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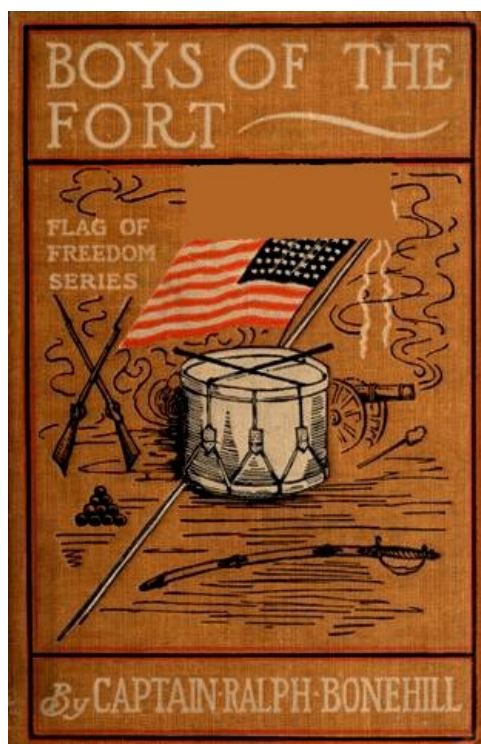
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BOYS OF THE FORT; OR, A YOUNG CAPTAIN'S PLUCK ***



BOYS OF THE FORT

Or, A Young Captain's Pluck

FLAG OF FREEDOM SERIES

By **CAPTAIN RALPH BONEHILL**

AUTHOR OF "THE YOUNG BANDMASTER," "WHEN SANTIAGO FELL," "A SAILOR BOY WITH DEWEY," "OFF FOR HAWAII," ETC.

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DEFENDING THE FORT.

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"AT LAST HE PUT THE GUNS IN THEIR HANDS AND LET THEM MARCH WITH THE PIECES."

"HE LEAPED BETWEEN THEM AND CAUGHT THEIR RIFLES."

PREFACE.

"BOYS OF THE FORT" is a complete story in itself, but forms the fifth volume of a line of works issued under the general title of "Flag of Freedom Series."

In penning this tale I had it in mind to acquaint my young readers with the ins and outs of military life at one of our Western forts of to-day, showing what both officers and privates are called upon to do, and what troubles the Indians and the bad men of that locality are still in the habit of making. The field is one about which little has been written, although abounding in interest, and one which is worthy the attention of all who have the proper development of our country at heart.

To some, certain scenes in this book may appear overdrawn, yet such is far from being the case. In this wild territory there are those who have lived all their lives beyond the pale of civilization, men who grow up dwarfed and crooked in mind, and who resent every effort made to better their condition.

The young captain is a fine specimen of the wide-awake American army officer, yet he is no more brave and dashing than are thousands of others, officers and privates, who serve under our Flag of Freedom. He is trained to do his duty, and he simply does it, regardless of possible consequences.

Once more I take this opportunity to thank my young friends for the kindness with which they have received my former stories, and I earnestly hope this present tale merits equal commendation.

CAPTAIN RALPH BONEHILL.

July 1, 1901.

BOYS OF THE FORT.

CHAPTER I.

BOUND FOR THE FORT.

"How many miles have we still to ride, Benson?"

"About fifty, Joe. But the last half is pretty much uphill, lad."

"Can we make the fort by to-morrow night?"

"Well, we can try," answered the old scout, who sat astride of a coal-black horse and rode slightly in advance of his two youthful companions. "It will depend somewhat on what the weather does."

"Why, do you think it is going to rain?" put in Darry Germain. "I'm sure it looks clear enough."

"Aint no telling what the weather will do in this valley," answered Sam Benson. "It may stay clear for a week, but to me the signs don't exactly p'int that way," and he shook his head gravely.

"A little rain wouldn't hurt," said Joe Moore. "A couple of miles back the road was fearfully dusty."

"The trouble is, when it rains out here it rains," answered the old scout. "The clouds come a-tumbling over yonder mountains, and inside of half an hour you'd fancy the water was going to drown out everything."

"Then if it rains we'll have to put up somewhere," said Darry Germain.

"Aint no cabin on this trail short of Hank Leeson's place, twenty miles this side of the fort. If we can get that far I reckon we can make the fort."

"Then where will we stop to-night?" asked Darry with interest.

"At the Star Hotel—if the sky is clear," said Sam Benson, with a laugh at what he considered his little joke.

"You mean in the open, under the stars!" cried the boy; and, as the old scout nodded, he went on:

"That will be nice. I've been wanting to camp out in regular trapper style ever since we left Riverton."

"So have I," put in Joe Moore. "But I don't know as I care to camp out and get soaked."

"If it rains we'll find some kind of shelter," answered Benson. "But come, let us make the most of the daylight while it lasts," and he urged his steed forward, and the two boys did the same.

The three were pursuing their way along a gap in the Rocky Mountains, where the so-called valley was broken up by tiny water-courses, walls of rock, and dense patches of forest and underbrush. It was midsummer, and the hot air was filled with the scent of green growing things. Deep in the forest the song-birds sang gayly and the wild animals had full play to come and go as they pleased, for to get at them in those vast fastnesses was next to impossible.

The party of three had left the town of Riverton four days before. They were bound for Fort Carson,—so named after Kit Carson, the celebrated scout and Indian fighter,—and Sam Benson carried messages of importance to Colonel Fairfield, the commandant at the fort.

Joe Moore and Darry Germain were cousins, and both were boys of sixteen, well built and well trained in outdoor athletic sports. Joe came from Chicago and Darry from St. Louis, and each had graduated from his local high school but a few weeks before.

It was while Darry was spending a brief vacation with his cousin Joe that a plan for visiting the fort was formed. Joe's older brother, William, was a West Point graduate and a captain at the fort, and he wrote on stating that he had received permission to have Joe visit him, and Darry could come too if he desired. Colonel Fairfield was an old friend of both families, and promised to treat the lads well should they make the trip.

"Hurrah! just the thing!" Joe had cried. "Of course you'll go, Darry. We couldn't have a grander outing."

"I'll go if father and mother will let me," had been Darry's answer, and he had at once written home concerning the affair. Two weeks later the boys were off, the parents of each cautioning them to be careful, and wishing them the best of luck.

The journey westward as far as the mining-town of Riverton had occurred without special incident. They had been told to hire a guide at this point, and while looking for a man had fallen in with Sam Benson. Benson knew Captain William Moore well, and he at once promised to take the boys along with him and do the best he could by them.

"You'll want good hosses," Benson had said, and had aided them in selecting their animals and in getting together the necessary outfit. The start was made one fine morning in August, and all three of the party were in the best of spirits.

The four days in the mountains had opened the eyes of both lads. The traveling had been rather hard, yet they had enjoyed every minute of the journey. They had stopped once to do some fishing, and Benson had brought down a small mountain deer. At night they had put up at the cabins of hunters and trappers, and before retiring had listened to thrilling tales of adventures with wild beasts and with the Indians.

But now Joe was anxious to get to the fort and see his brother, from whom he had been separated for nearly two years. Darry was also anxious to reach the outpost, to meet not only his cousin William, but likewise Colonel Fairfield, who was an old friend not easily forgotten. Once at the fort the two boys felt that a vacation full of fun and pleasure would follow. Never once did they dream of the perils which awaited them in that wild region, which was not as civilized as it was to become a handful of years later.

"It seems to me it is growing hotter," remarked Darry, after riding a quarter of a mile in silence.

"It is growing hotter," answered the old scout. "And that makes me more certain than ever that a storm's at hand."

"We'll have to take what comes," said Joe. "But I did hope we'd reach the fort by to-morrow."

On they went, around a bend of the trail and over some rough rocks, where the horses had to step with care, for fear of slipping into a gully on the left. Then they reached a patch of timber and plunged beneath the low-drooping trees. Here it was both dark and cool, and Darry breathed a long sigh of relief.

"How delicious!" he murmured. "It's almost like going into a cave. Benson, there must be lots of caves in these mountains," he went on reflectively.

"There are," answered the old scout. "I've been in a score or more."

"I should like to explore a big cave," came from Joe. "It would be a novelty to me."

"You may get the chance, lad," said Benson; "and get it soon."

"What do you mean? Are we going to ride by a cave?"

"There are a dozen or more ahead, and we may have to seek one of 'em for shelter. Do you hear that?"

Benson threw back his head to listen, and the two boys did likewise. From a great distance came the rumble of thunder, echoing and re-echoing throughout the mountains. To the westward the sun was hidden by a dense mass of black clouds which grew more ominous each instant.

"The storm is coming, sure enough," muttered Joe. "What do you propose?"

"We'll ride on a bit, lad. It won't hit us right away. Come!"

The horses were urged forward at an increased speed, and soon they passed the patch of timber and came out to where a thick fringe of brush skirted a long, high cliff. The sky was now dark on every side, and the wind was rising with a dull, humming sound.

"We'll catch it in a few minutes!" cried Benson; and hardly had he spoken when the big drops came splashing down, hitting the broad leaves in the underbrush with resounding smacks.

The old scout continued to lead, and presently he turned to the left, where the cliff parted. Here was an opening, lined on either side with rocks and dirt, and a short distance further was the entrance to a cave of unknown depths.

"We'll stop here," said the old scout, leaping to the ground, followed by the boys. "This aint the best place in the world, but it's better than the open, in such a blow as is coming."

He was right about the blow—already the wind was rising, and hardly had the three led their horses into the cave, the entrance to which was over a dozen feet high, when there came a crashing through the timber left behind, which sent many a frail limb and sapling to the ground and carried the leaves and twigs in all directions.

"I'm glad we didn't stay in the woods!" cried Darry. "We'd be in danger of falling trees."

"And lightning too," added Joe. "Oh, my! look at that!" he continued, as a blinding flash lit up the heavens. "That must have struck somewhere."

"We'll go back a little," said old Benson. "The lightning is just as bad here as it is in the woods. Wait till I get a torch."

Pine was plentiful in that locality, and soon he had a knot which was full of pitch and which burned well when a match was applied to it. With the torch in hand, he led the way further into the cave, and the boys followed with their animals.

CHAPTER II.

CAVES IN THE MOUNTAIN.

The two boys had expected to find the large cave damp and unwholesome, and they were surprised when they learned how dry the flooring and the sides were, and how pure the air was. There was no breeze in the place, but a gentle draught kept the air stirring. Of course the atmosphere was much cooler than it had been outside.

Hardly had the travelers gained the center of the first chamber of the cave, when the storm outside burst in all its fury. The lightning and thunder were almost incessant, and the rain came down in broad sheets which completely obliterated the landscape.

"It's little short of a flood," said Darry, after having gone to the mouth of the cave to investigate. "The water is already two or three inches deep on the trail."

"Well, such a downpour can't last long," returned Joe. "It's only a shower, or a cloud-burst."

"No, it's a regular rain, and it's good for all night," answered the old scout.

"All night!"

"Yes, lad, and we'll be lucky if it don't last through the morning, too. It don't rain very often out here, you see, but when it does it tries to make up for lost time."

"Then we'll have to camp right here, won't we?"

"To be sure. Even if it did let up, you wouldn't want to camp in the wet timber."

"Then we might as well start up a fire," came from Darry, in something of a disappointed tone. "I was hoping we'd be able to camp under the stars just once before we got to the fort."

"Perhaps you'll get a chance to go out after you're at the fort," said the old scout, by way of comfort. "Yes, we'll start a fire, if we can find any dry wood."

The horses were tied up between some rocks, and then the three searched around. At the entrance to the cave was a mass of brush and tree limbs which previous storms had sent in that direction, and from this they gathered enough for a good-sized fire. It did not take long for the brush to blaze up, sending the sparks to the roof of the cave and throwing fantastic shadows all about them.

"I declare, the fire makes the cave look quite home-like!" was Joe's comment, as he threw himself down on a flat rock with his blanket under him. "Staying here won't be so humdrum as I anticipated."

"I'm going to explore the cave, now I am here," returned Darry. "Who knows but what I might locate a gold mine!"

"You be careful of where you go," cautioned old Benson. "These caves are full of pitfalls, and now you two boys are with me I don't want anything to happen to you. If something did happen, neither Captain Moore nor Colonel Fairfield would forgive me."

"To be sure we'll be careful, Benson," answered Darry. "There'd be no fun in getting hurt—even if we did locate a gold mine."

"You won't find any gold mine here. This ground was prospected years ago—before even the fort was located. I came out here once myself, with a miner named Hooker Brown. Hooker was dead certain there was gold here, but although we stayed here about two weeks nosing around we never got even a smell of the yellow metal."

"Well, we'll have a look around, anyway," said Joe. "But we must get good torches first."

Pine knots were procured and lit; and, with another caution from the scout to be careful, they set off, leaving Benson to care for the horses and prepare such an evening meal as their stores afforded. Luckily the scout had brought down half a dozen good-sized birds, and these he now prepared to broil in true hunter style.

The front chamber of the cave was somewhat semi-circular, and behind this were several other irregular apartments, running down to a passageway which wound in and out between jagged rocks almost impossible to climb or explore in any manner. At a distance could be heard the trickling of water, but where this came from, or where it went to, nobody in the cave could imagine.

The boys advanced from one opening to another with care, one with his torch held high, that they might see ahead, and the other with the light close to the ground, to warn them of a possible pitfall.

"A regiment of soldiers could quarter in here," observed Darry, as they pushed on. "What a defense it would make!"

"An enemy could fire right into the entrance. And, besides, supposing the enemy started to smoke you out? I can smell the smoke from the camp-fire away back here."

At last the two boys reached the passageway back of the rear chamber, and here came to a halt. The dropping water could be plainly heard, and Joe flashed his torch in several directions in the hope of catching sight of the stream.

"I'm going to climb the rocks," he said, after a pause. "Perhaps there is another opening behind them."

"Remember what Benson said, and be careful," cautioned his cousin. "There is no use in taking a risk for nothing."

"Yes, I'll be careful," answered Joe, and crawled forward with care. Darry held his torch as high up as possible, to light the way.

The youth had advanced a distance of fifty feet when he came to a turn in the passageway. Here the side walls were not over two yards apart, while the roof could be touched with ease.

Thinking the walking better at this point, Joe struck out once more. The flare from his torch showed him something of a chamber ahead, and the water sounded closer than ever.

But hardly had the lad taken a dozen steps when the smooth rock upon which he was advancing tilted up, sending him headlong. As he went down the torch was knocked from his hand. Then he slid forward into the darkness.

"Help!" he managed to cry. "Help!"

"What's up?" came from Darry, but the words were drowned out in the crashing of one stone against another. In the meantime Joe had fallen, he knew not whither. He landed on some soft ground, turned over and slid along, and then took a second drop. A stone fell beside him and pinned his jacket to the ground.

For the moment the lad was too dazed and bewildered to do anything but try to get back his breath. Then, as it gradually dawned upon him that he was not hurt in the least, he endeavored to arise.

"Fast!" he muttered, and tore his jacket away from under the rock. Then he turned about, trying to locate his torch. But that was missing, and all was dark around him.

"I'm in a pickle now," he thought. "I wish I had taken old Benson's advice and remained around the camp-fire. But who would have imagined that big rock would play a fellow such a trick? How in the world am I to get back again?"

From a great distance he could hear Darry shouting to him. He tried to answer his cousin, but whether or not his voice was heard he could not tell.

With his hands before him, he moved around, and scarcely had he taken a dozen steps when he slid down a rocky incline. Here there was water; and he shivered, thinking he might be dropping into an underground stream from which there would be no escape. But when a pool was gained it proved to be but several inches deep.

As Joe stood in the pool there came a sudden rumble of thunder to his ears. He listened, and by the sounds became convinced that an opening into the outer air could not be a great way off. Then came an unexpected flash of reflected light on the rocks by his side.

"Hurrah, that light came from outside!" he cried. "I'm not buried alive, after all. But I may be a good way from daylight yet."

He had some matches in his box, and lighting one of these he discovered a passageway below him, running off to his left. Further on he picked up a bit of dry wood and lit this. It made rather a poor torch, but proved better than nothing.

"Now to get out, and then to find my way back to where I left old Benson," was his mental resolve.

With extreme caution he stole forward to where the lightning revealed a distant opening. He did not leave one foothold until he was sure of the next, for he had no desire to experiment with another moving rock.

The thunder now reached his ears plainly, and the lightning at times made the front of the cave as bright as day.

"It's quite another place," was his thought. "That dangerous passage connects the two."

Suddenly, as Joe was advancing, he heard a clatter of horses' hoofs, and into the cave ahead rode three rough-looking men, all armed with rifles and pistols and each carrying small saddle-bags across his steed.

At first Joe thought to call out to the newcomers, but he checked himself, for their appearance was decidedly against them.

"I'll try to find out something about them first," he muttered. "Perhaps they belong to that gang of bad men Benson was telling us about yesterday." And then, as the three came to a halt in the center of the outer cave and dismounted, he crept closer, in the shadow of some sharp rocks, to overhear what they might have to say.

CHAPTER III.

AN IMPORTANT CONVERSATION.

"Who ever saw such a downpour before?" growled one of the three men, as he switched the water from his soft felt hat. "I'm wet to the skin."

"I'm no better off," replied one of the others. "I think we were fools to leave Macklin's place, Gilroy."

"Just what I think, Fetter," said the third man. "We could have waited as well as not."

"Yes, we could have waited, Potts," answered Matt Gilroy; "but, to tell the truth, I don't want to trust Macklin too far. He might play us foul."

"He wouldn't dare to do that," returned Gus Fetter.

"Why not—if he thought he would get a reward?" came from Nat Potts, the youngest of the trio. "One thing is certain, Macklin is crazy to make money."

"I know a thing or two of Macklin's past—that's why," went on Gus Fetter. "If he got us into trouble I wouldn't keep silent about him, and he knows it."

"Macklin is slippery, no two ways about it," said Matt Gilroy, as he took off his jacket and wrung the water out. "I am not inclined to trust him, and that is all there is to it."

"Did he ever belong to the old gang?" questioned Nat Potts. "Some say he did, and some say he didn't."

"He was a hanger-on, that's all," came from Matt Gilroy. "He was always afraid to take the chances of being shot, but was on hand when the spoils were divided. They used him as a messenger and a spy, but I don't believe he ever really helped to hold up a coach."

"Humph, then it's a wonder the old crowd had anything to do with him!"

"Oh, they had to have messengers and spies, and they never gave Macklin more than was coming

to him, you can bet on that! I understand that when the Riverton coach was held up six years ago, and the gang got twenty-two thousand dollars, they gave Macklin five hundred, and he was glad to get that."

"That was a big haul!" cried Nat Potts enthusiastically. "I wish I had been in it."

"The gang was followed for two days—by the soldiers under Colonel Fairfield," went on Matt Gilroy, as he threw himself on the rocks, leaving his companions to start up a fire. "They had a hot time of it over to Bear Pass, I can tell you. Two men were shot, and one of them, Dan Hickey, my old chum, died from his wounds. They say Colonel Fairfield himself fired the shot that took poor Hickey in the head, and if that's so—well, I've got an account to square with the colonel, that's all."

"You can square that after we've had our little interview with the quartermaster," returned Gus Fetter with a hard laugh.

"That's right—we'll be sure to have the soldiers after us," put in Nat Potts. "They'll be doubly mad when they learn that the hold-up resulted in the emptying of the box with their wages."

"It will be a good haul if it goes through, boys. The quartermaster will be carrying not less than twelve thousand dollars of the government's money besides his other stuff," returned Matt Gilroy.

Here the conversation came to a temporary end, for Nat Potts had produced a black flask, from which each of the men took a deep draught. Then Potts and Fetter started in to build a roaring fire at which all might dry their clothing, leaving Gilroy, the leader of the crowd, to do as he pleased.

Joe had listened to the talk with mingled interest and horror. It did not take him long to realize the truth—that these men were thoroughly bad, and that they had been mixed up in road robberies of the past and were contemplating another robbery some time in the future.

"They mean to rob the quartermaster of the fort, when he is bringing in the soldiers' wages from Rockspur," he thought. "And that leader is going to shoot down the colonel if he can. Who would imagine men could be so bad! And that leader seems to be educated, too!"

Joe would have been very much surprised had he known the truth, which was that Matt Gilroy, often called The Shadow, was a college-bred man, having passed through one of the leading institutes of learning of the Pacific coast. But, following this college career, Gilroy had forged checks and committed a burglary, in company with an old chum named Hickey, and then the two had left Sacramento "between two days." Hickey had immediately joined the "knights of the road" and been shot down, as previously mentioned. Gilroy had drifted first to the Mississippi and then to Denver, and had not gone into the mountains until later. Now he was at the head of a desperate gang, numbering ten or a dozen, who had already committed several "hold-ups" of importance.

Soon the fire was burning brightly, and the three men took off part of their wearing apparel, that the articles might dry. They had brought some food with them, and as they sat eating and drinking they continued to discuss their plans. Nat Potts, who was not over nineteen or twenty, was evidently something of a new member, and asked many questions regarding the organization, and as he took in what was told him, so did Joe, listening with "all ears," as the saying goes.

"They must be as bad a crowd as can be found anywhere," thought the youth. "I wonder what they would do with me, if they found out I had been listening to their talk? Perhaps they'd kill me on the spot." And he gave a shiver.

The thunder and lightning had gradually abated, but with the coming of night the rain continued as steadily as ever. Fortunately for the desperadoes, however, the rocks sloped away from the entrance to the cave, so that no water came inside, while the fire made everybody quite comfortable.

Hardly knowing what to do, Joe continued behind the rocks, taking care to remain in the shadow. More than once he was afraid one or another of the men would start to investigate the surroundings and that he would be discovered.

"I wish they would go to sleep," he said to himself. "Then I might get a chance to slip past them and their horses."

With great impatience he watched the men finish up their supper, get out their pipes, and fall to smoking. In the meantime the horses had been led to the opposite side of the cave and fastened to the rocks.

As Joe waited for a chance to get away he wondered what Darry and old Benson were doing. More than likely they were looking for him. But were they in that other cave, at the narrow passageway, or did the old scout know of this second cave and the secret entrance to it?

"If Benson leads the way around to here there may be trouble," he mused. "It would be better if I could get out and head him off. But if I do get out, how shall I turn to find the trail we were pursuing? In this darkness a fellow couldn't see his hand before his face."

At last Fetter threw himself down on a blanket to rest, leaving Gilroy and Potts still conversing

earnestly by the fire. The two desperadoes talked in a low tone, so that Joe now caught but little of what was said.

The backs of both men were turned toward the side of the cave where Joe was in hiding; and, plucking up courage, the youth started forward on tiptoe, bent upon getting out of the cave before the men should make some move which would expose him.

Step by step he advanced, until he reached a point where he was within a dozen feet of Gilroy and almost as close to Potts. He hardly dared to breathe, and his heart thumped madly beneath his jacket. But the men continued to smoke and talk, unconscious of his proximity.

At the entrance to the cave the rocks were somewhat rough and the mist had made them slippery. Joe was crawling forward rapidly, when one foot slipped, and he pitched headlong, making considerable noise.

"What was that?" cried Matt Gilroy, and leaped to his feet. He had been gazing into the fire, and for the moment could make out little in the darkness.

"I don't know," returned Nat Potts. "Something moving around out there, I think." And the younger man reached for his pistol, which still remained in his belt.

As rapidly as he could Joe sprang to his feet. A good bit of his wind had been knocked out of him, but he felt that he must not delay, and he ran for the outer air gasping for breath.

"Hi! stop!" roared Matt Gilroy, catching sight of him at last. "Stop, I tell you!"

"A boy!" ejaculated Nat Potts. "He must have been hiding in here!"

"If he was he overheard too much," growled Gilroy. "Come, we must catch him by all means," and he ran after Joe, with Potts following.

CHAPTER IV.

LOST IN THE FOREST.

"I must get away from them!"

This was the one thought which surged through Joe Moore's brain as he dashed from the cave in the mountain. He felt that if he was captured it would go hard with him. Did the desperadoes learn that he had overheard their conversation, they might make his very life pay the forfeit.

Forward he pitched, into the rain and the inky darkness, not knowing in what direction and just then caring but little. His one idea was to put distance between himself and his pursuers.

"Stop!" he heard the men call, and heard the clicking of a pistol hammer. Then he reached some brushwood, and, crouching low, continued to move on. No shot came, for the reason that the desperadoes could not locate him with certainty.

At length Joe reached a clump of trees. Had he not had his hands before him he might have run into them head first. He glided around them, and then continued onward, down a slope leading into a broad belt of timber. Still with his hands before him, he advanced through the undergrowth and between the stately trees for a distance of several hundred feet.

He was now exhausted with running and with fighting the entangling vines, and had to halt to catch his breath. As he came to a stop he listened attentively, to learn if the men were following, but the downpour of rain drowned out every other sound.

Soaked to the skin, hatless, and still short of breath, he went on once more, feeling that he was not yet far enough from the cave for safety. He tried to steer a course in the direction of the cave where he had left Darry and the old scout, but whether he was successful or not he could not tell.

A hundred yards further and Joe came to another slope, covered with prairie grass. Down this he rolled in the darkness, to bring up in more brush below. Then he climbed out of the hollow at the opposite side, and, reaching a large fallen tree, sat down to rest and think over his situation. The tree lay partly under one with wide-spreading branches, so the boy was somewhat sheltered from the storm.

It must be confessed that Joe's heart sank within him as he reviewed the situation. Where he was he could not tell, nor could he form any definite plan for rejoining his cousin and old Benson. More than this, he was afraid that the desperadoes might come up at any minute and pounce upon him.

But as the minutes slipped by, and he neither saw nor heard anything of those in pursuit, he grew easier. Evidently they had given up the chase.

"I hope they have," was what he thought. "I never want to get so close to them again. They are a hard crowd, if ever there was one. If I can get to the fort and tell Colonel Fairfield of what I've heard, I'll be doing a good thing."

An hour went by slowly, and then Joe looked around to find some means of making himself comfortable for the balance of the night, knowing it would be useless to pursue his course through the forest in the darkness.

"This is camping out with a vengeance!" he muttered grimly. "Darry ought to be along; I guess he'd soon get enough of it. I'll be lucky if I don't fall in with some savage animal."

The thought of wild beasts gave him another shiver, and he concluded to climb into a nearby tree, which was low-drooping and had a spot where several branches made a sort of platform. He was soon up in a comparatively dry place, and here he fell asleep, being too tired to hold his eyes open longer.

When Joe awoke the storm had cleared away and the sun was struggling through the scattering clouds. The forest still dripped with the rain, and with this dripping were mingled the songs of the birds and the hum of insects.

Stiff from the wet, he climbed slowly to the ground and looked around. On every side were the tall trees and the dense undergrowth, shutting off the distant view of everything but a towering mountain to the westward. This was the mountain he and the others had been ascending when the storm had overtaken them.

"I suppose I may as well head in that direction," he mused. "If I can strike the trail that will be something. But I'll have to keep my eyes open, or I may fall into the hands of that Gilroy gang."

He was hungry, but there were no means at hand with which to satisfy the cravings of his stomach, and so he had to move forward without eating.

Getting into the forest had been difficult, but getting out was even more of a task. The underbrush at certain points was positively impassable, and he had to make long detours, which took time and tired him greatly. At noon he was still in the forest, and the mountain seemed as far off as ever.

"I am lost, that is all there is to it!" he burst out with a groan. "I am lost, and perhaps I'll never get out!"

The sun shone down directly on his head, and even though still wet he was glad enough to seek the shelter the stately trees afforded. Here and there he saw some berries of various hues, but they were strange to him, and he did not dare touch them for fear of being poisoned.

