid stink of one. Nearly knocked me down. Don't wonder at Broken Feather wanting to quit."

"Then I guess Rube let th' beast out early this mornin', while we was at the gulch."

Gideon led the way beyond the corner of the shed and pointed to a well-concealed trap-door in the lower timbers.

"Thar y'are," he went on. "That's sure the way he got out. Clear as print, ain't it?"

"Yes," Kiddie nodded, contemplating the moist ground, which the sun had not yet reached. "There are his footprints, covering the boy's smaller ones. Rube's footmarks were already crushed by the bear's pads, and he didn't turn back to bolt the door as the Indian did. Quite a baby cub it seems. But it will soon need a heavier chain than the one it has now."

"Eh? How d'you know Rube led it out by a chain an' not a rope?"

Kiddie glanced downward.

"Bear trod on it and left an impression," he indicated, as he strode to the trap-door. "The links are thin and small, hardly strong enough to hold in a collie dog, let alone a growing young grizzly."

"Grizzly?" repeated Gideon. "But you've not seen th' critter. Might be a brown bear, or a cinnamon."

"Never knew any but grizzlies to breed about here," explained Kiddie, moving the loose door along its grooves. "And I presume Rube caught it himself. Yes," he continued, "this is where the fellow got out. What perplexes me, however, is why Rube thought it necessary to have a second door at all."

"Padlock was too high for him to reach," returned Gideon, "an' Rube didn't notion t' have truck with keyholes, winter nights, when he c'd shove the cub's grub in by a trap he c'd slide open in the dark."

"Well, there's no great harm done, anyway," smiled Kiddie. "Your mare and the corral ponies are safe; none of your men are wounded. As for Broken Feather—we couldn't have kept him a prisoner, you know. We have no warrant for his arrest."

"Isa Blagg, the sheriff, is here, right now," Gideon told him. "Isa c'd have arrested him, legal, I guess."

"Even so," resumed Kiddie, "you would soon have had another raid. The Redskins would have been here like a shot to liberate their chief and to retaliate on you for having foiled them in One Tree Gulch."

"Sure," acknowledged the Old Man, leading the way to the stable. "An' even as matters stand, I'm figurin' as Broken Feather 'll notion ter have revenge on you fer puttin' the lasso on him. He'll try ter git level with you somehow, Kiddie, sure's a steel trap. You've made him your enemy—a dangerous enemy—an' he ain't no tenderfoot in villainy. He's cunnin' as a coyote, he's unscrup'lous, an' he's clever. Real clever, he is."

Kiddie's glance was roving over the land in search of the fugitive. He was not seriously concerned at the disappearance of the Indian chief; nevertheless, his pride was hurt and he did not conceal his annoyance that his prisoner had escaped so easily.

"Yes," he responded to the Old Man's remarks. "I'd already discovered that he's not an ordinary lazy and small-minded Redskin. There's something unusual about him which I don't quite understand. He's a chief, wearing a chief's war bonnet, with heaps of feathers in it to show the great things he has done; yet he's hardly more than a boy. He's a full-blooded Sioux, yet he has many of the ways and habits of the white man. When I slowed down on Laramie Plain and went back to slacken the lariat about his arms, I spoke to him in his own tongue. He answered in clean-cut English. 'Thank you, stranger,' he said, looking me full in the face as if summing me up. 'That is very much better. And, since you are so considerate, perhaps you will allow me to smoke a cigarette.' Naturally I decided that he was going to do without that smoke. His six-shooter, whether loaded or empty, was too close for me to let him have his hands free to draw it."

"Not but what you'd have been in front of him with your own," wisely commented Gid. "He's alert, he's slick; but not the same as you are, Kiddie."

"You appear to have had experience of him, Gid. Has he molested you before this morning?"

"Not exactly." The stable door was now open and Gideon was patting his restored Arab. "Not exactly. I've heard about him. He's the son of your old-time enemy, Eye-of-the-Moon. He's a man of tremendous ambition. Thinks a heap of hisself. Notions ter become the boss war chief of the hull Sioux nation, same as Sitting Bull. Ever since his earliest youth he's held that ambition in front of him, devotin' himself to attainin' it; aimin' at excellin' in horsemanship, in military exercises, and in the knowledge of strategy. 'Fore he'd gotten outer his childhood, he'd reco'nized that the white man has many advantages over the red, an' he'd made up his mind t' acquire intimate knowledge of the ways of civilization, addin' a college eddication to the trainin' of a nat'rally sly an' crafty Injun. I'm told he attended one of the big American universities. Guess that's how he come ter speak what you calls clean-cut English. But Isa Blagg c'n tell you a heap more about Broken Feather 'n I can. Here's Isa comin' along, with Abe. They'll be glad ter see you."

While Abe and Isa were heartily welcoming the unexpected return of Kiddie, and plying him with a multitude of questions, young Rube Carter watched them from the doorway of the bunk house.

Rube was painfully bashful of this newly-arrived stranger, whom he regarded merely as a traveller passing along the Salt Lake Trail. Yet he was curiously fascinated by the man who owned such a beautiful horse and who knew his way so unerringly about Birkenshaw's camp.

The more he watched, the more the boy was perplexed.

By all appearances the stranger was a person of very great importance; and yet there were Gideon, Mr. Blagg, and Abe Harum talking and laughing with him familiarly, as if he were their intimate friend and they his equals!

Presently all four of them glanced towards the doorway where the boy was standing. Abe Harum left the little group and strode forward in advance.

"Rube," he called, "you gotter come along right now an' be interdooced ter Lord St. Olave. He's just pinin' ter know you."

"Lord Saint Olave?" repeated Rube. "Gee! that's a mouthful! A lord, is he? I was guessin' he couldn't be no real frontier scout, spite of his outfit. Say, what'm I ter call him? Have I gotter say 'your highness,' or 'your ex'lency,' or what?"

"No, nothin' ceremonious," Abe assured him. "You drop in a 'sir' now an' again, like; an' you takes off your hat when he puts out his hand. Come along!"

He drew the boy forward. Kiddie advanced. Rube took off his hat and dropped it.

"This is Rube," said Abe, and to the boy he added: "This is the Right Hon'rable the Earl of St. Olave—better known along this yer trail as Kiddie—Kiddie of Birkenshaw's—Kiddie of the Camp."

Rube drew back in astonishment.

"*Kiddie?*" he cried. "Oh, that's diff'rent; that's a whole lot diff'rent. Why didn't yer put me wise at first? I know th' name of Kiddie. Ought to. I've heard it often 'nough. Real proud ter see you, sir," he added, taking Kiddie's outstretched hand.

"What d'you know 'bout him, boy?" inquired Isa Blagg.

"Heaps, sheriff," returned Rube. "Best horseman on all the Salt Lake Trail, best rifle shot, best swimmer an' trapper—best all round scout this side the Rocky Mountains; never told a lie, never said a bad word, never done anythin' he was ashamed of."

Kiddie laughed outright.

"Who's been feeding you up with all that silly rot, Rube?" he asked. "If that's the reputation you judge me by I shall have a jolly hard task to live up to it."

"'Tain't a whole lot wide o' the truth, for all that, Kiddie," interposed the Boss. "But never heed it fer the present. Come right in an' have suthin' ter eat. We're all hungry."

Kiddie walked with young Rube, with a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"No, you mustn't think I'm all that, Rube," he said. "I've made many a false step, fallen into many a mistake I ought to have avoided. Only this morning, you know, I made the mistake of shoving Broken Feather into the lean-to without looking if there was a loophole for his escape."

"My fault as much as yours, sir," said Rube. "I oughter ha' fastened the trap-door."

"Well, anyhow," resumed Kiddie, "you and I are going to be good friends. You see, we have a good deal in common. You've spent your boyhood in this camp, so did I mine. Your father was an English gentleman, so was mine. Your mother is a Pawnee Indian, so was mine."

"It's a proud day fer me, sir, your comin' back here, an' me walkin' alongside o' you," faltered Rube. "An' if you're shapin' ter stay here for a while, I shall learn a lot. You c'n teach me heaps about trappin' the wild critters, an' livin' in the woods, an' scoutin'; about horses, too, an' buffaloes an' Injuns."

He paused, surprised at the length of his speech.

"Yes," nodded Kiddie. "We'll go on the trail together. We'll go trapping and fishing and shooting. You shall be my boy scout."

"But thar's one thing as I'm hankerin' to learn more'n all else, sir," Rube went on boldly. "You was sayin' right now as my father was a English gentleman. Well, 'tain't possible fer me to be that, seein' as I was born here in th' United States; but I guess thar's such a thing as a 'Merican gentleman, an' maybe you'd teach me how ter be one o' them."

Kiddie was silent for some moments as they crossed the clearing in front of the cabin. But at length he said—

"Rather a tall order, Rube, my lad. And it's not just like teaching you to master a bucking broncho or to trap beaver. It's a longer process. But at least it's an experiment worth attempting, and we'll try it together."

"That big bay pony of yours don't feel anyways at home in the stall where I've put him," said Rube, as they went up the veranda steps. "I've given him a drink an' a feed, an' I've put his saddle an' bridle in the best bedroom, where they won't take no harm. I'm sorry t' say, sir, as thar's a scratch of a bullet on the saddle. Leather's some torn; but I reckon mother c'n fix it up; same's she done my moccasins when I tore 'em in the bush, trackin' a lynx."

"The saddle is of no consequence if Regent is all right," Kiddie assured him. "Regent is the name of

the bay. He's an English hunter; doesn't know anything about the work of a prairie pony."

Rube's mother had done her best to provide a good meal for the hungry men. They lingered at the table, all listening in wonder to what Kiddie told them of England and of the cities of Europe and Asia. He had been for a journey round the world, and had much to tell of his travels in foreign lands. Gradually as he talked, he dropped the precise English manner of speech and reverted to the homely phrases and drawling intonation of the West. And so they ceased to think of him as Lord St. Olave, regarding him without restraint as their familiar and unaltered Kiddie.

Towards tea time he took out his watch. Gideon Birkenshaw noticed that it was a very ordinary one, with a gun metal case, held by a leather thong.

"H'm!" the Old Man muttered. "I was expectin', Kiddie, as you'd be wearin' a real gold timepiece with a heavy gold chain. But that article you're handlin' ain't wuth more'n my own, as I've wore for twenty year. An' you ain't got no di'mond rings on yer fingers. But what d'ye want ter look at the time for, anyhow?"

"I'm going to ride back as far as Fort Laramie," Kiddie answered. "My outfit will be coming along the trail in a day or two, and I'm warned that it would be well to get a squad of cowboys together to guard it across the plain."

"Anythin' valu'ble as you're afraid of gettin' stole?" asked Isa Blagg. "Couldn't it be brought along safe in one o' Gid's farm carts?"

Kiddie smiled.

"Not quite," he answered. "There's too much of it. There's three mule wagons full, and there's a bunch of English horses. There's new sporting rifles and beaver traps, there's trunks full of clothing and personal fixings, material for building and furnishing a new cabin, to say nothing of money and other valuable property. But it's the horses I'm anxious about, Isa. If Laramie Plain is what it used to be, there's Indians and road agents hanging around who wouldn't think twice about helping themselves if the outfit isn't well protected."

"Best be on the safe side, anyhow," cautioned Gideon.

"And so," continued Kiddie, "I'm going to see Nick Undrell and get him to undertake the job."

"What?" cried Isa Blagg. "Nick Undrell? Gee! The last man along the hull trail ter trust with a job like that."

"Why, what's the matter with Nick?" Kiddie asked in surprise. "He used to be a steady, honest man, and an excellent scout—a friend of Buckskin Jack's, and that's good enough for me."

"Ah," interposed Abe Harum. "But Nick's a altered man since them days. He's what y'might call degenerated; a bit too fonder fire-water an' playin' poker. Ain't above takin' a hand in the road agency business, either."

"Meaning that he's a drunkard, a gambler, and a highwayman," nodded Kiddie. "Well, I'll go along and see him, anyhow."

"No need," said Abe. "He's here in this yer camp, right now, with the boys that hev just rounded up an' corralled Gid's stolen ponies; only he ain't figurin' ter meet you as knowed him only as a honest man. He ain't a whole lot proud of hisself, these times, ain't Nick Undrell."

Kiddie reached for his hat, strode across the veranda, and turned towards the corral. He looked exceedingly tall and handsome as he went out.

"It's all right," he announced on his return, a quarter of an hour later. "Nick's going to muster a gang of his pals, and they'll act as armed escort. It seems that the word of the coming of my outfit has already been passed along the trail, and that even the Indians have gotten wind of it."

"Kiddie," said Isa Blagg, "you're makin' a all-fired mistake. Nick Undrell has jus' canoodled you. That's about th' size of it. I knows Nick 's well as any one, an' I wouldn't trust him with a cent. Time after time in my capacity of sheriff of the Sweetwater district I've had him up before me—once fer stealin' a hoss, once fer robbin' the mail, once fer shootin' a man in a gamblin' saloon. He's just a desperado, Kiddie, an' I wouldn't have no truck with him."

"Of course, I shall be there myself," Kiddie explained. "Young Rube and I will be there."

"Git!" exclaimed the sheriff. "What's one man agin a hull gang o' scoundrels? You'll sure come a cropper, Kiddie; take my word. As fer the boy, why, takin' him along o' you's only a added responsibility, a added danger."

Warnings such as these had very little effect upon Kiddie. Indeed, they only spurred him with a firmer resolve to the undertaking.

Three mornings later he started for Laramie, well armed, mounted on one of Birkenshaw's prairie ponies, and accompanied by Rube Carter.

Much to the boy's disappointment, he was very silent during the long ride. But his eyes and ears were constantly busy, and occasionally he pointed things out to Rube's notice—the flight of a covey of sagehens, the track of a herd of buffalo, the ashes of an old camp fire.

Once, after fording Red Pine Creek, Kiddie dropped a glove, apparently by accident, and dismounted to pick it up. Rube did not observe that, on remounting, his companion held a black feather between his fingers.

When they rode into Laramie, they found the cavalcade halted before Brierley's saloon, all ready to start. Nick Undrell rode up to Kiddie, respectfully touching the wide brim of his hat.

"All s'rene, sir," he announced. "I got a gang o' picked boys distributed among the baggage. Seen any signs as you come along'?"

"Only this." Kiddie held forth the feather he had found. "What d'ye make of it?"

"Um, a black crow's wing feather, I guess," said Nick. "I see it's a *broken feather*. Where'd you pick it up?"

"Alongside of Red Pine Creek," said Kiddie, "with a pebble atop ter keep it in place. Quill end pointed south-east—direction of White Bull Ridge."

"Any hoof prints around? Thar was rain last night."

"No; just the touch of a moccasined foot in the moist sand, edge of the grass."

"We'll start right now, then," Nick decided. "I've gotten all the bills and doc'ments. You'll sign 'em when the goods is duly delivered. You'll be ridin' in front, I guess? You'll take the boy along? Say, if you scents trouble ahead, jes' hustle him back ter make me wise. Savee?"

Kiddie rode well in advance of the leading wagon, with Rube at his side. He was now more than ever silent and watchful. Between Horse Shoe Bend and Hot Springs, where they were among the foothills and narrow valleys, his gaze was fixed steadily forward over his pony's restlessly twitching ears. He moved his rifle crosswise in front of him. Without averting his gaze, he said to the boy—

"Just drop back, Rube, and tell Nick ter close up the ranks."

Still riding forward at an easy pace, he gave no sign that he had seen anything unusual. The row of dark objects showing along the upper edge of a projecting rock might well have been mistaken for so many birds preening themselves in the sunlight, only that his keen eight had caught the movement of a pony's tail and the half-hidden plumes of an Indian's head-dress. He dropped the loop of his bridle reins over the pommel and slowly gripped his gun with a finger on the trigger.

Instantly, the Redskin's head was raised. Kiddie fired at it. There was a wild, barbaric yell, and from both sides of the ravine Indians dashed forth from their ambush, riding downward to the attack.

CHAPTER IV

BROKEN FEATHER'S WAY

When he had fired that first shot, and while the Redskins were still riding out from their ambush to rally on the level trail and charge down in a compact body upon his outfit, Kiddie turned his pony and galloped back under a hail of arrows. Most of them fell short; very few flew past him, and only one touched him, doing no harm.

"That's right, Nick," he called, as he drew rein beside the leading mule wagon.

"There's a whole crowd of em' comin' out from behind the rock," cried Rube Carter, going up to him. "I'm goin' ter git 'neath this yer wagon an' fire at 'em through one o' th' wheels."

"You ain't goin' ter handle any gun," frowned Kiddie. "You're goin' ter hang back in the rear an' keep an eye on the hosses. Quit!"

Nick Undrell, following his instructions, had promptly brought the three wagons into position, extending them obliquely across the level trail, one to the rear of the other, so that each should have its broadside presented like a redoubt towards the oncoming enemy, the mule teams being swung round into cover on the sheltered side.

Kiddie's horses in the background were similarly protected from the line of fire, unless, indeed, the Indians should succeed in getting through on either flank, which was not at all probable.

Six picked marksmen were concealed under the canvas covers of each of the wagons, and every

man from behind his particular loophole commanded a wide section of the valley and of the hillside.

The Indians, seeing that the outfit had come to a halt, as if in submission, delayed their advance while they closed into massed formation to sweep down upon their unresisting victims in one grand overwhelming rush. They could see only the three drivers, who had now jumped down to attend to their mules, and four riders, one of whom was a mere boy.

Clearly, they considered the prairie schooners and their precious contents already their own, as well as the horses bunched in the rear. They could not have divined that, apart from the guns carried by the horsemen, there were eighteen repeating rifles levelled against them from under the cover of three innocent-looking carts.

Kiddie dismounted, dropped his bridle rein over his pony's head, and took up a position behind the foot-board of the foremost wagon, from which he could look forward along the trail, with a rest for his elbows in levelling his gun. There was a neat little stack of cartridges in their clips within his easy reach.

"Don't reckon as I touched Broken Feather when I fired that first shot along there," he remarked to Nick Undrell, who was posted near him.

"That ain't Broken Feather hisself as you's looking at," said Nick, squinting along the barrel of his Winchester, "though I allows he's wearin' the chief's dinky head-dress. No, sir, that's Murm'rin' Water, the boss medicine man. You won't easily reco'nize Broken Feather by his body coverin'. You'll be a whole lot wiser'n I think you, if you kin single him out in that crowd. Hullo! Now for it!"

Nick pressed his trigger. The Redskins were charging.

"Let go, boys!" he cried, as a shower of arrows and ill-aimed bullets peppered against the off sides of the wagons and kicked up spurts of dust on the trail.

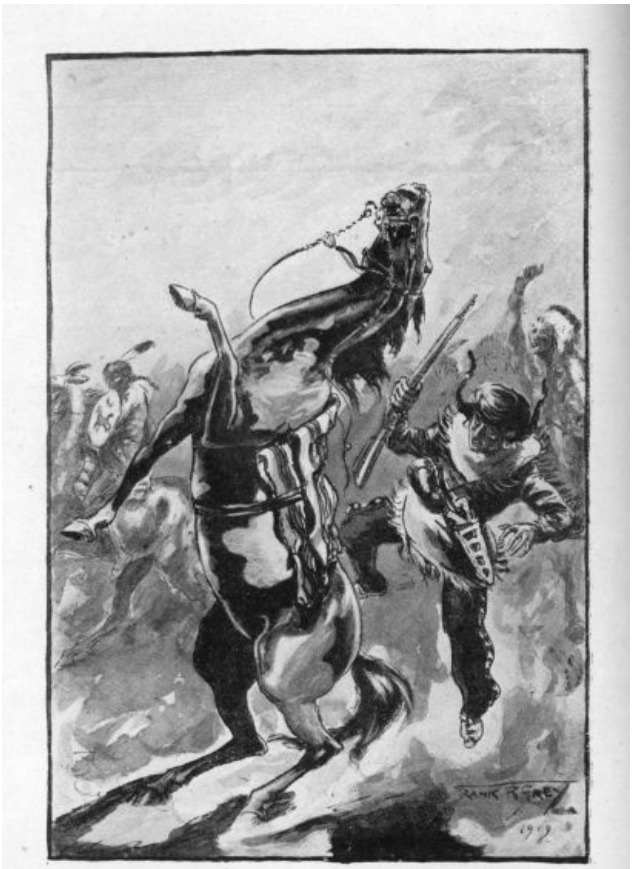
Simultaneously the hidden men in the three carts opened fire. There was a loud burst of rifle shots, and then a continuous stream, broken only at momentary intervals as the magazines were refilled and again refilled.

The Indians, taken wholly aback by this unexpected reception of point-blank fire, swerved in confusion. Many of them tumbled from their rearing, plunging, staggering ponies. Many of the ponies fell; many raced back riderless. There was a wild screech as the crowd stopped in their broken charge, unwilling to face the deadly barrier of bullets.

"Cease fire!" cried Kiddie, lowering his rifle. "Cease fire, Nick. We've checked 'em, sure. Don't you see? Order your men ter quit shootin'."

"Not yet," objected Nick, still using his gun. "We ain't finished yet, no more'n they. See the rooster in the fur cap—him ridin' the piebald mustang? He ain't done shootin' yet. He's figurin' ter pick you off. Bin at it all the time. Snakes! Why, it's Broken Feather hisself! Stand back! Leave him ter me, sir. Git back an' see ter them hosses—and the boy."

As he spoke Nick again pressed his trigger. Kiddie saw the mustang rear on its hind legs, pawing the air as it pivoted round, and then fall over with a heavy thud. But its rider leapt clear, flung himself flat behind his fallen pony, and continued to shoot.



Kiddie saw the mustang rear on its hind legs.
[To face page 39.

Kiddie saw the mustang rear on its hind legs.

"Jim's hit!" cried a voice from the wagon. "He's hit bad."

"Alf'll look after him," called Nick, thrusting a new clip of cartridges into his gun. "Th' rest o' you keep on shootin'. Keep a watch on the side slopes. Some of 'em's liable ter sneak past."

Some of the dismounted Indians now tried to work round to the flanks, crawling like snakes through the grass and taking shelter behind bush and boulder. But the sharp-eyed frontiersmen quickly detected them, and none got through.

Kiddie saw this new danger, however, and, taking Nick's advice, he leapt on his waiting pony and rode back to the rear, to assure himself that Rube and the horses were safe.

Rube was faithfully at his post, minding the horses and watching the back trail, but fretting sorely at being kept away from the excitement of the fighting.

"All right," nodded Kiddie, riding up to him. "Drive the horses back there, to the shelter of the ravine, where the stream comes down. Give them a drink. They'll be glad of it. And—stop there with them. I'll give you a sign when I want you to bring them along."

It seemed to Rube then that Kiddie wanted to get him out of the way, and he wondered at Kiddie's reasons for keeping him from participating in the battle.

Young though he was, and he was only fourteen, Rube considered himself quite capable of handling a gun and looking after himself. And he wasn't a coward. Why could he not be allowed even to look on from a safe shelter?

Kiddie's reasons, nevertheless, were good. He was thinking less of the boy, whom he implicitly trusted, than of his horses, and of a new peril which at this moment seemed to threaten the whole of his company.

Just as he had halted beside Rube he had turned his glance back along the narrow valley. Far off in the blue distance he had seen a thin film of dust rising; or was it smoke? He was not certain at first, but when Rube had gone he looked again in the same direction, and he said to himself in his old drawling Western way—

"'Tain't smoke. Guess it's just dust. An' it's travellin' this ways along the trail. But a cloud of dust same as that must ha' bin turned up by more'n one gallopin' pony. Dozens an' dozens, more like. Guess it's Injuns—a second detachment of Broken Feather's forces—rustlin' along with th' idea of nippin' us in 'tween two fires. A cute idea; but I don't notion that it's goin' ter come off. They're just a bit too late; didn't calculate on our comin' along so quick, I guess."

The fighting had slackened considerably when Kiddie returned to his loophole at the front of the leading wagon. Nick Undrell was still there. He was rigidly looking along the sights of his rifle, hesitating to fire.

"You're aimin' at a dead pony, Nick," Kiddie pointed out.

"I ain't doin' nothin' so fullish," returned Nick. "It's the skunk lyin' doggo behind it that I'm interested in. Broken Feather's thar, sure; and he ain't dead; he ain't even wounded. He's 'bout as much alive an' alert 's ever he was in his nat'ral. But his ammunition's all spent, an' he's jus' waitin' his chance ter quit. He knows I've got th' bead on him. Soon's I shift my gun, he'll do a vamoose, slick, an' his braves along of him."

"Then shift your gun," commanded Kiddie. "Quit shootin' an let's git outer this. Thar's a reinforcement of Injuns comin' down along the trail."

"Eh?" Nick quietly rested his gun on the footboard and drew stealthily back from it. "You watch him, then. When he's gone we'll make a move."

Kiddie watched, and witnessed a curious happening which gave him a vivid insight into the character of the young Sioux chief.

Within a minute after Nick had stepped back out of sight Broken Feather crawled swiftly out from the protecting barrier of the dead mustang and took cover behind a boulder.

Quite near to the same boulder a wounded Indian was vainly trying to mount his pony. The pony was restive and evidently frightened. The Indian, failing to mount, took hold of the pony's long, trailing halter and allowed the animal to drag him away.

Just at this point Broken Feather darted out from behind the boulder, making straight for the pony and the wounded brave.

Kiddie, still watching, naturally supposed that the chief was about to help the wounded man to mount, as any civilized soldier would have done. But this was not Broken Feather's way. Seizing the bight of the halter, he snatched it from the other's grip, while at the same time he struck the wounded Indian a fierce blow with his closed fist, full in the face, which sent him reeling to the ground.

Without a backward glance of pity or excuse, Broken Feather himself leapt to the pony's back, urged the animal to a gallop, and sped off, rallying his remaining warriors to a precipitate retreat.

"Coward and cur!" murmured Kiddie between his teeth. And calling a hurried command to Nick Undrell, he strode out to give help to the wounded Indian, carrying him on his shoulder to one of the wagons.

The Indian's nose was broken. Kiddie fixed it into shape with sticking plaster. He also extracted a bullet from the man's back and bandaged the wound.

"We'll leave him lyin' here on the trail," he decided. "His pards 'll look after him and the others that are wounded, when they come along. They'll soon know what's happened when they scout around. Guess they'll not be eager t' follow us up."

"Well, this outfit o' yourn hasn't suffered anyways serious," observed Nick Undrell, when all was ready for a new start. "I've had a look round, an', barrin' a few splinters took off the wagons, an' some holes pierced in the canvas covers, we've not taken a whole lot of harm. Jim Thurston here's th' only one as got badly hit. That broken bone in his arm 'll take a consid'rable time ter git well. It'll be weeks 'fore Jim kin ride again in the Pony Express."

Kiddie was giving a professional bandaging to Thurston's wound.

"You a rider in the Pony Express business, then, Jim?" he asked.

"Bin at it fer a couple of years," Jim answered. "That's what I'm worrying about. I'm figurin' as they'll fire me, slick, fer takin' on a job like this. 'Tain't in th' agreement that I sh'd go foolin' around after hostile Injuns in my off time. I shall be sacked, sure. An' me with a wife an' family, too."

"No need to worry, Jim," Kiddie assured the man. "You'll not get the sack, and your wife and family won't suffer any. You got hurt in my service, and I will see you through. As for the Pony Express ridin', I will even take on the job myself for a spell, until you're better. Does that comfort you any?"

Thurston shook his head and smiled.

"You couldn't do it," he said. "You, a English gentleman—a titled lord, I'm told. You couldn't do it. You gotter be some horseman 'fore you kin ride in the Pony Express. You gotter be brought up to it. 'Tain't no fancy amatoor job."

"Here, Jim, old pard," interposed Nick Undrell. "You'd best dry up. You dunno who you'se talkin' to, sure. His lordship rid in the Pony Express 'fore ever you shoved your toes in stirrups. He was the slickest Express rider along the whole trail. Thar wasn't a skilfuller horseman than Kiddie between Saint Joseph an' Sacramento. Couldn't do it, says you! Well, I should smile!"

"Kiddie, d'ye say? Kiddie? Gee! You never told me that! Course I knows the name o' Kiddie—same's I knows the name of the President of th' United States. Seems I bin makin' a fool o' myself, eh? Reckon it's up ter me t' apologize fer mistakin' him for a English lord; though some crooked-tongued skunk sure told me he was such. Kiddie, eh? Gee!"

"Say, Kiddie, was you plumb serious when you said you'd take Jim's turn in the Pony Express?" questioned Rube Carter, riding again at Kiddie's side.

"Sure," Kiddie smiled in answer. "I'm just hankerin' to be at the old job again, ridin' at top speed with the mail bags, same as I used ter do. Same as your father did. Your father lost his life in the business, you know. Was attacked by Injuns. And Eye-of-the-Moon—Broken Feather's father—went off with his scalp."

Rube was silent for a while.

"Didn't know 'bout the scalpin'," he said presently. "Didn't know as it were Eye-of-the-Moon as done it. Then, in that case, Broken Feather's father killed my father?"

"That's so. Guess you've got no occasion ter be anyways friendly with Broken Feather."

"Pity you allowed him t' escape," said Rube.

"Well, you see, Rube, it wouldn't have been gentlemanly to shoot at a man who was not armed," explained Kiddie, "and he was as good as unarmed when he had spent his last cartridge. You've got to be a gentleman, even when fighting a savage enemy. Yes," he went on, "I shall take a turn with the Express, if they'll let me; and I still have my licence. As for poor Jim Thurston, we will leave him at Lavender Ranch. Isa's sister, Martha Blagg, will look after him."

Kiddie of Birkenshaw's had always been well loved at Lavender, and he was warmly welcomed when his outfit halted at the gate. At his request Martha willingly undertook to nurse the wounded man until he should be well enough to return to his own home.

"My!" she exclaimed, at sight of the three heavily-loaded wagons. "My! Whatever are you goin' ter do with all that furniture? Goin' ter set up housekeepin' on your own account? Whatever have ye' gotten in all them Saratoga trunks?"

"All sorts of fixin's an' fancies," Kiddie told her. "Among other things, if you're hankerin' to know, thar's a heap of dress material that I brought all the way from London fer Martha Blagg. Likewise a dinky pair of shoes with silver buckles, and heels on 'em that'll make you inches taller'n you are now. I reckoned you'd rather have the cloth an' linen an' stuff than English hens or ducks an' sich farm truck, that wasn't just convenient ter bring along. I notioned ter bring you a couple of milch cows—pretty as antelopes, they was—but I couldn't manage 'em. Hosses is diff'rent. The brown mare with the white blaze up her face is fer Isa. Guess we may's well take her to the stable right now. He'll find her when he comes home. I'll send along the other fixings when I unpack."

He was in no great hurry to "unpack." When his outfit arrived at the camp, the main contents of the wagons were unloaded and stowed away under shelter, and the English horses were corralled. Only the materials for the building of his new cabin were left in the open at the edge of the trail.

These were the walls and partitions, doors, floors, and roof, already built in portable sections of stout American timber, needing merely to be erected and clamped in place on a substantial foundation.

He planned to erect the cabin on a long-chosen site apart from Gideon Birkenshaw's homestead, but near enough to be neighbourly.

The spot he had decided upon was a level plateau among the pine trees between the beaver pond and Grizzly Notch, where he had years ago killed his first bear. It was so close to the Sweetwater that in the mornings he could rise from his cot and dive from the brink of the cliff into the clear running creek.

There was some timber to be felled and the foundation to be dug and new paths to be made through the woodland glades, and it would take some weeks of hard work before the cabin could be occupied. But he had made all his plans and measurements in anticipation; nothing had been neglected.

Long before he had decided finally to return to the wilds—long ago, in the irksome social life of London—he had dreamt of this possible cabin hidden in the peaceful seclusion of the forest, where he could study the ways of the birds and beasts, where he could live the life of a lonely scout and trapper, hunting or fishing for his own food, cooking his own meals, doing everything for himself without the help of servants. And now his dream was coming true.

CHAPTER V

The day after the arrival of his outfit was a Sunday, and he did no unnecessary work. But on the Sunday afternoon he saddled one of the prairie ponies and rode along the trail to Fort Laramie. Here he presented his licence to the agent of the Pony Express Company and asked to be engaged in the place of Jim Thurston, until Jim was able to resume his job.

Kiddie's name was prominent in the records, his reputation as an Express rider was not forgotten, and his request was readily granted.

"You'll start on Jim's western section five o'clock in the mornin'," the agent intimated. "Thar's a dispatch—a very important Gov'ment dispatch—comin' along. I'm givin' you the responsibility of carryin' it to Drifting Smoke Crossing, where you'll transfer the mails to Roger Picknoll. You'll find relay ponies waitin' as per usual at the stages along the trail. And, say, you gotter be some keerful."

Kiddie smiled.

"D'you mean more'n ordinary careful?" he asked. "Isn't an Express rider always careful?"

"You've hit it," nodded the agent. "I sure means more'n or'nary keerful. Not only because of the dispatch. Nobody excep' the Gov'ment keers a red cent 'bout that docyment. But thar's a gang o' road agents—robbers an' horse thieves—at work along thar. They're liable t' interfere with any rider, no matter who or what he may be, on the chance of findin' valu'bles about him. Attacked a innercent, peaceful traveller only last week, they did; robbed him, took his pony, an' left him lyin' gagged an' bound an' senseless."

"Any idea who they are?" Kiddie inquired. "What's their partic'lar way of workin'?"

"By all accounts they got a many ways," said the agent. "I dunno just which report ter believe. One says they've the habit of disguisin' theirselves as Red Injuns, another holds as they goes foolin' around as or'nary cowboys, but wearin' face masks; an' another as they travels in a faked-up conveyance that strangers might mistake for a stage coach. But all agree that they're just desp'rate chara'ters all round. As to who they are, well, I dunno no more'n you. All I knows is that one o' the wust of the hull gang's a man named Nick Undrell."

