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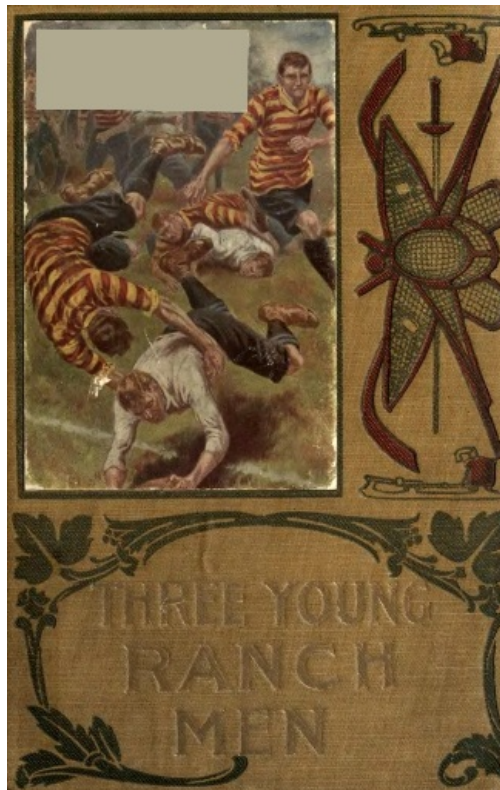
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THREE YOUNG RANCHMEN; OR, DARING ADVENTURES IN THE GREAT WEST ***



Three Young Ranchmen

Or, Daring Adventures in the Great West

By Captain Ralph Bonehill

Author of "A Sailor Boy with Dewey," "For the Liberty of Texas," "The Young Bandmaster," etc.

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HORSE AND YOUTH WENT PLUNGING HEADLONG.

PREFACE

"Three Young Ranchmen" relates the adventures of three brothers, Allen, Chetwood and Paul Winthrop, who are left to shift for themselves upon a lonely ranch home situated in the mountainous region of the beautiful State of Idaho, near one of the numerous branches of the Salmon River.

The lads, although sturdy and brave, have no easy time making a living, and among other troubles, they are visited by horse thieves, and also by a crafty prospector who wishes to take their claim away from them. In the meantime an uncle of the lads has gone off to visit the city, and he disappears entirely, adding to the complexity of the situation. What the boys did to straighten out the trouble is told in the chapters which follow.

In writing this story I have tried to give my boy readers a fair idea of life on a ranch of to-day, as well as of life in the wild mountains of Idaho, with some idea of the ranch hands and miners to be met with in these localities. The tale has been drawn as true to nature as possible, and I trust its reading will prove both entertaining and useful.

CAPTAIN RALPH BONEHILL.

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THREE YOUNG RANCHMEN

CHAPTER I.

AN UNPLEASANT DISCOVERY

"When do you think Allen will be back, Paul?"

"He ought to be back by two or three o'clock, Chet. His horse was fresh, and the roads are very good just now."

"I hope he brings good news, don't you? I am tired of waiting here."

"We will have to content ourselves on the ranch another year, I am afraid. Father left matters in a very unsettled condition, and what has become of Uncle Barnaby the world only knows."

"I don't care so much about the dullness—I like to hunt and fish and round up the cattle just as well as any one—but what I'm complaining of is the uncertainty of the way things are going to turn. For all we know, we may be cast adrift, as the saying goes, any day."

"That is true, although I imagine our title to the ranch is O. K. If those title papers hadn't been burned up when one end of the house took fire I wouldn't worry a bit."

"Neither would I. But we all know what Captain Grady is—the meanest man that ever drew the breath of life—and if he once learns that we haven't the papers he'll be down on us quicker than a grizzly bear in the spring."

"Well, we won't let him know that the papers have been burned up. We will continue to bluff him off."

"We can't bluff him forever. To my mind——"

The boy broke off short, and coming to a halt, pointed with his disengaged hand toward the barn.

"Did you leave that door unlocked?" he went on.

"Certainly I didn't. Who opened it? Perhaps Allen is back."

"And perhaps there are horse thieves around!" was the quick reply. "Come on."

Without a word more the two boys dropped their burdens and started for the structure in which

the horse belonging to each had been stabled.

The boys were Chetwood and Paul Winthrop, two brothers, tall, well-built, and handsome. The face of each was browned by exposure, and showed the perfect health that only a life in the open can give.

Chet and Paul lived with their elder brother Allen at a typical ranch home in Idaho, on one of the numerous branches of the winding Salmon River. The home was a rude but comfortable affair, with several outbuildings close at hand, the whole surrounded by a rude but substantial stockade, a relic of the time when troubles with the Indians were numerous.

It was a warm, sunshiny day in August, and the two boys had been down to the river fishing at a favorite deep hole near the roots of a clump of cottonwood trees. Each had a nice mess of fish strung on a brush branch, showing that their quest of game had not been a vain one.

For three years the three Winthrop boys had lived alone at the ranch home. Their former history was a peculiar one, the particulars of which will be given later. Just now we will follow Chet and Paul to the barn, the door to which stood half open.

"Gone!"

The single word burst from the lips of both simultaneously. It was enough, for it told the whole story. Their two animals, Jasper and Rush, had vanished.

"Thieves, as sure as fate!" ejaculated Paul, gazing rapidly on all sides. "See how the lock has been broken open."

"And they have taken all the extra harness as well," added Chet, his black eyes snapping angrily. "I wonder how long ago this happened."

"There's no telling, Chet. Let's see—we went off about eight o'clock, didn't we?"

"Yes."

"Then the rascals have had nearly four hours in which to do their dirty work. By this time they are probably miles away. This is the worst luck of all."

"You are not going to sit down and suck your thumb, are you, Paul?" questioned the younger brother, quickly.

"Not if we can do anything. But we are tied fast here,—we can't follow on foot,—they knew that when they came to rob us."

"Have you any idea who the thieves can be?"

"Most likely a remnant of that old gang from Jordan Creek. I knew they would spring up again, even after Sol Davids was lynched. Let us take a look around, and see if we can't find some clew to their identity."

"If only Allen would come——"

"Fire off your gun. If he is in hearing that will hasten his movements."

Thus directed, Chet hastened outside, and running to the house, quickly brought forth his double-barreled shotgun. Two reports rent the air a second later, and then the youth returned with the still smoking firearm to the barn.

"Have you found anything?" he asked.

"Here is a strap that doesn't belong to our outfit," replied Paul. "But it's only a common affair that might belong to any one."

"And here is a silver cross!" cried Chet, as he sprang forward to pick up the object.

The article which Chet had found embedded in the dirt flooring of the barn was really of silver, but so unpolished that it did not shine. It was not over an inch in length and height, with a round hole directly in the center. At the four corners of the cross were the letters D A F G.

"What do you make of it?" asked Paul, impatiently, as he bent over to examine the object as it lay in his younger brother's palm.

"Nothing. It's a silver cross with letters on it; that's all. I never saw one like it before."

"Is there no name on the back?"

Quickly the cross was turned over. There, dug into the metal, as if with a jackknife, were the letters S. M.

"S. M.," said Chet, slowly. "Who can they stand for?"

"Sam somebody, I suppose," replied Paul. "I reckon there are a good many folks in Idaho with the initials S. M."

"That is true, too, but it's not likely many of them are mean enough to turn horse thieves."

Chet surveyed the cross for a few seconds longer. Then he rammed it into his pocket and went on

with the search, and Paul followed suit.

But their further efforts remained unrewarded. Not another thing of value was brought to light.

They were on the point of giving up when a clatter of hoofs was heard outside on the rocks leading from the trail back to the willows and cottonwoods.

"There is Allen now!" cried Paul, joyfully. "Hi, Allen! This way, quick!" he added, elevating his voice.

"All right, Paul, my boy!" came in a cheery voice from the elder of the Winthrops, as he dashed up on his faithful mare. "What's wanted?"

"The horses have been stolen!"

"Phew!" It was a low and significant whistle that Allen Winthrop emitted, and the pleasant look on his fine features gave way to one of deep concern.

"Stolen!" he said at last. "When? By whom?"

"We don't know," replied Paul. "We just got back from the river a few minutes ago and found the barn door broken open and both horses gone."

"And no clew?"

"We found this."

Allen Winthrop caught up the silver cross quickly and gazed at it for the fraction of a minute. Then he muttered something under his breath.

"Did you ever see this cross before?" asked Paul.

"No, but I have heard father tell of it," was the answer. "It is the cross the old Sol Davids gang used to wear. Do you see those letters—D A F G? They stand for 'Dare All For Gold.' That was the gang's motto, and they never hesitated to carry it out."

"Then we were right in thinking that the horse thieves might be some left-overs from the old gang," observed Paul.

"Yes they are most likely of the same old crowd," said Allen. "The hanging of old Sol did not drive them out of this district."

"But what of the initials S. M.?" asked Chet. "I never heard of any horse thief that those would fit."

"We'll find out about that when we run the thieves down," said Allen. "You say you discovered the robbery but a short while since?"

"Less than a quarter of an hour ago."

"Have you been up to the house?"

"I went for my gun," began Chet. "I wonder if it were possible——" he commenced, and then meeting his older brother's eyes stopped short. Not one of the trio said more just then. All made a wild dash from the barn to the house. They burst into the living room of the latter like a cyclone.

"It looks all right," began Paul.

"But it isn't all right," burst out Chet. "See the side window has been forced open!"

Allen said nothing, having passed into one of the sleeping rooms. He began to rummage around the apartment, into the closet and the trunks.

"By gracious!" he burst out presently.

"What's up?" questioned his two brothers in a breath.

"It's gone!"

"Gone?"

"Yes, every dollar is gone!" groaned Allen.

He referred to three bags which had contained silver and gold to the amount of seven hundred dollars—the Winthrop savings for several years.

Paul and Chet gave a groan. Something like a lump arose in the throat of the younger youth, but he cleared it away with a cough.

"The mean, contemptible scoundrels!" burst out Paul. "We must get after them somehow!"

"I'll go after them," replied Allen, with swift determination. "Give me my rifle. I already have my pistol."

"You are not going alone, are you?" demanded Paul.

"I'll have to. There is only my mare to be had."

"It's foolhardy, Allen," urged Chet. "What could one fellow do against two or more? They would knock you over at the first chance."

"I won't give them the first chance," grimly replied Allen, as he ran for his rifle. "As they used to say when father was young, I'll shoot first and talk afterward."

"Can't two of us ride on the mare?" asked Paul. "I am not so very heavy."

The older brother shook his head.

"It can't be done, Paul; not with her all tired out after her morning's jaunt. No, I'll go alone. Perhaps the trail will lead past some other ranch and then I'll call on the neighbors for help."

"Can you follow the trail?"

"I reckon I can; leastwise I can try. I won't lose it unless they take to the rocks and leave the river entirely, and it ain't likely they'll do that."

Chet and Paul shook their heads. To them it seemed dangerous, and so it was. But it was no use arguing with Allen when he had once made up his mind, so they let him have his own way.

Three minutes later Allen was off on the trail of the horse thieves.

CHAPTER II.

ALLEN ON THE TRAIL

Although Allen Winthrop was but a young man in years, yet the fact that he had had the care of the family on his shoulders since the death of his parents had tended to make him older in experience and give him the courage to face whatever arose before him in the path of duty.

He was four years older than Chet and two years the senior of Paul, and the others had always looked upon him as a guiding spirit in all undertakings.

Consequently but little was said by way of opposition when Allen determined to go after the thieves alone, but nevertheless the hearts of both the younger brothers were filled with anxiety when they saw Allen disappear on the back of his mare up the trail that led to the southwest.

"It's too bad that we can't accompany him," was the way Chet expressed himself. "I'd give all I possess for a good horse just now."

"All you possess isn't much, seeing we've all been cleaned out," replied Paul, with a trace of grim humor he did not really feel. "But I, too, wish I had a horse and could go along."

"Still, somebody ought to stay on the ranch," went on Chet, "we might have more unprofitable visitors."

"It's not likely that the gang will dare to show themselves in this vicinity again in a hurry. Like as not they'll steer for Deadwood, sell the horses, and then spend their ill-gotten gains around the gambling saloons. That is their usual style. They can't content themselves in the mountains or on the plains as long as they have the dust in their pockets."

After Allen had disappeared the two boys locked up the barn as well as was possible, using a wooden pin in lieu of the padlock that had been forced asunder, and then went back to the house. Chet brought in the string of fish and threw them in a big tin basin.

"I suppose I might as well fry a couple of these," he observed; "though, to tell the truth, I am not a bit hungry."

"I, too, have lost my appetite," replied Paul. "But we must eat, and dinner will help pass away the time. I reckon there is no telling when Allen will be back."

"No. I don't care much, if he only keeps from getting into serious trouble."

In the meantime Allen had passed down the trail until the buildings of the ranch were left far behind. He knew the way well, and had no difficulty in finding the tracks—new ones—made by the hoofs of four horses.

"As long as they remain as fresh as they are now it will be easy enough to follow them," was the mental conclusion which he reached, as he urged forward his tired mare in a way that showed his fondness for the animal and his disinclination to make her do more than could fairly be expected.

The belt of cottonwood was soon passed, and Allen emerged upon the bank of a small brook which flowed into the river at a point nearly half a mile further on.

He examined the wet bank of the brook minutely and came to the conclusion that here the horse thieves had stopped the animals for a drink.

"I imagine they came a long distance to get here," he thought, "and that means they will go a long way before they settle down for the night. Heigh-ho! I have a long and difficult search before

me."

The brook had been forded, and Allen crossed over likewise, and five minutes later reached a bit of rolling land dotted here and there with sage and other brush.

Allen wondered if the trail would lead to Gold Fork, as the little mining town at the foot of the mountains was called.

"If they went that way I will have no trouble in getting help to run them down," he said to himself. "I can get Ike Watson and Mat Prigley, who will go willingly, and there is no better man to take hold of this sort of thing than Ike Watson."

Mile after mile was passed, and the trail remained as plain as before.

"It looks as if they didn't anticipate being followed," was the way Allen figured it, but he soon found out his mistake, when, on coming around a rocky spur of ground, the trail suddenly vanished.

The young ranchman came to a halt in some dismay, and a look of perplexity quickly stole over his face. He looked to the right and the left, and ahead, but all to no purpose. The trail was gone.

"Here's a state of things," he murmured as he continued to gaze around. "Where in the land of goodness has it gone to? They couldn't have taken wings and flown away."

Allen spent all of a quarter of an hour on the rocky spur. Then on a venture he moved forward over the bare rocks, feeling pretty certain that it was the only way they could have gone without leaving tracks behind them.

He calculated that he had traveled nearly ten miles. His mare showed signs of being tired, and he spoke to her more kindly than ever.

"It won't do, Lilly," he said, patting her soft neck affectionately. "We have got to get through somehow or other. You must brace up and when it is all over you can take the best kind of a long resting spell."

And the faithful animal laid back her ears and appeared to understand every word he said to her. She was a most knowing creature, and Allen would have gone wild had she been one of those stolen.

The barren, rocky way lasted for upward of half a mile, and came to an end in a slight decline covered with rich grass and more brush. Allen looked about him eagerly.

"Hurrah! there is the trail, true enough!" he cried, as the well understood marks in the growth beneath his feet met his gaze. "That was a lucky chance I took. On, Lilly, and we'll have Jasper and Rush back before nightfall, or know the reason why."

Away flew the mare once more over the plain that stretched before her for several miles. Beyond were the mountains, covered with a purplish haze.

The vicinity of the mountains was gained at last, and now, more than tired, the mare dropped into a walk as the first upward slope was struck.

Hardly had she done so than Allen saw something that made his heart jump. It was a man, and he was riding Chet's horse!

CHAPTER III.

A DANGEROUS SITUATION

It was not possible for Allen Winthrop to make any mistake regarding the animal the man on the mountain trail was riding. Too often had he ridden on Rush's back, and too well did he know the sturdy little horse's characteristics.

But the man was a stranger to the young ranchman, and he could not even remember having seen the rascal's face before.

"Stop!" called out Allen, as he struck Lilly to urge her on. "Stop! Do you hear me?"

The man caught the words and wheeled about quickly. He was evidently much disturbed by the encounter. He had been looking ahead, and had known nothing of Allen's approach.

"Stop, do you hear?" repeated Allen.

"Wot do yer want?" was the surly response, but the speaker did not draw rein in the least.

"I want you to stop!" exclaimed Allen, growing excited. "That horse belongs to my brother!"

"Reckon you air mistaken, stranger," was the cool reply. "This air hoss is mine."

This unexpected reply staggered Allen. He had expected the man to either show fight or take to

his heels. It was plainly evident that the fellow intended, if possible, to bluff him off.

"Your horse? Not much! Whoa, Rush, old boy!"

Commanded by that familiar tongue, the horse came to a halt that was so sudden it nearly pitched the rider out of his saddle. He muttered something under his breath, straightened up and gave the reins a vicious yank that made Rush rear up in resentment.

"See here, youngster, keep your parley to yourself!" howled the man, scowling at Allen.

"I will—after you get down and turn that nag over to me," rejoined Allen, as coolly as he could, although he was in an exceedingly high state of suppressed excitement.

"And whyfore should I turn him over to you, seein' as how he belongs to me?" growled the man, as brazenly as he could.

"You stole that horse from our barn not four hours ago," retorted Allen. "I will waste no more words with you. Get down or take the consequences."

As he concluded the youth unslung his rifle in a suggestive manner. He had lived out in those wilds long enough to know that to trifle in such a case as this would be sheer foolishness.

"You're a hot-headed youngster, tew say the least," was the reply, and as he spoke the man scowled more viciously than ever. The sight of the ready rifle in Allen's hands was not at all to his liking. He made a movement toward his pistols, but a second glance at the youth made him change his mind.

"I said I would waste no more words with you," repeated Allen. "Get down!"

"But see here, youngster——"

"Get down!" And up came the rifle in a motion that caused the man to start back in terror.

"There must be a mistake somewhar," he said, slowly, as soon as he could recover. "My pard turned this critter over to me, and I reckoned it war all right."

"There is where you reckoned wrong. Are you going to get down now or not?"

"Supposin' we talk it over with my pard first? Thar he is now."

The man pointed to the trail behind Allen. His manner was so natural that for the instant the young ranchman was deceived. He looked about.

With a dash and a clatter the horse thief urged Rush on, digging his spurs deep into the little horse's flesh. As he did so he dropped partly under the horse's neck, thus to shield himself from a chance shot, should it be taken.

But, although astonished and angered at being so easily duped, Allen did not fire. Rush was moving along over the rocks too rapidly for him to take the risk of killing his brother's favorite beast. Besides, only a small portion of the rider could be seen at one time.

"I'll follow him until I get a better chance," he thought, and he cried to Lilly to follow in pursuit.

Once again the gallant mare responded, although she was now thoroughly jaded. Up the rocks they went, and around numerous bends, the clatter ahead telling plainly that the race was about even for pursued and pursuer.

"I must be on my guard or that fellow may play me foul," thought Allen. "He looks like a most desperate character, and he knows well enough what capture by the law-abiding folks of this State means. They would lynch him in a minute."

Allen wondered what had become of the other thieves and the horse Jasper. Surely they could not be far away.

"Perhaps that fellow is trying to reach the others, who may have gone on ahead," he speculated mentally. "If he reaches them it will be so much the worse for me, for I can never fight two or more among these rocks and bushes. On Lilly. We must run him down at once!"

But the little mare could be urged no longer. She had reached her limit, and went forward with a doggedness that was pitiful to behold.

In five minutes Allen heard the clatter ahead drawing away from him. Soon it ceased entirely.

But he did not give up. It was not in his nature to surrender a cause so long as one spark of hope of success remained.

The mountain trail now led downward for a few hundred yards, and then wound through a rocky pass, dark and forbidding. Allen kept watch on either side for a possible ambush, but none presented itself.

"He has gone on, that is certain," he thought. "I rather guess he thinks to tire me out, knowing the condition my mare is in; but if he thinks that he is mistaken. I'll follow, if I have to do it on foot."

At last the trail left the rocky pass and came out upon some shelving rocks overlooking a deep

canyon, at the bottom of which sparkled the swift-running stream. Here a rude bridge led to the other side, a bridge composed of slender trees and rough-hewn planks.

Without hesitation, Allen rode upon the bridge. As he did so a derisive laugh resounded from the other side of the canyon, and he saw the man he was after and two others ride into view.

Then, before he could turn back, Allen felt the bridge sagging beneath him. Suddenly it parted in the center, and horse and youth went plunging headlong toward the waters far beneath.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAN IN THE SINK HOLE

We will now return to the ranch and see how Chet and Paul were faring during their elder brother's absence.

Chet took the string of fish, and selecting two, began to clean them. He was used to the work, and did it with a dexterity and quickness that could not have been excelled. Ever since his mother had died it had fallen upon Chet's young shoulders to do the culinary work about the ranch home.

While Chet was thus engaged Paul busied himself in looking over the shotguns, cleaning and oiling them and then loading up.

The fish cooked, Chet set the table, putting on three plates, although he himself was almost certain Allen would not come back in time for the meal.

"It's queer, I've been thinking," remarked Paul, during the progress of the meal, "Allen said nothing about the result of his morning trip."

"He was too excited over the theft of the horses to think of anything else, I reckon," was the reply Chet made. "It was enough to upset any one's mind."

"At least he might have said if he had heard from Uncle Barnaby," grumbled Paul. "More particularly, as we were just dying to know."

"I imagine if he had heard he would have said so and left us the letter, Paul. Allen knows as well as you or I how anxious we really were."

"It's queer the way Uncle Barnaby disappeared," mused Paul, as he mashed the potatoes on his plate with a fork. "One would not think a man could go to San Francisco and disappear forever."

"He might if he went to Chinatown and got sandbagged or something like that."

"Oh, you don't really think such a thing would happen?"

"It might. Uncle was a great hand to see the sights, and also to make a show of his money, and the Chinese in San Francisco are, many of them, a bloodthirsty set."

"Do you really believe he discovered the rich mine he talked about?"

"He discovered something, that is certain. And he had faith enough in it to go to San Francisco in the hope of starting a company to develop the claim."

It was in this strain that the two boys talked on until long after the meal was finished, and while they are conversing let us take a brief glance at their former history.

As I have said, the three brothers were orphans, their parents having died several years before.

The ranch had belonged to their father, who had willed it to his three sons equally, and as none of them were yet of age, he had appointed his brother, Barnaby, his executor.

Barnaby Winthrop was an old prospector, who had spent a life among the hills, prospecting for gold and silver. As has been said, he was a peculiar man, but warm and generous hearted to the last degree.

As there was really little to do at the ranch but look after the cattle, the uncle had left the place in charge of the three boys and continued month in and month out ranging over the hills and among the mountains in search of the precious metal which lay hidden beneath the surface.

One day Uncle Barnaby had staggered into the house, weak and hungry. He had made a perilous trip up to a point theretofore considered unattainable. He announced that he had at last struck a mining spot that if properly worked would prove a bonanza. He refused to state the exact location and announced his intention of going at once to San Francisco to organize a company to open up a mine.

He started apparently in the best of health, and although he had been gone now a number of months, and they had been anxiously awaiting his reappearance, they had seen or heard nothing of him.

During this period the boys had had considerable trouble at home, which had occupied their

attention. At the start some of the cattle had gone astray, and it had taken a ten days' hunt over the long range to find them. Then had come Captain Hank Grady, who had sought in various ways to get possession of the ranch, stating that their father had borrowed money from him and that it had not been paid back. The captain was known to be both mean and unscrupulous, and all of the boys doubted very much if he spoke the truth. But they had expected much more trouble from him before the end was reached, and they were destined not to be disappointed. Captain Grady knew the value of the ranch, even if the boys did not, and he meant to gain possession of it, if not by fair means, then by foul.

"We'll have to take a look for the cattle this afternoon," said Paul, some time after the conversation concerning Uncle Barnaby came to a close. "We don't want any of them to get in the sink hole again."

"That's so; we'll start at once, and we'll see to it that we lock up good," laughed Chet. "No more thieves wanted."

The house was soon tidied up, and then, after closing up everything well and setting an alarm to scare away any newcomer, Chet and Paul set out on foot over the rolling land which led from the river.

Half a mile beyond the rolling land was a nasty bit of spongy soil known as the sink hole. Not unfrequently the cattle would stray in this direction and more than one had sunk to death in the mire.

"Some cattle around there now!" cried Paul, as they drew close to the spot. "It's lucky we came this way."