Toward the middle of the afternoon he reached a tiny brook, flowing between the rocks, and here he again rested. He reached the conclusion that the brook came down from the mountain side and by following it up he must sooner or later run across the lost trail.

"I'll follow it, anyway," he told himself, and, hungry and footsore, set out along the water-course.

Here the walking was somewhat better, for he had no brushwood and vines to tear aside. The brook was clear, and he often saw trout and other fish darting hither and thither. This gave him an idea, and, picking some berries he had seen, he dropped them in. At once some of the fish darted forward and swallowed the berries.

"Hurrah, a good bait!" he cried, and quickly made himself a line out of threads from his clothing. To this he attached a pin bent into shape with infinite care. Then he baited with the berries, and dropped the line in over a rock near a cottonwood.

Hardly had his bait touched the water when a good-sized fish seized it, and in a twinkling he had his catch landed. His heart gave a bound, for here was the material for at least one square meal.

"I'll cook it right away," he told himself, after feeling to see if he had any matches. His hunger was beginning to make him desperate, and he did not much care even if the desperadoes did see his camp-fire.

With some trouble he got together a few sticks of wood and some moss which the sunshine had dried out, and soon he had a respectable blaze between two rocks. With his jackknife he cleaned the fish as best he could, and then broiled it on a green twig. When done the meat was slightly burnt on one side and underdone on the other, but to the half-famished lad nothing had ever tasted sweeter, and he continued to eat until the whole fish was gone.

"Now I feel like myself," he muttered, after washing down the repast with a drink from the brook. "On a pinch that meal ought to last me until to-morrow noon, and surely I ought to find my way back to the others by that time."

With renewed energy he continued his tramp along the brook, often wading in the water when the brushwood on either side was extra thick. He kept his eyes and ears on the alert, but no human being came into sight, and presently a great feeling of loneliness swept over him.

"I'm alone," he whispered to himself. "Alone! I must say I don't like it much," and he hurried on faster than ever.

The sun was shining over the distant mountain when he reached a bend in the brook and came out upon a rocky trail which crossed the water-course at a right angle. As he looked at the trail he was tempted to shout with joy.

"The place we crossed yesterday morning!" he exclaimed. "There is the very spot where we got a drink and watered the horses. Now I ought not to have such a hard time finding the cave."

He got down and examined the trail closely, hoping to discover some hoofmarks. But the heavy rain had washed everything clean. Nevertheless, he felt certain that he was right, and hurried along as fast as his tired limbs permitted.

Leaving the brook, the trail wound in and out along a series of rocks and then through some heavy brushwood and along the edge of a jagged cliff. The cliff was overgrown with heavy vines, which hung down and brushed Joe's head as he passed.

"I can't be more than three or four miles from the cave," thought the boy. "And if I hurry——"

He stopped short, and then gave a cry of terror, and with good reason. He had seen the vines ahead suddenly part, and now there came to view the shaggy head of a black bear. As soon as the beast caught sight of the boy he leaped to the trail and advanced upon him.

CHAPTER V.

THE BIG BLACK BEAR.

Joe had never before met a black bear in the open air, but he had seen several in menageries and studied them at a safe distance, and he realized that he was in a perilous position. The bear looked both untamed and fierce and as if nothing would suit him better than to hug the lad to death and eat him up afterward.

Joe did not stand upon the order of his going, but went instantly, running as fast as his tired limbs would permit. After him came the bear, and it was astonishing what good time the beast could make considering his size and his general appearance of clumsiness. Looking over his shoulder, the lad soon saw that the beast was slowly but surely lessening the distance between them.

"Shoo!" he yelled, and waved his arm threateningly, but the bear did not mind in the least. He trotted on until less than two rods separated boy and beast. Then Joe reached some underbrush and rocks, with a low-hanging tree in their midst, and without stopping to think twice he climbed into the tree and to one of the upper branches.

Hardly had he reached what he thought might prove a temporary place of safety when he realized his mistake. The bear came up the tree after him,—slowly, it is true; but still up,—and this caused Joe's hair to fairly stand upon end.

"I'm a gone one now!" he groaned, and then espied another tree growing not far away. A limb could just be reached, and as the bear almost gained the boy's foot Joe swung himself from the first tree into the second.

As the lad gained a safe spot on the tree limb, the bear, coming to a halt on the branch opposite, set up a growl of rage and disappointment. For a minute he surveyed the situation, then came out on the branch slowly, testing it inch by inch. As it bent down he retreated, letting out a second growl, louder than the other.

Joe was wondering if he could drop to the ground and escape in that manner, when he saw the bear descend and come quickly toward the tree he was on. He watched the beast closely, and waited until it was close to him. Then he made a leap back into the tree from which he had originally come.

Again the bear came out as far as possible on a limb, and again he let out a growl of rage and disappointment. In one way the situation was comical, and Joe might have laughed had he not felt so serious.

"We can keep this up a long time, I reckon," thought the boy. "And as long as you don't try to leap after me I'll be safe."

Finding he could not reach the boy by coming up one tree or the other, the black bear descended slowly to the ground. Then he walked around both trees several times, and at last came to a halt between the two. Here he sank down, as if to rest, but nevertheless kept one eye open and fixed upon Joe.

"He's going on guard! He means to keep me treed!" muttered the boy, and again his heart sank. He remembered a story he had once read, in which a bear had starved a man to death and eaten him afterward. Would Mr. Bruin do so in this case?

He wished he had a pistol, or a hunting-knife, or even a fair-sized stone. But he had nothing except a thin club, which he had cut for himself with his jackknife. This he kept in hand, and also kept the knife open and where he could get at it readily if needed.

Half an hour went by,—a time that to Joe seemed a whole day,—and still the black bear remained between the two trees, dozing with one eye and watching with the other.

The sight of the beast taking it so easy was maddening under the circumstances, and at last the youth cut another club and hurled it down on top of the bear. At once the beast flew up with a roar, and, standing on his hind legs, snapped his teeth at Joe. Then he flew up the tree once more, faster than ever before.

As the bear came up, Joe went higher than before, having seen another friendly limb over his head. He was sorely tempted to reach for the beast with his club, but thought best not to run too much of a risk.

As before, the youth swung to the next tree, and again the bear gave a growl and went down. Then, being near the top of the tree, the lad took a good look around.

In a moment a sight caught his eye which caused his heart to jump with delight. There on the trail were Darry and old Benson, riding along slowly.

"Hi! hi! This way!" he shouted, with all the strength of his lungs. "This way, Darry! This way, Benson!"

He saw his cousin and the guide bring their steeds to a halt and gaze around in wonder. To them the voice appeared to come out of the very air itself.

"It's Joe's voice!" exclaimed Darry. "But I must say I don't see him."

Both gazed around, and at last the scout caught sight of the boy's handkerchief fluttering among the tree branches.

"There he is!" he exclaimed. "But what's he doing up there?"

"This way!" went on Joe, and as they turned in the direction, he added, "Look out for the bear!"

"A bear!" came from Darry. "He must be treed!"

"I reckon you've struck it," muttered Benson, and hastily unslung his rifle, at which Darry did the same. "Follow me, but be on your guard," went on the old scout.

He advanced with caution, his horse lifting his ears sharply as the neighborhood of the trees was gained. Presently the animal came to a sudden halt. At the same moment Benson caught sight of the bear.

"So that's where ye are!" muttered the old scout.

The bear raised himself on his hind legs and let out a growl at the newcomers. Hardly had the sound arose upon the air when Benson's rifle cracked, and a bullet hit the beast in the breast. Down went the animal on all fours, but did not tumble further. Instead, he made a swift bound for the scout's horse.

Crack! It was now Darry's rifle that spoke up, and the bear was hit again, this time in the right front knee. He dropped, but quickly arose, shaking the wounded leg in the air and uttering a tremendous roar of pain and rage.



"NOW DARRY'S RIFLE SPOKE UP, AND THE BEAR WAS HIT AGAIN"

Neither horse would now stand still, and both danced around so lively that each rider had all he

could do to keep his saddle. But even while his steed pranced in this fashion, old Benson managed to draw his pistol, and two additional shots rang out, both hitting the bear in the side. The roars of the beast were now incessant, and the horses threatened to bolt in spite of all the riders could do to stop them.

"Come!" cried the old scout, and turned from the scene. Thinking he meant to go off to reload, Darry followed. But when at a safe distance Benson sprang to the ground and tied his horse to a tree.

"I'd rather finish him afoot," explained the old hunter, and slipped another cartridge into his rifle. "You can stay here if you wish."

"Not much!" murmured Darry, and came down also. In a minute he was following the old scout. When they came up a second time they found the bear crawling around, roaring in a lower tone. Evidently he was more than half exhausted.

"Another good shot will finish him," sang out Joe, from a bottom limb of the tree. "Why don't you give it to him in the ear?"

"I will," answered the old scout, and circled around, watching his opportunity. At length it came—the rifle cracked sharply, and Bruin fell on his side, to rise no more.

"Hurrah! That's a big haul!" cried Darry, much delighted. "I was wishing we'd get a bear some time while we were out here."

"It's lucky the bear didn't get Joe," remarked Benson. "They generally come up a tree after their victim."

"I jumped from one tree to the other," answered the youth. "But I had quite an exciting time, I can assure you."

"How in the world did you get here?" questioned Darry, as Joe leaped to the ground. "Did you get through to another cave? Benson thought that might be the case."

"That was the case, Darry. And I've had a wonderful adventure, too," added Joe earnestly. Then he told his story, to which the others listened with close attention. When he came to mention Gilroy, Fetter, and Potts, old Benson uttered a low whistle.

"So that gang has turned up again, eh?" muttered the old scout. "This will be news to Colonel Fairfield. I reckon he'll be glad to be put on guard. If the quartermaster was held up it would prove a big loss."

"Is it true that Colonel Fairfield killed this Gilroy's chum?"

"Perhaps he did. The colonel was in that mix-up, and after it was over Dan Hickey was found dead in the bushes. But it was a fair fight, and the desperadoes knew what to expect when they went in for it."

"When does the quartermaster expect to come through with the money?"

"I don't know, Joe. Like as not it will be soon. And that being the case, we had better not lose time here, but get to the fort just as soon as we can," concluded the old scout.

CHAPTER VI.

DARRY MAKES A DISCOVERY.

As pressed as they were for time, Darry and Joe begged that the bearskin be saved, and did all they could toward helping the old scout skin the beast. With the pelt they took along about twenty pounds of the juiciest steaks.

"It's a pity to leave the rest to the wolves!" sighed Joe. "But it can't be helped. What a feast they will have!"

"I'm going to sling the beast into a tree," replied old Benson. "That may help save it until somebody else comes this way. The soldiers from the fort use the trail yonder, you know."

Soon they were on the way to where Benson and Darry had left Joe's horse. As Joe was tired from his night's adventure, his cousin and the old scout took turns in carrying him behind them. Even then his eyes would occasionally close.

"We can't make the fort to-night, that's certain," said the old scout.

"Not if we pushed on hard?" asked Darry.

"Joe can't push on as fast as that, Darry. He'll want to rest as soon as sundown comes."

"Perhaps I can get a nap at noon, while you two get dinner ready," suggested Joe. "I wonder if we'll meet those rascals anywhere on the road? I hope not, for they'd be certain to recognize me."

"We'll keep an eye open for 'em," responded Benson dryly. "And see to it that your shooting-irons are ready for use."

"Why—do you think they'd attack us?" asked Darry quickly.

"They might—if they thought we were carrying anything of value. To such desperadoes all are fish that swim near their net."

"It's a pity the government can't stamp such a gang out, Benson."

"The government has stamped out lots of 'em, lad. Why, ten years ago none of these trails was safe. Nearly every horseman and stage-coach was held up. To-day you don't hear of a hold-up once in six months."

"Is this Gilroy a very bad man?"

"He is—in a way. He's a well-educated fellow, so I've been told, and not as brutal as some. But he's committed some robberies that have no equal in the history of these parts. Once he painted himself as an Indian and went to the agency, and there collected a lot of money which was coming to the redskins, the agent taking him for Chief Snowbird of the Modocs. The trick wasn't discovered until three days later, when the real Snowbird turned up. Even then it wasn't known who did the trick."

"And how was Gilroy found out?"

"A fellow named Downes, who belonged to the gang, was captured, and he gave the secret away. But it cost Downes his life, for he got away from the soldiers, and while he was in the mountains some of his gang shot and killed him."

At this story both Joe and Darry shuddered.

"What a lawless set!" muttered Joe. "One could hardly believe it unless he saw it with his own eyes."

"In a rough country the men are bound to be more or less rough, lad. Look at California, for instance. To-day it's as quiet and orderly as Massachusetts or Illinois. But in the days of '49 it wasn't that way. Many a miner was held up for his gold dust, and many a miner's secret of a rich find was stolen from him and the miner himself murdered."

"And how long do you think it will take to make this territory perfectly safe?"

"There aint no telling about that, but probably when you are as old as I am now you'll be able to travel anywhere without fear of being stopped. The railroads are a-coming in, towns are building up, and one of these days the desperadoes and stage-coach robbers will all be a thing of the past—and a good job done."

The third horse had been found, and now Joe was riding in his own saddle. The rain of the night before had made the trail dustless, and the air was as pure and sweet as one could wish.

By noon they calculated that they had covered ten miles of the worst portion of the distance to the fort. The ride had been a strain to Joe, and when old Benson called a halt he was glad enough to slip to the ground and throw himself in the shade of a tree to rest. Darry and the old scout lit a fire, and soon had a nice steak preparing for dinner.

"He's asleep," said Darry, a little later, pointing to Joe. "Poor fellow! supposing we let him rest for a couple of hours? I haven't the heart to wake him up."

"All right," answered Benson. The pair ate their dinner without arousing Joe, and after it was over the scout sat down near at hand to smoke his stumpy brier-root pipe, filling it with cut-plug which was as black as coal, and puffing away with keen satisfaction.

Darry was more restless, and having put away the things used in preparing the meal he began an inspection of the neighborhood.

"Be careful," said old Benson, as the youth moved around. "Don't get into trouble, as Joe did."

"I'll keep my eyes open," replied Darry.

Opposite the trail was a tall spur of rocks with something of a series of natural steps leading to the top. Up these steps went the youth. Some of the climbing was difficult, but this he did not mind.

When the top was gained a magnificent panorama was spread out before him. To one side were the tall mountains, hidden in a bluish mist, to the other the vast forests and plains. Northward was the continuation of the gap they were traveling, and southward was a series of foothills, with here and there a stream or waterfall glinting brightly in the sunshine.

"How grand!" he murmured. "What a vast country this is! Thousands upon thousands of people could live here, and nobody be crowded. This would make splendid pasture for cows and sheep, and yet there isn't a single animal in sight."

Beyond the rocky spur was a similar elevation, and presently Darry crossed to this. Here there was a lone pine with several low branches, and he drew himself up and climbed to the top. He

could now see much further than formerly, and his view took in a portion of the trail passed several hours before, as it wound, serpent-like, between the foothills.

"Hullo!" he cried, as he caught sight of something moving on the trail. "Three people on horseback. Can they be the desperadoes Joe met?"

He watched the riders with interest, and at last felt certain they were three men fully armed and wearing slouch hats and light-colored coats. This description tallied with that given by his cousin, and he hastened down to acquaint old Benson with the news.

"Must be the gang," said the scout. "Are they moving this way?"

"Yes."

"Then we had better move on."

Joe was awakened, and leaped to his feet, looking rather bewildered.

"I—I thought I'd take a little nap," he stammered. "I suppose I've slept a good while, haven't I?"

"About an hour and a half," answered his cousin. "Here's your dinner," and he passed it over. "We've got to move on. Those rascals are behind us."

"Behind us!"

"Don't get scared," put in old Benson. "They are a good distance back. Darry discovered 'em from yonder p'int. Eat what you want, and then it will be time enough to start."

The repast was quickly disposed of by Joe, and soon they were in the saddle once more. The long nap had refreshed the lad greatly, and he said he would now be able to ride as far as anybody.

On they went, the trail growing more difficult as the top of the mountain was gained. Here there was a stiff breeze that at times was positively cold, and both boys were glad enough to button their jackets tightly around them.

If all went well Benson calculated that they could reach Hank Leeson's place with ease before dark. This was the cabin of an old hunter and trapper who was known from one end of the Territory to the other. As mentioned at the beginning of this tale, Leeson's place was twenty miles from the fort.

"I could ride right through," said the old scout. "But you boys couldn't do it. If you tried it, you'd be so sore and stiff the next day you couldn't stand up."

CHAPTER VII.

AT HANK LEESON'S CABIN.

At first the boys were inclined to think that the old scout was mistaken—that they could ride as far as anybody. But when, shortly after sunset, they came within sight of Hank Leeson's place both were glad to think that they would have to ride no more for the present.

"I'm sore already," whispered Darry to his cousin.

"So am I—but I didn't want Benson to know it," was the low answer. "That last mile of the trail was awfully rough."

Hank Leeson had seen them coming, and stood at the doorway of his cabin, rifle in hand. He was a tall, thin man, with black eyes that were exceedingly sharp and shrewd. When he recognized Sam Benson he dropped his firearm into a corner and ran to meet the scout.

"Downright glad ter see ye!" he said, shaking hands. "Sam, yer a sight fer sore eyes, thet's wot!"

"And I'm glad to see you, Hank," responded Benson, just as warmly. "How have things been with you?"

"Putty slow, to tell the truth." Leeson looked at the boys. "Two tenderfoots along, I see."

"Yes. This is Joe Moore, brother to the captain up at the fort, and this is Darry Germain, his cousin. Boys, this is Hank Leeson, the best trapper and all-around shot in these parts."

"Oh, come, don't be a-praisin' me so much!" cried Leeson, as he took the boys' hands in a grip that made them wince. "As fer shootin', ye kin do thet yerself as good as anybody, Sam." He looked the boys over. "Glad to know ye, lads. I know Captain Moore downright well, and he's a good soldier."

"I've got news, Hank," put in the old scout. "Joe fell in with Matt Gilroy's gang down near Buckwater Run."

"What!" roared the old trapper. "Do you mean to tell me thet measly crowd is around here ag'in?"

"Three of 'em are—Gilroy, Fetter, and a young fellow named Potts. I think Potts comes from

Denver."

"I know him. His father was Ike Potts, the card-sharp. Thet blood is about as bad as any in the gang. What are they up to?"

"They are laying a trap for the quartermaster when he comes through with the soldiers' money. Joe heard part of their talk by accident. Do you know when the quartermaster is expected?"

"I do not. Ye see, ever since old Cap'n Bissile was held up the army officers keep mum about the movements of the cash-box. I reckon they have orders from Washington to do it."

"I want to warn Colonel Fairfield as soon as I can," went on the old scout.

"Yes, he ought to be warned."

"Can you lend me a fresh hoss?"

"I can."

"Then I'll be off as soon as I've had a bit of supper. The boys can stay with you all night, can't they?"

"They can, an' welcome," replied Hank Leeson.

"You are going to leave us?" queried Joe.

"Don't see any other way to do, lad. The sooner I get the news to the fort the better. I'll come back in the morning after you—or send your brother or somebody else."

"We can ride it alone, can't we?" questioned Darry.

"I wouldn't try it, if I were you. The trail is a rough one, and there are several forks where you might go astray."

"Better stay with me, lads," put in Leeson. "I'll treat ye well, never fear," and he smiled broadly.

"Thank you," returned Joe. "I was only thinking I'd like to see my brother soon, that's all."

"A few hours more or less won't make much difference," said Darry. He had looked around the trapper's cabin, and was interested. "Let us wait." And so it was arranged.

It did not take long to get a bit of supper, and in less than half an hour Sam Benson was off, astride of a powerful steed which had been Hank Leeson's pride for years.

"Jest tell him to go to the fort," said Leeson, "and he'll carry ye thar with his eyes shet," and he gave a parting salute to the old scout.

The cabin was a primitive affair of rough logs, with the chinks filled with dried clay. It contained two rooms, each about twelve feet square. Back of the cabin was a lean-to where Leeson kept his horses, two in number. There was room for more animals, so the beasts ridden by our friends were easily accommodated.

Night had fallen by the time the horses had been rubbed down and fed and the boys had finished their evening repast, and it was dark when they gathered around the doorstep to rest. Hank Leeson sat on a chopping-block, cleaning his rifle and smoking at the same time, and as the three rested Joe told of his adventure in the cave, and Darry took up the tale of the bear.

"You had a lucky escape, lad," said the trapper. "A lucky escape, an' no error. Like as not them desperadoes would have killed ye, had they caught ye."

"I've been thinking—do you imagine they'll come here to-night?" asked Darry.

Hank Leeson shook his head.

"Don't allow as they will. About a year ago I gave thet Fetter fair warnin' if he showed his face about my cabin I'd plug him full o' holes, an' I sent Gilroy the same message. They know me, an' know I won't stand any nonsense. They'll be likely to give me a wide berth. They know I aint got much worth stealin'."

"Then we ought to be safe until the soldiers get the news."

"Reckon you will be, lad," answered the trapper.

He was very much of a quaint character, and for two hours the boys sat up, listening to his tales of encounters with wild animals, desperadoes, and Indians.

"I've had my own little fun with b'ars," he said. "Got in a tree onct, and a b'ar kept me there fer a whole day. I had wounded him in the leg, and in running over a brook I dropped my gun."

"How did you get away?" asked Darry.

"I didn't know what to do fust. The b'ar had me foul, and kept right at the bottom of the tree all the time. With his wounded leg he couldn't come up, and I didn't dare to go down, and there we was—a-lookin' at each other, he a-growlin' and I a-sayin' all kind o' unpleasant things about him."

"Didn't you have a pistol?"

"No, all I had with me at the time was a powder-horn, a matchbox, and my pocket-knife. What to do I didn't know, and I was a-thinkin' I'd be starved out, when a thought struck me to blow him up with powder."

"Blow him up!" cried both boys.

"That's wot, lads—blow him up. I had a handkerchief, ye see, an' into this I dumped 'bout half my powder, an' into the powder I put three matches, with the ends pointing out. Then I tied powder an' matches into a hard lump and watched my chance. There was a flat rock near the roots of the tree, and putty soon Mr. B'ar squatted on this rock. Then I let drive fer the rock, an' the powder an' matches landed good an' hard, I can tell ye."

"And exploded?" put in Joe eagerly.

"Yes, exploded with a noise ye could hear 'most a mile, I calkerlate. The powder flashed straight up into thet ba'r's face, blindin' him and tearing his jaw half off, and the way he ran to save himself was a caution. As soon as he was gone I dropped down and ran for my gun. Then I made after the b'ar and caught him between the rocks and finished him."

This was the last story told that night, and soon after the tale was concluded Leeson showed the boys into the inner room of the cabin, where there was something of a rough bed with a straw mattress.

"Make yerselves ter hum," he said. "It aint no hotel, but it's the best I've got to offer ye."

"But we don't want to turn you out," said Darry.

"I'll make myself comfortable near the door," answered Leeson. "I want to sleep with one eye open—in case those rascals should take a notion to come this way."

The boys were glad enough to rest indoors again and take off the clothing they had worn during the storm.

"Camping out is well enough," declared Joe; "but I don't want too much of it."

"Oh, we've seen the worst side of it," returned Darry. "I expect lots of good times when we get to the fort."

"Oh, so do I, for the matter of that."

After turning in it did not take long for the cousins to get to sleep, and a little while later Hank Leeson also threw himself down to rest. But the old trapper remained close to the doorstep, and slept with his rifle near at hand.

An hour went by, and the darkness and silence continued. There was no moon, and only a few stars were visible. At a distance a few night birds were calling, and occasionally the howl of some lonely wolf could be heard, but that was all.

At last from out of the darkness of the trail came three men on foot. They were Matt Gilroy and his companions. They had tethered their horses in the bushes some distance away. They stole toward the cabin like so many grim and silent shadows.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STEALING OF THE HORSES.

"Go slow, men," came softly from Gilroy. "You know what kind of a man Leeson is."

"Reckon I do know," came in a growl from Fetter. "And I've got an account to settle with him, too."

"I'm pretty certain the boy is here," went on the leader. "But we must make sure if the others are here too, or if they have ridden off to the fort. If they have gone to the fort——"

"Hist!" came in warning from Potts. "You're talking too much. I've heard that this Leeson sleeps with his ears wide open."

"He does," grumbled Fetter; and then the three desperadoes relapsed into silence.

They were advancing upon the cabin from the rear, and each held a ready pistol in his hand, while his rifle was slung over his back. They had seen the boys and Benson head for the trapper's home while it was still light and they were on a high cliff; but darkness had closed in on the scene, and they had come up to the spot in ignorance of what had followed.

Tiptoeing their way they reached the lean-to where the horses had been stabled, and with caution Gilroy went inside. By feeling the animals he soon learned that three had been in use but a few hours before, while the fourth was cool and comfortable.

"Their horses are here," he announced. "And a fourth is here, too."

"That's Leeson's," answered Fetter. "But I thought he had two or three."

"Might as well take them while we have the chance," murmured Potts. "Four nags will bring some money over at Highwater. We can get Gingo to sell 'em."

"Let them out," answered Gilroy. "Without horses they'll have their hands full trying to follow us."

It was no easy task to untie the horses in a place that was pitch-dark, and it took some time to get even the horses belonging to our friends released.

As Fetter and Potts took the animals out, Gilroy worked to untie the sturdy mare belonging to Hank Leeson. This was a pet animal, and not used to strangers. As Gilroy caught hold of the halter she gave a neigh of suspicion.

"Hush!" murmured the desperado, and ran his hand down the mare's nose. But this made her skittish, and she stamped sharply half a dozen times.

"What's up thar?" came in Hank Leeson's voice, and the trapper was wide awake on the instant. "Whoa, Nancy, whoa!"

"Hang the luck!" muttered Gilroy, and ran outside after Fetter and Potts. "He must have been on the watch."

"We must get out!" responded Fetter. "He's a sure-shot, remember. Nothing but the darkness can save us."

"I'm going!" came from Potts, and he leaped on the back of one of the horses—that which Joe had been riding.

"I'm with you," said Fetter, and mounted old Benson's steed. "Come, Matt, and be quick about it."

By this time Hank Leeson was running around the corner of the cabin, gun in hand. His call had aroused Joe and Darry, and they were pulling on their clothing with all speed.

"Something is wrong!" exclaimed Joe.

"It must be those desperadoes," responded his cousin.

The boys were not yet dressed, when they heard a clatter of hoofs and a shot, followed by another.

Then they came out, rifles in hand, to find Leeson reloading near the stable.

"Those desperadoes have been here!" exclaimed the old trapper. "They ran off with your hosses, consarn 'em!"

"Went off with the horses?" repeated Darry. "Did you shoot at them?"

"I did, but the light's against me, and I don't reckon as how I hit anything." Hank Leeson meditated for a moment. "I've half a mind ter do it—yes, I have!" he muttered.

"Do what?" asked Joe.

"Go after 'em on my mare. Would you be afraid to stay here alone if I went?"

"No; go ahead!" cried both boys.

"We'll keep watch while you are away," continued Joe.

"If you can get the horses back it will be a great favor," said Darry. "The three are worth over five hundred dollars."

Without further words, Hank Leeson dashed into the stable, untied his mare and mounted her. Rifle over shoulder and pistol in hand, he dashed away on the back trail, whence the desperadoes had disappeared. Soon he was swallowed up in the darkness, although they heard the hoofbeats of Nancy for several minutes after.