"Nick Undrell?" Kiddie repeated the name as if it were new to him. "Well, I guess Nick won't interfere with me any. Good evenin', boss. I shall be here on time. Don't worry."

He stabled his pony in the town, and, as the night was fine and it was not yet late, he strolled out on foot for a walk along the Little Laramie River. At a distance of about a mile he entered a pine wood, made his way among the trees, and at length halted in front of a cunningly hidden shanty. He stood listening and watching. He heard the rattle of dice. There was a screened light in the window, but it was hurriedly extinguished when he knocked.

After a long delay the door was cautiously opened by a man wearing a mask. A strong smell of tobacco smoke and spirits came from within.

"Nick Undrell is here," said Kiddie, looking into the muzzle of a revolver held close to his face. "I heard his voice. Put aside that gun and tell him to come to the door. Tell him it's Lord Saint Olave."

The masked man within the doorway scrutinized the unexpected and evidently unwelcome visitor, at whom he still held his menacing revolver.

"Tell him it's Lord Saint Olave," Kiddie repeated in a level, insistent voice.

At mention of this name the man slowly lowered his gun and drew back a step, opening the door a trifle wider.

"Lord Saint Olave?" he muttered in surprise. "Lord Saint Olave—here—at this time o' night! Wantin' ter see——" He removed the black cloth mask that had hidden his face—"Wantin' ter see me?"

"Yes, Nick. That's why I'm here," returned Kiddie. "I want to see you kind of private. You've no occasion t' be alarmed. I'm not in the vigilance service, you know. Thought I'd just saunter along and have a jaw with you, that's all."

"Come right in, sir," said Nick, now holding the door wide open. "I got a few friends here; but they was jus' quittin' when you knocked."

Kiddie followed him within the darkness. The light in the room was then turned up, and he saw four evil-looking men busily pulling off their masks, putting away their pistols, and sweeping their playing cards, dice-box, and a "pool" of coins and greenbacks from the table.

"The four o' you kin quit, soon's you likes," said Nick Undrell. "His lordship an' me we've got a private pow-wow on hand, an' we don't want no listeners mussin' around."

The men emptied their glasses, stood up, hitched their belts, and went slowly past him and out at the door.

Kiddie knew them by sight. They had all been of Nick's gang in the defence of the mule wagons. One still had a patch of sticking-plaster across his cheek which Kiddie himself had put there over an arrow wound. When they were gone outside he turned to Nick.

"Any partic'lar reason why you and your convivial guests should hide your countenances behind masks?" he inquired in a casual tone, glancing about with curious calculation.

Nick Undrell did not answer this very pertinent question, and his visitor did not press him, but resumed, still casually—

"Can't say as this is quite a palatial residence for an industrious man that's called successful. You used ter make good money at one time, Nick, when you worked along with Buckskin Jack; had a consid'rable bankin' account, too. This all you've got ter show for it?"

"Yep. All I possess in the world, barrin' my pony, is contained in this yer shanty."

"What you done with that profitable ranch you had, back of Devil's Gate?"

"Lost it," Nick answered, as if a range of a hundred fertile acres with its herd of horses were a trifling article that had dropped through an unsuspected hole in his pocket. "Lost it."

"Just so," nodded Kiddie. "Gambled it away, I guess; staked the whole property on the turn-up of a miserable queen of spades, and lost the lot."

"As a matter of fact," Nick smiled grimly, "it were th' ace of hearts as done me in. An' the skunk as won it offen me wasn't a white man, neither, but a greasy Injun. So now you know."

"Ah, Nick, you sure ain't the man you was in Buck's time; gamblin', drinkin', hidin' your guilty face behind a mask, afraid when a harmless visitor knocks at your door. What d'you suppose Buck would have thought of you? What d'you expect me myself to think?"

"Dunno," said Nick ashamedly. "Th' ain't many men along this yer trail like Buckskin Jack an' you, Kiddie. Thar's nobody ter lend a guidin' hand to a man that's anyways weak. If I'd had you or Buck ter blaze the trail for me I reckon I'd never have lost my way, same's I have done. Savvy?"

"You c'd git back to the right trail even yet if you'd only go straight," urged Kiddie.

Nick shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Say, what you got in the bag?" he inquired abruptly.

Kiddie had opened his haversack and taken from it a small canvas wallet, which he laid on the table in front of him. He also produced a very beautiful gold cigarette case.

"Have a smoke, Nick," he invited, opening the case and displaying a compact double row of very fine Turkish cigarettes with gold tips. "These are a special brand. I never smoke myself; just carry these ter give away. Take!"

Nick Undrell glanced at them and shook his head.

"Them's just toy smokes," he objected. "Gimme some sensible, strong pipe terbacco an' I'll thank you; but I got no use fer aristocratic playthings like them. What you got in th' bag?"

Kiddie afterwards had an important reason for remembering Nick Undrell's contempt for cigarettes. Slipping the gold case into his breast pocket, he now took up the canvas wallet and opened it to take out a substantial bundle of American bank notes.

"I've to pay you and your boys for the great help you gave me in guarding my outfit along the trail," he explained, speaking now in his character of Lord St. Olave. "I don't forget that you risked your lives and were in danger of losing them. I want to reward you all accordingly."

"No occasion ter hurry 'bout the payment," said Nick, assuming an air of indifference. "Next week'll be time enough." He glanced down at the bundle of greenbacks and gave a little gasp of envious surprise. "Say," he observed, "you got consid'rable confidence in folk's honesty to carry a heap o' dollars like that along o' you."

Kiddie met the man's cunningly covetous glance as he passed the whole bundle across to him.

"Guess that's considerably more'n you an' your gang of road-agents found on the harmless traveller you robbed on the trail last week and left gagged and bound," he said pointedly.

"Eh?"

Nick clutched the notes and drew back. His hand went to his hip.

Kiddie seemed to have anticipated this movement, and he was quite ready for it.

"Keep your hand away from your gun," he said quietly. "I'm covering you with mine, and I'm quicker than you. Listen! You see, I know about that affair. I was hoping that you'd be able to tell me

you'd no hand in it. But now I know by your behaviour that you're guilty, that you were the ringleader of the despicable gang. I'm not accusin' you. I repeat that I'm not in the vigilance service; I'm not a policeman. I may tell you, however, that I knew your evil reputation before I engaged you to take charge of my outfit. I trusted you, Nick, and you did not betray my trust. You acted straight—you and your men alike—and every cent of the amount I've just handed to you is well deserved and honestly earned."

"You trusted me—you trusted the lot of us—knowin' we was low-down roosters that wouldn't think twice of killin' a man for the sake of his goods? That wasn't just wise, Kiddie. We might ha' bin springin' a trap on you. Why, the traveller you referred to—him as were left senseless on the trail—hadn't more'n the value of ten dollars on him all told. He'd only a nickel watch, his knife, a pistol as wouldn't shoot, an' a broken-winded cayuse that was hardly worth taking away. And you gave us the chance to make off with the whole of your valu'ble outfit! It wasn't wise. It wasn't safe."

"Then you guessed it was of value?" Kiddie questioned.

"Value? Well, I didn't on'y guess; I knew. We'd gotten word of it days an' days 'fore it came along. So had the Redskins. But we didn't cotton to the Injuns gettin' in front of us, see? We didn't have th' ambition of seein' Broken Feather collar the boodle."

"Eh?" Kiddie looked across with level, penetrating eyes. "In front of you? Then you admit that you had plans of your own?"

Nick Undrell was filling his pipe, ramming the tobacco in with nervous vigour.

"Don't make too sure, Lord Saint Olave," he retorted calmly. "Speakin' fer myself, I were ready to guard your property with me life, for the sake of who you are—the son of Buckskin Jack. An' when you comes up, trustin' me right down to the dust, an' requestin' me ter make up a armed escort, well, I reckon I was plumb on the job, an' didn't look fer no extravagant reward like this." He indicated the bundle of bank notes.

"But there were other plans," insisted Kiddie. "You'd planned to rob me on your own account. Don't deny it. Be candid. I'm wantin' to understand your position and your character."

Nick stared at him, but could not bear for long the searching expression in Kiddie's clear eyes. He lowered his own.

"Thar's no bluffing a player like you, Kiddie," he said. "You've called my hand. I gotter show up. You's correct. Thar was sure another plan. But we wasn't figurin' t' attack you on the trail, same as th' Injuns did—an' failed. We wasn't figurin' ter do no shootin'. Even allowin' as we'd attacked the wagons an' killed the drivers an' young Rube an'—an' you, it wouldn't ha' bin easy fer us t' carry away the goods. We couldn't have unloaded all them Saratoga trunks an' all that household furniture on the open prairie without bein' dropped on. Your hosses, too, we couldn't ha' hidden 'em. We couldn't alter their coats or their shape or action. They'd sure been observed an' admired all along the back trail from Leavenworth to Laramie. Everybody would ha' known 'em. No, it wasn't good enough."

"And so," rejoined Kiddie with a smile, "you decided to make a virtue of necessity, eh?"

Nick had lighted his pipe, and he took several thoughtful puffs at it before he answered.

"We decided ter delay operations. D'ye savee?"

"Yes, I see," nodded Kiddie. "You decided to wait until I had done the unpacking for you—until I'd got the valuables nice and handy for the robbery in the lonesome cabin that I'm building for myself in the woods."

"That's about the size of it," acknowledged Nick. "An' now you're warned."

"Forewarned and forearmed," returned Kiddie. "I shall be prepared, you may be sure. And you can expect a hot reception. A very hot reception, indeed."

Nick strode up to him, and tapped him on the shoulder with the wet stem of his pipe.

"Look 'ee here, Lord Saint Olave," he said steadily; "you ain't read my c'ara'ter true; not yet. You got a lot to learn 'fore you knows me proper. I ain't the low-down cur as you takes me for—not by a long chalk. I ain't beyond gettin' back on the right trail, if yer only gives me time. Your comin' back here to the wilds has made a kinder diff'rence t' me—a heap of diff'rence. D'ye savee?"

"I'm glad to hear it, Nick, my boy," said Kiddie. "And I quite understand. You mean that because I'm back here to blaze a trail for you, you'll give up gambling, you'll give up hard drinking, and you'll never again molest harmless travellers or do thieving of any sort. Do you promise all this, Nick? Eh? Straight, now, do you promise it? I know you'll keep your word, once you give it. You're a desperado, but I don't think you would break your word."

Nick Undrell pulled himself together.

"It's a steep proposition," he murmured. "But I guess I ain't no coward. Yes, Kiddie," he answered resolutely. "I promise; I promise faithful. You're blazin' the trail for me, an' I'm shapin' ter foller it true."

CHAPTER VI

JIM THURSTON'S SUBSTITUTE

At half-past four on the following morning, Kiddie stood alone on the trail with his saddled pony, waiting in the darkness outside the depot of the Express in Fort Laramie, and listening for the thumping sound of hoofs which should tell him that the westward bound mail was approaching.

He was earlier than it was necessary he should be, but he was aware from long past experience that when there was an especially important dispatch among the mails, the riders taking up their successive relays tried to gain a few minutes on their time.

And this was what now happened, for he had been waiting less than a quarter of an hour when he heard the expected sound from afar. Shortly afterwards the incoming rider dismounted at his side, breathing heavily after a ride of two hundred and forty miles.

"You've saved seventeen minutes on schedule time, pardner," Kiddie told him. "Guess I shall improve on that, if my ponies are all up to the mark an' ready at their stations."

He seized the two satchels, transferred them to his own saddle, mounted, and with a wave of the hand started off to the westward.

Not a moment had been wasted in making the change, and his trained pony broke at once into a full gallop which would be continued while the trail was level until the next station was reached, some thirty miles away, where a fresh pony would be awaiting him.

His first relay station was at Hot Springs, and it took him less than a minute to change mounts. He rode eight different ponies on this trip, and each of them satisfied him. Their pace depended upon the nature of the ground.

Where the trail was good, as across Laramie Plain, and could be taken at the gallop, the speed was something like twenty-five miles an hour, but where the way was rugged, as among the Porcupine Mountains, fifteen, or even ten miles in an hour was considered good going.

When Kiddie reached the station at Sweetwater Bridge he had gained by six minutes. Gideon Birkenshaw had come down from the homestead to greet him, and the fresh pony was held by young Rube Carter. Kiddie's Highland deerhound, Sheila, was also on the trail. As he dismounted, she raised herself on her hind feet and put her paws on his shoulders to lick his chin.

"Down, Sheila, down!" commanded Kiddie, drawing away from her. "I'm on duty. I've not come home to you."

Sheila walked majestically apart from him.

"Amazin' wise, that animal is," said Gideon, taking the bridle of the tired pony, and watching Kiddie leap to the saddle of the fresh one. "Built same's a racehorse, she is. Them long legs of hers, they'd cover a heap o' ground, eh? What kinder work did she do in her own country, Kiddie? Huntin'?"

"Yes, deer hunting," Kiddie answered. "She could race any stag—outdistance any horse. Has a pedigree as long's your arm, Gid. She's quite an aristocrat."

"Splendidest dog I ever see in my life," commented Rube, patting the hound's shaggy head. He seized her collar and held her in a firm grip while Kiddie started. She strained against him as her master went farther and farther away.

Rider and pony were quickly out of sight in a fold of the trail, but again they appeared on the farther rise. Sheila pulled harder now, but Rube dug his heels in the ground, and dragged her back.

"No, you ain't goin' ter foller him," he protested.

But with a sudden strong wrench the hound broke away, and bounded off along the trail, sending Rube flying backward into the bushes. Rube scrambled to his feet.

"Look! look, Boss!" he cried, excitedly. "Gee! did y'ever see a critter run like that? My! jus' look! Kiddie may well say she c'd outdistance any hoss. D'you reckon a railroad train c'd go faster'n that, Gideon!"

"Dunno," said Gideon, watching the animal racing at full stretch through a cloud of dust. "I ain't just certain 'bout that railroad train; but I sure never seen a critter go along quicker'n that hound's goin' now. Why, she'll overtake Kiddie inside of half an hour, for all his long start of her!"

Kiddie, indeed, had not gone half a dozen miles before the deerhound was galloping at his pony's heels. The pony's ears were twitching nervously, and there was a change in the measure of its headlong stride. Kiddie felt instinctively that he was being closely followed, yet there were no hungry wolves about at this time of year.

An impatient yelping bark reached him. He glanced round over his shoulder. The dog soon came level with him.

"Go back—back, Sheila!" he called.

But Sheila only slackened her pace, and dropped behind, where he could neither see nor hear her.

At a bend in the trail, where it entered a deep gully, overshadowed by trees, Kiddie looked round to assure himself that the hound had obeyed him. To his surprise he saw her still following him closely. He drew rein, dropping from a swift gallop to an easy canter. Still Sheila was close behind. Kiddie began to scold her, but, as this had no effect, he pulled up to a halt, and dismounted.

"Now, do as you're told, Sheila," he said, half gravely, half coaxingly. "Go back home, you're not to come with me. I'm going too far. Go home, now; there's a good girl."

The hound seemed to understand, for she turned away a few steps and then looked at him pleadingly, standing with her jaws open, and her long dripping tongue working like a piston over her white fangs.

Suddenly she lifted her head, and looked sharply into the shadow of the trees. Her ears were raised as if she had heard some strange, suspicious sound.

Kiddie, preparing to re-mount, listened also. He heard the breaking of a twig far in among the thickly-growing trees. At the same instant something like the buzz-z of a mosquito passed by his ear. An arrow flashed across the trail between him and the dog, striking against a stout tree trunk on the farther side. Then a second arrow, aimed higher, rattled among the upper branches.

Now, Kiddie had his mail bags to think of. He had already lost several precious moments dealing with the hound, and he could not afford to waste time in trying to discover what possible enemy was lurking in the woods with the evident purpose of taking his life.

Drawing his revolver, he fired two shots in the direction from which the arrows had come. Then he turned to Sheila.

"Seek him, Sheila—seek him! After him—quick!" he ordered, pointing out the way; and as the deerhound plunged into the woodland he snatched up the nearer arrow, ran to his pony, and, re-mounting, renewed his broken journey.

At Three Crossings, which was his next relay station, he showed the arrow to the man who met him with the fresh pony.

"Say, Hoskin, how's that?" he questioned. "Some skunk hidin' in the timber this side of Medicine Creek, figured ter do me in with it. Poisoned, ain't it?"

Hoskin took the weapon and critically examined its barbed point.

"Yep," he nodded meaningly, handing it back. "It's sure poisoned. A scratch with it would kill you right away. Got any partic'lar enemy among them Injuns hangin' out along your way? What about the lot as was at Birkenshaw's t'other morning? You was thar, I hear. What about Broken Feather?"

"Broken Feather could hardly know that I'm takin' this trip with the Pony Express," Kiddie demurred.

"Um!" Hoskin shook his head. "I ain't so sure 'bout that, Kiddie," he said. "He has spies planted all along the trail. He knows 'most everything. You'd best be keerful."

Late on that same day. Rube Carter was crossing the trail, carrying a load of material for Kiddie's building operations, when he saw Sheila limping towards him over the bridge. He dropped his load, strode up to her, and was putting his arms about her neck in welcome when he noticed that there was blood on her chin and throat. He searched for an open wound, but found none.

"Looks as if you'd bin gettin' back to yer old business of huntin' stags," he said. "Wait, though," he added, seeing a nasty tear in the skin over her shoulder. "Stags don't carry no knives along of 'em, an' if that ain't a knife stab on your shoulder, then I sure ain't fit t' be called a scout."

Rube was very much perplexed concerning Sheila's condition. It appeared to him that, after all, she had not overtaken her master; that notwithstanding Kiddie's confidence in her running powers, she had proved that a Highland deerhound was not the equal in speed of a well-trained prairie pony.

Rube blamed himself for having allowed her to break away from him. He was glad, however, that she was not lost, and that her injury was not serious. But where had she been? What had she been doing?

He at once began to exercise his scoutcraft in the endeavour to puzzle out the mystery.

The blood marks on her chin and throat might very well be accounted for on the supposition that, instead of following her master, she had gone aside from the trail to give chase to some large animal—a mountain goat or a big-horn antelope, and that she had attacked and perhaps killed it, as she had been trained to do when out deer-stalking in her native Highlands of Scotland.

She might very easily have been wounded in the encounter by a backward prod of an antelope's sharp horn; even as she might have got the stains about her mouth in licking the bleeding wound.

But, unfortunately for this simple theory, the wound in the hound's shoulder was not of a kind to suggest the stab of a goat's horn or of an antelope's sharp-pointed antler. It was clearly and unmistakably the cut of a knife; not round, but thin and straight, and it was too far forward and too high over her shoulder for her to turn her head and get at it with her tongue.

Moreover, some of the bristles that had been cut by the knife remained there loose among the congealing blood, showing that it had not been licked. Rube's obvious conclusion was that it was not an animal, but a man she had attacked; that she had bitten him severely, and that he had used his knife in defending himself. But who that man might be, or why the hound should attack him, Rube could not even conjecture.

It was a dark night, and Rube was sound asleep in his bunk, when Kiddie changed ponies at Sweetwater Bridge on his eastward-bound trip; but Kiddie made time to ask Abe Harum if Sheila had returned.

Abe told him that she was then in her kennel, but added nothing about her condition. On the following day, however, when he returned home for a spell of rest, it was Rube who met him on the trail.

"Seems Abe told you as the hound had come back," began Rube. "It was my fault she followed you. I couldn't hardly help lettin' her loose. Thar was no holdin' her in. She got up t' you, then? How long was she gettin' abreast o' you? I guess you hadn't gotten far, eh? Gee! how she did cover the ground!"

"Why," Kiddie answered, "she was alongside o' me inside of six miles from here. Good going, wasn't it?"

"Sure," agreed Rube. "But she didn't come back so quick, Kiddie, nothin' like it. Did yer know she'd a cut on her shoulder?"

"Eh—a cut?" Kiddie started in vexed surprise. "Is it bad?"

"Oh, no," Rube assured him, "makes her limp some. But I've doctored th' wound, an' it's gettin' along all right. Come an' have a squint at it."

He brought the dog out, giving no expression to his own theory. Kiddie examined the wound.

"Cut of a knife," he decided immediately.

"Thar was blood on her mouth," said Rube. "I washed it. 'Twasn't her own blood."

"Then they sure got to close grips," concluded Kiddie, "and I guess he got as much as he gave. She'd make for his throat, but I'm figurin' that he'd put up an arm to protect himself. His left arm, most like, as he'd use his right for the knife. We gotter keep our eyes open for a man with a lame left arm, Rube."

"Didn't yer see him, Kiddie?" Rube questioned.

"No."

"Then how d'you know anythin' about it? How d'you know it was a man as done it? How d'you know she didn't kill him outright, same's she'd kill a stag? An' why did she go for him, anyway?"

"She went for him because I sent her into the forest after him," Kiddie explained. "The scoundrel shot a poisoned arrow at me. And, having myself no time to spare, I left the business to the dog, see?"

"An arrow!" exclaimed Rube, "a poisoned arrow! Well, 'twas sure a Injun done it. Any one else 'ud have used a gun."

"Might have been a white man, for all that," resumed Kiddie. "An arrow's a silent weapon, and if it's poisoned, as this one certainly was, then a mere scratch would be fatal; whereas the victim might recover from a bullet wound. Whoever it was, however, Sheila must sure have left the mark of her fangs on him."

"How d'you know she didn't kill him?" Rube persisted. "How d'you know he ain't lyin' there dead, right now?"

"Because," Kiddie rejoined, "on my return trip—knowing exactly where the thing happened—I went into the forest and searched. I found spots of blood. I found signs of the struggle; that was all. There

wasn't any dead body lyin' around."

"P'raps th' other Redskins carried his body away," conjectured Rube.

"But he was alone," pursued Kiddie. "I'm plumb sure there was nobody with him."

"See the marks of his moccasins?"

"No. He wore nailed boots, which left scratches on the root of a cotton wood tree."

"Boots, eh? A Injun would have wore moccasins that wouldn't leave no scratch, even on the soft bark of a tree root. Y'see, a white man might wear moccasins, same's I do; but I never knew a Redskin shove his hoofs inter hob-nailed boots. Wait, Kiddie, wait! I've gotten a idea."

"Let's hear it, then, Rube. I'm glad to find that you're exercising your powers of reasoning. What's your idea?"

"This," declared Rube, with a knowing headshake. "I was figurin' that the low-down scoundrel as fired that poisoned arrow might be—well, *might* be Nick Undrell. I never told you before, Kiddie, but that day when your outfit was attacked by the Injuns, I heard one of Nick's chums say ter him—time you was ridin' alone in advance of the wagons—that now was the chance if Nick had a mind ter put a bullet inter you an' vamoose wi' the boodle."

"Yes," smiled Kiddie, "and your idea is that because one of his chums said such a thing as that, Nick went miles and miles out of his way to hide himself in Medicine Creek Forest and try to do the trick by putting a poisoned arrow into me, eh? And what d'you reckon might have been his motive?"

"Dunno," answered Rube. "Never thought of that."

"Because," pursued Kiddie, "if it was robbery, an experienced frontiersman like Nick Undrell wouldn't calculate on finding much boodle on a Pony Express rider. He'd find it a heap more profitable to do the robbery right here where all my valuables are. Besides, Nick is too slick a hand with the pistol to have any truck with an Injun's bow and arrows. No, Rube, my boy, your idea isn't worth a whole lot, come to analyze it. Even if I suspected Nick Undrell of shooting that arrow, the fact remains that when I started on that ride I left him in Fort Laramie, that he had no relays of ponies, as I had, waiting ready along the trail, and that he couldn't anyhow have got to Medicine Creek in front of me. It wasn't humanly possible. Any other solution ter suggest, Rube?"

Rube shook his head decisively.

"No," he answered. "I'm just more puzzled than ever. Can't straighten it out nohow. Can't think who it could be, or why he did it. Thar's only one thing t' be said, Kiddie, an' that's this: the man as tried ter take your life was either a Injun wearin' white man's boots, or else a white man usin' a Injun's bow an' arrow. Beyond that, I'm makin' up my mind ter look out fer a individual—red or white—goin' around with his left arm in a sling."

"Don't hold too tight t' th' idea that it was in the arm he was bitten—" Kiddie cautioned. "Sheila might have seized on any other part of his anatomy. My own notion is that the hound herself will spot him sooner'n you or I could do."

"Thar's a lot in that notion," Rube acknowledged. "Guess I'll keep my eye on the hound all the time. An' when I sees her bristles rise an' her teeth showin' an' hears a growl rumblin' up from her throat, I shall sure know that the skunk ain't a far way off."

CHAPTER VII

RUBE CARTER'S VISITOR

"Hullo!"

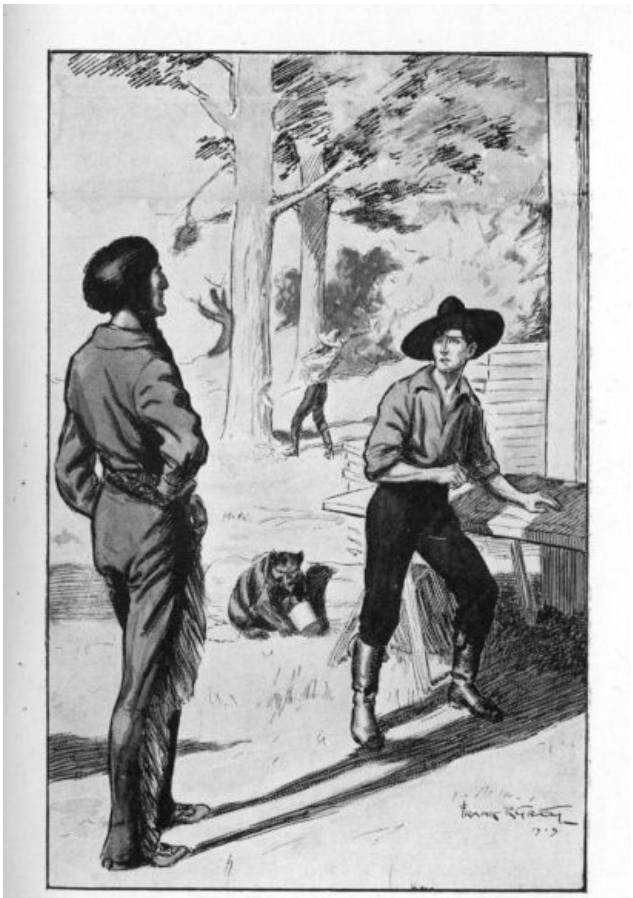
Rube Carter was studying the architect's plan of Kiddie's woodland cabin. The portable sections of the building were all precisely numbered; but they were nevertheless perplexing, and he wanted, above all things, to avoid mistakes.

Usually when in doubt he could apply for an explanation to Kiddie himself, but on this particular day Kiddie was absent on duty with the Pony Express, and Rube had to puzzle out the difficulty unhelped. He had one of the elevation plans spread out in front of him on the working bench, and was trying to ascertain the exact position of a window casement, when a moving shadow crossed the sheet of paper.

He had not heard any one approaching. The only sounds he had been conscious of were the

mumbling of his pet bear cub lying beside him chained to a log, busily licking the inside of an empty honey jar, and the regular strokes of the woodman's axe as Abe Harum worked at the felling of a pine tree some distance away. The shadow came from behind him and stopped on the sunlit expanse of paper.

Rube turned sharply round and looked up at the intruder.



Rube turned sharply round and looked up at the intruder.
[To face page 68.

Rube turned sharply round and looked up at the intruder.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "Where did you blow in from, I'd like ter know? An' what 're you doin' here, anyway? You aware as you're trespassin'?"

He stood confronting a tall, handsome young Indian, who was dressed in fringed buckskins with a red shirt, and a close-fitting cap of beaver fur. There was a finely-plaited leather belt about his waist, from which was suspended a holster containing a heavy revolver. His moccasins, of white deerskin, were gaily decorated with an intricate design in beads and coloured silks and little bits of looking-glass. They were so dainty, it seemed almost that their wearer wanted to draw special attention to his feet. Rube, however, stared inquisitively into the stranger's ruddy brown face, noticing how closely together his piercing black eyes were set and how sharp and thin was his nose. He was an unusually handsome person.

"Injuns ain't supposed ter come out from their reservations," the boy continued. "Anyhow, you've got no business trespassin' on this yer property. You'd best quit. You're not lost, I suppose? You knows your way home?"

"Ugh!" the Indian grunted, taking a step nearer and glancing curiously at the plan.

"Dessay you've got no savee fer what I'm tellin' you," Rube went on, signing a dismissal, "but I can't help that. You gotter quit, see? Go away. Make yerself scarce. Vamoose."

"Oh, I quite understand," said the Indian, speaking, to Rube's surprise, in very good English. "Your words are clear as the sunlight. It is only their meaning that I do not seize. You speak of trespass. I am not a trespasser. For long, long years—many generations—my people have had their hunting grounds, have put up their lodges, and lived and died in these same forest glades. They have trapped the beaver in this same creek, taken fish from this same lake, and followed the buffalo on yonder prairie. Who shall stop me if I lay my line of traps where my people so long ago laid theirs?"

Rube shrugged his shoulders.

"I ain't figurin' ter discuss ancient hist'ry with you, mister," he said. "I'm not denyin' that Redskins hunted on these yer lands centuries 'fore the white man happened along. But that ain't got nothin' t' do

wi' you an' me to-day. You're trespassin' on private property, an' you gotter quit, see? An' if you've bin layin' traps around you kin just lift 'em an' take 'em along with you. This yer forest, that thar lake, an' all the land as far's you kin see belongs ter Lord St. Olave. And he don't allow no trespassers mouchin' around."

"Lord St. Olave?" The Indian pronounced the name with peculiar distinctness. "Otherwise Kiddie," he added, resting a foot on the log, but carefully avoiding the bear cub. "I have heard of him."

"Yes, an' seen him, too," rejoined Rube.

"Seen him? When?" questioned the Indian.

"Why," answered Rube, "you saw him pretty plain, I guess, the time he dropped his lariat over your arms in One Tree Gulch. I suppose you thinks I don't know you, eh? You're Broken Feather; that's who you are. Broken Feather, the boss chief of the Injun village over thar. An' now, what you want? What you doin' around here? Spyin' out the lie o' the land fer future raids?"

"Surely I am at liberty to take interest in a neighbour's building operations," returned the chief. He leant closer over the working bench and gazed down at the architect's plan with renewed curiosity. "This, I suppose, is the front entrance," he said.

He touched the paper at a particular part of the design, but quickly drew his arm back. Rube heard him draw a deep breath, as if he were in pain.

"Say, what's up?" the boy asked. "You took bad in th' inside?"

Instead of answering, Broken Feather turned sharply round. Abe Harum was approaching, followed at some distance by Rube Carter's mother, who carried a basket of food for the workers.

The Indian waited coolly, taking out a tobacco bag and a packet of cigarette papers. Rube thought it curious that he did not make a cigarette, but hesitatingly returned the material to his pocket, as if on deliberation he had decided not to smoke.

"I see you got a visitor, Rube," said Abe, as he strode up. "How do, Broken Feather! You still coveting that Arab mare?—wantin' to buy her, since you couldn't steal her? Well, she ain't for sale."

"I was hoping to see Lord St. Olave," announced the chief. "I come to pay a friendly call upon him. Why not?"

"Friendly?" Abe stared at him in amazement. "Say, you've got some nerve t' come right here an' talk like that, mister. Lord St. Olave ain't anyways likely t' accept friendly calls from the likes o' you. Thar's too much bad blood 'tween you an' him fer that. Anyhow, he's not at home, an' won't be for a long while. So thar's no use your hangin' around."

"Won't be for a long while," Broken Feather repeated. Then with a look of cunning he added: "It will be a longer while than you think."

As he went away, treading very silently, he looked round and spoke in his own tongue, which neither Abe nor Rube could understand. He disappeared as mysteriously as he had come. When he was out of sight, Mee-Mee went up to Abe Harum.

"You no savvy what he say," she said. "I savvy heap. He say Kiddie never, never come back. He say he catch Kiddie on trail, kill him, take him scalp."

"I don't notion he came here ter say that, though," said Rube.

"What d'you reckon he come for?" asked Abe.

"Dunno," said Rube. "But I got a idea. Mother," he turned to Mee-Mee, "jus' you hustle back t' the homestead an' let the big dog loose, will yer?"

"What in thunder d'you want the dog for?" questioned Abe.

"I didn't think of it till he'd gone," returned Rube. "But jus' after you come along, he took out his tobacco pouch ter make a cigarette, but didn't make one. Before that, he stretched out his hand ter touch this yer plan, an' drew his arm back as if the paper'd burnt him. Now why? Ain't it plain? His arm was sore; he couldn't roll a cigarette. When he stretched out his hand it hurt him. It was his left hand, Abe. Kiddie made out that the man as fired that poisoned arrow was bitten in the left arm when the hound attacked him. See?"

"Yes, but what about the hob-nailed boots?" asked Abe. "I noticed that Broken Feather's wearin' moccasins. And uncommonly gay ones they are."

"Nobody c'd help noticin' 'em," argued Rube. "That's what he wanted, in case we'd heard about the boot-tracks. Ain't he just cute, puttin' us off the scent thataway?"

"That don't explain why he should come prowlin' around here," pursued Abe. "What did he want here, anyway? What's your idea?"

"This," said Rube. "Broken Feather calculated he wouldn't find Kiddie here to-day. He knew that Kiddie was ridin' with the Express. That was his chance—ter come here while Kiddie was away and ter prowl around in search of that hound—meanin' ter shoot her at sight with that heavy six-shooter that he carried. That was his errand, sure as mud."

"If that's so," resumed Abe Harum, "why do you want the hound let loose? She'll get on his track. She'll go up ter him where he's most likely lyin' in hiding. Then he'll put a bullet inter her. You'd best ha' kept her chained up, sure."

