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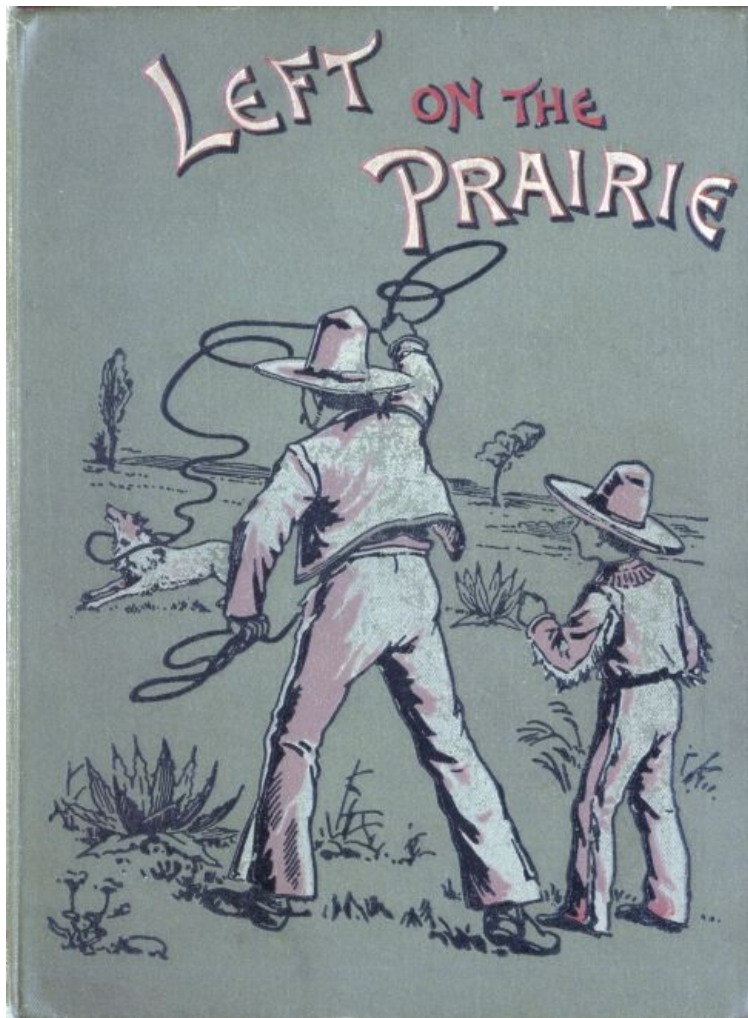
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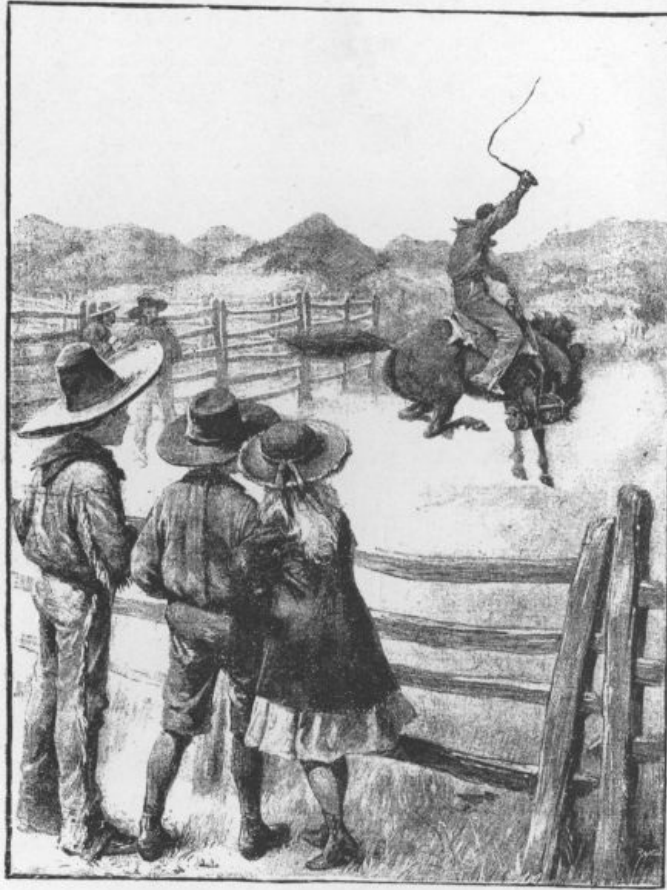
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' THEN BEGAN A TERRIBLE FIGHT BETWEEN THE MAN AND THE HORSE.
Page 124.

'THEN BEGAN A TERRIBLE FIGHT BETWEEN THE
MAN AND THE HORSE.' Page [124](#)

LEFT ON THE PRAIRIE

BY

M. B. COX (NOEL WEST).

ILLUSTRATED BY A. PEARCE

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LEFT ON THE PRAIRIE.

CHAPTER I.

AT LONGVIEW.

Little Jack Wilson had been born in England; but when he was quite a baby his parents had sailed across the sea, taking him with them, and settled out on one of the distant prairies of America. Of course, Jack was too small when he left to remember anything of England himself, but as he grew older he liked to hear his father and mother talk about the old country where he and they had been born, and to which they still seemed to cling with great affection. Sometimes, as they looked out-of-doors over the burnt-up prairie round their new home, his father would tell him about the trim green fields they had left so far behind them, and say with a sigh, 'Old England was like a *garden*, but this place is nothing but a *wilderness*!'

Longview was the name of the lonely western village where George Wilson, his wife, and Jack had lived for eight years, and although we should not have thought it a particularly nice place, they were very happy there. Longview was half-way between two large mining towns, sixty miles apart, and as there was no railway in those parts, the people going to and from the different mines were obliged to travel by waggons, and often halted for a night at Longview to break the journey.

It was a very hot and dusty village in summer, as there were no nice trees to give pleasant shade from the sun, and the staring rows of wooden houses that formed the streets had no gardens in front to make them look pretty. In winter it was almost worse, for the cold winds came sweeping down from the distant mountains and rushed shrieking across the plains towards the unprotected village. They whirled the snow into clouds, making big drifts, and whistled round the frame houses as if threatening to blow them right away.

Jack was used to it, however, and, in spite of the heat and cold, was a happy little lad. His parents had come to America, in the first place, because times were so bad in England, and secondly, because Mrs. Wilson's only sister had emigrated many years before them to Longview, and had been so anxious to have her relations near her.

Aunt Sue, as Jack called her, had married very young, and accompanied her husband, Mat Byrne, to the West. He was a miner, and when he worked got good wages; but he was an idle, thriftless fellow, who soon got into disfavour with his employers, and a year or two after the Wilsons came he took to drink, and made sad trouble for his wife and his three boys. George Wilson had expostulated with him often, and begged him to be more steady, but Mat was jealous of his honest brother-in-law, who worked so hard and was fairly comfortable, and therefore he resented the kind words of advice, and George was obliged to leave him alone.

George Wilson made his living by freighting—that is, carrying goods from place to place by waggons, as there was no rail by which to send things. Sometimes, when he took extra long journeys, he would have to leave his wife and boy for some weeks to keep each other company.

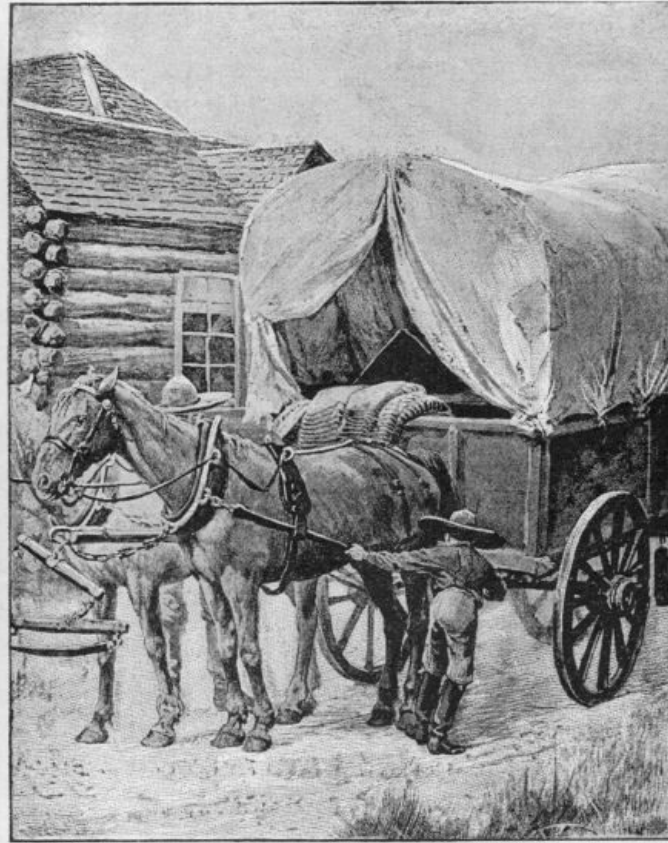
'Take care of your mother, Jack, my boy,' he would say, before starting. 'She has no man to look after her or do things for her but ye till I get home.' And right well did the little fellow obey orders. He was a most helpful boy for his age, and was devoted to his mother, who was far from strong. He got up early every morning, and did what are called the *chores* in America; these are all the small daily jobs that have to be done in and around a house. First, he chopped wood and lit a fire in the stove; after that he carried water in a bucket and filled the kettle, and then leaving the water to boil, he laid the breakfast-table and ground the coffee.

When breakfast was over, he ran off to school, and afterwards had many a good romp with his cousins, Steve, Hal, and Larry Byrne, who lived quite close to his home. Jack was very fond of his Aunt Sue; she was so like his gentle mother. He often ran in to see her, but he always fled when he heard his Uncle Mat coming, whose loud, rough voice frightened him.

Jack was very sorry for his cousins, as they did not seem to care a bit for their father; indeed, at times they were very much afraid of him, and Steve, the eldest, who was a big fellow, nearly sixteen, told Jack that if it wasn't for his mother, he would run away from home and go off to be a cowboy, instead of working as a miner with his father. But he knew what a sad trouble it would be to the poor woman if he went away from her, and he was too good a son to give her pain.