"This is the worst yet," was Joe's comment, when they were alone. "Those fellows are as daring as they are rascally. I never dreamed they would come up in that fashion. I wonder what they would have done if Leeson hadn't woke up?"

"Perhaps we would all have been murdered," answered his cousin with a shudder. "What shall we do, now we are dressed?"

"That depends upon how long Leeson remains away. I move we remain on guard—one at the front of the cabin and the other at the rear. If we keep our eyes peeled they can't come very close, even though it is dark."

"All right, Joe. Keep your rifle handy."

"Don't fear about that, Darry."

They were soon on guard, the one on the doorstep and the other near the lean-to, on a stump. Thus an hour dragged by. To both it was an unusually long while.

"I don't see a thing," said Darry, coming to where his cousin rested.

"Nor I, and I'm getting sleepy. I hardly think Leeson will be back until morning."

"Just what I was thinking. Let us take turns at watching. The one on duty can walk around the cabin now and then, and that will give each of us some sleep."

This was agreed upon, and they tossed up to see who should go on guard first. It fell to Darry's lot, and Joe, hardly able to keep his eyes open, quickly retired, without undressing.

Darry's vigil was certainly a lonely one, doubly so because it was new to him. As he tramped slowly around the cabin, he could not help but contrast this situation with the one he was used to at home.

"I don't know as I'd like to be a night policeman or a night-watchman," he reasoned. "They must be awfully tiresome jobs. And the city isn't near as lonely as this, either, even in the middle of the night." He drew a long breath and looked at his watch. "Gracious, only three-quarters of an hour gone, and I've got an hour and a quarter still to serve! How awfully slow it is! If Leeson—What's that?"

He broke off short and came to a halt, with his rifle in his hands and his gaze fixed on some brushwood a hundred feet to the rear of the stable. He had seen some dark object moving, but whether it was man or beast he could not tell.

"It was something, I'm sure of that," he told himself, after the object had disappeared from view. "If it was a man he must have been crawling on hands and knees."

He wondered if he had better awaken Joe, but hesitated, knowing how sleepy his cousin was. Perhaps the object would go away—if it was a wild beast.

Keeping his eyes on the spot, Darry waited what seemed to him a long time, but which was really but a few minutes. Then slowly the bushes parted and the object came forth, with eyes that gleamed fitfully even in that darkness.

"A mountain wolf!" muttered the boy. "Well, I'm glad it isn't one of those desperadoes."

Taking up a stone he hurled it at the wolf, at the same time shouting to the beast to go away. At once the wolf turned tail and disappeared whence it had come.

"Did you call?" came sleepily from Joe.

"There's a wolf in the bushes back of the cabin," returned Darry.

"Does he want to attack you?"

"I don't know. I just threw a stone at him, and he's slunk out of sight."

By this time Joe was also outside, and the two cousins waited for the reappearance of the wolf.

But the animal was cowardly, and did not show himself again, and presently Joe returned to bed. The remainder of the night passed without anything unusual happening.

CHAPTER IX.

ARRIVAL AT THE FORT.

The morning found the two boys still alone. The sun was well up over the eastern prairie before both were dressed, for they had taken turns at guarding, as agreed, and each had consequently lost half his regular sleeping time.

"Well, what's to do now?" questioned Darry, while they were stirring around getting breakfast.

"I don't know of anything to do but to wait here until we hear from Benson and Hank Leeson," answered his cousin.

Breakfast was soon disposed of, and then they sat down to wait, still keeping their firearms close to hand, in case of unexpected attack. The meeting with the desperadoes had opened the boys' eyes, and they did not intend to be caught "napping" no matter what else happened.

Shortly before ten o'clock Joe espied three horsemen coming down the trail which led to the fort. Both watched the approaching riders with interest, and presently saw that they were soldiers. One wore the uniform of a lieutenant, and the others were privates.

"You are from the fort?" cried Joe, running forward to meet them.

"Yes," was the answer from the lieutenant. "Which of you is Joseph Moore?"

"I am."

"I am glad to know you, Moore. Your brother, the captain, and I are great friends. I am Lieutenant Richard Carrol."

"Oh, I've heard of you," answered Joe, smiling. "Will has often mentioned his chum, Dick Carrol,

in his letters. This is my cousin, Darry Germain. Did old Benson reach the fort last night?"

"He did," answered Lieutenant Carrol, as he shook hands with both boys. "And your brother and a detachment of Company A have gone out to look for Matt Gilroy and his gang. Benson went with them, and I was asked to come down here and escort you to the fort."

"If my brother wants to round up Gilroy's gang he should have come here," said Joe. "The rascals were here last night and stole our three horses."

"Is it possible! And where is Hank Leeson?"

"He went after them on his horse, the only one they didn't get. We are looking for his return at any moment. We promised to watch the cabin until he got back."

"I see." The lieutenant turned to the privates. "Men, you may dismount and tie up the horses for the present. We won't be going back just yet."

Lieutenant Carrol leaped to the ground, and one of the privates took charge of his steed. The young officer was a handsome fellow, with a smiling face, and both Joe and Darry took to him at once.

"Yes, Captain Moore and I are great friends," he said. "You see, we went through West Point together, and we have been more or less together ever since. He has often told me about you two fellows, so I feel as if I've known you for a long while." He looked at Joe. "You must have had quite an adventure with those desperadoes at the cave."

"I did have," answered Joe. "I hope my brother and the others round them up. Do you know if they came anywhere near here?"

"No, they struck off on another trail—the one the quartermaster is expected to use. You see, he is to come in to-morrow with that money."

"To-morrow! Then they'll have time to warn him."

"That depends upon circumstances. The quartermaster is an odd sort of a fellow, and sometimes changes his mind about routes. He may come in the way we expect, and he may take some entirely different trail."

"We can't say when Leeson will be back," put in Darry. "But it seems to me it is our duty to stay here until he returns; don't you think so, Joe?"

"I do, Darry. But he will probably be back before long."

It was only a few minutes later when one of the privates came forward with the information that a man was coming through the underbrush skirting the timber. It was Hank Leeson, and he held his mare to a walk, for Nancy was all but exhausted.

"Mornin', lieutenant!" he called out, as he drew closer and saluted. "Come for them boys, I reckon."

"I did, Leeson. They tell me you've been after the gang. What luck?"

Hank Leeson shook his head dubiously. "Reckon I didn't have any luck, lieutenant. Got one shot, but if I hit it didn't count much. They had the best o' me in the timber, and they got away, not only with the hosses belonging to the boys an' Benson, but likewise with their own, which they had tethered in a hollow not far away."

"Then our horses are gone!" cried Darry, his face falling.

"That's it, lad. I'm sorry, but I did my best."

"Oh, I don't blame you, Leeson. But—but if we haven't any horses, how are we to get to the fort?"

"We'll take turns at carrying you," replied Lieutenant Carrol.

Hank Leeson was as worn out as his mare, and while one of the soldiers cared for Nancy the old trapper sank down on his doorstep and told his story. He had followed the desperadoes up hill and down for fifteen miles, and gotten one shot at Fetter, which, he believed, had struck the rascal in the arm. But the party had turned on the trail while passing through a wide patch of timberland, and on coming out at the other side he had been unable to locate them again. Then, as it was almost morning, he had thought best to return to his cabin, to ascertain how the boys were faring.

"Which road were they near when you saw them last?" asked Lieutenant Carrol.

"Over at Hunkwater's Rock," answered Leeson. "Moving toward the Knob."

"Humph! Then I am afraid Captain Moore won't round them up very quickly."

"My brother didn't go near that trail?" questioned Joe.

"No, he's on a trail three miles further north. Still, the desperadoes may turn north."

"That's so," said Leeson.

As there was nothing to keep them at the cabin, the boys were now anxious to move on to the fort, and a short while later Lieutenant Carrol set off. One private carried Joe and the other Darry; and, as the horses were powerful beasts, good progress was made.

"Hurrah! The fort!" cried Joe, as he caught sight of a large flag waving in the distance. He was right; and soon they could see the tall stockade quite plainly. It was three hundred feet long by two hundred feet wide, and surrounded by a ditch twelve feet deep. Inside of the stockade were the fort proper and a dozen other buildings, including the officers' quarters, the men's quarters, the messroom, hospital, and the gymnasium, and also a good-sized stable.

"Why, it's a regular town in itself!" murmured Darry, when they got inside.

"That's right, a town of exactly two hundred and seventy-five people," answered the lieutenant. "And of that number two hundred and sixty are soldiers belonging to three companies, three are officers' wives, two are Indian scouts, and the rest are cooks and other helpers."

Colonel Fairfield, a tall, dignified old officer, had been told of their approach, and now came from the officers' quarters to meet them.

"I am glad to see you, boys," he said, as he shook hands warmly. "If the story Benson told is true you have had quite a few adventures in reaching here. I am sorry your brother is not here to meet you, Joseph; but he was anxious to go after the Gilroy gang, and I let him have his way."

"You haven't heard about all of our adventures, colonel," said Darry, and told of the stolen horses.

"Worse and worse!" returned the colonel, stroking his mustache thoughtfully. "That proves that the gang—or what is left of it—is as desperate as ever. Those fellows will never give up until they are either arrested or shot down."

"I hope my brother doesn't get into trouble with them," said Joe anxiously.

"Well, a soldier has to take some risks, my boy. But Captain Moore is as shrewd as he is brave, so you need not fear for his safety. Come right in; Mrs. Fairfield will be glad to see you. She wants to hear from all the folks at home."

The boys followed the old officer into the quarters, and here received an equally warm greeting from Mrs. Fairfield, whom they had met in Chicago. Dinner was soon served, and while the lads were satisfying the inner man they had to tell their whole story over again, and also tell all the news from home.

"While you are here, boys, you must make yourselves perfectly at ease," said the colonel. "I know your fathers will expect me to be a father to you. As for Captain Moore, I will allow him to be with you as much as military discipline permits."

CHAPTER X.

THE RESULT OF A SWIM.

To the boys, who had never visited a military quarters before, the fort proved of great interest, and they were glad, after the meal was over, to have Lieutenant Carrol take them around. This occupied some time, and when they had finished it was time for the evening parade.

This was quite an affair, and the two lads joined the ladies of the place to witness it. Everybody turned out, in uniform as clean as possible, on inspection. The drums rolled, the fifers struck up a lively air, and the three companies, headed by a major, marched around the stockade several times and then to the parade-ground in front of the gates. Here the command went through the manual of arms and through a number of fancy evolutions.

"It's splendid!" murmured Joe. "Everything moves like clockwork."

"It makes me almost wish to be a soldier," answered Darry. "But if a fellow had this day in and day out I am afraid he would grow tired of it."

"You are right, Darry," said Mrs. Fairfield. "The colonel has to think up a great number of things whereby to interest his men. They get up all sorts of contests, and concerts and theatricals, and go hunting when they can get the chance—anything to keep them from growing too dull."

"Have they had any real military duty to do lately?" asked Joe.

"Not for over a year. Then the Modoc Indians got up a sun-dance, and they had to march over to Kedadmina and stop it. Two Indians were killed and one soldier was badly wounded. Since that time the Indians have been quiet."

"But the Indians may rise again."

"Probably they will—one is never sure of them. As one old general has said, 'The only safe Indian is the dead Indian.'"

The boys were assigned to a small room next to that occupied by Captain Moore and Lieutenant

Carrol. The apartment was neatly furnished with iron cots, an iron washstand, and a small wardrobe for extra clothing. Fortunately the extra clothing they had carried had not been stolen, so they were not as bad off as they would otherwise have been.

Joe was anxious to hear from his brother Will, but had to be patient. Yet he was not greatly worried, for he was almost certain that the soldiers would fail to fall in with the desperadoes, each having taken a different trail.

The day following their arrival the boys fell in with several soldiers who were going fishing up a mountain stream not far away, having obtained special leave of absence for that purpose. The soldiers, who were named Biggs, Ferry, and Lambert, were glad enough to have the boys for company.

"We'll show you some good sport," said Lambert, who proved to be something of a leader. "No better fish in these parts than those you can catch in Rocky Pass River."

The boys had no fishing-tackle, but Lieutenant Carrol fitted them out, and soon the party was on the way. The soldiers were to be gone but four hours, and so struck out at a gait that taxed Joe and Darry to the utmost to keep up with them.

"It's the air does it," explained Biggs, when Darry spoke about the speed. "After you've been out here a while you'll eat like a horse and feel like walking ten miles every morning before breakfast. I tell you, the air is wonderful."

"It certainly is bracing," answered Darry. "I noticed that as soon as we began to climb the foothills."

A walk of half an hour brought them to Rocky Pass River, and they journeyed along the bank until they came to a favorite fishing-hole.

"Here we are," said Lambert. "Now for the first fish!"

"Ten cents to whoever catches it!" cried Joe, and placed a shining dime on a nearby tree stump. At this the three soldiers laughed.

"That dime is mine," declared Ferry, who was the first to throw in.

"Perhaps," answered Biggs. "But I reckon I've got just as good a chance now."

"Here I come," put in Lambert, and threw over his friends' heads. Hardly had his bait gone down than he felt a tug and whipped in a little fish not over six inches long.

"Mine!" he cried.

"It isn't worth ten cents!" cried Biggs and Ferry; nevertheless Lambert pocketed the coin, amid a general laughing.

The boys now went to a spot a little above where the soldiers were fishing, and set to work on their own lines. Just as Ferry announced a fine haul, they threw in, and soon everybody in the party was busy, bringing in several kinds of fish, big and little, including some fine trout of a variety the boys had not before seen.

Inside of an hour everybody had all the fish he wanted, and then the soldiers said they were going to take a swim. The boys were willing, and soon the whole crowd were in the water, calling out and laughing and having a good time generally.

"Don't go too far down the stream," cautioned Lambert. "The falls are below, and you might get caught in the rapids."

"All right, we'll surely remember," answered Joe.

"I'll race you across the river and back," said Darry, a little later.

"Done!" cried Joe. "To what point?"

"To that willow hanging down near the big rock."

So it was agreed, and in a minute both boys were off. They were good swimmers, and the race interested the soldiers, so that they gave up sporting around to watch the result.

At this point the stream widened out to nearly two hundred feet, so the race was not a particularly short one. The water ran quite swiftly, and they soon found they had to swim partly up stream to prevent being carried below the willow.

Darry made the mark first, and, touching the willow, started on the return. Joe was close behind, and now it became a neck-and-neck race between them.

"Go it, boys!" shouted Lambert. "Do your best!"

"I bet on Joe," said Ferry.

"I bet on Darry," added Biggs.

Hardly had the wager been made when Joe shot ahead. Slowly but surely he drew away from his cousin.

While the sport was going on nobody had noticed a large tree that was drifting rapidly down the middle of the river. Now, however, Lambert saw the danger.

"Look out!" he cried wildly. "Look out! A tree is coming down upon you!"

Joe heard the cry, and looking up the stream managed to get out of the way of the big piece of driftwood. But Darry was not so fortunate, and in a twinkling the youth was struck and carried out of sight.

This accident came so quickly that for the moment nobody knew what to do.

"Darry! Darry!" cried Joe. "Where are you?"

"He went under!" shouted Lambert. "The tree branches struck him on the head."

"He'll be drowned!" gasped Biggs. "What shall we do?"

By this time the tree had drifted past the point where the soldiers were stationed. Joe had now struck bottom with his feet, and at once went ashore.

"We must do something!" he panted. "We can't let Darry be drowned!"

"He must be caught under the branches," said Lambert. "As the tree hit him it turned partly over. Perhaps—There is his foot!"

He pointed to the tree—and there, sure enough, was Darry's left foot, kicking wildly above the surface of the river. Then the boy's head came up, but only for a moment.

"Save me!" he spluttered, and immediately disappeared.

"This is awful!" groaned Joe. "Can't we throw a fishing-line over the tree and haul it ashore?"

"A good idea!" answered Lambert. "We'll take two lines."

He caught up the fishing-tackle, and lines in hand ran along the river bank until he was below the tree. The others followed, and helped him to get the lines into shape. Then a quick cast was made, but the lines fell short.

"Too bad!" came from Joe. "Quick, try once more!"

"The tree is turning over again!" shouted Biggs, and he was right. As some other branches came into view, they beheld Darry, caught in a crotch and held there as if in a vise.

Another cast was made, and then a third, but all in vain. Then the tree, with its helpless victim, moved forward more rapidly than ever, in the direction of the roaring falls, which were but a short distance off.

CHAPTER XI.

SOMETHING ABOUT DRILLING.

"Darry is lost! Nothing can save him now!"

Such was the agonizing thought which rushed through Joe's brain as he watched the progress of the drifting tree as it moved swiftly toward the falls of Rocky Pass River.

He knew the falls to be over thirty feet high. At the bottom was a boiling pool which sent up a continual shower of spray. Nobody entering that pool could survive.

Darry, too, realized his peril, and continued to call for help. Had he been able to loosen himself he would have leaped into the water, but he was weak and helpless, and his voice could scarcely be heard above the rushing of the rapids.

Joe and the three soldiers continued to run along the river bank, over rough rocks that cut their feet and through bushes which scratched them in scores of places. At last they came out on a point directly above the falls.

The tree still spun on, and Joe closed his eyes to shut out the sight of what was to follow.

Suddenly Lambert let out a shout:

"The tree is caught! It has stopped moving!"

Again Joe looked, and he saw that what the soldier said was true. The under branches of the drifting tree had hit some sharp rocks below the river's surface, and one branch had wedged itself fast.

This catching of the driftwood bent down the limb that held Darry, and soon they saw that the imperiled boy was free from the grip which had held him. But what to do next the lad did not know. To swim to the shore was out of the question.

"I—I can't make it," he told himself, as he panted for breath. He was so exhausted that he felt very much like fainting away. But he knew he must keep his senses, or all would be over with him.

"Darry! Darry! Are you much hurt?" called out Joe.

"Not much, but I—I can't—swim—ashore!" was the gasped out answer.

"I'll try the fishing lines again," said Lambert, and prepared them once more. A first cast did not reach Darry, but a second did, and he caught the sinkers to the lines with a good deal of satisfaction.

"Will they hold?" questioned Joe.

"I hope so," answered Lambert. "Anyway, it's the best we can do."

Letting the lines run out as far as possible, the soldiers and Joe moved up the bank of the stream to where there was a series of rocks projecting into the water a distance of several yards.

"Now brace me, and I will haul in," said Lambert. Then he called to Darry to help them by swimming as well as he was able, with the lines caught around him, under the arms.

"All right, I'm ready!" cried the boy, and dropped into the stream, taking care to steer clear of the tree.

Lambert hauled in slowly but steadily. The line straightened out and became taut, and looked as if it might snap at any instant. Joe's heart came up into his throat, and he breathed a silent prayer that his cousin might be saved.

"Here he comes!" muttered Lambert at length, and they could see that Darry's feet at last rested on the sandy bottom of the river. They continued to haul in, and soon he was safe. When on shore he pitched himself on the grass, completely exhausted.

"Oh, how glad I am!" cried Joe, as he knelt beside his cousin. "I was almost certain you'd be drowned!"

"It was a narrow escape!" answered Dairy, when he could speak. "When the tree first struck me I was almost stunned, and when I realized what had happened I found myself fast and hardly able to budge. Just look there!" And he showed a deep scratch on one side of his body and a heavy red mark on the other. "But never mind," he went on. "I am thankful my life was spared!"

It was a sober-minded party that dressed and journeyed back to the fort, Joe carrying both his own fish and those his cousin had caught.

"I am afraid that will end fishing and swimming for a while," said Biggs. "The soldiers never go near the falls, for they all know the danger, but Colonel Fairfield is too strict to run any chances."

"Don't say anything about the adventure on the tree," said Darry.

"Will you keep mum?"

"I will, and so will you, won't you, Joe?"

"Yes."

So it was arranged that nothing should be said, that the soldiers' little recreation might not be interfered with, for both boys saw that they had little pleasure at the best.

"A fine haul for you boys!" said Lieutenant Carrol, as he surveyed the catch. "I must go myself and try my luck. I haven't been fishing this summer."

"It's a splendid place for bites," said Joe.

"I know it. But you have to be careful up there. There's a nasty fall in the river. If you went over that you'd never come out alive."

"Yes, we saw the fall," answered Darry, and gave a shudder in spite of himself.

Again at sunset there was a parade, similar to that of the day before. After it was over the boys procured guns and had Lambert put them through their "paces," as he called it.

"First we'll drill a bit without guns," said the old soldier, for Lambert had seen sixteen years of service. "Toe this line, heads up, chest out, and little fingers on the seams of your trousers. That's all right. Now then, Eyes Right! When I say that turn your eyes to the right, but don't move your faces. Now, Eyes Front! That's good. Eyes Left! Eyes Front! That's first-rate."

"But we're not moving," said Darry.

"Now we'll move. Watch me. Right Face! Do you see how it's done? Balance on the heel, this way, and swing around. Now then, Right Face!"

The two boys came around like well-trained old soldiers.

"Good, boys, good. Now then, Front Face! Good. Left Face! That's not so well. Front Face! Now here's another, About Face!"

So the drilling went on, until the boys could move as Lambert wished them to. Then they began to march and to wheel right and left. At last he put the guns in their hands and let them march with the pieces, and then showed them the manual of arms.



"AT LAST HE PUT THE GUNS IN THEIR HANDS AND LET THEM MARCH WITH THE PIECES."

"You'll learn in no time," said the old soldier, when his off time came to an end. "You've crowded a dozen lessons into one."

"And I feel it," said Darry. "I'm going in to rest." And he went, followed by Joe. All told, the boys had enjoyed the drill very much.

Joe was somewhat worried when bedtime came and still nothing had been heard of his brother. Yet Colonel Fairfield told him not to mind the prolonged absence.

"But should not your quartermaster be here?" asked the boy.

"He may come in to-morrow morning," answered the colonel.

The next day dawned cloudy, and by noon a steady rain was falling. The boys hardly knew what to do, and, after watching a drill and some performances in the gymnasium, went back to the living quarters. They had hardly entered when there came a shout from the guard at the stockade.

"Captain Moore is coming, with the quartermaster!" was the cry.

"Hurrah, it's Will!" shouted Joe, and ran out despite the rain to welcome his brother.

Soon the soldiers came up, mud-stained and tired. They embraced half of Company A, and in their midst was the quartermaster of the regiment, with two attendants. Each of these three carried heavy saddle-bags, filled with government money for the soldiers, for payday was now due.

"Joe!" cried Captain Moore, as he dismounted and caught his brother by the hand. "I am glad to see you safe and sound."

"And I am glad to see you," answered Joe.

"I will be with you soon—I must first report to Colonel Fairfield," went on the young officer, and lost no time in seeking the commandant.

His story was soon told, and it speedily spread to all parts of the fort. Along with his men and old Benson he had looked in vain for the Gilroy gang for a whole day. Then he had come upon them just as they were preparing for an attack upon the quartermaster and his escort. The gang had numbered eight, and in the fight which had followed two of the crowd had been wounded, although all had made their escape by swimming their steeds over a dangerous mountain torrent. Of the soldiers three had been wounded, one man quite seriously. The young captain had received a bullet through his hat.

"It was Matt Gilroy himself who fired that shot," said Captain Moore. "And I won't forget it when next we meet."

Old Benson had been in the thickest of the fight from beginning to end, and it was he who had wounded one of the desperadoes while the fellow was in the act of carrying off one of the money-bags. The rascals had fought hard over that money-bag, but in the end had been compelled to drop everything and ride to save their lives.

As soon as Captain Moore had made his report, another detachment was sent out, to follow the desperadoes, if they could be found. This detachment was fifty strong and under the leadership of Lieutenant Carrol. The lieutenant was a man who had met numerous desperadoes in his time, and it was felt that he could do the work much better than the average soldier.

CHAPTER XII.

DEER HUNTING.

With his brother at hand, Joe felt much more at home than formerly, and the captain's presence also made a difference to his cousin. Old Benson remained at the fort for the time being, and did what he could to please the boys.

He took an especial interest in their shooting, and would often set up a target on the prairie for them to practice on.

"You'll do first-rate in a little while," he said. "And as Lambert says you take to drilling, it won't be long afore you're both out-and-out soldiers."

"I don't know as I care to be a regular soldier," answered Darry. "I wouldn't mind it for a while, but to enlist for five years—why, that's another thing."

"Lambert has enlisted four times. When his time is out he'll be in service twenty years."

"And yet he is only a private," put in Joe.

"He is content, and doesn't want to go any higher. He likes the life, and he told me not long ago that he wouldn't know what to do with himself if he was out of Uncle Sam's employ."

One day after another passed, until the boys had been at the fort a little over a week. They now knew the drills and the "time-card" as well as anybody, and often practiced on the apparatus in the gymnasium.

"It's not so bad, after you once get used to it," said Joe. "The men are a good deal of company for each other."

"It's odd to see so many men and so few women," returned Darry.

"Some of the men don't want any women around, so I've been told. They are like some of the old-time miners who used to move out of camp as soon as a dress-skirt showed itself."

One day Captain Moore and old Benson got permission to go off on a hunt, and took the boys along. All of the party were mounted, and each carried a saddle-bag with part of the necessary camping outfit.

"If it's possible to do so, I'll show you some big game," announced the old scout. "Although I'll allow big game is mighty scarce, even in these parts."

"Have the hunters shot down everything?" asked Joe.

"A good bit, lad. You see, many used to come out here just to shoot for the sake of killing. I've known a party of six men to kill twenty or thirty buffalo and then leave the carcasses to the wolves. That was a shame."

"So it was!" cried Darry. "One or two buffalo would have been enough."

"Some hunters never know when to stop," put in Captain Moore. "They shoot as long as anything shows itself. If it wasn't for that these hills would be filled with buffalo, deer, bears, and all other kind of game."

The morning was clear and cool, and everybody in the party was in the best of spirits. The course was down into a broad valley, in the middle of which flowed the Rocky Pass River, and then up a series of hills leading to Tom Long Mountain—a favorite resort in this territory for sportsmen.

"Do you think we'll see or hear anything of those desperadoes?" asked Joe of his brother, as they rode along side by side.

"It's not likely," answered the young captain. "As soon as they learn that the soldiers are after them they'll take to their heels in double-quick order. They haven't any taste for meeting our regulars."

"It's queer that this Matt Gilroy should go in for this sort of life—if he is as well educated as you say."

"Some men don't like anything better, Joe—they wouldn't earn their living honestly if they could. It's queer that this is so, but it's a fact. Those men have no regular homes, although many often talk of settling down. Generally they die with their boots on, as the saying goes."

By noon the party had covered fifteen miles and were well into the hills. They came to a rest beside a fine spring which flowed from a split in the rocks. Near at hand was some dense brushwood, and old Benson rightfully guessed that it would not be difficult to beat up some birds.

"You can now try your luck at aiming," he said to the boys, and led the way into the dense growth. Soon a flock of birds arose directly before them, and both Darry and Joe took a quick shot, bringing down seven of the quarry. Then the scout fired, and five other birds dropped.

"Pretty good for a starter!" cried old Benson, as they stalked around picking up the game. "That target practice has made you both pretty steady. Just a round dozen, all told. That's a-plenty for dinner, I reckon."

Captain Moore was also pleased when told of what his brother and his cousin had accomplished. "You'll make great hunters in time," he said. "The main thing is to keep your nerve when big game confronts you. You know you have the best of a bird or squirrel, or anything like that. But when it comes to a buffalo, or a bear——"

"I know all about bears," interrupted Joe, and at this there was a general laugh. "If I ever meet another bear I want to be well prepared for him," he continued.

"Generally a wild animal won't fight," went on the young captain. "But when one is cornered he is apt to get very ugly; eh, Benson?"