"Go to the westward of them," said Chet. "We can drive them——" Chet broke off short, for just then a piercing cry rang in their ears:

"Help! help! For the sake of heaven, help!"

Chet and Paul were thrilled to the heart to hear that wild, agonizing cry for assistance which rang out so clearly on the afternoon air. Plainly a human being was in distress, and needed immediate assistance.

They looked around, but for several seconds saw nothing. Then the cry rang out again, more sharply, more pitiably than ever.

"Help! help! Save me from death!"

"Do you see him?" demanded Paul, breathlessly.

"No, I do not," rejoined Chet. "But he must be near. Did not the cry come from over there?" pointing with his finger to the right.

"I believe it did. Come on!"

Paul set off on a run around the edge of the sink hole, which was all of several hundred feet in diameter. Close behind him came Chet, wondering who the man could be and how they might assist him should he be beyond their reach.

Two dozen steps brought them in sight of the sufferer. He was a young man and his general dress and appearance betokened that he was a stranger in those parts, and, in fact, a stranger to the wilds; a city fellow, born and bred.

"Save me! Help!" cried the man for a third time. He was up to his middle in the spongy soil and sinking rapidly.

"Keep up your courage; we will assist you!" shouted Paul in return.

"Thank God, somebody has heard my cry!" murmured the man, gratefully. "You must be quick; I am sinking rapidly," he continued aloud.

"Have you anything in the shape of a rope with you?" asked Paul of Chet.

"I have not."

This was a sad predicament, as the man was all of three yards from solid ground. How to get to him was a question. But it was solved by Chet, as he brought a bit of stout cord from his pocket.

"Tie the two stocks of the guns together," he said. "This way; let me show you."

He held the two stocks side by side, so that they overlapped each other about eight or ten inches. The cord was hastily wound about them and tied, and it was Chet who thrust one of the gun barrels toward the sinking man, while he firmly grasped the other.

"Catch hold," he said. "Paul, help me land him."



THE MAN CAUGHT THE END OF THE GUN.

The man caught the end of the gun and Paul took hold of Chet's hand. Two efforts were made, the first time the man letting the gun slip and sinking deeper than ever. But the second effort was successful, and, panting from his unusual exertion, the man reached the solid ground and fell exhausted.

CHAPTER V.

GOOD CAUSE FOR ALARM

It was several minutes before the man who had been rescued from the sink hole could sit up and talk. His hat was gone, and with a dirty face and tangled, muddy hair, he presented a sorry spectacle.

"I'm very thankful to you for what you have done," were his first words, accompanied by a look that told plainly he felt what he said. "I thought I was at the end of my string sure, as they say in these parts."

"I allow that's a bad hole to get into," returned Chet. "I wouldn't want to get into it myself."

"And may I ask to whom am I indebted for my life?" continued the man.

"My name is Chetwood Winthrop, and this is my brother Paul."

"I am exceedingly glad to know you, boys. My name is Noel Urner, and I am from New York. I am a stranger in Idaho, and I know nothing of such treacherous places as this—at least I did not know of them until a short while ago." And the man shuddered as the memory of his fearful experience flashed over him.

"It's one of the unpleasant things of the country," responded Paul, with a little laugh. "But how came you in it?" with a glance down at the spurs on the man's boots.

"I see you are looking at my spurs. Yes, I had a horse, but he is gone now."

"Gone! In the sink hole?" ejaculated Chet.

"No; he was stolen from me."

"Stolen!" Both boys uttered the word simultaneously.

"Yes. I was riding along when I came to a spot where I saw some flora which particularly interested me, for I am a botanist, although for pleasure only. I dismounted and tied my horse to a tree and climbed up to secure the specimens which were on a shelf of rock some thirty feet over my head. Soon I heard a clatter of horses' hoofs as they passed along the road. I came down with my specimens to see who the riders were, but they had already passed on, taking my horse with them."

"The horse thieves!" cried Chet.

And he told the man of the raid made on the ranch and how Allen had gone off in pursuit of the thieves. The reader can well imagine with what interest Noel Urner listened to the tale.

"One would not believe it possible!" he exclaimed, when Chet had wound up by saying he wished

Allen would lay every one of the rascals low. "I fancied horse thievery was a thing only permitted in the wildest portions of the territories."

"There are horse thieves everywhere," said Paul. "Every one living for a hundred miles around has suffered during the past ten years. Sometimes we think them wiped out, and then, all of a sudden they start up again."

"Well, I trust your brother gets your horses back," said Noel Urner. "It's a pity he won't know enough to take mine away from the thieves, too!"

"He'll collar the thieves and all they have, if he gets half a chance, you can depend on that," said Chet. "But won't you come to our ranch with us? You can clean up there and have something to eat if you are hungry."

"Thank you, I will go gladly. Possibly you can sell me a headgear of some sort too."

"We can fit you out all right enough, sir."

It did not take the boys long to chase the cattle away from the sink hole, and this accomplished, they set off for the ranch with Noel Urner between them.

They found the young man an exceedingly bright and pleasant chap. He said he had come west two months before and had been spending over a month in San Francisco.

"I came out at the invitation of an old prospector," he said. "We were to meet in San Francisco, but when I arrived there I could not find my man. He belongs somewhere in this neighborhood. His name is Barnaby Winthrop. Perhaps you have heard of him?"

"Heard of him!" cried Chet.

"He is our uncle!" added Paul.

"Your uncle!" And now it was Noel Urner's turn to be surprised.

"Yes, our uncle, and he has been missing for several months," continued Paul. "Oh, tell us what you know of him at once, for we are dying to know!"

"The Barnaby Winthrop I mean had an undeveloped gold and silver mine he wished to open up."

"It was our uncle, beyond the shadow of a doubt," said Chet. "Our name is Winthrop, and Uncle Barnaby is our guardian. We can prove it to you by the papers, if you wish."

"I am willing to take your word, boys. But, you understand, one must be careful about speaking of mines in this section; at least I have been told so."

"Yes, we know about that," returned Paul. "Many a man has lost the chance of his life by advertising his knowledge too broadly. Others would gain a clew of a mine, hunt it up, and put in a claim before the original discoverer knew what was up."

"Exactly, and that is why I was slow in saying anything. But when you ask me to tell you about your uncle, I am sorry to say I know but very little, although I suspect much, now you say he has been missing so long."

By this time the little party had reached the ranch house. They went inside, and despite the fact that the boys were impatient to hear what Noel Urner might have to say, they gave the young man time to wash up and make himself otherwise presentable, Chet in the meanwhile frying another fish and preparing a pot of coffee.

"This is just what I wished, and no mistake," said Noel Urner, as he set to with a hearty good will. "But I am sure you are impatient to learn something of your uncle, so I will not keep you waiting. To make my story plain, I will have to tell you something of myself also."

"In the first place I am a broker and speculator from New York city. I make a specialty of mining stocks, and own shares myself in half a dozen mines."

"About ten weeks or so ago I heard through a friend in San Francisco that Barnaby Winthrop was trying to form a company to develop a new strike in this vicinity. I wrote to him and he sent word back that if I would come on he would prove to me that he had a big thing, well worth looking into."

"I had other business west, and so at once started for San Francisco. Your uncle had given his address as the Golden Nugget House, a place I afterward learned was frequented by old-time miners and prospectors."

"I made inquiries at the Nugget House for your uncle, and to my astonishment learned that he had disappeared very mysteriously one night, leaving no trace behind him."

"What!" cried Paul, springing to his feet, and Chet was too astonished to speak.

"I do not wonder that you are astonished. Yes, he had disappeared, leaving his valise and overcoat behind him."

"I thought the matter so queer that I was on the point of notifying the police. But on calling at the post office for letters I received one from him stating that he was sorry, but he had come back to

the place in question and found it not what he had anticipated, so he wouldn't bother me any more."

"I don't believe he came back!" ejaculated Chet. "If he had he would have stopped at the ranch."

"I agree with you."

"Have you that letter?" asked Paul, his voice trembling with excitement.

"I have."

"I would like to see it, please."

"Certainly." And Noel Urner brought forth a large flat pocketbook from which he extracted the communication in question.

Paul took it to the light and examined it closely.

"This is a forgery! Uncle Barnaby never wrote it."

"Let me see, Paul," ejaculated Chet.

He also examined the letter with as much care as his brother had displayed. There was not the slightest doubt of it. The letter was not genuine.

"It's certainly a bad state of affairs," said Noel Urner. "It makes the disappearance of your uncle look decidedly bad."

"It looks like foul play!" cried Paul. "Why should Uncle Barnaby leave the hotel in that fashion if all was perfectly straight?"

"It's like as not some mining town rascals got hold of his secret and then put him out of the way, so that they might profit by it," said Chet. "There are plenty of fellows mean enough for that."

"At first I was satisfied by the receipt of the letter," continued Noel Urner. "But the more I thought over the matter the more I became convinced that something was wrong; but in a different way from what you think. I imagined your uncle had found other speculators to go in with him and they had persuaded him to cut me off. That is why I started off, after settling my other business in California, to find your uncle and learn the truth. I was willing to lose a few weeks' time out here looking around, even if it didn't pay."

"We are very glad you came and that we found you," answered Paul. "I am sorry for only one thing, that Allen is not here to meet you."

"I am in no hurry to continue my journey; indeed, I do not see how I can without a horse. If you wish I will remain here until your brother returns."

"You are right welcome to do that," cried Chet. "As for not having a horse, you are no worse off than ourselves, for we are without an animal of any kind, outside of the cattle."

"Then, being equally bad off, we ought to make good friends," smiled Noel Urner. "I shall like staying on a ranch for a few days first rate, and you can rely on my giving you all the assistance in my power when it comes to finding out the fate of your uncle."

"We can't do anything until Allen returns," sighed Paul.

"Then we will hope that your brother returns speedily, and with good news."

"The best news will be his return with all our horses," returned Chet. "We can do nothing without our animals."

Alas! How little did both Chet and Paul dream of the terrible ordeal through which Allen was at that moment passing!

CHAPTER VI.

FROM ONE PERIL TO ANOTHER

"I am lost! Nothing can save me!"

Such was the agonizing thought which rushed into Allen Winthrop's mind as he felt himself plunging madly downward to the glittering waters far beneath him.

It must be confessed that the otherwise brave young ranchman was fearfully frightened at the dreadful peril which confronted him. He and his faithful mare were going down, and certain death seemed inevitable.

"Heaven help me!" he murmured to himself, and shutting his teeth hard, clung grimly to the saddle.

Out of the sunlight into the gloom and mist below descended horse and rider.

Scarcely two seconds passed and then, with a resounding splash, the animal and its living burden disappeared beneath the surface of the river and out of the sight of the rascals on the opposite side of the canyon.

"That settles him," cried one of the horse thieves, grimly. "He was a fool to follow us."

"Maybe he'll escape," ventured a second.

"Wot! Arfter sech a plunge?" returned the first speaker, sarcastically. "Wall, hardly, ter my reckonin'."

They shifted their positions on the brink of the opening, but try their best, could see nothing more of the young man or the mare.

It was now growing darker rapidly, and fifteen minutes later, satisfied that Allen had really taken a fall to his death, they continued on their way.

And poor Allen?

Down, down, down sank the mare and her hapless rider, until the very bottom of the river was struck.

The swiftly flowing tide caught both in its grasp, tumbled them over and over and sent them spinning onward. Allen's grasp on the saddle relaxed, and as it did so the young man lost consciousness.

How long he remained in this state Allen never knew. When he came to he was lying among brush, partly in the water and partly out.

He attempted to sit up and in doing so, slipped back beyond his depth. But the instinct of self-preservation still remained with him, and he made a frantic clutch at the brush and succeeded in pulling himself high and dry upon a grassy bank.

Here he lay for several minutes exhausted. He could not think, for his head felt as if it was swimming around in a balloon.

At last he began to come to himself and after a bit sat up to gaze about him. But all was dark and he could see little or nothing.

He remembered the great plunge he had taken and wondered what had become of Lilly. He called her with all the strength of his enfeebled lungs, but received no response.

"She must have been killed," he thought. "Poor Lilly! But had it not been for the protection her body gave me it is more than likely that my life would have been ended, too!" and he shuddered to think of his narrow escape.

It was nearly half an hour before Allen felt strong enough to rise up. His head felt light, and for a while he staggered like an intoxicated man.

He knew he was down in the canyon, and some distance below where the bridge had been. He wondered how he could ascend to the top of the rocks which presented themselves on the two sides.

"I can't climb up in this darkness," he said half aloud. "I might slip and break my neck. I had better walk along and hunt for some natural upward slope."

He started off along the river side, the top of the canyon towering nearly a hundred feet above his head as he proceeded. The opening gradually grew narrower, and with this the distance between the rocks and the water decreased, until there was hardly room left for Allen to walk.

"I must have made a mistake," was the mental conclusion which he arrived at. "I should have gone up the river instead of down. The chances are that I can't go over a hundred feet further, if as far."

Soon Allen came to a halt. The ground between the wall of the canyon and the water ceased just before him. Beyond the steep and bare rocks ran directly downward into the stream.

"That settles it," he muttered, in great disappointment. "All this traveling for nothing. And it's getting night over head, too! It's a shame!"

Allen paused to rest, for in his weak condition the walk had tired him greatly. Then he started to retrace his steps.

Hardly had he taken a yard's advance, when his left foot slipped upon a round stone. He was thrown over on his side, and before he could save himself went plunging headlong into the stream!

He essayed by every means in his power to regain the bank, but in vain. The current of the river was extra strong at this point—the width of the course having narrowed down—and before he could clutch the first thing he was carried to where nothing but the steep and slippery rocks presented themselves.

Vainly he put out his hands to stay his progress, vainly he tried by every means in his power to obtain some sort of hold on the rocks.



VAINLY HE PUT OUT HIS HANDS TO STAY HIS PROGRESS

And now the surface of the river grew blacker as the rocks on both sides began, seemingly, to close in over his head.

He was almost tempted to cry out for help, and took a breath for that purpose, but the sound was not uttered. What would be the use? Not a soul would hear him.

On and on went the young ranchman, the waters growing more cold each instant and the prospects more gloomy. He was half tempted to give himself up for lost.

It was an easy matter to keep himself on the surface, for he was really a good swimmer, but now the current was so strong that he could scarcely touch either side of its rocky confines as he was swept along, he knew not where. Allen had never explored this stream, and this to him made the immediate future look blacker than ever.

"If it ends in some sort of a sink hole, I'm a goner sure," he thought. "But I never heard of such a hole up here among the mountains, so I won't give up just yet."

Hardly had the thought occupied his mind when, on looking up, he saw the last trace of evening fade from sight. The river had entered a cavern! He was now underground!

It may well be imagined with what dismay Allen, stout-hearted as he was, viewed the turn of the situation. Here he was being borne swiftly along on an underground river, he knew not where. It was a situation calculated to chill the bravest of hearts.

All was pitch black around and overhead; beneath was the silent and cold water, and the only sound that fell upon his ears was the rushing along of the stream.

As well as he was able, Allen put out his hands before him, to ward off the shock of a sudden contact of any sort, for he did not know but that he might be dashed upon a jagged rock at any instant. Then he prayed earnestly for deliverance.

On and on he swept, the stream several times making turns, first to one side and then to the other. Once his hand came brushing up to a series of rocks, but before he could grasp them he was hurled onward in an awful blackness.

A quarter of an hour went by—a time that to the young man seemed like an age—and during that period he surmised that he must have traveled a mile or more.

Then the current appeared to slacken up, and he had a feeling come over him as if the space overhead had become larger.

"This must be an underground lake," he thought. "Now if I—Ah, bottom!"

His thought came to a sudden termination, for his feet had touched upon a sloping rock but a few feet below the surface of the stream. The rock sloped to his right, and, moving in that direction, Allen, to his great joy, soon emerged upon a stony shore.

He took several cautious steps in as many different directions and felt nothing. He was truly high and dry at last.

This fact was a cheering one, but there was still a dismal enough outlook. Where was he and how would he ever be able to gain the outer world once more?

CHAPTER VII.

THE CAVE IN THE MOUNTAIN

Allen was too exhausted to do more than move about cautiously. He felt for the edge of the stream, and then moved away from it for several yards.

His hand came in contact with a dried bush and several sticks of wood, all of which had probably floated in at one time on the stream, and these at once made him think of a fire. What a relief a bit of light would be!

In his life on the long range, Allen had found a watertight matchbox very useful. He felt in his pocket and found the article still safe. He opened it with fingers that trembled a little; but the matches were still dry, and in a trice one was struck and lit.

He held the match under some of the driest of the brush, and had the satisfaction of seeing it blaze up. He piled the stuff up, and on top placed several heavy sticks. Soon he had a fire which blazed merrily.

The light illumined the cavern, casting a ruddy glare on the rocks and the rippling water. It was a weird and uncanny scene, and he shivered involuntarily. He would have given a good deal to have been in the outer world once more.

Allen saw that the river had simply widened at the spot, and that a hundred yards further on it flowed into a narrow channel, as before. Only on the side which he occupied was there anything in the shape of a shore. Opposite the rocks stood straight up, and were covered with moss and slime.

"If I am to get out, it must be from this shore upward," Allen thought as he surveyed the situation. "I can never get back on the river. One could never row even a boat against that current."

The shore was not more than thirty or forty feet wide. It was backed up by rocks, but Allen was glad to see that they did not present an unbroken surface. There were numerous fissures, and in one place the opening was a dozen feet in width.

Selecting the brightest of the firebrands Allen left the vicinity of the stream and started to explore this opening. He was in great hopes that it would lead upward and that he would thus be enabled to climb out of his prison—for to him that damp, dark place was nothing less.

The opening was filled with loose stones, and Allen had to be careful for fear of spraining an ankle, or worse. He moved along slowly, halting every few steps to survey the scene ahead.

Twenty yards distant from the entrance to the fissure Allen came to a turn to the left. Here was a narrow opening just large enough for him to pass through. Beyond was another cavern-like spot not over ten yards in width and height and of interminable length.

Fearful of losing his way, Allen hesitated about advancing. But presently he plucked up courage, and, holding down his firebrand, he allowed it to burn up again and then proceeded along the chamber.

The flooring was uneven and covered with loose rocks and stones. Huge stalactites hung down from overhead, and in several spots the moisture dripped down with weird hollow sounds.

"I would like to know how far underground I really am," was Allen's earnest mental speculation as he came to a halt beside a tiny stream which flowed from one side of the cavern to the other. "If there was only some slope which led upward it would be more encouraging. But it's about as flat as a bit of prairie land."

Allen hopped over the stream, and, assured that he could easily retrace his steps if necessary, continued on his search, his firebrand held over his head.

It was a discouraging journey when the end was reached. Before him arose a solid wall not less than twenty feet in height, at which elevation the cavern appeared to continue. Allen gazed up at the wall with a hopeless look on his face.

"Humph! How in the name of creation am I to climb up there?" he muttered. "It's as steep as the side of a house and twice as slippery. If I can't find some sort of stepping places I reckon I'm beaten and booked to go back to where I started from."

Waving the firebrand to make it burn the brighter, Allen began to scrutinize the face of the wall before him. He started at one end, resolved that not a foot of the surface should escape him.

He had traveled along some fifteen feet when he came to something that made him start back in astonishment.

"Great Caesar!"

Before him were a number of letters, cut in smooth rock, which was apparently quite soft. The letters read:

BARNABY WINTHROP'S MINE.

Allen stared at the letters on the rock as if he had not spelled out the words aright. But there was no mistake. They really read "Barnaby Winthrop's Mine."

"Well, if this isn't the most wonderful discovery ever made!" ejaculated the young man, finally. "So this is the place that Uncle Barnaby talked of as being the richest claim in Idaho. I wonder how he ever found it?"

While Allen stood close to the rocky wall he reached the conclusion that his uncle must have come there by the river, but whether a voluntary or involuntary passenger he could not decide. He knew Uncle Barnaby was exceedingly fearless, but was there any human being who would take the awful risk of a journey on that underground river, not knowing to where it led?

"He must have been caught, just as I was," said Allen to himself, at last. "And that being so, the question is, how did he manage, after he was once here, to get *out*?"

While Allen was debating this question he cast his eyes about for some means of scaling the wall. He walked along its face until the very end was reached, and there, to his joy, discovered a dozen rudely cut niches, some of them were close together and others nearly a yard apart, but, with the end of the firebrand between his teeth, he had no great difficulty in pulling himself up to the level of the flooring of the cavern above.

Allen now found himself in an opening not over fifty yards square. The roofing was hardly out of reach, and the young man saw at a glance that the quartz rock was full of virgin gold and silver. It was a veritable bonanza.

"A million dollars or more!" he cried, enthusiastically. "Uncle Barnaby struck it rich for once. I wonder why he don't come back and begin operations. It's queer I didn't get word from him."

Allen could not help but spend some time in looking around, so fascinating was the sight of the precious metal as it shimmered here and there in the ruddy glare of the torch. His uncle would be rich indeed, and he knew that he and his brothers would not be forgotten by their generous guardian.

But soon the thought of escape came back to him. Was there an opening to the outer world, or was he entombed alive?

At the far end of the chamber, after a long search, Allen came to a narrow passageway, which he was compelled to enter on hands and knees. It led upward and he had great hopes that ere long he would emerge into the outer air once more.

But he was doomed to disappointment. The passageway led around numerous curves, and long before the end was reached his torch went out, and he was left in total darkness. He crawled on and on, until finally he brought up against a solid wall.

Much frightened, he lit a match to survey the situation. Saving in his rear, the rocks arose on all sides. But overhead was open, and up he went, very much as a sweep might climb a half-choked up chimney, up through weeds and brush and dirt.

He was half smothered by the dust which filled his nose and mouth, and he was forced to keep his eyes closed for fear of being blinded.

At last, after he was nearly ready to give up in despair, he felt a breath of cooling air blow over him. This was encouraging, and he commenced to climb harder than ever. Up and up he went, until suddenly opening his eyes, he found himself at the top of the hole, and looking almost directly into the face of the rising sun!

CHAPTER VIII.

INTO A SNAKE'S NEST

"All night underground!" murmured Allen to himself as he surveyed the scene before him in intense surprise. "Heaven be thanked for my escape!"

His climb had so exhausted him that for a long while he sat on the ground, unable to move. He felt both cold and hungry, but paid no heed. It was blessing enough for the time being to be safe.

When he felt stronger, he began to speculate upon where he was and how far he would have to travel to reach the ranch. The face of the country looked new and strange to him.

"I must mark this spot, so I can find the mine again," he thought. "Uncle Barnaby may not know of this opening."

Close at hand was a tall tree, and upon this Allen cut his initials in large letters. Then he walked to all the trees in the vicinity and cut hands on them pointing to the first tree.

"Now, I reckon it's all right," he said to himself. "And the next best thing is to strike out for home."

Climbing the tree, Allen took his bearings as well as he was able, and then struck off as rapidly as his tired legs and sore feet would permit.

He had covered perhaps half a mile when he came to a steep decline. He tried to proceed down this with care, but slipped and rolled with a crash through the brush to the bottom.

It was a bad fall and hurt him not a little, but that was not the worst of it.

The passage through the brush aroused half a score of snakes, some small and others a yard and over in length, and now they came after him, hissing angrily and several preparing to dart at him.

It was small wonder that Allen gave a yell. He knew the reptiles were, many of them, poisonous, and he had not the first thing with which to defend himself. He leaped back to retreat, but only to find himself surrounded.

No one who has never been surrounded by snakes can realize the terrible feeling which awakens in one's breast at such an experience. It is a feeling that, once realized, is never forgotten. Allen said afterward he felt as if his hair had lifted from his head and his heart had had a bath in ice water.

"Great Scott!" were the words which escaped from his lips. "This is the worst yet!"

He had no time to say more, for at that moment one of the snakes leaped through the air directly for his hand. He threw his hand up, caught the reptile by the tail and flung it, hissing, among its fellows.

Then he essayed to leap over those in front of him. But before he could do so one wound itself around the instep of his boot. It was a poisonous snake. Allen saw that at a glance. He tried to kick it off, but missed it.

Then out darted the terrible fang and up came that ugly head, with diamond-like eyes, toward the young man's knee!

For one brief second Allen fancied his last hour on earth had come. A single bite from that snake and all would be over, for it would be all out of the question to get rid of the poison.

But with a strength and courage born of despair he bent down, and, reaching out, caught the reptile around the neck. The bright eyes almost paralyzed his nerve, and he was compelled to turn from them in order to accomplish his purpose.