Rube shook his head.

"Broken Feather's too cunnin' ter do her any harm now that he knows he's been seen. He didn't want t' be seen. He didn't expect t' be. He happened upon me quite sudden, when he was sneakin' round ter git past where you was busy fellin' that tree. I'd seen his shadder 'fore he knew I was thar at the bench. No, Abe, he won't hurt the dog. I've a notion he's gone right away."

"Leavin' no proof that he's the man that tried ter kill Kiddie," added Abe.

"Wait till the hound comes along," said Rube; "then we shall have proof. Just wait."

When at length the deerhound came limping eagerly towards them from among the trees, her nose was lowered to the ground and her tail slashing to and fro. Rube called her, but she went on sniffing the grass, until she got on to Broken Feather's track. Then she bounded forward in pursuit of him. Rube Carter followed her down to the creek, where she stopped.

"Checked!" muttered Rube. "He's too clever for us. Not a bit o' use trying ter pick up his scent in runnin' water, Sheila. Never mind, you've given proof that he's the man that dealt you the cut on the shoulder."

Rube was eager to tell Kiddie of his discovery, and he sat up that night with Abe Harum, waiting for Kiddie to ride along the trail and change ponies at Birkenshaw's station.

Towards two o'clock in the morning, when the eastern bound Express was due, Abe got ready the relay pony, and led it down to the trail. Rube accompanied him. The night was very dark, a thin rain was falling, and they took shelter under the trees. Abe presently struck a match, to see his watch.

"It's time," he said. "D'ye hear him comin'?"

"No," Rube answered. "Mebbe your ticker's a bit fast."

"It's exactly right," Abe assured him. "An' Kiddie's four minutes behind time. 'Tain't like Kiddie t' be late. Dessay his relay wasn't ready at Three Crossings. Keep yer ears open. Wind's comin' this way. We ought t' ha' heard him long ago."

Abe was at first merely interested in the fact of Kiddie being slightly behind schedule time. Then he became impatient, then anxious, and finally seriously alarmed.

"Suthin's happened," he declared. "Never knew Kiddie t' be late like this. Suthin's sure happened."

CHAPTER VIII

KIDDIE'S LUCK

"Say, now, d'you expect me t' ride a spick an' span, over-fed, highly decorated critter like that? My! I ain't entered for a horse show, Cully. I want a pony that can run without thinkin' of takin' prizes on points. And a dandy saddle with fancy stitchin' and finery don't help any in gettin' the mails through on time. What's the matter with the regulation Express pony—the piebald cayuse that you gave me on the last trip? That was a critter that knew how ter go, that was. What's the matter with her?"

"Gone sick," Cully answered, watching Kiddie's quick fingers unbuckling the mail bags from the saddle from which he had just dismounted. "Went sick only a hour ago. Guess she figured it was Jim Thurston's turn ter ride her. If she'd ha' known it was you an' not Jim, you may bet your socks she wouldn't ha' gone sick. But you'll find her substitute O.K. An' if anybody kin ride him, you sure can. Steve Tracy was sayin' only this mornin' as you kin git more pace an' bring yer pony in fresher 'n any rider along the hull Salt Lake Trail; an' I just guess Steve was right. Say, what's the matter wi' the saddle? Ain't you satisfied? Don't it fit the critter proper?"

Kiddie was in the act of mounting. He turned to Cully with a light laugh.

"Fits him like a glove," he answered. "I was only figuring that it's a bit too ornamental for its present purpose. I see the girth has been broken and mended—mended with a doubtful piece of string.

Why wasn't it sent to the saddler t' be properly fixed up? I've half a notion ter chuck it right away and ride bare-backed. But there ain't time to fool around now. So long, Cully."

Almost before he had leapt astride and slipped his feet into the stirrups, the pony was off with a drumming of hoofs along the grassy trail, needing no urging by spur or voice, and Kiddie was so well accustomed to riding at the full gallop that, after he had thrice forded the winding creek of Three Crossings, he could with ease take out the little paper bag of biscuits and fruit that had been handed to him, and munch his evening meal.

It was rough riding over the Rattlesnake Mountains, where often the indistinct trail led him through dark and narrow defiles, or along the brink of dangerous precipices, where the ground was of loose stones, perilously insecure. The mountain torrents, swollen by recent rains, had to be crossed unhesitatingly, and without the help of bridges. But all these dangers and difficulties were familiar to him, and he passed through them unconcerned.

Once when he was riding at fullest speed through the wide valley of White Eagle Gulch, he was forced to turn aside to avoid a great straggling herd of buffaloes. He noticed that the ponderous animals were breathing heavily, and that their flanks were moist with perspiration. Those at the head of the moving herd were strong and virile, and in good condition; those towards the rear were thin and scraggy, and many of these were a long distance in the rear.

"Seems they've been having a stampede," Kiddie reflected. "The weak ones lagged behind. Looks as if they'd been chased."

Amongst the stragglers was a magnificent bull, striding slowly but proudly alone. Blood was dripping from a wound in its nearer side, and deep in the wound was an arrow, buried almost to the feathers.

"Been chased by a band of Redskins," Kiddie assured himself. And he began to look out for further signs of the possible presence of Indians.

A mile or so farther on he came upon a buffalo lying dead, but there were no other signs for many miles until he was crossing a stretch of prairie, where he saw the remains of several buffaloes that had been flayed and cut up. Nothing but the stripped bones was left.

Shortly afterwards he crossed the trail of the hunters, and he estimated that the band consisted of about fifty Indians. They had gone off with their loads of buffalo meat and hides towards the foothills, in a direction at right angles to his own.

Clearly the Redskins were not out to interfere with the Pony Express. Nevertheless, Kiddie continued to keep a watchful eye on both sides of the trail as he galloped along, and also to observe the behaviour of his mount and of the wild birds.

It was the pony that gave him the first intimation of danger, by a sudden lifting of the head and restless twitching of the erect ears. This might well have been occasioned by the near neighbourhood of some beast of prey—a lynx, a wolf, or even an ordinary coyote.

By itself, it meant little, but it was enough to make Kiddie attentive, even though he had assured himself that the Indians, or, at all events, the main body of them, had gone home to their reservation beyond the Rattlesnake Mountains. There were other signs, however.

The gorge through which he was riding was thickly wooded with willows and larch trees, and far in advance of him he saw that the birds had been disturbed. They were in agitated flight over the tree-tops. Above the thudding of his pony's hoofs he heard the raucous squawk of a jay—the most alert of sentinels. It was not at his own approach that the birds were alarmed, but something which was happening nearer to them in the woodland glades.

Kiddie was not more concerned than usual; he was not even suspicious of coming danger, nor did he alter by so much as an inch his seat in the saddle or tighten his grip on the bridle reins.

At the mouth of the gorge, however, he suddenly became apprehensive that some human enemy was lurking in ambush. He remembered the incident of the poisoned arrow. His pony had changed its stride to a less measured gallop, bounding forward at an increased pace, with head lowered, muzzle outstretched and ears thrown back.

Kiddie leant over the pony's fluttering mane, searchingly glancing from side to side and in front of him. He was going at racing speed, but his practical eyes were alert to observe every tiny sign, and none escaped him.

He could see nothing but the trees and rocks as he flashed past them; nothing to cause him serious alarm. It seemed to him that if there had been any hidden danger he had already gone beyond it. But there might still be some unsuspected peril at the far side of the projecting cliff where, as he knew, the trail made an abrupt turn.

He shifted his feet in the stirrups to secure a firmer grip of the irons. As he did so, the pony suddenly swerved. At the same instant the string with which the girth had been improperly mended broke. The whole saddle moved ominously from its true place on the animal's back.

Kiddie preserved his balanced seat only for a few difficult moments. His left foot lost its sure hold in the stirrup, and presently slipped out of it altogether. The pressure of his right foot on the other stirrup caused the saddle to move still farther. Now that the girth straps were flying loose there was nothing but the rider's weight to hold it on the pony's back.

It was at this awkward moment of personal insecurity that he became aware that many galloping horses were close behind him. He did not need to look back over his shoulder to learn that he was being hotly pursued by a band of mounted Indians.

They had been lying in wait for him, well hidden among the screening trees and brushwood. They had let him gallop past, but now they had broken cover and were racing after him with menacing yells and savage cries.

They had lost some moments in getting free from the bush, and he was already well ahead of them; but their mounts had been rested, while his own pony was panting heavily, and wet with perspiration after an unbroken gallop of a dozen miles.

The Redskins gained upon him little by little.

At the turn of the trail he ventured to glance quickly round. In that quick glance he saw that there were at least six of them, led by a warrior wearing an ample war bonnet. They were therefore not members of the buffalo-hunting party, but were on the war-path.

He saw that they were armed with guns and tomahawks, not bows and arrows, and he took confidence from this circumstance, knowing that the Indian is a poor marksman with firearms when mounted, and that none could do him harm with the tomahawk unless within arm's reach of him.

Had his saddle been secure, he would have had little anxiety, but it was slipping farther and farther back. He wondered if he might get free from it altogether, and, dropping it to the ground, continue his ride bare-backed.

Then he remembered that the two mail bags were buckled to the saddle, and that it was his duty to safeguard them with his life.

He tried to ease the thing forward, and at the same time to raise it and save it from shifting perilously to the pony's right side. He believed he could manage it with an adroit upward movement of his right foot, and he made the hazardous attempt, but, unfortunately, in bending his ankle, he pushed his foot just a thought too far, and his boot went clean through the steel loop of the stirrup, high heel and spur included.

This would have been an awkward predicament in any circumstance, even if the saddle band remained unbroken, and the saddle itself firmly in position. It would have been almost impossible for him without help to get the projecting spur and the heel of the boot back again through the stirrup. But now, when the Indians were in close pursuit, only a few lengths behind him, yelling their exultant cries, holding their weapons ready, what was he to do?

Of one thing he was certain; the saddle was bound very soon to fall from the pony's back, and he must as surely go with it, possibly to be trampled to death under the hoofs of the Indians' horses.

He prepared himself for the inevitable fall, designing to fling himself off where there were no rocks to strike against, but only earth and sage grass.

First he made sure that the bridle rein was free, and that nothing would catch upon the saddle when he should drag it after him with his entangled foot.

The foremost Indian was but a couple of lengths behind him when he pulled at the left rein, threw the bridle forward, and flung himself bodily to the ground.

The pony swerved to the left in obedience, and Kiddie escaped its hind hoofs. He fell flat on his back, with his legs and feet in the air. The heavy saddle followed him, sliding down over the pony's hocks, and it was the saddle that got the worst of it when the Redskins galloped past.

Kiddie, indeed, received no injury from the madly pounding hoofs. But his back was badly bruised; he was not sure that one or two of his ribs were not broken; and his right ankle was certainly sprained.

It was evident that the Indians had not expected him to be thrown, for they raced past him, and several moments went by before they could swing round.

In those moments Kiddie rolled painfully over on to his knees and elbows. There was no time for him to cut the stirrup strap, or to attempt to get his hurt foot free. All that he could do was to be ready to defend the two precious satchels containing the mails.

Moving himself forward a few inches, so that he could stretch out his right leg and rest his weight on his left knee and elbow, he drew his revolver and levelled it.

He could not now see the Indians. They were hidden beyond a screen of trees and rock. But he heard them as they checked their wild onrush and turned to ride back and do their worst. He was quite ready for them; he had six bullets in his gun, and none should be wasted.

Suddenly amid the confused clatter of hoofs there came to him the sharp, unmistakable crackle of rifle and pistol shots. Then the Indians rushed into sight, galloping in hot haste.

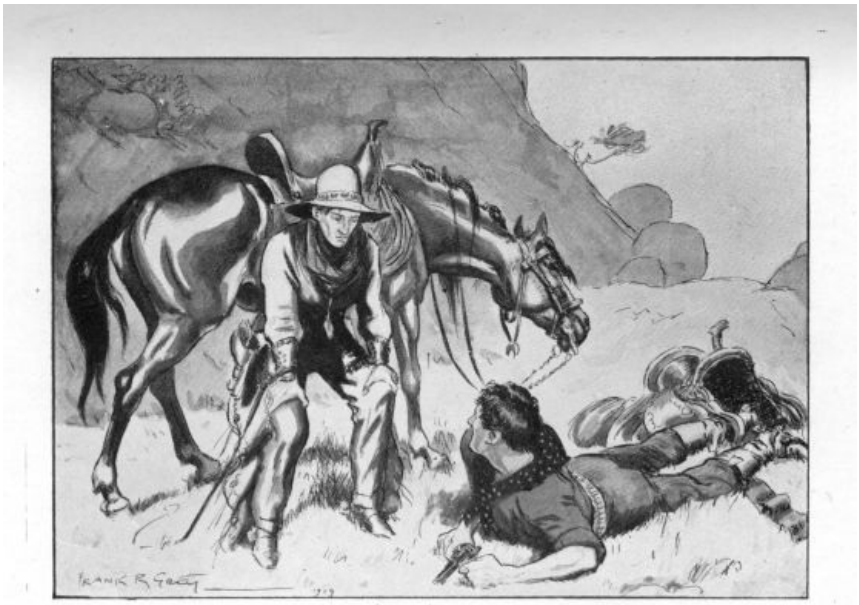
Kiddie fired at two of them, and was shifting his aim to a third, when he realized that they were in flight—that they were being pursued by a horseman who had newly come upon the scene, and who was firing at them with his six-shooter.

Only now did Kiddie reflect that in the ordinary course of his eastward bound trip he would have met the westward going Express rider just at about this same place.

"Alf! Alf Kearney!" he shouted.

The Expressman pulled up short. He had already emptied his revolver, and the Redskins were continuing their flight.

"Frizzle me if it ain't Kiddie of the Camp!" cried Kearney, dismounting and standing with his hands on his knees, staring at the fallen Expressman. "Say, now, are you hurt bad, pardner? I seen your riderless pony hustlin' along with that crowd of yellin' Injuns at its heels. I guessed suthin' had sure happened t' yer, though it ain't a regulation Express pony. Where 're you hurt? You're in luck if you ain't killed right out."



"Frizzle me if it ain't Kiddie of the Camp!" cried Kearney.

[To face page 82.

"Frizzle me if it ain't Kiddie of the Camp!" cried Kearney.

"I'm in sure luck by your happening along," responded Kiddie, trying with difficulty to move. "Say, if you c'n rip open that boot and disentangle my sprained foot from that rotten saddle, I shall be obliged. Then I reckon I c'n lie here while you ride along the trail with your mails and send help, see?"

Alf Kearney demurred to the suggestion, but at once proceeded to liberate Kiddie's foot, first cutting the stirrup-strap and then ripping open the stout leather boot.

"Couldn't you manage ter mount behind me?" he questioned. "My pony's fit ter carry us both, I guess. Like as not, Broken Feather and his gang'll come back. You ain't anyways safe lyin' here, rain comin' on; an' the sooner a doctor sees you the better."

"Broken Feather?" Kiddie repeated. "If that's the rustler wearin' the war-bonnet and ridin' a piebald broncho, then he ain't liable ter come back—not with my bullet in him. I didn't catch sight of his face—didn't savee it was Broken Feather. No, Alf, thank you, I ain't able ter mount. Leave me right here, hustle along with the Express, and send help from your first relay station."

The long, weary night that followed was very dark, and the two men sent along the trail to give help searched in vain for Kiddie in the driving rain. They had brought a buckboard cart with them in which to carry him home to Sweetwater Bridge.

They searched for hours, but even when they discovered some rain-washed hoof prints it was too dark for them to follow the tracks. It was not until daybreak that they found Kiddie asleep under his blanket, with the saddle for a pillow and his arms, with their red shirt sleeves, folded over his chest.

He awoke when they whistled. They ran up to him, afterwards bringing along the buckboard, into which they tenderly lifted him. The jolting of the cart was painful to him, but when at length they arrived at Birkenshaw's camp he declared that he wasn't at all badly hurt.

"Just leave me alone, boys," he said, "I don't want you ter make any fuss over me. There's nothing

serious the matter—a few bruises, a sprained ankle, a kinder gen'ral shakin' up; that's all. I shall be ready to go with the Express again before Jim Thurston, even now."

"No occasion ter worry any 'bout the Express, Kiddie," said Abe Harum, massaging the injured ankle with embrocation. "I'm notionin' ter take a spell at it myself fer a while, a kinder change for me, see?—good as a holiday. Besides, thar's two individuals I'm anxious ter meet. One of 'em's the rooster as palmed off that rotten saddle on you. The other's Broken Feather. You'd a legitimate chance of puttin' his light out, Kiddie. Nobody e'd have blamed you any if you'd aimed at a vital section of his anatomy; but you let him off with little more'n a scratch. And that ambush was all planned. Rube here's just hungerin' an' thirstin' ter tell you all about Broken Feather's friendly call along at your woodland cabin while he knew you was absent. Ain't that so, Rube?"

"Yes," Rube answered, coming forward to Kiddie's side.

Rube then told the whole story of Broken Feather's surreptitious visit to the forest clearing, of the discovery that it was he who shot the poisoned arrow and of his threat that Kiddie would never come back.

"So you see, Kiddie," supplemented Abe Harum, "the skunk meant ter do you in. When he quitted the clearin', 'fore the hound struck his trail, he went right away ter put his rascally plan into operation. He an' his braves lay in wait for you ter gallop along. As I remarked before, it's a pity you didn't plant that bullet of yours where it would sure be fatal. It's your way, I know. You'd sooner cripple than kill. You show mercy even to a Injun—even to your deadliest enemy. An' Broken Feather's your enemy. You're what's called hereditary enemies, if I knows the meaning of the term."

"That's so, Abe," said Kiddie. "His father, Eye-of-the-Moon, shot my mother dead. It was Eye-of-the-Moon who killed my father, Buckskin Jack, in the Custer fight. On the other hand, it was my maternal grandfather, Spotted Tail, who killed Eye-of-the-Moon in their duel on horseback that I've so often told you about. And now it seems Broken Feather and I are at enmity."

"Yes," put in Gideon Birkenshaw, "but I ain't figgerin' as Broken Feather's takin' heredity inter consideration; not a whole lot. He don't keer a brass button who his father killed, or who killed his father. 'Cordin' ter Redskin reckonin' they've all gone on the long trail to the Happy Huntin' Grounds, an' they're no longer objec's in the scen'ry. Broken Feather's got his own pussonal reasons fer enmity agin your lordship. He knows as you're a long sight cleverer'n he is as an all-round scout; he's some afraid o' your cleverness. He knows you're wealthy; he covets your wealth. He knows you're honest; an' the one pusson as a rogue most dislikes is the man who acts allus on the straight. Moreover, Kiddie, you've already got the better of Broken Feather on several occasions, an' he ain't liable ter forget it."

"Gee!" exclaimed Rube Carter. "Never know'd th' Old Man make sich a long an' logical oration in me life before!"

"You've got yer own remedy, however," resumed Gideon. "It's agin th' law fer Injuns ter come outer their reservations, same as Broken Feather an' his braves have been doin' lately. The hull thing 'ld be stopped if you'd only appeal t' th' law fer pertection."

"But suppose I don't approve of the Indians being herded like sheep in fenced reservations?" Kiddie objected. "Suppose I'm of opinion that in a free land like this all men should be equally free, Redskin and Paleface alike? No, Gid, I ain't figuring to appeal to the law. If I need any protection against a man such as Broken Feather, I'll do the business on my own, and a gun, a fleet horse, and my own common sense are good enough for me, without the interference of the law."

CHAPTER IX

KIDDIE'S "SELFISHNESS"

Kiddie's fall had been violent, and might easily have been fatal; but it had been neither sudden nor unexpected, while his experience with bucking bronchos, and his great skill as a horseman, had helped him to avoid serious physical injury.

He was bruised, he was shaken; but no bones were broken, and his worst injury was his sprained ankle. This gave him acute pain and inconvenience for many days, requiring care and rest.

Naturally he fretted under the forced inactivity; he became impatient, and when at length he could limp from his room to the veranda, he wanted to mount a horse and ride along to the forest clearing to superintend the building of his cabin.

"There's no need fer you ter go an' see things," Rube Carter insisted. "Jus' you have a good rest until you're quite well. Everything's goin' on famous. We've gotten the roof on, an' we're now fixin' up your bedroom, so's you kin occupy it while the rest of the shanty's bein' finished."

"Yes," pursued Kiddie. "But I want to be there right now. I'm hankerin' badly to see how it looks, ter judge what it'll be like when all the work's done and we've got the fixings in—the books and pictures and all that. I'm envying you terrible, Rube, being there every day and watching the thing grow. I'm envying you being able to see the wild critters while I'm kept a prisoner here on account of a fool saddle that was broken and mended with rotten string. I guess you've seen heaps of things this morning—new birds, new insects, new beasts, and wild flowers that you couldn't put a name to, eh?"

"Dunno 'bout that," said Rube. "Dunno as I saw anythin' as I hadn't seen before."

"Ah, you've got a heap to learn yet, Rube," Kiddie rejoined. "Why, when I'm out and about there's never a day, never an hour, hardly a minute, but I see something new, learn something fresh in woodcraft and scoutcraft. You don't go along with your eyes shut and your ears and nostrils closed, do you? What did you see early this mornin', for example, when you went across the grass patch, the dew still lying?"

"Say, now, how d'you know I saw anythin'?" Rube asked. "You was in bed."

"Yes, but I could see you from my pillow. You went aside from the straight trail."

"That's so," acknowledged Rube. "I was tryin' ter foller a track in the dew—some biggish animal, I guess; but thar wasn't no footmarks—not in the long grass—an' the track didn't lead to nothin'—only a root of dandelion with the leaves chewed off."

"Perhaps you went the wrong way," suggested Kiddie. "Was the track lighter than the rest of the grass, or darker?"

"Um! Now you puzzle me," demurred Rube. "I ain't just sure; but I guess it was darker. Yes, it was sure darker. Why? What's that gotter do with it?"

"Why? Well, a scout would sure know that grass blades bent towards him look dark; bent away from him, light. If the trail of your biggish animal this morning was darker than the grass, then you didn't follow him, you were going away from him all the time. He was probably a stoat on the track of a jack-rabbit. If you'd followed the other way, you might have seen where that stoat chased his victim into its burrow, and you might have seen where he came out again alone, after his feed underground. There's a heap of information in a track, Rube, altogether independent of plain footprints."

Rube rested his chin in his hands, listening.

"Suppose a bicycle or an automobile car had gone along a dusty or a muddy trail," continued Kiddie, "and you wanted to know which way it was travelling, what 'ld you do ter discover? You'd look at the rut the wheel had made. You'd see that the loose dust or the wet mud feathered out from it in the direction in which the wheel was going. No need ter search for footprints. It's the same with drops of blood from a wound, drops of water splashed from a jug or a bucket—any drippin' liquid; the drops splash forward in the direction in which the person splashing them was movin', the splashes being longer or shorter according to the person's pace. If you aim at being a capable scout—a good tracker—don't study the obvious things alone: look as well at the smaller signs, which often tell you more. And wherever you are, whatever you're doing, keep your senses busy—your sight, your hearing, your senses of smell and touch. At the present moment my senses tell me there's a mosquito in this yer veranda: I c'n hear the critter humming away back of me. I know that we're goin' to have bacon and eggs for dinner; I c'n smell them bein' fried. The kitchen's some warm; your mother has opened the window; I c'n feel the draught from it."

In the days of Kiddie's convalescence, Rube learnt many a lesson in scoutcraft; lessons which he hastened to put into practice. It was afterwards, however, when Kiddie was well, and they could go camping out together in the wilds, that he learnt most. In the meantime, there was the work of building the woodland cabin to attend to.

He had at first intended that the cabin should be constructed by his own hands alone, of rough, unhewn timber; that it should contain only one room, and that of the simplest. It was to be merely a trapper's log hut in the forest, and he was to live as a simple trapper, quite alone, forgetting that he was a wealthy English nobleman.

But gradually his ideals had developed, and he had decided to make the place comfortable and convenient as well as simple and solitary—to make it, as it were, his headquarters, where he could store his trophies of the chase and keep his guns and books and pictures.

If he wished to go away on hunting trips, he could leave the cabin in safety, and take his pony and his tent and knapsack and live as a lone trapper in the woods, moving from place to place, always having a home to come back to if he wished. What he had always to fight against was an inclination towards luxury and labour-saving convenience. He had bought a patent camp cooking-stove in New York. It was capable of cooking anything, from a sirloin to a savoury. But when he unpacked it he saw how incongruous such a thing was with the domestic economy of a shanty in the forest.

"What does a plain trapper want with fancy fixings like this, anyway?" he asked himself. "If he's hankerin' after delicacies an' dainty cookery, he'd best quit right back to London. My food's goin' ter be frizzled over an open wood fire, and that dinky, high-class kitchen range is goin' right away to the bottom of Sweetwater Pond."

He allowed himself to stain the outer planks of the dwelling, but not to use any decorative paints which an ordinary trapper or an Indian could not procure. A garden, with flowers as well as vegetables, and creepers for the veranda, he considered necessaries, just as frames for pictures, shelves for his books, racks for his guns, and cupboards for his crockery were necessary.

There were three rooms in the cabin—a large living-room, which was also kitchen, a workroom, and a bedroom; and they were all three very simply furnished. Not far behind the cabin were the sheds and outhouses, the stables, cow-house, and barns; and down at the lakeside was a boathouse, in which to keep his canoes and fishing materials.

This was the secluded home which Lord St. Olave was making for himself, in preference to a grand house in London and a great mansion on his vast estate in Norfolk, with innumerable servants to wait upon him, and crowds of fashionable friends to enjoy his hospitality. He was realizing his wish to abandon the social whirl of London and to return to his native wilds. But he was not yet wholly satisfied with his choice.

He entered the living-room one afternoon looking weary and untidy, and flung himself into an easy-chair, giving a curt nod of greeting to Gideon Birkenshaw, who had strolled down from the homestead to have tea with him.

"Tired, Kiddie?" Gideon inquired. "Bin workin' too hard?"

"No," returned Kiddie, "I ain't tired. I'm never tired."

"Ankle still hurtin' you some, mebbe?" pursued Gideon.

"Ankle's gettin' along all right," Kiddie assured him. "Guess it'll soon be's well's ever. Shall we have tea? Rube'll get it ready."

Gideon did not respond to the invitation.

"Buildin's progressin' all s'rene," he observed. "I like this yer room. It's real homesome; and the view fr'm your front windows and the veranda's real elegant. Time you gets a collection o' choice flowers in your door-yard, you'll have 'bout the most desirable residence in the hull state of Wyoming. Ain't you satisfied? What's the matter?"

"I'm just some worr'ed, Gid," Kiddie answered, flinging a leg over the arm of his chair.

"My!" exclaimed Gideon. "What in creation 've you gotter worry about?"

"Just the cabin," Kiddie answered dreamily. "Just the cabin and my living in it all lonesome; enjoyin' it—enjoyin' it too much. It's just what I've wanted. Everything's all as I planned. But I've bin thinkin', Gideon; thinking hard."

"That ain't a new experience fer you, Kiddie," said Gid. "You was allus' a deep thinker. Guess it's the Injun blood in you assertin' itself. An' what's the matter wi' the cabin ter make you meditate an' worry?"

"Why," Kiddie responded slowly, keeping his Western manner of speech, as was usual with him when addressing Gideon Birkenshaw, "I've come to the conclusion as it ain't just right an' proper o' me ter live here with everything I most covet in the shape of personal comfort—a cosy home in beautiful scenery, with the perfumed pine trees all around, the woodland solitude, where I c'n study the wild critters, beasts an' birds an' insects; the creek an' the lake, where I c'n paddle an' fish; my time all my own, with no slavish duties, no tasks, no responsibilities. An' it's all selfish, Gid, real mean an' selfish."

"Selfish, Kiddie?" Gideon screwed up his eyes in wonder.

"Yes. It ain't anyways right for a man ter live for himself alone, shirkin' his duties ter humanity. What did I do this mornin' that was any good whatever to anybody in th' world but myself? I went out 'fore sunrise, when the blue mist was hangin' round the mountain tops an' in among the trees. It was like a fairy dream. I listened t' th' orchestra of the birds—the woodthrush, the veery, the scarlet tanager an' the rest of the thrillin' songsters—and the music was more delicious 'n any opera I've heard in London an' Paris. I wasted a full hour watchin' a fool centipede that had gotten himself tangled in a spider's web—watched th' manoeuvres of that spider for a full hour, I did."

"I allow you learnt suthin', too, since the spider was at home," interrupted Gid. "Them critters has wonderful skill in tactics. I'm figurin' as that hour wasn't a whole lot wasted, Kiddie."

"It was wasted in selfish enjoyment, selfish gratification," Kiddie insisted.

"Git!" exclaimed Gideon. "You dunno what selfishness means, Kiddie, an' you couldn't be selfish if you tried. You's allus doin' suthin' unselfish. Here's you comin' back to this yer camp an' the Sweetwater district, an' right straight away you starts helpin' other folks, pertectin' their homes from hostile Injuns, makin' their lives smoother an' safer. Is it selfish ter do what you've already done? What about your takin' Jim Thurston's place in th' Express, riskin' yer life, an' precious near losin' it? Was that a act of selfishness?"

"It was my fault that Jim was hurt. I couldn't do otherwise than take his place."

"You wouldn't ha' done it if you'd bin selfish. You'd ha' let somebody else carry on the job," argued Gideon. "You's allus thinkin' of others; doin' 'em good turns, givin' 'em pleasure. You've given me a gold timepiece, you've given Isa a hoss, you've given us new guns all round. Thar's not a housewife along the trail as hasn't gotten suthin' as you brought her from England—cloth for a frock, trimmin' fer a hat, a box of scented soap, a machine fer mincin' meat. An' the children—the boys an' gels—what about them, eh? You brought 'em toys an' dolls an' pictur' books, whips, boxes of paints, needlecases with scissors an' thimble all complete. You've filled their little hearts with a joy they never knowed afore. Selfish! Great snakes!"

"Tea's ready," announced Rube Carter, breaking in upon the conversation. "I've opened a new tin o' peaches, and thar's cream."

In spite of Kiddie's efforts to be homely and unassuming, Gideon Birkenshaw was not always entirely at his ease in his presence. The old man recognized that his own upbringing and education had been sadly deficient and that his roughness of speech and manners became painfully obvious in comparison with Kiddie's unvarying courtesy and refinement.

"Kiddie," he said now, as they sat at tea, "thar's a many things in you, I notice, as makes you a whole lot different from what you was in th' old days, 'fore you made the surprisin' discovery that you was a aristocratic nobleman. In a heap o' ways you's the same Kiddie. Nothin' c'n alter your natur' or wipe away th' effects of your early trainin' as a frontier scout. You've lost none o' your skill an' cleverness, but added suthin' to them that makes you inches taller an' bigger'n you was. I guess it's the things you acquired in England as makes you diff'rent. Rubbin' shoulders with them high-class friends o' yours over thar has kinder wore off the rough corners."

"'Twas high time I quitted, perhaps," mused Kiddie. "If I'd stopped over there any longer, I guess there wouldn't have been any corners left to know me by. I should have been worn round as a pebble, exactly like all other pebbles without character and individuality."

"Thar you are!" nodded Gideon, "'without character an' individuality,' says you, as if you'd lifted the phrase outer a printed book. You wouldn't ha' used sich choice an' dainty langwidge 'fore you went away. Your speech has growed more c'rrect, more elegant, same as your dress."

"My dress, Gid? What's the matter with my dress?"

"Oh, yes," pursued Gideon. "You wears buckskins an' flannels an' a frontier hat; you goes about with your shirt-sleeves rolled up an' a scarf 'stead of a stiff starched collar; but you takes care that thar's allus elegant underclothin' nex' yer skin. You've gotten surprisin' clean habits, too: washes yourself three or four times a day, allus shaves yerself mornin's an' oils an' brushes yer hair. You don't go ter bed wi' yer boots and breeches on; you sleeps in a dinky suit o' pyjamas with stripes on 'em, an' braid, an' fancy buttons. I ain't complain'n' none, mind you. I gotter tremendous admiration fer all these yer signs of gentlemanhood. Only they makes me feel ter'ble humble, Kiddie. I feel 's if I oughter be sayin' 'sir' or 'your lordship' all the time."

"I'm glad you never commit such an outrageous mistake, Gid," said Kiddie, helping himself to preserved peaches with the spoon especially provided for them. Rube had just used his own spoon for the same purpose.

"An' thar's another thing—your manners at table," went on Gideon. "You're that dainty in your ways of eatin' an' drinkin', you make me feel like a brute animal 'stead of a well-brought-up human. Allus uses yer fork, you do; never shovels th' food inter yer mouth with a knife; never touches a bone wi' yer fingers. Seems ter me, Kiddie, if you was livin' on a desert island, same's that chap Robi'son Crusoe, you'd still show a example of perlite table manners t' the poll parrot an' the nanny goat."

Kiddie smiled in amusement.

"Well, well, Gid," he said, "you just wait until Rube an' I come back from our camp in the forest. I shall have dropped all the objectionable politeness by then. We shall take no forks or plates, but will tear our food with our teeth. We will sleep in our boots under blankets of balsam branches, and forget the comforts of pyjamas and hot shaving water. We're going to live like a pair of primitive savages, talkin' in the sign language, killin' an' cookin' our own food, takin' with us nothin' that you c'd buy in a city emporium, except, of course, our guns and huntin' knives. An' even then we shall be a heap better off than Robinson Crusoe, for, although he had his shot gun an' the fixin's he'd gotten from the wreck, yet he had ter build his own boat, while we shall have our birch bark canoe, and I guess the things we shall carry in the canoe an' in our pockets and haversacks 'll give us an enormous advantage over the shipwrecked mariner."