"Right you are, captain. I was once cornered by a buffalo, and had all I could do to save myself."

The old scout calculated that they would strike some game that afternoon, and he was not mistaken. About two o'clock they sighted several deer far up the hillside.

"Fine, plump animals," said Benson. "If we get a couple of them we can be well satisfied."

It was decided that they should move around in a semicircle, so as to get to leeward of the herd.

"If we don't do that, the deer will scent us and be off in no time," explained Captain Moore.

Their horses were tethered in the brush, near some trees, and the party of four started out on foot. The way was rough, but the boys did not mind this. Their sole thought was upon the deer, and each resolved to bring down one of the game, no matter at what cost.

It was no light task to reach a spot from which to shoot. They had to cross several depressions on the hillside, and here the undergrowth was so heavy that progress at times seemed impossible. Once Darry went into a hole up to his waist, and came out with several rents in his coat, where the thorns had clung to him.

"Oh!" he muttered. "Oh!"

"Are you hurt?" questioned Joe quickly.

"Not much, but I reckon I'm a good deal scratched up," answered Darry, with a wry face.

At last they gained a point well to leeward of the quarry, and Benson brought the party to a halt.

"We'll creep in as far as we can," he said. "But keep your guns ready for use, and as soon as one fires the others had best fire too, for the deer won't wait after one shot. Which will you take, captain?"

"I'll take the one near the big rock," answered Captain Moore. "Joe, you had better take the one on the knoll."

"I will."

"I'll take the one rubbing his side with his prong," put in Darry.

"And I'll take the one coming through the brush," finished old Benson. "Now then, forward. Make no noise, and be sure your gun doesn't go off and hit somebody else instead of the deer."

Rifles in hand, they crept through the underbrush and down toward the glade in which the deer were feeding.

The animals did not become suspicious until they were less than a hundred yards away. Then, of a sudden, the leader threw up his head and began to sniff the air.

"Now fire," said Benson in a low tone.

At once the four rifles came up, and each hunter took steady aim. Darry and Joe fired at the same instant, and the young captain and Benson discharged their pieces immediately after.

The aim of the two older hunters was true, and two deer fell dead after going less than six steps. But the other game was only wounded, Joe's deer in the side and Darry's in the flank, and they bounded away up the hillside.

"Missed!" groaned Joe, and slipped another cartridge into his firearm. Darry did the same, and

both fired a second time. Then, seeing how badly the deer were wounded, they ran after the animals.

The course of the deer was straight for the timber down the mountain-side, and through the brush crashed quarry and boys until another hundred yards were covered. Then, coming to a rocky cliff, and being unable to leap to the top, the deer came to a halt.

"Do you see 'em?" panted Darry, almost out of breath with running.

"Yes—there they are!" returned Joe. "See?"

"I do. They can't get up the rocks. Joe, we've got 'em after all. We must shoot—Gracious!"

The boy broke off short, and with good reason. The deer had spotted them, and now without warning turned and ran straight for both, as if to gore them to death!

CHAPTER XIII.

A FISH AND A SNAKE.

"Look out, Darry, or he'll kill you!"

"Look out for yourself, Joe!"

These cries were followed by two shots, as both the young hunters discharged their weapons. But in their haste the aim of each was poor, and the bullets flew wide of the mark. Then the maddened deer came closer, and both boys took to their heels, running as they had never run before.

"Hi! what's up?" came in old Benson's voice.

"The deer are after us!" yelled Joe. "Shoot 'em quick!"

Hardly had the lad spoken when he felt one of the deer close behind him. He leaped to one side, and the animal charged past with great vigor, considering how badly he was wounded. But that charge was his last, for Benson's rifle spoke up, and the animal fell lifeless where he stood.

In the meantime Darry was having his hands full with the second deer. The youth had been unable to reload, and now he found himself in a thicket, with the deer fairly on top of him. He caught his firearm by the barrel and hit the animal a resounding blow on the head. This made the deer stagger back and pause.

"Help! help!" yelled the boy. "Somebody shoot this beast!"

"I'm coming!" came in Captain Moore's voice. "Where are you?"

"Here, in the bush! Quick, or he'll stick me to death!"

The deer was now charging with lowered head. He was in a fearful rage. As he came on there was a sharp report, and the young captain burst into view, his rifle barrel still smoking. Then the deer gave one last leap into the air, and came down upon Darry. The fall knocked the boy senseless.

While Captain Moore was removing the weight from Darry's body, the old scout came up, followed by Joe.

"Hullo, he got it, did he?" said Benson. "Is he badly hurt?"

"I hope not," answered the young captain. "You see, the deer didn't touch him until I fired. Then he leaped up and knocked my cousin down."

"Hope there aint any bones broken."

The deer was removed, and Benson went off to get some water. When he came back Captain Moore and Joe were rubbing Darry's wrists. The water was dashed into the unconscious youth's face, and soon he gave a gasp and opened his eyes.

"The deer?" were his first words.

"You are safe," said the captain reassuringly. "The deer is dead."

"Oh!" Darry uttered a sigh of relief. "I was thinking he was goring me to pieces."

"You had a narrow escape," put in old Benson. "If it hadn't been for the captain he would have mauled you for certain. Didn't you hear me yell to be careful?"

"I thought it would be an easy matter to bring him down, after he was wounded," said Darry, still gasping for breath.

"Any bones broken?" questioned Captain Moore.

"I—I guess not." Darry gave a sigh and sat up. "How did Joe make out?"

"I am all right," answered that individual. "Benson did the trick for me though. Benson, I owe you a good deal."

"And I owe you a good deal," said Darry, turning to his cousin.

"I'm glad I came up, Darry," answered the young captain. "After this both you and Joe must be more careful. If either of you had been killed I would never have forgiven myself for bringing you out on the hunt."

"I want to give you both a bit of advice, and I want you to remember it too," came from the old scout. "Never get too close to big game until you are certain of what you are doing, and be extry careful of big game that is wounded and cornered. Even a sneaking fox will turn on you if he sees there is no other way out of his difficulty."

"I'll remember that," answered both Joe and Darry, and they did remember, and thus was one peril of big-game hunting abolished.

Darry felt too weak for the time being to do much, so Joe led him back to where they had left the horses, while Captain Moore and old Benson took upon themselves the task of bringing in the four deer. Each was a beautiful prize, and the quartet made an imposing sight when hung up on a couple of tree branches.

"The colonel will like this haul," said the young captain. "It will mean prime venison for some days to come. Benson, I wish we could get some of it back to the fort without delay—so we can put it on ice and keep it nice."

"I'll take 'em all to the fort to-night, if you say so," answered the scout. "I can take one on my horse, and load the other three on one of the other animals."

"Then do that, and while at the fort ask the colonel if he will give me permission to remain out until Saturday. Tell him we think we can bring in something for all hands to enjoy."

"I'll do it," said the old scout.

Soon the deer were packed on the horses, old Benson having first cut some steaks from the smallest of the game, to leave behind.

"Take good care of yourselves while I am gone," he said on departing. "And you, Joe and Darry, mind what I told you about getting cornered." Then he was off, and a turn in the mountain trail soon hid him from view.

"A fine old fellow," was Joe's comment, when Benson was gone.

"He is that," answered the young captain. "I liked him from the first time I saw him, and I have never had cause to regret it. He is a good hunter, an excellent scout, and has done us many a good turn."

"What shall we do while he is absent?" questioned Darry.

"Oh, we can try our hand at small game and we can fish!" answered the young captain. "As it is, I reckon both of you would just as lief take it easy until morning."

"I would. That deer on me has made me feel sore all over."

They were soon in camp again, and while the boys rested Captain Moore stirred around and showed them how the soldiers prepared their meals. He cooked the steaks to a turn, and boiled a pot of coffee, and these, with some crackers they had brought along, made a most excellent meal. Being in no hurry, they took their time over the repast, and it was dark long before they finished.

"It's going to be a fine night, so we can sleep under the trees without fear," said the young captain.

"Don't you think some wild animals will attack us?"

"Not if we keep our camp-fire burning."

The boys brought in plenty of brush and some heavier wood, and arranged it so that it would burn for a long while, doing this by forming the stuff into something of a circle. Then the horses were looked after, and each retired, with his blanket rolled around him to keep off the mountain dew, which was already showing itself.

When the boys awoke the sun was shining brightly into their faces. For a moment each stared at the other.

"Gracious, I never slept so soundly in my life!" cried Joe. "I couldn't have done better in a bed at home."

"Nor I," returned his cousin. "I can tell you, sleeping in the open air when it doesn't rain is all right."

But when Darry got up on his feet he changed his tune. The fall of the day previous, combined with the night air, had made him woefully stiff, and it was a good half-hour before he became

limbered up.

They found Captain Moore already stirring, and the kettle over the fire was boiling merrily. The captain himself was trying his luck at a brook not a great distance off.

"I saw some fish in here some weeks ago," he explained. "I thought I might get a couple for breakfast. But you lads will have to wait until I strike luck."

"I'm willing to wait," said Joe. "There is nothing to do, is there, until Benson gets back?"

"Nothing that I know of, unless you want to fish or go after some small game. I want to hear what he has to say. If the colonel won't let me stay out, I'll have to return to the fort to-night."

It did not take long for Captain Moore to land several good-sized specimens of the finny tribe, and these the boys took turns at preparing for eating, while the captain continued to fish. The balance of the morning was passed at the brook, and, strange to say, the captain and Joe were both quite successful, while Darry hardly got a bite.

"I'm going to try my luck further up the stream," announced the boy. "I believe we are all fishing too closely together."

"That doesn't seem to hurt my luck," said Joe.

Darry was soon climbing the rocks leading up the brook. The way was rough, but he was growing used to this life in the open air and he enjoyed even the hardship, if such it can be called.

"That ought to make a good fishing-hole," he said to himself, as he reached a point where several big rocks hung over the water's edge. "It's dark down there, and that's what some fish like."

He prepared his bait with care, and then dropped his line into the hole. Almost immediately he felt a nibble, and, giving a jerk, found he had caught something that was both large and powerful.

"Gracious, it must be a whopper!" he muttered, as the fish darted hither and thither. Then he braced back on the rock, to play the game, for bringing in the catch at once seemed out of the question. The pole bent greatly, and he was afraid it would snap on him.

He could not stand on the slippery rock very well, and so stepped behind it, on a number of loose stones. Hardly had he done so when he heard a strange hissing. Looking down, he saw a snake glide from under the rock. In a moment more the angry reptile faced him.

CHAPTER XIV.

OVER THE MOUNTAIN TOP.

Darry was much alarmed, and with good reason. Never before had he faced such a snake, and the reptile looked ready to spring upon him at any instant.

What to do the boy did not know, yet instinctively he leaped back to the top of the rock. Then the fish gave a jerk which almost took him from his feet.

"Joe! Will!" he shouted. "Come this way! I'm in a pickle!"

"What's the matter?" shouted Captain Moore, and soon he and his brother were coming forward as quickly as they could.

In the meantime Darry was having his hands full, for the big fish was bound to get away. At the bottom of the rock lay the snake, with head raised and mouth wide open. Its eyes shone like diamonds.

"A snake! Kill it!" shrieked Darry.

"A snake?" echoed Joe. "Where?"

"At the bottom of this big rock. Oh, my, he's going to come up!"

"I see him," put in Captain Moore.

As he spoke the snake made a leap for the top of the rock. As the reptile went up, Darry went down, and ran along the brook's edge, still with his fishing-pole in his hand.

Catching up a sharp stone, Captain Moore flung it at the snake, hitting the reptile in the tail. At once the thing whirled around, and now forgetting Darry it turned on its assailant.

"He's coming for you!" ejaculated Joe. "Run, Will, or you'll be bitten sure!"

"I'm not running from a snake," answered the young officer, and in a trice he whipped out his pistol. As the snake came on he let drive. His aim was true, and the snake dropped with its head half severed from its body.

"Good for you!" said Joe, and now he picked up a stone as large as his hand. This he dropped directly on the quivering head, and thus ended the battle, although the body of the snake

continued to wriggle for a long while afterward.

With white face and set teeth, Darry continued to play his catch and he was still at it when Joe and his brother came rushing up.

"Did the snake bite you?" questioned the young captain. "Why didn't you pull in?"

"I've got something big on," answered Darry. "I didn't want to miss it."

"Well, I never!" gasped Captain Moore. "And you didn't let go even with that snake at your heels? Well, you like a fish better than I do, I can tell you that."

Again the pole bent and threatened to break, but Darry knew what he was doing, and promptly let the fish have more line. Then he wound in, and as the fish unexpectedly came close to shore he gave a sudden strong, steady sweep, and up came the prize on the rocks, flapping and flopping violently.

"My, what a whopper!" cried Joe. "He must weigh at least seven or eight pounds!"

"He felt as if he weighed about forty when he was in the water," returned Darry, a little crest-fallen that the catch was not larger.

"That's the biggest fish I've ever seen taken out of this stream," said the young captain. "You can be proud of it, Darry. But to hold on when that snake was behind you——" He shook his head.

"Oh, I knew you'd come up and take care of that, Cousin Will."

"But I might have been too late."

"Was it a poisonous one?"

"Some claim they are poisonous, but the surgeon up at the fort says not. Still I wouldn't want to risk a bite."

"Perhaps there are more around," suggested Joe.

"No, the peculiarity of this variety of snakes is that they always travel alone. If they meet they fight until one or the other is dead."

"Did you ever see such a fight, Will?"

"I did, when I first came to these parts. I was riding over a rocky trail when my horse suddenly stopped, nearly throwing me. On looking ahead to find out what had frightened my animal, I discovered two of these snakes. They were facing each other, with mouths wide open and fangs showing. Each was so interested in the other that neither noticed me or the horse. They faced each other for fully a minute, and during that time began to hiss louder and louder. Suddenly they sprang at each other, and one snake was stung in the eye. He curled himself around the other snake's neck, and in an instant both were in a tight ball. They rolled around and around among the rocks. Once in a while a head would show itself, and then there would be more hissing. After ten minutes the ball fell gradually apart, and then one snake crawled slowly away, more dead than alive. The other snake proved to be dead, with both eyes torn from its head."

"Didn't you kill the other snake?" asked Darry.

"I did. That's the first and only battle I ever saw between snakes, and it was terrible while it lasted, I can tell you that."

Fishing over, they went into camp, and here rested until old Benson came back.

"The colonel was tickled to death to receive so much deer meat," said the old scout. "And he says you can stay until Saturday night if you wish. His lady said she had been wanting some venison for several weeks."

Captain Moore felt glad to think he could be out four days more.

"We'll have a grand time now," he said. "Benson, we can go right over yonder mountain, can't we?"

"To be sure," answered the scout.

"Is the hunting good over there?" asked Joe.

"Yes, lad. There used to be some buffalo there."

"Good! Let us get a buffalo by all means!" cried Darry.

"You go slow about tackling a buffalo, especially a bull," said the young captain. "If we do sight a buffalo you let Benson manage the whole affair."

It was not long before the party were off once more, up a trail which led directly to the mountain top. Here traveling was difficult, and both riders and horses were glad to rest at frequent intervals.

When the top was gained the sun was just sinking in the far west. The sight on every side was a glorious one, and as the captain had a small field-glass with him, they could see for miles.

"There is the fort," said Joe, after looking through the glass. "I can see the flag quite plainly."

In the west were more mountains, and between these the valley for which they were bound. Timber and underbrush were dense in spots, while at other points the mountain sides were covered with bold, blackish rocks, with here and there luxuriant moss of several hues. Springs and brooks were numerous, so there was no danger of a water famine.

"I can make out some game over yonder," said Darry, when he had the glass adjusted to his sight.

"What is it?"

"I can't see very plainly."

"Hand over the glass," said old Benson, and took a careful look. But the setting sun now cast a deep shadow between the mountains, and he was unable to tell what it was.

"Mountain deer, most likely," he said. "We'll find out to-morrow—if the good weather holds out."

"Do you think we'll have a storm?" asked Joe quickly.

"We'll have something; don't you think so, captain?"

"I think we'll have more wind than rain," returned Captain Moore.

"If we have a high wind, will it be safe right on the mountain top?" questioned Joe.

"We won't stay here," said old Benson. "I know of a much better camping-place. Come, while it is still a little light." And they set off once more.

The place the old scout had in mind was close beside a cliff. The wall of rocks was twice as high as their heads, and on either side was a growth of heavy timber. There was a spring at hand and a grassy patch which promised them an easy bed, providing it did not rain.

"If it storms we can seek the shelter of the cliff," said old Benson. "It won't be as comfortable as a house or cabin, but it will be a good deal better than being right in the open."

The boys were glad enough to rest after the wearisome ride over the top of the mountain, and hungry for the meal the old scout took upon himself to prepare.

When the fire was lit it burned up lively, blowing the sparks in several directions. As soon as he finished cooking the meal Benson put out the blaze.

"Too much wind," he said, in reply to a question from Joe. "I don't want to set the whole mountain side on fire."

Benson was right about the wind, which was now sweeping strongly through the tops of the tall trees. Presently it came lower, and shook up the brushwood. The night birds began to fly around, uttering their shrill cries. The old scout listened to the birds with some concern.

"It's going to be a big blow," he said to Darry.

"You are sure?"

"Yes. The birds are afraid of it. See how they flutter around? That's a sure sign."

"Birds must know a good deal, Benson."

"They do, lad—a heap sight more than folks gives 'em credit for. We could learn a good deal from them, if we'd only set our minds to it."

They took their time about eating, having nothing else to do. Then Benson cared for the horses, putting them in the shelter of the brush, but away from the big trees.

At last it began to blow in earnest, and presently they heard a tree limb here and there snap with a loud report. Then the wind became so furious they were glad enough to huddle under the cliff for shelter.

"It's coming now!" shouted old Benson suddenly. "Hold fast to your hats, boys, or you'll never see them again. And sit down on the traps!"

And in a moment more the fury of the wind storm was upon them.

CHAPTER XV.

THE RESULT OF A HURRICANE.

Both Joe and Darry had witnessed many a blow, but nothing to compare to that which now swept through the valley and up the mountain side. The velocity of the wind was simply terrific, and it was well that old Benson had cautioned them to hold on to their hats and sit on their traps, otherwise all would have been blown away to parts unknown.

"Say, but this is fierce!" gasped Darry, after several minutes had passed.

"It's a regular hurricane," said Captain Moore. "I've been out in them before. Fortunately they do not last over a quarter or half an hour. Down on the prairies of Kansas they would call it a cyclone. Here, however, it can't get the sweep that it can on the level."

"Hark! what is that?" put in Joe, as a tremendous crashing reached their ears.

"That's a tree in the forest going down," answered old Benson.

"There goes another," said Darry, as more crashing was heard. "I am glad we didn't go into the timber. It's more dangerous than lightning."

"So it is!" shouted Benson. It was with difficulty that he made himself heard. "Here comes the worse of it!" he added.

A strange humming now filled the air, followed by twigs and flying branches. Overhead it was unusually dark, and they could scarcely see one another. Joe and Darry kept close together and clasped hands. Captain Moore was on one side of them and old Benson on the other.

As the wind struck the cliff it sent a shower of loose stones in all directions. Then it tore through the undergrowth where the horses were tethered. Next it seemed to hit the trees fronting the cliff. One tall monarch of the forest was twisted completely from its roots and began to topple.

"See, the tree is coming on top of us!" shrieked Joe.

His words were drowned out in the fury of the wind and the crashing of the tree. The next moment the monarch of the forest came down on the cliff with a bang, cracking the stone in several places. The bottom limbs caught those under the cliff and pinned them fast.

To both boys it seemed as if the end of the world had come. They rolled over, one on top of the other, and for several seconds lay dazed. Then they tried to get up, but found themselves unable to do so.

"Get off of my chest!" gasped Joe, who was underneath.

"I can't—I'm pinned down!" panted Darry.

"Boys, are you safe?" came from old Benson, who was also caught.

"I—I guess so!" answered Joe. "But it's a tight squeeze." Then the youth called out to his brother, but no answer came back.

"Will must be hurt!" he exclaimed, his heart rising in his throat. "Will! Will! Where are you?" he continued.

Still there was no answer, or if so the fury of the wind drowned it out completely. The boys tried their best to move, but could only budge a few inches.

In five minutes the fury of the blow spent itself and the last of the wind sent the fallen tree rolling along the cliff a distance of several rods. This released Joe and Darry, and they arose to their feet dazed and bewildered and scarcely knowing what to do next. It was now raining and darker than ever.

"Benson!" called out Joe, "where is my brother?"

"The captain must still be under the tree," replied the old scout. "He was next to you when the tree came down, wasn't he?"

"He was, but I believe the wind carried his hat off, and he made a dive for it. That's the last I saw of him."

Staggering to his feet, Joe looked around, trying to pierce the darkness. Darry followed him, and old Benson also got up. The scout had received a nasty cut on the shoulder, from which the blood was flowing.

In a few minutes Joe found his brother. The captain lay on the rocks unconscious, a big lump on his forehead, where the largest of the tree's branches had struck him. Kneeling at his brother's side, the boy made a hasty examination.

"He's alive!" he said. "But he must have been struck a terrible crack."

There was little to do excepting to bathe the unconscious officer's head, and this was done. In the meantime Darry assisted old Benson at binding up the wounded shoulder.

"Take the tree off!" Such were the first words Captain Moore uttered when he returned to consciousness. It was some time before he could sit up.

"You are all right, Will—the tree is not on you," said Joe soothingly.

"But it came down right on top of me."

"Yes, it came down on all of us."

"Anybody killed?"

"No. Benson has a cut on the shoulder, and you were knocked out. Feel the lump on your head."

The young captain did so.

"Phew! But that's a regular goose-egg, isn't it?" he muttered. "I suppose I can be thankful that I am alive."

"We can all be thankful for that, Will."

"It was the greatest blow I ever experienced—in more ways than one," said the captain. "I see it is raining. We had better go back to the cliff for protection."

"Don't do it!" cried old Benson, from out of the darkness. "The tree struck the cliff a heavy blow, and we don't want that down on our heads next."

"No, let us give the cliff a wide berth," said Darry. "I'd rather remain right out in the open and get soaked than take any more risks."

"The rain won't amount to much," said Benson. "It never does after such a hurricane."

The scout was right, and in less than half an hour after it had begun the downpour was over and the stars were struggling forth in the sky. Without delay a camp-fire was lit, and the blaze did much toward making them comfortable. It was found that Benson's wound was by far the worst, yet the old scout said it would not interfere with his outing.

"I've had lots of 'em in my time," was the way he expressed himself. "Lots, and I aint dead yet. 'Pears to me I'm about as tough as a pine-knot."

It was found that the horses had not suffered in the least from the storm, although they had been much frightened. Soon they calmed down, and by midnight all was as quiet as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. But Captain Moore and old Benson carried the marks of the adventure for many days after.

On the following morning no one felt much in the humor for hunting, and half a day was lost in "bumming around," as Joe expressed it. This gave all a good rest and put the horses in fine fettle, and when they started out after the midday meal all were once again in high spirits.

That night found them on the edge of what old Benson called the buffalo ground, a broad valley where the grass was thick and of a peculiar richness. On the way they had shot a number of birds and also a few small animals, but nothing of importance. Once some deer had been sighted, but the game was too far off to be pursued.

As they expected to remain at this point until ready to return home, the old scout proceeded to put up a shelter of brush, which, when completed, was almost as comfortable as a cabin. On the bottom were strewn pine boughs, which gave the shelter a peculiar odor.

"Best thing in the world for colds and weak lungs, that smell," said Benson. "I've never known it to fail." The boys declared that the odor made them sleep "like logs."

"It's queer we haven't seen any Indians," remarked Darry. "I thought these mountains were full of them."

"They were full, before the fort was established," answered Benson. "But the kind that are in this neighborhood don't like white men very much, and they only come around the fort when it's necessary. But we may meet some after buffalo. An Injun will do a heap to get a critter like that."

The old scout said it would be useless to go out in a body to look for buffalo, and so it was arranged that he should first go over the ground alone, leaving the captain and the two boys to look for smaller game.

This settled, Benson soon set off, and a little later Captain Moore, Joe, and Darry took their way along some bushes skirting a small water-course. They went on foot, leaving their horses tethered near the shelter.

"I will go up one side of the stream, and you can go up the other," said the captain. "By doing that we'll be sure to stir up anything within a hundred yards of the water."

The boys agreed, and soon each member of the party was hard at work, on the hunt for any small game the vicinity might afford.

It was not long before they gained a spot where the underbrush along the brook was thick. Here the stream divided into two branches, and, without knowing it, the captain and the boys became gradually more and more separated, the brush and small trees hiding each from the other.

"I don't see much," said Joe, after half a mile had been covered. "Those little birds aren't worth wasting powder and shot on."

"It looks to me as if somebody had gone over this ground," returned Darry. "See here, aren't those fresh footprints?"

"I believe they are. And see, here are the prints of several horses' hoofs. Benson didn't come this way, did he?"

"I don't think he did."

"Then there must be other hunters not far off."

They continued on their way, coming to a halt where the branch of the brook entered a small, rocky canyon.

"No use of going further," said Joe. "Let us retrace our steps."

"Where can your brother be? I haven't heard him for some time."

Joe set up a yell, and both listened attentively. No answer came back. Then both called in concert. Still the silence continued.

"It's mighty queer," was Joe's comment "Let us go back. Perhaps he's in trouble."

CHAPTER XVI.

CAPTAIN MOORE'S ADVENTURE.

In the meanwhile, never dreaming of the danger at hand, Captain Moore pursued his way up the other branch of the water-course. Here the underbrush was even more dense than where the boys were, and consequently he did not think it strange that he heard nothing of his brother and his cousin.

The fact that he stirred up no game nettled him, and he pushed on, determined to bring down something before he went back.

Suddenly he espied something moving in the patch of wood ahead of him. Rifle in hand, he moved cautiously in the direction.

As he did this, a man glided out from the bushes to his right and followed him as silently as a shadow.

The man was Gus Fetter. The desperado was fully armed, and his face was black with hatred of the young army officer.

As the wood was gained, Captain Moore paused to locate the object he had seen.

But before he could do this, he was caught from behind and his rifle was wrenched from his grasp.

"Fetter!" he ejaculated, as he caught sight of the desperado.

"Up with your hands, Captain Moore!" growled the rascal savagely. "Up, I say! I've got the drop on you!"

Fetter had thrown the captain's rifle to the ground, and now stood upon it. In his hands he held his own weapon, and the muzzle was aimed at the young officer's head.

Realizing that discretion was the better part of valor, Captain Moore threw up his hands promptly, at which the desperado grinned wickedly.

"Where did you come from, Fetter?" demanded the captain.

"From not far away, captain."

"What do you mean by treating a United States army officer in this fashion?"

"I've got a score to settle with you, captain. Don't forget that."

"Are the rest of the gang around?"

"They are."

Following his last words, Gus Fetter gave a long, clear whistle, followed by two shorter ones. At once an answer came back from the woods, and in a few seconds Matt Gilroy appeared.

"Hullo, so you've got him," sang out the leader of the desperadoes. "A good haul. How are you, Captain Moore? Delighted to see me, I suppose."

"Not at all glad to meet you—considering the circumstances," answered the young officer, trying to keep cool, although he realized that he was in a dangerous situation.

"Well, you're honest about it, anyway," said Gilroy with a brutal laugh.

"Have you been following our party?"

"You had better not ask too many questions, captain."

By this time Potts and two other men were coming up. One of the latter carried his left arm in a sling. Captain Moore's recognized him as a fellow who had been wounded in the raid on the quartermaster's party.