Holding the snake with a grasp of iron, he leaped out of the circle of reptiles. Then he bent down and forcing the snake's head against a rock, ground it to pieces under his heel.



HOLDING THE SNAKE HE LEAPED OUT OF THE CIRCLE OF REPTILES.

It was a highly dangerous bit of work, and when it was over the great beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. To him it was as if the last few seconds had been an age.

The other snakes had not followed him, but, nevertheless, he lost no time in leaving the spot on a run. Five minutes later he was nearly a quarter of a mile from the vicinity.

He had gone at right angles to the course he imagined would take him back to the ranch, and now he found he must make a detour around a hill covered with cactus and other prickly plants.

By this time Allen was thoroughly worn out and hungry to the last degree. Bitterly he regretted the loss of his favorite mare, Lilly.

"If I had her I imagine I could strike home inside of a couple of hours," he said to himself. "But on foot it will take me until noon or longer."

But there was no use to grumble, and after resting a spell the young man again started on his weary tramp through thicket and brush, over hills and through hollows. More than once he stumbled and fell, and it was all he could do at times to regain his feet.

"It's no fun to be afoot on the long range," he soliloquized. "A mile seems three times as long as when on horseback."

But there was no help for it; he must go on, and on he went, his feet now so sore in his wet boots that he could hardly take a regular step.

As he proceeded, he looked about for something to eat, but outside of a few half-green berries, found nothing. Birds were numerous, but without firearms they were out of his reach.

A less experienced person than Allen would have been much frightened by the solitude and loneliness. But the young ranchman was accustomed to being out alone for days at a time, and he did not mind it. He wished to get home more for bodily comforts than aught else.

At last, when Allen was beginning to congratulate himself that the roughest portion of the journey would soon be over he came face to face with a most unexpected difficulty. Emerging from a thicket, he found himself at the very brink of a gully all of ten feet wide and of great depth.

"Humph!" he muttered, as he came to a halt. "I can't jump that. How am I to get over?"

This question was not easy to answer.

Looking up and down the opening, no bridge, either natural or artificial, was presented to view.

"I'll have to cut a pole and use that," he thought. "There is no use to tramp up and down looking for a spot to cross."

His pocketknife was still safe, and he drew it out and went to work with a will on a sapling growing some distance from the gully's edge.

The sapling had just been laid low and Allen was on the point of dragging it away when sounds broke upon his ear that filled him with surprise. He heard human voices, and one of them was that of a man he had encountered on the road, the fellow who had been riding Chet's horse!

"I reckon you have missed the road, Saul," said the man in a disgusted tone.

"No, I ain't missed nuthin'," was the reply. "So don't you go for to croak so much, Darry."

"Well, we don't appear to be makin' much headway," growled the fellow addressed as Darry.

"We'll come out all right, never fear. It's this yere blamed gully bothers me. We might git over afoot, but we can't cross it on the hosses."

Allen crouched back behind a bush, and a moment later the two men appeared in the opening near the gully. The fellow called Darry still rode Chet's horse, while he addressed as Saul was astride of Paul's animal. Behind the pair came a tall negro, riding a mustang and leading two others, little animals looking much the worse for constant and hard usage.

"Dis yere ditch doan' seem ter git no narrower, nohow," said the colored man, with a good-natured grin. "I dun racken we might as well build a bridge an done with it."

"By the boots, but I reckon Jeff is about half right," cried Darry. "This split may last clear across the hill."

"It's not so easy to build a bridge," grumbled he called Saul, who appeared to be the leader of the trio. "We ain't got no axes."

"Well, I move we take a rest, anyway," said Darry. "I'm tired of riding a strange hoss over these yere hills."

"All right, we'll lay off and have a bite of the stuff in Jeff's haversack," replied the leader of the crowd.

They dismounted not over two rods from where Allen lay hidden in the brush, hardly daring to breathe. Being unarmed and knowing the temper of the rascals only too well, the young man kept himself covered and made not the slightest sound.

The negro brought forth an old army haversack and from it produced some crackers, jerked meat, and several other articles. Soon the trio were eating voraciously.

The horses had been tied to several trees in the vicinity, and while the men were eating and talking in low tones, Allen conceived the idea of gaining possession of one of the animals and riding off with it. He knew it would do no good to confront the thieves unarmed.

"I'll get on Paul's horse," he thought, "and if I can, I'll take Chet's animal with me. Then I'll have their horses back, even if I won't have my own."

Watching for a chance, when the backs of the men were turned, Allen crept from his cover and

wormed his way toward Paul's horse. His knife was in his hand, and noiselessly he cut the halter. Another cut and Chet's animal was also free.

The horses stamped as they recognized Allen, who always made pets of all in the stable. Then Jasper let out a loud neigh of welcome.

The sound reached the ears of the leader of the horse thieves. He sprang to his feet, and a second later, Allen was discovered!

CHAPTER IX.

A VISITOR AT THE RANCH

Let us once more go back to the ranch, where Chet and Paul, as well as the newcomer, Noel Urner, anxiously awaited Allen's return.

The night had been a long one to the two boys, neither of whom had slept a whole hour at a time. As Chet expressed it, "they felt it in their bones" that something was wrong.

At daybreak both rushed up to the roof of the ranch house, and with a field glass which Mr. Winthrop had left them, scanned eagerly in all directions.

"Not a man or horse in sight," said Chet in deep disappointment. "The chase must have been a long one indeed."

"Like as not Allen has gone on to some town," rejoined Paul. "But he ought to be back by noon; he knows we will be anxious to hear how he made out."

The two went below to meet Noel, who had just finished dressing. They set to work and a smoking hot breakfast was soon on the table.

"Well, I see nothing for me to do but to calmly wait for your brother's return," said the young man from New York. "I don't want to start out anywhere on foot, especially as I know nothing of the roads."

"Yes, don't go anywhere till Allen gets back," said Paul. "I want you to tell him yourself all you know concerning Uncle Barnaby."

The morning dragged by slowly, and at the passage of each hour the boys grew more anxious.

"It's a dangerous proceeding, this chasing horse thieves," explained Chet to Noel Urner. "A fellow is apt to get shot, unless he is careful. That is what worries us so."

"Unless something turns up right after dinner, I'm going off on foot with my rifle," put in Paul. "I may not discover anything, but it will ease my mind trying to do something."

It lacked half an hour of noon when the boys heard a cheery voice from the road hail them. They looked out and beheld Ike Watson, the hunter, from Gold Fork, resting in the saddle just outside of the semi-stockade.

"Whoop! Hullo thar!" cried the old fellow, who was hearty in both mind and body and full of fun. "Wot's the meanin' o' two healthy boys a-bummin' around the ranch sech an all-fired fine day as this yere?"

"O, Ike; I'm so glad you happened along!" cried Paul, as he ran out to meet him. "We were hoping some friend would come."

"Thet so?" Ike Watson's face grew sober on the instant. "Wot's the trouble?"

"Our horses have been stolen——"

"Gee, shoo! Hoss thieves ag'in! Wall, I'll be eternally blowed!" exclaimed Ike Watson, in a rage. "Who be they, Paul?"

"We don't know. Allen has gone after them."

"How many animiles did they git?"

"Only two—that is here—Chet's and mine. But they also stole the horse belonging to this gentleman, Mr. Noel Urner. Mr. Urner, this is our friend, Ike Watson."

"Hoss thieves is worse 'n pizen," growled Watson, as he sprang down and gave Noel Urner a hearty shake of the hand. "Thar ought ter be a law to hang every one o' 'em, say I!"

"Allen went off yesterday afternoon, and as we have not heard from him since, we are getting anxious," put in Chet. "We would have followed, but we haven't a single beast left in the barn."

"I see. Which way did the thieves go?"

"Allen took the trail over the brook," replied Paul.

"Humph!" Ike Watson scratched his head for a moment. "Wot's ter prevent me goin' after him, boys?"

"Will you?" asked Paul eagerly.

"Sartin. I ain't got nuthin' ter do, an' if I had, I reckon I could drop it putty quick ter do a favor fer Granville Winthrop's orphans. Give me a bite ter eat an' I'll be off ter onct."

"Are you sufficiently armed?" questioned Noel Urner.

"Armed? Well, I reckon," and from his belt Ike Watson produced an old '49 horse pistol nearly two feet long. "Thet air's my best friend, barrin' the rifle."

Chet soon had dinner for the hunter, which was as quickly devoured, and then, after receiving some of the particulars of the case on hand, Ike Watson started off.

"You'll hear from me before another sun smiles on ye!" he called back. "An' don't ye worry too much in the between time!" And he then disappeared.

The boys felt much more comfortable after Watson had started off to hunt up Allen. They knew the old man would do all in his power to help their elder brother, no matter in what difficulty he might find him.

"A rather odd character, truly," observed Noel, as they again passed into the house.

"Yes, but with a heart of steel and gold," returned Chet. "Idaho does not contain a braver or better hunter than old Ike Watson."

Shortly after this Chet and Paul went out to care for the cattle about the place, for quite a few head had already been penned up ready for the early fall drive. The ranch did not boast of many cattle, and such as there was they desired to keep in the best possible condition.

Noel Urner accompanied them and was much interested in all to be seen and what was done.

"Such a difference between life out here and in the city," he remarked. "Actually, it is like another world!"

"You're right there," replied Paul. "And when you size it up all around, it's hard to tell which is the best—providing, of course, you can get a comfortable living at either place."

Just as the three were walking back to the ranch the sounds of a horse's hoofs broke upon their ears.

"Can it be Allen?" burst out Chet, but then his face fell. "No, it's not his style of riding."

"Oh, pshaw!" whispered Paul a second later. "If it isn't Captain Grady!"

"And who is he?" queried Noel.

"An old prospector who wants to get possession of this ranch. He claims that our title to it is defective, or not good at all. I wonder what he wants now?"

"Perhaps he's got more evidence to prove his claim to the place," groaned Chet. "Oh, dear! Troubles never come singly, true enough!"

With anxious hearts the two brothers walked forward to meet the new arrival, whose face bore a look of insolence and self-satisfaction.

Captain Hank Grady was a tall, evil-looking man of forty years of age. His title was merely one of favor, for he had neither served in the army nor the navy. But little was known of his past by the people of the section, and he never took the pains to enlighten those who were curious enough to know.

For years he had wanted the Big Bear ranch, as the Winthrop homestead was called, for neither by fair means nor foul had he heretofore been able to obtain possession of the property. But now he had been working in secret for a long while, and he came prepared to make an announcement that was designed to trouble the boys not a little.

"Hullo, there, young fellers," he called out roughly, as he dismounted. "I reckon you didn't expect to see me quite so soon again, did you?"

"We did not," rejoined Paul, coldly.

"Well, I confess I fixed matters up quicker than I first calculated to do," went on the captain. "I thought I was going to have a good bit more trouble to establish my claim."

"As far as I know you have no claim here to establish," put in Chet, sharply. "You may pretend ___"

"See here, I ain't talking to you," retorted Captain Grady, cutting him short. "Your big brother is the feller I want to see—him or Barnaby Winthrop."

"Both of them are away," replied Paul, "and Chet and I are running the ranch just now."

"And if you do not like my manner of speech you need not stay here," cried Chet, warmly, his

temper rising at the newcomer's aggressive manner.

"Ho! you young savage, don't you speak that way to me," roared Captain Grady. "I didn't come here to deal with a kid."

"I may be young, but I have my rights here, just the same," retorted Chet.

"My brother is right," added Paul. "If you wish to talk business you must do so with both of us."

The captain growled out something under his breath. He was about to speak when he caught sight of Noel Urner.

He started back as though a ghost had confronted him, and the words died on his lips. The young man from New York saw the action, but could not in the least account for it.

CHAPTER X.

THE CAPTAIN'S SETBACK

Captain Grady recovered in a few seconds. He glanced suspiciously about to see if there were others with Noel. Seeing the young man was alone, he plucked up fresh courage.

"All right, I'll talk business with both," he said. "Who is this?" and he jerked his thumb toward Noel.

"A friend of ours from New York," replied Paul.

"Humph! Didn't know you had friends so far off."

"We don't know everything in this world," retorted Chet, pointedly.

"You're right, we don't," replied the captain with equal emphasis.

He tied his horse fast to the doorpost and strode into the house. Paul motioned Chet to follow, and then buttonholed Noel Urner.

"This is Captain Grady," he whispered. "We have told you a little about him. He is trying to get this ranch away from us."

"And he has no real claim to it?"

"I do not believe he has. But he is so slippery a customer he will swindle us if he can. Will you give us some advice how best to proceed? You know more about claims and legal papers than we do."

"Certainly I'll do what I can for you," and then both entered the ranch home.

"I'm sorry I ain't got your older brother to deal with," began the captain. "I reckon he is the one who will understand my talk best."

"Then, perhaps you had best wait till he gets back," said Chet quickly.

"And when will that be?"

"I cannot say exactly."

"I'm not in the humor to wait. I've waited too long already." The captain paused and cleared his throat. "I believe you said you had the original title papers to the ranch, didn't you?" he went on.

"Yes, we did say that."

"I would like to see 'em."

Chet and Paul looked at each other. They had expected and dreaded this request.

"Supposing we don't care to show them to you?" said Paul cautiously.

"What's the reason you don't care?" retorted the captain, angrily.

"We are not called on to explain all our actions to you," said Chet.

"See here, I don't want to quarrel, but I'm a-goin' to see them ere papers," blustered Captain Grady, with a decided shake of his head. "I came all the way from Deadwood to see 'em."

"Well, you won't see them," returned Paul, boldly. It would never do in the wide world to acknowledge that they had been burned up.

"Well, then, I reckon I'm free to speak what's on my mind," roared the captain, "an' that is, that you never had no papers at all."

"You can say what you please," said Chet, as calmly as he could.

"An' that ain't all I've got to say," went on the captain. "I've got more to say to you. This ere claim

o' land originally belonged to Sam Slater, o' Deadwood——"

"We know that."

"Slater died, an' left no will——"

"That may all be true, too."

"An' he left this land——"

"No, he didn't. It was sold to my father before that!" cried Paul.

"No such thing. Old Slater left it as part o' his estate——"

"He did not."

"He did, an' I can take my affidavit to it, if it's necessary," exclaimed Captain Grady. "But that ain't all yet wot I hev got to tell. Slater left it to his heirs, an' I bought it from them only last week."

"It can't be true!" gasped Chet, faintly.

"It is true, an' I hev the papers to prove it. This here ranch belongs to me, an' the sooner you boys pack up your duds an' git out the better it will please me," and Captain Grady smiled maliciously at the blow his news had brought to the boys.

Both Paul and Chet were much dismayed by the unexpected announcement Captain Grady had made.

For the moment they stared at the speaker as if they had not heard aright.

It was Paul who spoke first.

"You bought the ranch, and have the papers to prove it?" he gasped.

"That's just wot I said, boy."

"Your claim will not hold water," put in Chet, faintly.

"Well, I reckon it will," retorted Captain Grady. "I allow as how I know wot I'm a-doin'."

"My father bought this ranch, and that settles it," said Paul. "We will not give up our rights here just on what you say."

"Perhaps you had better look at his papers," suggested Noel Urner, who had thus far remained silent.

"It won't be necessary for them to look at 'em," returned the captain, doggedly. "I have 'em and that's enough. I ain't got to show my papers no more than they hev got to show theirs."

"What shall we do?" whispered Paul to the young man from New York, as he led him a little to one side.

"Stick to your resolve to stand up for your rights," was Noel's reply. "Remember, possession is nine points of the law. He cannot dispossess you unless he starts a lawsuit to recover the property he claims."

"I ain't a-goin' to wait for your Uncle Barnaby or Allen to return," went on Captain Grady, sullenly. "I want you to leave at once, bag and baggage."

"Indeed," returned Paul, coldly.

"Yes, indeed. I've been kept out of this place long enough—seeing as how the original owner gave me a half hold on it long before he died."

"What makes you so anxious for the place?" asked Noel Urner with sudden interest.

"That's my business," growled the captain.

"Is there any concealed wealth upon it?"

"No, there ain't," exclaimed Captain Grady, almost so quick that it did not sound natural.

"You seem to be awfully anxious——"

"I own the next ranch, that's why. I want to turn my cattle an' sech in the two. Besides that, it ain't natural for a man to stand by an' see others a-usin' of his things."

"You talk very positively, Captain Grady," said Paul. "But it will do you no good. We shall not budge for the present."

"You won't?"

"Not a step. We claim this property and you will have to get the law to put us out if we are to be put out."

"You young highfliers!" growled the captain. He had a dread of the law and would do anything to

keep out of court. "Do you think I'll stand sech talk?"

"You will have to stand it," put in Chet. "I agree with Paul. We won't budge until the sheriff or a constable puts us out."

For the moment Captain Grady was speechless. His face grew dark with gathering wrath, and he looked as if he wanted to eat some one up.

"You won't budge, hey?" he roared at last.

"No."

"I'll put ye out!"

"I don't think you will," retorted Paul.

"Not without a big fight," added Chet.

"The boys have a right to stay here until put out," said Noel Urner. "The property is in dispute, and the only way to settle the matter is by going to law."

"I didn't ask for your advice," growled the captain, fiercely. "I own this ranch, an' I'm a-goin' to have it, an' putty quick, too!"

And without another word he turned on his heel, strode out of the house, sprang on his horse, and rode away at top speed.

"Phew! but isn't he mad!" exclaimed Chet, as the rider disappeared up the river trail.

"You bet!" returned Paul, dropping into a bit of slang. "But he can stay mad as long as he pleases; he can't bulldoze us."

"He is not so sure of his rights as he pretends to be," remarked Noel Urner, who, in the course of his city life, had met many men similar to Captain Grady. "If he knew all was right he wouldn't bluster so much."

"That's my idea of it, too," rejoined Chet. "I am half inclined to think he never bought the land—that is, paid for what he supposed was a title to it—for he couldn't really buy it except it was sold by Uncle Barnaby."

"Well, by the time he pays another visit your brother will be back most likely. It is a pity that your uncle should just now be missing."

The afternoon wore away, and anxiously the two boys awaited the coming of Allen. Several times they went up to the roof of the house and swept all points of the compass with their field glass.

At last the shades of night began to fall, and with heavy hearts the two began the round of evening work, feeding the chickens and pigs and seeing that everything was secure for the night. There were also a couple of cows to milk and a dozen or more of eggs to gather.

Noel Urner went around with them as before, and he was greatly interested. When they returned to the house he began to question them as to the extent of the ranch.

"Oh, it's pretty big," replied Paul. "It runs up and down the river nearly half a mile, and as far back as what we call the second foothills. If we had horses I could ride you around and show you."

"Are there any mines in the foothills?" was the young man's next question.

"There used to be a few, but they have all been abandoned because they did not pay."

"Perhaps this Captain Grady has struck something that will pay."

"Hardly. My father and Uncle Barnaby went over every foot of the ground half a dozen times, and they were both better prospectors than the captain."

Noel Urner was about to ask more questions, but a sound outside of the stockade caused him to pause. They all listened, and then Chet gave a shout.

"Somebody is coming! It must be Allen or Ike Watson! Come on out and see!"

CHAPTER XI.

IKE WATSON'S ARRIVAL

Let us go back to Allen.

We left him just as the sound made by Paul's horse aroused the leader of the horse thieves, whose full name was Saul Mangle.

"The feller that went over into the river, as sure as fate!" burst from the lips of Mangle, and he

started back in astonishment.

"Impossible!" cried Darry, the second man. "That feller must have been killed!"

"See for yourself."

With these words Saul Mangle sprang forward to stop Allen, who was about to mount Jasper. He reached the young man's side as Allen gained the saddle.

"Come down out of that!" he cried, roughly.

"Not much!" returned the young man. "Clear the track, unless you want to be run down!"

He urged the horse forward. Jasper started, but ere he had taken three steps, Mangle caught him by the bridle.

"Whoa!" he cried. "Whoa, I say!"

"Let the horse go, do you hear?" ejaculated Allen, sharply.

"I won't do it! Darry! Jeff! Come here, why don't you?"

The others leaped into the brush. Allen saw that affairs were turning against him. He leaned forward to Jasper's neck.

Smack! Mangle caught a sharp blow full across his mouth. It came so quickly that he staggered back and his hold was loosened.

"On, Jasper, on, my boy!" cried Allen, slapping the animal with his palm. "Come, Rush! Come, Rush!" he added to Chet's horse, which stood close beside.

Off went Jasper with a bound, and Rush followed at his heels.

"Stop him! Hang the measly luck!" roared Saul Mangle. "Darry! Jeff! What are you at?"

As he cried out, the leader of the horse thieves felt for his pistol. But before the weapon could be drawn both horses and Allen had disappeared behind a clump of cottonwoods.

"We had bettah follow him on de mustangs," suggested the negro. "He can't ride——"

"Of course, we'll follow him!" growled Mangle. "Don't stand and talk about it. Come on! He'll be out of hearing in another minute! This is the worst luck yet!"

He leaped for one of the mustangs. In another second all three of the men were mounted and riding after Allen as rapidly as the nature of the land and growth would allow.

"How do you think he escaped?" asked Darry, as they pushed on.

"Can't make it out," replied Mangle. "We'll make him tell the story when we catch him. Ha! what was that?"

A sudden crash ahead had arrested their attention. He listened. A dead silence followed.

"The hosses and young feller have gone into some sort of a hole," cried Darry. "We'll have him now, all right enough."

On they went through the brush, Mangle leading the way. Suddenly the leader came to a halt. Before him was a sheer descent of eight or ten feet.

"Here's where he and the hosses went down," he said to his followers.

"But where is he?" questioned Darry.

"Not far off, I'll warrant ye. Come on."

"Dis yere mustang won't take dat leap," put in Jeff, drawing back.

"And I won't venture it," added Darry, "I don't want to land on my head."

"Cowards!" howled Saul Mangle. "Well, then, there is a trail to the right; take that. Here goes!"

He spoke to his animal, and an instant later rider and mustang went down in a graceful curve. They landed in a bunch of brush, none the worse for the leap.

Darry and Jeff followed by way of the trail. They could hear Allen pushing through the brush not over a hundred yards ahead.

The young man was having a hard time of it. He was going it blindly, and was so faint from want of sleep and something to eat that he could hardly sit up in the saddle.

Yet he realized his peril and clung on desperately, meanwhile urging the horse and his mate to do their best to place distance between them and their pursuers.

But now the slight trail he was pursuing became rougher, and it was with difficulty that any progress could be made. The horses labored along bravely, but were no match on such ground for the nimble-footed mustangs.

"Halt! Do you hear?" were the first unpleasant words which greeted Allen's ears, and looking back he saw that Saul Mangle was in plain sight.

Allen attempted to dodge out of sight. To frighten him Mangle fired off his pistol, the bullet cutting through the brush under Jasper's feet.

"Will you stop now?" yelled Mangle.

Allen was in a quandary. He did not wish to be shot, and yet—

But the young man was not called on to solve the dreadful question. While he hesitated there was a loud shout from some distance to his right, and looking up the rocks he saw to his great joy Ike Watson, the hunter, sitting astride of his horse, rifle in hand.

"Wall, wall!" shouted the old man. "And what's the row, Allen, I want to know?"

"Horse thieves, Ike! Save me!" was the quick reply. "There are three of them after me!"

"Saul Mangle, as I'm a nateral born sinner, and Darry Nodley and Jeff Jones! Wall! wall! wall! Turn about, before it is too late, ye sarpints!"

The loud cry from Ike Watson caused the gang of horse thieves to come to a sudden halt. Every one of them knew old Ike Watson only too well—knew him for a man of quaint humor, but with a sense of justice that no one dared to question.

"Hang the measly luck!" muttered Saul Mangle. "There's Ike Watson!"

"Then the jig's up for the present, and we had better vamoose!" returned Nodley.

"Clar out, do ye hear me?" yelled Ike Watson to the crowd of three. "Don't wait for me to git riled up."

"Come on!" whispered Saul Mangle, with a scowl, and like magic the trio of villains turned about and disappeared down a side trail, leaving poor exhausted Allen safe in friendly hands at last.

"By the grasshoppers of Kansas, but ye look fagged out, Allen!" exclaimed old Ike Watson as he sprang down and caught Allen in his arms. "What's the matter with ye, boy?"

"I've had an awful experience, Ike," replied the young ranchman as soon as he could recover sufficiently to speak. "I've been underground several miles, and I haven't had a mouthful to eat since yesterday morning!"