"An' when d'you purpose startin' on this yer outlandish trip, abandonin' the delights o' civilization?" Gideon inquired. "It's the fust I've heard of it. You ain't bin makin' no preparations. When d'you reckon on startin'?"

Kiddie glanced aside at Rube.

"As soon's Rube's ready," he announced.

"Why, I bin ready fer days an' days," said Rube. "I ain't thought o' nothin' else ever since yer told me it was goin' ter happen!"

"What about the weather prospects?" Kiddie asked.

"Weather's all right," answered Rube. "I've had me eye on it a lot. It's plumb sure t' be fine. Birds are flyin' high; flowers ain't got much scent in 'em; the sheep are grazin' with their heads to the wind; cattle are quiet. Mother's clothes line's saggin' betwixt the poles; spiders' webs are slack, too, an' thar's crowds of 'em on every bush. This mornin', when I looked out, great white mountains of cloud were banked up in th' sky. 'Fore I'd dressed an' got out, the clouds had melted clean away. All them signs mean fair weather, I reckon."

"That's so," agreed Kiddie, "especially the spiders' webs an' the quickly meltin' clouds. Guess we may's well start right now."

"Some sudden, ain't it?" said Gideon in surprise.

"No advantage in delay," returned Kiddie, rising from his seat and signing to Rube to begin at once. He went methodically about the cabin collecting things—a sack of potatoes, a bag of flour, some tins of milk, supplies of lard, salt, onions, rice, bacon, tinned fruit, and eggs, tea, cocoa, sugar, and butter, with various cooking utensils, his medicine chest, a hurricane lamp, candles, and a can of oil. Rube had made out a long list of their requirements, and busied himself collecting them.

"How many blankets?" he inquired.

"None," Kiddie answered. "Two ground sheets an' our sleepin' bags 'll be enough. An' we'll take the Indian teepee. It's better 'n a canvas tent. Shift all these fixin's inter the garden, an' then we'll start puttin' back everything we c'n do without. What d'you want the books for? You'll have no time fer readin'; we'll talk instead. You c'n do without a lookin' glass. Put tin dippers in place of the china cups an' saucers. Where's the fryin'-pan? Don't ferget soap an' towels."

In the garden he rejected a surprising number of things which Rube had thought necessary. He reduced the equipment to the smallest possible bulk. Nevertheless, he forgot nothing that was essential and included nothing which did not afterwards prove indispensable. The whole outfit occupied only a small space in the canoe.

They were carrying the bundles down to the lakeside when Rube, who was leading, stopped and looked back. Kiddie had come to a halt, and, still with the wigwam poles over his shoulder, was staring curiously at the ground at his feet.

"You passed by without noticin' that, Rube," he said, when the boy went back to him. What he was staring at was the stub of a cigarette. "It wasn't lyin' there when I went along here this mornin', I guess. You c'n see by the ash that it hasn't been here long. Less'n an hour, I'd say. Who dropped it, I wonder? There ain't anybody in this yer camp smokes cigarettes."

He searched for footprints, but could discover none; a newly-broken twig was all the sign that he could see. He glanced around among the trees, but there was no visible movement, and a whip-poor-will was singing undisturbed from a high bough of a balsam tree close at hand.

"No occasion ter worry about a trifle like that," he remarked, as he went on in the direction of the lake. "All the same, I'm some curious."

He did not look back while carrying the long teepee poles through the narrow ways between the closely-growing trees. Had he done so, even the sureness and quickness of his eyesight might still have missed the cleverly hidden form of Broken Feather, who lay at full length in the midst of an elder bush, stealthily watching him.

CHAPTER X

THE GUARDIAN OF THE HONEYCOMB

"And we're really goin' ter make a start right now?" questioned Rube, as he watched Kiddie packing their fishing gear on top of the rest of their equipment in the canoe. "We shall not get very far if you're notionin' ter make camp 'fore dark."

"All the better," said Kiddie. "If we find we've forgotten anything, there'll be the less distance for us to come back for it, see?"

"Thar's nothin' as you're liable ter have forgot," observed Rube, confident in Kiddie's forethought. "Seems ter me you must have had a schedule of the things already fixed up in your head. Anyhow, I don't reckon as we shall have any occasion t' come back—unless it's for the big dog. Why ain't we takin' Sheila along of us, Kiddie? Wouldn't she have been useful?"

"In some ways, yes; in others, no," Kiddie answered decisively. "I'm leaving her to mount guard up

at the homestead and down at the cabin. She'll be better fed here at home, and she won't be running wild. If we took her along with us, she'd sure be foolin' around among our traps, scarin' the wild critters away from 'em; and I ain't in favour of keepin' her on the chain. Besides, I don't calculate on your havin' a hound ter help you in trackin' and scoutin'. You must learn to do it all on your own. Ready? In you get, then, while I shove her off."

Kiddie himself took the paddle. The water was extremely calm, and as the canoe rippled out from the shore, every tree and bush and boulder was clearly reflected in the glassy surface.

"No," he said, after a long spell of silence, reverting to Rube's remark. "Thar's no advantage in going far this evening. We've made a start; that's the great thing. I ain't greatly in favour of a long-prepared programme, or of doin' things accordin' ter plan, like an ordinary tourist. Guess we'll make camp back of that point that juts out in front of us. But 'fore we land, we got ter catch a fish or two for supper. That's why we packed the rods an' lines on top of the outfit. May as well begin right away. Be careful how you move. Don't stand; crawl."

Rube got the two rods ready, while Kiddie paddled onward for a couple of miles. Here and there the calm surface was dimpled by rising fish.

They drifted slowly into the shadows of the trees. Rube was the first to cast his fly, and the first also to make a strike, but it was a catfish that he caught, and, gently removing the hook, he threw it back.

Kiddie caught a small trout, and then a larger one. Both Rube and he were expert fishers, and between them they soon had enough for a good supper.

They entered a sheltered bay, into which flowed a little creek of pure, sparkling water, overshadowed by great, low-branching cotton-woods and tall, feathery silver spruce trees.

"No use in goin' far up the creek," said Kiddie, letting his paddle drag. "What d'ye say to here?"

"Right," agreed Rube. "Thar's a nice level bit o' ground, middle of them four cotton-woods. We couldn't do better."

They beached the canoe, and while Kiddie began to unload her, Rube went about collecting twigs and fir cones and as much dry wood as he could find to start a cooking fire. He built a fireplace of stones from beside the stream, lined it with dry grass and light twigs, and soon had a crackling blaze going from which to kindle the larger billets of wood broken up with his axe.

By the time he had cleaned the fish a glowing red fire was ready. Like a wise trapper, he put aside the offal to serve as bait for the traps. Thoroughly drying the cleaned trout, he soused them in flour, and laid them gently into the frying-pan of boiling lard. Then he gave himself time to cut bread and brew a dipper of tea.

Kiddie paid no regard to the cooking, excepting occasionally to sniff at the odorous air that came to him from the frying-pan. He knew that supper would be quite ready before he had finished his own work of unloading the canoe and setting up the teepee.

In this latter work he needed no help. There were no tent-pegs to drive into the hard ground. He had only to erect the tall poles in pyramid shape, and then enclose them in the buffalo-skin cover, lacing the latter together down to the door flap.

It looked extremely Indian when it was up, even to the smoke-grime round about the vent and the picture-writing in many colours that decorated the outer surface. The two trappers themselves looked Indian also, in their fur caps, fringed buckskins, and moccasins. Kiddie had even stuck a pair of white eagle feathers in his cap, and his tunic was richly decorated with silk thread-work and coloured beads.

When he moved away from the wigwam, Rube saw him go up to a gnarled old cedar tree and stand looking at it curiously. He seemed to be peculiarly interested in the rugged trunk. Presently he took a piece of white chalk from his belt pouch and made a mark upon the tree.

"Guess you've got some p'ticlar reason fer blazin' that thar old tree," said Rube, as Kiddie strode towards the fire; "I ain't just able ter make it out, unless you're figgerin' t' have the tree cut down for timber. It's your own property, of course. You goin' ter have it felled?"

"No, the tree's not comin' down," explained Kiddie, seating himself on his rolled-up sleeping bag within easy reach of the food. "Go an' have a squint at where I chalked the mark. Guess you'll soon understand."

Rube strode to the tree, walked round it, and then stood for a while, with his thumbs in his belt, opposite the chalk mark.

"Yes," he nodded wisely, when he returned. "We oughter git a considerable store of honey in the mornin' when we smoke them bees out. Thar's a rare procession of 'em goin' in at that little hole. Tree's hollow. Dunno why th' critters don't go in by the big doorway on the far side. Takin' a short cut, I expect. Else they goes in one way an' out th' other."

"That's it," said Kiddie. "Say, these trout are just top-notch. You've cooked 'em to a turn. I haven't

tasted better since I was in Russia. They keep 'em alive in big tanks in the hotels in Moscow. You c'n choose your breakfast while it's swimmin' round; so it's served fresh. Keep the scraps all together. We'll bait the traps with 'em, presently, soon's we've washed up an' covered the fire. I notice you've made it in a good place—not too near the trees. But we've still got to be some careful. This yer ground's thick with pine needles and cones, that might easily catch alight if a breeze came along. Best dig a trench round it an' fill it with water."

They washed their pans and plates in the creek, and then got out their snares and traps.

Rube laid the snares in rabbit runs, and set some beaver traps in the creek, while Kiddie, with his greater skill, laid spring traps for the larger animals of prey in places where there were signs that large animals had recently been hunting and killing.

He was particularly attentive to one special steel trap, which he carefully baited with fish and set close beside the gnawed remains of a rabbit, still fresh and blood-stained. He examined the surrounding ground, and discovered the spot where the rabbit had been killed. Light tufts of fur lay about, and in their midst were the deep scratches of large claws, as far apart as a man's expanded finger-tips.

"Guess there's a lynx been prowlin' around here lately," he said to Rube, who was taking a practical lesson in the laying of traps. "That fish bait 'll sure tempt him. Anything more need doin'? What about that trench?"

"I've done it," Rube answered. "Thar ain't nothin' else, except t' get our beds ready."

"Mine's going t' be in the open," Kiddie decided. "Your's 'll be in the teepee. Keep a candle and matches and your moccasins within reach, case you've got ter get up in the dark. May as well plant your six-shooter under your knees, too. Thar's where I allus keep mine. It's a good habit, anyway. Don't reckon you'll need it, unless the coyotes come nosing around. Take a good sleep. No occasion ter get movin' about 'fore six o'clock."

Before they turned in for the night, the moon had risen over the jagged mountain tops, casting a glittering path of silver across the lake. On the farther side of the water they could see the black openings of many cañons and yawning chasms that invited exploration.

The deep murmur of a distant torrent came to them. The hoarse croaking of frogs and the chirping of crickets were mingled with the hooting of owls and the nearer hum of mosquitoes. Bats and moths were flitting on silent wings among the trees, and there was a rustle of dry leaves, as unseen animals of the night moved in the undergrowth.

Rube was up and moving about the camp at sunrise, and he had stirred up the smouldering fire and put a kettle and a dipper of water to boil before Kiddie crawled out of his sleeping bag. Kiddie's first occupation was to launch the canoe.

"Fetch the towels and come along," he said. "We'll get t' the deep water for our swim. You won't be anyways afraid, will you?"

"Not when you're near ter keep an eye on me," returned Rube, with confidence. "Course you'll help me t' git back inter the canoe. 'Tain't the same's mountin' a pony."

"Well, no," smiled Kiddie. "You'll mount over her head or her tail. She'll roll over, sure, if you try ter get astride her by the middle."

Rube paddled out into the lake until he was told to stop. He shipped his paddle, and looked round in time to see Kiddie's beautiful muscular figure poised ready to dive from the high peak.

With an adroit movement, Kiddie leapt into the air and, turning, cut the water as cleanly as an arrow, making very little splash. Rube waited so long for him to reappear that it seemed almost that some accident had happened to him. But at length he came up in a quite unexpected place, swimming back to the canoe at a pace that was astonishing. Thereafter he devoted himself to giving lessons to Rube in swimming and diving and re-entering the frail canoe.

"Quite enough for one morning," he said, before Rube had been in the water nearly as long as he wished. "We'll get back to camp now and have a cracker and a drink of hot tea. Then we'll visit the traps, and you c'n get breakfast ready while I shave. I guess we may's well have eggs and bacon, eh?"

"Might have some o' that thar honey as well," suggested Rube.

"All right," Kiddie agreed. "But you'll be havin' the bees foolin' around while we're at breakfast, if you're not careful. What you goin' ter smoke 'em out with?"

"Sulphur," Rube answered promptly. "I got a chunk in me pocket; been usin' it t' put in my bear cub's drinkin' water."

Rube was in more haste than he need have been to disturb the bees. Kiddie, while waiting for his shaving water to heat, was making a toasting fork of a stick with a forked end for cooking the bacon. He had seen Rube carry away a flat slab of stone with crushed sulphur on it, and had watched Rube lighting the sulphur and shoving the slab within the hollow of the tree, as he might shove a dish into an

oven.

Suddenly there was a cry of alarm.

"Kiddie! Kiddie! Quick! Come here!"

Kiddie ran to the tree, still with his knife and the forked stick in his hands.

"Keep back!" Rube cautioned him. "It's a rattler—a huge one—far in among the roots. Listen!"

Kiddie heard the unmistakable crackling sound. He went nearer, holding his pronged stick in front of him. He peeped into the hollow of the tree, and through the blue fumes of the burning sulphur he saw the snake's thick black body with its brown geometrical markings gliding and twisting round the exposed roots.

While he watched, the repulsive head, with its sinister, beady eyes and busily darting tongue, came out, rising slowly as it came. The wide mouth opened, and Kiddie could see the two protruding poison fangs outside the ordinary teeth. He stepped backward as the snake's neck and body began to curve in readiness to strike.

"Seems he don't intend us ter get that honeycomb, Rube," he said calmly.

"Do keep back, Kiddie!" pleaded Rube. "Them fangs 'ld go clean through your moccasins or your buckskins. What you gonner do—shoot him?"

"Ain't got my gun," Kiddie answered. "It's in my belt alongside my tunic. Fetch it, if you like; may as well."

Rube ran back to where Kiddie had slept, and returned with the loaded revolver. He was astonished and alarmed at what he now saw. The rattlesnake had come wholly out from the tree, and Kiddie stood directly over it with his right foot planted across the thicker part of its writhing body, and the toasting fork, held firmly in his left hand, gripping the reptile by the neck. The snake's mouth was wide open—it seemed almost to be snarling angrily; the long body was wriggling, and all the time came the ominous rattling sound from the ringed tail.

"Get round by the back of me, and give me the gun in my right hand," ordered Kiddie. "Don't be scared. I've got him, sure; he ain't goin' ter wriggle away."

"I've got him, sure; he ain't goin' ter wriggle away."

[To face page 108.

"I've got him, sure; he ain't goin' ter wriggle away."

Rube passed the revolver and watched. He expected Kiddie to discharge the weapon close to the rattlesnake's head. To his surprise, Kiddie removed his right foot, drew away the forked stick, and stepped back a couple of paces. The snake, now at unhindered liberty, raised its head several inches from the ground and coiled round, with jaws wide open, ready to strike. Kiddie then pressed his trigger, and the bullet, entering between the two poison fangs, came out at the back of the serpent's skull.

"Say, what in thunder did you let it go loose for?" questioned Rube. "It might have escaped! It might have bitten you!"

"Which means that you figure I might have missed my aim?" said Kiddie. "Not very complimentary to my shootin'. Why did I let it go loose? Well, I jest notioned it would be some cowardly ter shoot while I held the brute that way. Beside, I didn't want ter shatter the skull too much. Biggest rattler I've seen

—seven feet long if it's an inch, and worth preservin'. Say, those bees look like givin' us trouble. Best hustle through with breakfast, and then get along to the traps. The honey c'n wait. That sulphur of yours is goin' ter do the trick."

They went together to make the round of the traps, first going some way up the creek to the willows where Rube had set his beaver traps in the midst of a colony of these busy animals. Rube was in hope that every trap would be filled; but there were only two beavers—one of them quite young and small, the other, a large male in prime condition.

"Best let it go, as it ain't hurt any," Kiddie advised, liberating the smaller one. "You c'n take the bigger chap and we'll cook the tail. Where did you set your snares?"

"In amongst the scrub, thar," Rube pointed.

There was a fine jack-rabbit in the first snare they came to. Rube gave the animal a sharp knock on the back of the head, killing it instantly.

"Guess we'll have this yer feller for dinner," he said; "stewed with plenty of onions an' some taters."

"You see," observed Kiddie, "we're already beginnin' ter be self-supportin'. Fish, meat, honey—there wasn't any occasion t' bring a butcher's shop along with us. We c'd even make our own bread at a pinch. I'm plannin' ter make a fruit pudding. Thar's a bush 'most breakin' down with its weight of ripe and juicy thimbleberries, back of the old cedar tree. Bees have been at 'em."

The next snare they visited was empty. In another a woodgrouse was caught, and in yet another a fox cub. Kiddie's steel traps were set farther away. He went first to the one about which he had been so particular.

"Gee!" he exclaimed. "It's sprung! Bait's taken. Remains of that rabbit have been eaten, too!"

"Lynx is a cunnin' critter," said Rube. "You gotter wear two pairs o' moccasins t' git level with a lynx."

"I ain't just sure that it was a lynx," mused Kiddie, searching the ground for signs. "You never happened on a jet-black lynx around here, did you, Rube?"

"Nope," Rube answered. "They's allus the same tawny colour. Why d'you ask?"

Kiddie looked down at the tight shut jaws of the gin.

"Thar's a tuft of black fur in the teeth of the trap," he pointed out. "An' look at them claw marks! Guess that critter's some bigger'n a lynx. May's well stay another night in this camp an' try ter git the critter, eh?"

"Dunno 'bout that," Rube demurred. "Might be a whole fam'ly o' rattlers lyin' around. 'Tain't just healthy."

"Guess that rattlesnake we killed had done with family life a long while ago," said Kiddie. "Anyhow, I'm curious to know what critter it was that sprang this trap."

"Mebbe he shoved his nose inter one of the others," suggested Rube.

Kiddie led the way unerringly among the forest trees. His traps had all been visited by wild animals. Two of them had been sprung ineffectually; in others he found a raccoon, a cross-fox, a musk-rat and an otter. One had been dragged away, and was found some hours afterwards with part of a fox's tail between the teeth.

Rube Carter rather prided himself on his skill in cooking, and he was particularly anxious to make a good rabbit stew. Kiddie helped him only so far as to skin and dismember the rabbit and peel the onions. He was himself a capable camp cook, but he did not wish to interfere with Rube's personal satisfaction in doing the work.

"Say, Kiddie," said Rube, when he had fixed the saucepan firmly in the fire; "if we ain't goin' ter quit this yer pitch 'fore ter-morrow, you'd best sleep to-night along o' me in the wigwam. That rattlesnake wasn't many yards away from you, an' if you'd bin bit I dunno what I should ha' done. Thar ain't no good in hangin' around after that lynx, whatever its colour. Why shouldn't we quit?"

"Where would you go, Rube?" Kiddie inquired.

Rube looked out across the lake.

"I got a idea of paddlin' across an' makin' camp in one of them cañons," he said.

"Tut!" objected Kiddie. "You want to do some exploring, eh? Want ter get into some lonesome place where nobody has ever been before? What's the matter with this forest? I reckon we're the first civilized humans that have ever spent a night in it. Prowl around in it; search in whatever direction you like, you'll find no sign of any sort that a human being has been here in front of us to leave his mark on a tree, to drop a button or a chip of crockery, or to lift a stone from the bed of the creek. It's all as

Nature meant it to be, centuries and centuries ago. Growth and the weather alone have changed things."

"All right," nodded Rube; "so long's you're satisfied, so am I. Suppose we get at that honey 'fore the bees come back."

The sulphur fumes still lingered in the hollow tree, and scores of bees had fallen stupefied among the roots. Rube, being the smaller, entered the hollow and looked up.

"Thar's pounds an' pounds of honeycomb here, Kiddie," he called out; "but I can't reach it without somethin' ter stand on, an' we shall need that biscuit tin ter hold it."

Kiddie fetched the biscuit tin, and a spar of firewood, and stood by while Rube handed out to him the dripping combs of honey.

"Thar's heaps more, higher up," said Rube, standing on tip-toes and reaching upward.

Then somehow his foot slipped, the decayed substance of the tree crumbled under his weight. He screamed in terror as he fell in a heap at Kiddie's feet, followed by a shower of dust and strange, dry rottenness that was mingled with the syrup from the honeycombs.

"What is it?" cried Kiddie. "What made you scream? Another rattler?"

"No." Rube shivered. "*That!*" And he turned over and pointed with an agitated finger at a human skull and a heap of crumbled bones. "It's a man's skeleton. And you notioned as nobody 'd ever set foot in this forest before!"

CHAPTER XI

LESSONS IN TRACKING

"Queer!" ejaculated Rube, standing up and contemplating the gruesome remnants of the skeleton. "Mortal queer it is. Can't make it out. How'd he come ter be fixed up thataway in the middle of the tree, dyin' thar all lonesome, like a poor critter caught in a trap? How'd it happen, Kiddie?"

He appeared to expect Kiddie to tell him off-hand exactly how the thing had occurred.

"Dunno," returned Kiddie, with a grave headshake. "It's a mystery. I'm trying t' think it out. What way was he fixed?"

"Can't just say," Rube answered slowly. "Inside the tree's like a chimney. You c'n see daylight if yer looks up, as I did. I couldn't see that it was a man—a skeleton. Thar was a mass of honeycomb an' wax below what was left of his feet. I reached up an' seized hold o' somethin'. Guess it was one of the poor chap's legs. I was pullin' at it, an' pullin', when my foot slipped, an' the whole concern came down on top o' me, crumblin' into dust. How d'you reckon he got thar? Kin y'u explain?"

"Seems to me," said Kiddie, after a long pause, "that there are three possible explanations. First, that he was killed by some enemy and shoved in there out of sight: which ain't at all likely, since it would have been much easier to fling the body into the lake, and quite as safe from discovery to leave it lying here in the forest glade. Second, that he was escaping from some other Redskins, or even from some dangerous wild animal, and went into the hollow tree for safety."

"Climbin' too high, an' gettin' fixed so as he couldn't wriggle out again either up or down?" suggested Rube.

"Exactly," nodded Kiddie. "But, if that was the way of it, why didn't his pursuers get on his tracks and find him? I'm not of opinion that he had any pursuers, either animal or Indian. I believe he was just a lone scout—a trapper, maybe, but a lonesome wanderer, anyway—and that he was taking shelter from a storm. Perhaps he knew of that hollow tree: perhaps he came upon it by chance. It was a convenient shelter in either case. That's my third point."

"An' a reasonable one," commented Rube. "But it don't account fer how he came t' be fixed in so high above the ground. If he was only shelterin', why didn't he walk out again when the storm was through?"

"I'm supposin' it was a snowstorm, or else a fierce blizzard," Kiddie went on. "As the snow got deeper an' deeper, it would block up the hole that he entered by, and he'd work his way higher an' higher to get at the purer air. Maybe he'd wait till the storm was over, and then the snow might have been so deep that he'd think it easier to climb higher still and escape that way rather than attempt to go back feet foremost and burrow a passage through the drift. And then he got so wedged in that there was no movin' and no means of escape either way, and he just had to stay there and die a lingerin'

death."

"Yes," said Rube. "I guess that's th' explanation of the whole thing. Wonder where he come from. Pity thar's none of his clothes left: no gun, or knife, or watch, or pocket-book ter tell us who he was, an' all that."

"He wouldn't be carryin' a gun or a watch," observed Kiddie, "and Injuns ain't in the habit of keepin' pocket diaries."

"Injuns?" repeated Rube questioningly. "D'you reckon this yer chap was a Injun, then?"

"Certainly," Kiddie answered, "an Injun, young an' tall."

"H'm!" murmured Rube, not satisfied. "You just guessin' all that, Kiddie, or have you figured it out?"

"I've figured it out," returned Kiddie. "Look at his thigh bone—the only bone that's left intact. It's longer'n mine, an' I ain't a pigmy. Must have been taller'n I am. Look at the teeth: they're not an old man's teeth. There ain't a speck of decay on 'em, they're not worn down any, an' they're well separate one from another, not crushed together like an old man's. Must sure have been young."

"Yes," said Rube, "but all that don't prove he was Injun. White men c'n be tall; white men c'n have good teeth. How d'you make out he was Injun?"

"By the shape of his skull for one thing," explained Kiddie—"the square jaw, the high cheek bones, the slopin' forehead. But more'n all I argue he was Injun because I calculate he was fixed tight in the tree, and was well on the way to bein' a naked skeleton long before any white man opened his eyes on the Rocky Mountains—yes, even perhaps before the Pilgrim Fathers landed in New England. That's why he didn't carry a gun. He didn't know there was such a thing as a gun, or a watch either."

"Git!" exclaimed Rube incredulously. "D'you expect me ter swaller a tall yarn like that? Why, the tree couldn't have bin more'n a seedlin' all them years ago!"

"Well," returned Kiddie. "I'm not prepared to declare that it was hollow, the same's it is now, in the time of the Pilgrim Fathers. But it was already an old tree. I guess it was an old tree even before Christopher Columbus discovered America. What's the girth of it, anyhow? Measure the girth of it, just above the base."

Rube made the tour of the forest veteran, estimating its circumference with outstretched arms.

"I reckon it's just over twenty-four feet," he announced, "allowing for the part that's missin' from th' open gap."

"Say eight feet in diameter," nodded Kiddie. "And it's one of the slowest growin' of all forest trees. I calculate that every inch of diameter represents at the very least ten years of growth. Eight feet equal ninety-six inches; an' that means nine hundred and sixty years. So you see the tree was quite a hundred years old at the time when William the Conqueror was King of England."

"Methuselah!" exclaimed Rube. "Then I ain't denyin' that it may have bin gettin' some ancient an' holler-hearted time of the Pilgrims. But even yet you ain't solved th' problem of just how long this yer trapper's bin dead."

"There's no way of tellin'," said Kiddie, "except by the condition of the bones. They crumble to dust at a touch, and as the protection of the tree was liable to preserve them rather than to hasten their decay, you wouldn't be a whole lot out if you argued, as I did at first, that he was dead before ever a white man set eyes on the Rocky Mountains."

"Guess thar's no occasion fer Sheriff Blagg ter hold an inquest, then," observed Rube, glancing round at the tin of honey. "Say, Kiddie, you gonner eat any o' that stuff—after where it come from?"

"Why not?" questioned Kiddie. "It's good, wholesome honey. We'll store it away in the teepee, where the bees an' flies can't get foolin' around it. That rabbit stew goin' along all right, d'ye think? See if it's seasoned enough. Onions are beginnin' ter flavour the woodland air, eh? Good thing we ain't goin' t' a fashionable West-end party this evenin'. I'd a heap rather smell of onions right here. Prefer bein' here in any case. You've never bin to a party, Rube; never seen me togged out in evenin' dress, wearin' a swallow-tailed coat an' a white bow an' patent leather pumps. But thar's a heap o' things you've never seen. You've never seen a locomotive engine, or a steamship, or a Gothic cathedral, or a Japanese cherry orchard in blossom; don't know what it means ter walk along an English lane, past cottages covered with roses. Thar's London an' Paris, thar's th' Atlantic Ocean an' the lone coral islands of the Pacific. Thar's pictures an' books an' theatres. Oh, thar's a whole world of interestin' things you've never seen!"

"Makes me feel ter'ble ignorant," Rube regretted ruefully. "I dunno nothin' o' what's beyond th' mountains that I see ev'ry mornin' from Birkenshaw's Camp. Don't know nothin'; can't do nothin'. I'm just as useless as I'm ignorant."

Kiddie put his arm affectionately round the boy's shoulders as they moved together towards the campfire.

"Not useless, Rube; not ignorant," he said, speaking now in his character of Lord St. Olave. "You know things that thousands of well-educated English and American boys do not know; you can do things which millions of clever boys are incapable of doing. I won't make you blush by telling you just what I think of you. I'll only say you're learning more and more every day, and that every day you're proving yourself to be a better and a better scout."

He left Rube occupied with the cooking and went off to bring together the animals that had been trapped.

"What d'yer say ter tryin' your hand at gettin' the pelts off en these critters?" he asked, when he returned and had placed the animals side by side. "It's best done while they're fresh."

"You're thinkin' of preservin' 'em, then?" questioned Rube.

"I'm thinkin' of mounting 'em," Kiddie answered, "but mainly for practice. I took lessons when I was in London, from the people who preserve animals for the British Museum, an' picked up a heap of wrinkles. I want ter show you how it's done."

"How d'you reckon you're goin' ter get the skin off that rattlesnake?" Rube was anxious to know.

"Well," said Kiddie, "'tain't just as easy an' simple as drawin' off your glove; but it's on the same principle."

They were engaged during the afternoon with the work of securing the skins and cleaning them. The carcases were cut up for use as bait for the traps, the traps being plentifully baited and very carefully set for the larger animals. Kiddie was again most particular in laying the gin for the same animal that had visited it and perplexed him on the previous night.

"Guess that'll sure get him, whatever he is," said Rube.

He looked round for a response in agreement with his comment, but Kiddie was not there.

"Which way've you gone, Kiddie?" he called.

But there was no answer.

Rube stood listening, but heard no sound. He called louder; there was still no answer.

Now, Rube knew Kiddie well enough to be assured that there was some special meaning in this sudden disappearance. It was not a mere playful fancy. Kiddie had gone away intentionally, making no sound, leaving no sign. Clearly he wanted to test Rube's skill in tracking.

Rube remained standing where he was, but his eyes were alertly searching around amongst the shrubs and trees and along the ground for some mark or sign that might tell him in which direction Kiddie had gone. He knew that success in following him depended entirely upon his true start, and that a false beginning would only land him in difficulties, if not in his being actually lost.

Rube knew also that Kiddie would not play him any childish pranks, but would give him fair play all through, even helping him by leaving some "scent" in his trail—not handfuls of torn-up paper, as in an English schoolboys' game of fox and hounds, nor by so obvious a method as that of blazing the trees. It would be a test in which every faculty of the searcher's scoutcraft would be brought into active exercise.

Sniffing the warm air, listening keenly, looking with sharp scrutiny over every foot of the ground from where Kiddie had stood behind him, Rube at length fixed his gaze upon a tuft of grass where some of the blades had been bent over as by the tread of a moccasined foot. He went closer to it and saw that some of the frail blades were fractured. Now he had his starting point. He did not rush forward, but carefully estimated the probable direction, listening the while.

Presently there came to him the harsh cry of a jay, which told him of Kiddie's whereabouts, or at least of the line of Kiddie's course through the forest solitudes.

And now he went on in pursuit, picking up the faintly-indicated tracks one by one; often going far astray on a false scent and needing to return on his own back trail to the point where he had gone off the line that had been so cunningly laid for his guidance or his confusion; but always coming upon some new clue that lured him on and on.

Many times he stood still in serious perplexity. Everything around him was wild and unfamiliar, with no slightest trace or sign, either new or old, of human presence.

He might easily have allowed himself to be alarmed at the utter loneliness, and afraid lest he should lose himself. But he knew all the time that if he should be lost, Kiddie would come out in search of him and quickly find him.

In his moments of deepest despair, however, he always discovered some obvious sign which he had previously overlooked, and at last he perceived that he had been led round in an exact triangle, for through the green meshes of the trees he caught a glimpse of the lake and a thin blue column of fire-smoke, and then in the surrounding silence he heard Kiddie's well-known voice singing a snatch of a

Scots ballad—

"Late, late in the gloaming, Kilmeny cam' hame."

"Hullo, Rube; got back inter camp, eh? Been wanderin' about the forest all on your own, have you? I've waited for you; got tea ready, you see—all but boilin' th' eggs. Guessed you'd relish a couple of eggs."

Kiddie did not turn to look at Rube as he spoke. He was reclining between the teepee and the fire with his open note-book on his knee and a blacklead pencil in his fingers. Beside him was a newly-cut birch stick with part of the bark whittled off.

"Yes," Rube responded, halting near him and standing looking him up and down in curious examination. "Yes, I allow I'm some hungry. Say, your moccasins are wet. Spilt some of the tea-water on 'em? Pity ter spoil a nice pair of moccasins by wettin' 'em. You ain't written much with that pencil. The point's still sharp since you sharpened it after dinner."

Kiddie glanced at the pencil point and smiled.

"Might have sharpened it again, while I've been waitin'," he said.

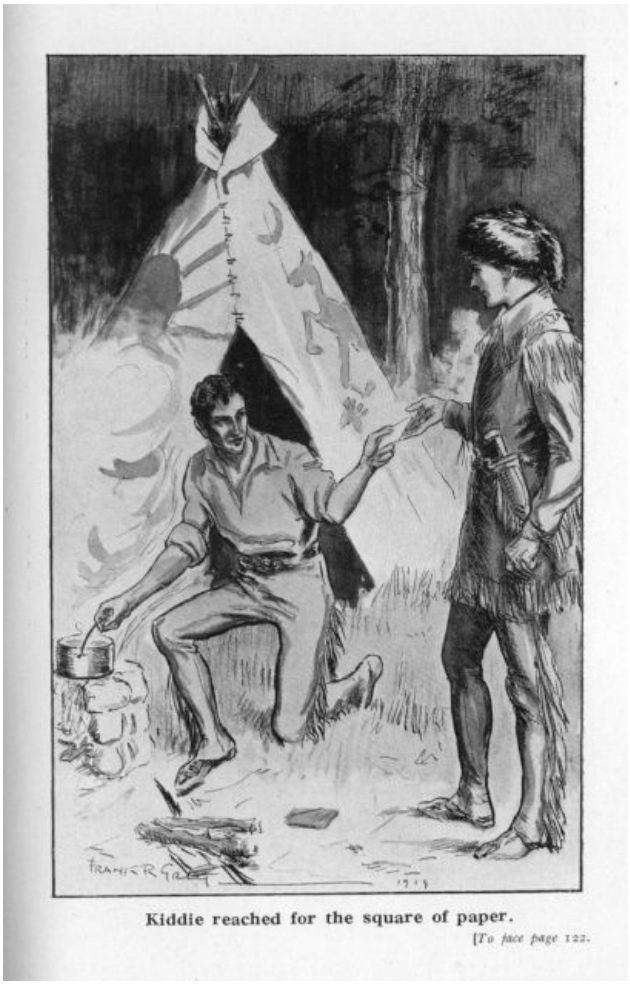
"But you didn't," returned Rube. "There ain't no chips lyin' around—unless you've put 'em in your pocket, same's you did before."