The desperadoes consulted among themselves for a few minutes, and then Captain Moore was ordered to march on.

"To where?" he asked.

"You'll see when you get there," answered Fetter. "Now move, or, by the boots, I shoot you down where you stand!"

Seeing it would be worse than useless to resist, the young officer did as ordered, and the whole party moved away from the water-course and took to a trail leading back to the side of the mountain.

Presently they came upon a number of horses, and here they mounted. There were two steeds without riders, and Captain Moore was ordered to the back of one of these. All rode off in a bunch, the prisoner being kept in the center of the party. He had been searched and his pistol taken from him, also his pocket-knife, field-glass, and his money and jewelry.

In less than quarter of an hour a split in the mountain side was gained. To the rear was something of a cave, the entrance overgrown with brush and vines. At the mouth of the cave the party came to a halt, and were met by several other desperadoes.

"Now you can get down," said Gilroy. "Fetter, I guess we had better bind his hands behind him."

"You are going to bind me?" queried Captain Moore.

"And why not? You are such a nice chap, captain, we don't want to part with you just yet."

"Why are you going to keep me a prisoner?"

"Well, don't forget that we hold you responsible for that little mix-up when we were after the quartermaster's money-bags."

"I only did my duty, Gilroy."

"Perhaps; but if it hadn't been for you and your men our gang would have been about twenty thousand dollars richer than we are to-day."

"And I wouldn't have this lame arm," growled the fellow who had been wounded.

"As I said before, I only did my duty," repeated the captain calmly. "Even if I hadn't arrived, don't you suppose the quartermaster would have done all he could to defend himself?"

"Certainly; but his party numbered only three. However, we won't talk now. We have other things to do. Get into that cave. And don't try to escape, or it will be the worse for you."

With a downcast heart the young officer entered the cave, which was an old rendezvous of the desperadoes. Inside were a rude table and a couple of benches, and he threw himself down on one of the latter. One of the gang, Potts, put himself on guard outside, rifle in hand. The others separated into two parties, and went off again.

"Can they be going after Joe and Darry, or after Benson?" was the question the captain asked himself.

He waited until the hoofbeats outside had entirely ceased, then called to Potts.

"Where are they going?" he asked.

"That's Captain Gilroy's business," was the answer.

"Oh, so you call Gilroy captain now?"

"We do."

"How many men is he captain of?"

"About thirty, if you're anxious to know."

"Thirty! There are not that number of desperadoes within three hundred miles of this place."

"All right, if you know better than I do."

"Has the captain gone off for the rest of my party?"

"Perhaps he has."

"It won't do him any good to make them prisoners."

"I reckon he knows his own business best, Captain Moore."

"And what will you get out of this affair, Potts?"

"Me? I'll get my share when we make another haul."

"Do you expect to make another haul soon?"

"As I said afore, better ask the captain. We're organized into a regular company now, and all the privates like me have to do is to obey orders. You know how it is in the regular army."

"A company of desperadoes," mused Captain Moore. "That's something we haven't had out here in years."

Potts would talk no more after this, but sat down on a rock to smoke his pipe and continue his guard duty.

The young captain had had his hands bound tightly behind him, and, try his best, he found himself unable to either break or slip his bonds.

He was anxious concerning himself, but he was even more upset concerning his brother and his cousin.

"If they kick up a fuss, more than likely Gilroy and the others will shoot them down!" he groaned. "It's too bad! I thought we would have a splendid time hunting, and here we are, falling into all sorts of difficulties."

As impatient as he was, he could do nothing but stalk around the cave. The place was five yards wide by over a hundred feet long. To the rear was a rude fireplace, the smoke drifting through some wide cracks overhead. A small fire was burning, and he kicked a fresh log on the blaze, which soon gave him more light. Then he sat down again.

As he rested, his eyes roamed around the rocky apartment, and presently fell upon a sheet of paper lying under the table. Curious to know what it might contain, he bent down backwards, and by an effort secured the paper and placed it upon the table. Then, by the flickering flames, he tried to make out the writing it contained.

The letter—for such the sheet proved to be—was a communication which had been sent to Matt Gilroy by a writer who signed himself Mose. It ran as follows:

"The plan will work perfectly, and all we must do is to wait until the money is at the fort. I am sure the soldiers will leave as requested, and the defense will amount to little or nothing. Will see to it that Colonel Fairfield is drugged, and will treat Captain Moore and the other officers the same way, if I can get the chance."

CHAPTER XVII.

THREE PRISONERS.

It did not take Joe and Darry long to retrace their steps at the water-course. They continued to call to the young captain, and once Joe shot off his rifle as a signal, but, as we know, no answer came back.

"I can't understand this at all," said Joe, when they halted near the shelter. "I didn't hear him do any firing, did you?"

"Not a shot," answered Darry. "He must have gone away from the brook instead of along the bank."

The two boys hung around the shelter for some time, and then decided to follow up the trail left by the young officer.

This was easy for part of the distance, but soon the footprints became so indistinct that they came to another halt.

"Stumped!" muttered Joe. "We might as well go back to the shelter and wait till he returns. One thing is certain, he hasn't found any game, or we would have heard the firing."

Tired by their long tramp the boys sat down in the shelter, thinking that Captain Moore would return at any moment.

Thus an hour was passed. It was now noon, and Joe and Darry set to work to prepare dinner for themselves.

The repast was just finished when Joe let out a cry of alarm.

"Matt Gilroy!"

He was right. The captain of the desperadoes had appeared, followed by several others.

The boys were taken completely off their guard. Darry made a clutch for his rifle, but on the instant Gilroy had him covered.

"Leave the gun alone!" cried the rascal. "Leave it alone, or it will be the worse for you."

"What do you want?" questioned Joe.

"We want you to behave yourselves," answered Fetter, who was in the crowd.

"You played us a nice trick that time you escaped from the cave," growled Gilroy, eying Joe darkly.

"Do you blame me for wanting to get away?"

"Hardly. But I'll warrant you won't get away again."

"Then you consider me your prisoner?"

"I do."

"Oh, Joe, do you think they met Will——" began Darry, and then stopped short.

"Yes, your brother is waiting to meet you," said Fetter, addressing Joe.

"Then he is also a prisoner?"

"Yes."

Joe's heart sank within him.

"If old Benson was only here!" he muttered.

Still guarding the boys, the desperadoes took their guns and also a pistol the young captain had loaned his brother.

"Now get on your horses," commanded Gilroy. "And mind, if you try to play us foul both of you will get shot."

"Are you going to take us to Captain Moore?" asked Darry.

"Perhaps."

The desperadoes would answer no more questions, and in a few minutes the whole party was off for the cave. Both Darry and Joe wished to leave behind some sort of message which Benson might pick up, but they were watched so closely they could do nothing.

When the cave was gained the boys were told to go inside and keep quiet.

"Joe! and you too, Darry!" cried Captain Moore. "I was afraid of this."

"No wonder we couldn't find you!" said Joe, and told of the hunt he and his cousin had made.

"These rascals are up to some deep game," whispered the young captain. "I just picked up a message which Gilroy must have dropped," and he told what the sheet contained.

"If I were you I'd burn the paper," said Darry. "Then he won't know you have seen it."

"No, I would like to keep the sheet——to show to Colonel Fairfield if I can manage to get away."

"Who wrote the message?"

"I have no idea. There used to be a half-breed around here whom the soldiers called Mose, but I thought he was dead. He was thick with the Modoc Indians."

"Then if he was the writer that would show that the Indians are going to help the desperadoes, wouldn't it?" asked Joe.

Before his brother could answer, Matt Gilroy stalked into the cave.

"I told you not to talk," he growled, as he cast his eye on the table and then around the rocky floor. "You can't get away, so it won't do you any good to plot against me and my men."

He was evidently looking for the sheet of paper, for presently he lit a torch and went over the whole cave carefully.

"See anything of a bit of paper around here?" he asked presently.

"What kind of a paper?" questioned Darry.

"Something with writing on it."

"I haven't seen anything."

"What was the writing about, Gilroy?" asked Captain Moore.

"That's my business. Then you haven't seen the paper? All right," and the desperado stalked from the cave again.

"That was a close shave," whispered the young captain. "And it proves that the paper is valuable and that he is worried about it."

Slowly the balance of the day wore along, and at nightfall one of the men brought them a scanty supply of food.

They ate sparingly, fearing the food might be drugged, but no evil effects followed the meal.

At the mouth of the cave sat two of the desperadoes on guard, each with his rifle across his knees.

"A dash into the darkness might save us," suggested Darry, but the captain shook his head.

"No, those fellows are too good shots," he said. "We will have to remain as we are until something turns up in our favor."

Our friends wondered if the desperadoes would remain about the cave all night. The other party which had gone off when Gilroy went for Joe and Darry had not yet returned, and the leader of the gang seemed to grow anxious concerning them.

"Something has happened to them," he said to Fetter. "Perhaps we had better send somebody off on the trail to find out what's up."

So it was agreed, and Fetter was the man chosen for the mission.

As may have been surmised by some of my readers, the other party had gone off to watch for old Benson and make him a prisoner. The crowd numbered three, and were desperadoes well acquainted with that territory.

The old scout had spent several hours in a vain endeavor to locate some buffalo, when, on resting in the crotch of a tree, he saw the desperadoes approaching.

The rascals were tired out with their search for the scout, and came to a halt directly under the tree.

"It's a fool errand," old Benson heard one of the men say. "Matt Gilroy ought to have been satisfied with corralling Captain Moore and those boys."

"The captain wants to make a grand round-up," answered another of the men. "He told me that if we missed Benson the scout might make trouble."

Benson listened to this conversation with intense interest, and soon learned the truth—that Captain Moore was already a prisoner, and that another party had gone off to bring in Joe and Darry.

"This is a nice state of affairs," he thought. "These rascals mean mischief. I wish I could get the drop on them. I'd soon teach them a thing or two."

He watched the men as a cat watches mice, and, when the party of three moved on, stole after them like an Indian on the warpath.

The desperadoes skirted the brushwood, but did not go out on the grassy slope of the valley, fearing that the old scout might be near by in hiding and see them.

They were a shiftless lot, and soon came to another halt, under some small trees. Here they threw themselves on the ground, and while two of them smoked their pipes the third indulged in a nap.

Not a great distance off was a spring of pure cold water, and presently one of the men got up and walked over to this to get a drink.

"My chance for number one!" muttered old Benson, and crawled after the desperado. As the man turned the corner of a number of rocks, he came up behind, clapped his hands over the fellow's mouth, and bore him to the earth.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BENSON PUTS SOME MEN IN A HOLE.

The man whom old Benson had attacked was taken completely by surprise, and he went to the ground easily. But, once down, he struggled fiercely to release himself, and at the same time did his best to cry out for assistance.

"Silence!" commanded the scout in a whisper. "If you yell, it will go hard with you."

The desperado now saw who had attacked him, and his face changed color. But he continued to struggle, and was on the point of breaking away when the old scout hit him a heavy blow on the ear, which bowled him over and rendered him partly unconscious.

"Hi! did you call?" came from the other man who had been smoking.

Old Benson looked at the man before him, and saw that the fellow would be unable to do anything for several minutes to come.

"Yes," he answered, in a rough voice. "Here's something funny to look at. Come quick."

At once the second man leaped up, and without stopping to pick up his rifle came to the spring. Old Benson quickly stepped behind a bush, out of sight.

"Hullo, Riley, what's the trouble?" cried the second man when he beheld his prostrate companion.

He bent over Riley, and while he was making an examination old Benson came behind him and threw him as he had thrown the first desperado.

But the second man was "game," and the struggle lasted for several minutes. At one time it looked as if the old scout would get the worst of the encounter, but in the end he triumphed and the rascal was disarmed.

All the time the struggle was going on Benson had been afraid the third man would rouse up, especially as the second called several times for help. But the rascal had now fallen into a heavy sleep, and heard nothing.

What to do with the two desperadoes before him the old scout did not know, until he suddenly thought of a big cave-like hole he had discovered that very morning, while hunting for buffalo tracks. The hole was fifteen to twenty feet in diameter and twice as deep, and once at the bottom he felt certain the desperadoes would have considerable trouble in getting to the top.

"Come with me," he said to the second fellow. "And no monkey shines, if you know when you are well off."

"Wot yer goin' to do wid me?" growled the desperado.

"You'll see. Your blood is so hot it needs cooling off," answered the old scout.

He forced the man along, and soon the big hole was reached. Much against his will, the rascal was forced to drop to the bottom.

"Now, if you try to climb up I'll shoot you," said Benson, and ran back swiftly to where the second rascal was just getting out of his unconscious state.

Before the other desperado could realize what was coming he, too, was down in the big hole. Old Benson made certain that each of the men was relieved of all his weapons.

"Now, I'm going to keep watch on you," he said, as a warning. "Be careful of what you try to do."

"Don't leave us here!" pleaded Riley. "A buffalo or a bear might fall in on us."

"You've got to take your chances on that," answered Benson.

The next movement of the old scout was to go back to where the third man was sleeping. It was an easy matter to secure all the weapons belonging to this fellow. Then Benson procured a rope from their outfit, and bound his feet together and then his hands. During the latter operation the rascal awoke.

"Wot yer doin'?" he demanded sleepily, and then, seeing the old scout, stared in open-mouthed astonishment. "Let go o' me! Wot did yer tie me up fer?"

"You keep quiet," said Benson, with a broad smile over the trick he had played.

"Whar's Riley an' Nason?"

"Not far off."

"Did they go ter sleep too?"

"You can ask them when you see them, Anderson."

"So you know me, do yer?"

"I do, and I haven't forgotten that affair at Mountain Meadow," went on old Benson, referring to a shooting in which Anderson had been the guilty party.

At these words the desperado winced.

"Well, now ye have got me fast, wot yer goin' to do with me?" he questioned.

"I'm going to ask you a few questions, Anderson, and I want you to answer me straight, too. If I learn you've given it to me crooked, I'll fix you for it, remember that."

"Wot do yer want to know?"

"Where are Gilroy and the rest of your crowd stopping?"

"Wot do yer want to know that fur?"

"Answer the question—and tell me the truth," and old Benson looked sternly at his prisoner.

"At a cave near Bald Top," returned Anderson sulkily. "But I don't know how long they were goin' ter stay there."

"Where were they going to take Captain Moore?"

This question came as a surprise to the desperado.

"Wot do yer know about dat?" he cried.

"Answer the question."

"Goin' ter take him to dat same cave, first."

"And then?"

"Dey was bound fer Lone Creek, up to where old Cimber onct had a claim."

"You are telling me the truth? Remember, if you put me on the wrong trail——"

"It's the truth, Benson. But, say, don't be rough on me. I aint such a bad egg. Dat shootin'——"

"I know all about you, Anderson. Now come with me."

Reaching down, the old scout untied the rascal's feet, that he might walk, and then forced Anderson to journey to the big hole.

Here they found the other two desperadoes sitting at the bottom, growling over their luck and speculating upon what old Benson intended to do next.

"If you leave us here we'll die of hunger and thirst," said one.

"No, you won't," answered the old scout. "You've got your hands to work with, and if you aint lazy you can dig your way to the top inside of twenty-four hours."

"And our hosses?"

"I'll take care of them, Riley. If you want 'em again you can get 'em by applying at the fort."

"At the fort!"

"Exactly, and in the meantime we'll keep them in exchange for the animals Matt Gilroy stole, when I and my friends were stopping at Hank Leeson's cabin."

With the desperadoes safe for the time being at the bottom of the hole, old Benson set off without delay for the cave near Bald Top Mountain, as it was called for years by Rocky Mountain pioneers. He rode his own horse, leading the others by his lariat, which he always carried with him.

He fully realized that there was danger ahead, and that if he wanted to assist his friends he must move with caution. He knew that Captain Moore had been made a prisoner, but whether or not Joe and Darry had been captured also was still a question.

Coming in sight of the spot where the cave was located, he dismounted and tied all the horses in the woods at the foot of a slope. Then he crawled forward until he was within a hundred feet of the entrance to the cave.

He was just in time to see Fetter depart on his mission. The desperado passed within fifty yards of where the horses were stationed, and for several minutes Benson was fearful that the animals would be discovered. But Fetter was looking in another direction, and so saw nothing of the steeds.

As darkness had come on, the desperadoes had lit a camp-fire near the entrance to the cave.

Two men still remained on guard. The others took it easy, and did very much as they pleased. All waited for Riley and the others to return with Fetter, bringing in old Benson as a prisoner.

As the scout heard the talk about himself he chuckled grimly and grasped his rifle tighter than ever.

"Reckon you'd be surprised to know I was so close," he muttered. "Well, if it comes to a mix-up, I'll try to hold up my end, just you see if I don't!"

CHAPTER XIX.

ESCAPING IN THE DARKNESS.

It was after midnight when the camp settled down to rest. Fetter had not returned, and Matt Gilroy was much worried in consequence. Yet he was tired out, having lost a good portion of the night previous in traveling, and he lay down with the others.

The guards at the entrance to the cave had been changed. Those now there were two young men, recruits to the desperadoes' organization.

Inside of the cave Captain Moore, Joe, and Darry, having untied each other's bonds, held a long consultation, the upshot of which was that they intended to escape if the deed could be accomplished.

"There is no use in telling you that we will run a big risk," said the captain. "But as for myself, these rascals are plotting against Colonel Fairfield and the soldiers at the fort, and I feel it my duty to do my best toward getting away and warning my commander."

"Whatever you do, Will, I will back you up, so far as I am able," was his brother's answer.

"And I will back you up, too," came from Darry. "But we must be cautious, for these desperadoes will not hesitate to shoot, and shoot to kill." And the boy shivered in spite of himself, for no

matter how brave a person may be he seldom cares to run the risk of losing his life.

The prisoners had been ordered to keep to the back of the cave, but after all but the guards had retired Captain Moore made bold enough to walk carefully to the mouth of the place.

"Hi, you want to keep back there," growled one of the guards, promptly raising his rifle.

"Don't be hard on us," pleaded the captain. "Let me get a little fresh air. It's vile in the back of the cave."

"Orders were to keep you out of sight," growled the second guard.

"All right, I'll go back as soon as I've cleaned out my lungs."

While the captain was speaking he was peering around sharply, trying to locate the other desperadoes and ascertain what the chances of escape really were.

As he gazed first to one side and then the other, he caught sight of a hand waving in the air. A second later he made out the head and shoulders of old Benson, as the scout rose to his feet behind some brushwood.

The thought that the scout was at hand to assist them cheered the young officer wonderfully, and he drew a deep breath of satisfaction.

"Are you going back soon?" growled one of the guards.

"Yes," answered the captain. "But I say," he went on, "why can't we come to terms?"

"Don't want to make any terms with you," growled the other guard.

"It might be better for you to do so."

"We know our own business best, captain. You just go back as you was ordered to do. If you don't ___"

"I don't feel safe in the cave, men, to tell the truth. What is that pounding overhead?"

"Pounding overhead?"

"Yes."

"Don't know of any pounding. Do you, Ike?"

"Nary a bit," replied the other guard.

By this time Joe and Darry were just behind the young officer.

"Watch out," whispered Captain Moore. "Old Benson is outside, in the bushes on the left."

"Good for him!" whispered Joe joyfully.

"What are you talking about?" demanded one of the guards.

"I want to know about that pounding overhead," said Captain Moore. "I don't want the roof to cave in on us."

He spoke so decidedly that both of the guards were deceived.

"Nobody is up there," said one of the two. "It must be some wild animal."

"Can't one of you go up and look?" asked the young officer.

"You want the chance to get away," was the suspicious answer.

"How can we get away, when we are unarmed and you have that rifle," went on the captain, speaking loudly, for old Benson's benefit. "It won't take you a minute to look."

The men, however, refused to budge.

"We'll stay right here," said one, and the other nodded affirmatively.

In the meantime old Benson had crawled closer, until he was directly behind the pair.

Now of a sudden he leaped between them, and as quick as a flash caught their rifles and twisted the weapons from their grasp.



"HE LEAPED BETWEEN THEM AND CAUGHT THEIR RIFLES."

As the old scout did this, the young captain also leaped in, followed by Joe and Darry.

The guards struggled, but with four against them could do little or nothing. One, however, had a powerful pair of lungs, and before he could be stopped, set up a loud cry of alarm.

"Come with me!" cried old Benson. "Be quick, or it will be too late!"

He led the way to the wood where the horses were tethered, and the captain, Joe, and Darry came close behind him.

Hardly had they gotten away from the guards when the whole camp was in alarm.

"What's the trouble?" demanded Matt Gilroy, leaping to his feet and catching up his rifle.

"The prisoners have escaped!" answered one of the guards. "We were attacked by some men from behind. There they go!"

"Stop!" roared the leader of the desperadoes, and raised his rifle. But before he could take aim our friends were behind the shelter of the trees.

It took but a few seconds to loosen the horses, and as the captain and the two boys had long since relieved themselves of their bonds they were soon in the saddle and following the old scout, who seemed to know the way perfectly, despite the darkness.

"It was lucky you came up, Benson!" cried Joe, as they dashed along.

"Wait, we are not yet out of this trouble," answered Benson. "Hark! they are following!"

He was right. Gilroy and several of his men had rushed to their horses, and were now coming along the forest trail at a good rate of speed.

But their horses were no better than the animals our friends rode, so the desperadoes did not succeed in cutting down the distance between the two parties, and at last gave up the chase.

"It has been a most stirring adventure from start to finish," said Captain Moore after each had told his story. "And it brings to an end this outing. I must now get to the fort without delay."

"And I am perfectly willing to go along," said Darry. "There is no fun in hunting in a country where the desperadoes are so thick."

"This will open Colonel Fairfield's eyes," went on the young officer. "I shouldn't be surprised if he organized another expedition against Gilroy's gang and didn't let up on them until they were all either in prison or shot down."

"It's what they deserve," came from old Benson. "I'll go on such a hunt with pleasure."

Our friends continued in the saddle all night and until ten o'clock the next morning. Then, tired and hot, they went into camp by a cooling stream. Here they went fishing, and soon caught enough fish for dinner, after which they took a nap lasting several hours.

"And now for the fort!" cried Captain Moore; "and the sooner we get there the better."

The nap had done the boys a world of good, and as they rode along their spirits rose so high that Darry proposed a race. Joe was willing, and away they went, along the well-defined trail, before either the young officer or the old scout could stop them.

"They are full of life," said Joe's brother. "Let them go. We'll make the fort to-night, even if they do tire the horses a bit."

"It's all right if they don't get into trouble," answered Benson.

On and on went the two lads, down something of a slope and then along a level stretch. The bushes grew thick upon both sides, and here and there were numerous wild flowers. At last they

reached a glade rich with green grass.

Joe was slightly ahead when he came to a sudden halt.

"Back, Darry!" he cried. "Get back behind the bushes."

"What's up?" queried his cousin, as he brought his steed to a standstill.

"Buffaloes!"

"Buffaloes! Where?"

"Right around the cliff on our right. See, they are coming this way! Here's luck."

Joe was right; they had come most unexpectedly upon a herd of seven buffaloes. The shaggy beasts were all large and powerful-looking. They were not in the least alarmed, and came toward the boys at a slow but steady walk.

CHAPTER XX.

SOMETHING ABOUT WHITE OX.

"What shall we do, Joe; wait until your brother and old Benson come up?" asked Darry, as they surveyed the approaching animals.

"I suppose we ought to wait," answered Joe. "But if they take alarm, they'll be off in double-quick order, I am afraid."

Each of the boys brought around his rifle, which had been picked up on leaving the desperadoes' rendezvous, and saw that it was ready for use.

"If we could only signal to the others!" suggested Darry impatiently.

"One of us might go back," began Joe, when he gave a sudden start. "They see us! See, they are turning away!" he cried.

Hardly had he spoken when Darry fired, aiming at the largest of the buffaloes. Joe followed, with a second shot, aimed at the same beast. Both bullets reached their mark, and the animal was hit in the breast and in the right foreleg.

"We hit him!" ejaculated Darry. "Let us fire at him again!" And he started to reload with all speed.

When struck the buffalo uttered a bellow of pain and went down on his knees. But he quickly arose, and now came straight for the boys, his head down, as if to gore them to death.

Crack! It was Darry's rifle which spoke up, and the buffalo staggered, hit on the head, a glancing blow, however, which did little damage.

By this time Joe had reloaded, but he did not fire at once, hoping to get a closer shot at the beast. In the meantime the others of the herd had disappeared completely.

Soon the buffalo was less than fifty yards off, and not daring to wait longer Joe took steady aim and let drive. His rifle-barrel had been pointed at one of those gleaming, bloodshot eyes, and the bullet sped true, entering the brain of the beast. With a roar and a grunt the buffalo went down, tearing up a great patch of grass in his fall.

"Hi! what's all the shooting about?" The cry came from Benson, as he rode down the trail at a breakneck speed, rifle ready for use.

"A buffalo!" cried Darry.

"A buffalo? Look out for yourselves."

"Yes, take care," came from Captain Moore, who was behind the old scout.

"We've fixed him," said Joe, not without a good deal of pardonable pride.

"Fixed him?" Old Benson looked out upon the glade. "By the great Jehosophat!" he roared. "Gone and shot a buffalo all by your lone selves! Or maybe he was dead when you got here?" he added suspiciously.

"You wouldn't think he was dead, if you could have seen him come toward us," said Darry.

"But who shot him? I heard four shots."

"And every one of 'em went into the buffalo," answered Joe. "Two for Darry and two for myself."

"But Joe finished him, with a shot in the eye," said Darry quickly.

"But Darry hit him in the leg, and that lamed him," said Joe, just as quickly. "I guess honors are even."

"Certainly remarkable shooting," was Captain Moore's comment. "Old hunters couldn't do better, could they, Benson?"

"Not much better, captain. I never would have dreamed of it, boys. And to think I couldn't get a smell of 'em when I was out looking 'em up," Benson said, shaking his head dubiously.

"This buffalo wasn't alone," said Darry. "The others went in that direction. You might follow them up."

"It wouldn't be any use now, lad. They are gone, and that's the end of it."

"We mustn't lose too much time," put in the young captain. "I must make the fort to-night, no matter what comes."

"But, Will, we can't leave this magnificent buffalo behind," pleaded his brother. "Darry and I will want the skin, and we'll want to mount the head and horns, eh, Darry?"

"To be sure."

"How long will it take to skin the beast, Benson?"

"An hour and over, if I want to make a good job of it," was the slow reply. "It's too nice a hide to ruin by quick cutting."

"Supposing I ride ahead then, and you follow with the boys as soon as you are ready?"

This was agreed to, and in a minute the young officer was off once more, urging his horse forward at the animal's best speed.

"Now I can take my time," declared old Benson. "Sorry I aint got my hunting-knife."

"Where is it?"

"It was lost in the shuffle with those desperadoes I put in the hole." The old scout chuckled. "My! my! how they must love me for putting 'em down there!"

"They'll have it in for you when they get out," remarked Darry.

"Oh, I'm not afraid, lad."

The buffalo had fallen into something of a heap, and it took their combined efforts to turn the huge carcass over. Then old Benson got out his clasp-knife, sharpened the blade upon the leather of his boot, and set to work, the boys assisting him as much as possible, which was not much, since the process was entirely new to them.

"That will be a load," said Joe, when they had the skin and a part of the head free. "How much do they weigh, Benson?"

"Close on to a hundred pounds."

"And how shall we carry that load?"

"We'll tie it up into something of a long bundle and take turns at toting it behind our saddles. Of course we won't be able to move along as fast as before, but that won't be necessary, now the captain has gone ahead to break the news."