When his father was away freighting, Jack, even while he was at play, kept a good look-out across the prairie, watching every day for his return. He could see for miles, and when he spied the white top of the familiar waggon appearing in the distance, he would rush home shouting, 'Mother! Mother! Daddy's coming! I see the waggon ever such a long way off.' And then the two would get to work and prepare a nice supper for him.

Jack could help his father, too, when he arrived home, for there were four tired horses to unharness, and water, and feed. Jack knew them all well; Buck and Jerry in front as leaders, and Rufus and Billy harnessed to the waggon. George Wilson was very proud of his horses, and they certainly had a good master, for he always looked after them first, and saw them comfortably into their stable before he began his own supper.



'JACK COULD HELP HIS FATHER, TOO, WHEN HE ARRIVED HOME.'

Page 17.

**'JACK COULD HELP HIS FATHER, TOO,
WHEN HE ARRIVED HOME.'**

Trouble, however, was dawning over the happy household. The life in the hot village had never suited Mrs. Wilson, and it told on her more as time went on. She looked white and thin, and felt so tired and weary if she did any work, that her husband got alarmed and brought in a doctor to see her. The doctor frightened him still more. He said the place was slowly killing her, as the air was so close and hot.

'You must take her away at once,' he said emphatically, 'if you want to save her life. She has been here too long, I fear, as it is. Go away to the mountains and try the bracing air up there; she may come back quite strong after a year there if she avoids all unnecessary fatigue. Take my advice and go as soon as you can. There's no time to lose!'

These words came as an awful shock to George Wilson, who had no idea his wife was so ill, and had hoped a few bottles of tonic from the doctor would restore her failing strength. But the medical warning could not be disregarded, and he could see for himself now how fast she was wasting away. They must go away from Longview as soon as possible.

It was a sad thing for the Wilsons to contemplate the breaking up of their home, but there was no help for it. They talked matters well over, and came at last to the conclusion that it would be better not to take Jack with them. They would probably be moving on from place to place, and in a year he would forget all he had learnt at school. After a long consultation with Aunt Sue, it was arranged that Jack should stay at the Byrnes' house and keep on at his lessons, his Uncle Mat having given his consent after hearing the Wilsons would pay well for his keep.

George Wilson and his wife felt keenly the idea of leaving Jack, and it was agreed that if they decided to stay in the mountains altogether, someone should be found who would take the boy to them.

It was terrible breaking the news to poor little Jack that his parents were going away from him, and for a time he was quite inconsolable. His father talked very kindly and quietly to him, and at last made him see that the arrangement was really all for the best.

'Ye see, Jack,' he said, 'the doctor says your mother is seriously ill, an' the only chance for her is to take her off to the mountains.'

'Can't I go too, Daddy?' pleaded Jack, with tears in his eyes. 'I'll do such lots o' work.'

'No, my lad; it won't do for ye to miss yer schoolin', as ye'd be bound to do if ye came wanderin' about with us. It's only fur a year, so ye must try an' be a brave boy, an' stay with yer

good Aunt Sue until we come back agin or send fur ye. We know what's best fur ye, an', laddie, won't it be fine if Mother gets strong and well agin?'

'Aye, dad! That would be grand!' said Jack, brightening up.

'Well, it's a sad partin' fur us all; but there's nothin' else to be done, an' ye must try an' keep up a good heart fur yer mother's sake, as I doubt she'll fret sadly o'er leavin' ye.'

Jack promised to be brave, but there was a troubled look on his usually bright face as he watched the rapid preparations going on for the departure. The things had to be sold out of the house, as they could not take much with them. The sale at first excited Jack, as so many people came to buy; but when he saw their furniture, beds, chairs and tables all being carried oft by strangers, he realized fully what the breaking up of his home meant, and it made him feel very sad.

There was a lot to be done. Jack went with his father to buy a stock of provisions for their long journey, and then they tried to make the clumsy waggon as comfortable as possible for the sick mother. Aunt Sue packed up, as her sister was so weak, and the trial of leaving Jack was proving almost too much for her slender stock of strength. All the same, she bravely tried to hide the pain the parting gave her, and for her boy's sake tried to be cheerful even to the last.

Alone with Aunt Sue, she opened her heart, and received true sympathy in her trouble from that good woman, who knew well that the chief sorrow to her sister was the fear she might never see her little lad again.

'You mustn't get so down-hearted, Maggie,' said Mrs. Byrne kindly, 'but hope for the best. I have heard the air in them mountains is just wonderful to cure cases like yours, and perhaps ye'll get quite strong afore long.'

'If it pleases God,' said her sister gently. 'And now, Sue, ye'll promise me to look well after Jack. I know ye're fond o' him fur his own sake as well as mine; but I'm feared if Mat gets one o' his mad fits on he might treat him badly.'

'Don't you fear, Maggie,' returned Mrs. Byrne soothingly; 'I'll treat him as one o' my boys, an' ye know I manage to keep them out o' their father's way when he's too quarrelsome. Besides, Mat knows as ye're payin' well for Jack, and that, if naught else, will keep him civil to the lad.'

'I hope so,' murmured the mother sadly; 'an' if all goes well we'll have our boy with us again in a year.'

'Aye, a year'll go quick enough, never fear!' concluded her sister cheerfully; 'an' Jack'll get on finely at his schoolin' in that time.'

The night before they started came, and Jack, who had gone early to bed, lay sobbing quietly to himself, quite unable to go to sleep. Before long his mother came softly into the room and stood beside him. She noticed the flushed, tear-stained face on the pillow, and exclaimed in a grieved voice, 'Oh, Jack, darling, don't take on so! It'll break my heart if I think o' ye frettin' all the time.'

'I can't help it, Mother!' cried Jack. 'What shall I do without Dad an' ye?'

'Ye must think o' the meeting ahead, dearie. P'raps if Daddy does well in this new part of the country, an' I can get strong again, we may make our home up near the grand mountains as ye've never seen. It's so different from this hot prairie, fur there are big trees to shade ye from the sun, an' little brooks, called creeks, running down the sides of the hills.'

'Aye, I'd like to go an' live up thar,' cried Jack. 'I hope ye'll send fur me soon, an' I'll try an' be good. I do love Aunt Sue, but I'm scared o' Uncle Mat at times.'

'Never fear, Jack,' said his mother, putting her arms round him; 'Aunt Sue'll see as ye come to no harm. But, oh! dearie, how I wish I could take ye with me!' And the poor woman broke down and mingled her tears with Jack's.

But the boy suddenly remembered his promise to his father, and, knowing how bad the excitement was for his mother, he made a great effort to stop crying, and, rubbing his tears away, he said, 'Mother! this won't do; I promised Dad I'd be brave!'

'You're right, Jack. We mustn't give way again. I ought to have kept up better. I must be goin' now, dearie, an' before I say good-night, will ye promise me not to forget to say yer prayers every day, an' ask God to take care of us all till we meet again?'

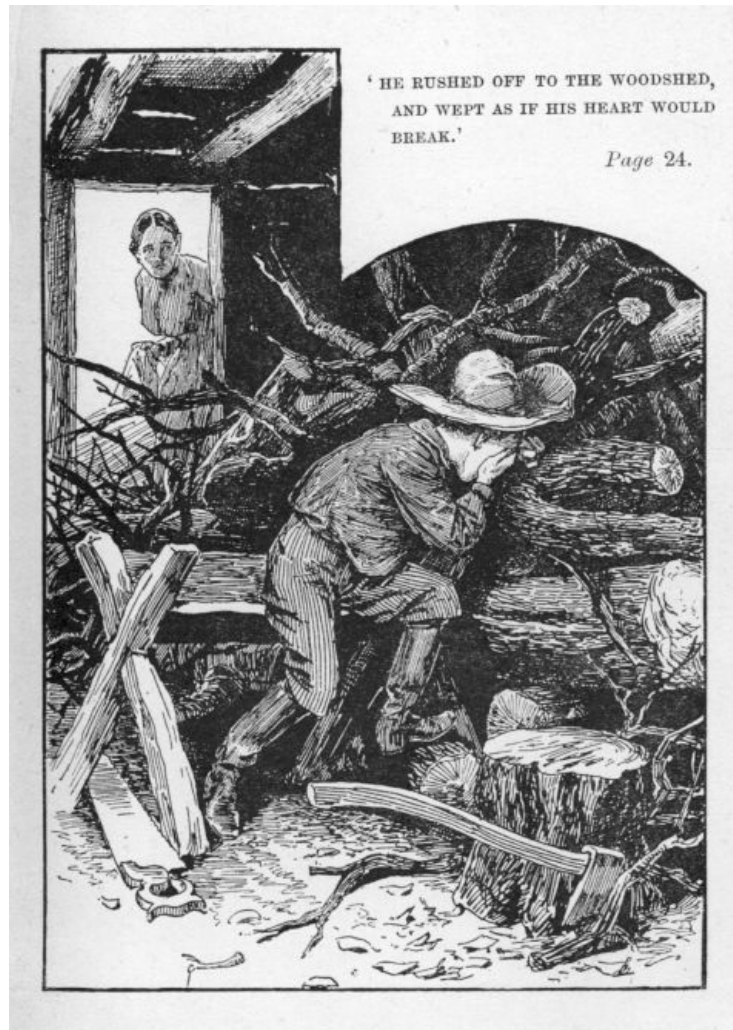
'I promise,' said Jack gravely.

'An' ye'll sing the hymns I've taught ye sometimes, won't ye, laddie?' asked his mother softly.

'I won't forget,' returned Jack, as he kissed her wet cheek; and then she went away with a feeling of comfort in her heavy heart.

'A year isn't so *very* long,' murmured the boy to himself, and before long fell asleep.

Next morning his parents started, and Jack, after the terrible good-byes had been said, stood watching the retreating waggon until it became like a speck in the distance. At last it vanished altogether, and then the boy's loss seemed to overwhelm him. In a frenzy of grief he rushed off to the woodshed, and wept as if his heart would break.