Kiddie smiled again. He had moved to the fire to put on the eggs.

"You're becomin' quite observant, Rube," he said. "See anythin' special on your solitary wanderin's?"

"Guess I found this here scrap of paper," Rube answered. "Looks as if it had been tore outer that note-book you was pretendin' to be writin' in—same size, same colour, an' thar's writin' on it, too. Looks like your own fist, don't it?"

Kiddie reached for the square of paper that was handed to him and examined it as if he had never seen it before.



Kiddie reached for the square of paper.
[To face page 122.

Kiddie reached for the square of paper.

"Queer!" he ruminated, "it's sure my handwritin'—'*Bring this back to camp*.' Where'd you pick it up?"

"Didn't pick it up at all," answered Rube. "Found it on a hickory bush, far, far in, as it might be the very heart o' the forest."

"Ah! Some mischievous jay bird plant it there, d'ye think?"

"Jay bird couldn't have written that message on it," said Rube. "Jay bird couldn't have fastened it with a twig drove through the paper ter keep it in place. Guess you heard a jay squawkin' a lot, didn't you, Kiddie?"

"Sure," Kiddie nodded. "Couldn't get quit of the fowl until you came along on my track an' it started ter foller you instead of me. How'd you find your way back to camp?"

"Came th' same way as you did, I reckon," answered Rube. "Went th' same way's you meant me ter go, all the time—trackin' you by the clues you left."

Kiddie was silent until the tea was quite ready and the two of them were seated. Then he said—

"You've done a heap better'n I expected you to do, Rube. I didn't leave many clues, there was none of them conspicuous, an' they were very far apart—fifty yards apart at the least. Tell me exactly what you found."

"Well," said Rube, beginning on his tea, "first of all thar was a mark of your foot where you went in so silent. Then' th' jay started squawkin', an' I got my direction. I follered it, an' hadn't gone far when I sees a balsam branch swayin' where thar was no wind ter stir it. I went straight forward until I began ter think I was goin' wrong, when I smelt smoke. I searched an' came upon a bit of charred cloth. You'd squandered a valuable lucifer match ter set fire t' a piece of greasy rag that you'd cleaned the lamp with. After that, I went astray; couldn't find a trace o' you nohow, an' had ter get back t' th' burnt rag ter make a fresh start."

"Yes," interposed Kiddie, "just as I intended. The trees were all alike thereabout and easily mistaken one for another. Well?"

"Thar was one of 'em different," pursued Rube, "a silver birch tree amongst the cotton-woods—an' I found where you'd cut a stick from it an' smudged the cut so's it wouldn't easily be seen. Is that right? You carried that stick along of you—brought it home. Once or twice you scored a mark on the ground with th' point of it. You began cuttin' some of the bark from the stick, droppin' a bit every fifty yards or so. But that was too easy for me. Any tenderfoot'd have found them bits o' bark."

"Quite right," agreed Kiddie, "an' you ain't anything of a tenderfoot. Yes? Well?"

"So you changed your scent, so ter speak. You felt in your pocket an' fetched out them chips o' lead pencil, an' you planted em one by one so all-fired cutely that nobody who wasn't searchin' fer signs c'd have discovered 'em. One of 'em you dropped lightly on a branch of balsam, level with my eyes; another you hung up, even more lightly, on a line of spider web. How did you manage that, Kiddie?"

Kiddie looked up from his spoonful of egg.

"Just laid th' chip in the palm of my hand an' blew it softly inter th' web, where it stuck suspended, like Mahomet's coffin," he explained.

"Don't know nothin' 'bout Mahomet's coffin," said Rube, "but that chip o' pencil was real cleverly done; it was top notch. After that, you dropped clues pretty freely, afraid o' my missin' 'em, I reckon. You didn't just blaze the trees; but you broke down twigs, you tore up ferns an' things, you kicked up the soil with your toe, an' you scored marks with your stick. At one place you tied a knot in a clump of rush grass, leavin' a pointer. I was follerin' you quick when at last I come t' the creek, an' thar you had me. You waded into th' water—that's how you got your moccasins wet—an' you didn't cross; you walked up the stream, I guess."

"Right," nodded Kiddie. "But that was a false scent. I didn't go far—not more'n a dozen yards—I came out on the same side and dried my feet."

"I saw where you did that," Rube went on. "It wasn't far from where you laid the three fir cones as a pointer, plain's a sign-post. Then you followed along by the creek to the tree where you hung up th' leaf from your pocket-book. From there you made it easy for me, comin' home in a bee-line, scatterin' clues right an' left."

"Well, Rube, I'll say this," declared Kiddie, "that you did remarkably well all through. There were not a great many clues that you failed to pick up. You missed some important ones, however, which makes it all the more surprisin' that you came back so quickly. We'll play that same game another time. It's good for us both. And now, I guess we'll just wash up an' make the camp clean for the night before goin' out in the canoe ter catch a fish or two, if it's not too late."

CHAPTER XII

A MOONLIGHT VISITOR

As a matter of fact, the fishing was only a pretext on Kiddie's part. They caught no fish whatever, and they were still in the middle of the lake when darkness came on.

Kiddie lingered yet longer, resting over his paddle and entertaining his companion with talk and stories and the singing of songs. Hardly noticed by Rube, he dipped the paddle and gradually turned the canoe round and round.

"Rube, old man," he said at length, "I've made up another scouting task for you. Find our landing place. Take us straight into it. You can't see it in this darkness, I know. You dunno where 'tis; but you've got ter navigate us into it, and without my help, see?"

Rube was not to be caught napping. He took the paddle in hand, looked up to the stars, and made for home as truly and unerringly as even Kiddie himself could have done.

The air was hot that night, and Kiddie again preferred to sleep in the open. And he slept very soundly.

Rube, on the contrary, found the teepee stifling, in spite of the wide-open door flap. He was restless; the mosquitoes tormented him, too. He began to envy Kiddie, lying in the cooler air. So much so that at about two o'clock in the morning ho got free of his sleeping bag, took his revolver, and crept out into the bright moonlight.

Kiddie lay flat on his back under a cotton-wood tree, his arms folded across his chest, shielding his hidden eyes from the silvery light of the moon.

Rube's foot kicked against an unseen pannikin, making an alarming clatter.

He looked to see if Kiddie stirred, and saw instead a movement in the tree. The branch just above Kiddie's head was swaying and a strange black body showed itself ominously through the trembling leaves.

Rube leant forward and became aware of a pair of large, shining, yellow eyes. Beneath them, farther back, a long, curved tail was swinging to and fro like a pendulum. The eyes were far apart, showing that the animal which owned them was of great size—bigger, certainly, than an ordinary lynx.

Rube raised his gun, deciding to shoot the beast between the eyes. But before he could take aim there was a sudden quick movement in Kiddie's sleeping-place, a sharp flash, and a loud report that was mingled with a fierce howl and a heavy thud.

Kiddie had leapt to his feet and was ready to fire a second shot at the beast that was writhing and snarling at his feet.

"Keep back, Rube," he said calmly. "He ain't dead yet. But I've got him. It's that black puma that came t' th' trap last night."

From where Rube Carter stood, Kiddie and the wounded puma seemed to be hopelessly mixed up together in the darkness. He made a step or two forward holding his revolver levelled, with his finger on the trigger, ready to shoot, yet hesitating, lest he should hit Kiddie.

"Keep back!" Kiddie repeated. "I've sure got him."

The puma was rolling and writhing in helplessness, snarling viciously, and now and then howling, as it tried to rise to its feet. Rube could see the brute's big round eyes flashing brightly at first and then becoming smaller and dimmer.

"Mind it don't give you a scratch with them claws," he cautioned Kiddie.

Kiddie stood back, and the moonlight fell upon the puma's sleek black coat.

"Biggest lion I've ever seen," remarked Rube. "I'm only wishin' it had bin me 'stead of you as put the bullet in him."

"You can give him one right now, to finish him," said Kiddie.

"He ain't needin' another," said Rube. "Besides, 'tain't th' same thing. I guessed you was sound asleep when I come outer the wigwam. Puma was lyin' along the branch right over you, gettin' ready ter drop down on you. I reckoned your life was in danger, an' I wanted ter save you, see? That's what I'm allus wantin' t' do; but you never gives me a chance. How did you know the brute was thar, Kiddie? How did you happen ter wake an' git out your gun an' shoot so mortal quick—'fore I'd time ter lift my arm an' press the trigger?"

"Well," returned Kiddie, "I dunno exactly. But I've a notion that I knew the critter was right there long before you did, Rube. I'd heard him crawlin' along among the bushes an' nosin' around about the

traps. He was some wise, though, after his experience of last night. He wasn't havin' any truck with them traps. He was kind of suspicious of 'em, I guess, an' preferred to hunt his own food alive. So he got on ter the scent of the camp an' came sneakin' right here. I've a notion he didn't like the look of the teepee where you were sleepin'—thought maybe it was another trap; no more did he find any attraction in the camp fire. Thar was a live man, however, easy t' get at, under this yer tree. He came t' investigate overhead, an' was lyin' along that branch when you oozed outer the teepee an' diverted his attention by kickin' your foot against a tin pannikin, makin' noise enough t' waken the seven sleepers. If I hadn't been pretty quick with my gun just then, I guess that puma wouldn't have hesitated t' make a meal of you."

"Allus allowin' that I didn't stop him," rejoined Rube.

He watched the puma giving a final kick, and then become still and silent.

Kiddie went nearer to the animal, seized its long tail in both hands and hauled it bodily away from under the tree.

"We'll leave him there till daylight," he decided, "an' then have a proper look at him. Meanwhile, let's quit and finish our sleep."

Daylight revealed the puma as an uncommonly fine animal, in good condition. Kiddie preserved the pelt, with the head and feet. He also took the dimensions of the carcass at various parts to help him in modelling the body for mounting.

"I've got a pair of glass eyes that'll just suit," he told Rube. "They're some light in colour, but I guess we c'n darken 'em before we fix 'em in."

On that same day they moved the camp to a different part of the forest, but still on the shores of the lake, and they remained there for a week, trapping, shooting, fishing, and exercising their woodcraft. Then, at Rube's suggestion, they landed on a small island thickly overgrown with pine trees. Here, however, there were very few animals to trap, and small opportunity for scouting, although Rube did not for that reason cease to take advantage of Kiddie's wider knowledge and skill.

They were out in the canoe fishing one afternoon. Kiddie remarked upon the extreme clearness of the water, and told Rube to lean over and look down into it.

"You c'n see the bottom of the lake fathoms an' fathoms beneath us," he said.

"Yes," agreed Rube, peering down into the transparent depths. He raised his head and added: "You was sayin' th' other day, Kiddie, that no white man, an' p'r'aps no red man either, had ever lived in these parts in ancient times."

"I said—or meant to say—that there was no visible trace of early native inhabitants or white settlers," Kiddie corrected.

"Well, that's good enough," resumed Rube. "I guess I've got you, anyway. Look deep down thar, an' you'll see the trunk of a tree. It ain't got 'ny branches on it. I b'lieve I c'n even make out the cuts of an axe on the end of it. How'd it come there if it wasn't hewn down by men as used edged tools?"

Kiddie was not in the least nonplussed.

"How'd it come t' be lyin' at the bottom of the lake, anyway?" he questioned.

"Dunno," Rube answered, very much puzzled. "You mean, why ain't it afloat? Guess it's too heavy; though I can't tell just why. All wood floats, don't it?"

"Most wood does—all that grows about here," Kiddie affirmed. "Why, do you suppose, your men with edged tools took the trouble to cut down a big tree like that, and not make any use of so much valuable timber?"

Rube shrugged his shoulders.

"Now you're askin' me a conundrum I can't answer," he said.

"No," returned Kiddie; "because you've got hold of the wrong idea. That tree wasn't felled by any axe. It grew at the edge of the lake, where the ground was soft and moist. It was blown down in some storm or hurricane, and fell into the water. Gradually th' roots an' branches broke off, and after a long while—many years, mebbe—the bare trunk floated off. It drifted about like an iceberg or a derelict ship—drifted an' drifted until it became water-logged an' so heavy that it sank t' th' bottom, where it still lies. It was just an ordinary process of Nature."

Rube was silent for many moments.

"Thar ain't no trippin' you up, Kiddie," he said at length. "I made certain sure I had you that time."

"Wait a bit," pursued Kiddie; "I'll show you something else." He paddled farther out in the lake, taking his bearings by well-remembered landmarks. "Now look down through the water," he instructed, when after many pauses, he at last drew in his paddle. "What d'ye see?"

Rube leant over and searched the depths.

"Not much," he answered. "I c'n see the bottom, sure—stones, gravel, swayin' weeds. Hold hard, though. Them stones didn't grow there. Guess they're too reg'lar. I c'n make out a ring of 'em."

"Yes," said Kiddie. "So c'n I. Some queer that they should be arranged in a circle that way, ain't it? Are you able t' figure it out?"

Rube pondered deeply, frequently looking down at the stones so precisely placed in a ring at the bottom of the lake.

"They sure never come there on their own account, like the tree," he decided. "Looks as if human hands had put em' that way, an' I've got a idea, Kiddie. It's just this. Centuries an' centuries ago, this yer lake wasn't a lake at all, but dry land."

"Well?" Kiddie smiled. "That's possible."

"And," continued Rube, "when it was dry land, a tribe of what you call prehistoric men lived here. They was pagans—sun worshippers, an' such. They built the stones in a circle as a kinder temple, same's them chaps you told me of that built Stonehenge. What? Ain't that a cute idea of mine?"

"I allow th' idea's cute," conceded Kiddie. "But it ain't an explanation. It's too far-fetched altogether, an' it contradicts the theory that there were no inhabitants in these wildernesses all that time ago. If you'd thought a bit longer, you might have hit upon the true an' very commonplace explanation. Y'see, the stones haven't even been in the lake long enough to get a growth of weeds and moss on 'em. As a matter of fact, they've been there only a very few winters—since the time when the name 'Kiddie' was more appropriate to me than it is now. There was a big frost; the lake was frozen over. I'd the boyish idea that it 'ld be int'restin' t' build a house on the ice. There was no snow; stones were handier 'n timber. I carted the stones here on my sled. I built 'em in a circle. Snow came, an' I finished the buildin' with snow. You c'n sure guess the rest."

"Yes, course I can," said Rube. "When the snow an' ice melted, the stones sank straight down, an' fell to the bottom in a ring. What did I say just now, Kiddie? Thar ain't no trippin' you up or catchin' you nappin'."

"I dunno if you're aware of it, Rube," resumed Kiddie, "but for the past two or three minutes I've had the corner of my eye on a canoe that's comin' this way down the lake. Who's at the paddle? 'Tain't Gideon's way of paddlin'. 'Tain't Abe Harum. Who d'ye reckon it c'n be?"

Rube watched the approaching canoe. It had appeared suddenly from beyond a jutting promontory of spruce trees.

"Dunno," he answered, "don't reco'nize him. Seems like as Gid had loaned the canoe t' a stranger. An' yet I seem t' have seen that pinky-red shirt before, an' that straight-rimmed Stetson hat."

"Looks t' me like Sheriff Blagg," said Kiddie. "What's he want, cavortin' about on the lake searchin' for us? He's been t' our first campin' ground. Now he's shapin' for the island, led by our fire-smoke."

"Looks to me like Sheriff Blagg," said Kiddie.

[To face page 132.

"Looks to me like Sheriff Blagg," said Kiddie.

Kiddie whistled a shrill, long, tremulous note. He was an uncommonly good whistler. The sound was echoed and re-echoed from every chasm and cañon on the far shores of the lake; it might have

been heard many miles away.

Above the island and over the forest the air was sprinkled with startled birds; from the dark ravine of Laramie Pass a pair of eagles took flight.

Isa Blagg drew his paddle and waved his hat. He followed Kiddie's canoe into the little bay that was its mooring place on the farther side of the island.

"Located you at last!" he said, as he stepped ashore. "Gid Birkenshaw told me I sh'd find you somewheres around the lake; but he didn't say nothin' 'bout your bein' camped on an island. I bin searchin' along the shores; found one o' your campin' grounds in among the trees, though you'd cleaned it up so's it wasn't easy ter be sure it was a campin' place at all. Guess you didn't intend anybody ter foller on your tracks, or you'd ha' left some signs around. How do, Rube?"

He shook hands with the two trappers, and then turned to help in the work of cleaning and frying the fish for tea.

"Gee!" he exclaimed, at sight of the afternoon's catch. "Never notioned thar was so many fish in the whole of your lake 's all that, Kiddie! Why, they're 'most as pretty an' colourful as birds, too. Say, are they all the same breed?"

"Oh, no," Rube told him, indicating the various kinds in rotation. "Them thar's pickerel, that's a bream, these are shiners, pouts, an' chivins; the others are trout an' perch. We'll cook 'em all together, though."

"Young Rube's gettin' quite a professional hand at cookin'," said Kiddie, measuring out pinches of tea. "You'll hear of him one o' these days takin' on the job of chef in some high-class New York hotel. He's got twenty-one diff'rent ways of cookin' eggs, an' as many of potatoes. You didn't happen ter bring along any eggs or potatoes, did you, Isa? Rube an' I are livin' quite simply, but I'm figuring that you'll be lookin' for variety in the matter of food. You'll stay with us, won't you, Sheriff, until we break camp?"

Isa Blagg shook his head.

"No, Kiddie; no," he responded. "It would suit me right down t' th' dust; but it ain't possible. I'm here t' consult you on a matter o' business; an' soon's I'm through with it, I gotter quit."

CHAPTER XIII

A MATTER OF BUSINESS

Isa Blagg was in no haste to state the nature of the business which had brought him upon so long a journey in search of Kiddie; and Kiddie did not press him for an explanation of his unexpected visit.

"Rube an' I, we ain't gettin' anyways tired of each other's company," Kiddie remarked when the meal was over and Isa was taking out his pipe. "All the same, Sheriff, we're main glad ter see you. Got any news?"

"News?" Isa was lighting his pipe. "No, thar ain't a whole lot. Things is kinder quiet along the trail, an' you ain't missin' a great deal of excitement. I'm told as Broken Feather's bin seen about again. Seems he's bin laid up f'r a while back with the bullet wound you gave him. But he ain't bin interferin' none, an' in any case, he don't come within my jurisdiction. Nick Undrell's different."

"What about Nick Undrell?" Kiddie asked.

"That fetches me up against the point," returned Isa. "That's the business brought me on your trail. But before we drag in Nick, I'll start at the beginnin'. I don't doubt you remember the name of Sanson T. Wrangler."

"Yes," Kiddie affirmed, "he kept a prosperous general store in Laramie. Used to sell very good candy an' a variety of temperance drinks, includin' a special brew of lemon squash, of which delectable beverage I've consumed some quarts."

"That's the man," resumed Isa. "But 'tain't just c'rrect ter call Sanson prosperous. Thar's a heap of competition in the temp'rance drink line, an' the retailin' of candy don't represent a gold mine. Sanson T. Wrangler's store hasn't flourished since the time he was in Leavenworth hospital for an operation. His speculations was unfortunate. He lost a heap of dollars an' got inter debt. His chief creditor threatened law proceedings against him if he didn't shell out slick. Ter meet his liabilities he sold out a quantity of his stock. He borrowed where he could, an' one way with another, he accumulated enough capital ter pay that debt on the stipulated date, which was last Monday. Are you listenin', Kiddie? You're gazin' up inter them clouds as if you was composin' a poem to 'em, 'stead of cipherin' out the problem I'm puttin' in front of you."

"I assure you I'm all attention, Isa," Kiddie averred. "I expect you're going to tell me now that Sanson T. Wrangler got foolin' around in some low down gamblin' saloon and lost that pile of dollars over a game of poker. What?"

"No," continued Isa, "that wasn't the way of it; though I allow he was in Brierley's saloon Saturday night, boastin' to his friends about how he'd rounded up the cash, and had locked it away in his iron safe back of the store. On Sunday he didn't show up at meetin': nobody saw him all day. Next mornin' his store wasn't opened as usual. The matter was put inter my hands, an' I entered the premises t' investigate. First thing I see was Sanson T. Wrangler's iron safe standin' open an' empty, th' account books an' papers bein' flung around in disorder. Second thing was Sanson T. Wrangler hisself lyin' huddled up in a corner 'f th' room, gagged an' apparently unconscious."

"Why 'apparently'?" questioned Kiddie.

"Didn't move, didn't make no sound," explained the sheriff. "When I turned him over he was kinder mazy, didn't know where he was or what had occurred, an' was like as he was sick. Afterward, however, he was able t' give a circumstantial account of the robbery. His wife an' daughter'd gone away to St. Louis. He was livin' alone in th' emporium. Sunday evenin' he was on the point of goin' out ter meetin' when, on openin' the door, he caught sight of two masked men—strangers, so far's he c'n tell, though he'd an idea as to the identity of one of 'em. They dropped on him instanter; a pair of arms was flung around him, and a cloth that had a sickly sweet smell, like the stuff given him in hospital t' send him asleep, was clapped over his head. He struggled, but was soon overpowered, dragged across the floor, and deposited unconscious in the darkest corner of the room. It was while I was present that he first come ter know that his thief-proof safe had been opened and that his pile of greenbacks had been stolen. The safe had been opened with the key hidden back of the tobacco jar on his writin' desk."

Isa Blagg broke off, looking to Kiddie for comment.

"Well?" said Kiddie. "Go on. What's your theory? You mentioned the name of Nick Undrell a while back. Have you arrested him?"

"Nick's vamoosed," resumed the sheriff; "an' that goes against him. He was sure in Laramie Saturday night—even in Brierley's saloon. He knew about Sanson T. Wrangler's pile o' money bein' fixed up in the safe. He wasn't anyways friendly disposed to Sanson T. neither. Thar's a heap of evidence pointin' straight to Nick Undrell. It's in Nick's methods ter wear a black face-mask an' leave his victim helplessly gagged. I allow as Jim Thurston declares he met Nick at Three Crossings Sunday evenin'; but Jim's a pard of Nick's, an' his unsupported word ain't worth a whole lot, anyway."

Rube Carter leant forward. He was deeply interested in this case of burglary with violence.

"Say, now, sheriff," he interposed, "didn't you look for footprints and finger-marks?"

Isa shook his head.

"Never knew a clean boot make a print on a soft pile carpet," he answered. "As fer finger-marks—Sanson T. Wrangler's ready ter swear in court as the criminals both wore gloves, fully provin' that they wasn't novices in the burglary business."

He turned again to Kiddie.

"Knowin' as you're kinder int'rested in the moral regeneration of Nick Undrell, Kiddie," he went on, "I've hesitated ter issue a warrant for the man's arrest. I concluded that before goin' to extreme measures I should be wise ter take your advice. I'm here now for that purpose."

Kiddie smiled.

"My personal interest in him would be no excuse for your allowin' a guilty man to go free and unpunished," he observed judicially. "If you believe that Nick Undrell committed this burglary, then by all means issue your warrant and have him arrested. There are circumstances in the case, however, which do not seem to me to support your suspicions. Let us examine them. You suspect Nick because he knew of the money and where it was kept. He wasn't the only one who knew. Sanson T. Wrangler had publicly boasted of his readiness to meet his liabilities, and every man in the crowded saloon must have known just as much as Nick. I allow that Nick's an old offender; but it ain't fair to condemn him on mere supposition, simply because the victim in this case is alleged to have been gagged by a man wearing a mask. I'm not saying that Nick didn't do it, mind you; but you've got to prove that Jim Thurston was lying when he said he saw Nick along at Three Crossings on Sunday evening—a good seventy miles away from the scene of the crime."

Kiddie paused for a moment.

"Were Sanson's shirt-sleeves buttoned at the wrist, or were they rolled up?" he asked abruptly.

"Rolled up t' the elbow," Isa answered quickly. "His arms was bare."

"And the bag or cloth, with the chloroform in it, was drawn down over his hat, I suppose?" pursued Kiddie.

"No. His hat was hangin' up, back of the door. But you're right about the bag. It was like a big

nightcap. He'd pulled it off."

"You smelt the sickly sweet smell about the room when you entered, did you, Isa?"

"Can't say as I did. Guess it had evaporated by then."

"Dare say," nodded Kiddie. "Y'see it was at least twelve hours afterwards, and—say, now, don't you reckon twelve hours a precious long time for a man to lie insensible after only one dose of chloroform?"

"Dunno," said the sheriff, "I'm ignorant of the effects an' uses of them outlandish drugs."

"And yet you imagine that Nick Undrell knew how to use it, or get hold of a dose of it, even if he knew! Why, I don't figure that Nick ever heard the name of the stuff—not havin' been in hospital, like Sanson T. Wrangler. If you ask me, Isa, I don't believe there was any chloroform within a day's ride of Laramie on Sunday evening. Just put your wits to work, my friend. To begin with, Sanson T.'s wife and daughter were away in St. Louis. That was real convenient. Then the money disappeared from the thief-proof safe just at the time when it was to have been paid up to clear off the debt—that was equally convenient. I'm told that the thieves attacked him when Sanson opened the door to go out to meeting. But did any one ever know a respectable citizen go out to meeting with his sleeves rolled up to the elbow, and without his hat? Or would he go out leaving the key of the safe on the open desk table? Then the stupefying effects of chloroform would not certainly last more than an hour, although the sickly smell of the drug would linger about the closed room for quite twelve."

"Say, Kiddie," Rube interrupted, "you've gotten on this yer crime problem the same's you'd track a wild critter in the woods. Seems ter me, you've run that critter right into its lair. All you've been sayin's as clear's the water in the lake. I c'n see the bottom plain, an' I figure it up as thar wasn't no burglary at all, thar wasn't no masked men or chloroform. Sanson T. Wrangler made the whole thing up ter cover his own tracks, an' the only thief in the case was Sanson T. Wrangler hisself."

"Exactly," nodded Kiddie.

"Shake!" cried Isa Blagg, thrusting out his hand. "You're sure right, Kiddie; plumb right, you are. You've gotten straight's a die to the very innards of the problem. The hull evidence supports your theory. Here's me, a perfessional lawyer, so ter speak, bin puzzlin' my head over that alleged crime f'r days on end, an' never c'd make top nor tail of it; an' you, settin' idle at this yer camp fire, have solved it as easy an' as slick 's you might cipher out a sum in simple arithmetic."

Kiddie shrugged his shoulders.

"It's merely the application of common sense to a very ordinary proposition," he said.

"Kiddie don't jump at no rash conclusions," observed Rube Carter. "Trainin' in scout-craft has sharpened his wits at ev'ry point. He follers th' evidence of a crime same 's he'd foller on the tracks of a wild critter of the woods."

"Exactly," Kiddie nodded. "There's no difference."

"He looks at a thing all round an' through an' through 'fore he fixes up his mind about it," Rube went on, addressing the sheriff. "You an' me, Isa, we ain't built the same 's Kiddie. We ain't so slick or so clever at analysin'. Because a galoot like this yer Sanson T. Wrangler happens along an' says he's bin robbed, you never waits t' inquire if he's tellin' the truth. You dash off on a false trail t' arrest a innercent man. Kiddie has a way o' workin' that's all his own, an' if he don't allus hit the bull's-eye fust shot, at least he never misses the target."

"I allow Kiddie's cute," acknowledged Isa. "He's got the sagacity of a Injun combined with the trained intelligence of a civilized human. If Kiddie wasn't so all-fired scrupulous about truth an' justice, he'd make a passable magistrate. But I reckon his ambitions don't lie in that direction."

The sheriff stood up and glanced towards his canoe.

"Guess it's 'bout time for me ter think of quittin'," he remarked.

"But you'll stop in camp with us to-night?" said Kiddie. "Now that you're through with that robbery problem, there's no occasion for hustle, an' I guess Rube c'n make you as comfortable 's if you were stayin' in a high-class Cincinnati hotel."

"Nothing would please me better'n to be your lordship's guest for a night," returned Isa. "I'm goin' ter stay. Th' experience of sleepin' on a island 'll be suthin' of a novelty. Thar's a spice of adventure about it that I appreciate. Gideon Birkenshaw 'll conclude I've located your camp. He won't worry any on my account. When shall I tell Gid you'll be home?"

"The time is not limited," returned Kiddie. "Rube and I are a long way from bein' tired of campin' out, and we've got 'most all we want. We ain't worryin' about letters or newspapers or any engagements or duties. We're havin' a real good holiday, an' it's goin' ter last as long as the fine weather holds. But I'll tell you what you c'n do for us, sheriff. You've got plenty of cargo space in that canoe, an' we've some green pelts—the skins of critters we've trapped—that you c'n take back with you. Abe Harum knows what to do with 'em."

"Figurin' ter make this yer island your headquarters, I guess?" observed Isa.

"No," Kiddie answered, glancing aside at Rube. "We've exhausted the interests of the island. Rube has an idea he'd like t' explore some of those dark an' dismal cañons on the far side of the lake. We're only waitin' until he makes up his mind which one to choose."

"Then we've no need ter hang around much longer," said Rube, "for I've fixed on Lone Wolf Cañon. There's a strong appeal in the name of Lone Wolf."

"Gives promise of romantic solitood, don't it?" mused the sheriff. "I'm not hankerin' after solitoods, myself. For real enjoyment, give me Brierley's saloon in Laramie on a Saturday night."

"Ah," rejoined Rube, "you never learnt the meanin' of campin' out. You ain't got the instincts of a scout, the same as Kiddie an' me. Don't suppose you even knows the name of the bird that's bin warblin' so sweet for the past half-hour in the tree over your head."

Isa turned and looked up into the tree.

"No," he said, "until you mentioned it, I wasn't aware that there was any warblin' in the programme."

"Don't you pay any heed to Rube, sheriff," Kiddie interposed. "It's a special hobby of his to know a bird by its notes. The songster you're listenin' to now is just a whip-poor-will. It starts every evening precisely at sunset. When it quits singing, we reckon it's time to crawl into our sleepin' bags."

Isa Blagg was in no hurry for the bird to cease its singing. Indeed, it was long after the usual bed-time when at length he consented to leave the bivouac fire.

On the following morning he awoke with alarm to find himself alone on the island. He searched for Kiddie and Rube, and was beginning to fear that they had marooned him, when at last he discovered them swimming far out in the lake, where he had never thought of looking for them. They were so far away that he supposed he would have ample time to prepare breakfast for them; but on going to the fire he found the kettle boiling, the clean plates set ready, and the cut bacon waiting in the frying-pan. He strode to the creek and saw that his canoe was already loaded with the neatly-packed pelts that he was to take with him to Birkenshaw's.

"Gee!" he said to himself. "Never seen such a pair as them two in all my days. I ain't in it. They gets in front o' me every time!"

"We didn't ask you to come out and have a swim with us, Isa," greeted Kiddie as he stepped ashore.

"No use if you had done, Kiddie," returned Isa. "I never been in deep water in my life. None the less, I've gotten a healthy appetite for that bacon. Sleepin' on a island suits me. I'm real glad I came."

He paddled off in his canoe immediately after breakfast, when also Kiddie and Rube prepared to break camp.

CHAPTER XIV

LONE WOLF CAÑON.

They were not long in crossing to the farther side of the lake and making a landing within the entrance to Lone Wolf Cañon. Neither of them had ever been here before, and they were disappointed in the prospect presented by the steep walls of barren cliff and the sunless gloom.

"Seems ter me we may as well leave our traps in the canoe," said Rube. "There ain't much chance of findin' any game where there's no bush for the wild critters ter hide, an' no herbage for the little 'uns ter feed on."

"It's the kind of place where our guns'll be of more use than the traps," Kiddie added. "I c'n make out a beaten track winding down among the rocks there. 'Tain't a human footpath, I reckon. Guess it was made by mountain goats, antelopes, deer, foxes, wolves, an' even buffalo, comin' down t' th' water for their evenin' drink. Have a close look, an' see if you can distinguish any footprints."

Rube examined the ground at various points, particularly near the water, where it was moist.

"Quite right, Kiddie," he reported. "It's sure a water trail. I made out the tracks of a bear and a lynx; an' thar's heaps of others that might be any of the critters you've named."

"There's birds as well," said Kiddie, "eagles, hawks, wild turkeys, grouse."

"I've never seen a eagle close at hand," Rube regretted. "I want to, badly. Did y' ever shoot one,

Kiddie?"

"No, I've no use f'r a dead eagle. Caught one in a fox-trap once, in Lost Man's Gulch. Hadn't visited that trap for several days. When I went to it, there was a fine male eagle in it, an' all round about were the remains of rabbits an' birds. Couldn't make out at first just how that trapped eagle had gotten so much food. The rabbits an' lambs an' grouse didn't sure go up an' ask him ter kill an' eat them, and thar wasn't any humans near to take pity on him. Well, I watched from a distance, an' after a while I see the eagle's mate fly down an' give him a cub fox. That's how it had been all the time."

"Say, what did you do then, Kiddie?" Rube asked.

"Went an' opened the trap an' came away with two fine tail feathers and a nasty scratch on the arm," Kiddie answered, turning from the canoe to search for a suitable pitch for the camp.