The trail now led toward the river where Darry had almost lost his life by being hit with the drifting tree. The path was uncertain in spots, and they had to be careful for fear of getting into some boggy hole.

"What a splendid place for a ranch home!" suggested Darry. "Benson, I am surprised that there are so few cabins in this neighborhood."

"There used to be quite a number through here, lad; but the Modoc and other Indians burnt them all down. I suppose new settlers will come in, now the Indians are behaving themselves."

"But are they behaving themselves?" questioned Joe.

"They are doing a good deal better than formerly, Joe. There is only one old chief in this neighborhood who seems to want to cause trouble."

"And who is that?"

"White Ox. He is some sort of a relative to Sitting Bull, so I've been told, and he won't give in that the white man is master of the situation. He has tried to get his warriors to rise against us several times, but so far he hasn't accomplished much."

"Where is White Ox now?"

"Over behind yonder mountain to the north. He is chief of a band that numbers between a hundred and a hundred and fifty people. He himself is one of the best Indian shots in the West."

"It's a pity they can't become citizens as well as other folks," remarked Darry.

"That's the whole trouble, lad. The United States didn't treat them right in the first place, and we are bound to suffer in consequence. But in the end the Injun will be wiped out completely."

As night came on, countless stars shone in the sky, making the trail fairly light. Old Benson rode in advance, with Darry next and Joe bringing up the rear.

Presently the old hunter drew rein, and motioned the others to do the same.

"Somebody ahead," he said in a low voice. "Four or five men on hossback. If I aint mistaken they're Injuns, too."

"Indians!" exclaimed Joe. "Do they come this way often?"

"No, lad. Fact is, they haven't any right over here, so close to the fort. It's against Colonel Fairfield's rules."

"Then what can they be doing here?"

"That's for us to find out."

Old Benson led the way to a side trail, and then into the shelter of a number of trees.

He quickly passed the pelt over to Darry.

"Both of you stay here until I get back," he said. "I'm going to find out what those redskins are up to."

"You won't be gone long, will you?" asked Joe.

"Don't expect to be gone over an hour at the most. If I aint back in two hours, make up your mind something has happened. Then you'll have to get back to the fort the best way you can," concluded the old scout.

A moment later the darkness of the night hid him from their view, and they were left alone in the bit of timberland.

CHAPTER XXI.

A TRICK OF THE ENEMY.

"I must say I don't fancy this much," observed Joe, after the sounds of Benson's departure had lost themselves in the distance.

"Nor do I like it, Joe," came from Darry, with a long-drawn sigh. "But I guess we'll have to make the best of it."

"With what was on that message my brother found in the cave, and what Benson said about this Indian chief, it looks as if the folks at the fort might have trouble in the near future."

"That's true, too. I hope Will got through in safety."

Dismounting, the two boys sat down under the trees to wait in the darkness. The horses were glad enough of the rest, and fell to cropping the short grass which showed itself in spots in the vicinity.

Thus half an hour passed. The silence was oppressive, broken only by the occasional note of a night bird or the dismal croaking of a frog in some hollow and the answering squeak of a lizard.

"Somebody is coming!" cried Joe at last, and both of the boys stood on the defensive, rifles in hand. The party came closer and closer, and at last they made out the form of the old scout. He was riding at the top of his speed.

"Quick! follow me!" he exclaimed, as he dashed up. "There is not a moment to lose!"

The boys needed no second bidding, and in a trice they were in the saddle once more and riding after old Benson, who now took to another trail leading somewhat to the south of that formerly pursued.

"You saw the Indians?" questioned Joe, as they dashed on.

"I did. White Ox is ahead, with sixty or seventy of his best warriors. From what I could learn he and Lieutenant Carrol have had a fight, and half a dozen of the soldiers were either killed or wounded. Now White Ox is marching for the fort."

"To attack it?"

"I can't say about that, but I think he is going to hide in the vicinity, to wait for the coming of the desperadoes."

"And what of my brother?" questioned Joe anxiously. "Did he get through all right?"

"Nothing was said about the captain, lad. I suppose he got through."

It was hard to talk while riding at such a rate of speed, and soon the conversation came to an

end. The horses now showed plain evidence of their long journey, but each rider kept his steed at his best.

It was after two o'clock in the morning when the fort came into view, dark and silent in the midst of the plain surrounding it. Benson now rode in advance.

"Halt!" came the sudden command, while the scout was still a hundred yards from the stockade. The command was loud and clear, but the speaker was invisible.

"It's all right, friend," answered the old scout. "It's me, Sam Benson. Let me in, quick, I've news for the colonel."

"All right, Benson," was the answer. "But who is that behind you?"

"Joe Moore and Darry Germain. Is the colonel sleeping?"

"The colonel is very sick."

"Sick?"

"Yes."

"What's the trouble?"

"The surgeon can't make out exactly. He's in a sort of stupor, and they can't rouse him."

By this time the stockade gate was open, and all three of our friends lost no time in entering the yard. Then the gate was closed and barred again.

"Has Captain Moore returned?" asked Joe, as soon as he could get the guard's attention.

"I haven't seen him."

"How long have you been on duty?"

"Came on about an hour ago."

"Has Lieutenant Carrol come in?" came from Benson.

"Not that I know of; reckon not," answered the guard.

"Worse and worse!" groaned the old scout. "Who is in command here?"

"Captain Lee. But he's about half sick, too."

"It's a trick of the enemy!" cried Darry.

"A trick?" queried the guard with interest.

"Yes, a trick," put in Joe. "Benson, hadn't they better sound the alarm?"

"Yes, and I'll interview Captain Lee."

No more was said, and, while the sentinel called the corporal of the guard, the old scout hurried off to find the captain in command. With him went Joe and Darry. Joe's heart was like a lump of lead, for he was much concerned over the non-appearance of his brother. Had the captain met the Indians and been killed or taken prisoner?

Captain Lee was in a sound sleep, but quickly roused up when told that an important message awaited him. He met the party in one of the living rooms of the fort. His head was tied up in a wet towel, and his eyes showed that he was suffering.

"This is certainly a deep-laid plot," he said, when all had told their story. "The desperadoes and Indians intend to combine in an attack on the fort. Mose is undoubtedly that wily old half-breed who is still alive and who is very thick with White Ox. But I didn't know he could write."

"But what about this money at the fort?" asked Joe.

"The money is here, in a chest that is hidden away. It amounts to forty thousand dollars in gold, and is the property of the Nevell Mining Company. It was left for safe-keeping until Mr. Nevell could have it transported to Denver. You see, Nevell is a brother-in-law to Colonel Fairfield."

"The colonel must be drugged," said Benson. "That's the reason he acts so queerly."

"I suppose so, and that is what has affected me, I presume," answered Captain Lee. "Last night my head ached as if it would split open. We must tell the surgeon of this. Perhaps he can then do something to relieve Colonel Fairfield."

The captain lost no time in issuing the necessary orders, and in a few minutes the whole place was in alarm and the soldiers were on the watch for the first appearance of the Indians.

"My poor husband drugged!" cried Mrs. Fairfield, when she heard the news. "What villains those Indians and desperadoes are! Doctor, can you do nothing?"

"I think I can, madam," answered the surgeon. "Much depends upon what drugs were administered and how much the colonel has taken. Rest assured I will do my best for him."

Upon examination it was found that out of all the officers at the fort only four were fit for duty, all the others being sick, either through being drugged or otherwise. Of the privates not more than sixty-five were in a condition to fight should an attack come.

"And the worst of it is, the men won't know what to eat or drink after this," said Captain Lee to Benson. "Who can tell what has been drugged? Perhaps it's in the very bread we eat and the water we drink."

Strict orders were given to the men to touch nothing until the surgeon had passed upon it. Then the doctor got out his medicines to counteract the drugs, and set to work to bring the colonel and the other sufferers out of their stupor.

Hour after hour went slowly by, and still Captain Moore did not return. What had become of his brother, Joe could not imagine. He feared the worst, and when morning came it was all he could do to keep back the tears.

"Don't take it so to heart, Joe," said Darry sympathetically. "It may be all right."

"But he said he was going to ride straight here—you heard him, Darry."

"So I did, but he may have seen the Indians or met Lieutenant Carrol, and that might have changed his plans. Anyway, I wouldn't worry too much just yet."

With the coming of daylight Captain Lee brought out his long-distance glass and swept the surroundings of the fort with extreme care.

"Some camp-fires are burning to the northward," he announced.

"Any Injuns?" questioned old Benson laconically. He had been told to come along to the top of the fort for consultation.

"Nobody in sight, Benson."

"Humph! Well, I don't calculate they are far off."

"Nor I, from what you and the boys told me. How long will it take those desperadoes to reach here?"

"They ought to arrive this morning, if they are not with the Injuns already."

"All told, we have about seventy officers and men available for duty," went on the captain thoughtfully. "What is worse, they must know how greatly our garrison is reduced, since they have had that skunk of a Mose do the drugging for them."

"The Injuns number over sixty, and if there are thirty desperadoes, that will give them a force of almost a hundred, or twice as many as we have, captain. But then, we hold the fort. They can't come anywhere near us without being cut down—if we set out to do it."

"Of course. But White Ox may send off for more Indians—when he hears how small the available garrison is."

"Does he know much of affairs here?"

"I am afraid he does. There were two Indians here yesterday, to lodge a complaint against a miner who had stolen a horse from them. I think, now, that the complaint was a blind, and the Indians were here merely to size up the situation," concluded Captain Lee.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY.

Little dreaming of all the adventures in store for him, Captain Moore left the scene of the buffalo shooting and rode forth swiftly in the direction of Fort Carson.

He felt that he carried news of great importance and the sooner he gained the fort the better. Should anything happen to Colonel Fairfield the command of the post would fall upon himself, as next in rank.

As he dashed along the trail, over hill and valley, he reviewed the situation with care, and the more he thought of it, the more worried did he become.

"Something is going to happen—I can feel it in the air," he muttered.

The thought had scarcely crossed his mind when something did happen, but not exactly what he anticipated.

A shadow fell across his path, and as he drew rein he found himself confronted by several Indians.

"White officer, stop!" cried the leader of the red men sternly.

"Hullo! what do you want?" demanded the captain. The meeting was a complete surprise.

"Want to have a talk."

"Who are you?"

"Me Red Wolf, belong to White Ox tribe," returned the Indian with a scowl.

"And what are you doing out here at this time of night, Red Wolf?"

"Indians on a big hunt. See buffalo yesterday."

"Yes, I saw one of the buffaloes myself." Captain Moore paused, not knowing how to go on. "You are pretty close to the fort."

"Red Wolf and warriors get on the wrong trail," was the slow reply. "But want to talk now. Come along."

As the Indian concluded he caught the captain's steed by the bridle.

"Let go the horse."

"Want to talk to white officer."

"You haven't any right to touch my horse."

Hardly had the words been spoken when two Indians rushed up behind the captain and dragged him to the ground.

The fellows were large and powerful, and they disarmed him before he could even fire a shot.

Without further ado Captain Moore was forced to march along, between two of the red men, while a third led his horse.

A route around the rocks was taken, and presently they came to a dense bit of timberland. In the midst of this was a clearing, and here was the camp of some ten or a dozen Indians.

The Indians at hand were a guard over several white soldiers, and to his intense surprise the young captain recognized some of Lieutenant Carrol's men.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Had a mix-up and came off second best——" began one of the soldiers, when an Indian guard clapped a dirty hand over his mouth and ordered him to be silent, under penalty of death.

Then the captain was taken to another part of the glade, and here he was made a close prisoner by being bound, hands and feet, to the trunk of a blasted tree.

Red Wolf wished to know what the captain had been doing away from the fort.

"I've been on a hunting expedition."

"Alone?"

"No."

"Where are the others?"

"Safe, by this time. What do you intend to do with me, Red Wolf?"

"White Ox shall decide that," grunted the red man.

"Then he is on this hunt, too?"

"He is."

"When will he be here?"

"Soon."

"Don't you know that I am an army officer, and that you are laying up a good deal of trouble for yourself by making me a prisoner?"

"The white man has not treated the Indians right."

"This is no way to redress wrongs, Red Wolf. Why don't you go to Colonel Fairfield and make a complaint? He will send the story to the Great Father at Washington."

"The Great Father will not listen. We have sent many complaints—as the white captain knows."

"He will listen—if the complaint is a just one. The trouble is, the Indians will not obey Colonel Fairfield's orders."

"And why should they obey the white man? Is not White Ox their chief?"

"That is true. But the land is now the white man's, and the Indians must obey the Great Father at Washington, or in the end it will go hard with them."

"Not so!" cried Red Wolf savagely. "In the end the white man will be driven eastward, where he

belongs. No one shall rule in these mountains but the red man. White Ox and the other great chiefs have spoken."

"What! you are going on the warpath?"

"The hatchet may be dug up, if the white man will not listen to the red man."

"I know what the trouble is, Red Wolf. Matt Gilroy and that scoundrelly half-breed, Mose, have set you up to this. They have filled your ears with false stories about our cruelty and about much money at the fort."

By the look on the Indian's face the young officer saw that he had struck the truth, at least in part.

But the red man would talk no more, fearing he had already said too much, and he stalked off, warning a guard to be careful and not let the captain escape.

When left to himself, Captain Moore's reflections were very bitter.

"If the redskins are out in force they'll probably fall in with Benson and the boys," he told himself. "And if they do there will surely be trouble. Benson won't allow them to take him alive, and that will mean a good deal of shooting all around."

He listened attentively for shots in the distance, but none came, and this caused him to be more perplexed than ever.

Just before daybreak several additional Indians came in, and the young officer and the soldiers were told to march. Their feet were unfastened, but their hands were not, and they were forced to move with the red men on all sides of them, and each of the enemy fully armed and ready to shoot them down at the first show of resistance or escape.

From one of the privates Captain Moore learned that Lieutenant Carrol and the other soldiers had escaped, but what had become of them nobody knew.

The little body of whites and Indians marched over a mountain trail for fully four hours. The step was a lively one, and when the party came to a halt even the soldiers used to a hard march were tired out.

"Those redskins can walk the legs off of anything I know of," was the way one old soldier expressed himself. "They are like some of these wiry mustangs who don't know the meaning of rest."

"This region is strange to me, Peck. Do you recognize it?"

"I do, Captain Moore. Yonder is Henebeck Fall, and this trail leads to Silver Gulch."

"Then we are about six miles from nowhere in particular."

"You've struck it, captain. Why they brought us to such a forsaken spot is more than I can guess—unless they are going to shoot us down like dogs and leave us for the wolves to feed on. The wolves are thick around here, so Leeson told me."

"I don't believe they'll shoot us down. They are not desperate enough yet. But they may do it, if they attack the fort and lose heavily. That will open their eyes, and make them as mad as hornets."

A little later Silver Gulch, a wide opening in the rocks of the mountain, was gained, and here the soldiers were again made fast to several trees. Then the Indians prepared their midday meal. They took their time about eating, and did not offer the white men anything until they had finished.

"They don't intend to treat us any too good," was Peck's comment. "Captain, can't we fix it to get away?"

"I intend to escape if I can manage it," returned the young officer. "But we must be careful, for they are fully armed, and they watch us like so many foxes."

Slowly the afternoon wore away, and with the coming of night it grew darker than usual, as though a storm was brewing.

"A storm ought to help us," said the captain.

Some of the Indians had departed, so that now the guard consisted of but four warriors. These red men walked around each prisoner, seeing to it that all the bonds were tight.

As the men passed Peck the old soldier watched his chance, and, unknown to the red men, caught a hunting-knife from the belt of one of the number.

This knife was concealed up his sleeve, and then the soldier waited for his chance to use the blade, which was as sharp as a razor.

The Indians decided that two of their number should sleep, while the other two remained on guard. Soon those to retire turned in, while the others sat down to smoke their pipes.

This was Peck's opportunity, and with a slash of the hunting-knife he released his hands. A

moment later the lariat around his ankles was likewise severed.

Watching his chance, Peck passed the knife to Captain Moore, and then went back to his position by the tree as if still fastened.

Thus the knife was passed from soldier to soldier until all were liberated.

All told, the party numbered six, and nobody was armed, excepting Peck, to whom the hunting-knife had been returned.

Motioning to the others to keep quiet, Captain Moore picked up a stick of wood lying near and threw it in some bushes a distance away.

This made considerable noise, and instantly the two guards gazed in the direction.

"A wolf, perhaps," said one of the Indians, in his native tongue, and walked over to the bushes. His companion started to follow, when Captain Moore leaped upon him and bore him to the earth.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A PANTHER IN CAMP.

As Captain Moore fell upon one of the Indians, Peck the private stole after the guard who had walked toward the bushes. The other soldiers jumped to where the remaining Indians were sleeping, to gain possession of the firearms.

The Indian the captain had tackled was a young but powerful brave, and he put up a hard fight to release himself. But he had been taken unawares, and after he was on the ground the captain saw to it that he did not get up.

In the meantime the Indian near the bushes turned just in time to see Peck raise the hunting-knife. Crack! went the red man's rifle, and the bullet clipped the soldier's ear. The shot was so close that to the day of his death Peck carried in his face some traces of the burnt powder.

The shot was the last the Indian ever fired, for in the midst of the smoke Peck hurled himself at the warrior, and a second later down came the hunting-knife, piercing the red man's back and entering his right lung. The stroke was a fatal one, and before the fighting in the glade came to an end the Indian had breathed his last.

When the sleeping Indians awoke they could not for the moment realize what was going on. In his bewilderment one leaped up and rushed at a soldier, who promptly laid him low by a heavy blow from a rifle stock, which almost cracked the warrior's skull. Seeing this, the other brave became frightened and ran for the bushes.

"Don't let him escape!" cried Captain Moore, who was still holding his man down.

At once two of the soldiers ran after the fleeing Indian, and presently two rifle shots rang out, followed by a scream from the red man.

"He's done for," said one of the soldiers, after the smoke had cleared away. "He has gone to his happy hunting-ground."

After this turn of affairs it did not take the soldiers long to make prisoners of the two Indians who remained alive. These fellows were in truth much frightened, but tried their best to suppress their feelings.

From one of the Indians, Captain Moore learned that more Indians were expected early the next morning.

"That's all right," said he. "They will come in time to release you and save you from starvation."

"Going to tie 'em up, captain?" asked Peck.

"Yes. There is nothing else to do."

"Better shoot 'em."

"I can't shoot them in cold blood, Peck. That would not be human."

"The wretches don't deserve to live, captain. The Indians and those desperadoes are plotting to wipe out everybody left at the fort."

"I know that. Still, I cannot bring myself to take their lives—and we can't stop to take them along as prisoners. The sooner we get back to the fort the better."

"If we can get back," put in another soldier.

"I don't believe the fort is surrounded just yet," returned the young officer.

"But if it is?"

"Then, perhaps, it will be better for us to be out than in."

"You wouldn't desert the crowd at the fort, would you?"

"You know me better than that, Gorman. We might be able to ride to the next fort and obtain reinforcements."

"That's so, captain! I didn't think of that."

Leaving the dead Indians in the bushes and the others tied to the trees, the captain and his companions now lost no time in striking out for the fort.

Fortunately, Peck was well acquainted with every foot of the territory to be covered, and he led the way by a route which was fairly easy and as direct as could be expected, considering the wild region to be covered.

As he hurried along, the young captain's thoughts were busy. Where were Joe, Darry, and Benson, and how were things going at the fort?

"The Indians are not so much to be blamed as the desperadoes," he said. "They have some wrongs, although they are more fancied than real. But the desperadoes ought all to be either shot down or placed under arrest."

"Right you are," returned Gorman. "This district will never prosper until the desperadoes are cleaned out."

It was not long before the party began to grow hungry, and they had to halt for an hour, to prepare some birds which one of the number had brought down with a gun.

All the time they were eating, one of the soldiers remained on guard, for they were fearful a band of Indians might come up unawares to surprise them. But not a red man or desperado showed himself.

Nightfall found them still sixteen miles from the fort, and unable to walk further.

"We will camp out where we are," said Captain Moore. "It is useless to think of covering the distance in the dark. Besides, we might fall into some trap."

A storm had been threatening, but now the clouds passed and the night proved clear and pleasant. It was decided that two men should remain on guard at a time, each taking a turn of three hours.

The young captain slept from nine o'clock until three in the morning. Then he awoke with the feeling that further sleep was out of the question. Getting up, he walked to a nearby brook, intending to wash up and obtain a needed drink.

While Captain Moore was in the vicinity of the brook something stirring in the bushes attracted his attention.

"Carwell, did you see that?" he asked, of the guard who was nearest to him.

"See what, captain?"

"That thing in yonder bushes."

"I see nothing, sir."

"Something is moving there. Come here and look."

The private did as commanded, and both gazed steadily into the bushes.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the young officer at length, "Do you see what it is now, Carwell?"

"I do not, captain."

"It's a panther, unless I am greatly mistaken."

"Where?"

"Lying on the fallen tree, behind that tall bush," and Captain Moore pointed with his hand.

As he did this the panther arose suddenly, then crouched down as if to make a leap at them.

"Shoot!" ordered the captain, and as quickly as the private could raise his rifle he fired. But his aim was poor, and the bullet flew a foot over the panther's head.

"Missed, hang the luck!" muttered Carwell.

Scarcely had the words left his lips, when the panther made a fierce leap and landed directly at the feet of the astonished pair. The beast was evidently very hungry, or it would not have attacked human beings in this semi-light of the early dawn.

Full of fear, Carwell staggered back, with his smoking rifle still in his hand.

The panther growled and switched its tail from side to side. The rifle shot had filled it with wonder, and it did not know what to do next.

"Be careful—he is going to take another leap!" cried the young captain.

He was right; the panther was now preparing for another spring. Before Carwell could get out of the way, the beast came on, pinning the private to the earth.

As Carwell went down the whole camp roused up, and the second guard came up on the double quick.

"What's up, captain?" he sang out.

"Shoot the panther!" answered the young officer. "Quick, or you'll be too late. Don't hit Carwell."

Crack! the rifle spoke up, and the beast was hit fairly and squarely in the side. At this it let out a blood-curdling scream of pain. It had caught Carwell by the arm, but now it released its hold.

"A panther!" roared one of the old soldiers. "And a big one. Git your guns, boys! He aint no beast to fool with, I can tell you that!"

Those who had guns ran for them. But in the meantime the panther turned around, as if to retreat.

Then, of a sudden, it seemed to catch sight of Captain Moore, and with a snarl of rage it threw itself upon the young officer, and both went over with a loud splash into the brook.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SKIRMISH IN THE BRUSH.

Up to the time the panther had turned upon him, the young officer had thought but little of his own safety, being concerned chiefly about Carwell, who was flat on his back, and who looked as if he as going to be chewed up by this wild, lean, and hungry beast of the forest.

But now Captain Moore found himself attacked, and as he went over into the brook he realized that he was in the most perilous position he had yet encountered. Facing Indians and desperadoes was nothing compared to facing this beast, that seemed bent upon his destruction.

The spot where the young officer struck the brook was five or six feet deep, and as the panther came down on top of him he went straight to the bottom.

The beast was also submerged, but not for long. Panthers, although they can swim, do not like the water, and this one lost no time in coming to the surface to get air. Then it let out another scream of pain, while the bullet wound in its side dyed the brook red.

As the panther came up the young captain tried to do the same. But the first thing he encountered was the beast's fierce claws, and he received a deep and painful scratch in his left shoulder. Then he went down again, and tried to come up further down the stream. But unfortunately the panther moved in the same direction.

In the meantime the other soldiers came up to the edge of the brook. They realized their captain's peril, and as soon as the panther showed itself two of them blazed away, one hitting the beast in the back and the other landing a bullet in the panther's neck.

The fury of the animal was now intense, and whirling around it lashed the water of the brook into a perfect foam. Then it leaped for the opposite shore, and made a break for the underbrush. Before anybody could fire again it was gone.

When Captain Moore regained the surface of the brook willing hands helped him out.

"Hurt?" questioned Peck anxiously.

"A little—on the shoulder," was the answer, with a gasp. "Where is the beast?"

"Got away in yonder bushes, sir. That's a nasty dig. You had better let me bind it up."

"Carwell, how are you?"

"The beast nipped me in the arm," answered the private, trying to suppress a groan. "By George, but he was an ugly one!"

"That's right," put in another soldier. "You can be thankful you wasn't chewed up."

A brief search revealed the fact that the panther had left the vicinity, and then the others set to work to bind up the wounds the captain and Carwell had sustained.

"We had better move on now," said the young officer, when the hurts had been attended to. "If there are Indians or desperadoes around they must certainly have heard those shots, and they will be wondering what they mean."

They marched on in the gloom, and did not halt until the sun was showing itself over the hills to the eastward. They had now gained a rise of ground from which with a field-glass the fort might

have been seen. But the young captain's glass was gone—confiscated, as already told, by those who had first attacked him.

"We will draw closer with caution," said the young officer. "We don't want to walk into any trap."

Less than a mile was covered, when Peck, who had been sent out in advance, came back and called for silence.

"Some Indians are ahead," he said.

"How many of them?" questioned Captain Moore.

"Not less than a dozen or fifteen, captain. I counted eleven, and heard some talking that I couldn't see."

"Where are they?"

"Down behind where the brook flows over those sawtooth rocks. We were out there fishing last summer."

"I know the spot you mean. What are the redskins doing?"

"Nothing in particular. I overheard one say to another that he expected White Ox along before sundown."

"They must be an advance guard of the tribe, then," returned the young officer thoughtfully. "Did any of them see you?"

"I don't think they did."

But in this Peck was mistaken, for scarcely had the soldiers started to walk around the spot where the Indians were encamped, when a savage war-whoop rang out, followed by half a dozen shots.

The first round was a deadly one, killing two of the men and wounding Peck in the side. A bullet likewise grazed Captain Moore's shoulder.

"To cover!" shouted the young officer, as soon as he could speak. "The Indians are on us!"

He had a gun in his hand, and as he gave the command he leveled it at the leader of the party, he who had killed one of the soldiers. Captain Moore's aim was true, and the Indian fell lifeless over the very body of the man he had slain.

By this time the other Indians were coming up, and all the soldiers could do was to take to the nearest cover, as the captain had ordered. The warwhoops continued, and shots were fired from several directions.

Scarcely knowing whether he was hit or not, Captain Moore dashed into the midst of some brushwood, and not far away from him came Peck. The latter had broken his rifle over the head of one of the red men, and now advanced with the hunting-knife which was still in his possession. The young captain held a rifle, but just now had no time in which to reload the weapon.

"They are after us hot-like!" cried Peck, after several hundred feet had been covered.

The private's breath came short and sharp, and now for the first Captain Moore saw how he was suffering.

"You are wounded, Peck."

"That's right, captain."

"You can't run any more."

"I've got to run," muttered Peck, between his set teeth. "They'll be on—oh!—on us in another minute."

"Give me your arm—I'll help you along."

The private held out his hand, then gave a pitch, and, before the young officer could catch him, sank on the grass insensible.

Captain Moore's heart leaped into his throat, for he had known Peck for years, and the two were very friendly. He listened, and heard a distant shot. Evidently the Indians were not yet coming in that direction. They would first hunt down the others, providing they were not already slain.

Bending down, the young officer took Peck in his strong arms and threw the private over his shoulder. The weight was considerable, and made him stagger.

"I've got to carry him, somehow!" he muttered. "Heaven give me strength to do it!"

The brushwood was thick ahead, but there was a sort of trail, made by wild animals, and he pursued this until he came to a brook. Then to keep the Indians from following them, should they come in that direction, he followed the brook for a hundred yards or more. At last he reached a point where the banks of the brook were rocky, and here he came out, and crawled over the rocks. Not far off was an opening between two large boulders, and here he sank down, too

exhausted to take another step.