**'HE RUSHED OFF TO THE WOODSHED, AND
WEPT AS IF HIS HEART WOULD BREAK.'**

But Aunt Sue guessed the tumult of sorrow that was going on in the young heart, and she soon came to find him and offer comfort. She was so like his dear mother, with her sweet voice and gentle manner, that she soothed him in his trouble; and when she proposed he should help her to get the house brushed out and tidied up, he gladly threw himself into the work.

He was helping his aunt to lay the things on the table when his uncle came in. He had not seen the boy before, and even he felt a bit sorry for the poor lad, so he said not ungraciously, 'That's right, Sue, make him useful. There's nothin' so good fur sick hearts as work.'

Poor Jack flushed at this speech, as it touched him on a sore point; but he saw his uncle did not intend to hurt his feelings by the words, and he tried to swallow the lump that would rise in his throat. The three boys came in for supper, and Hal and Larry looked curiously to see how Jack was taking his trouble; but he was determined they should see no sign of tears from him, and they did not suspect that the little heart was nearly bursting.

Steve was a most good-natured lad, rough to look at, but with a large slice of his mother's kind heart, and he now looked quietly after Jack, seeing that he had a good supper. He was very fond of his small cousin, who in return was devoted to him, and the big boy felt sorry when he noticed the effort Jack was making to keep up a brave face before Hal and Larry.

Very soon Aunt Sue suggested he should go to bed, which he was glad to do, and once there, he was so tired out with his grief he fell fast asleep.

JACK IN TROUBLE.

Over a year had passed away since Jack's parents had left Longview for the mountains, and the boy was just nine and a half; but he was no longer the same happy little fellow as when we first knew him. Great changes for the worse had taken place, and misfortunes had come thick and fast upon him.

He lost his good Aunt Sue, for she died of heart disease ten months after his parents' departure. How poor Jack missed her! His uncle very soon afterward married again, and his new wife was a loud-voiced, harsh woman, who treated Jack most unkindly.

Steve, too, his great friend, had gone away, as he had long threatened, to be a cowboy, for he found the life at home unbearable without his mother. Hal and Larry, who had not improved as they grew older, took good care to keep away from the house, except for meals; and thus Jack, as the youngest, had to bear the brunt of everything. He no longer went to school, for his uncle's wife wanted him to wash floors, carry water, and go endless errands for her. Every morning and evening he had to look for Roanie, the cow, who was given to wandering off on the prairie for long distances, searching for better pasture. When he had driven her home he had to milk her, and if he chanced to be late getting her in he was severely scolded, and oftentimes deprived of his supper.

It was a hard life for the little lad, and many a night he sobbed himself to sleep as he thought sadly of the happy days before his parents left him.

There was another thought troubling him, and that was, *Why hadn't his people sent for him, as they promised?* Was it possible that they had forgotten him, or meant to leave him for years with Uncle Mat?

It was dreadful to think about, but there was no getting over the facts of the case, and Jack knew right well that it was long past the time they had said he should be away from them. Only one year! He remembered it as if it were but yesterday, but not even a message had come for him. He could not understand it, and his heart felt sad and sore as he often crept away to escape his uncle's drunken wrath or the wife's cruel blows.

One evening he could not find Roanie for nearly two hours, and when he got home, tired and hungry, he found Mrs. Byrne in a bad temper. She gave him a little dry bread for supper, and, anxious to get away from her tongue, Jack stole off across the prairie for some way, where, lying on the short, burnt-up grass, he gave vent to his misery, and burying his head in his hands, had a good cry.

Suddenly he heard the sound of horse's hoofs approaching him, and a great jingling of spurs, as someone dashed up close to him and stopped abruptly. Jack looked up, and was surprised to see his cousin Steve, looking very smart and happy.

'Hello, young un!' he cried, jumping off his horse. 'I thought it was you, so I turned off the prairie road to see. What's the trouble? You'll drown everyone in Longview if you cry so hard.'

Jack sat up and wiped his streaming eyes with his sleeve. 'Oh, Steve!' he exclaimed, 'I'm so unhappy. I'm glad you've come, for they're so unkind to me, and I'm beginning to doubt as Father and Mother have forgot me. They've never sent for me.'

'Don't fret, Jack,' said Steve; 'they haven't forgot you, never fear. D'you know,' he went on slowly, 'I've found out as they sent for you long ago, an' he'll not let you go.' Steve nodded towards his home.

'*He!*' repeated Jack in astonishment. 'Uncle Mat! Why, he hates me, Steve, an' I guess he'd be only too glad to get rid o' me.'

'Not he!' returned Steve. 'You're better than a servant to that woman, for she'd never get anyone to work as hard as you, an' she ain't a-goin' to let you leave. I heard a tale from Long Jim Taylor, as worked in the mine with Father, an' it's that as brought me home now. Father was drunk one day, an' let out about a mean trick as he'd played on your folks, an' you, too, for the matter o' that; an' though he denied it afterwards, I'm sure it's true, an' I'll talk my mind to him afore I'm done.'

Steve looked so furious, Jack felt almost frightened as he asked timidly, 'What was it, Steve? Tell me what he has done.'

'Well, then, kid, listen!' said the cowboy. 'He never wrote to say Mother was dead, but gave your folks to understand as it was *you* as was buried; said as how you'd had a bad fall an' died terrible sudden, an' there was no time to get 'em over.'

Jack's eyes had grown rounder and larger with horrified surprise as he listened to Steve's story.

'How wicked of him!' he cried. 'But, Steve, I wonder he wasn't afraid o' their hearin' about it.'

'Aye, and so do I,' answered his cousin. 'I believe, however, he has been meanin' to move to some other part o' the country an' take you. Your folks are settled a long way off, an', thinkin' as you're dead, they'll probably never come back here again, so he'd be pretty safe.'

'What shall I do, Steve?' asked Jack piteously. 'I'll ask Uncle Mat about it this very night.'

'Don't make him angry,' returned the cowboy kindly; 'but tell him you have heard what he's done, an' you are bound to go to your folks somehow. I'll tell him what I think when I meet him in the street. I ain't a-goin' near that house with that woman there, so if you want to see me, come here to-morrow evening.'

'I will, Steve. Good-night.' And Jack darted away.

Jack felt very brave and determined when he left his cousin, but his courage failed a little as he approached the house. The door was open, and as he drew near he heard his uncle and his wife talking loudly, and caught his own name.

'I'm not such a fool as to let Jack go back to them,' he heard his uncle say, 'in spite o' what Jim Taylor wrote sayin' he'd told Steve, an' the lad was so angry he was comin' over to make things right for Jack. The boy's worth fifty cents a day to us, an'll make more afore long; so the sooner we clear out o' here, an' make for a part o' the country where we ain't known the better. I guess we needn't let Steve into the secret o' our whereabouts, if we can get off afore he comes.'

Jack's pulses were beating fast as he listened to this speech. He shook with indignation, and at last, unable to stand it any longer, he rushed into the kitchen, exclaiming: 'Uncle Mat, I heard what you were sayin', an' I must go to my folks. I thought as they'd forgot me, an' now I know they haven't, but you've told 'em a lie.'

A look almost of fear crossed the man's face at first when Jack burst in, but it was quickly replaced by a hard and cruel smile.

'Listenin', were you?' he said angrily, 'Well, listeners hear no good o' themsel's, an' it's a mighty bad habit to give way to. Perhaps a touch o' the whip will make you forget what wasn't meant for you to hear.'

'Oh! don't beat me, please, Uncle Mat,' cried poor Jack.

But there was no mercy to be had this time, and when his punishment was over, Jack, quite exhausted, made his way to his miserable bed, which was in a shed adjoining the house. Through the thin wooden walls he could hear the two Byrnes talking and planning to leave Longview as soon as possible, and he felt sick with fright as he heard them arrange to take him too.

'Oh dear! oh dear!' murmured the boy sadly. 'What will become o' me? If Steve don't save me I don't know what they'll do to me. But I'm glad I didn't say I'd seen him.'

In spite of his aching bones, Steve's assurance that his parents had *not* forgotten him, as he feared, was a great comfort to the lonely little lad, and, thinking hopefully of his interview with Steve the next day, he fell asleep and forgot his troubles.

CHAPTER III.

JACK'S RESOLUTION.

Jack could hardly get up the next morning, he was so stiff and bruised from the beating his uncle had given him, but he was not the kind of boy to moan and groan in bed. He dragged himself up and dressed, and after washing and dipping his head into cool water in the back yard, he felt better, and soon got to work, lighting the fire and getting the things ready for breakfast. He rather dreaded meeting his Uncle Mat, but although the man looked surly enough, he did not allude to the occurrence of the previous evening, and after breakfast, to Jack's relief, he left the house. The day seemed longer than usual, but Jack finished his work at last, and hastened away to the place where he and Steve had arranged to meet.

His cousin was already waiting there, lying on the ground, lazily watching his horse quietly grazing the herbage near. He hailed Jack heartily.

'Well! how did you get on last night?'

'Very badly, Steve,' returned the boy, and related how he had been treated. Great was Steve's indignation when he heard what had taken place and looked at Jack's bruised back.

'Poor little lad!' he said pityingly. 'He has been hard on you, I can see. He licked me once in a

rage, an' I wouldn't stay a day longer in his house, for I hadn't done wrong. I saw him to-day, an' we had a terrible row over you. I gave him a piece o' my mind about the way he was keepin' you from your folks under false pretences.'

'Steve!' cried Jack suddenly, a ray of joy crossing his face, 'I've got a plan in my head. You ran away from home, an' why shouldn't I?'

'Aye! but I was a big fellow over sixteen, an' you're but a little un, not much more than a baby yet,' returned Steve.

'But I shouldn't be afraid to try,' declared Jack stoutly. 'I might get lifts from folks goin' along the road.'

'You're right there,' exclaimed Steve. 'It isn't such a bad idea after all. You're a plucky boy, for I never thought as you had the grit to make a bolt on it. If you're sure you aren't frightened to go so far alone, I do believe as I might be able to help you a bit on your way.'

'Could you, Steve?' cried Jack. 'Oh! do tell me how.'