He found a good place on a stretch of sloping ground between two high rocks at the edge of the lake, and in a very little time the teepee was erected, a fire well kindled, and the camp in order.

Their store of food had been almost exhausted on the island, where they had not set their traps and had caught only fish. They still had abundance of flour, however, as well as tea, sugar, tinned milk, and rice; and Kiddie was confident in the prospect of being able soon to add meat to his larder.

On that same evening of their arrival in Lone Wolf Cañon, he went out with his gun and climbed the mountain side in search of game. But he returned to camp without having fired a shot, and with only a capful of thimbleberries as spoil.

"Didn't you see anything?" Rube questioned.

"Oh, yes," said Kiddie, "I saw plenty—a big-horn antelope that was too far away for a shot, a herd of black-tail deer, still farther away, a family of rattlesnakes, a skunk, and a racoon. And you'll be interested to know that there's a pair of white-tail eagles nestin' on one of the crags up the cañon. I got a good view of them from the opposite side."

"I'm goin' ter have a look at those eagles," decided Rube. "I'll go to-morrow evenin' the same time as when you were there, an' when they're likely to be at home."

On the following evening his expedition was interfered with by the fact that earlier in the day Kiddie had stalked and killed a black-tail deer and needed Rube's help in carrying the carcass into camp and cutting it up for venison.

But Rube was not to be denied a sight of the eagles, even if he could not hope to capture an eaglet and take it home with him as a pet.

"I see you're preparin' yourself for a climb up those crags, eh?" said Kiddie on the next afternoon. He spoke without encouragement.

"Yep," Rube nodded. "Any objections t' offer?"

"Not exactly objections," returned Kiddie. "I was only thinkin'."

"A habit you have—thinkin'. What was you thinkin', Kiddie?"

In response, Kiddie looked around at the mountains and the sky.

"Wind's changed," he said. "Looks like rain, don't it? Might keep off till after sunset time, though."

"Guess I'll chance it, anyway," resolved Rube.

Kiddie had told him exactly where the eagles' eyrie was situated and how he might most easily and safely approach it, first by ascending the gradual slope of the mountain and then working his way round on the face of the precipice, and then again ascending by a craggy cleft that would bring him close to the nesting-place. And Kiddie's directions and advice were always too practical to be ignored. Rube followed them exactly.

It would have been well for him if before starting he had also paid more serious heed to Kiddie's suggestion regarding the weather. But Kiddie had not insisted. Like Rube himself, he had not foreseen more than a mere evening shower of refreshing rain.

In Rube's absence, Kiddie occupied himself with the ordinary work of the camp. He was always scrupulously orderly and methodical; never allowing any refuse to accumulate, always regulating the fire to his requirements, washing up after every meal, and having a fixed place for each utensil and for the different kinds of food and stores.

All of his camps were ordered on a similar plan; so much so that one was a duplicate of another, differing only in situation and natural surroundings.

It was the same with his packing. The things that were most urgently needed were always packed last, to be ready to hand on his arrival at a new pitch.

Over his work, Kiddie watched Rube climbing the mountain side, and once or twice he whistled to him to let him know that he was going all right. But very soon Rube disappeared into the brooding gloom of the cañon, and Kiddie continued with his work until every tin-pot shone like silver and the whole camp was faultlessly tidy.

"Queer how fond of that boy I've got to be," he said to himself. "I'm missing him already." He glanced round at the mountain tops and the lowering clouds. "Don't like the look of that mist that's rolling down," he reflected. "He ought to turn back; but I don't suppose he will. Hullo! he's disturbed the eagles! I hope he got a good view of them first."

The majestic pair of birds had taken wing, and were now gliding on seemingly motionless pinions through the misty air. Kiddie watched them as they crossed over the lake, growing smaller and smaller until they became tiny specks in the distance and were lost to sight among the dark ravines of the Rattlesnake Range.

At dusk, when it was time for Rube's return, Kiddie got ready some venison cutlets and chipped potatoes for frying with them for supper. But before beginning his cooking he waited until he should hear Rube's signal call from afar. He sat by the fire listening for it with his eyes bent on the slope of the hill where he expected Rube to appear.

The long minutes went by, but he heard no signal call and saw no sign of his companion. Still, he was not anxious. Rube might be sheltering from the rain under the lee of some rock.

The mist on the mountains thickened, the darkness of night and the drizzling rain blotted out all landmarks.

Kiddie whistled at regular intervals—a long, penetrating whistle it was. He piled more fuel on the fire, so that the glow might serve as a guide. He knew that there would be no use in going out in search of Rube. They might so easily miss each other in these trackless wilds; unless indeed, Rube was hurt and unable to move about. Climbing in the fog among rocks slippery with rain and wet moss, he was likely enough to have missed his footing and injured a limb in his fall.

This thought that Rube was possibly lying helpless on the crags began to worry Kiddie as the night grew late. He blamed himself for having allowed the boy to go forth alone on such a hazardous adventure.

"It's the kind of thing I'd have done myself when I was his age," he reflected. "I can't blame Rube. But I ought to have stopped him from going when I saw that there was rain coming on and saw the mist gathering on the hills. Pity we didn't bring the hound with us after all. Sheila would sure have found him."

Fearing that he might yet have to go out in search of the boy, he cooked his own supper. He had already packed all his stores under the shelter of the wigwam and the canoe, covering the latter with the ground-sheet. He had also lighted the hurricane lamp and suspended it from the top of the totem pole.

He ate his supper in the teepee, but more than once got up from the solitary meal to open the door-flap and look out searchingly in the darkness for signs of Rube.

Towards midnight the light of the moon behind the clouds lessened the surrounding darkness. He could dimly distinguish the mountain ridges, outlined against the sky. The rain had ceased. The mist had lifted from the heights; but it still hung in fantastic layers between the walls of Lone Wolf Cañon.

"If it's only the fog that's kept him, he ought to be back in camp within another hour," he told himself, as the moon broke through a rack of drifting clouds.

He waited for a while, and then renewed his whistling, sending messages in the Morse code, which Rube very well understood.

But no answer came; only the repeated echoes of his own shrill whistle.

An hour went by, and yet another hour.

"Rube's wise in his way," Kiddie meditated. "I guess he's having a sleep up there rather than risk his neck by climbing down that precipice in the dark. There's no moonlight deep down in the cañon. Quite right of him to wait until sunrise."

Thus arguing, Kiddie entered the teepee, dropped the door-flap, and turned into his sleeping-bag.

But he did not sleep. All the while he lay listening and at the same time trying to realize just what had happened to Rube. It was his excellent habit when puzzling out any such problem as this to imagine himself to be the other person and to figure himself in that other person's situation. He did not consider what he himself would do in the circumstances, but what the other, having a different character, would attempt.

And so it was now. He imagined himself to be Rube Carter climbing across the face of a steep precipice overhanging a chasm so deep and narrow that the level strip of rocky ground at the base of it could not be seen. A false step, a slip of foot or hand, would mean a fall to certain death.

But Rube was too good and cautious a climber to make a mistake. He had got near enough to the eagles to startle them into flight, and this had happened just before the mist had rolled down the mountain sides into the cañon.

Now, Rube knew well that to climb down a precipice is always more difficult than the ascent; and that to attempt the descent in a thick mist was doubly perilous. Kiddie argued, therefore, that Rube had either remained where he was when overtaken by the mist, or else that he had climbed farther up the mountain. This, indeed, was in any case the safer way, and although it would mean a long and weary tramp back to camp, still he might be expected soon after daybreak.

From earliest dawn until long after sunrise, Kiddie waited in hope, and when Rube did not return he resolved to go out in search of him.

If Rube were seriously hurt, it would be necessary to take him home to Birkenshaw's with the least possible delay. Kiddie therefore packed up the teepee and the stores in the canoe and left the latter ready for launching. He took his rifle and revolvers with him, filled his haversack with food, and did not neglect to take his pocket box of surgical dressings. In case Rube should return in his absence, he left a message in picture-writing on the paddle of the canoe.

He followed Rube's direction over the shoulder of the mountain, and then began to look for tracks, finding them now and again, and particularly at the point where Rube had left the hill-side to begin his difficult climb across the face of the precipice. Here he had dropped a stick that he had carried, and he had evidently sat down to tighten the thongs of his moccasins. Kiddie had now no doubt of his way. He knew that Rube would instinctively take the easiest and quickest course to the eagles' nest.

He found the place without much difficulty, and had proof in some detached fragments of moss and lichen that Rube had been here in advance of him, and had been able to look down into the eagles' nest, where the female was even now sitting unconcerned on her eggs.

Kiddie did not disturb her, as Rube had probably done. Instead, he searched for signs of Rube himself.

Yes, Rube had not attempted the perilous descent. He had waited until the rain had ceased and the mist had lifted. High up above where he stood, Kiddie saw the scratch of a slipping foot on the wet moss, which showed that Rube had climbed upward. Again, still higher up, there was a similar mark, and above this the way was easy as a step-ladder, needing only very ordinary care, a sure foot, and steady nerves.

At the top of the ascent Kiddie came out upon the farther side of Lone Wolf Mountain, which now interposed between him and Sweetwater Lake. To reach the lake side he must either return as he came, or else cross the next valley and work his way round the base of the mountain. He judged that Rube had not hesitated to take the latter and longer course.

He walked round in a circle, searching for a track in the soft ground, and at last he came upon the impression of Rube's moccasins. He followed their direction. Presently he realized that Rube had been running and that his tracks were leading in quite an unexpected direction.

Greatly wondering, Kiddie went on and on. Then he came to an abrupt stop and stood staring in astonished alarm at the ground. At his feet lay two crumpled up eagle's feathers. A yard or so away from them was Rube's fur cap, pierced by an Indian arrow. And all around were the confused impressions of Indians' feet.

Kiddie drew a long breath as he picked up the boy's hat.

"That's the way of it," he said. "That's why Rube never came back. He's been captured by Indians!"

CHAPTER XV

THE CRY OF THE JAY

Up to the point to which Kiddie had tracked him, Rube Carter had done precisely what Kiddie had conjectured he would do. He had reached the eagles' eyrie just as the mist began to envelop him and cut off his direct retreat.

He had not deliberately startled the birds to flight. The male had been perched like a faithful sentinel on a point of rock, above his mate sitting on her eggs. Rube had a long, close view of the pair of them, and had watched without molesting them. But presently he had the boyish idea that it would be interesting to see and count their eggs, and take note of how their nest was lined.

Cautiously he approached the nest, moving very slowly and stealthily. But the guardian male resented this bold intrusion, and attacked him with beak and talons and fiercely-flapping wings.

Rube drew his revolver, but did not shoot. He used the weapon only as a club with which to defend himself, while he sheltered his body from the assault by crouching low, with his back wedged in a cleft of rock.

The eagle pursued him there and glared at him menacingly. He had what he afterwards called a grand sight of the bird's wonderful clear eyes, its hooked beak, and its wicked-looking claws, and he marvelled at the enormous stretch of its pinions.

Once it made a dash at him, spreading itself close against the wall of rock, covering him like a cloak. He thrust out his free hand to grab at one of its legs, but, missing the leg, he seized hold of its tail, pulling out three of the long white plumes. He crouched still closer in his shelter, where neither beak nor talon could touch him. And soon the eagle drew off.

When at length he raised his head to investigate, he saw the two birds rising through the misty air and flying off together over the mountains.

Rain was now falling heavily, and the mist was thickening. He heard the whisper of the mountain streams growing louder and louder until it became a deep, prolonged murmur. Quite near to him a torrent of brown, foaming water was rushing and leaping down the steep.

Rube knew it would be futile to attempt to return to camp before daybreak. He judged that Kiddie would understand his absence and not worry unduly. So he ate what food he had brought in his haversack, and, regardless of the driving rain, curled himself up to try to sleep.

Once during the long, uncomfortable night he heard from afar, or fancied that he heard, Kiddie's familiar, penetrating whistle. He knew that his own comparatively feeble whistle in response would not carry far enough to be even faintly heard. There were no means by which he could send back an answering signal. No fire smoke or fitful glow could be seen, no cry or call be heard.

Later in the night, when the moon broke through the clouds, he again very faintly caught the sound of Kiddie's whistle; so faintly that he could not distinguish the notes which he believed were being sent forth as a message in the Morse code.

Rube held his breath and listened; but all that he heard now to break the silence of the vast desolation was the weird howl of some far away koshinee—the dreaded buffalo wolf of the prairies.

When the rain had ceased, and the black mountain peaks could be seen against the lesser blackness of the sky, he still thought it prudent to remain where he was.

One of the last things that Kiddie had said to him was: "Be careful. Don't hurry; don't worry," and, rather than risk a climb up the wet and slippery rocks, he again curled himself up and closed his eyes in sleep.

The red dawn was breaking when he awoke shivering with cold. His buckskin clothes were wet and clammy, and his limbs were stiff.

He sat up and looked about him.

The two eagles had returned and were exactly as he had seen them at first, the male keeping sentry on the point of rock above his nested mate. The mountain torrents still babbled. On the farther side of the cañon was a beautiful waterfall as white as chalk against the indigo darkness of the cliff down which it leapt into the unseen depths. The jagged shapes of the mountains were now exceedingly clear, showing alp above alp into the far blue distance.

Rube was excessively hungry. And there was nothing for him to eat, unless indeed he had chosen to make a meal of a fragment of rabbit flesh that had fallen from the eagles' nest.

"Wonder what Kiddie's havin' for breakfast!" he said to himself longingly. "Fried kidney, I expect, outer that stag he shot. Guess he'll be worryin' some 'bout my not bein' back in camp yet. I'd best quit an' get back right away. No; I ain't goin' back the way I come. I'm figurin' as th' easiest an' safest way's ter climb up higher an' then make tracks across Lone Wolf Mountain an' down to the lake. That's what Kiddie'd do, I reckon."

He looked upward, calculating his direction. Before he moved away he picked up his eagle plumes. He had been lying on them; their feathering was ruffled and their quills were fractured. Still, they were worth preserving as trophies of his adventure.

The ascent of the cliff was not difficult, though at first he made two or three awkward slips on the wet moss and lichen. After a while the climbing became quite easy, and he reached the rounded shoulder of Lone Wolf Mountain without difficulty. Here, however—as Kiddie afterwards discovered—he was obliged to make a long detour in order to get to the farther side of the mountain.

Rube started off at a brisk walk, and was in hopes of reaching camp early in the forenoon. The wild desolation of these mountain heights oppressed him. So much so that he was startled by the cry of a jay.

He looked round, thinking it strange that such a bird should live here—here, where there were no trees and none of the smaller animals for a jay to kill and feed upon.

As he turned, he saw a movement beside an outcropping rock. At the same instant something like the buzz of a large insect sounded close over his head. He saw an arrow strike the ground and remain upright, trembling with the impact.

Rube knew now the meaning of the jay's cry. It was not the cry of a bird, but the signal call of an Indian.

He started to run in his original direction, but he had not gone more than a hundred yards when another arrow struck his cap, taking it off. He staggered, then, taking a new direction, ran a few strides, then stopped in hesitation, seeing an Indian rise to his knees, fixing an arrow to his bowstring.

With a quick glance Rube realized that he was surrounded, and that there was no way of escape, no shelter of any sort on the barren mountain side. He drew his revolver as the Redskins closed in upon him.

Just as he was about to press the trigger, he reflected upon the inevitable consequences. They would capture him in any case; he could not escape. But if he killed one of their tribe they would torture him to death; whereas, if he quietly submitted, there would still be a chance of his being set free and unharmed.

The Indians had already seen his pistol, however, and they did not doubt that he intended to use it. They ran swiftly up to him. One approached from behind and seized him by the arms.

Rube struggled, but was soon overpowered and flung to the ground, where his hands were tied to his back. What became of his cap and revolver he did not see, for a greasy, ill-smelling rag was bound tightly over his eyes.

They led him away, forcing him to a quick walk down the mountain side, for miles and miles, it seemed. He often stumbled on the rough ground.

Sometimes he was half-pushed, half-dragged along the rocky side of a watercourse; more than once he was led waist deep across a rushing stream that was icy cold. Then there was a steep climb up another mountain slope and down into a farther valley.

Here the Indians came to a halt. Rube heard the movements of horses, and presently he was lifted and flung over the back of one of them. He managed to get comfortably astride, in spite of his imprisoned hands. Fortunately for himself, he was a good rider and could keep his seat on the pony's bare back without great difficulty.

All the time he was thinking less of his own position as a captive than of Kiddie. He knew very surely that Kiddie would be anxious about him. What would he do? Would he just wait in camp in fretful annoyance?

Rube knew Kiddie pretty well by now; knew that so soon as a reasonable time had gone by he would judge that an accident of some kind had caused the delay, and would set out in search.

"Pity I didn't blaze the trail, somehow," Rube reflected. "Dessay he'll squander heaps of valuable time lookin' fer my dead body along the foot of the cliffs away down in the cañon. Though I reckon he'd foller on my tracks as far's he could. If Kiddie noticed that pair of eagles takin' flight, he'll know it was my bein' near their nest that scared 'em. He'll make for the nest, sure."

Rube was applying Kiddie's method of imagining himself in the other person's place, and, following up this process, he decided that it would not be very long before Kiddie would get on to the track of these Indians.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SIGN OF THE BROKEN FEATHER

When at length the ponies were brought to a halt, Rube was dragged to the ground and left there, lying on his back, with his cramped arms beneath him. He heard the muffled sounds of barking dogs and chattering squaws, and he judged that he had been brought into the Indians' encampment.

Presently he was turned over and his arms were set free, the tight bandage was taken from his eyes.

He sat up and gazed about him wonderingly, with dim sight and aching forehead.

For the first time in his life he was in an Indian village, surrounded by wigwams, all of them similar to Kiddie's teepee, only that his was cleaner and better made, and decorated with more care.

The village was pitched in the midst of a green valley, through which ran a narrow creek, bordered with willows. Horses and cattle grazed on the neighbouring slopes, and an enclosed cornfield and well-beaten trails showed that the Indians lived here permanently.

Near to where he sat were two lodges larger than the rest. They were decorated with many painted devices and trophies of the chase, and in front of each of them was a high totem pole from which grim-looking scalp locks and skulls and bones were suspended. He conjectured that one of these tents would be the chief's wigwam and the other the Medicine Lodge.

None of the Redskins took much notice of him, passing him with a mere glance, or making a remark in a tongue which he did not understand.

A young squaw approached, carrying water. Rube signed to her, asking for a drink. She stopped and stooped to give him one. He then made further easily understood signs to show that he was very hungry. She spoke to him, but he shook his head.

"Wish you c'd speak plain English," he said.

Then the squaw also began to talk in the sign language, and Rube gathered that she did not dare to bring food to a prisoner. Nevertheless, a little later she went past him and dropped within his reach, as if by chance, a fragment of dry buffalo meat, which he ate hungrily.

He was left alone for a long time. But he knew that he was being watched, and that it would be worse than useless for him to attempt to escape.

He saw the young Indian boys at their games of skill, or engaged in competitions with the bow and arrow, horse racing, mounting and dismounting while their bare-backed ponies were at the gallop, throwing the lariat, wrestling and running, and thus training to become braves and warriors.

At about mid-day two of the scouts who had been among his captors came up to him and signed to him to follow them. They led him across a foot-worn patch of grass towards the entrance of the Medicine Lodge, where they came to a halt, standing on guard over him.

Rube wondered what was going to happen; but, watching, he began to understand that the chief warriors and medicine men were within the lodge, and that some sort of court of justice was being held. He further gathered from the picture-writing on the lodge that these Redskins were of the Crow nation, and that the tribal name of their chief was Falling Water.

When at length he was marched into the lodge he saw the councillors seated on the floor in a half-circle round a small fire. All of them wore feathered war bonnets and had their faces painted.

Falling Water himself, a grim, wizen-featured old man, sat in the middle, smoking a tobacco pipe that was shaped like a tomahawk and adorned with coloured beads and feathers. He looked at Rube long and steadily, and then spoke to one of the scouts inquiringly.

Rube could only understand the answer by the gestures and signs that accompanied it. From these and what followed he was able to make up a coherent outline of the offence of which he was being accused.

It appeared that a picket of scouts had been out on the mountains watching for enemy spies. They had captured this one in the very act of spying upon them. He had been making signals, sending messages and answering messages by sounds made with his lips. He carried a gun, and was ready to use it upon them if they had not been too quick for them. And he was disguised. It was clear that he was an Indian—one of their Sioux enemies—who had tried to make himself look like a Paleface. Moreover, he wore the totem sign of his chief, who was the enemy of Falling Water.

Rube was perplexed in his effort to understand this part of the scout's evidence.

He was not surprised that he had been mistaken for a full-blooded Indian. Was not his mother an Indian? And had not both he and Kiddie when they started on their camping trip dressed themselves in fringed buckskins and designedly made themselves look as much as possible like Indians?

He supposed that the scouts picketed on the heights had heard Kiddie's whistle from afar and his own feeble attempt to respond. What puzzled him most was the spokesman's declaration that he wore the totem sign of his chief. For so he understood the scout's gestures.

Falling Water was apparently dissatisfied, for he closely questioned the witness, whose answer, partly in the Crow tongue and partly in pantomime, threw a flood of light upon Rube's perplexity.

Plucking a feather from his own headdress, the scout pinched the quill and bent it over, holding it in position on Rube's head.

This, then, was the totem sign of his supposed chief. And he, Rube Carter, was believed by these Crow Indians to be a spy of their enemy Broken Feather!

He did not know that one of the medicine men had questioned him in the tongue of the Sioux, which, if he were indeed one of Broken Feather's tribe, he ought to have understood. His failure to answer was taken for stubbornness, a sure evidence of his guilt.

Falling Water spoke, holding up a cautioning finger to impose attention to his words. Rube guessed by his serious judicial manner that he was passing a sentence of punishment upon him.

"It's a pity none o' you c'n understand plain, straight-forward English," he protested. "I c'd explain in a jiffy."

"Eh?" cried the medicine man who had addressed him in the Sioux, "you c'n speak English yourself, can you, young 'un?"

Rube looked across at him in astonishment. Surely he was not an Indian, speaking like this! He was an old, old man with a wrinkled face, white hair, and a matted white beard and dim blue eyes. In dress and manner, however, he was very little different from his companions.

"It's the only language that I c'n speak," said Rube.

"Barrin' your own," winked the medicine man. "But you're not the only one of your tribe that can speak English. Broken Feather himself's a dab hand at it, so I hear. A clever scoundrel is Broken Feather. Togged you out like a Paleface and sent you into this reservation to spy around and find out how many braves and warriors we've got, how many war-horses we possess, and how far it's safe for him to come out on the war-trail against us. Well, young 'un, you're caught at it, and you've got to take the consequences, which is as much as to say that you're going to be tortured to death. You asked for plain English, and now you've got it. Quit!"

"But you haven't let me explain," Rube objected hotly.

The old man closed his dim blue eyes and drew his red blanket closer about his shoulders.

"No explanations needed," he grunted.

At a sign from the chief, the scouts dragged Rube forcibly away, and again tied his hands.

They took him into an empty teepee and there bound his legs together and mounted a guard outside so that he could not possibly escape.

No food and no drink were given to him during the rest of the long, weary, monotonous day. He watched a shaft of sunlight moving slowly across the earthen floor of the wigwam until it became a thin streak and then faded.

At dusk a new guard entered—two powerful young Indians with grotesquely painted faces. They loosened the bonds about his legs, but did so only that he might walk as they led him out into a lane broken through a dense crowd of excited braves and squaws and curious children, waiting to witness his torture.

He saw Falling Water with his medicine men and principal warriors in their full war-paint seated in a group in the midst of an open circle of the expectant people. Drums were being beaten, weird Indian songs were being chanted, braves wearing hideous masks were dancing round a blazing fire.

In the middle of the wide ring was the charred stump of a tree, and to this Rube was led. When he came closer, he saw a procession of youths march up, each carrying a large load of faggots. Following them came Indians armed with spears, scalping-knives, bows and arrows, and formidable clubs.

Rube began to feel exceedingly limp. He was trembling from head to foot, though as yet he only guessed at the ominous meaning of these preparations.

Suddenly he was seized from behind and thrust bodily towards the grim execution tree. He struggled, but was overpowered. A blow on the head made his brain reel, and all the strength of his resistance went out of him.

When he came to himself again he found that he was bound by ropes to the tree, and that flames were licking at his feet and legs, while by the light of the fire and through the mist of smoke he saw hideous figures of red men dancing round him, menacing him with their spears and knives and tomahawks.

The fire nipped his shins, the ropes were cutting into his flesh, the sparks and smoke were choking him.

"Kiddie! Kiddie!" he cried aloud in his anguish of body and mind.

And then, from immediately behind him, there came a calm, steady voice—

"All right, Rube; all right. I'm here."

Never, never, though he should live to be a hundred, could Rube Carter forget those magical, unexpected words, coming to him as they did in the most awful moment of his young life!

He did not ask himself just then how it had been possible for Kiddie to find him and to penetrate the crowd of excited Indians unnoticed and unhindered. All that he thought of was that Kiddie was here to rescue him from the torturing death from which there had seemed to be no faintest hope of escape.

But even yet escape had not been achieved.

The rising flames were scorching his legs, the flying sparks were stinging his face and neck, the resinous smoke of the pine wood was stifling him, and the madly-gesticulating Redskins were prodding at him with their long spears and striking at him with their tomahawks to see how nearly they could hit him without yet touching him. They prolonged the process of cruelty to increase his mental suffering; but the delay gave Kiddie his chance.

"Cut the rope, Kiddie—cut the rope!" Rube cried, not knowing that Kiddie's sharp knife had already done its work.

Hardly had he spoken, when a strong arm was flung round him, and he was lifted bodily backward beyond reach of the flames and the menacing weapons of torture. His brain reeled as the supporting arm was withdrawn; he stumbled and sank to the ground.

In his stupor he heard a wild yell from the Redskins robbed of their victim. His eyes nipped painfully, but by the light of the leaping flames he could distinguish Kiddie standing at bay above him, with a revolver in each outstretched hand swinging threateningly from side to side as the Indians made a rush towards him.

Believing that Kiddie's life was now in imminent peril, Rube managed to scramble to his knees. He felt instinctively for his gun, forgetting that it had been taken from him.

But Kiddie was not shooting. Were his pistols empty? Rube wondered. He saw the crowd of Redskins fall back with lowered weapons and sullen looks and hoarse grunts of disappointment.

"Best put them guns out of sight now," Rube heard some one advise. He turned and saw the English-speaking medicine man standing at Kiddie's side. "You've managed all right up to now," the same voice continued. "Boy's not much harmed, by the look of him. You pulled him out just in time, though. Another minute and they'd have been at him like a pack of wolves. Hold hard while I go forward and explain to 'em."

He strode off and harangued the Indians in a loud voice of command.

"Who is he, Kiddie?" Rube was curious to know. "Who and what is he?"

"A man of the name of Simon Sprott," Kiddie told him. "Used to be a friend of Gid Birkenshaw's years ago, when Gid was a lone trapper in Colorado."

"Then he ain't a Crow Injun?"

"Well, he is and he isn't," returned Kiddie, helping the boy to his feet. "When Gid knew him at first he was just an Englishman, come out West on a trip of adventure. Then he got mussin' around with the Redskins, married a squaw, and took the blanket. They made him a chief, calling him Short Nose, and when he became too old to lead the braves on the war trail they made him a boss medicine-man. That's about all I know of him. I ran up against him when I was sneakin' into the village on your track, and it was him that put me wise about what they were doin' to you. I guess you'd a narrow squeak, eh?"

"I just had." Rube nodded. "But all the time I kinder felt as you'd turn up, somehow. I gotter 'normous faith in you, Kiddie. I was plumb certain you'd foller on my tracks, though I didn't blaze no trail."

"You blazed it quite enough for me, Rube," Kiddie averred. "I didn't fool around any, searchin' for your dead body at the foot of the cliffs in Lone Wolf Cañon. The sight of the eagles in flight and, afterwards, the signs of Injuns told me all I needed to know. Say, you didn't make an extra good witness for the defence, else you'd have made 'em understand that you weren't the enemy spy they took you for. Pity you never mentioned the name of Gideon Birkenshaw, or of Buckskin Jack, or even of your own father. Simon Sprott would sure have tumbled to your innocence."

"Dare say," acknowledged Rube. "But how in thunder was I ter know as any of 'em c'd understand English? Simon Sprott never let on that he was anythin' but a pure Injun until after I was condemned."

"You ain't hurt any, I hope?" Kiddie inquired.

"Nope. Shins are some scorched. Moccasins an' leggin's are spoilt, an' my eyes are nippin'. Oh, an' they've took my six-shooter, Kiddie. D'you reckon we c'n get it back?"

"Very likely," said Kiddie. "I'll ask Si Sprott. Here he is comin' back."

CHAPTER XVII

Simon Sprott approached them, smiling as Indian medicine men are not supposed to smile.

"You'll put up in my lodge until we can get your own outfit brought along," he said. "You'll both be hungry, after what you've gone through. Indian food, cooked by Indians, isn't at all bad."

He conducted them into his teepee, and Rube Carter was surprised to see how comfortably furnished it was, with a camp bed and washing-stand, a table and two or three chairs, as well as a stove, and even a shelf of books.

Simon Sprott looked at Kiddie in deliberate scrutiny.

"Friend of Gid Birkenshaw's, you tell me?" he said very slowly. "And the son of Buckskin Jack. Well, Gid and me, we was pals years and years ago, trapping up on the head waters of the Platte. Yes, and afterwards, when he'd settled down in his ranch on the Sweetwater, I seem to remember a nipper that he'd bought from an Indian and adopted. Dare say it was yourself. What was the name he'd given you? Little Cayuse, was it?"

"Quite right," answered Kiddie. "That was me, sure. And you mended my wheelbarrow and taught me how to throw the lariat."

"As for Buckskin Jack," continued Sprott, "there never was any one like him. Best all-round scout I've ever known, Red or White; and the truest gentleman. English, too, he was, and that means a lot to me—a lot it means. I'm proud to meet the son of Buckskin Jack. And if there's anything I can do for you, just name it."

"Thank you, Simon," returned Kiddie. "But you've done enough in helping me to rescue young Rube here. We'll stay the night in your camp and then get back to our canoe and home to Sweetwater Bridge."

"What's your all-fired hurry?" questioned Simon. "You'll stay as long as ever you like. It can't be as long as I should like. Stay a while for my sake. Just consider. It's years since I've heard my mother tongue spoken as you speak it, and I'm sore longing to have a chat with a friend who isn't a Crow Indian. Your young partner'd like to stay, if I know anything of boyhood. The adventure would suit him, and to-morrow the Crows are going out on a buffalo hunt. A big herd has been seen, back of Washakee Peak."

Kiddie glanced towards Rube.

"Like to go buffalo huntin', Rube?" he asked.

"Wouldn't I just!" Rube answered. "But you'll come, too, won't you?"

"Oh, yes," Kiddie agreed.

Rube was so hungry after his long fast that he considered the Indian food quite delicious, and he ate heartily.

After the meal he wandered out of the lodge; but there was little for him to see except the dark shapes of the wigwams and here and there a group of silent Indians seated round their camp fire; and so he returned and took comfortable refuge between the blankets and buffalo robes provided for him by one of Simon Sprott's attendant braves.

Before he fell asleep, however, he listened to the conversation between Kiddie and their host.

"He's got spies everywhere," Simon was saying. "Yes, even among the trappers, even working among the cowboys on the ranches. Many of the cowboys themselves are in his pay, stealing horses for him from the outlying corrals, or smuggling firearms into his reservation. For, as a rule, he gets others to do his dirty work for him. Naturally, we've got scouts as well as he, and we're not ignorant of his strength or his intentions."

Rube knew by now that it was of Broken Feather that they were speaking.

"If all I've heard of him is true," said Kiddie, "he has as strong a following as any chief within a week's ride. As for his intentions, I don't pretend to have any special knowledge, excepting that he's a man who thinks a tremendous lot of himself and has the ambition to be a great military genius like Sitting Bull or Red Cloud."

"That's just the point," resumed Simon Sprott. "And to achieve his ambition, he's aiming at conquering the smaller tribes, one by one—Crows, Blackfeet, Arapahoes, Pawnees. But the Crows first of all. Any day he may lead his army on the war trail against us, here in the Falling Water Reserve."

"If you're certain of that, why not be the first to attack?" suggested Kiddie. "You could take him by surprise."

Short Nose grunted deep in his throat and shook his head.

"Unfortunately," he answered, "the Crows have no warrior capable of planning and carrying out such an enterprise. It'll be as much as we can do to defend our village when we ourselves are attacked. Now, if Buckskin Jack were here——!"

There was a long spell of silence in the lodge, broken only by the crackling of the fire. Rube had closed his heavy eyes when he again heard Kiddie's voice.

"Tell me this, Simon," said Kiddie, seeming to change the subject from warfare to hunting. "Exactly how did you learn of that herd of buffalo, back of Washakee Peak?"

Simon Sprott was meditatively puffing at his tobacco pipe; but he paused to answer—

"Word was brought in by one of our scouts."

"Did that scout see the herd with his own eyes?" Kiddie pursued.

"Well, no; I believe not," Simon answered absently. "A lone trapper on Box Elder Creek gave him the information; said it was the biggest herd seen on these hunting grounds for many summers back."

"Trapper might have been one of Broken Feather's spies," Kiddie suggested very quietly.

"Eh?" Simon Sprott looked up sharply and blew a long, slow jet of smoke from his lips.

"It's possible," he acknowledged; "quite possible, but not just likely. And why should the trapper, if he was a spy, tell the scout that the buffalo were there, and even recommend the hunt?"