"Gee shoo, Allen! Wall! wall! wall! If I didn't know ye so well I'd be apt ter think ye war tellin' me a fairy tale. But I allow as how Granville Winthrop's son couldn't lie if he tried."

"I speak the truth, Ike. But where are those villains?"

"Gone, boy, gone. They knowed better nor to stay whar Ike Watson was, ho! ho!"

"They are horse thieves, and ought to be locked up."

"Thet Saul Mangle ought to be strung up, ye mean. And Darry Nodley and that coon, Jeff Jones, ain't much better. But they are gone now."

"Well, I have Paul's horse and Chet's, too, anyway," returned Allen, with a slight smile of satisfaction.

"Whar's your own horse?"

"Dead, I reckon. We went off the Upas Pass bridge together into the river, and I suppose she was drowned. Poor Lilly!"

"Off the bridge! Gee shoo! Then ye war carried down the Black Rock River?"

"Yes!" Allen gave a shudder. "It was fearful, Ike. But come, let us get to the ranch, and I can tell my story to all at once!"

"That's the best way, sure. But down that air stream! Great snakes and turkey buzzards!"

"I know it hardly can be believed, but that is not the worst or most wonderful part of it. But come; I am nearly famished."

"Here's a bite I have in my pouch; eat that," returned Ike Watson, and he passed over some crackers and meat which Allen devoured with keen relish.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BOYS TALK IT OVER

Allen and Ike Watson were soon on the way back to the ranch. Fortunately Ike Watson knew every foot of the ground, and led by the most direct route.

As the reader knows, Paul and Chet heard them approaching and received their elder brother with open arms.

"You look like a ghost!" declared Chet, starting back on catching sight of Allen's pale face.

"And I feel like a shadow," responded Allen with a weary laugh. "But a good dinner and a nap will make me as bright as a dollar again."

"He has our horses!" cried Paul.

"Yes, but not my own," returned Allen.

He walked into the house and was here introduced to Noel Urner. The table was at once spread, and soon both Allen and Ike Watson were regaling themselves to their heart's content.

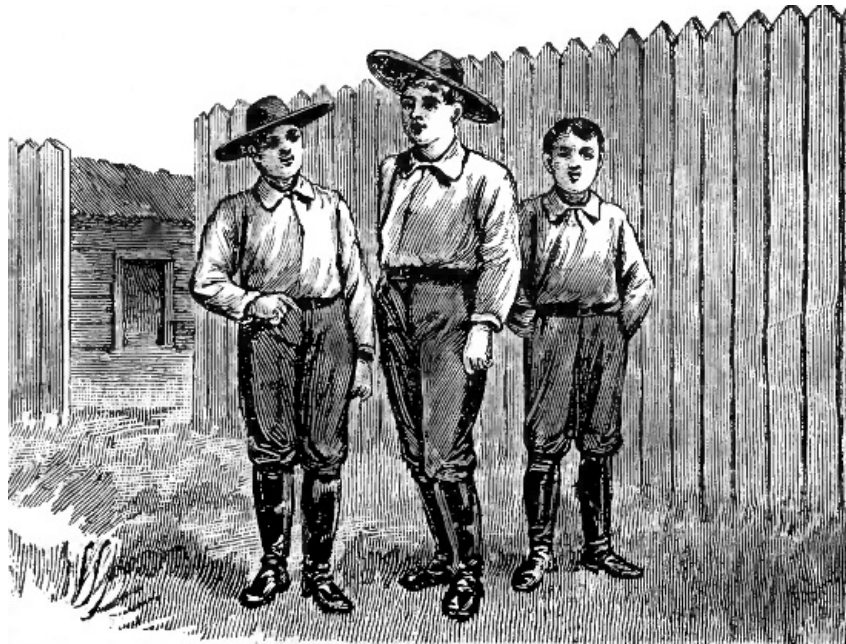
During the progress of the meal Allen related all of his wonderful story of the fall from the bridge, the journey on the underground river, and of his struggle to reach the open air once more. He said nothing about the wealth which lay exposed in the cavern or of the fact that it was Uncle Barnaby's mine, for he felt he had no right to mention those matters before Ike Watson and Noel Urner, friends though they might be. Uncle Barnaby had guarded his secret well and he would do the same.

All listened with deep interest to what he had to say.

"It was a wonder the fall into the water didn't kill you," said Paul. "Such a distance as it was!"

"Lilly saved my life—but it cost her her own," returned Allen, and he sighed, for Lilly had been his favorite for several years.

Chet and Paul were eager that Allen should hear Noel Urner's story and the young man from New York related it without delay. Allen was as much surprised as his brothers had been, and so was Ike Watson.



THE THREE YOUNG RANCHMEN TALKED IT OVER

"I am afraid somebody has played Uncle Barnaby foul," cried Allen, his face full of anxiety. "If he had left of his own accord we would have heard from him."

"That's just my idea of it," said Paul. "But the thing of it is, who met him in San Francisco, and what did they do?"

To that question Allen could only shake his head.

"I am too tired to say much about it to-night," he said at last. "I must sleep on it."

Allen wished to retire early, but before he did so Chet told him of Captain Grady's visit.

"We won't stir," said Allen, briefly. "Let him sue Uncle Barnaby. We have nothing to do with it. Our first duty is to find uncle."

And both Paul and Chet agreed with him on this point.

Ike Watson was on his way up the Salmon River to visit a new gold diggings. He refused to stay

all night, and set off in the dark, with Allen's thanks ringing in his ears for what he had done.

Despite the excitement through which he had passed, Allen slept "like a log" that night, and did not awaken until long after the others were up and Chet and Paul had the morning chores done.

"Now I feel like myself once more," he said when he came down. "And I am ready for business."

"So am I," laughed Noel Urner. "But the trouble is, I do not know how to turn without horse or conveyance. I am not used to tramping about on foot."

"If we had horses we might lend you one," said Allen. "But two nags for four people are two short," and he laughed.

During the morning Paul went out on horseback, accompanied by Noel, to see if the cattle were safe. While they were gone Allen told Chet of the hidden mine.

"It is worth a million," he said. "But it is Uncle Barnaby's secret, remember."

"I will remember," said Chet, "but we must tell Paul."

"Certainly; tell him after I am gone."

"Gone? Why, Allen, what do you mean?"

"I am going to leave home this afternoon, Chet."

"You are fooling," remarked the younger brother.

"Never more serious in my life, Chet."

"And you are going——" Chet hesitated.

"Direct to San Francisco to hunt up tidings of Uncle Barnaby."

Of course, Chet was taken completely back by Allen's announcement.

"To San Francisco!" he ejaculated.

"Yes, Chet. I feel that it is my duty to discover what has become of uncle, if possible, at once."

"I know, but it's such a journey——"

"I am not afraid to take it. I will ride to the nearest station on the railroad, which is not over a hundred and forty miles, and then take the train. The journey on the cars will not take over a couple of days, all told."

"And the cost——"

"I will have to take what we have saved from the thieves. But surely, Chet, you do not regret taking that for such a purpose?"

"No! no! take it all! I was thinking if it would be enough."

"I will make it do. I will buy a cut-rate ticket from Ogden, if I can."

"And what shall Paul and I do in the meantime?" questioned Chet in some dismay.

"Do nothing but guard the cattle and the place generally. I will be back, or let you hear from me just as soon as I can."

Paul was equally astonished at Allen's sudden determination. It was, however, what Noel Urner had expected.

"Yes, I would go if I were you," said the latter. "And if you want me to, I will go with you," he added. "I must confess I am deeply interested in this strange case."

"I would like you to go with me first rate," returned Allen. "And whether uncle is found or not, I will promise that you shall be well paid for all the trouble you will be put to."

"I want no pay for helping you. I will enjoy the bit of detective work, as one might call it. But how am I to get to the railroad station without a horse?"

"You can take both horses, if necessary," suggested Chet.

"That's so; although we ought to have at least one animal on the ranch," added Paul.

"We can both ride one animal as far as Dottery's ranch," said Allen, "and there we can either borrow or hire another animal."

"How far is Dottery's?"

"Only about twenty-five miles. We ought to reach it by dark, if we start shortly."

"We can start at once, as far as I am concerned," laughed Noel.

So it was decided to lose no time, and Chet at once set to work to prepare dinner and also some food to be carried along.

CHAPTER XIII.

CAUGHT IN A CYCLONE

Less than an hour later Jasper was brought out and Noel Urner sprang into the saddle, with Allen behind him on the blanket.

"Keep a close watch for more thieves while I am gone!" cried Allen.

"We will!" shouted Paul. "And you take care for more doctored bridges!"

A parting wave of the hand and the ranch was left behind, and Allen was off on a journey that was to be filled with adventures and excitement from start to finish.

Chet and Paul watched the horse and his two riders out of sight, and then with rather heavy hearts returned to the house. The place seemed more lonely than ever with both Allen and Noel Urner gone.

"It's going to be a long time waiting for Allen's return," sighed Paul.

"Perhaps not," returned Chet. "He left me with a secret to tell you, Paul."

And Chet lost no time in relating Allen's story of the hidden mine of great wealth.

"And perhaps we can explore the place during his absence," Paul said, after he had expressed his astonishment and asked half a dozen questions.

"I don't know about that, Paul. We may not be able to find the opening Allen mentioned, and then, again, he may not wish us to do so."

"Why should he object?"

"I don't know."

"We'll have ten days or two weeks on our hands, at the very least. We might as well take a look at that wealth as not."

"Supposing somebody followed us and found out the secret? They would locate a claim before we could turn a hand."

"We will make sure that we are not followed," said Paul, who was anxious to see if all Allen had told could really be true.

Chet continued to demur, but after Allen and Noel had been gone the whole of the next day he gave in, and seemed as anxious as Paul to do something which would make it less lonely. Apparently the horse thieves had left the vicinity, so there was nothing to be feared in that direction during an absence that they meant should not last more than one whole day.

Sunday came between, and on Monday morning they arose early and had breakfast ere it was yet daylight. They decided to take Rush, both to ride when on a level and each to take a turn at walking when on the uphill trails.

Allen had left Chet minute directions as to how the opening to the hidden mine could be located, he having fixed the locality well in his mind before leaving it.

It was rather a gloomy day, but this the two boys did not mind.

"It's better than being so raging hot," said Paul. "It makes my head ache to ride when it's so fearfully hot."

"If it only don't rain," returned Chet. "We need it bad enough, goodness knows, but it has held off so long it might as well hold off twenty-four hours longer."

"I doubt if we get rain just yet. It hasn't threatened long enough," replied his brother.

Before the two left the ranch they saw to it that every building was locked up tight, and an alarm, in the shape of a loaded gun, set to the doors and windows.

"That ought to scare would-be thieves away," said Chet. "They'll imagine somebody is firing at them."

The rest for a couple of days had done Rush much good, and he made no work of carrying the two boys along the trail that led to the second foothills.

Long before noon they reached the hills, and here stopped for lunch.

"And now for the wonderful mine!" cried Chet. Then, happening to glance across the plains below, he added: "Gracious, Paul! What is that?"

The attention of both young ranchmen was at once drawn to a round, black cloud on the horizon to the east. It was hardly a yard in diameter, apparently, when first seen, but it increased in size with great rapidity.

It was moving directly toward them, and in less than two minutes from the time Chet uttered his cry it had covered fully a third of the distance.

"From what I have heard I should say that was a cyclone cloud," exclaimed Paul. "And still——"

"Who ever heard of a cyclone up here among the foothills," returned Chet. "I don't believe they ever strike this territory."

"I certainly never heard of their doing so," returned Paul. "But still, you must remember, that cyclones are erratic things at the best."

"It looks as if it were coming directly this way."

"So it does, and I reckon the best thing we can do is to make tracks for some place of safety."

"That is true. Come on!"

Both boys sprang into the saddle and started up the trail. Hardly had a hundred feet of the way been covered than a strange rush and roar of wind filled the air.

"It's coming," shouted Paul. "Quick, Chet, down into that hollow before it strikes us!"

He plunged into the basin he had designated, which was six or eight feet below the level of the trail and not over ten yards in diameter. Chet followed, ducking low as he did so, for already was the air filled with flying branches.

"None too soon!" ejaculated Paul. "Down, Rush!"

Between them they managed to get the horse to lie down close to a wall of dirt and rocks. They lay near, waiting almost breathlessly for that awful time of peril to pass.

No one who has not experienced the dreadful effects of a cyclone can imagine it, be the description of it ever so fine. That strange rush and roar, that density of the air, accompanied by a feeling as if the very breath was about to be drawn from one's lungs, the flying débris, all unite to chill the stoutest heart and make one wonder if the next moment will not be the last.

The cyclone was short and sharp. From the time it first struck the foothills until the time it spent itself in the distance was barely four minutes, yet, what an effect did it leave behind!

On all sides of them many trees were literally torn up by the roots, brush was leveled as if cut by a mowing machine, and dirt and pebbles which had been perhaps carried for miles were deposited here, there, and everywhere. Ranch boys though they were, and accustomed to many things strange and wonderful, Chet and Paul could only gaze at the work of destruction in awe, and silently thank heaven that their lives had been spared.

They had escaped with slight injury. Several sharp sticks and stones had scratched Chet's neck as he lay prostrate, and Paul's arm was greatly lamed by a blow from the branch of a tree which fell directly across the opening, pinning the horse down in such a fashion that he could not rise.

"We must liberate Rush first of all," cried Chet. "Poor fellow! Whoa, Rush, we'll soon help you," he added, and patted the animal on the neck to soothe him.

Evidently Rush understood, for he lay quiet. Then Chet and Paul, using all of their strength, raised up one end of the tree, which, fortunately, was not large. As soon as he felt himself free, Rush scrambled up out of harm's way, and they let the tree fall back again.

"That is the kind of an adventure I never want to experience again," said Paul when he had somewhat recovered his breath. "My, how the wind did tear things!"

"It was a full-fledged cyclone and no mistake," returned his brother. "Had that struck a town it would have razed every building in it."

"That's true, and oh!" went on Paul suddenly, "I wonder if it has destroyed the marks Allen left whereby the mine is to be found?"

Chet stared at him speechless.

"Perhaps!" he gasped at last. "Come, let us go on and see!"

There was considerable difficulty in getting out of the hollow into which they had so unceremoniously thrust themselves. Rush was somewhat frightened still, and instead of riding him, they led him out by a circuitous way which took them nearly a hundred yards out of their path.

They found the trail almost impassable in spots, and more than once were compelled to make a wide detour in order to avoid fallen trees and gathered brush.

"A cyclone like that can do more damage than can be repaired in ten years," observed Chet as they labored along on foot. "I wonder where it started from?"

"Somewhere out on the flat lands near the river, I reckon," returned Paul.

On they went around trees and rocks and brush, until the way grew so bad that both came to an involuntary halt.

"It looks as if the very trail had been swept away," said Paul. "I can't see anything of it ahead."

"Nor I. Whoever would have thought of such a thing when we left home?"

"We can't go on in this direction, that's sure. What's best to be done?"

Both looked around for several minutes and then decided to cross a rocky stretch to the right. They had to do this with great care, as the road was full of sink holes and crevices, and they did not want to break a leg or have the horse injured.

The stretch crossed, they found themselves on a little hill. All about them could be seen the effects of the cyclone, not a tree or bush had escaped its ravages.

"It looks as if the landmarks Allen had mentioned had been swept away," said Paul, as he gazed around hopelessly. "I can't see the first of them."

"It would certainly seem so," rejoined Chet. "If they are, they won't be able to locate the mine again, excepting to sail down the underground river."

"That is so—excepting Uncle Barnaby turns up with another and better way of locating it," replied Paul very seriously.

CHAPTER XIV.

ANOTHER SURPRISE

The desolation on all sides of them and the failure to locate the marks Allen had mentioned caused Paul and Chet to become much downcast. They had had their long and tedious journey from the ranch home for nothing.

"I suppose there isn't anything to do but to go back," remarked Chet dismally, as he thrashed around in the brush with a stick he had picked up. "We are as far away from the mine as we were when we started."

"Let us be in no hurry to return," rejoined Paul. "We'll give Rush a chance to get back his wind."

Leaving the trusty animal to roam about as pleased him, the two boys threw themselves on the grass and gave themselves up to their reflections.

"I'll tell you what I would like to do," remarked Chet. "I would like to find the chap who cleaned us out of that seven hundred dollars."

"I wonder that Allen didn't get Watson to stop the horse thieves and search them," mused Paul. "He must have known they had the money."

"He was too played out to think of much just then, I reckon. It was a good deal to escape with the horses without getting shot."

"The cross we found in the barn belonged to that Saul Mangle beyond a doubt. The initials prove that."

"I believe you."

"We must watch out for that Mangle, and if we can ever get our hands on him, make him give up our money and then have him locked up."

"It is not so easy to lock up a man when you are miles and miles away from a jail."

An hour went by, and the boys thought it time to start on the return. Rush was called back from a thicket into which he had wandered and both mounted, for the trail now lead almost entirely down hill.

After the cyclone the sun had come out strong and hot, and halfway back to the ranch the brothers were glad enough to stop beside the bank of a tiny mountain stream and obtain a drink and water the horse.

They were about to depart when Rush pricked up his ears and gave a peculiar whinny.

"Hush! What does that mean?" Paul asked in quick alarm.

"Draw behind the brush and see," replied Chet, cautiously. "Those horse thieves may be still in the vicinity."

"Oh, they would not remain here," said Paul.

Yet he followed his brother behind the brush. They tried to make Rush come, too, but for once the animal would not obey.

"Come, Rush, come," whispered Chet. "Why he never acted this way before."

"The cyclone upset his mind, I reckon," said Paul, with a faint show of humor. "Make him come."

But the more Chet tried the more obstinate did the animal become. Finally he broke away altogether and ran off, kicking up his heels behind him.

"Well, I never!" gasped Chet.

"Quick, after him! I believe he means to run away!" cried Paul.

"Rush run away!" said Chet reproachfully. It hurt him a good deal to have Paul speak in that fashion of the horse he so loved.

Both boys leaped from the thicket and after Rush, who was now running up the bank of the stream at top speed. A turn was made and the brothers burst out into a loud and joyous shout.

There, not fifty feet away, was Lilly, the faithful mare Allen had fancied was drowned in the Black Rock River. Rush stood beside her, licking her neck affectionately.

"Allen's horse!" cried Chet.

"And as well as ever almost," added Paul, as he rushed up and began an examination.

The mare was evidently glad to see both the boys and her mate. She stood trembling as Chet and Paul examined her.

"A few slight bruises, that is all," said Paul. "Won't Allen be glad when he hears of it?"

"Indeed he will be. He loves Lilly as if she was his best girl. It's a good thing for us, too, Paul," he went on. "Now each can have a mount home."

"Right you are—if Lilly can carry me."

Paul was speedily on the mare's back. She seemed willing enough to carry him; in fact, glad to be in the keeping of a human being she knew.

"If she could only talk what a tale she would have to tell," observed Paul as they rode homeward. "I wonder how she got out of the river?"

"I reckon we'll never know, unless Allen makes her talk. He can make her do most everything," laughed Chet.

On they went over the rocks and the level prairie beyond. The sun was now sinking in the west, and ere long the evening shadows would be upon them.

"Well, we found a horse even if we didn't find a mine, and that's something," said Paul, as they reached the trail beside the river.

"But I hope that the mine isn't lost for good," replied Chet, quickly. "The mine is worth a good deal more than even Lilly."

"Maybe you can't tell that to Allen."

"Oh, yes I can; for he saw the wealth there, you know."

"If only he finds Uncle Barnaby," sighed Paul. "Do you know, the more I think of it, the more I become convinced that something dreadful has happened to him."

"And that is the way I look at it, too, Paul. If we could——"

Chet stopped short and stared ahead. They had come in sight of the semi-stockade around their ranch house.

"Our furniture and trunks!" gasped Paul, following the direction of Chet's stare. "What on earth does it mean?"

There on the grass lay their furniture in a confused mass—tables, chairs, trunks, clothing, one on top of another. And in another heap were the farming implements from the barn.

"Captain Grady's dirty work!" cried Paul. "He has come here and taken possession during our absence."

Paul was right, for at that moment Captain Grady appeared at the stockade gate, gun in hand.

The sarcastic smile on the captain's face told plainly that he rather enjoyed the situation. He gazed at the boys without saying a word.

His left hand was tied up in a bandage, showing that he had not entirely escaped the gun traps which had been set. As a matter of fact, half a dozen bird shot still remained in the fleshy part of his thumb.

"What does this mean?" demanded Paul at length. He spoke as calmly as he could, although tremendously excited.

"Reckon you have eyes an' can see," growled Captain Grady. "I told you that you hadn't seen the end of this, an' that I would have this place in my possession putty quick."

"You had no right to break into our house and fire our things out!" cried Chet.

"I deny as how it's your house, youngster. It belongs to me, as does the whole ranch property. There be your traps, an' the quicker you git them off this ground the better it will suit me."

"We won't move a thing until we put them back into that house," retorted Chet hot-headedly. "This is no way to gain possession, and you know it."

"Halt where you are!" Captain Grady raised his gun and pointed it at Chet, who was in advance. "You'll not come near this gate, mind that!"

"I'm going in, and you won't stop me," retorted Chet.

"Don't be rash, Chet," whispered Paul, riding up and plucking his younger brother by the sleeve.

"You try and cross this gateway and I'll fire on you, sure as fate," went on the captain.

Urged by Paul, Chet brought Rush to a stand. The boys were about thirty feet from where Captain Grady stood on guard.

"Now, the best thing you fellers can do," said the captain, sharply, "is to ride over to Dottery's ranch, an' git a wagon an' tote these traps away. If they are left more 'n a week I'll pitch them into the river, mind you. If you ain't satisfied at the way matters have turned, you can go to law, just as you advised me to do," and again the man smiled sarcastically.

"We certainly will go to law," replied Paul. "Are you alone here?"

"That's not for you to ask."

"I presume you hung around here and saw my brother go off first and then waited for us to go away."

"I ain't standing here as a target for questions," growled Captain Grady.

"You are a sneak and worse, Captain Grady!" burst out Chet. "If there is any law in Idaho you shall have your full dose of it, mark my word!"

"Hi! you young bantam, don't talk to me in that fashion," roared the man in a rage. "Come, I've told you what is best to do. Now clear out. I shall keep watch, an' if you attempt to play any trick in the dark on me you'll find yourself running up against a charge of buckshot."

That Captain Grady was in dead earnest was very evident. He scowled viciously and walked a step forward.

Yet the boys were not daunted. They held their ground, and Paul even took a slight move forward on Lilly's back.

"Supposing we go to Dottery's ranch," said the youth. "If we tell our story, don't you imagine Dottery will turn in and help us bounce you out of here?"

"No, you'll get no help at Dottery's."

"He is our friend, and he will not stand up for your doings, even if you do own the ranch over the river."

"Well, why don't you go an' see Dottery," snapped Captain Grady.

"We will—and some other people, too," cried Chet.

"And in the meantime, if any of our stuff is lost, you'll pay for it," added Paul.

"I won't be responsible for anything. Now clear out an' leave me alone."

The two brothers looked at each other. Neither knew exactly what to do. Paul finally made a sign to withdraw, and they turned and rode down the river trail to the belt of cottonwoods.

Captain Grady remained at the gateway, his baneful eyes on them until the trees hid them from view. Then he shut the heavy gate and walked slowly toward the house, rubbing his grizzled chin reflectively.

"They won't come back to-night, I'm pretty certain of that," he said to himself. "An' by to-morrow I'll be better fixed to hold my own."

CHAPTER XV.

AT DOTTERY'S RANCH

"It's a shame, Paul!" ejaculated Chet, almost crying with rage. "We ought to have shot him where he stood."

"I suppose many a man would have done it," returned Paul, somewhat moodily. "But we must get him out."

"He won't go out without a fight."

"I think he will—when we get enough of a crowd against him. I more than half believe he is totally alone, although the furniture and other stuff look as if he had had somebody to help him."

"He's been hanging around watching his chance," went on Chet. "Who knows but what he has been spying on us ever since his last visit."

"Oh, I trust not, Chet!" Paul looked much disturbed. "He may have overheard some of our talk about Uncle Barnaby's mine, you know."

"That's so! What if he did! He is rascal enough to try to locate it and set up a claim, eh?"

"Undoubtedly. Come on; the best we can do is to ride to Dottery's and try to obtain help. It's a long journey by night, but there's nothing else to do."

"I won't mind it—if only Dottery will turn in and help us. He ought to, but he always was a peculiar fellow. He may not want to make an enemy of Captain Grady, seeing as the ranches adjoin. But come on, while daylight lasts."