It was half an hour before Peck came to his senses. In the meantime the captain had obtained some water, washed the private's wound and bound it up in bandages torn from his shirt. The loss of blood had made Peck light-headed.

"Keep them off!" he murmured. "Keep them off! They want to bore a hole in my side. Keep them off!"

"Be quiet, Peck, you are safe," answered the young captain soothingly. "You've been wounded, that's the trouble," but the private continued to rave for some time, when he relaxed into a stupor.

With strained ears Captain Moore waited for the appearance of friends or enemies, but nobody came up the brook. Once he heard two shots far to the northward, but whether fired by the soldiers or the Indians he could not tell.

"I'm afraid it's been a regular slaughter," he mused sadly. "And our getting away was a miracle," and this surmise proved correct, for, as was afterward proven, all the others of the party were slain within an hour after the surprise occurred.

CHAPTER XXV.

A LUCKY MEETING.

"Captain, where am I?"

"In the woods with me, Peck."

"What has happened?"

"Don't you remember? The Indians surprised us, and you were shot in the side."

The brow of the wounded soldier contracted for a moment, and then he drew a long and painful breath.

"Ah, yes, I remember now. Are we alone?"

"Yes."

"And what of the others, captain?"

"I am afraid they have either been shot down or taken prisoners. Poor Carwell and Leeds I know are dead."

"It was a nasty surprise, wasn't it? I was sure they hadn't seen me."

"Those Indians are sly, Peck. They never let on until they are fully ready. We can be thankful that we escaped."

"How long have we been here?"

"The best part of the day. I carried you along the brook and to here, and I haven't dared to go any further. Those Indians can't be far off."

"It was good of you to do that for me, captain," said the private gratefully.

"I know you would have done as much for me, Peck. What I am worried about is what we are to do next."

"Perhaps you had better wait till dark, and then sneak to the fort."

"How do you feel?"

"Weak, captain, weak as a rag."

"I shan't leave you, Peck."

"But you ought to try to save yourself."

"We can both try to do that, when you are stronger."

Slowly the day wore along until night was once more on the pair. Peck had tried to stand up, but the effort had proved a dismal failure.

"It's no use," he murmured. "I reckon I'm a fit subject for the hospital," and he gave a sickly grin.

The night was one Captain Moore never forgot. He was hungry, but there was nothing at hand with which to satisfy the cravings of the inner man. Peck's mind began to ramble again, and once he struggled violently, thinking he was fighting with an Indian, who was trying to tear out his side.

With the coming of dawn the young officer felt that matters were growing desperate and that he must do something. He determined to go on a short exploring tour, leaving the soldier where he lay.

"I'll be back inside of half an hour," he said. "Make yourself as comfortable as possible while I am gone."

"Don't desert me!" groaned Peck. "Promise to come back, captain—promise!" he pleaded, and the young officer promised.

On the opposite side of the brook was a series of rocks leading to the top of rather a high hill, and Captain Moore had an idea that from this eminence he could obtain a faint view of the fort and its surroundings.

Half of the rocks were passed when he came to a sudden halt. A low groan ahead had reached his ears. As he stopped and listened the groan was repeated.

"That sounds familiar," he thought. "I've heard that before. But where?"

At last he made up his mind that the sounds came from some wild animal that was wounded, and plucking up courage he moved forward again, but with his rifle before him, ready to shoot at the slightest provocation.

"The panther—and dying!"

The young officer was right. There on a shelf of rocks lay the wounded beast, its breath coming short and heavy, and its eyes letting out a glassy stare that caused the captain to shiver in spite of himself.

At the sight of a human being the panther tried to rise. But the effort was too much for it, and it sank down, groaning with pain, in a pool of blood which had formed.

At first Captain Moore thought to finish by putting a bullet through its head, but then he remembered that ammunition was scarce and lowered his rifle.

"He'll be dead by the time I get back," he thought, and continued on his way up the mountain side.

At last the top was gained, and he looked around eagerly. At first only the plain far below met his view, but presently he made out a spot which he knew must be the fort. But all was in a blue haze, and no details could be distinguished.

Having spent quarter of an hour on the mountain top he picked his way back to where he had left the panther. The creature had now breathed its last, and lay stiffened out on the rocky ledge.

"I must have something to eat, and so must Peck," he said to himself. "Panther steaks may be tough, but they will be better than nothing. I'll go back for the hunting-knife and cut off as much meat as we'll be likely to need for a couple of days."

When he reached Peck's side he found the soldier sleeping quietly, and did not disturb him. Going back, he cut off a generous slice of the panther meat, leaving the rest to the wild beasts.

The captain hated to build a fire, fearing it would attract the attention of the enemy, but he did not wish to eat the meat raw, and presently, having no matches, shot his gun into the midst of some dry leaves. By this means he soon had a blaze, which he fed with the driest wood he could find, thus avoiding a great cloud of smoke. Over the blaze he cooked the steak, which was soon done to a turn.

When Peck awoke he felt stronger, and readily partook of the meal brought to him, washing down the meat with some water from the brook.

"What do you calculate to do now, captain?" he asked.

"From the top of yonder hill I can see the fort in the distance," answered the young officer. "But how to get to it is a question. It would be a hard enough journey as it is, without having to be on guard against Indians and desperadoes."

"Better leave me here, and go it alone."

"No, I shan't desert you, Peck. We'll see the thing through together."

"But the Indians might come down on us."

"We've got to run that risk. The question is, can you walk at all?"

For reply Peck got up on his feet. At first he swayed around a little, but presently steadied himself.

"I'm good for a little distance, captain, but I don't reckon to go into any walking match just yet."

"Then we'll go ahead. As soon as you feel played out, don't hesitate to say so."

Captain Moore carried the rifle, hunting-knife, and what was left of the meat, and also insisted upon having the private lean on his arm. In this fashion two miles were covered by noon, when they came to a rest under the shade of a big tree. Peck was pale, and showed plainly that the

exertion had done him no good.

"Hardest walking I ever did," he admitted, as he stretched himself at full length. It was his will-power alone that had kept him up.

"Well, we are gaining," said Captain Moore cheerfully. "Three miles more will see us through."

"If the enemy don't gobble us in the meantime."

"The Indians are nowhere in sight."

"They won't be showing themselves if they can help it. They spring on us——Hark!"

Peck broke off short, and both listened.

"Somebody is coming this way!" whispered the young officer. "Come, we must get out of sight!"

He took the wounded soldier by the hand, and with all speed the pair crept into some brushwood behind the big tree. In the meantime the foot-steps of the unknown party came closer.

As the man came into view, Captain Moore let out a shout which was full of joy.

"Hank Leeson! How glad I am to see you!"

The old hunter started around and drew up his gun. Then the weapon dropped, and he ran forward.

"Captain Moore!" he ejaculated. "Hang me ef I aint glad to set eyes on ye! Who is that with you?"

"Private Peck of Company B. We've had a fight with the Indians, and a number of the soldiers were killed."

"The Injuns are on the warpath, along with the desperadoes under Matt Gilroy," returned Leeson. "I got the word from Sam Benson early this mornin'."

"And where was Benson?"

"Out among the hills, a-lookin' fer you."

"And what of my brother, and my cousin? Have you heard anything of them?"

"They are safe at the fort."

"Thank Heaven for that!"

"I see ye'er both of ye wounded," went on Leeson, as he came closer.

"My wound is not much. But Peck's is bad. I hardly knew how I was going to get him to the fort. Are the Indians or desperadoes around?"

"They are, captain—but whar is jest now the conundrum. Captain Lee—he's in command now—thinks there's a big plot on foot ter wipe out the fort."

"He is right. But Colonel Fairfield—what of him? Did they drug him?"

"They did, captain. But it's queer you know of all this."

"Then Joe didn't tell you I was with him at the cave?"

"I didn't have time to hear the whole story. Benson was coming out, and I came with him. Now, as you're found, I reckon I had better go back with you," went on Hank Leeson.

"By all means, for we'll have to take turns in supporting Peck."

A few minutes later the march for the fort was taken up. It was a tedious journey, and there were times when the young captain felt as if it would never come to an end. But at last they came within sight of the stockade and the big flag floating so proudly to the breeze, and then several came rushing out to meet them, and their hard-ships, for the time being, came to an end.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE ENEMIES WITHIN THE FORT.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you again, Will!" was the greeting which Joe gave his brother. "We were almost certain either the Indians or desperadoes had fallen upon you and killed you."

"Well, we did have some hot work," answered the young captain modestly. "Are you all right?"

"I am."

"And you, Darry?"

"I'm first-class," answered the cousin. "But I can tell you, Will, there is trouble ahead."

"I know that, Darry. I must see Colonel Fairfield at once."

"He is very ill. The surgeon can do hardly anything for him. He says he has not the right drugs to reach such a dose as the colonel has swallowed."

"That's too bad."

By this time Captain Lee was at hand, and the two officers exchanged reports. Nothing had been heard concerning Lieutenant Carrol. The command of the fort now fell upon Captain Moore.

As soon as possible the young commander went in to see his superior. He found Colonel Fairfield very weak and in no condition to talk upon military matters. He took the young captain's hand, and said feebly:

"You must do your best, captain, do your best. Defend the place to the last."

"I will, Colonel Fairfield," answered the young officer. "And I trust you recover soon."

That day and the next passed without incident of a special nature. Sick and wounded were cared for by the surgeon, and a detachment went out, accompanied by Sam Benson and Hank Leeson, to look for any of the soldiers who had been attacked by the Indians or desperadoes and who might still be alive.

When this party returned they brought in the bodies of two soldiers that had fallen.

"The Indians are gathering in force," said old Benson, who had been right among them in the darkness. "There are now over a hundred and twenty of them."

"And what of the desperadoes?" asked Captain Moore.

"The desperadoes number twenty-six," answered Hank Leeson. "I counted noses myself. Matt Gilroy is a reg'lar captain over 'em an' has 'em drilled like a company o' sharpshooters—an' I reckon thet's wot they are, consarn 'em!"

"Then the enemy, all told, numbers about a hundred and fifty," mused the young captain.

"How many men here fit for duty to-day, captain?" came from the old scout.

"Not over forty, including the cooks and stable help, Benson. All the others are on the sick list—and some of them are pretty bad."

"Perhaps the crowd outside are a-waitin' till ye all git sick," suggested Leeson with a scowl. "'Taint fair fightin', is it? They ought all to be hung!"

"I must do my best," said Captain Moore gravely. "I can do no more."

As the day wore along and two additional soldiers were taken sick, he decided to send a messenger to Fort Prescott, a hundred and sixty miles away, for assistance.

Hank Leeson knew every foot of the territory, and was chosen for the mission. Benson was more than willing to go, but Captain Moore told him to remain where he was.

"If the enemy attack us you'll have to be our right-hand man, Benson," he said. Then he added: "I want to talk to you after Leeson is gone."

Since coming to the fort Captain Moore had been watching two old soldiers very closely.

These soldiers were named Moses Bicker and Jack Drossdell. Their reputations were not of the best, and the black marks against them were numerous.

Some time before, the young captain had heard that Bicker came of a family of Colorado desperadoes and that he had joined the army during a spasm of reformation.

The actions of the pair did not suit Captain Moore in the least, and that night he took it upon himself to watch them more closely than ever.

In the darkness he saw Bicker make his way to the stable, and to that spot, a little later, Drossdell followed.

"Something is in the wind, and I'm going to find out what it is," he mused, and watching his opportunity he passed into the stable unobserved.

At first he could hear nothing but the movements of the horses, but presently came a low murmur from one corner of the loft.

Cautiously the young officer climbed the ladder and stepped into the hay.

Here he could hear the conversation between Bicker and Drossdell quite plainly.

"They never suspected the butter," he heard Bicker say. "It tastes a little strong, but they would rather have it that way than have none, and the same way with the condensed milk."

"When shall we give the signal to the boys?" came from Drossdell.

"Not yet. There will be more of them sick by to-morrow night," replied Bicker.

More of the same sort of talk followed, until the young captain became fully convinced that Bicker and Drossdell were in league with the desperadoes, and that they had been using some drugs in the butter, milk, and other articles consumed at the fort, in order to make the soldiers sick.

As soon as he realized the importance of his discovery Captain Moore went below.

A corporal's guard was called out and sent over to the stable, and when Bicker and Drossdell came below they were placed under arrest.

"What's this for?" demanded Bicker, putting on a bold front. Drossdell had nothing to say, and trembled so he could scarcely stand.

"You know well enough, Bicker," answered Captain Moore sternly.

"No, I don't. I haven't done anything wrong, captain."

"March them to the guardhouse," was all the young commander said, and the two were promptly marched away.

As may be surmised, the moment the evildoers were alone each accused the other of having done something to bring on exposure.

Captain Moore knew his men well, and presently he sent for Drossdell and interviewed the soldier in private.

"I am sorry to see you in such trouble as this, Drossdell," he said. "I thought you were a better soldier."

"I haven't done anything, captain."

"It is useless for you to deny it. Do you know what my men would do to you and Bicker if they learned the truth? They would rebel and hang you on the spot—and you would deserve it, too."

"Oh, captain, for the love of Heaven, don't put us in the hands of the boys!" pleaded Drossdell, turning a ghostly white.

"You and Bicker plotted to get us all sick and then let the Indians and Gilroy's gang in on us."

"I—I——"

"It is useless for you to deny it, for I heard your talk myself, and saw a letter written by Bicker to Gilroy."

"Bicker formed the plans!" cried Drossdell, breaking down completely. "He—he forced me to help him."

"Forced you?"

"Yes, captain, forced me. I stood out a long while, but he—he——Well, I might as well make a clean breast of it, sir. He had me in his power, on account of something I did in Denver years ago. He said he would expose me if I didn't help him."

"This is the strict truth?"

"Yes, captain, and I will swear to it if you want me to," answered the prisoner.

"You were going to signal the gang when all was in readiness for an attack," went on Captain Moore.

"Bicker was going to do that."

"What was the signal to be?"

"Three white handkerchiefs stuck on the ends of a cross made of sticks six feet long. He was going to show these at ten in the morning or four in the afternoon, from the southwest corner of the stockade, behind the mess hall."

"And what was the signal to be if you wanted the enemy to hold off for a while?"

"A red shirt if he wanted them to hold off for one day and a red and a blue shirt if they were to hold off for two days."

"You are certain about these signals? Remember, if you are telling a lie it will all come back on your own head."

"I am telling the strict truth," answered Drossdell.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SIGNALS AND WHAT FOLLOWED.

The interview over, Captain Moore lost no time in summoning Hank Leeson.

"You must depart for Fort Prescott without delay," he said.

"I'm ready now, captain," replied the old hunter.

"You must ride night and day till you get there."

"I'll do that too."

"I have received important news. At the longest our enemies will hold off two days. I will try to make them hold off a day longer if I can. That will give you three days. I will write a letter to Major Hardie at once."

This was early in the morning, and inside of half an hour the letter was written and the old hunter was off, on the back of the freshest and most enduring horse the fort possessed. He went fully armed, for he knew that he carried his life in his hands.

As soon as Leeson had gone the young captain summoned the surgeon and told that individual about the drugged butter and condensed milk.

Dr. Nestor was incredulous, but on an examination said that all were drugged. A cat that had drunk of the diluted condensed milk was found in a stupor from which she could not be aroused.

"It's awful," said the surgeon.

A trustworthy cook was called in, and all the butter and condensed milk which were open, or which showed signs of having been tampered with, were thrown away.

This put the soldiers on short rations so far as these commodities went, but nobody complained. Some suspected Bicker and Drossdell, and there was talk of a demand on the captain to have the traitors shot, but it came to nothing.

"What does this mean?" asked Joe, when he caught his brother in a quiet spot.

In a few words the young captain explained.

"You and Darry must say nothing," he concluded. "We will have our hands full as it is. The Indians are in this, but the drugging was not done by Mose the half-breed."

"When will you signal to the enemy?" asked Darry.

"This afternoon at four. That will give us at least two whole days—and a lot may happen in that time."

"If only the surgeon can bring some of the men out of their stupor," remarked Joe.

"He hopes to do so—now he knows more about the drugs used against them."

"If you hadn't caught Bicker and Drossdell what do you suppose would have happened?" questioned Darry.

"More than likely every one of us would have been sick," answered the young captain with a shudder. "Then the Indians and the desperadoes could have walked in here without a struggle."

"Even if help does not come, you'll fight them, won't you, Will?"

"To be sure—to the bitter end."

"By the way, are you certain the ammunition hasn't been tampered with?" came from Joe.

"I was thinking of that and was going to have an examination made when you stopped me," said Captain Moore, and hurried on.

An examination showed that some of the powder on the place had been hidden. Drossdell said this was under the barn flooring, and his words proved true.

Promptly at four o'clock Captain Moore appeared at the southwest corner of the stockade with a red shirt in one hand and a blue shirt in the other.

Fortunately he was built like Bicker, and donning a private's hat and coat made him look a good deal like that individual from a distance.

Slowly he waved the coats to and fro for five minutes.

Then an answering signal came back from some brushwood on the top of a distant hill—the answer being similar to the signal itself, showing the message was seen and understood.

It is likely that the Indians and desperadoes were much chagrined to think that they would have to hold off for two days, but if so they made no sign.

The next day proved unusually warm. There was nothing for the boys to do in the fort, and they wandered around from place to place. At drill but thirty-eight soldiers presented themselves, all the others being on the sick list.

"I must say I don't feel very well myself," remarked Darry. "I can hardly keep my eyes open."

"Gracious! don't say that you're going to get sick too!" cried Joe.

"I won't get sick if I can help it," replied Darry. "But I feel awfully queer."

Joe did what he could for his cousin. But, with the limited means at hand, this was not much, and by sundown Darry was flat on his back, although the attack he sustained was not as severe as that of many around him.

"I feel as if I was in something of a dream," he told Joe. "That drug must have opium in it."

"It's something like opium—I heard the surgeon say so," answered his cousin.

At night a strict watch was kept, and twice old Benson went out to reconnoiter.

"The Indians and desperadoes have surrounded us on all sides," he announced. "But it don't look as if they meant to attack us just yet."

With the coming of morning it began to rain, but this cleared away by noon, and then the sun boiled down as fiercely as ever. The sunny spots within the stockade were suffocating, and the boys were glad enough to stay within the cool walls of the stone fort.

As far as he was able Captain Moore had prepared the place to resist an attack. A weak spot in the stockade was strengthened and the cannon of the fort were put in the best possible condition. The soldiers were told where to go in case of a sudden alarm, and were cautioned not to waste any ammunition, for the supply was limited.

Thanks to the surgeon's efforts Colonel Fairfield was now somewhat better. Yet he was too weak by far to get up or to manage affairs, so the command still remained in Captain Moore's hands. Even Captain Lee was now down, and it was a question whether he would live or die.

"You must do your best, Captain Moore," said the colonel feebly. "I know I can trust you. You are brave, and your training has been a judicious one."

Early that night there came a sudden alarm, followed by two rifle shots in quick succession. At once there was a commotion, and everybody sprang to his post.

"The Indians and desperadoes must be coming!" cried Joe, and ran for the rifle with which he had been armed.

The cause of the alarm, however, was not from without, but from within. Bicker had forced his way out of the guardhouse, and at the risk of breaking his neck had climbed to the roof of the barn and leaped over the stockade into the ditch outside.

A guard had seen the leap and had fired on the man, hitting him, it was thought, in the shoulder. Then a second guard had discharged his weapon, but by this time the fleeing prisoner had been swallowed up in the gathering darkness.

"He must not get away!" cried the young captain. "If he does, they will attack us at once. After him, Benson, and you, too, Forsheew and Donaldson. I will follow with some horses!"

Without delay the old scout climbed the stockade and scrambled over the ditch. The others ran around to the gate, and soon several additional soldiers followed. On second thought Captain Moore sent the horses out by a lieutenant, thinking it best that he remain where he was, that being primarily his post of duty.

"Can we go?" asked Joe.

"No, Joe, stay where you are," said his brother. "If that rascal gets to his friends there will be work enough here, never fear."

The pursuit of Bicker lasted for over an hour, and brought on a smart skirmish between the men from the fort and the desperadoes, in which one person on each side was slightly wounded. But the rascal managed to gain the enemy's camp in safety, and then those from the fort came back as fast as possible to report.

"Now the deception is up," said Captain Moore, with a serious look. "I wouldn't be surprised to see them attack us before morning."

"Right you are, captain," replied old Benson, "and my opinion is, that the desperadoes and Indians will fight hard, when once they get going," he concluded.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE DEMANDS OF THE ENEMY.

It was an hour later, when the excitement had cooled down a little, that Captain Moore sent for Benson again. Wondering what was to follow, the old scout hurried to the room in which the young commander was transacting his business.

"I want a little talk with you in private, Benson," said the young officer.

"Yes, captain."

"I know you've been wondering why I didn't send you to Fort Prescott instead of sending Hank Leeson."

"You had a right to do as you pleased, captain."

"The truth of the matter is, Benson, I wanted you here. You brought Joe and Darry to the fort, and those two boys need looking after. We are going to have a fight, sooner or later. We may win, and if we do, all right. But if we don't——"

"You want me to stand by the boys to the last?" put in the old scout quickly.

"I do, Benson; and, no matter what comes, I want you to promise to do your level best to save them, and see them safe back to the East. If the worst comes I am willing to die fighting, but Joe must get out of it somehow. If he doesn't it will break my mother's heart. And you must do as well by Darry, for he is an only child."

The eyes of the old scout and the young captain met. Then Benson put out his hand, which Captain Moore quickly grasped.

"I understand, captain. I'll do my best, and if those lads don't get away it will be because Sam Benson aint alive to take 'em."

"As you are not a soldier you have a right to leave the fort as quickly as you please," went on the young captain. "Therefore, if you see the tide of battle turning against us, don't wait, but get the boys away as speedily and as secretly as you can."

"I will, captain; but yourself——"

"Never mind me. Get the boys to a place of safety, and I know our family and Darry's family will reward you well."

"I won't want any reward. I took to the lads from the start, and I'll stand by 'em through thick and thin," said old Benson.

There was but little sleeping done in the fort that night. The majority of the soldiers slept on their arms, expecting an alarm at any moment. Yet it did not come, and the sun rose on a scene of perfect peace and quiet.

But at eight o'clock a sentinel announced a horseman approaching, bearing a white flag.

"So they want to talk, eh?" said the young captain. "All right, anything to gain time."

The flag of truce was promptly answered, and as the horseman came closer many recognized Matt Gilroy. The young captain went out himself to meet the leader of the desperadoes.

"Good-morning, Captain Moore," began the desperado, with a regular military salute.

"What brings you?" demanded the captain abruptly.

"Well, I thought we had best come to terms—that's what brought me."

"Terms about what, Gilroy?"

"Terms about surrendering the fort and all of its contents."

"Surrendering? To whom?"

"You know well enough, Captain Moore. It will be only a waste of time to beat about the bush. Our crowd and the Indians now number over three hundred, and we are bound to get possession of the fort and all that is in it."

"Do you speak for the Indians as well as for yourself?"

"I do."

"So far as I know the Indians are not on the warpath, Gilroy. I must have a talk with one of their chiefs before I do anything."

"You know they are on the warpath. Didn't you have a mix-up with them?"

"There are always some Indians who are ugly and willing to make trouble."

"Well, all the Indians are standing in with us on this deal," went on Gilroy, his face darkening. "And you have got to surrender or take the consequences."

"What will the consequences be?"

"If you won't surrender we'll attack the fort immediately. We know just how weak you are, and let me tell you that we have a dozen or more dynamite bombs on hand with which we can blow the fort sky-high if we wish."

"What good will it do you to capture the fort?"

"We know all about the money that is stored here, and we want every dollar of it."

"And if we surrender?"

"If you surrender you will be allowed to march from the place unmolested, taking all of your sick with you, or leaving them here, in care of a doctor, if you prefer. If you know where your head is level you will surrender," went on the desperado earnestly.

"But if I am compelled to surrender, don't you know that our army will be after you, Gilroy?"

"Never mind, we'll take care of that part of it," was the answer, with a sickly grin. "Then you agree to surrender?"

"I can't do it until I have spoken with one of the leading Indian chiefs."

At this the desperado's face fell.

"Will White Ox do?" he asked, after an awkward pause.

"Yes."

"All right; I'll bring him along in about half an hour."

This ended the interview, and turning his horse Matt Gilroy rode off and Captain Moore walked back to the fort.

"A little time gained, at least," was the young officer's comment.

It was fully an hour before Gilroy reappeared, accompanied by White Ox and an under-chief known as Little Wildcat.

"Want to talk," grunted White Ox, coming to a halt at a safe distance.

"Have you dug up the hatchet, White Ox?" demanded the captain. "If not, let us smoke the pipe of peace together."

"The pipe of peace is broken," answered the old Indian. "The white man is not the red man's friend. He makes promises only to break them. The Indian must fight for what is his own."

"Do you consider this fort your own?"

"The land is the red man's—the white man has stolen it from him. The white man must go and leave the red man to his own."

"If you want the white man to go why don't you drive Gilroy and his gang away too?"

"They have promised to leave—after they have had their share of what is here."

"Oh, so that's the bargain!"

"You see how matters stand, Captain Moore," broke in the leader of the desperadoes. "If you know when you are well off, you'll submit as gracefully as possible."

"If we leave will you promise to let all go in peace," went on the young captain to the Indian chief, "you will not molest the women or any of the young people?"

"Yes, all the women and young people can go," said White Ox, but the look in his face was not one to be trusted.

"And if we refuse when do you expect to attack us?"

"At once."

The reply came from Matt Gilroy, and White Ox nodded in the affirmative.

"I must consult Colonel Fairfield first," said the captain slowly, wondering how he was to gain more time.

"I thought you were in command," remarked Gilroy.

"I was—but the colonel is getting better. Meet me here in another hour, and I will give you his reply and my own."

This did not suit Gilroy and White Ox, but the captain was firm, and at last they went off, promising to be back exactly at the end of the hour.

"And then it must be surrender or fight," said the leader of the desperadoes sharply. "No more dilly-dallying."

It must be confessed that Captain Moore returned to the fort in a thoughtful mood. He had an awful responsibility upon his shoulders. He called several of the other officers in consultation.

"For myself, I believe in fighting," he said. "But we must consider those who are sick and must consider the women."

"The colonel's wife wishes us to fight to the end," replied another officer. "She is not willing to trust White Ox or any of the other redskins."

"I don't believe in surrendering," put in another. "Let us see if we can't hold off until we hear from Leeson and Fort Prescott."

And so it was arranged.

CHAPTER XXIX.

OPENING OF THE BATTLE.

Promptly on the minute Gilroy and White Ox appeared again, with the white flag of truce flying between them.

This time Captain Moore took with him one of his lieutenants, Bacon by name.

The interview was shorter than the captain had anticipated.

"Well, is it surrender or not?" asked Matt Gilroy.

"We must have more time," answered Captain Moore. "Cannot you wait until to-morrow morning?"

"Not another minute," was the angry reply. "Is it surrender or not? Answer yes or no."

"We will not surrender—at least not yet," came from the young captain firmly.

"Then your time is up, and we shall attack at once," returned the leader of the desperadoes. "Am I not right, White Ox?"

"You have spoken truly," came from the Indian chief. "Soon the blood of the white soldiers will flow freely."

Without another word White Ox galloped away, and Matt Gilroy went after him.

"We are up against a battle now!" exclaimed Lieutenant Bacon.