"Yes, why?" Kiddie asked. "For my own part, I don't believe that there's a herd of buffalo within a hundred miles of Washakee Peak. I guess the trapper had his instructions to tell that story, just to get your warriors out on the buffalo trail, leaving your village undefended for Broken Feather to make his unopposed attack upon it in your absence."

Simon Sprott stared at Kiddie in amazement.

"That's cute," he said, "very cute indeed of you to hit upon such an idea. It's just the sort of idea that Buckskin Jack himself might have sprung out of that wonderful brain of his. I believe you're right. Broken Feather would do a cunning thing like that. It's quite in his line. Nothing more likely. In any case, the Crows are going to alter their programme. All preparations for the buffalo surround are complete. You and friend Rube there were to have had a great time. But that buffalo hunt isn't going to come off."

When Rube Carter awoke the following morning he found himself alone in the teepee, and might have believed himself to be back in Kiddie's camp on Sweetwater Lake but for the medley of sounds that came to him through the open door-flap.

He heard the neighing of horses, the barking of dogs, and the high-pitched voices of squaws and children.

He listened sleepily for a while. Just outside of the lodge a party of young braves were quarrelling for possession of a cooking-pot.

"For people who have the reputation of bein' silent, Injuns are capable of makin' a heap of noise," Rube said to himself, "I never heard such a racket in all my days."

He sat up and reached for his moccasins, and was surprised to find his lost fur cap, with the bedraggled eagle's feathers in it, lying beside them. His revolver also had been restored to him.

He was examining the injury done by the fire to his leggings and moccasins when he heard Kiddie's voice from outside raised almost to a shout of command, as if he were drilling a company of soldiers. Rube flung his blankets aside and crept across the floor to look out. What he saw astonished him greatly.

The wide open space in front of the chief's lodge was now crowded with mounted Indians, in full war paint, drawn up in regular ranks. Apart from them, and halted in a group facing them, were Falling Water and his principal warriors, all wearing their feathered war bonnets and armed with rifles, clubs, and tomahawks.

Falling Water, mounted on a fine black mustang, carried his great staff of high office, decorated with coloured beads and fringed with scalp-locks. He looked very magnificent and dignified, and younger than Rube had at first supposed him to be.

But it was the rider at the chief's side—a rider astride of a lank, piebald prairie pony—who arrested Rube's closest attention. There were but two feathers in his simple war bonnet, which was partly hidden by his blue-and-white blanket. His back was towards Rube, who could not see his face or know if it was painted with vermilion, but by his seat on horseback and the way he held himself Rube instantly knew that it was Kiddie.

Kiddie was giving commands to the Crows in their own language. Clearly he had been placed in authority over them as their general and field-marshal—he who, hardly twelve hours before, had crept

secretly into their camp, an unknown trespasser!

Rube Carter marvelled at the strangeness of the situation, though not for an instant did he doubt Kiddie's fitness and ability. In Rube's estimation there was nothing great and honourable that Kiddie was incapable of doing.

Rube wanted to go up to Kiddie now and ask him how this transformation had all come about; but he did not dare. Instead, he stood watching Kiddie riding slowly along the files, inspecting them, followed by Falling Water, Short Nose, and the principal warriors.

It was not until after Rube had washed and made himself tidy that he had a chance of speaking with Kiddie. They were then at breakfast, or what passed for breakfast in the Indian encampment. As a matter of fact, it was an enormous feast that was served to them, of buffalo steak, beaver tail, prairie chicken, stewed berries, and great quantities of rich new milk, with all the other luxuries that the attentive Crows could lavish upon them.

"Looks as if they'd bin turnin' you into a boss war chief, Kiddie," Rube began. "Some sudden on their part, ain't it?"

"Well, yes," returned Kiddie, "it's certainly sudden, seeing that I'm just a stranger among 'em. But you see, it's this way. After you'd gone to sleep last night, one of Falling Water's scouts came in, reportin' that the story of the herd of buffalos was all a made-up affair. He'd been on a big scout round about the Broken Feather Agency, and he was able to prove that Broken Feather and his warriors and braves were busy gettin' ready to come out on the war-path against the Crows. The expedition's timed to start so as to be right here while the Crows are out huntin' imaginary buffaloes."

"Just your own idea," commented Rube, "the same idea to a tick! And so the Crows are fixin' up things to be ready for the defence, I conclude?"

"Not exactly that," Kiddie corrected. "They're goin' ter strike the first blow by makin' a surprise attack on the Sioux. They're not figurin' to wait until Broken Feather makes the assault."

"But then," Rube objected, "didn't Short Nose—otherwise Simon Sprott—say last night that the Crows hadn't a warrior capable of undertakin' such an expedition?"

"Seems he's changed his mind," said Kiddie.

Rube scratched the back of his ear, which was his habit when thinking deeply.

"Somethin' new, eh, t' get a English nobleman ter lead a band of painted Redskins on the war-path?" he said. "Though I reckon you c'n do it if anyone can. 'Tain't as if you was a tenderfoot at the business."

"Feel inclined to come along with us, Rube?" Kiddie casually inquired. "You c'n keep in the rear, you know."

"I shall keep right back in the rear if that's where you are goin' t' be yourself, Kiddie," returned Rube. "I'm figurin' t' be alongside o' you wherever you are. When d' we make a start?"

"As soon as you're ready," Kiddie intimated, "for I see you're determined to be with us. I oughtn't to allow you; but I think you may be of use, and if you come through it all right it will be a great experience for you. I've found a good pony for you and an apology for a saddle. Your own rifle would have been handy if you'd brought it. The Crows have none light enough. Don't neglect to take cartridges for your six-shooter. And if the battle comes off, don't expect me t' be looking after you all the time."

"I understand," Rube acquiesced. "You've gotter concentrate on defeatin' Broken Feather, and you mustn't be worried thinkin' of my safety. Well, all right. I shall not interfere with you any."

Rube was certainly determined to be present in the expected battle. He considered it a more than ample substitute for the mythical buffalo hunt.

He did not speak with Kiddie again for many hours. But he saw him frequently, riding at the head of the long procession of mounted Indians.

The Crows were divided into three armies—the first commanded by Kiddie, the second by Falling Water, and the third by Short Nose. They rode in single file, with scouts in front and rear and on either flank. Towards noon there was a halt on the banks of Poison Spider Creek, and the march had not yet been renewed when Kiddie sent Rube out alone to scout for possible signs of the enemy outposts.

Rube had not gone many miles in advance when on crossing the ridge of a range of foothills he looked down upon the wide rolling prairie beyond and saw a vast, well-ordered army of the Sioux, moving very quickly and in numbers far surpassing the forces of the Crows, whom it was evident they had come out to meet.

Making a rapid calculation of their strength, Rube rode back at top speed and reported his significant discovery to Kiddie.

This unexpected news that the enemy were out of their reservation and making a forced march towards Falling Water's encampment caused an entire change of plan. The coming conflict was not to be a mere surprise attack on Broken Feather's village, but a pitched battle in the open. Kiddie, however, was equal to the occasion.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BATTLE OF POISON-SPIDER CREEK

Rube Carter, who was the only person in Falling Water's army who had actually seen the approaching enemy, and who knew beyond a doubt how greatly the Sioux outnumbered the Crows, had the impression that Kiddie must now decide either to beat a hasty retreat, and thus avoid the battle, or else advance and suffer an inevitable defeat.

There was a hurried council of war, in which Kiddie appeared to hold the ruling influence; but Rube did not know the result of the conference. Neither did he pretend to have an opinion of his own, as to what the Crows had best do. He was satisfied to watch Kiddie. But it was with relief that he presently saw all three of Falling Water's divisions retiring over the level prairie ground, which they had recently quitted, beside Poison Spider Creek.

He supposed that they were returning to defend their wigwams. But they were not making for the fording place by which they had previously crossed the creek.

When the creek was reached there was a halt, and a large section of the army disappeared into ambush, while the remainder rearranged their ranks and examined their ponies and their weapons.

Rube was perplexed. Were they going to engage the enemy after all?

Scouts who had been sent out returned with the report that the enemy was quickly advancing through a gap in the foothills. They would soon appear in sight.

Leaving his reserves in ambush, Kiddie now led his own division slowly forward across the plain, the armies of Falling Water and Short Nose forming his right and left wings, well in his rear.

He had covered hardly half the distance between the creek and the near foothills when the Sioux appeared, emerging like a huge serpent through the gap. They were riding in single file, across the Crows' line of march, clearly with the purpose of surrounding them and cutting them off from the ford. They continued in a straight, unbending column, but were still beyond range, when suddenly the Crows halted, turned right about face, and retired once again in the direction of the creek, apparently unwilling to engage so formidable an enemy.

For the first time in his experience Rube Carter suspected Kiddie of cowardice, or at least of indecision. If he were not meaning to fight, why had he not retreated earlier, while there was time to escape?

To the Sioux, as well as to Rube Carter, it must have appeared that Falling Water was owning himself defeated before even a blow had been struck.

Kiddie, however, was but following out his own plan of campaign. He was manoeuvring his forces for position. While appearing to be in retreat, he was keeping his divisions in perfect order, and at the same time alluring the Sioux towards that part of the plain which he had chosen for his battle ground. His reserves had already secured possession of the ford, and they were ready to join in the battle if their support should be needed.

The crucial moment came when the leading warriors of the Sioux' long column were level with the rear of Kiddie's division.

Then, as by a pre-arranged plan of action, the Crows wheeled round to a new position, the three divisions joining and forming an unbroken semi-circle confronting the Sioux, and completely heading them off from the ford to which they had been advancing.

So quickly and so accurately was the manoeuvre performed, that the Sioux might well have been astounded. The result of it was that the Crows had concentrated the whole of their strength against less than half the forces of their enemy, whose files from the centre back to the rear were wholly out of action.

Urging their ponies to the full gallop, the Crows charged down upon the Sioux like a hurricane, assailing them with bullets and arrows as they swept into close contact.

The Sioux were not prepared for this sudden change of front, but they made the best of the situation by a quick turn, which brought them face to face with the attacking hordes, while the rear of

their long column, issuing from the gap in the hills, broke off from the centre, with the purpose of surrounding the Crows' third division.

Falling Water's army might thus have been adroitly caught between two fires, had it not been for Kiddie's forethought in sending his reserves to the support of his right wing. It accordingly followed that, while numerically the inferior force, the Crows continued to hold the great advantage they had gained by concentrating their strength upon a weak point at the most fitting moment.

Rube Carter saw but little of the battle. He was not called upon to engage in the actual fighting. Instead, he acted as a messenger, or dispatch rider.

Just as the turning movement was being made, Kiddie sent him to the rear to order the reserves to break cover, and advance across the plain to the support of Short Nose. This order he delivered by means of signs and gestures, which were well understood and very promptly obeyed.

Rube then rode back to a spot where Kiddie had told him to wait, and it was from here that he watched as much as could be seen of the progress of the battle.

When the two conflicting sides were apart, he could realize the meaning of all they did. He saw the Crows advancing to surround the van of their enemy; he saw the Sioux turn sharply to confront them. And then, with a loud thudding of horses' hoofs, the two contending armies rushed one at the other in a rising cloud of prairie dust.

There was a crackle of rifle fire, mingled with thrilling war-cries and wild, barbaric yells. Arrows flew from side to side, making a visible arch between.

As the rifle fire lessened at close quarters the yells and shouts grew louder and fiercer. And now Rube lost all power of distinguishing one side from the other, for it was all one vast mass of horses and men, swaying this way and that in wild confusion.

It seemed to Rube that even the horses were fighting, for they were rearing and plunging, kicking and biting, as they forced themselves through the crowd. Many of them fell, many were riderless. Some of them had two or even three Indians mounted on their backs, wielding their clubs and tomahawks.

Through the dust and powder-smoke Rube could see that the ground was thickly strewn with killed and wounded horses and men. There were wide gaps in what had been the ranks, but no order was kept, and the combatants broke off into dense groups. Here and there a chief or important warrior would draw off his section, rallying and forming them into line for a new attack, again to become mixed up in a grand scrimmage.

Rube could distinguish the chiefs by their feathered war bonnets, and amongst them he thought he recognized the young chief Broken Feather riding to and fro in the rear of his warriors as if urging them to new movements or increased effort.

Kiddie was not so easily to be distinguished, as he wore only a very simple head-dress, but Rube, knowing him by his piebald prairie pony, saw him once or twice in the forefront of the battle, and again leading a retirement to take up a fresh position on the field where the fighting was most severe.

Then for a long time there was no sign of Kiddie, and Rube began to fear that he had been killed or seriously wounded. So much did this fear oppress him that he resolved to risk his own safety by riding forward to make a search. He knew that Kiddie's main object in posting him here where he waited was to keep him out of danger. But what if Kiddie himself were in danger, or badly wounded, and needed help?

Rube Carter had often said that what he wanted more than anything else was to be of vital help to Kiddie in some situation of great peril, and the idea that such a situation was now at hand so took possession of him that caution and obedience alike were put aside. With the impulsive recklessness of boyhood, he started off to search for Kiddie in the very midst of the fighting. He had only the very vaguest notion of where Kiddie might be. He was aiming at getting to the place where he had last seen him riding at the head of a large company of the Crows to encounter an equally large company of the Sioux. The fighting at this point had now ceased, and the ground was covered with dead and dying horses and fallen warriors.

Rube did not reflect that his mount was a trained Indian war-horse, accustomed to the excitement of battle, and when he tugged and pulled at the halter rein to make the pony stop and let him dismount to go on foot amongst the wounded, the animal tossed its mane and galloped on and on to join a troop of its fellows charging across the battle front.

All Rube's efforts to keep out of the actual fighting were useless. Wholly against his will he was carried into it. Arrows and spears were flying about his head; bullets hummed past him; he saw tomahawks raised aloft to strike at him.

Suddenly the horse immediately in front of him staggered and rolled over. Rube's own mount reared and swerved to clear the obstacle. His knees lost their grip, and he was thrown to the ground.

The long halter rope, wound round his wrist, almost wrenched out his arm. He was dragged for a little distance, but his hand was open, and the loops of the lariat uncoiled themselves as the horse

plunged onward, leaving him behind.

The fighting continued round about him for a while, but the Crows pressed their enemies back and back until none remained excepting those who had lost their horses; and these, instead of following the battle on foot, went among the killed and wounded collecting scalp locks.

Some of the braves seized riderless ponies, leapt on their backs, and galloped off to join the throng. Rube also looked round in search of a pony that might carry him back to the rear. There was one not many yards away, tugging at the halter that held it.

Rube rose to his knees, only to realize that in his fall he had injured his hip, and could not even crawl. How, then, could he hope to mount a strange horse without help?

He was still on his knees, trying to rise to his feet, when something like the sting of a whip struck his right cheek and ear. He put up his hand to his face, and drew it away wet and stained. The warm crimson moisture trickled down his neck, and dripped from his chin. He opened and shut his mouth.

"Gee!" he exclaimed ruefully. "Seems I'm wounded. Jaw ain't put outer gear, though. Might ha' bin worse—heaps worse."

"Lie down flat, Rube! Lie down flat!"

It was Kiddie's voice. Rube instinctively obeyed the command, without even looking round to see where the voice had come from. But as he prostrated himself, he glanced forward and saw quite near to him a young Sioux chief mounted on a fine black horse, and wearing a magnificent feathered war-bonnet.

It was Broken Feather.

The chief was aiming with his revolver at a mark beyond where Rube lay. He pressed the trigger; but the chambers were empty, the cartridges all spent; and when no shot followed, he gripped the gun by its muzzle end, flung back his arm, and threw the weapon from him with all his force.

Rube had turned his head to look back over his shoulder, and now, just at the moment when the weapon was thrown, he saw Kiddie stretch out his hand and adroitly catch it, as he might have caught a cricket ball. Kiddie, still riding the same lank, piebald prairie pony; still unhurt in the battle; still cool and self-contained.

"So it's you—you—that have been leading these Crows against me?" snarled Broken Feather, with an angry scowl.

"Well," returned Kiddie, dropping the chief's revolver and drawing back his hand under his blanket; "you may take it that way if you choose. It seems I'm here. Anyhow, I guess you're pretty well beaten this time."

Broken Feather had seized the haft of his tomahawk, and was holding his bridle rein ready to make a desperate charge forward to a hand to hand encounter.

But Kiddie had foreseen his intention.

"Steady, there, steady!" he cried, quickly withdrawing his hand and levelling his fully-loaded six-shooter at a point between Broken Feather's eyes. "Put up your hands! You can't get at me before my bullet reaches you, see?"

For many moments Broken Feather stared at the shining ring of steel in front of Kiddie's steadily held hand. He saw Kiddie's finger twitching against the trigger, and knew for a certainty that Kiddie would not hesitate to shoot if his command were disobeyed.

"Put up your hands," Kiddie reiterated.

Broken Feather's tomahawk was now hanging by its thong from his wrist. Slowly and very reluctantly he raised his two empty hands above his head.

"Right," Kiddie nodded, lowering his weapon, but still keeping it turned in the same direction. "You've saved your precious life. And now you'd best call off your warriors before there's any more blood spilt. D'you understand? Put an end to this needless battle, and quit right away, with what's left of your army. You're tryin' to fly a bit too high, my man. But you're not made big enough. Give up tryin'. Go back to your reservation, and try to live a decent, honourable life of peace and usefulness."

Broken Feather drew down his hands, and folded his arms across his chest, sitting very upright astride of his horse.

"I have not asked advice from you, Lord St. Olave," he said.

"It isn't advice I'm giving you," returned Kiddie. "It's a command. Draw off your warriors right now, and quit, while you have the chance."

He again raised his weapon, and urged his pony a few steps nearer. But Broken Feather did not

wait. Seizing his bridle, he pulled his mustang round and galloped away.

Kiddie then advanced to where Rube Carter was lying. He dismounted.

"Why did you let him off like that, Kiddie?" Rube asked, one hand up to his wounded cheek. "You might have shot him easy. Why don't you go after him?"

"What?" said Kiddie, going down on his knees; "and leave you here, without help? Not likely. My! you do look pretty, with all that blood about your face. Take away your hand, and let's have a look at where you're hurt. What's become of your pony?"

"Dunno," Rube answered feebly. "I was thrown, an' he ran off on his own. I've hurt my hip some. Don't think I c'n walk. Wound on my cheek ain't much, is it, Kiddie?"

"Nothing serious," Kiddie told him, taking out his pocket case. "A strip or two of stickin' plaster 'll fix it up till we get home. Bullet went very near your eye, though. Say, how d'you happen to be here? I expected to find you away back there, where I told you to wait. Got tired of waitin', I guess."

"Don't blame me, Kiddie; I didn't think you really wanted me ter stop thar. An' when the fightin' was at its worst, I got anxious about you; figured as you might be badly wounded an' needin' help, or—or even that you might be killed. So I came along ter search for you, see?"

"Yes, Rube, I see," nodded Kiddie. "And instead of you finding me, it was I who found you, eh? Well, I'm real sorry to disappoint you, but it can't be helped."

"No; but it's allus the same," Rube regretted. "It's allus you that helps me. How many times have you saved my life since we come out on this yer trip? I never get half a chance to save yours. Never!"

"Keep your face still, can't you?" ordered Kiddie. "How d'you expect me ter fix up this cut on your cheek if you keep on waggin' your jaw?"

He was not long over the operation of getting a pad of lint on the wound and binding a rough bandage round Rube's head. Then he stood up.

"Now let me give you a leg up on to my pony," he said.

"What about yourself?" objected Rube. "Ain't yer goin' to do any more fightin'? The battle ain't finished yet."

"Fightin'?" repeated Kiddie. "Oh, no; not now. I'm going to take you back to the rear. Besides, it wouldn't be at all gentlemanly if I were to continue fightin' after having told Broken Feather that he must put an end to it all."

He stopped and lifted Rube bodily from the ground, planting him securely astride the piebald pony, which he led away across ground that was thickly strewn with dead and wounded Indians and horses. Rube's injured hip was exceedingly painful; every movement of the pony gave him a new twinge; but he bore the pain stoically, not wishing to let Kiddie know how much he was hurt.

Near the fording place they came to a halt. Rube was left lying on a blanket while Kiddie, re-mounting the piebald, rode back to the battlefield to put a stop to all scalping and mutilating and looting, to attend to the wounded, and to draw off the Crows as Broken Feather had drawn off the Sioux.

Amongst the dead and wounded Crows he discovered Simon Sprott kneeling at the side of the chief Falling Water, whose body had been pierced by a dozen arrows.

"Poor old Falling Water's done in, Little Cayuse," Simon announced. "He's gone right away to the Happy Hunting Grounds. But I guess he'd a big thought for you just before he started on the Long Trail. Asked me to thank you for leading the Crows to victory, he did."

CHAPTER XIX

KIDDIE'S ANSWER

It was late in the evening when the surviving Crows arrived in their village. Rejoicings over their victory were mingled with lamentations over the death of their chief—ceremonies in which neither Kiddie nor Rube took any personal interest.

They were both lying very weary and silent on a pile of soft buffalo robes within their teepee, when Simon Sprott entered, accompanied by several of the warriors and counsellors.

"We've been having a big talk," began Simon Sprott. "We've lost our chief, and the Crows have

elected a successor. Their choice of Little Cayuse was quickly made." He saluted Kiddie. "And we're hoping you won't refuse."

Kiddie looked puzzled. He glanced round at Rube.

"Well?" said Rube. "Chief of the Crow nation. That's what they're offerin' you. Why don't you answer?"

Kiddie stood irresolute.

"Why don't you answer?" Rube repeated, impressed by the importance of the occasion. He was very much interested in the deputation of Indians waiting so patiently for Kiddie's decision.

Kiddie still looked puzzled, as if he had difficulty in making up his mind concerning the offer that had been made to him to become the head chief and lawman of the Crow nation.

"There's no need for you to hurry, Little Cayuse," said Simon Sprott. "Take your own time to consider the proposition. Think about it deeply, all round, from all sides. The Crows will wait. They will leave you alone with your own thoughts. They do not ask for your answer right now. They would wish you to sleep upon it. When the sun has risen over Washakee Peak they will come again into the wigwam of Little Cayuse. He will then give them his answer. If it is Yes, they will rejoice; all the Crow nation will be glad. If it is No, their hearts will be heavy. For Little Cayuse alone is the leader they would follow and obey. I have spoken. What I have said is said by all the Crows."

He turned to his companion medicine men and warriors, and told them what he had said. Then he took from one of them a magnificent war bonnet of white eagles' plumes, and from another a robe of soft doeskin adorned with beautiful designs in coloured beads and porcupine quills and needlework in brilliant silk. From a third he took a chief's staff of office, and from a fourth a pair of richly-decorated moccasins. All these he spread with great ceremony at Kiddie's feet, evidently expecting him to wear them when next he should appear in public.

Kiddie bowed to them as the counsellors filed slowly out of the lodge. When they had closed the door-flap behind them he turned round to Rube Carter.

"Feelin' better now, Rube?" he asked. "I'll dress that cut on your cheek again, 'fore you go to sleep. Dunno about your hip. Is it painin' you?"

"Some," Rube answered. "But don't you worry. I ain't thinkin' about my wounds. I'm thinkin' about you. What's the matter with that head-dress? Ain't you goin' ter put it on, and lemme see how you look in it? What about a dress rehearsal?"

Kiddie shook his head.

"Gee!" exclaimed Rube. "Ain't you figurin' ter take it on, then—this boss chieftainship that they've offered you?"

"Not I," said Kiddie, very decisively.

"Made up your mind against it?"

"Yes. I'd made up my mind before Short Nose began to speak. I'd guessed what was coming."

"Um!" murmured Rube. "Dunno whether t' be glad or sorry. Why didn't you tell 'em, Kiddie?"

"Because they wouldn't have liked it if I'd said No right at once. Much better to let them suppose that I'm hesitatin', wonderin' over it, weighin' the proposition in a balance. Why, Rube, you didn't think for a moment that I would take it on, did you?"

Rube shrugged his shoulders.

"You might have done what Broken Feather's tryin' to do," said Rube. "You might have made yourself as great a chief as Red Cloud or Sitting Bull. Besides, it's a biggish thing ter be a Injun chief. Next door t' bein' a king."

Kiddie smiled.

"I might have been an Injun chief years an' years ago," he remarked. "But my ambitions don't lie in that direction. See?"

"Of course," Rube nodded. "I was forgettin' that you're a English nobleman, with a seat in the House of Lords. I'm allus forgettin' that. But what d'you mean t' do, Kiddie—now, I mean? Ain't you goin' ter stop here just for a week or two, an' see what it feels like t' be a Injun chief?"

"No." Kiddie turned to his blankets. He was very tired. "No," he repeated. "I'm goin' to stay until you're well enough to be moved. Then we shall find the canoe and our outfit, and go right back home to Sweetwater Bridge."

"Trip comin' to an abrupt conclusion, eh?" queried Rube.

"That's about the size of it," nodded Kiddie. "The fine weather won't hold out much longer, and I guess there's a whole heap of letters waitin' for me to answer 'em."

"Well, anyhow, we've seen an' done a good deal, an' had a few adventures," Rube concluded, holding himself so that Kiddie might apply a fresh pad of lint and a new bandage to his wounded cheek.

Kiddie left the head-dress and other garments where Simon Sprott had placed them. But in the early morning Rube Carter awoke to see him wearing the doeskin robe and moccasins, and in the act of covering his head with the great war bonnet.

"What, changed your mind?" cried Rube. "Goin' ter be a chief after all?"

Kiddie did not answer. He had got the two long feathered streamers of the head-dress twisted behind his back, and was trying to disentangle without injuring them.

"Get dressed and go outside to watch the ceremony," he ordered. "There's a couch of buffalo robes near the door, and you won't need to limp very far."

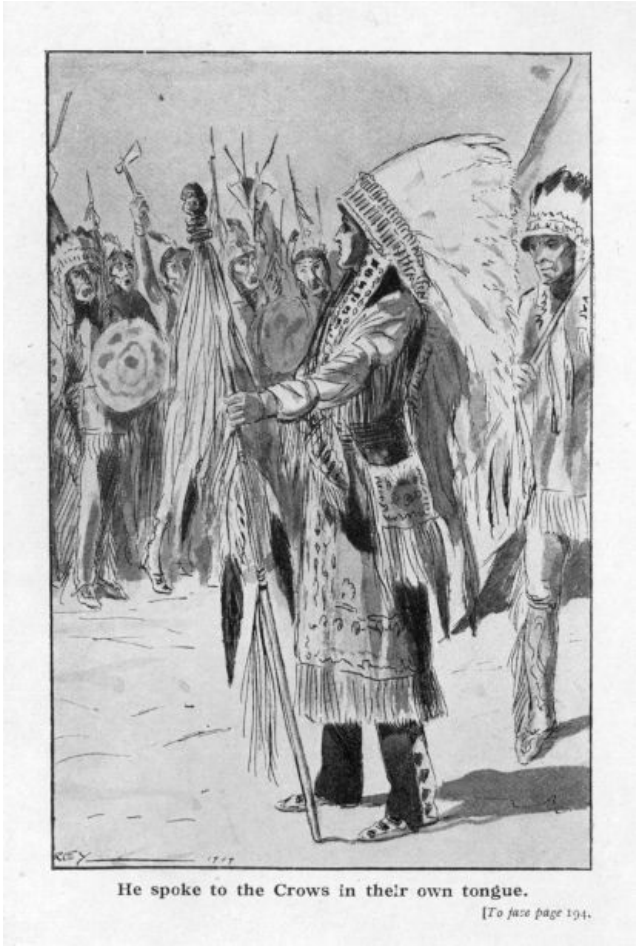
When Rube went out, he found the open space in front of the principal lodges crowded with warriors and braves. They were all on foot, but half a dozen of them held as many chosen war horses, which were to be presented to the new chief. The war-chiefs and medicine men were seated by the totem pole in a half-circle, facing the crowd.

Suddenly they rose to their feet, and bowed as Kiddie strode forth from his lodge, looking extremely tall and dignified and handsome in his picturesque Indian dress.

Murmurs of admiration ran through the throng of waiting braves. Drums were beaten and minstrels gang a weird, crooning chant as he advanced.

Rube's gaze was fastened upon Kiddie. He would not have understood, even if he had listened to what Simon Sprott said to the Crows. He supposed that it was merely a public declaration of the election of Little Cayuse as successor to Falling Water. For at the close of Simon's speech there was a prolonged hubbub of acclamation.

Kiddie then strode forward, with his left hand clasping the staff of office, the morning sunlight shining on his face and on the pure white plumes of his magnificent head-dress. He spoke to the Crows in their own tongue, in a clear, loud voice.



He spoke to the Crows in their own tongue.

[To face page 194.

He spoke to the Crows in their own tongue.

"Warriors, braves," he said, "Little Cayuse is proud that the Crows have asked him to be their war chief. The Crows are a mighty nation, rich in horses and in buffalo robes. They love peace, but they do

not fear war. It is a great thing to be their chief, to make their laws, to lead them in battle. Little Cayuse is glad that they think him worthy to take the place of Falling Water. He has searched his heart for his answer. His thoughts have been long; but he has reached the end of them. They have been deep; but he has seen through them as through clear water. He has decided. His medicine has told him that it is not for Little Cayuse to be the chief of the Crow nation. He is not a Crow Indian. He is not of their blood. His medicine is not their medicine, or his totem their totem. He is a stranger among them. As a stranger he came. As a stranger he will go away. I have spoken."

Then slowly he removed his war bonnet, put aside his staff, and began to untie the thongs of his doeskin shirt.

"Ah!" cried Simon Sprott, stepping forward, and speaking in English. "I guessed it would be that way. But hold hard. Don't take off your robes. They're yours, and you're still a chief. There's no going back on it. You've been elected. Naturally you don't feel like living the rest of your days amongst a tribe of Redskins. I don't wonder at it. There's a way out, however. The Crows are disappointed. Their hearts 'll be heavy for many a long day. But they'll understand. And if you don't see your way to doing what they want, you'll at least consent to being what you might call an honorary chief. Eh? How'll that suit?"

Kiddie willingly agreed to this arrangement, and accordingly he again wore the feathered head-dress and duly acted his part in the ceremonies connected with his initiation.

CHAPTER XX

FOUL PLAY

"Now, as you're here, Kiddie, an' we're all so comfortable, an' so interested in all you've got ter tell us 'bout this yer campin' trip, what d'yer say ter stoppin' the night along of us?"

Kiddie looked across at Gideon Birkenshaw.

"Dunno, Gid," he answered lightly. "Only I was hankerin' to go down an' have a look at the cabin."

"Cabin's all right," objected Gideon. "Cabin won't run away. What's the good of goin' down thar, a cold dark night like this? Better by far wait till mornin', an' see it by daylight. Rooms haven't bin dusted, beds haven't bin aired, fires ain't lighted. Supper 'll be ready soon, an', say, thar's a great pile o' letters lyin' waitin' for you on the window ledge back of you."

Kiddie turned and glanced at the formidable pile, but he did not move to open any of the letters.

"Oh, all right, Gid," he said, flinging a leg over the arm of the easy-chair in which he was sitting. "I'll stay. Of course I'll stay."

He had brought the canoe ashore in the creek at Grizzly Notch, instead of at his own landing-place nearer the cabin. Rube's injured leg was still painful, and he had to be helped up the steep trail to Birkenshaw's camp. So Kiddie had not yet visited his wood-land retreat.

There was a large party of them at supper. In addition to Abe Harum, Tom Lippincott and Jake Paterson, Sheriff Blagg had dropped in on his way home down the trail from Three Crossings, where he had been to look at a bunch of horses. During the meal Kiddie was very quiet. It was Rube Carter who did most of the talking, and who told them of the battle of Poison Spider Creek and of Kiddie's election as chief of the Crows.

"I ain't any surprised at Kiddie's refusin' ter take on the chief business," commented Gideon.

"Not but what he'd make a tip-top Injun chief," added Isa Blagg. "But I'm figurin' as the time's gone by for a lay-out of that sort. Thar ain't liable t' be any more Injun wars an' mutinies, an' thar's no need fer another Sitting Bull. Buffalo huntin's played out, too. Buffaloes are 'most all killed off. All that's left for the Redskin is to turn his mind to agriculture, an' thar's heaps of men c'n teach 'em husbandry better'n Kiddie could."

"That's so, Isa; that's so," agreed Kiddie.

"Say, Sheriff," interposed Rube; "have you gotten any news ter tell us about that Sanson T. Wrangler business that brought you t' our camp t' get Kiddie's advice?"

"No." The sheriff shook his head. "No, it all turned out just as Kiddie said, in every particular."

"And Nick Undrell had nothin' whatever to do with it?" questioned Kiddie.

"No, Nick was innercent that time," returned Isa. "Nick's been keepin' on the straight trail since that occasion when you'd a talk with him, I'm told, however, that he's broken out again—gamblin',

drinkin', an' cavortin' around with the old gang."

"Which reminds me," said Abe Harum. "Nick Undrell's bin seen prowlin' around this yer camp a good deal lately—since you've bin away on your trip, Kiddie. I'm kind o' suspicious that he ain't spying around for no good. Seems he's bin making friends with that big dog, too."

"With Sheila?" Kiddie started upright in his seat. "By the way, where is she? I haven't seen or heard her since we came back. I wonder she hasn't discovered that we're here. Where is she?"

"Oh, the hound's all right," Abe Harum assured him. "Guess she's asleep in her kennel. Pass that tobacco jar, Rube."

Kiddie had a profound faith in his deerhound's sagacity, and he was more than a little disappointed that she had not yet discovered his presence in the camp.

He did not again refer to her absence that night, assuming that the hound could hardly have scented him passing in the canoe, or heard him landing so far away from the cabin as Grizzly Notch. But when he went to bed he began to wonder anew. He stood at the open window, listening, hoping to hear her bark. Hearing no sound but the whispering of the wind in the trees, he got his feet on a chair and leant out. He whistled, a long shrill whistle.