'Well! There's a waggon here now belongin' to some miners who are on their way to the "Rockies" to prospect. I know one o' them, an' it would be a grand scheme if he would let you go along with him. Shall I ask him?'

'Please do,' said Jack. 'I'm ready to start any minute they want to go, an' I promise I won't give 'em any trouble. Oh, Steve, I must get away from here!'

'All right! I'll try an' fix it for you,' returned Steve. 'Wouldn't it be a surprise for your folks if they saw you walk in one fine day? I don't quite know where they live, except that they're somewhere on the Cochetopa Creek, but I reckon if you do get that far as you'll find 'em. I'll see the miner to-morrow. He's campin' t'other side o' the village. I guess he won't object to takin' you, as I'll tell him you're a handy little chap. I believe I'd have gone an' seen you safe there myself, but I'm goin' to look after cattle down on the Huerfano.'

'You are good to me, Steve!' cried Jack, throwing his arms round the cowboy's neck and hugging him. 'I thought you'd save me somehow, an' I do love you so.'

'There! That'll do, young un,' said Steve good-naturedly. 'Go home an' keep quiet, for if that woman gets wind o' our plans, it'll be all up, for she ain't goin' to give up a slavey like you. But, look here! How shall I let you know if he'll take you?' as Jack was turning to go.

He stopped, and after a little more talking it was decided that Steve was to interview the miner on Jack's behalf, and if the man agreed to let the boy go with him to the mountains, Steve was to ride past his father's house the next morning and wave a red handkerchief as a sign of success.

They parted in great spirits, for both were too young to understand what a great undertaking they were contemplating for a little child. Jack had no notion of the distance it was to his parents' new home, and Steve was rather vague about it. Jack's one idea was to start off and find his father and mother somehow.

The next day Mrs. Byrne was in a very bad temper and was a great trial to poor Jack. Nothing he could do was right in her eyes, and being in a state of anxious excitement himself over the result of Steve's mission, he made some trifling blunders which brought swift correction upon him, and many a time his ear tingled from a blow from her hand.

He was busily engaged in washing the kitchen floor when he heard a horse coming rapidly along the dusty road. He knew what it was, and, unable to resist the temptation, he jumped up from his knees and rushed to the door. Unluckily for him, Mrs. Byrne came in from the garden at that moment and met him at the doorway. Seeing him, as she thought, neglecting his work, she seized him by the arm, and pulling him back roughly into the kitchen, said angrily, 'You lazy imp, the moment my back's turned you leave the washin'! I thought your uncle had taught you a lesson two nights ago; an', mark you, I'll give you another hidin' as you'll remember if I catch you shirkin' your work.'

But Jack cared nothing for her threatening words now. In the one glimpse he had got through the doorway he had seen Steve galloping past, and waving in his hand the red handkerchief of success.

Hope sprang high in the boy's heart, and with a bright smile on his face he set to work once more at the dirty floor, scrubbing with a will. Nothing put him out again that day. He carried pail after pail of water through the hot sun without a sigh, although it blistered his hands, for there was a great thought of joy to cheer him on: 'The last time for her!'

When he met Steve in the evening he heard the waggon was to start at daybreak, and Jeff Ralston, the miner, was willing to take him as far as the mountains if he were there in time, but on no consideration would he wait one moment for him.

'I'll be there, never fear!' exclaimed Jack joyfully.

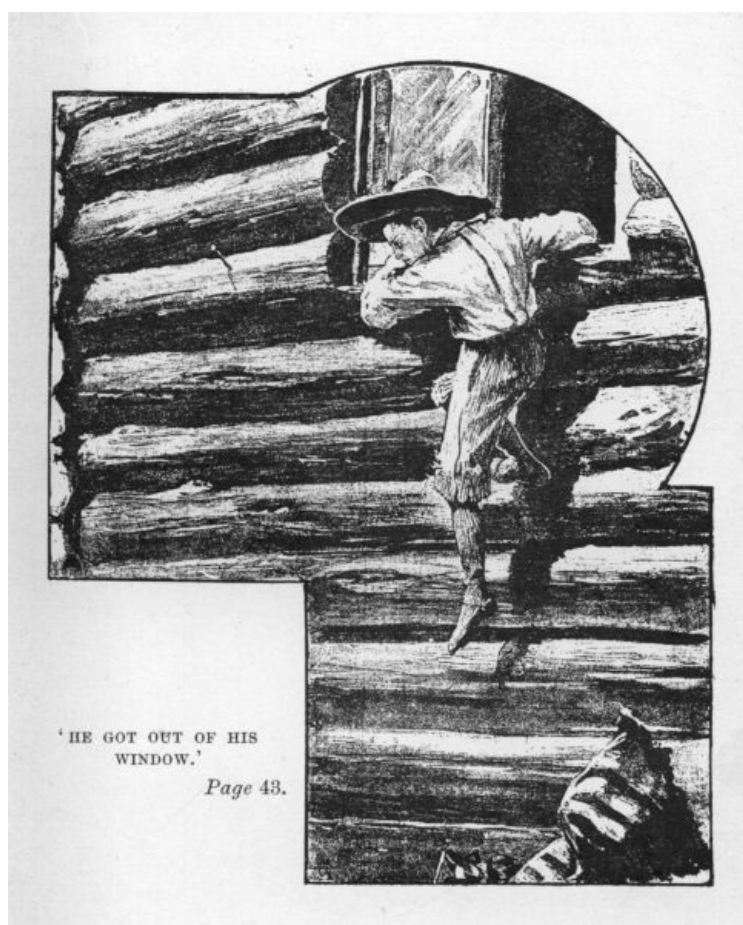
'This Jeff seems a rough, good-natured fellow,' went on Steve, 'an' he'll be kind to you, I guess, if he don't get drunk. He's like my father when he's drunk: he ain't no use at all; but there isn't much to drink on the prairie, so I expect you'll be all right.'

Jack was quite grateful enough to please Steve, although the little boy did not know that his kind-hearted cousin had given the miner some of his own hard-earned dollars to secure his goodwill towards the youthful traveller.

'You'd better get home an' to bed now,' said Steve at last, 'or you'll miss getting up in time. I hope you'll get through safe, Jack, an' perhaps I'll come an' look you up myself some day.'

'Good-bye, Steve; I won't ever forget you, an' I'll tell Father an' Mother how you helped me off to see them,' said Jack gratefully, and after an affectionate farewell the cousins parted.

Jack went to bed directly he got into the house, but never a wink of sleep did he get. He lay quite still for hours, until the deep breathing through the thin partitions told him that the rest of the family were slumbering soundly. Then he arose and dressed himself. Making no noise, and carrying his boots and a blanket which was his own property, he quietly got out of his window, and in a few minutes was hurrying along the road towards the outskirts of the village in the direction of the miners' camp.



'HE GOT OUT OF HIS WINDOW.'

It was a starlight night, which enabled him before very long to make out a big prairie schooner a little way ahead of him, with four horses tethered near by long ropes. Close up under the waggons he saw the figures of two men sleeping on the ground, and not wishing to disturb them, he lay down near them to wait until they awoke. But his long hours of wakefulness had tired him out and he fell asleep.

He was aroused by a stir in camp to find preparations going on for breakfast. He felt chilly from lying on the ground, and was not sorry to see a nice fire of sticks burning near him. A man was putting a kettle of water on to boil, and as Jack rose up and approached him, he welcomed him in a gruff but not unkindly way.

'How do, kid? I reckoned I'd leave you to sleep it out? Are you the young un as Steve Byrne came to inquire about? You want to go along with our outfit as far as the Range, don't you?'

'Yes, please,' answered Jack. 'I'm goin' to my father. He's way over in the San Luis Valley, up on the Cochetopa Creek.'

'*Cochetopa Creek!*' ejaculated the man. 'Why, boy, that's over two hundred an' fifty miles from here, an' you'll have to cross the "Rockies," too. Say, Lem,' he called out, 'here's an

enterprising young un. He's startin' off alone for Cochetopa Creek. What d'you think o' that?'

'He'll never get there,' returned his companion, who had been looking after the horses and came up at that moment.

'You're right, Lem, I do believe,' said the first speaker. 'Just listen to me, boy! A kid like you can never travel so far. Take my advice an' go back to the folks as look after you here.'

'No, I won't,' answered Jack sturdily; 'I've started now, an' I ain't going back for no one. If you won't take me I'll go on an' walk. My father sent for me, but my uncle won't let me go. I guess he shan't stop me now.'

'Well, you're a plucky kid, as sure as my name's Jeff Ralston,' declared the miner.

'How soon is grub to be ready?' asked Lem impatiently. 'I'd better harness up the team while I'm waitin', as we want to get away soon.'

'All right. I'll call you when I've made some oatmeal porridge. Here, kid, go to the waggon an' get out the tin cups an' plates.'

Jack obeyed, and was so quick getting out the things, he pleased Jeff, who remarked to him, when he saw Lem was safe out of earshot: 'Look here! Ye're a sharp lad, an' I'm glad I promised Steve Byrne as I'd do my best for you. All the same, I'm a bit afraid as to how Lem'll take it, for he can't abide kids, an' I haven't told him as you're a-comin' along with us. He's my mate an' a terribly cranky chap.'

'I won't bother him a bit,' cried Jack, delighted to find one of his escort inclined to be so friendly, and hoping to be able in time to please the doubtful Lem too.

Jack confessed to himself he did not like the man's looks at all, and when Jeff at breakfast intimated to him that he intended to take 'the kid' along, he only received a disapproving 'Humph' in return. Jack, distrusting the dark, sullen face, determined to have as little as possible to do with him while he formed one of their party.

CHAPTER IV.

JACK STARTS ON HIS JOURNEY.

The sun had not risen far above the horizon when the waggon started. The men very carefully extinguished every ember of their camp fire before they left the place, by pouring buckets of water over it, as the laws were very strict on that point. Many of the terrible prairie fires are traced from time to time to sparks left by careless people camping out, which, blown by the wind, ignite the dry grass near, and start the destructive flames which spread and rush on for miles, carrying ruin in their track.