"I have done my best to delay the contest—I can do no more," said Captain Moore.

When he returned inside of the stockade he was immediately surrounded.

"Boys, we must fight," he said in a loud, clear voice. "They will wait no longer. But reinforcements must be on the way by this time. Can I depend upon your standing by me?"

"Yes! yes!" was the cry.

"We know how to do our duty to Uncle Sam and the flag!"

"Let the desperadoes and the Indians come on! We'll give them as hot a reception as they ever got!"

While the soldiers were taking their way to the several defenses of the fort there was the beating of Indian drums at a distance, followed by the blowing of a bugle in the camp of the desperadoes.

Soon the beating and blowing came from half a dozen directions.

"They are gathering, sure enough!" exclaimed Joe. "I wonder how long it will be before they fire the first shot?"

"They'll not be rash—be sure of that," answered Darry. "They must know that the fort is a strong place."

A little later one of the guards announced that bodies of Indians were marching from the south of the fort to the westward.

Here there was a fringe of trees at a distance of not over a hundred yards from the stockade.

Colonel Fairfield had often thought to have the belt of timberland cut down, but had never put the plan into execution.

"They mean to get as close as possible before they expose themselves," said the captain. "Dilberry, have the four-pounder trained on that spot."

"I will, Captain Moore," said the head gunner, and saluted.

Quarter of an hour went by, and the drumming and bugle calling had ceased.

Suddenly a shout went up from behind the belt of timberland, and a small cannon spoke up, sending a shell into the ditch outside the stockade.

"Hullo, they have a cannon after all," thought Captain Moore. He called Dilberry to him. "Can you get the range of that piece?" he asked.

"I can try, sir."

"Then do it, and if you can disable the piece so much the better."

At once the head gunner ran off and sighted one of the cannon of the fort with care.

A few seconds later the cannon spoke up with a report that rang in the boys' ears for long after. The ball sped straight into the timberland and cut down a heavy sapling growing beside the piece the enemy were reloading. One desperado was killed instantly and another badly injured.

"A fair shot!" said the young captain. "Try it again," but before Dilberry could do so the cannon was withdrawn from sight.

After this came another lull, as if desperadoes and Indians were considering what to do next.

"It's a wonder they don't make a rush," said Joe, "if they have so many in their command."

"Nobody cares to risk an advance in the open, Joe," said old Benson. "More than likely they won't try to do much until dark."

Again the Indian drums were rolling, coupled with shrill warwhoops.

Then, with a wild yelling and a brandishing of rifles, about a hundred and fifty red men burst from cover and ran toward the stockade.

"They are coming!" was the cry.

"Stand firm, men, don't waste your ammunition!" Captain Moore cried. He turned to the gunner. "Let them have it, Dilberry!"

Bang! the cannon boomed out again, and the shot tore through the advancing horde of Indians, laying four of them low.

Then came a volley from the red men, followed by the discharge of the piece in the hands of the desperadoes. The splinters flew in several directions around the stockade and one soldier was seriously wounded. The cannon ball grazed the flagstaff, and presently it was seen to totter.

"Look out!" roared old Benson to Joe, and as he spoke down came the Stars and Stripes on the heads of Joe and Darry, and a section of the flagstaff with it.

"The flag is down!" A score of voices took up the cry, and a yell of triumph came from the Indians and desperadoes.

"It's not going to remain down!" cried old Benson, and began to climb what remained of the pole. He carried the halyard with him, and soon, with the aid of the two boys, he had the glorious Stars and Stripes once more in position.

In the meantime the soldiers under Captain Moore were busy. The Indians were now at the ditch, and one had advanced as far as the stockade itself. They were yelling like demons, and now the desperadoes began to show themselves, confident that the fort would soon be taken.

"They haven't got a corporal's guard to defend it!" cried Matt Gilroy. "Nearly everyone of those inside is sick. Come on!"

The noise was now deafening, for soldiers and Indians were discharging their weapons as rapidly as possible. The red men had brought with them a long board, to which cross-pieces were nailed. This board was now set slantingly against the stockade, and a dozen warriors rushed upon it.

"Down with them!" shouted Captain Moore. "Heave the plank off!"

A dozen soldiers started to do his bidding. The first that showed himself was shot down, and the second shared a similar fate. But others were more successful, and into the ditch went the board with a loud splash, carrying the Indians with it.

The soldiers set up a shout of triumph, and as the red men fell back those who could gain a point of vantage fired on the enemy. By this movement three Indians were left in the ditch dead and several others were wounded. A desperado was also brought down. Those that were uninjured lost no time in seeking cover; and thus the first advance on the fort came to an end.

All told, the attack had lasted nearly an hour, and when it was over it was found that everybody was hot, dry, and dusty. But, fortunately, water was to be had in plenty, and a drink refreshed all. The dead and wounded were carried away, and the latter were made as comfortable as the limited means of the fort afforded.

"They won't come back in a hurry," said the young captain. "The Indians have had their eyes opened."

"How soon can those re-enforcements come, Will?" asked Joe.

"I don't think they can get here before to-morrow noon, if as soon. They'll have a long journey before them, and a body of several hundred soldiers can't travel as fast as a single person."

"Of course they'll be cavalry," put in Darry.

"I hope so—if the cavalry was at Fort Prescott when Leeson got there."

Colonel Fairfield was much disturbed by the shooting, and he insisted upon sitting up and

hearing the particulars.

"Good!" he murmured. "Keep them off another twenty-four hours and we shall be saved," and then he went off in another stupor.

All was now as quiet as if not an enemy was within a mile of the fort. But the soldiers remained on guard, and this vigilance was increased as the sun went down in the west.

"This night will tell the tale," was old Benson's comment. "Boys, it's do or die, and don't you forget it!"

Whether or not the old scout was right we shall soon see.

CHAPTER XXX.

SIGNALS IN THE DARK.

"Joe, I've got a scheme to outwit the desperadoes and Indians, and I've a good mind to propose it to Will."

It was Darry who spoke, as he and Joe were eating an early supper that night, in one corner of the messroom.

"If the scheme is good for anything let Will have it by all means," answered his cousin. "Heaven knows we need all the help we can get!"

"My scheme is this," went on Darry. "Those Indians and the desperadoes must know something of our sending off for re-enforcements. Now why can't Will send out old Benson and a few others, to steal off for several miles and light camp-fires, blow bugles, and all that, to make the enemy think the re-enforcements are close at hand?"

Joe clapped his hands. "That's a grand scheme!" he cried. "Let's speak to Will about it at once."

The supper was soon finished, and they sought out the young captain, who was dividing up his force for guard duty during the night.

"I was thinking of such a scheme myself," he said, when he had heard them. "And old Benson suggested it, too. Perhaps I'll do it."

"If old Benson goes can't I go with him?" asked Joe quickly.

"And let me go too," put in Darry. "You won't miss us as much as you would miss two of your regulars."

At this the young captain grew grave. "Old Benson said he would like to take you along. Perhaps it would be best, too." He paused. "You see, they may fall on the fort to-night and wipe us out completely."

"Oh, Will, do you really believe that?"

"They will certainly attack us, and the men fit for duty number but thirty-four. Thirty-four against several hundred is not much of a force, even in a fort."

The matter was talked over for half an hour, and old Benson was called in for consultation. In the end it was decided that the old scout should head a party consisting of two regulars and the two boys, who were to carry a drum and a bugle and a good supply of matches for bonfires.

"If you can pass them without being seen, head straight for Conner's Hill," said Captain Moore. "Blow the bugle there, and beat the drum, and then move over to Decker's Falls and light your first camp-fire. After that you'll have to do what you think is best."

"I understand, captain," answered the old scout. "And trust me to fool 'em nicely, if the trick can be done at all."

"It is not going to be an extra-dark night," went on the young officer. "So you will have your own troubles in getting away from the fort without being seen."

"I know a route," answered old Benson. "Trust me for it." But just then he would say no more.

The men to go along were named Cass and Bernstein. Cass was a good drummer and bugler, and Bernstein was noted for his good sight and the accuracy of his aim. All of the party went fully armed, and took with them rations for two days.

"Good-by, Joe," said the captain affectionately, and he took his brother by the hand. "I hope you pull through in safety."

"And I hope you do too, Will," answered Joe, and his lip quivered as he spoke. Perhaps this would be the last time he would see his brother alive. Never before had the situation appeared so serious as now. Darry also received an affectionate farewell.

In absolute silence old Benson led his little party to a far corner of the stockade, where there was a small gate, fastened with a strong log bar. This gate was opened just far enough for them to slip through, and then closed again. Their mission had begun. There was no telling how it would end.

Slipping into the ditch, the old scout told the others to lie low, while he and Bernstein surveyed the situation. It was silent, and from overhead only a few stars twinkled down upon them.

Old Benson presently pointed with his bony hand.

"Clear that way, aint it?" he whispered.

"Looks so," answered Bernstein, after a searching look lasting several minutes. "I wouldn't go too close to that patch of underbrush, though."

The party began crawling along the ditch, until they came to a little gully which the last heavy rains had formed. Here they progressed on hands and knees until they reached some low brushwood. Then old Benson, still crouching close to the ground, set off on a lope, and the others came after him in Indian file.

If they had been discovered, neither Indians nor desperadoes gave any sign, and inside of ten minutes the fort was left out of sight, and they were standing in a hollow fringed with berry bushes. The boys were somewhat out of breath, and old Benson gave them a short spell in which to get back their wind.

"We were right, they are none of 'em in this vicinity," said the old scout. "Getting away was easier than I expected."

"It was no easy matter with the drum," came from Cass. "I came pretty close to falling and smashing it once."

The course now led up a small hill and then across a valley to another hill, a distance of nearly three miles. The trail was by no means straight and the walking was bad, and Joe and Darry had all they could do to keep up with the others.

At the last minute Captain Moore had given the boys half a dozen rockets, and explained how the fireworks were to be set off. Everything they could do to puzzle the enemy was to be done.

At last they gained the top of Conner's Hill—so called because Major Conner fell there while battling with some stage-robbers early in the seventies.

Bringing around his bugle, Cass blew a long blast and then a regular military call, which echoed and re-echoed throughout the mountains. This was followed by a long roll on the drum, and then another call on the bugle.

After this all waited impatiently, gazing in the direction of the fort, which was, of course, hidden in the darkness.

"There they go!" cried Joe, and as he spoke two rockets flared up, dying out almost instantly.

The boys had planted two of the fireworks given them, and now these were touched off and went hissing skyward, leaving a trail of sparks behind. Two minutes later a single rocket went up from the fort.

"That's the last," observed old Benson.

"I'll wager that will set the Indians and the desperadoes to thinking," said Cass.

"They'll think some more when they see a camp-fire over Decker's Falls," put in Bernstein. "They'll imagine that they are being surrounded."

"Don't be too sure," came from the old scout. "White Ox is no fool. He has been through too much fighting. If we can only make him hold off a bit that's as much as we can expect. You can bet he'll have spies up here in less than an hour from now."

The march was now for Decker's Falls, a distance three miles to the westward. Again they advanced in Indian file, Bernstein now leading and old Benson bringing up the rear.

A mile had been covered, when the regular in front called a halt.

"A small camp is ahead," he said. "There, through the trees."

Without delay old Benson went forward to investigate.

He found three desperadoes talking earnestly among themselves, while warming some coffee over a small fire.

Listening to their talk he learned that they had been out on the trails leading to Fort Prescott, and had come in with the news that no re-enforcements for Fort Carson were within forty miles of the latter place.

"Gilroy and White Ox will be glad to hear our news," said one of the crowd. "They've been afraid all along Colonel Fairfield had sent out for aid."

Not stopping to hear anything further, old Benson crawled back to the place where he had left the others.

"We must capture those men, dead or alive," he said. "If they carry their news to the enemy there will be another attack on the fort within an hour."

Leaving the drum, bugle, and remaining rockets in a safe place, our friends advanced until all could see the three desperadoes quite plainly.

One of the fellows was unknown to Joe, but the others were Gus Fetter and Nat Potts.

The desperadoes had placed their rifles against a tree, and old Benson motioned to the boys to secure the weapons.

As Joe grabbed up two of the firearms and Darry the third, the desperadoes leaped to their feet in alarm.

"Hands up!" sang out old Benson. "Hands up, or you are all dead men!"

The scout's rifle was raised, and so were the weapons of Cass and Bernstein, and the desperadoes found themselves at a disadvantage.

Yet Fetter was game, and he quickly reached for a pistol hanging in his belt.

But the movement, quick as it was, was not quick enough for Bernstein, and as the regular's rifle rang out Fetter fell headlong across the camp-fire.

"Do you surrender?" asked old Benson.

"Yes," came from Potts, sulkily, and his companion said the same. In the meantime Fetter had rolled from the camp-fire and was breathing his last at Potts' feet.

The sight was a thrilling one, and caused Joe and Darry to shudder.

"Can't I do something for that poor wretch?" asked Joe, of Benson, but before the old scout could answer Fetter breathed his last.

In a few minutes more Potts was made a close prisoner.

While he was being tied up, the third man made a quick leap into the woods.

"After him!" cried Benson, and Cass and Bernstein did as commanded. Soon the desperado and the two regulars were out of sight and hearing.

CHAPTER XXXI.

BURNING OF THE STOCKADE.

"What will you do with him?" asked Joe of Benson, as he pointed to Nat Potts.

"Don't be hard on me," pleaded Potts. "I meant you no harm."

"You ought to be hung," grunted the old scout. "You aint fit to live and you know it, Potts. You could make an honest living if you wanted to, but you would rather cheat and steal."

"It was Matt Gilroy who got me into this," answered Potts. "He——"

"Don't put it off on to somebody else, Potts!" cried the old scout wrathfully. "If you aint got backbone enough to be honest, it's your own fault."

"Will you let me go, if I promise to leave this Territory?" asked Potts eagerly.

"No, sirree!" was Benson's answer. "You shall suffer the full extent of the law, and don't you forget it!"

While waiting for the return of Cass and Bernstein, the old scout searched Potts and the dead body of Fetter, taking away all their weapons and some papers which Potts carried.

These papers showed how deep-laid was the plot which the desperadoes had formed to gain possession of the money stored at Fort Carson, and how they had duped the Indians under White Ox and other chiefs to assist them.

At last Cass and Bernstein came back, all out of breath with running.

"Did he get away?" questioned Benson quickly.

"He did and he didn't," answered Cass. "He ran up Cedar Cliff, and seeing we were after him he tried to jump to the other side of the canyon. But he missed his footing in the dark, and went down, and that's the last we seen or heard of him."

"And that's the last anybody will see or hear of him," answered the old scout. "That canyon is three hundred feet deep, and nothing but sharp rocks, sides and bottom. He's done for."

The march onward was now resumed, the old scout forcing Potts to walk between himself and the

boys, with his hands tied tightly behind him.

"If you make any noise it will cost you your life," said Benson to the prisoner, and thereupon Potts became perfectly mute. To tell the truth the desperado was thoroughly downcast, and his face was filled with despair.

They calculated that it was two o'clock in the morning when the heights above Decker's Falls was gained, a wild spot, from which old Benson had often viewed the fort, miles below, in the valley.

The driest possible brush was gathered, and on this were heaped several good-sized limbs, that the fire might burn an hour or two. Quarter of a mile away another similar fire was kindled, and at this spot the boys set off all but one of their remaining rockets.

"There is the answer from the fort!" said Joe, as two rockets flared up in the dim distance. "Anyway, Will knows we have gotten this far."

"But he doesn't know of the adventure we have had on the way," said Darry.

As soon as the fires were well under way old Benson began to lead the way down the mountain side toward a stretch of timber running within half a mile of the fort.

While they were in the midst of the forest a distant firing broke upon their ears.

"Is that from the fort?" asked Joe quickly.

"Reckon it is, lad," replied the old scout.

"Then our signals haven't done any good."

"Perhaps they have. But it may be that others have been out spying, and they have brought in the same report that Potts and his crowd were carrying."

As they advanced the firing died away for half an hour, but then it was renewed with vigor.

Coming to another hilltop, they could see the flashes, of fire as the rifles and cannon were discharged.

The Indians and desperadoes had approached Fort Carson in the darkness, hoping to catch those inside napping.

But the regulars had opened the firing, and two Indians were killed at the very outset.

The red men had brought forward a large quantity of brush, and at the risk of their lives they heaped this against the wooden stockade.

When Joe and the others who were with him gained the plains surrounding the stronghold they saw that the brush was burning at a lively rate.

"They are firing the fort!" cried Darry. "Heaven have mercy on those inside!"

"I see nothing of Indians or desperadoes," said Joe. "Where have they gone, Benson?"

"Reckon they didn't like those last signals," answered the old scout.

From a distance they watched the burning of the brush with interest. Here and there they saw the stockade take fire, and then saw a blaze on the stable within the fort yard.

"The fire has reached inside!" groaned Joe. "The place is doomed!"

"Come on! There is no use of our staying here longer!" cried Benson, and led the way across the plain, now lit up by the conflagration beyond. He forced Potts with him.

Suddenly several shots rang out, and Joe felt a bullet graze his hand. Then he saw Cass pitch forward on his face, and heard Potts give a yell of mortal agony.

"Poor Cass, he's a goner!" muttered Bernstein. "And the desperado is dead, too."

No more was said, for all felt they must run as never before, if they would save themselves. Soon the gully was reached, and they dropped to shelter. But no more shots followed, and in a few minutes more they were close to the burning stockade.

"Friends!" shouted Benson, to a guard. "Don't shoot! Come out here and put out the fire!"

"Is that you?" came from Captain Moore, in the semi-darkness. "Are Joe and Darry safe?"

"Yes," came from the boys.

There was no time to say more, for already the soldiers were forming a bucket brigade, carrying water with which to put out the flames. Some had long poles with hooks, and with these they dragged a large part of the burning brush into the ditch.

All this while some of the regulars remained on guard, and occasionally a shot rang out, answered by another from a great distance.

"They have surely withdrawn," said the young captain. "Benson, the trick worked after all."

"That's right, captain. But it won't work many hours, you can depend upon that."

"If it only makes them hold off until morning I shall be satisfied," concluded Captain Moore.

By the exertion of the soldiers the fire was kept from communicating with any of the buildings but the stable, and of this structure only a corner of the roof suffered. But the stockade was greatly damaged, and by the time the last spark was out it was seen that it had sustained three openings each eight to twelve feet long.

"We'll have to repair these," said Captain Moore; and, tired though the workers were, he made them haul fresh timbers from the woodpile and also tear up part of the barn floor, that the stockade might present a whole front to the enemy once more.

The fighting had greatly agitated the women in the fort, and nobody had slept for two nights. Yet even now, with the fire out and silence brooding everywhere, nobody thought of going to bed. All felt that this was but the lull before the greater storm.

If only the relief would come! Such was the thought of everyone but Drossdell, who still remained in the guardhouse, heavily chained, hands and feet. Drossdell was deeply downcast, and with good reason.

At last came the welcome signs of dawn in the east, and then a few of the soldiers, who could stand the strain no longer, threw themselves down to sleep. The others, pale and haggard, sat around in little groups wondering what was going to happen next. To each was served extra-strong coffee and the best rations the fort afforded.

"It cannot last much longer," said Captain Moore, trying to cheer them up. "Relief must come sooner or later."

He had now but a pitiful twenty-eight men left, including old Benson and Joe and Darry. Twenty-eight! What could such a number do against the attack of two or three hundred desperadoes and Indians? The situation was certainly one to make the stoutest heart quail.

"It was too bad you came out here on a vacation," said the captain sadly, to his brother and his cousin. "Perhaps you'll never see home again."

"Oh, Will, do you really think it's so bad?" came from Darry.

"It is hard to tell what I think, Darry. I know we are in a mighty tight box."

"Let us hope for the best," said Joe. "Leeson must be doing something."

"If he wasn't caught and shot down, Joe."

"That is true," and now Joe gave a long sigh that meant a good deal.

"There is but one thing in our favor now, this daylight. But if no relief reaches us by sundown ——" The captain did not finish, but shook his head.

A moment later one of the guards called down that he could see some Indians to the northwest of the fort.

A glass was brought into play, and by this a party of seventy-five red men could be made out marching directly for the fort. Behind the red men came a dozen or fifteen whites.

Hardly had this discovery been made when another body of Indians and whites were seen marching upon the fort from the south.

"We are to suffer a double attack now!" was Captain Moore's comment. "Heaven help us and bring us through it in safety!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

RELIEF AT LAST—CONCLUSION.

The attack did not come until half an hour later, and during the time of waiting the nerves of the boys were strained to the utmost. The seriousness of the situation was depicted upon the faces of all the soldiers, who felt that the coming contest must decide whether or not the fort was to stand.

The firing began on the part of the Indians and desperadoes, who advanced upon the stronghold from four points of the compass at once. The enemy had learned the folly of massing their force, and Indians and whites came on in a wide open skirmish line.

The soldiers within the stockade fired upon the advancing foe as best they could. Yet by the time red men and desperadoes were within reach of the stockade only three of the foe had fallen.

As before, some of the Indians carried a board with strips nailed across it for steps, and the desperadoes had a similar contrivance. The two boards were placed at opposite ends of the stockade, and, while some of the enemy began to mount them, others came rushing on with a tree trunk, which they used as a battering-ram against the stockade gate.

The noise was now terrific, as rifle and cannon shot sounded out, mingled with the warwhoops of the Indians and the groans and shrieks of the wounded and dying.

As for Joe and Darry, the first shock over, each felt as if he was in a dream—as if this terrible sight presented to their gaze could not be true. They shot off their rifles mechanically, yet when it was all over Joe remembered how he had sent one redskin tumbling back into the ditch, and Darry could tell of a desperado who had dropped his gun because of a shot through the shoulder.

"Fight to the last, men!" shouted Captain Moore, as he discharged his pistol at the leader of the desperadoes. Gilroy had hit him in the forearm, but the young officer's aim was still more true, and Matt Gilroy went down never to rise again.

In the meanwhile old Benson was having a terrific hand-to-hand encounter with White Ox. Each had fired a shot at the other, and now they closed in, the Indian chief with his hunting-knife and the old scout with his clubbed rifle.

The struggle was as short as it was thrilling. Benson made a pass which the Indian chief dodged. Then White Ox plunged his knife toward the old scout's heart, but a quick turn made it catch in Benson's hunting-shirt. Down came the rifle butt a second time, and the blow, catching White Ox on the neck, forced him to his knees. Even then he struck at Benson's legs, but the old scout leaped over his head. Then down came the rifle butt once more, and the Indian chief gave a groan which was his last.

Fully sixty Indians and a score of desperadoes were now within the stockade, and it looked as if all was lost to our friends. A part of the regulars were fighting at the entrance to the stable, but the majority were gathered around Captain Moore at the entrance to the officers' quarters. Behind these were the ladies of the fort and the officers who were sick.

"Perhaps we had better surrender," said Colonel Fairfield, when told by his wife of the condition of affairs. "If we don't—" He could not finish.

"Kill the white soldiers!" was the cry from the Indians. "White Ox has fallen! They must all die! Spare nobody!"

Captain Moore was now fighting as never before. Beside him stood old Benson, and not far away were Joe and Darry. Each of the number was wounded, and hardly any of the regulars were better off. Ammunition was running low. Still the horrible din continued, and the dust and smoke were blinding.

But now, hark, what was that? From a distance sounded out a bugle call. Then came a shot, followed by another, and then a regular volley. Captain Moore started, and his eyes lit with pleasure.

"The relief!" he shouted. "The relief from Fort Prescott! Boys, we are saved!"

"Hurrah, the relief!" was the shout which made the fort ring from end to end. "The relief! We are saved!"

"Give it to the reds and to the desperadoes!" came from old Benson. "Teach 'em the lesson so they won't forget it! Don't let a skunk of 'em escape!"

Nearer and nearer came the shots from without, and a bugle continued to blow calls to a detachment still further away. Then up to the fort rode a troop of dashing cavalry from Fort Prescott, Hank Leeson beside them, and every horse covered with foam. Crack! crack! crack! spoke up the firearms of the newcomers, and Indians and desperadoes fell in all directions.

"We must retreat!" shouted one of the desperadoes. "The game is up!"

"Retreat! retreat!" came from the others; and the red men took up the cry. Soon the enemy were pouring from the fort grounds even more rapidly than they had entered.

There was only a pitiful handful that could follow them, the young captain, Benson, and nine regulars. But there was no need for even that number, for the blood of the cavalry was up and every desperado and red man received one or more shots the instant he appeared. Soon the enemy were flying in all directions. But the cavalry went after them, and in the end all but four desperadoes and thirty-six Indians were killed, the others being forced to surrender.

It was rather a silent party that gathered in and around the fort that night. Victory had come to our friends, but the cost had been a heavy one, and the hospital ward of the fort was filled to over-flowing.

Hank Leeson came in for many a warm hand-shake, and was made to tell his story over and over again.

"It was a close shave," said the old hunter. "Twice I got in a close box with the redskins an' I had to shoot one of 'em down afore I could git away. That's wot kept me so long. I'm glad we wasn't an hour later, fer then mebber we'd 'a' been too late."

All of the principal desperadoes were dead and the same can be said of the Indians. Among the slain was found the body of Bicker, and, if the truth must be told, nobody mourned his loss.

"He is responsible for a great deal of this suffering," said Captain Moore. "Had he lived it is likely

he would have been court-martialed and shot."

Both of the boys had been slightly wounded, yet each felt happy when the fighting was over and they were assured that from henceforth they would be safe to come and go as they pleased.

"It was like a regular campaign," said Darry. "Joe, we have become soldiers after all!"

"That's so, Darry," replied Joe. "We can call ourselves, after this, the boys of the fort!"

A few words more, and we will bring this story of fort life in the Great Northwest to a close.

Two weeks after the events just narrated Joe and Darry returned to their homes. Here they were received with open arms by their parents, who had heard all manner of ugly reports and who half expected to see them coming back wounded and crippled for life. But the lads soon proved that they were not so bad off as that, and inside of a few months both were as well as ever.

At the fort an active campaign was started under Captain Moore and the commander of the cavalry, and this resulted in the rounding up of six more desperadoes and thirty Indians. Lieutenant Carrol and four regulars were found as prisoners of the Indians and were released.

The desperadoes were turned over to the civil courts, and were dealt with severely, two being hung and the others being imprisoned for years.

Drossdell was court-martialed, and after a long trial was sentenced to imprisonment in a military prison for ten years. He served six years, after which he was released. To his credit be it said, he turned over a new leaf, and from the West went to Cuba, where he fought with the Cubans against Spanish rule. He was with the Cubans at the fall of Santiago and died a few weeks later of tropical fever.

As soon as the proper medicines could be obtained and administered, those who had been drugged at the fort began to recover, and inside of two weeks Colonel Fairfield, Captain Lee, and our other friends were around once more, although rather weak.

The mining company whose money had been saved was exceedingly thankful to Captain Moore and the others for what had been done, and when, several years later, the young captain left the regular army, this company offered him a lucrative position, which he accepted and which he fills to this day.

Old Benson and Hank Leeson still continue to roam the Great Northwest, and are happy. Occasionally they receive a visit from Joe and Darry, and are never more satisfied than when they have the two young men with them on a hunting and fishing tour.

"Takes me back to years ago," says old Benson. "Years ago, when you were both green as grass."

"Well, we are not so green now," replies Joe, with a quiet smile. "Through bitter experience we have learned a thing or two."

"Now it is over I am glad I didn't miss it," puts in Darry. "We got a genuine taste of soldier life, didn't we?"

"That's so," adds Joe. "We were really and truly the Boys of the Fort."

THE END.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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