Rube Carter was already asleep in the same room. The whistle awoke him.

"What you whistlin' that way for?" Rube asked in alarm. "Shanty ain't afire, is it?"

"I'm whistling for Sheila," Kiddie told him. "Lie quiet while I listen if she answers."

"She won't hear you all this way off," said Rube. "Wind's against you."

"So it is," laughed Kiddie, stepping down from the chair. "Never mind! I shall see her in the morning. Sorry I disturbed you. Good night."

During their camping trip Kiddie and Rube had accustomed themselves to early rising, and on the following morning they were out and about before the rest of the household.

Kiddie looked at some of his letters, and then took his towel and went down to the creek for his morning swim, leaving Rube to help to get the breakfast ready. Kiddie returned looking astonishingly fresh and clean.

At the end of the meal he sat very silent, watching his companions taking out their pipes. He seemed to be particularly interested in Abe Harum, who was feeling in one pocket after another.

"Lost your pipe, Abe?" Kiddie inquired, thrusting a hand into his own side pocket.

"No," Abe answered. "I got it in my hand. I was feelin' for my matches."

"Oh, then," returned Kiddie, withdrawing his hand and producing a briar, "this ain't yours that I found?"

Abe looked at the pipe and shook his head.

"That ain't mine," he said. "Where'd you pick it up, Kiddie?"

"In the spare canoe, when I went down to have a bathe. I supposed you'd left it there."

"Ain't used that canoe since you've bin away," said Abe. "Nobody's used it, only Isa, when he went out on the lake t' look for you that time. Mebbe it's Isa's."

But the sheriff also shook his head.

"'Tain't mine," he said, glancing at the pipe, which Kiddie had pushed along the table.

Rube Carter took hold of it and began to clear the stale tobacco out of the bowl with the point of his pocket knife.

Kiddie watched Abe Harum striking a match. It was a safety, with a brown head.

"What sort of lucifers are yours, Isa?" Kiddie inquired.

Isa Blagg handed him his box, which was partly open, showing about a dozen matches with pink heads.

"Ah," Kiddie nodded. "Where'd you get 'em?"

"Bought 'em in Brierley's saloon in Laramie," said Isa. "Why?"

"Nothing," replied Kiddie, "only they're the same sort as a broken one I found in the canoe. Chap as left that pipe must have tried to light it in a high wind. There was quite half a dozen dead lucifers lyin' around."

"An' it don't appear as he lighted his pipe after all," added Rube Carter. "It's as dry as a bone, just as if it hadn't been smoked for months and months."

Abe Harum leant over and took a pinch of the tobacco ashes, smelling it.

"Thick twist," he said, "strong enough to pull your head off."

Kiddie had taken three dead matches from his pocket and laid them on the edge of the table in front of Rube.

"See anythin' peculiar 'bout those lucifers, Rube?" he asked.

"Guess I see the same as you do, Kiddie," was Rube's reply. "They're dirty, an' the charcoal's wore off their tips. Looks as if they'd been carried in some chap's pocket."

Kiddie stood up.

"Now let's get along t' the cabin," he said. "Will you come, Sheriff?"

Isa and Rube both accompanied him. They went down to Grizzly Notch, where the still loaded canoe had been left overnight. While Rube was loosening the painter, Kiddie went aside to the spare canoe, and searched about on the bank. Presently he stood still, and called Rube to his side.

"Take stock of that footprint," he began, pointing to the moist ground. "Horseshoe heel, a toecap, an' two rows of hob-nails; one nail missin'. D'ye know anythin'?"

Rube shook his head.

"None of our men wears boots like that," he declared. "But I've a idea I've seen the same impression before—somewhere. Lemme think."

Later, when the three of them were landing at the little pier, close to Kiddie's cabin, Rube said quietly—

"I remember now, Kiddie, 'bout that footprint—or the boot that made it. Nick Undrell wears boots nailed an' clamped like that. An' didn't Abe tell us as Nick had bin seen prowlin' round here? Guess it was Nick's pipe you found in the canoe. What you whistlin' for?"

"The dog," returned Kiddie. "I want to see Sheila. Go an' fetch her, Rube."

As Kiddie reached the cabin, he saw that the door was not locked. It was an inch or two ajar. He pushed it open farther, and strode within. He sniffed. There was a smell of tobacco smoke in the air. The living-room was in confusion, the furniture out of place. He ran into the farther room. Here the confusion was greater. A window-pane was broken, and the window itself was open.

For the next few minutes he went about opening cupboards and drawers. Then he heard footsteps on the veranda, and he went back to the front door.

"Don't come in, Isa! Stay where you are, Rube," he cried. "I've been robbed! Some one's broken in and gone off with all my jewellery, my gold watch, my best revolvers, my cash-box with hundreds of pounds in it. Where's the hound, Rube? Haven't you brought her? Didn't you find her?"

"I—I found her, Kiddie," Rube stammered, "but I couldn't bring her. She's dead! Shot dead."

CHAPTER XXI

THE CLUE OF YELLOW WORSTED

"Sheila—shot dead!" cried Kiddie, staring blankly in front of him.

Rube Carter nodded his head gravely. He saw that Kiddie was deeply moved.

"Come an' have a look at her," he said. "I've not touched her. Say, it ain't any wonder she never answered your whistle last night. Must sure have happened 'fore we come ashore, else we should have heard the shot."

He led the way in among the trees beyond the outhouses. But before he had gone very far he came to an abrupt halt, and pointed.

"The far side of that clump of sage grass," he indicated. "I'm figurin' as the man that shot her stood about here. She was runnin' towards him. His bullet went in at her chest."

"Scout around an' see if you c'n find any footprints," said Kiddie, going forward to examine the dead hound.

Rube and Isa Blagg both searched, but there was no likelihood of their finding any bootmarks on the grass. Rube went back to the path leading up from the landing-place. There had been heavy rain on the previous afternoon, and the ground was still moist enough to show the faint impressions of his own and Kiddie's moccasins, and yet more distinctly the marks of Isa Blagg's heavy boots.

At sight of these he turned sharply round.

"Show me the soles of your boots, Sheriff," he asked; "both of 'em? Ah," he added, on seeing them, "you've got horseshoe heels an' toecaps, too; but only one row of hob-nails. I'm lookin' for the marks of boots with two rows, an' with a nail missin' from the inside row of the left boot. You'd best not walk about more'n you c'n help."

"Rube," said Kiddie, now coming up. "We landed from the canoe last evenin' at a quarter to seven. At what time would Abe Harum be down here?"

"'Bout four o'clock, I guess," Rube answered. "That's his usual time for lockin' up the stables an' givin' Sheila her feed. Abe told us he left the hound in her kennel. But, of course, she c'd get out if she wanted. She'd soon be out if she heard a stranger prowlin' around."

"As no doubt she did," agreed Kiddie.

"Heard him gettin' outer the canoe," Rube conjectured.

"You believe he came along in the canoe, then?" Kiddie interrogated.

"Well," returned Rube, "what about the tobacco pipe an' the footprint? You haven't spotted any more footprints like that one, have you, Kiddie?"

"Only one," Kiddie answered, "close beside the dog."

"H'm!" nodded Rube; "went up to her ter make sure she was dead, eh?"

"And, havin' got the watchdog outer his path," interposed the sheriff, "he went round t' th' side of your cabin, an' broke in by the winder."

"The easiest way," explained Kiddie; "you see the front door was locked, and I had the key. But it's sure he came out by the front door, leavin' it ajar."

"Seems t' have made a big scoop," said the sheriff. "Must have known where you kept all that money an' jewellery. What was it all worth, Kiddie?"

"I don't know yet," returned Kiddie. "I haven't had time to see just what he's taken an' what he has left. It's the dog that I'm troubled about most."

"Well, the first thing to do is ter get on the scoundrel's track," advised Isa Blagg. "An' he's liable to have left some traces round about that broken winder. Let's get there right now an' have a search."

Their nearest way to the cabin was past the front of the stables. Rube Carter limped forward in advance of his two companions, searching the ground as he went. Suddenly he came to a halt.

"Hallo!" he cried. "Come an' look here, Kiddie. What d'you make of this?"

He was staring down at the marks of a horse's shoes, mingled with the impressions of a man's hob-nailed boots.

"Looks like the tracks of your big horse Regent, don't it?" he questioned. "An' the bootmarks are the same's the one near the canoe."

Kiddie did not wait to make conjectures. He strode quickly towards the stables. Before he reached the building he saw that the stable door was open. He went within. His favourite English hunter, Regent, was not there. Its stall was empty.

"Stolen!" he exclaimed. "Rube—Isa, d'ye see? Regent's been stolen!"

"Then we'll sure catch him, whoever he is," said Rube. "He won't ride many miles without Regent bein' seen an' recognized by somebody that knows that hoss is yours."

"Any suspicion who it is?" asked the sheriff.

"What's your own idea, Isa?" Kiddie inquired.

"Well," returned Isa, "seems ter me thar was more'n one of 'em at this yer job. I'm tryin' t' identify th' owner of them boots. I've got a notion; but I ain't goin' ter jump at no rash conclusions this time. Come an' have a look at that broken winder."

Rube had gone back to the footprints, and was intently examining them when Kiddie went up to

him.

"Well," queried Kiddie, always interested in Rube's investigations, whatever they happened to be.

"This is where he mounted," said Rube. "Here's where he stood when he was fastening the cinch of the saddle. Nick ain't such a clever criminal as I thought. I wonder at him leavin' his bootprints scattered about like this. Why didn't he mount from the grass?"

"He was certainly careless," agreed Kiddie. "Looks as if he'd been in a precious hurry to get away with the boodle. You're sure, I suppose, that it was Nick Undrell who wore boots like those that made these marks?"

"What makes me certain," said Rube, "is the missin' nail. I noticed it that day when we were bringin' along your outfit from Laramie. You've got to remember, too, that Nick's bin seen prowlin' around on your property here."

"Go ahead, then, Rube," urged Kiddie. "Follow up your clues, and don't waste time."

Kiddie himself did not appear to take much active interest in tracking the criminal. He knew that a large quantity of his most valuable possessions had been stolen, but he still considered the killing of his dog the most serious injury that had been done to him, and while Isa and Rube made their way towards the cabin, he again went back to where Sheila lay dead.

When he rejoined his two companions they were still searching for tracks outside the cabin.

"Thar wasn't more'n one of 'em at it," Rube told him. "If there'd bin a second, he'd sure have left some sort of clue; but we've found only the one set of bootprints."

"Have you looked near the window?" Kiddie asked.

"Not yet; I'm goin' there right now," replied Rube. "Keep Isa Blagg back, or he'll only get trampin' out the signs with them heavy boots of his. Just let me go alone—see?"

"Right," said Kiddie; "go ahead."

Rube found an empty packing-case against the boards under the window. He mounted on top of it, and examined the window sash and the broken pane of glass, by means of which the catch of the window had been opened. There were finger-marks on the glass, but these did not help him, since he did not yet know what kind of marks Nick Undrell's fingers might have left. What engaged his especial attention was one of the sharp points of splintered glass. He jumped down, and went back to where Kiddie and the sheriff waited.

"Either of you happen ter recollect what kind of a vest or shirt Nick Undrell wears?" he inquired. "Red, ain't it?"

Kiddie shook his head.

"Never saw Nick with red shirt-sleeves," he responded.

"Nor I," added the sheriff. "If you'd said yaller now——"

"Yes," resumed Kiddie; "yellow with black stripes, like a wasp, or an English football player."

"Come along o' me," said Rube.

And he led them both to the window, and pointed up at the broken glass.

"Yes," began Kiddie, "he broke that pane, shoved in his hand, and moved the hasp, then opened the lower sash, and went bodily in."

"All that's as plain as sunlight," said Rube. "But look at that sharp point of glass. Thar's a thread of wool caught on it—yellow wool."

"Ah!" exclaimed Isa Blagg. "Nick Undrell for a certainty!"

"That's how I figure it out," Rube agreed.

"Queer!" mused Kiddie, thrusting a finger and thumb into one of his smaller pockets. "I found a thread of the same yellow wool caught in one of poor Sheila's claws—the middle claw of the left fore foot."

"Dog got at him pretty close," conjectured Isa. "Guess Nick was right up agin her when he fired."

"The hair ain't singed any round about the bullet hole," added Rube.

"That's an important point," nodded Kiddie, turning and leading the way round to the front door of the cabin.

Rube Carter, following close behind him, sniffed, as Kiddie had done, on entering the living-room.

"Ugh," grunted Rube, "somebody bin havin' a smoke in here lately. Smells like a cigar, don't it, Kiddie? 'Tain't pipe tobacco smoke—eh?"

"No," said Kiddie, sniffing like a spaniel after partridge. "It's more like the aroma of one of my Egyptian cigarettes." He glanced up at a shelf. "They're gone, I see."

Rube also looked up at the shelf. He knew where Kiddie kept his stock of cigarettes. He knew also that besides the cigarettes there had been several parcels of pipe tobacco. He observed now that while the cigarettes had been taken, the tobacco remained on the shelf untouched. This fact puzzled him.

Kiddie had already gone into the farther room—his workroom—with Isa Blagg. Isa had taken out his pocket-book and pencil.

"If you'll sing out the things that are missin', Kiddie, I'll make a list of 'em," he said.

"But I can't tell you right off," objected Kiddie. "There's my gold watch and chain, worth fifty guineas, a gold cigarette-case studded with brilliants, five diamond rings, three diamond scarfpins, about five hundred pounds in English and American bank-notes—a whole heap of things are missin', but I'm not goin' ter worry about 'em now. The list can wait."

"But you want t' catch an' punish the thief, don't you?" urged Isa.

"I want to catch and punish the low-down skunk who murdered my deerhound," declared Kiddie, his eyes flashing in the vehemence of his anger.

"Kiddie," said Rube, now entering the room, "I'm some puzzled."

"What about, Rube?" asked Kiddie. "What's your problem?"

"It's this," answered Rube, scratching the back of his ear. "Allowin' that Nick Undrell entered by the broken winder an' carried off the valuables you've just bin figurin' up, why, when he went into th' other room, did he take the cigarettes an' leave the tobacco?"

"That's a very interestin' proposition which has already occurred to me," said Kiddie.

"You see," pursued Rube, "Nick ain't a cigarette smoker. He looks on a cigarette as a childish plaything. He smokes strong tobacco, the same as we found in his pipe. Then why did he take the cigarettes an' leave the tobacco?"

"Dunno," said Kiddie, "unless it was with the idea of leavin' a false clue—a blind. If he had taken the tobacco, I, who know his contempt for cigarettes, might the more readily have identified him."

"Thar's a lot in that notion," Rube acknowledged; "but it's just a bit too cute fer a man like Nick. The galoot that would scatter his footprints around an' leave his pipe in the canoe ain't clever enough ter lay a false trail. Seems to me it's more likely Nick didn't see the tobacco. He was hustlin' to get away with the loot."

"Everything else clear?" Kiddie asked.

"Yes," answered Rube. "I've got the whole thing straightened out."

"Good," nodded Kiddie; "then sit down an' give me your theory, from beginnin' to end."

Isa Blagg appeared to consider it preposterous to appeal for an explanation to a mere boy. Nevertheless, when Rube stated his case the sheriff was constrained to agree with it in every particular.

CHAPTER XXII

RUBE CARTER'S THEORY—AND KIDDIE'S

"To begin with, then," said Rube, "Nick Undrell knew about your valuables—knew that you kept 'em here in your cabin; and he coveted them. He'd made up his mind weeks ago to get hold of 'em. He admitted as much to you yourself, an' he put you off suspectin' him by makin' out that he'd started on a new trail by givin' up drink an' gamblin' and thievin'. That's where he was artful. Then he knew that you'd gone away on a campin'-out trip. We've bin told as he's bin spyin' around here an' tryin' to make friends with the dog.

"Naturally, he didn't know just when we should be back. Anyhow, he reckoned that last night would be safe, there bein' no moonlight. In case he should be heard movin' through the bush, he took the loan of our spare canoe an' dropped along silent by water. I'm figurin' that he calculated on the dog knowin' him an' not barkin'. But he wanted ter make sure, an' he crept up towards the kennel.

"Sheila was free; she wasn't chained up or locked in; an' she met him. Whether she fawned on him or attacked him, an' so got that thread of yaller wool on her claw don't greatly signify, though I guess she attacked him, an' he shot her dead, going up to her afterwards t' make sure, an' leavin' his footprint."

Kiddie nodded in satisfaction at the boy's narrative.

"And then?" he said.

"Then Nick made a bee-line for the cabin, broke the pane of glass, opened the winder, an' crawled in. Here he collected all the valuables he c'd lay his hands on—money, trinkets, jewels—hundreds and hundreds of dollars' worth, an' packed the lot into the gunny sack that he found in that there corner."

"Ah, I didn't remember that gunny sack," said Kiddie. "I had wondered how the things were carried away. Well?"

"Well," continued Rube, "after that, he went through the sittin'-room t' escape by the front door. He looked around the room an' caught sight of the cigarettes and tobacco. Before decidin' which ter take, he thought he'd try one of the cigarettes, so he smoked one, leavin' the scent of it hangin' in the air. I reckon he enjoyed it, so he took the cigarettes an' left the pipe tobacco."

"They are very good cigarettes, I believe," commented Kiddie. "I've never smoked one myself."

"Still, I wonder at Nick Undrell leavin' all that tobacco on the shelf," put in Isa Blagg. "What d'you figure he did next, Rube? Went around to the stables, helped himself t' the best hoss thar, an' rode off, I should say."

"That's about it," concluded Rube.

"My theory exactly," declared the sheriff, "an' now I calculate the first thing t' do is ter get on Nick's tracks an' arrest him."

"Wait," said Kiddie. "There's one thing that Rube has not explained. What about the canoe? We found it tied up in Grizzly Notch. How did it get back there?"

"Ar-rum!" ejaculated Rube. "I forgot the canoe; but I suppose Nick took it back an' tied it up 'fore he went to the stable."

"Not at all," said Kiddie. "Your theory is wrong from beginnin' to end. The canoe was never used. The paddles were in the boat-house as dry as a bone. The tobacco pipe, the dead matches and the footprint were planted there purposely as a blind to put us on a false trail. I don't deny that the pipe was Nick Undrell's, or the boots, or that the threads of yellow worsted came from Nick's vest. But in spite of these clues, yes, even because of them, I believe that Nick Undrell had nothing to do with this robbery."

"Git!" exclaimed Isa Blagg, with a derisive laugh.

"S-shoo!" whispered Rube in amazement.

"You say you didn't touch the dead dog," pursued Kiddie, "didn't look into her eyes an' see how the pupils were dilated; didn't handle her limbs an' feel how rigid they were. You've seen many an animal killed with a bullet, Rube, but you never saw one lookin' as Sheila looks. Why? Because she wasn't shot. It was poison that killed her—a quick an' deadly poison, injected on the point of a dart, a spear, or, perhaps even an arrow. And the bootprint was made purposely by the man who went up to her to recover the weapon and to fix the thread of yellow worsted to her claw, just as he afterwards fixed the thread on the splinter of window glass, as an intentionally misleading clue. As to the cigarettes and tobacco, there need have been no hesitation. The cigarettes were taken in preference by a man who never smokes a pipe, but is peculiarly fond of cigarettes."

"Gee!" cried Rube. "You are clever, Kiddie."

Kiddie had disappeared into his bedroom. When he came out again some minutes afterwards, he was dressed as a western cowboy.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Rube. "Where're you off to?"

"Along to Laramie ter locate Nick Undrell," drawled Kiddie, fixing his six-shooter in his belt.

He hastened out to the stables, saddled and mounted a pony, and started off through the woodland towards the trail.

Hardly had he got out from among the trees when he heard the clattering of a horse's galloping feet. He dropped the bridle over his pony's head, leapt from his saddle, gathered the coils of his lariat in his fist, and crept to the side of the trail. The galloping horse came swiftly nearer. Kiddie peeped out over the edge of a boulder and recognized his own bay hunter Regent.

The rider's face was hidden under his wide hat, but as he raised his whip hand there was the gleam of a yellow and black striped vest. Kiddie gripped his lariat ready to throw, but he did not throw it.

Instead, he whistled loud and shrill, and, as the horseman came abreast of him, he called out—

"Nick—Nick!"

Nick Undrell drew rein, and, swinging sharply round, rode up to Kiddie.

"The very man I wanted to see," said Kiddie, dropping his lariat, and seizing the hunter's palpitating muzzle in his hands. "Where is he, Nick?"

"He?" echoed Nick Undrell, with a laugh. "Well, if your lordship's referrin' ter Broken Feather, he's a prisoner in my shack, wearin' handcuffs an' a pair of my boots, an' with two o' my boys standin' over him with loaded revolvers. An' the boodle—the loot—the swag that the greasy skunk stole from your cabin last night, it's all fixed up right an' tight in Laramie Bank."

CHAPTER XXIII

EVIDENCE FOR THE PROSECUTION

"Good—very good," said Kiddie. "He's captured; and you're sure he can't escape—eh?"

Nick Undrell laughed.

"Don't you alarm yourself any," he answered, dismounting from the bay horse. "He ain't goin' t' escape, that's sure."

"Very well," returned Kiddie, slinging his coiled lariat over the horn of his saddle. "In that case, I c'n afford to wait for your further explanations until we get along to my cabin. Sheriff Blagg is there, an' young Rube Carter."

He led his pony through the woodland by the same narrow trail that he had followed a few minutes earlier, and it was not long before they reached the stables.

"I presume," said Kiddie, when he was closing the door, leaving the two horses secure in their stalls, "that Broken Feather was ridin' my horse Regent when you laid him by the heels?"

"That's so," Nick answered; "the best hoss I've ever bin astride of. Yes, we waylaid him—middle of One Tree Gulch."

"Seems you expected him. You knew just where he'd been, an' what he'd been up to. You expected him to ride through One Tree Gulch exactly at that time?"

"No, your lordship," returned Nick; "I knew nothin' for sure. It was no more'n a cute guess on my part, knowin' the man."

Kiddie turned and looked at Undrell very steadily.

"I'm very much afraid that you know more about this business than you're likely to admit," he said. "You were in it yourself to some extent. Perhaps you even went partners with him—eh?"

"What?" Nick showed genuine astonishment at the implied accusation.

"Walk right in," ordered Kiddie, when they were at the front door of the cabin.

Isa Blagg started forward excitedly at Nick's unexpected entrance.

"Got him already!" he exclaimed. "That's smart, Kiddie—real smart."

"Wait, Isa, wait," retorted Kiddie. "I want to ask a few questions."

He reached round to his desk and laid a tobacco pipe on the table in front of Nick Undrell.

"Is that yours?" he asked.

"Yes," said Nick, taking it up and turning it in his fingers, "it's sure mine. Where'd you pick it up? Last time I see it 'twas on the shelf at home in my shack. Been lying thar for months. Too good ter throw away, not good enough ter smoke. How in thunder did it get here?"

"It was found in one of our canoes," explained Kiddie. "You are supposed to have dropped it there and forgotten it."

"Never bin in one o' your canoes in all my life," Nick declared.

"Ever been in this room before?" pursued Kiddie.

"Never," Nick denied; "never been inside the door."

"Show me the soles of your boots," said Kiddie.

Nick lifted his feet for inspection. Kiddie looked at the smooth soles inquiringly, nodded in satisfaction, and then leant forward and carefully picked a thread of yellow worsted from Undrell's striped vest.

"How do you explain," he went on, "that we found a thread of this very same yellow wool caught in the glass of that broken window? How do you account for a thread of the same stuff bein' found fixed round one of the claws of my dead hound?"

"Your dead hound!" repeated Nick, in genuine surprise. "Dead, d'ye say? D'ye mean he killed it—shot it? My, I'm glad we captured him—real glad, I am."

"What's that?" cried Isa Blagg. "Who d'ye mean?"

"All right, Sheriff," said Kiddie. "Leave it to me, please. I've only one more question to ask." He turned to Nick again. "Ever smoked one of my foreign cigarettes, Nick?" he inquired.

Nick shook his head.

"Never even seen one of 'em, except that time in my shack when you offered me one outer your gold case, an' I wouldn't have it," he answered. "But I guess you knows as well as I do that Broken Feather collared a whole heap of 'em?"

"Yes," said Kiddie. "It was the takin' of the cigarettes that made me certain that the robber was Broken Feather. You will have gathered from my questions that he tried to fix the crime upon you, Nick. He wore a pair of your boots an' left the prints of them around. He planted your old pipe in the canoe. He left the yellow threads from your woollen vest where they would serve as clues pointin' to you an' you alone and at the same time he was most careful to leave no trace or sign of his own identity."

"The skunk!" muttered Nick; "the greasy, low-down skunk?"

"Say, Kiddie," interposed Rube Carter, "thar's one thing you ain't asked Nick Undrell t' explain. What was his game prowlin' around here an' tryin' ter make friends with the dog?"

"I'll tell you that," returned Nick, glancing across at Rube. "It was all quite innercent. I knew that Kiddie an' you was away on a canoe trip. Broken Feather knew it, too. I'd a suspicion, an' more'n a suspicion, that he'd made up his mind ter break in here an' carry off some of Kiddie's valu'bles. I came prowlin' around ter spy on him. I saw him here once. He saw me watchin' him, an' he quitted. Then I heard that he'd gone cavortin' off on the war-path against the Crows, back of Lone Wolf Mountain, an' I didn't worry any more, since he couldn't be in two places at once. D'ye savvy?"

"Yes," nodded Kiddie; "yes, go on."

"Well," continued Nick, "night before last I was sittin' all lonesome in my shack, waitin' for the water to boil an' listenin' t' the rain outside, when there come a knock at the door. I opened it, an' there was a stranger—a Injun—lookin' like a drowned rat. He wanted food; he wanted shelter. I lets him come in. He couldn't speak English. We talked by signs, an' didn't get a lot said. I made two mugs of coffee, one for myself, one for him.

"Then I turned to the cupboard ter git some cheese an' a cracker or two, never suspectin' that he was anythin' else than a homeless wanderer. Well, I dunno just how he managed it—wasn't watchin' him, didn't suspect him—but when my back was turned, he must ha' took the opportunity he was waitin' for an' cunningly dropped suthin' in my mug of coffee. That's sure what he did. Thar ain't a doubt about it. I didn't taste nothin' unusual; but that coffee was doped. I couldn't keep awake. I fell asleep, an' yet not altogether asleep. I kinder saw things an' heard 'em in a dreamy way.

"Seemed ter me after a while that the door opened an' a second Injun came crawlin' in. It wasn't till afterwards that I realized who this second one was. He looked at me hard, kept on watchin' me for mebbe a full hour, until he figured I was sound asleep. Then he crept near an' touched me: caught hold o' this yer vest an' tugged at it till he tore a hole in it. Then he went about the room, silent as a cat. He drew my boots away from the stove, where I'd put 'em to dry. He went to the shelf, where that old pipe was lyin'. I dunno what else he did. I was too much asleep t' know anythin' or care anythin'. I only know that it was broad daylight when I awoke, that both them Injuns had vamoosed, an' that I couldn't find my boots."

"Reason bein' that Broken Feather had took 'em," said Rube Carter. "Didn't you find tracks outside the door, Nick?"

"Yes," Nick answered, "I found the marks of two pairs of moccasins leadin' up to the door; a pair of moccasins an' a pair of hob-nailed boots—my own boots—goin' away. It wasn't a very difficult proposition, an' I allow it wasn't long 'fore I'd ciphered it all up. I made out that Broken Feather, havin' failed in his raid on the Crow Indian reservation, had planned ter come right here an' do a bit of the burglary business in your absence. He's bin owin' me a grudge for a while back. He took my boots so

that the marks of 'em in the mud would draw suspicion on me. D'ye savvy?"

"That was clearly his idea," Kiddie agreed, "and he very nearly succeeded. He gave himself away, however, by plantin' too many false clues around, an' makin' them too conspicuous. Did you follow on his tracks, Nick?"

"We did," Nick replied. "Jim Thurston, Fred Crippleshaw an' me, we follered him as far as Long Grass Creek. There we lost track of him, an' gave up the chase. We couldn't hope ter get here in front of him, though he was on foot an' we were mounted. But knowin' that he'd likely be goin' back with the loot to his own village, an' guessin' which trail he'd take, we hung around in One Tree Gulch. Waited hours an' hours.

"At last we heard a strange horse comin' along at an easy trot. By the sound of its feet we c'd tell it was no or'nary prairie cayuse, an' soon, sure enough, Broken Feather came inter view, with the goods in a gunny sack slung over his shoulder. Before he guessed we were there—before he c'd whip out his gun—we'd dropped on him."

"Ah," said Sheriff Blagg, stroking his chin. "I allow you did that business with considerable credit, Nick Undrell. Case of set a thief to catch a thief. I'm only regrettin' that I wasn't present on the occasion to make a formal arrest."

"'Tain't too late yet," smiled Kiddie. "You c'n ride back to Fort Laramie along with Nick an' conclude the business in proper legal form. No need to caution you to see that the prisoner cannot escape, and when the trial takes place, I guess you'll count upon me to be there to give evidence against him."

"What d'you reckon they'll give him, Kiddie?" Rube Carter wanted to know.

"Dunno," Kiddie shrugged his shoulders: "two or three years in penal servitude, I expect. Anyhow, Broken Feather's ambitious career doesn't look as if it would materialize. He'll be put out of the way of doin' further mischief, and we can settle down in our peaceful solitude, happy and undisturbed."

He turned to Nick Undrell.

"By the way, Nick," he said, "you told me a while back that you'd lost that cattle ranch of yours over a game of cards. You gambled it away to an Indian, didn't you?"

"That's so, your lordship," returned Nick. "An' the Injun referred to was Broken Feather. I ain't sure, but I've allus had a notion that he cheated in that game of poker. Why d'you ask about the ranch?"

"Because," said Kiddie, "it came into the market the other day and I bought it. Now that the estate is mine, I don't find that I've any use for it. I don't want it. D'you reckon you could run it for a season or two, Nick?"

"As your lordship's manager?" Nick asked.

"No," Kiddie answered, "as my workin' partner."

"Could you trust me?" questioned Nick.

"Down to the ground," said Kiddie, holding forth his hand.

Nick Undrell seized it.

"Kiddie," he faltered, "you're making a new man of me. You found me when I was lost. You blazed a new trail for me, an' I kept to it. I shall keep to it until the very end."

During the rest of that same day, while Rube Carter was occupied in the work of unloading the canoe and setting the cabin in order, Kiddie engaged himself in opening his delayed correspondence and writing letters.

Many of the letters he opened were business communications from his lawyers in London, requiring immediate attention. Some were letters from friends in England, regretting his absence and imploring him to return. The one that he left to the last was addressed in a familiar handwriting, and he read it with close interest.

MY DEAR COUSIN HARRY,—

Do you remember once when we sat together in the billiard-room at St. Olave, and you were yarning to me about Buckskin Jack and Gideon Birkenshaw and the Pony Express? I said something about wishing I could go out West again and enjoy some such adventures as yours, and you said: "Well,

you'd better come out with me." I don't know what I answered, but I believe you thought I didn't quite take to the idea, and you went off suddenly without repeating the invitation.

Now, however, I'm not going to wait to be asked. Since you didn't take me with you, I am going to come out on my own. I want to see you again, Kiddie. I want to be your chum for a few weeks, and share your life in that shack in the Bush that you were going to build. By this time you ought to be pining for a companion.

There are so many things I want to do and to see, with you to teach me. Golf and tennis and billiards are all very well, but I yearn for the wide spaces and the wilds. I want to see a real herd of buffalo and a pack of wolves, and to go bear hunting, to do some trapping, and to see some Indians—not the imitation article that hangs around on railway stations wearing breeches and a top hat, but the real noble savage, the wigwam Redskin with painted face and feathered head-dress. But more than all, I want to live in the same world of adventure with you. So I am coming out West. Before you get this letter I shall have started, and some day very soon you may meet me riding along the trail on my way to Sweetwater Bridge.

Then when I have had enough of it, I count upon your coming back home to England with me. This is imperative. There are heaps of important things waiting for you to do and to see to here.

Always your affectionate cousin,
HAROLD FRITTON.

P.S.—Give my love to Sheila, and stroke her velvet ears for me.

Kiddie drew a deep breath. Rube Carter, who was behind him dusting the books and pictures, heard him, and turned round.

"Got some bad news in that letter you're readin', Kiddie?" he asked.

Kiddie folded up the letter and replaced it in its envelope.

"No," he answered. "It ought to be good news. My cousin Harold is coming out to pay us a visit."

"That so?" said Rube. "You've told me of your cousin Harold. He's your heir, ain't he? What did you sigh for? Don't you want him?"

"It was Harold who gave me the deerhound," Kiddie explained. "He sends his love to her. And she's dead. That's why I sighed. Say, Rube, you'll like Cousin Harold."

"Dunno 'bout that," said Rube. "Guess I shall have ter take a very far back seat when he comes along. Why, by all accounts he's even more of a gentleman than you are yourself, Kiddie."

"That's quite true," Kiddie acknowledged. "But that's no disadvantage, is it? We both stand in need of a bit of polishin' up before we go home to England again."

"Home to England?" Rube repeated. "What d'you mean by that?"

"Sooner or later I've got to go back to London," Kiddie told him. "But it won't be for always, you see—just long enough for you to have a good look round."

"Me!" exclaimed Rube in amazement.

"That's my notion," Kiddie intimated. "You'd like to go to England, wouldn't you? And you don't expect me to stay here for ever?"

"Course not," said Rube. "And—and—well, I dessay thar's a lot of chores you're hankerin' to attend to over there. We c'n easily lock up the cabin. It won't come to no harm now that thar's no Broken Feathers lyin' around."

“Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.

- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE

LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you 'AS-IS', WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™'s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any

particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.