Lem sat in front of the waggon, driving the four horses, while Jeff was beside him, both smoking. As Jack was afraid of being pursued, Jeff suggested it would be safer for him to ride inside the waggon for the first day or two. They had only got a few miles from Longview, when Jeff perceived a horseman tearing after them, evidently bent on overtaking them.

'Lie down, boy!' he called through the waggon opening to Jack. 'We're followed already. Get under the blankets.'

Poor Jack obeyed, trembling with fright, and not daring to look out and see who it was. How relieved he felt when the horse came up close behind and he heard Steve's cheery voice hailing them: 'Hi, stop!'

'Hold on, Lem, for a bit,' cried Jeff. 'It's the young un he wants to see.'

Lem pulled up with evident reluctance.

'Have you got the kid?' asked Steve anxiously.

'Yes, there he be,' returned Jeff, as Jack's happy face looked out through the canvas curtains; 'I guess we can take care o' him for a spell of the way; but though he's got his head screwed on right, an' he has plenty of pluck, I doubt if he'll ever get as far as Cochetopa Creek.'

'He's bound to go,' said Steve, 'an' I leave him now in *your* trust, Jeff.'

Steve could not help laying a slight emphasis on the *your*, when speaking to Jeff, for there was no doubt his face had fallen considerably when he perceived that Lem Adams was Jeff's

mate. He had known *two* men were going, but Jeff Ralston was the only one he had seen the day before, when he went over to the camp to negotiate on Jack's behalf.

He had not thought of asking the other man's name, and now he was sorry enough to find that Lem was one of Jack's companions. Some months before, Steve had seen a good deal of Lem Adams in a mining town, and disliked him intensely, having found him a bad, untrustworthy man. Lem hated Steve, too, and the scowl on his face was not pleasant to see, as he looked at the young cowboy.

Jack had jumped out of the back of the waggon upon Steve's arrival, and now the latter pulled his horse round to where the boy stood, and leaning from his saddle, he whispered, so that the others could not hear, 'Look out as you don't vex that black-lookin' fellow. He's a mean chap, and hates me, so I'm feared as he'll plague ye if he gets the chance; but Jeff'll see as ye ain't bullied, if he don't get drunk. Take this, lad; it may be useful; but don't let on as you have it.' He slipped a small paper packet into Jack's hand, and shook his head warningly to stop his words of thanks.

Then calling out, 'Good-bye, Jack. Keep a good heart up, an' good luck go with you!' he put spurs to his horse and galloped away.

Jack stood gazing after him until he was lost to sight in a cloud of dust; then, holding the packet tight in his hand, he remounted the waggon, and they moved on once more over the dusty road.

It was August, and the hot sun poured down its relentless rays on the prairie schooner and its occupants travelling slowly on; but Jack never grumbled. He was happy enough, knowing that he had started out on his long journey; and what cared he for the heat when he found himself moving along the same road over which his dear father and mother had travelled before?

But to return for a time to Longview. Jack's absence from his uncle's house was not noticed until breakfast-time. When he was first missed, the Byrnes concluded he had gone to look for the cow, as there was no morning's milk in the place where Jack usually left it. A few hours later they were surprised to hear Roanie lowing near the yard gate, and knew that the wandering animal must have actually come back of her own accord to be milked. But where was Jack? Roanie's arrival caused quite a stir. Mat Byrne began to think something was wrong, and he and the two boys sallied forth to look for the truant in the village.

They asked various people, but no one had seen Jack, and though they hunted every spot they could not find him. His uncle got very angry, and vowed to pay him out when he caught him again.

Luckily for Jack, his uncle never once supposed so young a boy would think of running away, and he made sure that by evening Jack would return to his house hungry and repentant.

He at first thought he would find Jack with his own son, Steve, and therefore was greatly surprised to see the latter riding carelessly about the village all day. Steve rode past him, giving him an indifferent nod, and his father little thought how closely the cowboy was watching every movement he made.

Never for one moment did Mat Byrne connect Jack's disappearance with the departure of the two miners that morning, and when it dawned on the searchers the next day, after having ransacked every shed and building in Longview, that they must look further afield, for the missing boy, our fugitive was too far away to fear recapture. Byrne made many inquiries from incoming travellers as to whether they had seen a lad anywhere along the different roads; but, thanks to Jeff's precautions, not a soul passing their waggon had seen the small boy hiding under the blankets; and, unable to get any clue to the direction Jack had gone in, his uncle was at last obliged to give up the search.

For three or four days Jack was very careful to keep out of sight; but as they got farther away from Longview, he felt safer and breathed more freely. He was always glad when they stopped to camp for the night, as his legs got very cramped in the waggon. If possible, they halted each time near some spring or creek of water, where they could get plenty for man and beast to drink.

Everyone had his own work allotted to him, and in this way, knowing what each one had to do, much confusion was saved when forming the camps. Lem looked after the four horses, unharnessed them, watered them, gave them their feeds, and picketed them out where the grass grew most plentifully. Jeff was cook, and Jack helped them both. Jeff found him most useful. He collected fir cones and bits of piñon or birch-bark to start the fires with, and kept them going with sticks; he filled the camp-kettle from the spring, while Jeff fried the beefsteak or sausage-meat; and even Lem looked less sullen when he found how much quicker he got his meals than before Jack came.

Always after they had eaten their food Jack washed up the things in a bucket, and put them tidily by in their places in the waggon, while the men lounged by the fire and smoked. Jack soon got used to the life, although it seemed very strange to him to find himself every night farther away from Longview, and getting nearer and nearer to the grand mountains which they could just see stretching along in a huge range miles ahead of them.

Jeff liked Jack better every day, and asked him a great deal about his people. One day he questioned him about his mother, and being a subject dear to the boy's heart, he launched forth into a glowing description of her, which quickly showed the rough miner what a good influence she had exercised over her little son.

'Well,' said he slowly, 'I understand you now, my lad. Your mother was one worth having. But you say she taught you prayers an' hymns. I don't care about prayers, but I'm powerful fond o' singin'. Could you give us one o' your mother's hymns now?'

They were gathered round the fire after supper, but Lem seemed half asleep as Jack and Jeff talked. In answer to the latter's questions, the boy said:

'Aye, of course I can. I'll sing you the one as father liked best, for he used to sing it when he was freightin' an' campin' out as we're doin' now.'

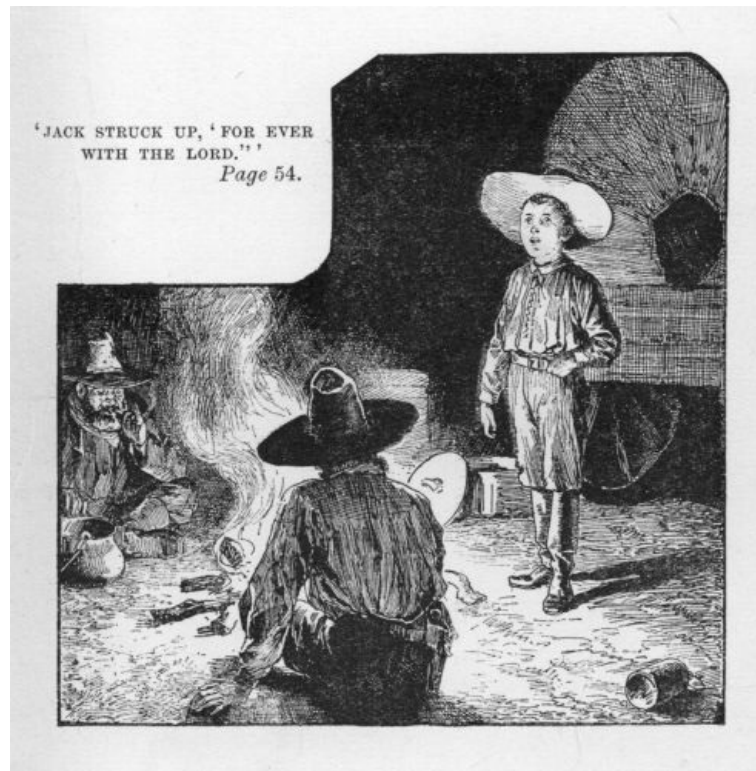
'Give it us, my lad,' said Jeff, as he refilled his pipe, and prepared to listen.

Jack had a sweet young voice, and, possessing a good ear for music, he had quickly picked up the tunes of his favourite hymns from his parents, who both sang well.

Delighted to please his new friend, he struck up 'For ever with the Lord,' repeating the last half of the first verse as a chorus after all the verses. Fresh and clear his voice rang out, and when he came to the last two lines—

'Yet nightly pitch my moving tent
A day's march nearer home'—

he seemed to throw his whole energy into the words.



'JACK STRUCK UP, "FOR EVER WITH THE LORD."

The hymn struck home to rough Jeff, and when it was ended he said:

'That's the way, lad. It's almost as if them words were written for such rovin' chaps as us. Don't stop. I like it. Give us another.'

Jack was only too glad to go on. He sang his mother's favourite, 'My God, my Father, while I stray,' and followed it by many more, until his voice got tired. Sometimes he forgot a verse here and there, but he remembered enough to show Jeff that he must have sung the hymns day after day, to know them so well by heart.

Lem had sat silently on the far side of the camp fire, and as Jack ceased singing, he said sneeringly: 'Say, Jeff, you ain't been much o' a hymn-fancier afore to-night, I reckon.'

'No, I ain't,' returned the miner quietly; 'more's the pity, perhaps. If I'd had such a mother to teach *me*, I dare say I'd have lived a deal straighter life than I have done. I don't remember my mother. She died when I was a babby, but if she'd been like Jack's, I reckon I'd have gone as far to see her as he's agoin'.'

Lem grunted. In spite of himself he had liked listening to the boy's singing, but the *words* that

he sang had made no impression on him.

Jeff always sent Jack early to bed, for the unusual fatigue made the little fellow feel very tired and weary towards night. He slept in the waggon, for Jeff had said after the first day, 'Jest roll yersel' up cosy in there. Lem an' I are used to sleepin' on the ground an' like it best, but it's different for a kid like you.'