And off the two brothers struck, along the river trail, and then down the road Allen and Noel Urner had pursued on their way to the far-away railroad station. They realized that in another hour darkness would be upon them.

The boys knew the way well, having traveled it a dozen times in search of stray cattle. They rode on, side by side, urging on the tired horses and discussing the situation in all its various phases.

Slowly the sun faded from view behind the distant mountains, casting long shadows over the foothills and the level stretches beyond. The night birds sang their parting song, and then came the almost utter silence of the night.

"When do you suppose we'll reach Dottery's?" questioned Chet, after several miles had been covered.

"If all goes well, we'll get there by one or two o'clock," returned his brother. "You must remember we have Demon Hollow to cross, and that's no fool of a job in the dark."

"Especially if the Demon is abroad," laughed Chet. He was only joking, and did not believe in the old trappers' stories about the ghost in hiding at the bottom of the rocky pass.

When darkness fell the hoofstrokes of the horses sounded out doubly loud on the semi-stony road. Yet, to the boys, even this was better than that intense stillness, which made one feel, as Chet expressed it, "a hundred miles from nowhere at all."

So tired were the horses that the boys had their hands full making them keep their gait. They would trot a few steps and then drop into a stolid walk.

"I don't blame them much," said Chet, sympathetically. "It's doing two days' work in one. But never mind, they shall have a good rest when it's all over."

By ten o'clock it was pitch dark. To be sure the stars were shining, but they gave forth but a feeble light. The boys had to hold their animals at a tight rein to keep them from stumbling into unexpected holes.

"It will be nearer three o'clock than two before we get there at this rate," grumbled Paul. "Just look ahead and see how dark and forbidding the Hollow looks."

"Not the most cheerful spot in the world truly," rejoined Chet, as he strained his eyes to pierce the heavy shadows. "Let us get past it as soon as we can."

"Afraid, Chet?"

"Oh, no, only I—I would rather be on the level trail beyond the pass."

Paul said no more, having no desire to hurt his younger brother's feelings. To tell the exact truth, he himself felt a bit "off." It was growing toward midnight.

Down and down led the road, between two rocky crags. Soon the last trace of light was left behind, and they had to let the horses pick their own way as best they might.

Suddenly Chet gave a start and a cry.

"O, Paul, what is that?"

"Where?"

"Over to the left."

Paul turned in his saddle. As he did so an object not over two feet in length and of a gray and white color, with some black, swept to one side of them.

"Can it be a pig?" gasped Chet.

"A pig? No, it's a badger, out on the forage. Don't you smell him?"

Chet recovered and unslung his gun. He tried to take aim in the gloom.

"Don't fire!" said Paul. "What is the use? It's only a waste of ammunition. The badger isn't hurting anything, and he's a good distance from the ranch. Let him go."

By the time Chet had listened to all this the badger had disappeared. The animal was not used to being aroused and was more frightened than any one.

They passed on. The very bottom of the Hollow was at hand. The horses proceeded slowly, realizing the peril of the place.

Once Rush went down into a hole nearly throwing Chet over his head. But the youth held on, and Rush arose all right, with nothing but a slight scrape on his left foreleg.

They peered with watchful eyes up and down the silent pass. Not a sign of any life was there. The water flowed on with a muffled murmur and the wind sighed through the deep opening, and that was all. In another five minutes the pass was left behind.

For some reason both boys drew a long breath of relief when the high ground beyond was reached. The strain was gone, and now, by contrast, the road looked as bright to them as if the sun was about to rise.

"Come to think of it, we may as well take it easy," remarked Paul. "It isn't likely that Dottery will care to make a move before daylight."

"Yes; but if we get there sooner, we'll have a chance to rest up a bit, and we need that, and so do the horses."

"I didn't think of that. Well, forward we go."

An hour passed and then another. Soon after Chet gave a joyous cry.

"There are Dottery's outbuildings! We'll soon be there now!"

"Right you are, Chet. I wonder——" Paul stopped short. "Oh, look over there!" he cried.

He pointed to a barn not a great distance back from the road.

The door of the structure was open and within flashed the light of a lantern.

"Dottery must be up, or else——" began Chet.

"Horse thieves!"

Both boys uttered the word simultaneously. Could it be possible that the thieves were raiding their nearest neighbor?

"Wait. Let us dismount and investigate," whispered Paul. "Don't do anything rash," this as Chet started to run toward the barn.

Thus cautioned, the younger boy paused. The horses were tied up behind some brush, and, guns in hand, the pair crept across the road and over a wire fence into the field.

Hardly had they advanced a dozen steps when three men came out of the barn, leading four horses. They made for an opening in the fence not a rod from where the boys flung themselves flat on the grass.

From the description they had received, the lads made up their minds that the men were Saul Mangle, Darry Nodley, and Jeff Jones.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN ENCOUNTER IN THE DARK

Chet and Paul could hardly suppress their excitement as they saw the horse thieves move toward the opening in the fence. Chet drew up his gun and pointed it at the leader.

"Don't fire! Wait!" cautioned Paul. "There are three of them, remember."

"I wonder where Dottery is?" questioned the younger boy, with his hand still on the trigger.

"Asleep, most likely."

"We ought to arouse him. Run, Paul, while I keep watch."

"I will, but don't do anything rash during my absence," replied Paul Winthrop.

He sneaked along in the tall grass until the outbuildings were left a hundred feet and sped like a deer toward the ranch home, showing dimly in the grim shadows ahead.

Less than sixty seconds passed, and he was pounding vigorously on the front door of the heavy log building. Not content with using his fist he banged away with the toe of his cowhide boot.

"Who's thar?" came from within presently.

"Mr. Dottery!"

"That's me, stranger."

"Come out. It's Paul Winthrop. There are horse thieves at your barn."

"What!" roared Dottery. He was a heavy-built man, with a voice like a giant. "The same chaps ez robbed you?"

He unbarred the door and came out on a run, gun in hand and a long pistol in his belt. He was an old settler, and rarely took the trouble to undress when he went to rest for the night.

"Yes, the same, unless I am very much mistaken. My brother Chet is down there now on the watch."

"I'll fix 'em. Go back and call Jack, my man."

Paul hesitated and then did as directed. It took some time to arouse the cowboy, Jack Blowfen, but once aroused, the man quickly took in the situation, and arming himself, joined the boy in a rush after Dottery.

"The pesky rascals!" he muttered. "Yer brother told us about 'em when he stopped here on his way to the railroad station. It's a pity Ike Watson didn't plug every one of 'em when he had the chance. Next thing yer know they'll be runnin' off with a bunch o' cattle."

"Be careful when you shoot; my brother Chet is there," continued Paul, not wishing Chet to be mistaken for a horse thief in the dark.

"I know the lad, and I also know this Saul Mangle and his crowd," returned Jack Blowfen. "I owe Mangle one for the way he treated me in Deadwood one day."

He ran so swiftly that Paul had hard work to keep up with him. Dottery had already disappeared in the darkness of the night.

Bang! Bang! The shots came from behind the barn, while Paul was some distance away. It was Dottery firing at the thieves. Jack Blowfen was chasing them down by the wire fence.

"Paul! Paul! Hold on!"

It was Chet's voice. As he cried out the lad arose from the grass and caught his brother by the sleeve. Paul had passed so close that he had almost trodden on Chet.

"Come on, Chet."

"I'm coming. But hadn't we better look to our horses?"

"In a minute. Let us find out what that firing means."

Paul led the way in the direction of the barn. There, in the gloom, they saw two men struggling violently. They were Dottery and the negro, Jeff Jones. The other horse thieves and Jack Blowfen were nowhere in sight.

Two horses were running about wildly, alarmed by the shots in the dark. Both were bridled but had no saddles.

"Catch the hosses!" yelled Dottery, as he made out the forms of the boys. "Don't let 'em get out of that break in the fence!"

"Have you that man?" cried Paul.

"I will have in a second."

The brothers ran for the animals as directed. It was no light work to secure them. When it was accomplished they ran the horses into the barn and closed the doors. As they came out panting from their exertions, they heard a gunshot from the brush on the opposite side of the road, and then the voice of Jack Blowfen calling out:

"Let them hosses go, you rascals! Take that, Saul Mangle, fer the trick yer played me in Deadwood!"

"Rush and Lilly!" gasped Chet. He said no more, but started in the direction of the encounter. He was determined his horse should not be taken again. Paul came on his heels. Both boys were now sufficiently aroused to fight even with their firearms. The wire fence was cleared at a single bound and into the brush they dove pell-mell.

That Jack Blowfen was having a fierce hand-to-hand contest with his antagonist was plain. The boys could hear both men thrashing around at a lively rate.

"You've hit me in the leg, and I'll never forgive you for it!" they heard Saul Mangle exclaim. "How do you like that, you milk-and-water cow puncher?"

"I don't like it, and ain't going ter stand it, yer low down hoss thief and gambler," returned Jack Blowfen, and then came the fall of one body over another, just as Paul and Chet leaped into the little opening where the battle was taking place.

They saw Jack Blowfen on his back with Saul Mangle on top of him. The horse thief had the butt of a heavy pistol raised threateningly. He looked alarmed at the unexpected appearance of the boys.

"Let up there!" sang out Paul. "Let up at once!"

The cry and the glint of the boys' weapons decided Mangle. With a low muttering he gave Jack Blowfen's body a kick and sprang for the bushes.

Chet and Paul went after him, leaving the cowboy to stagger to his feet and regain his pistols.

The boys followed Mangle not over a dozen feet. Then they came upon Darry Nodley, who had several horses in a bunch, among them Rush and Lilly. The man had been waiting for the leader of the gang to finish his row with Blowfen.

Saul Mangle was ahead of the two boys, but ere he could leap upon the back of the nearest animal Paul ran up to him and seized him by the arm.

"Stop!" he ordered. "You cannot take those horses. We will shoot you both if you attempt it!"

"The Winthrop youngsters," muttered Darry Nodley. "How did they find their way here?"

He attempted to move on, thinking Mangle would follow. But now Chet barred the way.

The ranch boy had his gun up to his shoulder and there was a determined look on his sunburnt face. He was fighting for Rush as much as for anything else.

"Get down!" was all he said, but the tone in which the words were uttered left no room for argument.

Darry Nodley hesitated and thought at first to feel for his own gun. But then he changed his mind. He saw that Chet was thoroughly aroused, and saw, too, that Jack Blowfen was coming up.

"We'll have to make tracks," he cried to Saul Mangle, and leaped to the ground, putting the horse between himself and Chet, and ran for the bushes.

In the meantime Paul and Saul Mangle were having a hand-to-hand fight. The boy fought well, and the wounded man had all he could do to defend himself. Finally he went limping after Nodley, but not before Paul had relieved him of his gun. The brave lad could have shot the thief with ease, but could not bring himself to take the risk of killing his antagonist.

"Where are they?" roared Jack Blowfen, coming up. "Which way did they go?"

Paul pointed in the direction. At once Blowfen ran off. In another second Chet and Paul were left alone with the horses. The sounds from the distance told them that Saul Mangle and Darry Nodley were doing their best to escape from the neighborhood.

"Our money!" cried Chet. "We ought to have made an effort to get that seven hundred dollars!"

"That's so—but it's too late now, unless we go after the pair on horseback."

"Let us return Dottery's horses to the barn first and see how he has made out with the negro."

They took the horses in charge and passed with them across the road and through the break in the wire fence. At the barn they found the ranch owner in the act of making Jeff Jones a close prisoner by tying his hands and legs with odd bits of harness straps.

"Got this one, anyway," growled Dottery. "Whar are the others?"

"Jack Blowfen has gone after them," replied Paul. "Here are your horses."

"Good enough. Say, will you watch this man if I follow Jack?" went on the ranch owner, anxiously.

"Of course," exclaimed Chet. "If you can capture Saul Mangle, do so. We believe he has seven hundred dollars belonging to us."

"So Allen told me."

The boys took charge of the negro, and mounting one of the horses Caleb Dottery rode out of the inclosure. He took the lantern with him, thus leaving those behind in darkness.

"Strike a light, Chet, and see if you can't find another lantern in the barn," said Paul. "I'll watch Jones so he don't get away."

"Dis am werry hard on a poah man," moaned the negro. He was fearfully frightened, for he knew full well how stern was the justice usually meted out to horse thieves in that section of the country.

"You ought to have thought of that before you started in this business," replied Paul.

"It was Mangle coaxed me into de work, sah. He said as how he had a right to de hosses."

"Indeed! I suppose he said he had a right to our horses, too," went on the youth, with a sarcasm that was entirely lost on the prisoner.

"Yes, sah."

"In that case you will have to suffer for your simpleness," was Paul's short response. He did not believe the colored man.

"No lantern in the barn, so far as I can see," called out Chet. "Better march the fellow up to the house."

"He can't march with his legs tied."

"I reckon he can hobble a bit."

Jeff Jones was unwilling to move, thinking he had a better chance of escape while out in the open. But Chet and Paul each caught him by the arm, and groaning and trembling the colored man was forced to move slowly toward the ranch home.

Before moving to the house Chet had driven the horses into the barn and locked the door, so now the animals were safe, at least for the time being.

It was found that Jeff Jones had received an ugly wound in the shoulder. This Paul set to work to dress, taking good care, however, that the prisoner should be allowed no chance of escape.

"Wot is yo' gwine to do wid me?" asked Jeff Jones as the work progressed. "Ain't gwine ter tote me ter town, is yo'?"

"That depends upon what Mr. Dottery says," replied Chet. "He's the boss of this ranch."

"Better let me go," urged the colored man. "If yo' don't dar will be big trouble ahead."

"Don't imagine we are to be scared so easily," returned Chet, smartly. "We have a bigger rascal to deal with even than you," he added.

"Yo' mean Saul Mangle?"

"No, I mean Captain Hank Grady," replied the boy, without stopping to think.

"Captain Hank Grady! Wot yo' know ob him?" ejaculated Jeff Jones. "Did yo' know about him and yo' Uncle Barnaby——" the colored man broke off short.

"My Uncle Barnaby!" exclaimed Chet. "What made you think of him in connection with Captain Grady?"

"Oh, I know a lot about him an' de captain," said Jeff Jones suggestively. "A heap dat maybe yo' boys would gib a lot ter know about."

CHAPTER XVII.

SOMETHING ABOUT A LETTER

Allen Winthrop knew full well that he had a long journey before him and one that would, perhaps, be full of peril, yet his heart did not fail him as he and Noel Urner rode away, bound first for Dottery's ranch, and then for the railroad station, over a hundred miles away.

"You must keep up a stout heart, Allen," said the young man from the east. "Perhaps all is well with your uncle in spite of appearances."

"I am not daunted by what lies ahead," said the young ranchman. "But I am convinced that Uncle Barnaby has been led into some great trouble. Were it otherwise we would surely have heard from him ere this."

At Dottery's they put up over night, and set off at sunrise in the morning; Allen riding the animal from the ranch and Noel using a large and powerful beast hired to him by Dottery.

"Thirty-five miles to-day," observed Allen, as they pushed on along a somewhat hilly trail, lined on either side by cactus and other low plants.

"Is that the distance to Daddy Wampole's hotel, as you call it?"

"Yes—by the roads. The direct route would not make it over thirty miles, but we can't fly as the birds do."

"We ought to make thirty-five miles easily enough."

"We could on a level. But you must remember we have several hills to climb and half a dozen water courses to ford. I imagine, too, you will get tired of the saddle before nightfall."

"Oh, I can stand it," laughed Noel Urner, "thanks to my experience in the riding schools in New York and my frequent exercises in Central Park."

"A big difference between Central Park and this, eh? I would like to see the park some time," returned Allen.

On they went, taking advantage of the early morning while the sun was still low. The level stretch

was passed and then they came to a good-sized brook. Beyond was a belt of timber and the first of the hills.

They watered the horses and took a drink themselves, and pushed on without stopping further. Allen knew they must keep on the move if they expected to reach Daddy Wampole's crossroads ranch before the evening shadows fell.

On through the forest of spruce and hemlock, with here and there a tall cottonwood, they spurred their horses. The foot of the hill was soon reached, and up they toiled.

"A grand country," murmured Noel Urner.

"And big room for improvements," returned Allen, grimly. "It will take a deal of labor to put this land in shape for use."

"We never realize what the pioneers had to contend with when they first settled this country until we see things as they are here. To cut down forests, level the land, build houses and barns, and fix roads—it's an immense amount of labor, truly."

At noon they halted near the top of a second hill, and here started up just enough of a fire to boil themselves a pot of coffee. They had brought jerked meat and crackers from home and made a comfortable, if not luxurious meal. In twenty minutes they were again on the way, the horses in the meantime having also been fed.

"Daddy Wampole's ranch is our post office," explained Allen, as they rode along side by side. "The mail comes down from Deadwood once a week. It's not very extensive and Wampole usually puts everything in a soap box and lets every comer pick out whatever belongs to him."

Noel laughed. "I've heard of such doings before," he said. "I suppose he has another box of letters to be mailed."

"Exactly."

"It's not a very safe way to do. Letters might easily be stolen or taken by mistake. Who knows but what some communication from your uncle was carried off by another?"

Allen's face grew serious. "I never thought of that. But who would be mean enough to do it?"

"The man who sent that forged letter to me would be mean enough."

"So he would! I must ask Wampole if he remembers any letter addressed to us."

It was now the hottest part of the day. The road was dry and dusty and the horses hung out their tongues as they toiled onward. All were glad when they reached a portion of the road overhung by huge rocks a hundred feet or more in height.

"A day in the saddle seems a long while," said Noel Urner.

"And we have four more days to follow," smiled Allen. "I was afraid it would tire you."

"Oh, I am all right yet, Allen. But look, what is that ahead, a building?"

"That's the crossroads hotel. Come, we have less than a mile more to go."

The sight of the rude building ahead raised Noel Urner's spirits. Off he went on a gallop, with Allen close at his heels. In ten minutes they drew up at the rude horse block and dismounted.

Old Daddy Wampole, then a well-known character throughout Idaho, came out on the porch of his ranch to greet them.

"Back ag'in, hey?" he called out to Allen. "Wall, thar ain't no new mail in sense ye war here afore."

"I know that, Daddy," replied the young man. "I didn't come for the mail, exactly. My friend and I are bound for the railroad station."

"Goin' ter San Francisco?"

"Yes; we want to stop here to-night."

"Ye air welcome ter do thet," and Daddy Wampole gave Noel a friendly nod.

The young man was introduced and all three entered the ranch, one room of which did duty as a general store, barroom, and post office. Before anything else could be spoken of, Allen questioned Wampole concerning the letters which had been in the box for several weeks back, and the people who had called for them.

"I don't remember much about the letters, but I recerlect thet Cap'n Grady took most all ez came in," was the suggestive reply from the so-styled postmaster.

"So he took most of the letters, did he?" said Allen, slowly. "How many of them, on a rough guess?"

"Seven or eight."

"And you can't remember if any of them were addressed to me?"

"No, I don't recerlect thet, Allen, but hold on—do ye suspect the cap'n o' tamperin' with yer mail?"

"I don't believe he is above such an action," replied the young man, bluntly.

"Wall, neither do I, privately speakin'. I was goin' ter say," went on the ranch owner slowly, "when the cap'n got the letters he walked over there to the old place and tore 'em open. Maybe ___"

There was no need for the man to go on. Allen had already left the apartment and was hurrying across the road to what had in former days been the only house in the section.

It was a rude affair, now half fallen into decay. Outside, under the overhanging logs of the roof, was situated a bench sometimes used by travelers as a resting place. Here many a yarn had been told, and many a "hoss deal" talked over and closed.

Straight to the bench went Allen, and in the fading light looked eagerly on all sides for bits of paper of any kind. He found a great number and gathered them all into his empty dinner pouch. When he was sure there were no more scraps in the vicinity he returned to the house.

"Well, what have you?" asked Noel Urner, with interest.

"I have nearly fifty scraps of letters," said Allen. "I must look them over at once."

A lamp was lit, and, spreading out the scraps on a large, flat board, Allen set to work to sort out the various pieces. It was tedious work and Noel Urner assisted him.

Suddenly the young ranchman uttered a low cry.

"Look! Here is part of a letter that was addressed to me," he said.

And he held up a scrap which bore the words: "—you and Chet can meet me and Paul—"

"Is it in your uncle's handwriting?" questioned the young man from the east.

"Yes."

"Then it would seem as if some one had stolen your letter, certainly."

"That's just what was done!" ejaculated Allen. "I wonder—" he stopped short.

"What do you wonder?"

"I wonder if Captain Grady had anything to do with Uncle Barnaby's disappearance."

"The cap'n air a slick one," put in Daddy Wampole. "I never liked him from the day I fust sot eyes onto him. An' seem' as how he's achin' ter git thet ranch from ye boys, why, it ain't surprisin' he took thet letter and would do more, if 'twas fer his own benefit."

"It won't be for his benefit if I find he is playing such an underhand game," rejoined Allen, grimly. The thought that Captain Grady had stolen his letter angered him thoroughly. "He fancies that we are only three boys, but he'll find out that even boys can do something when they are put to it."

"It's a pity you didn't find the rest of the letter," observed Noel Urner. "No doubt that letter was of great importance. It might be best to hunt up this Captain Grady and learn the truth from him before we push further for the railroad station."

"The trouble is the cap'n air hard to find," said Daddy Wampole. "He ain't on his ranch more 'n a quarter o' his time. Ye know he's as much interested in mines ez he is in cattle."

The mention of mines gave a new turn to Allen's thoughts. Had that communication from Uncle Barnaby contained any reference to the valuable claim over by the Black Rock River?

"If it did, then Captain Grady will rob Uncle Barnaby as sure as fate," thought the young ranchman, with an inward groan.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ALLEN CHANGES HIS PLANS

A moment later a clatter of horse's hoofs on the road outside betokened another arrival. Catching up his gun, Daddy Wampole strode out to see who it was.

"Ike Watson! Wot brings ye here?" Allen heard him cry, and then ran out to greet the old hunter.

"Allen, by all the good fortunes o' the Rockies!" ejaculated Ike Watson. "Jes' the boy I'm pinin' ter see."

"And I'm mighty glad to see you, too, Ike," returned the young ranchman. "I want a bit of advice, and you are just the man to give it to me."

"Advice? I'm ready to give ye bushels o' it, if it will do ye the least bit o' good, lad. But wot are ye doin' here? Why ain't ye hum?"

"I came here on my way to the railroad station, I am bound for San Francisco to hunt up Uncle Barnaby."

"Gee whiz! Now that's what I call fortunate! If I hadn't a cotched ye, ye would be goin' off on a wild goose chase, with no end to the trail."

"A wild goose chase? O, Ike, have you word from my uncle?"

"No, I ain't got no word from him, but I got word in a way thet two rascals didn't dream on."

"But what do you know?" questioned Allen impatiently.

"Not much, ter tell the truth, an' yet a good deal. It happened this mornin', when I wuz down to Casey's Fork. I wuz ridin' along the old B'ar Trail when along comes a couple o' the worst lookin' bad men ye ever seed. Sez one to tudder, 'If we can make him tell us whar the mine is, we will all become millionaires.' Then sez tudder, 'We'll make him speak. We didn't trap Barnaby Winthrop inter leavin' San Francisco fer nuthin'.' The fellers wuz on the bottom trail, while I wuz up on the rocks. I tried to git to 'em to make 'em tell me wot wuz the meanin' of it all, when they spied me comin' down, an' by the grasshoppers o' Kansas! ye ought ter hev seed 'em put an' scoot. They got out o' sight in a jiffy, an' I couldn't locate 'em, try my best. I hung around an hour, an' then I made up my mind ter ride over an' tell ye wot I hed heard."

Not only Allen, but also Noel Urner and Daddy Wampole were astonished by the revelation Ike Watson made.

"Uncle Barnaby trapped into leaving San Francisco!" gasped Allen. "Did they say where they had taken him?"

"Didn't say nuthin' more'n I told ye," responded the hunter from Gold Fork. "Leas'wise, didn't say nuthin' ez I could hear."

"Who were the men?"

"I don't know, 'ceptin' I seed 'em hangin' around Jordan Creek about six months ago. Like ez not they belong to the old Sol Davids gang. Nearly every one up thet water course belonged to thet gang."

"Would you know them if you saw them again?"

"Sartinly—I'm powerful good at recerlectin' faces onct I see 'em."

"Where do you suppose the men went to?"

"Rode off in the direction o' Black Rock River Canyon."