Jack soon became attached to the good-natured miner, and he felt as long as he was present he need not feel in the least afraid of Lem troubling him.

CHAPTER V.

JACK GOES IN SEARCH OF NIGGER.

For nearly three weeks the horses dragged the waggon slowly on over the prairie, and although it was very hot and dusty, Jack was as happy as a sandboy.

For some days they had made very short journeys, as one of the horses had rubbed a sore place on its shoulder, and consequently refused to pull at all. Lem at last had to tie it on at the back of the waggon, and arrange the other three animals in unicorn fashion—that is, one in front of two. This, of course, delayed their progress a good deal.

Jack was delighted with the novelty of all he saw, and a band of antelopes bounding away in the distance nearly drove him wild with excitement. One evening they came upon some cowboys who had just bunched up a huge herd of cattle for the night. There were nearly three thousand beasts, and it was a wonderful sight to see how a few men managed to keep so many cattle in check. The cowboys were stationed on their horses at near distances all round the herd like so many sentinels.

If an animal broke away, a horseman was after it at lightning speed. With a swift turn of his arm he would throw the lariat with a true aim over the horns of the runaway, and the sagacious horse, knowing what was expected from it, would twist round on his hind-legs, and the jerk on the rope would bring the fugitive down to the ground. Sometimes the cowboys galloped round the running beast, and headed it back to the herd without using the lariat or long leather rope.

Jack and his companions camped for the night close to the cowboys, and Jack took a great interest in them for Steve's sake. They relieved each other like guards all through the night.

The way they rode was wonderful in Jack's eyes, and their horses were so well trained, they turned to the right or left as their riders bent their bodies in the direction in which they wanted to go, and if the reins were thrown over an animal's head it would stand quite still.

There was great work next morning, as the cowboys made an early start, and the bustle was most exciting to Jack as he watched them standing or sitting in groups round their grub-waggon eating their breakfast. Then, directly after, they tightened their saddles, and before long the gigantic herd of cattle moved slowly on. Such a bellowing they made, and the dust rose in a huge cloud behind them, in which they were soon lost to sight. Their grub-waggon followed them, and shortly after Lem got his horses harnessed, and he, Jeff, and Jack, taking their places in their prairie schooner, rolled on once more towards the mountains.

These mountains, which were getting nearer every day, were a fresh source of wonder to Jack. He had lived all his life on the flat prairie where there was not even a hill to be seen, and he was speechless with surprise as he gazed on the snow-capped peaks in front of him, stretching up into the blue sky. Lower down the sides of the mountains the dark forests of trees spread for miles, and Jeff pointed out to him where the deep ravines or cañons could be seen where the mountain creeks rushed down to the valleys, fringed all along their banks with quaking aspens and cotton-wood trees.

How pleased Jack felt to think that his new home must be somewhere in sight of these glorious mountains, and already the air they breathed seemed very different from the hot, close atmosphere at Longview.

One evening they made their camp for the night just outside a Mexican village. It was a very queer-looking place, and Jack stared about him in astonishment. He had seen Mexicans passing through Longview occasionally, and now he had come to a village where no one but Mexicans lived. The houses were not built of wood, like those at Longview, but were made of a kind of mud called adobe. This adobe was shaped into bricks and baked. The houses looked so funny. Some were quite round like beehives, and it amused Jack very much when he noticed that many of the doors were halfway up the front wall of the houses, and when people wanted to go in and out, they went up and down ladders placed to reach the openings.

That evening, after supper, Lem persuaded Jeff to walk into the village, leaving Jack as usual to wash up the things. The boy felt a mistrust of Lem when he saw how maliciously triumphant he looked as he strolled away from the camp accompanied by Jeff. He watched them as far as the village and then returned to his work. When it was finished he sat contentedly down by the fire to wait for them. It got later and later, but his companions did not return, and at last, unable to keep awake any longer, he went to bed.

He fell into a troubled sleep, from which he was roused by hearing men's voices. Starting up, he listened and heard his companions returning. They were singing and shouting in a wild, boisterous way that struck terror to Jack's heart, for he knew from such sounds that they must have been drinking heavily. Their loud, rough voices frightened him, and he lay very still inside the waggon for fear they should see him. He could tell Lem was in a quarrelsome mood, and trembled as they hunted about in the back of the waggon for their blankets, swearing and growling all the time. At last they sank into heavy slumbers, but all sleep had fled from Jack's eyes at the fresh trouble that had arisen for him. The two men were evidently given to drink, the awful curse in the West, and had taken the opportunity of a first halt at a village to satisfy their craving for it. It was a terrible thought for poor Jack, for he knew, from what they had said, there must be many mining camps ahead of them, and of course in such places there would be great temptations for men like them, and his heart sank at the idea of being alone with such companions.

He lay awake for hours, but dropped into a kind of doze towards morning. He rose early and moved very quietly, fearful of disturbing Jeff and Lem after their night's carousal. He went to water the horses, and to his surprise found one had disappeared.

It had evidently dragged its picket-rope from the pegs that secured it, doubtless frightened by the noise in camp the previous night. It was the horse that had been led behind the waggon on account of its sore shoulder, and it probably was fresher than the other three horses and more likely to run away. It was not shod, and unfortunately had made no impression on the short, dry herbage, to show Jack which way it had gone. He wandered away a short distance from the camp looking for the fugitive, but, unable to see anything of it, he returned, and began to prepare breakfast.

Just as it was ready Lem roused up, and came grumbling towards the fire. Jack deemed it wiser not to speak to him, as he looked very cross indeed, and the boy could not help wishing his friend Jeff would also wake up, as he always felt safer in his presence.

They silently ate their breakfast, until Lem, looking over towards the group of horses, asked suddenly:

'Where's Nigger?'

'He was right enough when I went to bed last night,' returned Jack, 'but I found him gone this mornin'. I expect he dragged his picket-rope and got away.'

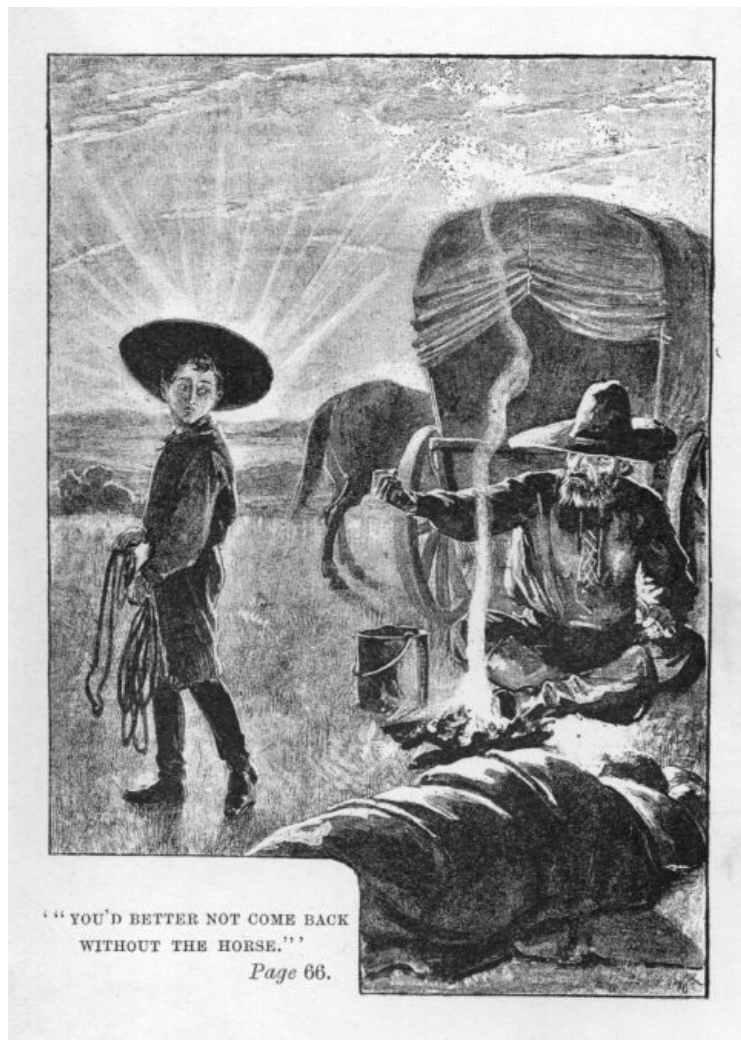
Lem darted an angry look at the boy. 'I believe you loosed him yoursel',' he exclaimed furiously, 'to pay Jeff and me out for goin' for a bit of a spree into the village!'

'I didn't,' cried Jack indignantly; 'I wouldn't do such a mean trick nohow.'

'I don't believe you, there!' declared Lem insultingly. 'I can't abide kids, an' I wouldn't trust one of 'em anywhere. I was mad when I heard as Jeff was bent on bringin' you along with us.'

In vain Jack protested he knew nothing about the horse's escape. Lem's temper was bad from the effects of his drinking bout, and as ill-luck would have it, the boy was the victim of it.

'Look here, kid,' he said sternly, 'it was your business to see to them creatures when we were gone away, an' I guess you'll skip out an' find that there Nigger as quick as you can. Not a step on with us do you go, till he's brought back again!'



“YOU'D BETTER NOT COME BACK WITHOUT THE HORSE.”

'I've looked all round the camp this mornin',' said Jack dolefully, 'but I haven't seen no tracks of him. Would you let me get on Yankee Boy an' ride over to that clump of trees over there?'

'No! I guess you can walk that far,' returned Lem, 'an' I reckon you'd better not come back again without the horse. I mayhap would like to ride Yankee Boy mysel' an' have a look round.'

Poor Jack! He looked wistfully at the recumbent figure of Jeff, who was still in a deep slumber, and then, seeing there was no help for it, bravely put the best face he could on the matter, and set forth. He carried a long leather rope to catch the horse with, and walked towards the trees, which were about a couple of miles from the camp.

As he approached them, he noticed they were growing at the entrance of a deep ravine that ran back towards the mountains, with a creek running through it. It was a very rough place; boulders lay strewed about, but here and there were patches of grass which looked so much fresher and greener than that which grew on the prairie, that Jack noticed the difference. It also struck him that the grass looked as if it had been freshly trampled, and in a moment the idea flashed into his mind that Nigger had, without doubt, wandered up the ravine. Jack never hesitated a moment, but started to follow up the tracks he saw so plainly. It was a pleasant change from the hot prairie, as the trees shaded him from the sun, and he climbed steadily on over the stony path, hoping every minute to come on the truant. The ravine ran between towering walls of rock, covered with piñon and oak-scrub, and completely hid all the adjoining prairie from view.

At last Jack turned a corner of rock, and saw ahead a small band of bronchos or prairie horses. He hurried on, hoping to find the object of his search, but, alas! Nigger was not amongst them, and his weary toil up the long ravine had been on a false trail, after all! The wild ponies were scared at the sight of a human being appearing in the lonely cañon, and scampered away up the steep sides of the precipice like goats, leaving Jack gazing sadly after them. It was a great disappointment, and tears were not far from the boy's eyes as, tired out, he sat down on a rock for a rest. It was no use pursuing the hunt for Nigger any higher up there, and seeing it would be quicker to retrace his steps than climb up the sides of the rock, he turned to make his way down again. It was long past noon by the time he had scrambled out of the ravine and stood once more on the prairie.

There was no time to lose, and with many misgivings as to the reception he would receive from the indignant Lem, Jack hurried back as fast as he could towards the camp. He was afraid

that his long and, alas! useless delay might also have vexed his friend Jeff, which was a thing to be avoided, if possible.

Ahead of him he saw the quaint Mexican village, but something strange had taken place in his absence! What could have happened? Quite puzzled, he rubbed his eyes and ran on faster towards the place where they had camped, and reaching it, could hardly believe his own eyes when he saw nothing of the prairie waggon, or the horses, or the camp he had left in the morning!

CHAPTER VI.

JACK IS DESERTED.

Jack stood on the forsaken camping-ground, and the truth dawned slowly on him—his companions had gone on and left him behind! He noticed the still damp embers of the extinguished fire, and though there was every indication of their recent presence, not a sign could he see of the two men.

He was very indignant at this unkind way of treating him.

'That's Lem's doing,' he muttered. 'He's done it on purpose to spite me. I don't care much; they'll go very slow, an' I guess I can overtake them by night. I hope Jeff will be right again by then.'

All the same, it gave him a feeling of forlornness to know he was absolutely alone on the prairie. He felt very hungry, and of course there was nothing to eat, as all the provisions had gone on in the waggon.

How glad he now felt that he had a little money of his own—the precious packet Steve had given him. He took a quarter-dollar (about one shilling in our English money) out of his store and returned the rest to a safe place inside his shirt. He knew his road lay through the Mexican village, and decided to follow it, hoping to see a shop where he could buy some bread.

Lem and Jeff had picked up a few Mexican words, but, of course, Jack neither understood nor could speak any of the language. He lost no time in entering the village, trusting to make someone understand what he wanted; but he had not proceeded a couple of hundred yards up the main street of the place when he found himself surrounded by a crowd of Mexican boys, all shouting at him in a tongue he did not know.

He tried at first to show them he was hungry, by pointing to his mouth, but they only jeered and laughed, instead of helping him. He got out of patience at last, and endeavoured to make his way through the noisy band towards the centre of the village; but the boys pushed him back each time, evidently thinking it great sport to tease an unprotected little lad.

Jack appealed in English to two Mexican men who were lounging near, but they seemed to enjoy watching the group of cruel boys tormenting him. Jack was no coward, although he was so young, and after receiving a hard push from a bigger boy than himself, he lost his temper, and hit his opponent a good blow between the eyes.

This was the signal for a general outburst. The Mexicans are a fierce, passionate race, and the boys retaliated on poor Jack by all setting on him at once. Jack fought hard, and dealt out many a telling blow; but they were too many and strong for him, and at last he found himself being hustled out of the village where he had entered it, while his tormentors formed a long line to prevent his coming in again. Bleeding and bruised, Jack felt too worn out and faint from hunger and the fight to attempt another tussle with the enemy, so, like a wise boy, he deemed 'discretion the better part of valour,' and skirting the village, he recommenced his weary trudge along the road leading towards the mountains.



"JACK FOUGHT HARD, BUT THEY WERE TOO MANY FOR HIM."

The range loomed up at no great distance in front of him, and the peaks towered up so high, they seemed to pierce the bright blue sky. But as the afternoon lengthened, Jack noticed that the sky was assuming a very threatening aspect. Big clouds came rolling up over the mountains, making them look almost black in the shadow. Jack went on bravely, hoping to reach some place of shelter before the storm broke, but it was getting rapidly darker, and his heart began to sink at the prospect ahead.

Blacker and blacker it grew around him. Bright flashes of lightning shot from the murky clouds, followed by loud, crashing thunder, which shook the ground, and echoed and re-echoed through the rocky cañons. In a short time Jack was in the midst of a bad specimen of a Rocky Mountain thunderstorm, and no shelter near him. The poor lad was terrified, and crouched near the ground, while the lightning played about him and the thunder roared overhead.

'Oh, dear! oh, dear! I'm so frightened!' cried the little fellow; and then he remembered his mother's words: 'Ask God to take care of us until we meet again'—an injunction he had followed every day since she left. Now he knelt down and prayed to God, Who rules the storms, asking Him to send him help and keep him safe, and he felt comforted in his fear. Soon the rain began to come down in torrents, and Jack was quickly drenched to the skin. The rain, however, broke the power of the storm, and before long the thunder-clouds rolled away and the sky began to clear.

Chilled to the bone and tired out, Jack rose from his crouching position and moved on again, not knowing whither he was going. He had wandered off the road, and was aimlessly walking on over the prairie.

He began to feel very queer. First he shivered, and his teeth chattered with cold, and a few minutes after he was burning hot all over. His head ached and throbbed as if it would burst, and at times a feeling of giddiness came over him. He tried to think what direction he ought to move in, but everything was buzzing and humming in his brain. He thought he heard people shouting after him, and suddenly imagined he could distinguish his Uncle Mat's harsh voice calling him. How it seemed to ring through his head! It struck terror into his weak, over-strained mind, and he rushed on wildly into the gathering darkness. Poor Jack! It was only the fatigue and hunger, combined with the soaking he had endured, that was bringing on an attack of fever, and all these pursuing noises were purely imaginary. He ran on, trying to get away from the mocking sounds, which seemed to grow louder and nearer every minute.

'They'll catch me, I'm feared,' he moaned in an agony of mind as he tore on, but suddenly his headlong career was stopped. His foot tripped, and he fell heavily, knocking his head against a

stone.

'Oh! Mother, Mother, save me!' he shrieked; 'he'll get me and take me back!' And the next moment he lost all consciousness.

In the meantime our readers may wonder how it came to pass that Jeff had deserted his little friend, and in order to tell you I must go back to the time when Jack left the camp to look for the horse. Soon after he had set out for the clump of trees, Lem had saddled Yankee Boy, and after riding a few miles, came upon Nigger, whom he at once secured and brought back to camp. He then harnessed up the four horses ready to start, and as Jack did not return, he grew very impatient, and while idling about doing nothing an evil thought took possession of him. What a good opportunity he had now to pay off an old score against Steve Byrne by leaving Jack behind! It was a cruel thing to think of doing, but Lem was an unprincipled fellow who cared little who suffered as long as he got his revenge.

He quickly finished his preparations for starting, the last being to hoist Jeff into the waggon, where he immediately dozed off again, quite unconscious of what was going on. All day he remained half-stupefied, and as Lem drove the horses a long way before making a halt, it was not far off evening when Jeff discovered what had happened.

The indignation it roused in him cleared his torpid brain as if by magic.

'D'ye mean to say as you've been and left the young un behind?' he demanded.

'That's so,' returned Lem coolly; 'I found as he'd been at some tricks, so I guessed we'd get rid of him. I sent him to look for Nigger, and skipped out afore he got back.'

'I don't believe it,' declared Jeff. 'Jack wasn't a kid to play tricks, and I call it a crying shame to desert him. You daren't have done it if I'd known what was goin' on. I blame mysel' for it most, and I'm agoing right back to look for him.'

'Eat your supper first, man, and don't be a fool,' said Lem, somewhat staggered at Jeff's concern over his desertion of Jack; but the miner heeded him not. He mounted one of the tired horses and rode all the weary way back to the place they had camped at, but not a sign did he see of the boy. On the way he endured the whole of the awful storm, which he hardly noticed. In his anxiety he pressed on, arriving late in the Mexican village, where he made inquiries, but received such purposely conflicting answers to his questions about the way the boy had gone, that he got quite confused, and in the end had to turn back and retrace his steps. He stopped at short intervals to shout, but no reply came out of the darkness, and at last he got back to the waggon utterly wearied out, and as unhappy as a man could be.

Lena's surly voice sounded out from the blankets asking, 'Well, I suppose you've got the precious kid all right, haven't you?'

'No, I haven't,' returned Jeff savagely; 'and I'm feared as he's come to grief somewhere, for there ain't a house 'twixt here and the village for him to shelter in. I'll never forgive mysel' nor you either for this day's work, and the sooner we part company the better I'm pleased. I knew you were a cranky chap, but I didn't reckon ye were as mean as this.'

Lem angrily growled out something about making such a fuss over a bit of a kid, but poor Jeff's conscience was at work, and he blamed himself over and over again for Jack's misfortune.

'It's the drink that has done it,' he murmured, 'and I swear I'll never touch another drop again as long as I live. But that won't bring back the little lad,' he went on sadly to himself, 'and I'm scared as a night up so high 'll kill him, with nothing to keep him warm, for it gets terrible cold towards daybreak.'

Jeff could not sleep. He tossed about, listening to Lem's deep breathing.

'I promised to see to him, and I might have known Lem wasn't to be trusted. He did it for spite, I'm pretty sure, and nothin' else,' he argued to himself; and he was right, as we already know.