Allen started. Could it be possible they suspected the claim was up in that neighborhood? It was more than possible.

The young ranchman turned to Noel Urner. "Noel, I'm going to change my plans. I am going after those two men instead of going to San Francisco."

"It would certainly seem a useless trip now," replied the young man from New York, slowly. "There is not the slightest doubt but what your uncle was decoyed away from San Francisco. Where he is now is a mystery which those two men must solve for you—they or——"

"Captain Grady," finished Allen, impulsively. "I feel it in my bones that he is in this plot against Uncle Barnaby."

"It would seem so."

"How do ye make that out?" asked Ike Watson.

In a few words Allen told the old hunter about the missing letter.

"Gee, shoo! He are one o' the gang, sartin!" cried Ike Watson. "The best ye can do is to start in an' round 'em all up."

"Thet's the talk," put in Daddy Wampole. "The state would be a hundred per cent better off with 'em fellers out o' it."

Allen gazed at Ike Watson earnestly.

"Will you help me in this work?" he asked. "You know more about these bad men than I do."

"Will I help ye? Allen ye ought ter know better than ter axt sech a question. O' course I'll help ye. I ain't got much ter do. Them new claims up the Salmon kin wait well enough."

"I would help ye, too, if I could git away," said Daddy Wampole. "Thet gang worried me enough for six years, goodness knows!"

"And what of you?" Allen turned to Noel. "You see how matters stand. I don't want to ask you to go, for we may have some rough times, and——"

"I came out to see rough times," interrupted the young man from the east. "So unless you think I'll be too much of a hindrance, I would like greatly to accompany you wherever you go. You must remember that I, too, am anxious to find your uncle."

"Then, that's settled," said Ike Watson. He did not much fancy having the company of a "tenderfoot," but Noel's manner pleased him.

A long discussion followed. While it was in progress Mrs. Wampole prepared a hot supper, to which later on Allen and the others did full justice.

It was decided to remain at the crossroads hotel all night, and the three retired early, that they might make a start before sunrise.

It must be confessed that the young ranchman slept but little. His mind was in a whirl over all he had discovered, and he shuddered whenever he thought that his uncle might possibly be in peril of his life.

"Those men would indeed dare all for gold, as those initials on the cross imply," he said to himself. "What a pity they were not exterminated the time old Sol Davids was lynched."

Toward morning Allen dropped off into a troubled slumber, to be awakened with a start by a touch from Ike Watson's hand an hour later.

"Time ter climb below an' feed up, Allen," cried the old hunter. "We hev a long ride afore us, ez ye know."

"That's true!" cried the young ranchman, springing to his feet; and Ike went off to arouse Noel Urner.

The young man from New York felt rather stiff from his ride of the day previous. Yet he did not complain, and did all he could to make the others believe he felt in perfect trim for another day in the saddle.

After a substantial but hasty breakfast the horses were saddled and they were off, Daddy Wampole waving his hand after them and wishing them the best of luck.

"We'll make for Casey's Fork fust o' all," said Ike Watson. "Perhaps I can pick up the trail thar. If I can't we kin push on toward the Salmon an' trust ter luck."

Allen was doubtful if the old hunter could pick up the trail after having once lost it, but in lieu of something better, he agreed to Watson's plan. Noel, of course, was willing to go wherever the others led.

It was high noon when Casey's Fork, a rough lot of rocks in a bend of the Umihalo Creek, was reached. Allen and Noel were glad enough to dismount in the shadow of the rocks while Ike Watson went off on a tour of inspection.

The old hunter was gone so long that Allen at last grew alarmed.

"Something is wrong, or he would be back ere this," he said. "Let us go after him."

But hardly had they mounted when they heard a shout ahead. Looking beyond a belt of bushes they saw Ike Watson waving his hand to them.

"Found it!" he cried as they came up. "They took the creek road over ter the forest trail. The marks are fresh, showin' they didn't move on until dark last night."

"Then they can't be many miles ahead!" cried Allen. "Oh, if we can only keep the trail till we catch up to them!"

"No time ter lose," said Ike Watson, and once more they continued the pursuit, this time faster than before.

Yet at the end of two miles they came to a sudden halt. The trail led down to the bank of a shallow stream and there disappeared from view.

CHAPTER XIX.

ALONG THE WATER COURSE

"Gone!" burst from Allen's lips.

"What's to do now?" asked Noel Urner.

Ike Watson halted in perplexity for fully a minute. Then he dismounted and waded into the stream, which was scarcely a foot to a foot and a half in depth.

"Ho! ho! ho!" he laughed, suddenly. "I thought so! No, ye can't play thet game hyer."

"What now, Ike?" questioned the young ranchman.

"They went up in the middle o' this yere stream, thinkin' they could throw me off the trail. See, hyer are the marks ez plain ez the nose on Cap'n Grady's face." And the old hunter pointed into the clear water.

Leaving Allen to bring his horse, Watson walked slowly along the bed of the stream, taking good care not to step into any deep holes. In this manner half a mile was covered, when, at a point where the brush along the bank was thin, the trail led out once more on the dirt and rocks.

"An old trick, but it didn't work this trip," chuckled Ike Watson to himself, as he once more resumed his seat in the saddle.

"What I am thinking of is, what made them suspicious, after they were so far from Casey's Forks," said Allen.

"Perhaps their guilty consciences," laughed Noel.

"Thet, an' because they thought I might be follerin' 'em," added Ike Watson. "Hullo! What does this mean?"

He had followed the trail around a belt of timber. Beyond was a wall of rocks, and here were traces of a recent camp—a smoldering fire and some odds and ends of crackers and meat.

"We ain't far behind 'em, boys!" he went on. "This fire wuz tended ter less than a couple o' hours ago."

"Then let us push on, by all means," returned Allen. "If we can catch those two men before they have a chance to join any of their evil companions, so much the better."

"The trail leads along the rocks," observed Noel. "Have you any idea where we are going?"

"Idee! I know this yere country like a book," said Ike Watson. "Don't ye git 'feered o' bein' lost so long ez ye stay nigh me."

"I don't mean that. I mean, do you know where the men went from here?"

"Up to Grizzly Pass, most likely, an' then along over ter the Black Rock Canyon. Eh, Allen?"

"It would seem so," responded Allen seriously.

"Grizzly Pass; rather a suggestive name," said Noel.

"Ye-as; especially when a big grizzly shows hissself," drawled Watson, and there the conversation dropped.

Despite the fierce sunshine, it was deliciously cool along the base of the rocky wall, and the horses made good progress over the hard but level trail. Here and there immense brier bushes overhung the way, but these were easily avoided by the animals, who were more afraid of them than were their riders.

Presently the trail took an upward course, leading between a split in the rocks.

"Ye want ter be careful hyer," cautioned Ike Watson. "It's a mighty slippery spot fer the best o' hoss flesh."

Scarcely had he spoken when Noel Urner gave a cry of alarm.

He was in the rear, and both the old hunter and Allen turned quickly to see what was the matter.

They found Noel's horse on his knees, having slipped to one side of the trail.

The young man was on the ground, one foot caught in the stirrup.

"Stop the hoss!" cried Watson. "If ye don't he'll bang the young man's head off!"

Before he had ceased speaking Allen was on the ground. He ran back and caught Noel's horse by the bridle. The young man from the east was partly stunned, and it was several seconds before he could recover sufficiently to disengage his foot and arise from his dangerous position.

"Good for you, Allen!" he cried, as he stood by, while the young ranchman assisted the horse to a safe spot in the trail. "I was afraid I was in for it."

"Ye did jes' the right thing, Allen," put in Ike Watson. "Dunno but wot ye hed better walk a brief spell," he went on to Noel, who was only too glad to do so.

Half an hour later the top of the rocks was reached, and they moved back to where the way was smooth and safe. A lunch was had from the pouches, and on they went as fast as the fatigued horses would carry them.

"I can see no trail," said Noel, as he rode abreast of his companions.

"There ain't no need ter see a trail hyer," replied Ike Watson. "This yere way is a blind pocket fer all o' these three miles. Ye couldn't go no different if ye tried. Byme-by, when we come out on Sampson's flats, we'll look for the trail ag'in."

"We ought to catch up to those men before we reach the flats," remarked Allen. "They must be tired out by that climb."

"We ain't fur off," rejoined Watson. "Jes' keep silent half an hour longer, an' we'll——"

He broke off short, reigned in his steed, and pointed ahead.

Allen looked eagerly in the direction. Under the spreading branches of a giant pine rested two men. Not far from them two horses were hobbled. The men looked thoroughly tired. Both were smoking pipes and leaning against the tree with their eyes closed.

"Let us dismount and tiptoe our way to them," whispered Allen. "If we secure their horses first they will have no chance to get away from us."

"A good plan, lad," returned Watson, in an equally low tone. "Supposin' ye an' I leave our nags with Mr. Urner?"

This was agreed upon, and after dismounting the horses were led behind some heavy brush by the young man from the east.

Then, with their weapons ready for use, Allen and old Ike Watson stole cautiously forward to where were grazing the animals belonging to the two bad men from Jordan Creek.

Allen and the old hunter from Gold Fork went about their work as silently as possible. The horses were somewhat in the rear, and so they made a detour, coming up behind the dozing men as softly as twin shadows.

The animals reached, the next thing was to release them. This was speedily accomplished, and it was Allen who led them off, while Ike Watson still remained on guard with his trusty gun ready should the occasion arise to make use of the firearm.

In less than three minutes the young ranchman was back, having left the captured animals in Noel's care.

"Now, what's to do?" he questioned.

"Maybe we hed better git a few ropes ready, in case we want ter bind 'em," began Ike Watson, but ere this idea could be put into execution one of the men dropped his pipe, and the hot tobacco, falling on his hand, brought him upright with a start. He opened his eyes, and with a loud exclamation, which awoke his companion, leaped to his feet.

"What does this mea——" he began.

"Hands up, ye rascal!" ordered Ike Watson, so sternly that instantly both arms were raised high overhead. The horse thief, for the man was nothing less, if not much worse, fully understood that his opponent had the "drop" on him and would not stop to parley unless the order to elevate his hands was obeyed.

The second rascal, in his sitting position, attempted to draw a pistol, but Allen, producing his own weapon, forced the man to remain stationary.

"We hev ye, stranger," remarked Watson after a second of silence. "Do ye acknowledge the corn?"

"What's the meaning of this outrage?" growled the fellow who was standing, and he scowled fiercely, first at the old hunter and then at the young ranchman.

"It means firstly that ye are in our power," chuckled Watson. It was evident that he thoroughly enjoyed the situation.

"Well?"

"Then ye acknowledge thet, do ye?"

"I suppose we'll have to."

"It's Ike Watson from Gold Fork," put in the man who was sitting.

"Ike Watson!" the face of the speaker grew quite disturbed. It was plain he had heard of Watson before and did not relish being held up by the well-known old man.

"Ye-as, I'm Ike Watson," drawled the old hunter. "Now, strangers, give me yer handles, and let me have 'em straight."

"My name is Roe Bluckburn," came from the standing man.

"Mine is Lou Slavin, and I'm not ashamed of it," came from the other.

"Jes' so," mused Watson. "I've heard o' both o' yeez belongin' to the old Sol Davids gang o' hoss thieves."

"You are mistaken. We are not thieves of any sort," said Bluckburn, who appeared the leader of the pair.

"Well, we won't quarrel about that, seein' ez how we are on another trail ter day. We want ye ter up an' tell us ter onct whar Barnaby Winthrop is."

"Yes, and tell us the truth," put in Allen, sternly.

The men were both taken aback by the request. They exchanged glances and each waited for the other to speak.

"Come, out with it, Bluckburn!" cried Watson.

"Dunno the man you are talking about."

"Ye can't come it thet way. Didn't I hear ye talkin' it over down ter Casey's Forks only yesterday? Come, out with the truth, or take the consequences!" and to scare the horse thief Ike Watson tapped his gun barrel suggestively.

"Must be some mistake. We wasn't near Casey's Fork in a month. Eh, Lou?"

"Nixy."

"Ye tell it so smooth I would most believe ye, if I hadn't follered ye up," growled Watson. "But we know ye air in the deal ag'in Barnaby Winthrop, an' I am hyer ter help his nevvv thar, Allen Winthrop. So ye hed better ease yer mind ter onct. Understand?"

The two men turned their attention to Allen curiously. They wished to hold a consultation, but Watson would not permit it.

At that moment Noel Urner came forward, having succeeded in tying all of the horses in a little grove not far distant.

He eyed both of the prisoners keenly, and then gave a start.

"I saw that man in San Francisco!" he ejaculated, pointing to Roe Bluckburn. "He was hanging around the very hotel at which Mr. Barnaby Winthrop stopped."

"It ain't so," growled Bluckburn, but his face proclaimed that Noel Urner had spoken the truth.

"If that is the case, then he is the one who decoyed my uncle away," put in Allen. "For there is no longer any doubt in my mind that he was spirited away in some fashion."

"Air ye fellers goin' ter speak?" roared Ike Watson, impatiently. "Ye can't expect me ter stand hyer with a gun the rest o' the day!"

"Unless you do speak, we shall bind you and hand you over to the sheriff," said Allen. "We believe we have a good case against you—and will have a better after Captain Grady is placed under arrest," he added, struck with a sudden thought.

"Captain Grady!" groaned the man named Lou Slavin. "I reckon the jig is up, Roe."

"Shut up!" growled Bluckburn.

"But if the captain is known wot show have we got?" grumbled Slavin. "Say?" he continued eagerly. "I went into this thing ag'in my will, an' I wish I was out of it. Supposin' I tell yer the truth about the hull gang, does that save me?"

"Don't you say a word, Lou!" shouted Bluckburn, warningly, but ere he could speak further the muzzle of Ike Watson's gun caused him to retreat up to the tree, where he stood, not daring to say another word.

"Go on and have yer say!" cried the old hunter to Lou Slavin. "And, ez I said before, give it ter us straight. Whar is Barnaby Winthrop?"

"He is a prisoner, about ten miles from here," was Slavin's flat and sudden confession.

CHAPTER XX.

MOVING AGAINST CAPTAIN GRADY

Both Paul and Chet Winthrop were deeply interested in the words uttered by Jeff Jones, the colored member of the horse thieves' gang.

"So you know something of Captain Grady and our uncle, Barnaby Winthrop?" cried Chet, excitedly. "What do you know?"

"Dat's fer you two fellers ter find out—onless yer let's me go," replied Jeff Jones, suggestively.

"You mean you won't speak unless we grant you your liberty?" put in Paul.

"Dat's de way to figure it."

Paul looked at Chet inquiringly.

"We can't promise anything until Mr. Dottery gets back," said Chet. "But if you know anything about our uncle you had better speak out, if you wish us to do anything at all for you."

"I won't say a word," growled the colored man.

Chet bit his lip in vexation.

"Don't you know what it is to have us able to speak a word for you?" said Paul. "Supposing we let Jack Blowfen take you over to the next camp and tell the men that you are a downright horse thief? Would you fancy that?"

Jeff Jones began to tremble. He knew what Paul meant—that he would be lynched inside the hour. In that section of the country, at that time, horse stealing was considered almost as bad as murder.

"No! no! doan let him take me down ter de Fork!" howled Jeff Jones. "Anyt'ing but dat, boys!"

"Well, you, had better talk, then," returned Paul, severely.

"I doan know much, but I'll tell yo' all I do know," said the prisoner, after a short pause, "and yo' is ter do de best yo' can fo' me, promise me dat?"

"We will," said Chet. He was very impatient for Jeff Jones to proceed.

"Well, den, Captain Grady has been a-spottin' yo' uncle fer seberal weeks—eber sence he got Massah Winthrop ter leave San Francisco."

"Got him to leave San Francisco?" queried Paul.

"Yes. I doan know how de t'ing was done, but he got yo' uncle ter leave de city an' now he's tryin' ter make him gib up de secret ob a mine, or sumfin like dat."

"Gracious!" burst from Chet's lips. "That explains it all. Uncle Barnaby must be in Captain Grady's power."

"And by getting us out of the ranch he thought to make us leave the neighborhood," added Paul. "Do you know," he went on, "I believe he is at the head of a band who wish to obtain entire control of this section."

"I don't doubt it, Paul," Chet turned to the prisoner. "Where is our uncle now?"

"Dat I can't say."

"Captain Grady must know."

"Suah he does."

"Then we'll make him tell, never fear," Chet began to walk up and down. "I wish Mr. Dottery would come back."

"I hear somebody down the road," said Paul as he walked to the door. "It must be the two coming back now."

Paul was right. There was a clatter beyond in the dark, and a moment later Caleb Dottery appeared, followed by Jack Blowfen.

"Couldn't catch 'em in the dark," said Dottery, as he strode into the house and dropped into a rude but comfortable chair. "But thank fortune, the stock is safe!"

"Slick rascals, Mangle and Nodley," continued Jack Blowfen. "But we'll round 'em up some day, I'll bet my *sombrero* on it."

"We have just heard important news," said Paul, and he instantly proceeded to repeat what Jeff Jones had said.

Caleb Dottery and his cowboy helper listened with interest. The former gave a long, low whistle of astonishment.

"Must say I didn't quite think it of Captain Grady, though I allow as how he's a slick one," he remarked. "Wot's ter do about it?"

"We came here to obtain your aid," said Chet. "Captain Grady has taken possession of our ranch. You know he sets up some sort of a claim to it."

"Got yer papers, ain't ye?"

"No; they were burned up when we had our little fire."

"Humph! thet's bad!"

"But the place is ours—father bought and paid for it," added Paul, warmly. "And we intend to get Captain Grady out, even if we have to fight him."

"Good fer ye!" shouted Jack Blowfen. "Thet's the way ter talk. I'm right hyer ter help ye. I love grit, I do!" and he held out his big brown hand to Paul as if to bind a bargain.

"I'll certainly help ye, too," said Dottery. "Ye have done a good turn this night which I'm not likely to forgit in a hurry."

"This colored man told us about our uncle and Captain Grady of his own free will," said Paul. "So, if you can be a little easy on him on that account I wish you would be."

"Stealin' hosses ain't no light crime," growled Dottery.

"An' it don't improve a man's reputation to become a sneak," added Jack Blowfen.

Yet, after some talk, it was agreed to hold Jeff Jones merely as a prisoner for the present, instead of carrying him to the nearest camp to be turned over to the vigilance committee.

It was now so near morning that to think of retiring was out of the question. The men began to smoke, and Blowfen stirred about getting breakfast. At six o'clock they dined.

"I'll chain Jones up as a prisoner in the house till we git back," observed Dottery, when the meal was finished. "He'll keep quiet if he knows when he is well off."

This was done, and then both house and outbuildings were made as secure as possible.

Ten minutes later Paul, Chet, and the two men were on their way on horseback to the Winthrop ranch. All were armed and ready for anything that might turn up.

But not one of the number dreamed of the several surprises in store for them.

CHAPTER XXI.

SHOOTING A GRIZZLY BEAR

"I wonder if Captain Grady is alone or if he has a number of the gang with him?" observed Paul, as he rode alongside of his younger brother, and just in front of the two men.

"Most likely he is expecting trouble and has help at hand," returned Chet. "He knows well enough we won't give up our claim without a fight."

"It's possible he thought to frighten us off until Allen got back from San Francisco."

"Don't make any difference how much help he has," broke in Jack Blowfen. "He ain't no right to put ye out like a couple o' dogs, an' he knows it."

In this manner the talk went on until a little after noon, when the locality known as Demon Hollow was reached.

"Do you remember the badger, Paul?" laughed Chet. "The Hollow looks different in the daylight, doesn't it?"

"Yes, indeed, but still—what was that?"

"Jumpin' June bugs!" cried Jack Blowfen. "Dottery, did ye hear that?"

"I did," replied the old ranch owner, and he clutched his gun apprehensively.

"I heard something," said Chet. "What was it?"

"A bar, boy, sure ez ye are born—a grizzly!"

"Oh!"

At once the little party came to a halt. To the right of them was a tall overhanging rock, to the left a number of prickly bushes. Ahead and behind was the winding and uneven road along which their animals had come on a walk.

"Do ye see old Ephraim?" asked Jack Blowfen, as he, too, got his gun in readiness.

"I don't see anything," declared Paul.

Bang! It was Chet's gun which spoke. He fired up toward the top of the overhanging rock. Scarcely had the shot rung out than a fearful roar of mingled pain and rage rent the air.

"Shot him, by Jupiter!" cried Caleb Dottery. "Stand from under, quick!"

Hardly had the word been given than there was another roar. Then a heavy weight filled the air and down into the road leaped a big brown and gray grizzly weighing all of eight hundred pounds.

He came down between the boys and the two men, and no sooner had he landed than Dottery and Blowfen opened fire on him, both striking the beast in the shoulder, and, consequently, doing but little damage, for a grizzly bear is tough and can stand many shots which do not touch his vital parts.

The horses, much scared, backed in all directions, some going into the bushes and others up against the rocks.

More angry than before the grizzly half turned, and then, without warning, raised up on his hind legs and made for Chet, whose horse was now flat upon the rocks, having stumbled in his hasty retreat, Chet himself was partly in and partly out of the saddle when the charge was made.

"Run, Chet, run!" yelled Paul. "He is coming for you!"

In alarm he came up on foot, his horse refusing to budge in the direction of the bear.

The bear heard Paul's voice and for the second paused and turned, as if to make sure he was in no immediate danger from that quarter. Then he continued to advance upon Chet.

Almost overcome with fear, Paul raised his gun and fired at the bear's head. It was a chance shot, but luckily it hit the huge beast in the ear. The bear howled with pain, staggered forward a few feet and rolled over on his side.

By this time Dottery and Blowfen had their pistols out. Leaping to the roadway, they ran forward, and in less than a minute the bear had received six pistol balls and was kicking in his death agony.

It was Paul who helped Chet to his feet. The boy was as white as a sheet and trembled so he could scarcely stand.

"I—I thought I was a goner!" he stammered. "What a big fellow he is!"

"The bar we war arfter last spring," said Jack Blowfen to Dottery as they examined the brute. "See those marks on his side where we tipped him? A good job that he is out of the way."

It was the second grizzly bear the boys had seen since they had lived in that section and they gazed at him curiously. What white teeth he had, and how powerful he looked! Even now that he was still and all was over, Chet hardly cared to touch him.

"I want to see no more of him," he said.

"Well, I reckon he's the last in this neighborhood," said Caleb Dottery. "He's the only one I've seen around in nigh on six years."

It was decided to leave the bear where he was until they returned. Of course, it was possible some wild animal might come up and make a feast in the meanwhile, but this could not be helped. To skin the animal and hang up the meat would take too long.

Leaving Demon Hollow, they pushed along as rapidly as the horses would carry them.

At the creek they stopped to water the animals, and here also partook of the lunch which Blowfen had packed up before starting.

It was nightfall when they at last came in sight of the ranch home. All seemed deserted. Every building was tightly closed and so was the gate to the stockade.

"Maybe he has thought better of it and skipped out," said Chet.

"There is our stuff still in the road," returned Paul, pointing ahead.

In a moment more they had reached the stockade. All four rode straight up to the heavy wooden gate.

"I'll have to jump over and unbar it," said Paul.

"Be careful," was Caleb Dottery's caution. "This may be a trap and——"

He had no need to say more.

"Halt!" came from the yard behind the stockade. "Stop where you are or I'll fire on you!"

It was Captain Grady himself who spoke.

CHAPTER XXII.

AN IMPORTANT CAPTURE

Of course Paul made a prompt retreat. It would have been worse than useless, just then, to have remained where he was, with his hands on the stockade gate.

The party outside could not see Captain Grady, but from the direction of his voice they knew he was on the other side of the stockade at a point where several peep and gun holes covered the entrance.

"That's right, you better git back!" went on the captain, as Paul retreated.

"See here, Grady, what does this mean?" demanded Caleb Dottery, as he advanced in the direction of the guard openings.

"It means that I have got possession of this ranch, which rightfully belongs to me, and I mean to keep it," was the grim reply, delivered with great force and distinctness.

"The Winthrop boys deny yer rights."

"That makes no difference. I know what's what."

"Open the gate and let us talk it over quietly," went on Dottery, who was naturally a peaceably inclined individual.

"I'm not opening the gate just now. Those boys can go away. I don't mind you coming around, but I don't want those boys here."

"Well, you'll have to put up with us," cried Chet, angrily. "Now, open the gate, or we'll smash it down!"

"Don't be rash, Chet!" whispered Paul.

"You monkey!" roared Captain Grady. "Fall back, before I let you have a dose of buckshot!"

"There will be no shooting here, Captain, unless ye want ter get wiped out," broke in Jack Blowfen. "Open the gate fer yer neighbors and let us hev a powwow."

"I've told you wot I'll do—open up when the boys go away."

"Come on, Chet," whispered Paul to his younger brother.

"Yes, but Paul—"

"Come on, I say," and Paul whispered something into Chet's ear.

At once, with a wink at Jack Blowfen, the two boys started off on a gallop toward the river.

"Do you think we can do it?" asked Chet, anxiously.

"I think so. We can try, anyway."

Dismounting, the brothers made their way to where a deep ditch drained from the ranch home under the stockade into the river. The ditch was almost dry and was all but choked up with weeds and brush.

"Now, Chet, it is a serious undertaking, but you know we must take some chances," went on Paul, as they let themselves down into the ditch. "The captain may really shoot at us, although I think he will hardly dare do it with Blowfen and Mr. Dottery at hand to see that justice is done."

"If he shoots, we'll shoot back," replied Chet. "He has no right on our land, and, besides, we must do something for Uncle Barnaby's sake."

Full of determination, and realizing that a crisis was at hand, the two boys wormed their way along the ditch until the stockade was reached.

Here a few wooden bars blocked the way. But one of the bars was loose and was wrenched aside, and they went on.

"We must be careful, in case any one is in the house," said Paul in a whisper.

The ditch led around to the rear of the ranch home. But here it went underground and they were compelled to leave it and take to the grass.

They gave a brief look and saw Captain Grady down by the opening in the stockade, still arguing with Dottery and Blowfen. He looked anxious.

"He don't see us," whispered diet. "Come, the front door is open!" and he made a quick dash for the house, followed closely by Paul.

The door was closing on the pair when Captain Grady started around and beheld Paul's form from the rear. He gave a quick cry of alarm.

"Stop! Come out!"

"Too late, Captain Grady!" called back Paul, facing about and aiming at the man with his gun. "Now, just you go and open the stockade gate!"

"Thar ain't no need o' thet!" cried the voice of Jack Blowfen. "Well done, boys; I give ye credit."

And over the stockade vaulted the cowboy, leaping from his saddle to the grass on the other side.

Captain Grady knew not which way to turn, and before he could decide the gate was unbarred and Caleb Dottery rode in.

In the meantime Chet had taken a hasty glance through the house and satisfied himself that Captain Grady was really alone. There was evidence that several visitors had been there but recently—a number of unwashed dishes and drinking glasses.

Chet returned to the doorway and beheld Captain Grady in Jack Blowfen's strong grasp. The firearm had been wrenched from the captain and hurled a dozen feet away.

"This—this is an outrage!" puffed the captain in a great rage.

"So is the way ye set up to treat neighbors," replied the cow puncher, coolly. "Why didn't ye leave us in like gentlemen an' thus avoid all trouble?"

The captain glared at him.

"What does this mean?" he demanded sullenly after a pause.

"Can you hold him, Blowfen?" asked Paul, anxiously.

"I reckon, Paul; but maybe ye might better keep him covered with yer gun."

"This means that we have come to take possession of our own," put in Chet. "We told you that we would be back."

"It's ag'inst the law, and I'll have the sheriff on you!" shouted Captain Grady wrathfully.

"We'll chance that," said Paul. "March into the house, please. We want to question you a bit on another matter," he continued.

Captain Grady started. "What matter?" he asked in a lower tone of voice.

"About our uncle, Barnaby Winthrop."

"Don't know nothing of him," was the reply, and as he spoke Captain Grady's hand moved up to his inside breast pocket.

Instantly Jack Blowfen leaped upon the rascal and bore him to the earth.

CHAPTER XXIII.

NEWS OF IMPORTANCE

"Don't be alarmed; he is not going to shoot," cried Paul.

"Don't ye make too shure o' thet," ejaculated the cowboy. "Wot's he puttin' his hand into his pocket fer?"

"He has something there I fancy he wishes to conceal," went on Paul. "Empty the pocket, please."

"Let me go! This is highway robbery!" stormed Captain Grady.

He struggled fiercely to regain his feet. But Blowfen was the stronger of the pair and he easily held the rascal down with one hand, while with the other he brought several letters from his inside pocket.

Paul eagerly snatched the letters, in spite of the captain's protest. He glanced at them, with Chet looking over his shoulder.

"Well, what do you make out?" asked Caleb Dottery. He didn't quite like the way matters were turning.

"I think we will be safe in making Captain Grady a prisoner," replied Paul slowly.

"Yes, make him a prisoner by all means," put in Chet. "He is a villain if ever there was one. If we can't prove it I think my Uncle Barnaby can."

At the reference to Barnaby Winthrop Captain Grady grew pale. It was evident that his sins were at last finding him out.

It did not take Jack Blowfen long to act upon Paul's suggestion. He disarmed the captain and made him march into the house, where he bound the fellow in very much the same manner as Dottery had bound Jeff Jones.

While he was doing so Paul showed the letters taken from the prisoner to Caleb Dottery. Chet, while a second reading was going on, commenced to ransack the house.

The captain had moved but a few things into the ranch home—a couple of chairs, a table, a bed, and an old hair trunk. The trunk Chet opened without ceremony.

More letters were found there—documents which told only too plainly what manner of man the captain was. Chet smiled to himself to think how foolish the rascal had been not to have destroyed the epistles.

"But the greatest of villains occasionally over-reach themselves," he said to Paul. "I fancy this is proof enough to show what an awfully bad man Captain Grady is."

"You are right, Chet," said Dottery, after a careful examination. "He is a hoss thief as great as was old Sol Davids, and he is trying to rob yer uncle out of a mine claim as well."

"Not only that, but as Jeff Jones said, he is with the crowd who holds my uncle a prisoner, sir. That, to me is the worst part of it."

"I don't know but what ye are right."

The captain was raising such a row that to quiet him Jack Blowfen threw him bodily into a dark

closet and turned the key on him.

"Now if ye don't quit yer noise, I'll gag ye in the bargain," said the cowboy, and thereupon the captain became quiet at once.

It was now quite in line to hold a council of war, as Paul termed it. But before this was done all hands went to work to move the Winthrop household effects back to where they belonged.

This was accomplished in a short space of time, and was productive of an accident which, while not excessively serious, was still of sufficient importance to cause a decided change in their plans.

In moving in an old, heavy bedstead Caleb Dottery allowed the end he held to slip from his grasp. A sharp corner came down on his ankle, twisting it severely. He cried with pain and work was at once suspended.

The ankle was bandaged, but it was found the old ranch owner could not walk, nor could he move about with any degree of comfort. He was placed on a couch and there he remained.

The four talked matters over for a long while. In one of Captain Grady's letters was mentioned a certain cave in the vicinity of what was then known as the Albany Claim. The boys fancied that their uncle might be a prisoner in that cave.

"Well, I dunno but what ye are right," mused Jack Blowfen. "It's sartinly wuth going to see."

"Then you advise us to go?" asked Paul, eagerly.

"Yes, and I'll go with ye."

"But Mr. Dottery," began Chet.

"I'll stay whar I am an' watch the captain," groaned the old ranch owner. "It's about all I'm good for jes' now."

"The old Albany Claim is a good stiff forty miles an' more from hyer," said Jack Blowfen. "But I know the road over the second foothills perfectly. So if ye say the word any time we'll start."

"It looks like rain just now," said Paul.

"An' ye'll catch it heavy, too," put in Dottery.

"We'll have to look after the cattle, too," added Chet. "Like as not half of them are in the sink hole."

"I'll help ye with the stock," said Blowfen.

That evening it rained in torrents, but only for a short while. By midnight it was as clear as it could be. Long before sunrise the boys and Blowfen were out on the range looking up the heads belonging to the Winthrops.

They were gratified to find that all the stock was safe with a single exception. That was an old cow who had been caught in the cyclone and killed. Not one of the four-footed beasts had gone anywhere near the sink hole.

When let out of the closet Captain Grady begged hard for his liberty. But the boys were obdurate and Caleb Dottery backed them up, as did Jack Blowfen.

"Ye have done wrong an' must suffer," said the latter, and there the matter rested.

By nine o'clock the two boys and Blowfen were off. They took with them enough provisions to last several days, as the journey upon which they were about to enter would be for the greater part through a dry and unproductive section. This same section has now been made, by a system of irrigation, very productive.

"And now to find Uncle Barnaby and bring our enemies to terms!" cried Paul, as they rode out of the stockade.

"So say I, and may uncle be found well," added Chet.

"Amen," murmured Jack Blowfen.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SOMETHING ABOUT BARNABY WINTHROP

"My uncle a prisoner about ten miles from here?" repeated Allen Winthrop, after Lou Slavin had made his confession.

"Will you shut up?" howled Bluckburn, savagely. "You'll spoil everything."

"An' he'll save hissself from bein' lynched," added old Ike Watson, suggestively.

"We haven't done anything—you can't hold us," spluttered Bluckburn. He found himself in a bad corner.

"Holding a man a prisoner is nothing, I presume," said Allen, in deep anger. "Go on," he continued to Slavin. "Where is my uncle?"

Thus urged, Lou Slavin blurted out a full confession, telling how Barnaby Winthrop had been followed to San Francisco by Bluckburn, who wanted to learn the secret of the new claim, which Bluckburn realized must be valuable.

Slavin said it was Bluckburn who had sent to Barnaby Winthrop a forged letter calling the old prospector back to the ranch. The rascal had also forged the note received by Noel Urner.

Word had been sent by telegraph to the other members of the thieving band, and when Barnaby Winthrop got off at the nearest railroad station to the ranch he was followed and waylaid.

"The crowd had a mighty hard time o' it with him, he fit so," went on Slavin. "Onct he nearly got away, but Captain Grady tripped him up an' then he war bound tight."

"Captain Grady!" ejaculated Allen.

"Thet's his size," cried old Watson. "I allers allowed as how he war one o' the shady class."

"He—he led the whole business," put in Bluckburn. He began to think it time to clear himself. "I only acted under his orders."

"It's too late fer ye ter open yer mouth," was the way Ike Watson cut him short. "Go on, Slavin. Whar's Barnaby Winthrop? Straight, now, remember."

Thus admonished, Slavin told the location of the cave in which the old prospector was held, as well as he was able.

"I don't know the lay o' the land exactly, but I'm comin' purty nigh it."

"Would you know the spot if you were in the vicinity?" asked Allen, eagerly.

"I think I would."

"Then we must take him along," said the young ranchman to Ike Watson. "But what shall we do with Bluckburn?"

"He ought ter be lynched right now," was the old hunter's stern reply. During his days among the rough characters of the mountains he and his companions had had small use for jails and lockups. The law of the land, so called, was administered on the spot.

A long discussion followed, which ended in a determination to take Bluckburn back to Daddy Wampole's place. They would leave him there a prisoner, and then take Slavin along with them, that he might locate Barnaby Winthrop's place of confinement.

Bluckburn was secured on his horse's back, and Slavin was disarmed, and in less than half an hour the return to the crossroads hotel was begun.

It was a long and tedious ride to Allen who was impatient to be off to find his uncle. But it could not be helped, and Allen bore it as patiently as he was able.

Daddy Wampole was as much surprised as he well could be to see them ride up with their prisoner. He listened with deep interest to the tale Allen, Watson, and Noel Urner had to tell.

"Yes, I'll keep him a prisoner," he said at the conclusion. "An' take my word on it, he shan't escape."

"And it won't be long before we have Captain Grady, too," said Allen, never dreaming of what was taking place at home in the meanwhile.

Bluckburn was exceedingly downcast over his turn of fortune. He insisted that Captain Grady was totally to blame, but this statement no one felt inclined to believe.

Slavin showed himself more than willing now to do all in his power to redeem himself and his reputation. Yet neither Ike Watson nor Allen could trust him with so much as a pistol.

"You jes' ride on ahead, an' if thar's any trouble we'll look out fer ye," was the way Watson put it, and with this Slavin had to be content.

A long and exceedingly rough journey now lay before the three, a journey destined to try their patience to the utmost.

"But we will have to make the best of it," said Allen. "And I don't care what we have to put up with so long as we find my uncle safe and sound."

"Thet's the talk," answered Watson. "Can't expect ter have every comfort out in these yere parts nohow."

The sun had been shining brightly, but presently the sky became overcast.

"Unless I am mistaken we are close to a storm," observed Noel, as he surveyed the heavens

anxiously.

"That's wot," came from Watson. "An' I allow as how it will be a putty heavy one when it comes."

"We've had storms enough lately," said Allen. "I want no more of them."

They continued on their way as rapidly as the nature of the ground to be covered permitted. Occasionally Slavin grumbled at being pushed on so fast but Watson soon put a stop to his mutterings.

"No ust ter grumble, Slavin," he said. "Ye kin be thankful thet ye wasn't shot down like a dog."

"But I'm not feelin' well," pleaded the evil doer.

"Ain't ye? Wall, what ye want is exercise," was Watson's sarcastic rejoinder. "So trot along, an' no more parley about it," and Slavin went along, but with a face that looked far from pleasant.

Half an hour later the raindrops began to fall, at first scatteringly and then in a steady downpour. It was a cold rain and made one and another of the little party shiver.

"I must say I don't like this," said Allen, when he was more than half soaked through. "I wonder if we can't find shelter until the worst of this is over?"

"Perhaps we can," said Noel. "Although I don't see many large trees handy."

"Might be as how's thar's a cave around," said Watson. "Anyway, we'll keep our eyes peeled fer one."

This they did and a quarter of a mile further on came to something of a cliff overlooking a rocky valley. At the base of the cliff were a number of rough openings and one of these openings led to a cave of no mean size.

"Jes' the ticket!" cried Watson, as he dismounted and entered the opening. "We can stay here all night an' by thet time the storm will be a thing o' the past. We ain't none too soon either," he added.

Watson was right, for scarcely had all of the party entered the cavern than the storm let down in all of its fury. The landscape was blotted out and all became darker than ever.

"Ye set down on thet rock," commanded Watson to Slavin. "An' don't ye dare ter stir if ye know when ye're well off."

"I ain't stirrin'," growled the prisoner.

Nevertheless, although he spoke thus, Slavin had his eyes wide open. He intended to escape if it were possible to do so, fearing that all would not go well with him even though he had confessed to his captors.

CHAPTER XXV.

FIGHTING A WOLVERINE

"I think we had better make a fire," suggested Allen, after the horses had been tied up in a place that was comparatively dry.

"Right ye air, Allen," returned Watson. "Pervidin' we can find some firewood."

"Here is a tree branch," said Noel, pointing it out in a dark corner of the cavern. "But we may have some trouble in breaking it up."

"Ho! ho!" laughed Watson. "It's easy ter see ye ain't very strong. We'll break thet up in a jiffy; eh, Slavin?"

"What do ye want?" growled the prisoner.

"Want ye ter help break up some firewood."

"Me?"

"Persackly, Slavin. Reckon as how ye want ter git as warm as anybody. Wall, ye kin start in by doin' some work."

Slavin demurred but his protest was unavailing and soon he and Watson were breaking up the large part of the tree branch, Noel looking on in wonder and Allen assisting on the smaller portions.

"My, but you are strong," said Noel, in open admiration. "I'd give a good deal for your muscles."

"Ye'll get the same, if ye stay out hyer long enough," answered Watson, "It's the mountain air as does it."

"Oh, come, Watson, you know you are extra strong," put in Allen. "Why, he can do some wonderful things when he wants to." To this Watson made no reply, but the grin on his face showed that he appreciated the compliment.

Soon they had a roaring fire, which threw grotesque shadows on the cavern walls. All drew closer to enjoy the warmth, and they prepared a meal to which even Slavin did full justice.

They questioned the prisoner closely and he said he felt certain he was on the right trail. But he was shy about saying more. He was wondering if the coming night would offer any opportunity of escaping.

"I'll get away if I can," he thought. "And if so I must lose no time in warning Mangle and Nodley. If I don't they'll be running into a trap, and my share of that stolen money will be lost."

After the meal Allen and Watson remained near the entrance to the cave, to talk over the situation and speculate upon what the day following would bring forth.

Slavin wanted to join them, but Allen ordered him back.

"You go back to the fire," he said. "If you want to go to sleep you may do so."

"Don't trust me even yet, do ye?" muttered the prisoner.

"I do not."

"Ye're rather hard on a chap wot is trying ter do ye a good turn."

"It remains to be seen if it is a good turn or not, Slavin. You may be putting up a job on us."

"No, I swear it's all right, Winthrop. Ye'll find everything jest as I told ye."

"Perhaps. But you go back to the fire," and Slavin went back, but with a look on his face that rivaled the black clouds in the heavens outside.

Soon the prisoner was curled up close to the fire and he closed his eyes as if in slumber, but he kept as wide awake as before.

While Allen and Watson were talking at the entrance to the cavern, Noel, out of idle curiosity, procured a torch from the camp fire and went on a tour of observation.

The cavern proved to be a narrow and rambling affair, being nothing more or less than a split in the mountain side. The floor was uneven and back from the entrance arose in a series of rough steps.

Up these steps climbed the young man until he had gained a position fully fifty feet above the mouth of the cavern.

At a great distance he heard the falling of water, as the rain swept over some rocks at a rear entrance to the cavern.

Curious to see where the cavern led to be continued his climbing until the light of the camp fire was left far behind.

His torch was burning low but he whirled it into a blaze and went on once more.

Occasionally he slipped, for the rocks were now wet, but this did not daunt him.

At last he reached a spot where the water was flowing in a miniature waterfall. There was an opening over his head but it was out of reach.

"This must be a pretty place in the daylight," he mused. "What grand scenery on every hand throughout this State!"

Of a sudden more than the usual amount of water came down and some of it hit the torch, extinguishing it instantly.

"Confound the luck," he murmured, and felt in his pocket for a match.

While he was searching for the article, he heard a strange noise overhead, close to the waterfall.

He listened and the noise was followed by the unmistakable growl of a wild beast.

A wolverine had strayed close to the waterfall and had slipped on the rocks to a shelf below.

For a few seconds the ferocious beast clung to the ledge, then slipped again and landed at Noel's feet!

The wolverine is one of the most ferocious beasts to be met with anywhere. It is not unlike the bear in general make-up, but has a more pointed head and a bushy tail. It is said that, generally speaking, a wolverine will not eat anything else if it can get meat.

As soon as the wolverine smelled the presence of a human being he let out a growl that seemed to strike to Noel's very backbone.

Letting the match he had pulled from his pocket drop, the young man felt for his pistol and brought forth the weapon with all possible speed.

Bang! The weapon was discharged and the bullet clipped the wolverine on the left side of the head. Then with a snarl that was almost a scream, the ferocious animal hurled itself upon Noel.

"Help! help!" cried the young man.

He felt that he was in an exceedingly perilous position and that assistance was absolutely necessary. In the darkness he thought he had been attacked by a mountain bear.

The wolverine managed to reach his shoulder, but Noel made a quick twist and freed himself. Then the young man fired a second shot.

The wolverine was now hit in the side, but the wound was far from fatal or even serious, and it only made the creature scream louder. With blazing eyes and gleaming teeth, it crouched low and prepared to spring for Noel's throat.

The young man knew that almost all wild beasts are fearful of fire but he did not know how the beast before him regarded water. Yet as he fired a third shot he stepped close up to the rocks, so that the water from the fall might pour over his person.

The third report echoed throughout the cavern as loudly as had the others, while the bullet flew a foot over the wolverine's head. Then the savage beast made a second leap at Noel and caught the young man by the arm. The weight of the animal made Noel lose his balance, and man and wolverine rolled over on the cavern floor together.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DISAPPEARANCE OF SLAVIN

"What's that?"

The exclamation came from Allen as he broke off short in his conversation with Watson.

The cry from Noel had reached his ears and the cry was quickly followed by the first of the pistol shots.

"He's in trouble, thet's wot!" cried the old hunter. "Hark, thar's another shot!"

He bounded back to the camp fire, but quick as was his movement, Allen was ahead of him. Both felt that Noel's peril must be extreme.

"Get a torch!" cried Watson, and caught up a burning brand.

"What of Slavin?" questioned Allen, but then, as the second shot rang out, he waited no longer, but with a torch in one hand and his gun in the other, he darted up the rocky steps as fast as he could. Watson was beside him, with pistol drawn, his gun resting on the side of the cave below.

It took but a few seconds to gain the vicinity of the little waterfall but before they came up they heard the third shot and another yell from Noel.

"My gracious!" burst from Allen's throat, as he beheld the awful scene.

Noel was lying partly on his back, with one foot pressed against the wolverine's stomach. The wild beast still held the young man by the arm.

Allen realized that whatever good was to be done must be done instantly, and without stopping to think twice he blazed away at the wolverine, twice in quick succession. Watson likewise fired, and the creature was struck each time. With a yelp that was almost human the wolverine turned, let go his hold on Noel, and leaped for Allen.

"Take care!" yelled Watson, and then fired another shot, just as the wolverine, unable to reach Allen's throat, made a clutch at his left leg. The shot from the old hunter took the beast directly in the right eye, piercing his brain, and he fell over like a lump of lead, to move no more.

"A close shave fer ye," remarked Watson, when he saw that Allen was uninjured. "A big one, too," he went on, shoving the wolverine with his foot. "How are ye, Urner?"

"I—I guess I am not much hurt!" gasped Noel, when he felt able to speak. "The beast bit me in the arm though."

"It's lucky he wasn't after gittin' at yer throat. I knowed a man onct as got a nip in the throat from a wolverine that made him pass in his checks then an' thar."

"It was a terrible encounter! I thought I was a goner sure."

"Didn't you have a torch?" questioned Allen.

"I did, but the water struck it and put it out."

"The darkness was what made the critter so bold," remarked Watson. "They're afeered o' fire, jes' like most o' wild beasts."

"Oh, my, we forgot Slavin!" burst suddenly from Allen's lips. "I'll wager a horse he has dusted out!"

"Ye're right," returned Watson, and began to make his way back to the camp fire with all speed, and with Allen close beside him. Noel was too weak to run and had to walk. He was still very white and his limbs trembled under him because of the unusual excitement.

The camp fire gained, it needed but a single glance around to convince them that Slavin had indeed gone.

"Took my shootin' iron, too, consarn him!" ejaculated Ike Watson. "What fools we wuz ter leave him yere alone!"

"We saved Noel's life by the operation," answered Allen.

"Thet's so, too, but——"

"You hate to see him get away. So do I, and—Look!"

"What now?"

"He has taken one of the horses, too!"

Allen was right, the best of the horses was gone.

"He ain't got much o' a start," said Watson. "So let us git arfter him hot-footed."

"I am with you on that, Watson; he must not get away under any circumstances. If he does——"

"We won't be able to git on the trail o' yer uncle."

"That's it."

Both were soon in the saddle, and shouted back to Noel to keep the fire burning and wait for their return. Then away they dashed into the midnight darkness.

The storm still continued and the rain poured down with a steadiness that was dismal enough to contemplate. But to the discomfort Allen gave scant heed.

"He must not get away," he said, to himself, over and over again. "We must capture him and make him take us to where the gang have Uncle Barnaby a prisoner."

"Right ye air, Allen."

To follow a trail under such circumstances was not easy, yet they found some tracks in the soft dirt directly in front of the cliff and these led on the back trail and then to where there was a deep ravine between the rocky slopes of the mountains.

Half a mile was covered and Watson called a halt.

"Ye want ter go slow yere," he cautioned, "I don't like the looks o' this territory nohow."

"What is wrong with it?"

"Full o' holes, fer one thing, and water under the surface. We'll go slow," and they did.

Occasionally it lightened and by the flashes of light they made out a fringe of woods skirting the hollow. The wind was coming up and this swept through the trees with a mournful sound.

They were moving with care when they heard a sudden yell ahead. It was Slavin calling to his horse.

"Back up!" they heard him cry. "Back, hang ye! De ye want ter pitch me in a hole?" And then followed a savage muttering they could not make out.

"We've got him!" cried Watson. "Come—but be careful, be careful."

"I'm going to dismount," said Allen, and did so and led his steed forward along the trail which the rain had made slippery and treacherous.

Watson likewise got down and they now had to wait for another flash of lightning to show them just where they were. As the flash came Allen gave a look ahead.

"Well, I never!" he ejaculated.

"Wot did ye see?" came quickly from the old hunter.

"Slavin has tumbled down and the horse with him."

"Then we've got the rascal sure!"

They plunged forward again. The trail was narrower than ever and the gully, or hollow, was on one side, and a fringe of mountain brush on the other.

Presently they heard something which served to increase their surprise. Slavin was groaning as if in extreme pain.

"The fall hurt him," said Allen, "Look after my horse, will you? I am going ahead."

He hurried on around a slight turn of the trail and through a clump of bushes and trees growing close to the edge of the hollow. As he emerged from the bushes a sight met his gaze that thrilled him to the backbone.

Slavin had fallen over the edge of the trail at a point where lay a huge half-rotted trunk of a tree. The trunk of the tree had slipped in the wet, rolled partly over the man, and was slowly but surely crushing the life out of him!

CHAPTER XXVII.

ALLEN SHOWS HIS BRAVERY

"Slavin!"

"Hel-help!" gasped the poor wretch. "Help! For the love of Heaven, help me!"

"How did you get under the tree trunk?"

"My horse kicked me and I fell. I tried to save myself from going into the hollow. Please help me!"

"Thet's wot ye git fer runnin' away," put in Watson, who had appeared on the scene.

"Don't—don't talk! Save me!" was Slavin's only answer.

"We'll do what we can for you," returned Allen.

Yet even as he spoke he realized how difficult, not to say dangerous, was the task which lay before him.

Should he attempt to roll the log over it might catch him just as it had caught the suffering wretch now under it.

"Take care, Allen!" warned Watson. "The bank here is mighty slippery."

"I know it," was the answer. "Watson, can you hold yonder branch?"

"Wait till I tether the hosses."

This was done as quickly as possible and then the old hunter caught hold of the branch Allen had mentioned.

Allen got down under the lower end of the fallen tree and caught Slavin by the arm.

"Can't you turn over?" he asked.

"I—I—can't budge!" was the low answer. And then with a groan the prisoner became insensible.

"He has fainted!" cried Allen, to Watson. "Pull on that branch for all you are worth."

"I'm a-pullin'."

Still the tree trunk did not budge, for one end was embedded in the mud lying on the edge of the bank.

Allen was determined to save the poor wretch who was slowly but surely having his chest crushed in by the sinking tree. Finding he could not move the tree he called on Watson to hold fast as before.

"Ye can't do nothin', Allen," protested the old hunter. "Come away afore the tree rolls over an' crushes ye too!"

"It won't roll if you hold fast," Allen answered.

"Yes, it will, when it starts. I can't git nothin' ter brace ag'in here."

"Well, I'm going to do my best and you must hold back as long as you can," was the answer.

Getting down on his knees, Allen began to scoop away the loose dirt with his hands, working directly under Slavin's body. It was hard work and broke his finger nails, but he kept on and at last had quite a hole made.

"Now hold hard, I'm going to pull!" he shouted to Watson, and the old hunter held as hard as he could. Then Allen pulled with might and main and at last had the satisfaction of getting the senseless body of Slavin free from its awful pressure.

"Quick, the tree is a-goin'!" came from Watson. "Give me yer hand!"

He reached forth and at the same time the tree began to slide down the hollow, directly in Allen's pathway. Allen had Slavin in his arms by this time. He made a leap and got on top of the tree, and just as the trunk went down Watson caught him and held tight.

"A close call an' no error!" cried Watson, when Allen was safe on the trail once more. "Ye came within an ace o' goin' into the hollow with the tree on top o' ye!"

"I guess Slavin's pretty badly hurt," said Allen, when he could get back his breath. "That trunk had him pinned down for fair. He would have been crushed in another minute or two. What shall we do with him?"

"Wait till I catch his hoss an' we'll take him back to the cave," answered Watson.

To catch the animal was not difficult and close at hand they found the gun Slavin had stolen. Then while Allen carried the firearms and led one horse and rode another, Watson took up the unconscious man in his arms and followed on his own steed to the cave.

They found Noel sitting by the fire nursing his lacerated arm. The wound was an ugly affair but by no means dangerous, and after it was washed and bandaged it felt a great deal better, although the arm was bound to be stiff for several weeks to come and sore in the bargain.

"Got him, I see," remarked the young man, as he glanced at Slavin. "What's the trouble, did you have to shoot him?"

"No, he got under a fallen tree," answered Allen.

The unconscious man was placed in a comfortable position near the fire, which was heaped up with fresh wood, that all might dry themselves, and Watson went to work to restore Slavin.

This was no mean task and it was a good half hour before the man opened his eyes to stare about him.

"I—I—where am I?" he stammered.

"Yer safe," answered Watson, laconically.

"That tree—Did I go over into the hollow?"

"No."

"How did I escape?"

"Allen Winthrop saved ye."

"He did!"

"Yes, Slavin; he's yer best friend, if ye only know it," went on the old hunter warmly.

"But I—don't—don't understand."

In a few words Watson explained the situation to which Slavin listened with much interest. Then his eyes rested on Allen.

"I'm much erbliged ter ye," he said slowly, and his manner showed he meant it.

"You were a fool ter try ter git away," went on Watson.

"I know thet—now," muttered the hurt one.

"Don't ye know I would have plugged ye on sight?"

"Would ye?"

"Sartain shur, Slavin."

"Wall, I won't give ye another chance," responded Slavin, with a heavy sigh.

"Ye won't git the chance, ye mean," said the old hunter, significantly.

"All right, jes' as ye please, Watson. But if thet young feller saved my life why I'm——"

"What?"

"I'm going to make it up ter him, thet's all."

"Do you mean that you will lead us without any further trouble?" questioned Allen eagerly.

"Thet's wot I do mean, an' I'll swear ter it if ye want me ter," added Slavin, solemnly.

"You needn't swear, Slavin."

"But I mean it, Winthrop. I may be a bad man, but I ain't so all-fired bad as ter forgit a man when he does me a good turn," went on the sufferer, with increased earnestness.

"Well, I will take you at your word."

"But I can't go on just yet. I've got a terrible pain in my breast, here."

"I suppose you have. We shan't move to-night and maybe not to-morrow. It will depend upon how Noel Urner feels."

"Oh, I'll go on," said Noel. "But I think a little rest here will do us all good," he added,

thoughtfully.

"Yes, ye all need it," put in Watson. "An' now I want all o' ye to turn in an' git some sleep. I'll stay on guard."

"But not all night," insisted Allen. "Wake me at two or three o'clock."

And so it was arranged.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A BUFFALO STAMPEDE

Allen went on duty at three o'clock and remained on guard until six, when the others awoke.

The sun was showing itself in the east and all that remained of the storm were a few scattering drops.

"How do you feel?" asked Allen of Noel.

"Fairly well, although the arm is stiff, Allen." And the young man continued: "What shall we do with the wolverine?"

"Nothing, unless you want the pelt."

"I never want to see the beast again," said Noel, with a shudder for which Allen could not blame him.

"Then let him lie for the other wild beasts to feed upon."

When Watson arose Allen had breakfast ready and all ate without delay. Even Slavin got around, but it was plain to see that he was suffering.

"I want ter show ye I mean ter do what I said," he told Allen. "I'll go on if I drop in my tracks."

"We won't start just yet, Slavin," answered Allen, "and when we do we'll take it rather easy, both for your benefit and for Mr. Urner's."

It was past ten o'clock when they left the cave. Their horses were much refreshed by the rest taken, and despite Slavin's hurts fair progress was made along the foothills.

It was a lonely section of the State through which they were traveling and Allen could not help mentioning this fact to Ike Watson. But at his words the old hunter merely laughed.

"Lonely," he snorted. "Gosh all hemlock, Allen, it ain't half as lonely as it used ter be, not by a jugful. Why, I remember the time ye could ride fer days an' days an' see nuthin' but buffalo or some other wild critters."

"The buffalo are almost all gone now, aren't they?"

"Putty much, an' it's a great shame, too, fer they were fine game. But them sports used ter come out west an' kill 'em off by the score, worse luck! Didn't want 'em fer nuthin' either!" And Watson shook his head sorrowfully.

"Were you ever caught in a buffalo stampede, Ike?"

"Onct, Allen, onct, an' it's an experience I'll never fergit as long as I live."

"I should like to hear the particulars."

"Thet ain't really much ter tell, Allen. I wuz out on Crazy Tom Mountain at the time. Reckon ye know the place."

"Fairly well."

"Well, it wuz while the buffalo had been over to the Fork. Grazin' wuzn't very good that season an' the critters wuz rather ugly in consequence."

"Yes, I've heard they get bad when their feed is cut short."

"As I wuz sayin', I wuz up alongside o' Crazy Tom Mountain, looking fer b'ar, an' I had jes' struck a fine trail when I heered a curious sound on the tudder side o' the hill. I couldn't make it out nohow at fust, but byme-by I thought it must be buffalo, an' I wuz right."

"Did they come right down on you?"

"No, worse luck, they didn't. If they hed I might have scooted to one side or tudder. But instead o' comin' straight over the mountain—'tain's high, ye remember—they came around on both sides, an' afore I knowed it, I wuz right in the middle o' 'em."

"What did you do?" asked Allen, as Watson paused reflectively.

"At fust I didn't know what ter do persackly. I shot one of 'em, but bless ye, thet wuzn't nuthin', and I calkerlated as how I'd have ter ride fer it. Then of a sudden my hoss got scared and shot me over his head into a big thorn bush and made off like a streak o' greased lightnin', leaving me alone."

"With the buffalo all around you?"

"Jes' so, more'n twenty o' 'em, an' more'n a hundred others comin' up fast as they could leg it. I kin tell ye I wuz in a fix an' no error."

"It must have hurt you to land in the thorn bush?"

"Hurt? Wall say, it wuz like bein' dumped into a pit full o' daggers, that wuz! Hain't fergot the awful stickin' pain yit an' never will! But bein' chucked into thet thorn bush saved my life."

"Didn't the buffalo touch the bush?"

"Nary a one. They would come up close, on a dead run, an' then shy like a skittish hoss afore a bit o' white paper. Time an' ag'in I thought one would heave hisself atop o' me an' squash me, but the time didn't come. Say, but it wuz a sight, that wuz!" went on Watson earnestly. "Them buffalo was mad, clean stark mad, and trampled all over each other. The stampede at thet p'int didn't last more 'n three minutes an' arfter it wuz over thar wuz five buffalo dead less than four yards away from me!"

"Tramped to death by the others?"

"Yes, smashed up too. Ye never saw sech a sight. Arfter thet ye can calkerlate I keep clear o' all other stampedes," concluded the old hunter.

Talking over one thing and another the party moved along until about one o'clock, when a halt was made for dinner.

Allen found that Noel was suffering but little but his arm was well bandaged. Slavin, however, was pale.

"You need a rest, Slavin," he said, kindly.

"I reckon ye air right," was the faint response. "Didn't calkerlate ter git sech an all-gone feelin'."

"We'll rest until the worst of the heat is over; eh, Ike?"

"Jes' as ye say," answered the old hunter.

They found an inviting spot in a small grove of trees close to a spring and a brook, and proceeded to make themselves comfortable. Slavin was glad enough to drop into a light doze.

"He's a changed man, unless I miss my guess," said Allen to Noel.

"I think you are right, Allen. That adventure took him so close to death I fancy it rather awakened his conscience."

"I hope he does turn over a new leaf. He doesn't appear such a bad fellow at heart."

"You are right. I suppose some men get bad out here simply because they haven't any good example to follow. They cut loose from their old associates and fall in with the wrong sort."

"That's just it, and it's so much easier to find the wrong sort than the right sort. Some men think life altogether too slow unless they are doing something against the law."

Allen, as he rested, could not help but think of his two brothers. What were Chet and Paul doing? He sincerely trusted all was going well with them.

"They ought to be old enough to take care of themselves," said Noel. "You mustn't worry too much on their account."

"Well, we have to be on guard out here night and day, Noel. You really don't know who to trust."

"Oh, I know that."

"Just think of what my uncle has suffered, and of what he may be suffering this minute. It is enough to make one's blood boil!"

"It may not be as bad as you imagine, Allen. Your uncle must know a thing or two."

"Of course, but one man can't do much against three or four, or half a dozen. Those rascals will do all in their power to bring him to terms, rest assured of that."

"Well, I am willing to push on at any time you say."

"I'll push on as fast as Slavin can travel. I can't do more than that. If he caves in on our hands we'll have no means of finding out anything more about my uncle's whereabouts."

"He can't be shamming, can he?"

"Not a bit of it. He was caught under the tree and I wouldn't have been in his position for a thousand dollars."

"Then don't push him any harder than you dare. To me he looks like a fellow who might be getting a fever."

"I noticed that. But I hope he doesn't," concluded Allen.

But the fever was coming and by nightfall all of the others saw that Slavin was in a bad way. He sat up and began to talk wildly.

"Let me go! Take the tree from me!" he cried. "I haven't got the money! Oh, how do ye do Mr. Winthrop. Glad to see me, eh? And how is that new mine, an' what kind of a trade are ye goin' to make with Captain Grady, eh? Ha! ha! The cave by the seven pines! A good hiding place, the seven pines! Let me go, the tree is crushing me!" And then he fell back almost exhausted.

"He won't travel any more, not jes' yet," said Watson, soberly. "He's up ag'in a long spell o' sickness."

"Did you hear what he said about Captain Grady?" asked Allen.

"I did. He must be in this game, too. An' the seven pines."

"The cave must be at a place called the seven pines," said Noel.

"If it is I think I know the spot," answered Ike Watson. "I ran across 'em seven pines two years ago. They air about two miles from here, on the other side o' the mountain. We'll have ter go around ter git ter 'em."

An hour later Allen and Watson left Slavin in Noel Urner's care and struck out for the place on the other side of the mountain which the old hunter had mentioned.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE LONG LOST FOUND

Before leaving camp both Allen and Ike Watson saw to it that their weapons were in good condition and ready for immediate use.

"No tellin' what we may run up ag'inst," said the old hunter.

"Well, I am ready to fight, if it comes to that," returned Allen, grimly. "But I would rather take the enemy by surprise."

"Thet would be the best way, Allen. But fust we must locate thet cave."

The ride around the mountain was a rather trying one and from a gallop they had to slow down to a walk. In some spots the trail was much cut up and the mud was deep, while in others they had to pick their way over rocks which were as smooth as they were dangerous.

"Look thar," said Watson, as he paused on a spur of the rocks. "Thar's a tumble fer ye!"

He pointed to a canyon all of five hundred feet deep and Allen had to draw back after looking into the awful depth.

"If a fellow should tumble here he would never live to tell it," said the young ranchman. "This would be a bad trail to follow in the dark."

Moving away from the spur of rocks overlooking the canyon, they turned to the northwest and plunged through a forest of cedar and hemlock. Here the wild birds were numerous and Allen was tempted to bring some of them down with his gun, but Watson demurred.

"No use o' makin' too much noise," he explained. "Remember, somebody may be on guard up at thet cave."

"Slavin said he thought only an old woman had been left in charge—a woman who claimed to be Darry Nodley's wife."

"Didn't know as how thet rascal hed a wife."

"That is what Slavin said."

"It might be the truth, and then ag'in, it might not. We don't want ter believe too much, Allen."

"I agree with you, Ike. But I think Slavin was really anxious to help us after we did him that good turn."

The old hunter shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps; but I've seen too much foul play in my time ter trust everybody. Thar may be a woman up thar, an' thar may be some men-folks too."

So the talk ran on and they gradually drew closer to where the old hunter had once seen the seven pine trees. To one not used to a life in the open, to remember such a locality after two years' absence would have been difficult, but it was not so with Ike Watson.

"Can't fool me on a thing like this," he said, flatly. "Onct I see a place it hangs in my mind forever. Same way with a trail. Why onct I struck a trail in the south o' the State, kind o' a mixed trail too. I didn't see the trail fer nigh onto six years, but when I did see it ag'in I knew it jes' as quick as I clapped eyes on it."

"I believe you," replied the young ranchman. "You have an eye like a hawk," and in that Allen was right.

The sun was sinking low in the west when they came out of a defile in the rocks and the old hunter pointed to a valley on the opposite side of the foothills below them.

"Do ye see them, over thar?" he questioned.

Allen gave a long look.

"I do—seven pines, sure enough!"

"Told ye I'd remember the spot!" cried Watson, triumphantly.

"But where is the cave?" went on the young ranchman.

"Like as not it's close by. Come, before the sun goes down an' it gits too dark."

Soon they were making their way along the foothills at the lower side of the mountain. They had to pass through considerable brush and while they were doing this Watson suddenly halted and pointed to his side.

"What is it?" asked Allen, as he also halted.

"If thet ain't a putty fresh trail then I miss my guess."

"It does look fresh, Ike."

"Ain't over twenty-four hours old, nohow," went on the old hunter. "Allen, I reckon we have struck it about right."

"But I see nothing of a cave."

"Let us follow the trail. The cave may not be persackly by the pines but in sight o' them, do ye see?"

"I do."

"The trail is almost in the direction I wuz goin'," continued Watson. "So we won't miss much if we go wrong. Forward it is!"

And again they struck out, this time with increased confidence. As they progressed the old hunter examined the hoof marks from time to time and said he was certain two horsemen had passed that way.

But just as they were coming to the end of the foothills they reached a mountain water course and here the trail came to an abrupt end.

"We are stumped now," said Allen, after both had crossed to the other side of the stream.

"I ain't a-givin' up jes' yet," answered Watson.

"Oh, neither am I. But where has the trail gone to?"

"Let us move down the stream a bit," suggested the old hunter. "I don't think the hossmen who made thet trail would stick ter the water very long."

On they went once more, and now in silence, for both felt that the cave might be close at hand. The seven pines were still in view, standing upon a hillock by themselves.

At last they came to a spot where the water course broadened out into a tiny lake. At this point there was another brook, coming down from a spring upon the hillside.

"The trail!" cried Allen, presently, and pointed it out.

"Right ye air, Allen," returned Watson. "An' I reckon we air gittin' close ter the end on it too," he added suggestively.

But little more was said and they quickly followed the trail up to where a wall of rocks arose, standing boldly out from the foothills and facing the seven pines.

"If I ain't mistaken thar's a cave over yonder," whispered Watson, pointing with his hand.

"Forward we go!" cried Allen, and dashed ahead, with his weapon ready for use. Two minutes later a turn of the trail brought them into plain view of a large cave in the cliff side.

"Eureka!" began Watson, when Allen checked his speech.

"Somebody is coming!" he whispered. "A woman! Get behind the brush!"

He led the way and Watson followed, and both waited with bated breath. Presently a woman passed them, carrying an empty water bucket. She was bound for the spring just mentioned.

"That must be the woman Slavin mentioned," went on Allen, in a low voice.

"Like as not," whispered the old hunter in return. "Shall we capture her?"

"No—wait."

They waited and presently the woman came back with the bucket full of water. She entered the cavern without looking around her.

"Let us follow her on foot," suggested Allen, and they tied up their horses. Soon the entrance to the cave was gained and they peered inside.

For the moment they could see but little, for there was only a low fire burning in the cavern. Then of a sudden Allen let out a wild cry:

"Look! look! There is my Uncle Barnaby, tied fast to the rear wall!"

CHAPTER XXX.

TOGETHER AT LAST—CONCLUSION

Allen spoke the truth. There, tied by strong ropes to a projecting rock, was the uncle of the Winthrop boys.

His face was pale and haggard, showing he had suffered much since his confinement.

Forgetting the woman, Allen dashed forward.

"Uncle Barnaby! How glad I am that we have found you!" he cried loudly.

"Who is that?" The prisoner sprang up from where he was resting. "Allen!"

"Yes, uncle! Are you not glad to see me?"

"Glad is not a strong enough word, my boy!" was the reply from Barnaby Winthrop, and as soon as Allen had released him he caught his nephew in his arms. "I was praying to be rescued."

"They have not treated you well, I can see that, uncle."

"They have used me worse than a dog. They wanted to get my secret from me, and used every means in their power to accomplish their purpose."

"But they did not succeed, did they?"

"No. I told them I would die rather than allow the scoundrels to get rich through my instrumentality."

A scuffle behind them stopped the conversation. Ike Watson was trying to secure the woman, who was struggling desperately to get away.

By biting and scratching the desperate female at last freed herself from the old hunter's grasp. Then she bounded for the cave entrance. Watson aimed his gun at her and then lowered the weapon.

"Reckon I won't," he drawled. "Never did shoot at a woman, an' I'm too old ter begin now. She don't count, anyhow!"

And thus the woman was allowed to escape. She lost no time in quitting the vicinity.

The old hunter shook hands warmly with Barnaby Winthrop, who was profuse in his thanks to Watson for what he had accomplished.

"You shall lose nothing by what you have done, Ike," he said. "Just wait till I open up that new claim."

"Speaking of the claim, there is somebody else to see you," began Allen, when the talk was interrupted by the clattering of horses' hoofs on the rocks outside.

"Saul Mangle and Darry Nodley!" exclaimed Allen, as he glanced down the stony trail. "They are coming here, too!"

"They belong to the gang," said Barnaby Winthrop.

"Reckon ez how we can receive 'em all right," put in Ike Watson, dryly.

As quickly as possible Barnaby Winthrop was provided with firearms.

"My gracious!"

It was Allen who let out the cry, loud enough for those who were approaching to hear.

"What's up?" asked his uncle.

"Look back of them."

All did so, and then a shout went up. There only a few hundred yards to the rear, were Chet and Paul, trying their best to run down the horse thieves, whom they had discovered but a short five minutes before.

"We've got 'em corralled!" said Watson, grimly.

"Look, there is Jack Blowfen, too!" ejaculated Allen, as the cowboy also came into view.

"Halt!"

Ike Watson uttered the command.

He ran into the open, followed by the others.

A shout went up from Saul Mangle and Darry Nodley, and then another from those in the rear.

"There is Allen!"

"There is Uncle Barnaby!"

"Capture the horse thieves!"

The two rascals were bewildered and paused, not knowing which way to turn.

They were quickly surrounded, and it was old Ike Watson who commanded them to throw down their weapons.

At first they felt inclined to refuse, but a glance at the stern faces about them caused them to comply.

"The jig is up!" muttered Saul Mangle, and Nodley groaned inwardly.

There was another joyous greeting between uncle and nephews when Paul and Chet rode up.

In the meanwhile Jack Blowfen assisted Ike Watson in making prisoners of Mangle and Nodley. The latter asked for his wife and seemed disappointed to learn she could not share his captivity.

Allen and Barnaby Winthrop were glad to learn that Captain Grady was a prisoner.

"When I am done with him I warrant he'll not give any of us further trouble," said the uncle of the boys.

Before the party left the vicinity, Saul Mangle and Nodley were searched, and from them were taken the seven hundred dollars which had been stolen from the ranch home, as related at the beginning of this story.

The prisoners were removed to Daddy Wampole's hotel, and later on were placed in the hands of the sheriff. The sheriff also took into custody Captain Hank Grady and Lou Bluckburn. The colored man, Jeff Jones, was, by the advice of Chet and Paul, allowed to go his own way on promise to turn over a new leaf. Slavin was taken to a hospital and later on let go.

Several years have passed since the events above recorded took place. In that period of time many important changes have occurred.

The horse thieves and would-be claim stealers were all duly tried according to law, and are now serving various terms of imprisonment. The ranch belonging to Captain Grady was confiscated by creditors from Deadwood and sold to Barnaby Winthrop, who turned it over to the three boys to add to the ranch already belonging to them.

The Winthrop mine is now in operation and is paying very well. It is managed by Barnaby Winthrop himself, and Noel Urner owns a large block of stock, which he considers the best investment he ever made.

Caleb Dottery and Jack Blowfen manage the ranch jointly in connection with their former work, doing this on shares for the Winthrop boys. As for old Ike Watson, he still roams the hills and mountains. He can have a good home with Barnaby Winthrop any time he wishes, but says he is not yet ready to settle down.

And Allen, Paul, and Chet? The three boys are all in San Francisco. Allen is in college, and his two brothers are preparing to follow at a well-known private school. Allen is to be a lawyer, and privately has a notion he may enter politics as the State of Idaho grows in importance. Paul is inclined to be a doctor. Chet has not yet settled the question of a future occupation.

"I think I'll go in with Uncle Barnaby," he said a few days ago. "I love the mountains too well to stick in any city. I'll become a mine owner and speculator in claims and cattle."

They are all happy together, and, come what may, will never forget their adventures when they were left alone on the ranch to combat their many unknown enemies.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THREE YOUNG RANCHMEN; OR, DARING
ADVENTURES IN THE GREAT WEST ***

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