He and Lem parted company on the first opportunity, and certain it was, from the day Jack was lost, Jeff was a changed man. He kept his word, and never touched a drop of drink. It was no easy matter to break off a long-indulged habit, but when he found the desire for it growing too strong, and felt inclined to yield to the temptation, he would think of little Jack sitting by the camp fire singing his hymns, and as the bright face of the boy rose before him, it would break the evil spell and the longing for drink would pass away. He stayed about for some days, hoping to hear something of Jack, but he was obliged at last to believe that in all human probability the boy had died of exposure on the prairie.

'We may never know for certain,' said he, 'but I'm feared as his mother 'll never see him again, for I think he's *dead*.'

CHAPTER VII.

JACK IS RESCUED.

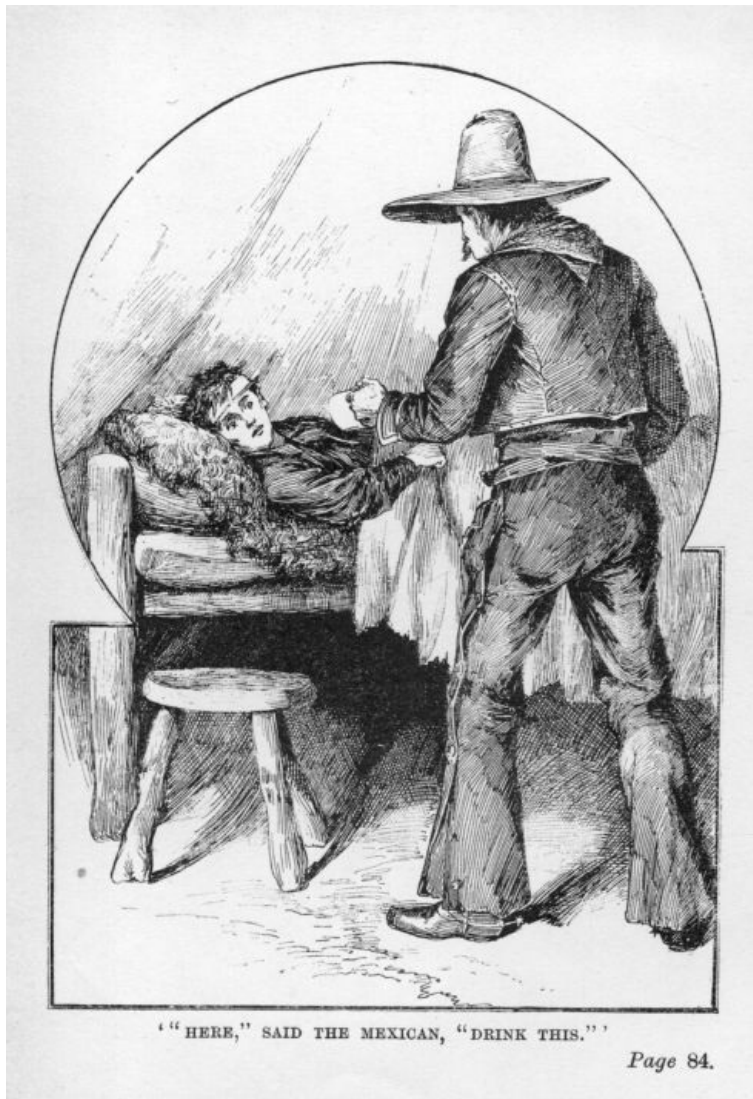
But Jack was not dead. When he returned to consciousness, he was surprised to find himself no longer on the prairie, but lying on sheep-skins spread over a wooden couch, and covered with a blanket.

He was in a rough kind of tent, and through the turned-back flap of canvas at the entrance, he could see the prairie. He could remember nothing of what had happened, and tried to imagine how in the world he had got into such a place. His head still ached badly, and, putting his hand up, he found his forehead was bandaged. He felt very weak and ill, but his surroundings were so strange to him, he tried to sit up and look about him. The effort was too much for him, and with a groan of pain he fell back on the sheep-skins.

At the sound he made, a man appeared at the tent-door, and approached the couch. He was a fine-looking fellow, evidently a Mexican, from his swarthy complexion, but there was a look of compassion in his dark eyes that inspired Jack with confidence, and made him feel that he had found a friend in need.

'Where am I?' he asked feebly, fearing the man would not understand the English words, and his relief was great when the Mexican answered:

'In my tent. I had lost some sheep last night that scattered in the storm, and while looking for them, my dog Señor found you lyin' on the prairie. You were hurt here'—pointing to his forehead—'and I thought you were dead. I carried you here, and you were nearly gone, but I got you round at last. You've got mountain fever, and you must keep very still if you want to get well. Here, drink this.'



"HERE," SAID THE MEXICAN, "DRINK THIS."

As he spoke he handed Jack a cup, and the boy, thanking him, drank the liquid, which the Mexican told him was a kind of tea he made from the wild sage which grew all over the prairie

and was a grand remedy for agues and fevers.

Jack was suffering from the chill he received in his state of fatigue, and it was fortunate for him he had been rescued in time by the shepherd's dog, and had fallen into the hands of such a kind-hearted, sensible man as Pedro Gomez, who had lived all his life on the prairie near the mountains, and knew how to treat most of the maladies that people were subject to in that part of the country.

He saw Jack was excited, so wisely said, 'I shan't listen to you for a day or two, but when you're better, then you can tell me where you come from. It was lucky I found you in time.'

'Yes,' said Jack. 'I believe I asked God to help me, and I expect He heard, for, ye see, He sent you to me.'

The Mexican listened gravely, and said, 'I reckon you've got Him to thank for it arter all, for it was strange we should come across you, and not another soul near you for miles.'

He then gave Jack injunctions to lie very still until he returned again, and prepared to go back to his sheep. He first called his dog and put him on guard.

'There,' he said; 'if you want me, just tell Señor. He knows more than many a man, and 'll come for me at once.'

Jack looked gratefully at him, and said wistfully, 'I guess ye don't hate kids, like Lem?'

'Hate 'em?' repeated Pedro. 'No! My boss has two little uns at his ranch, and I've nursed 'em often. They just love to play with Señor, and want me to tell them prairie tales when I'm there all day long.'

Left by himself with Señor, Jack prepared to make friends with him. He was not a beautiful animal, being a long, thin, vagabond-looking dog; but faithfulness was stamped in his honest, intelligent face, and Pedro was right in saying he knew more than many a human being. Jack was fond of animals, and made the first advances towards his guardian, but Señor was not disposed to be friendly incautiously. His life had made him suspicious of strangers, and he *hated boys*.

Like Jack, he had a rough time of it when he went to the Mexican village with his master, as dogs and boys invariably attacked him. He therefore avoided them, and at first deemed it wiser not to notice this boy who spoke to him in a coaxing voice. He had stretched himself down on the ground near the tent-door, and prepared to spend his hours of watching with one eye on his charge and the other out-of-doors.

Jack, however, was restless and lonely, and anxious to make friends, so he continued calling him in a caressing way, until at last Señor thought he might as well investigate him closer. Accordingly he rose up, and in a slow, cautious way walked up to the couch, and looked up in the boy's face.

Apparently he was satisfied with his scrutiny, for when Jack ventured to pat his rough head, he returned the friendly act by licking his hand. As Jack talked and caressed him further, Señor gradually threw off all reserve, and when Pedro returned he was surprised to find the dog curled up on the couch, as friendly as possible with the invalid.

'Well, that's good! I see Señor has taken to you, boy,' he said approvingly. 'He can't abide strangers as a rule, so I take it as a sign as we'll get on all right.'

Pedro was a good nurse, and looked after Jack so well that in a few days he was able to get up for a bit and sit at the tent-door. He was very weak, and Pedro told him it was madness to think of trying to continue his journey for some time.

When Jack was strong enough to tell him his story, Pedro proved a most interested listener.

'An' where are your folks now?' he asked.

'Over on the Cochetopa Creek,' answered Jack.

'Why, that's way over t'other side o' the range. You'll never get across the mountain pass alone,' exclaimed Pedro. 'It ain't safe for a child to wander up there with no one near him. There's bears an' mountain lions—let alone the timber wolves! You'd be eaten, boy, afore you'd crossed the divide.'

Jack shuddered. He was afraid of bears. He had never seen one, but they had always been a terror to him.

'I'm terrible afraid o' bears,' he said truthfully; 'but p'raps I'd meet someone going over as would let me go with them.'

'You might,' agreed Pedro; 'but winter's coming on fast, an' it'll be bad getting over the range after November comes. You bide here for a few weeks with me until my boss comes over again, an' I promise you as he'll help you along a bit. He'll be right along shortly to bring me flour an'

grub, an' to look at the sheep.'

And so it was decided that Jack should stay on with the Mexican until Mr. Stuart came again, when they would ask him his opinion as to the wisest course for Jack to take to get safely over the mountains.

Pedro took a great fancy to his little visitor, and the quiet life in the tent was very pleasant to Jack after his rough experiences. He was astonished at the Mexican's cleverness: he seemed able to do anything with his fingers, and had a wonderful store of knowledge about plants, insects, and animals, which he had acquired by study and observation in the long, monotonous hours he spent on the prairie.

Jack's clothes, which at his start from Longview were none of the best, had suffered a good deal from the wear and tear of travelling, and by the time he arrived at Pedro's tent they were nothing but rags, and his boots were all to pieces. He was much distressed at his tattered garments, whereupon Pedro said he would soon make it all right for him, and proceeded to hunt out some buckskin leather, which he had tanned himself. It was quite thin and soft, and out of it he cut a suit for Jack, and sewed it together. When the clothes were finished, Jack was delighted with them. They were so comfortable, and the leather shirt and long-fringed trousers made him look like a little cowboy.

His worn-out boots hurt his feet, so his friend made him a pair of mocassin shoes, cut out of a single piece of leather, which fitted him nicely.

Pedro was pleased with the success of his tailoring, and said: 'There, lad; them clothes 'll never wear out, but 'll last after you've outgrown 'em.'

The herd of sheep that Pedro looked after numbered over a thousand, and as winter approached he began driving them towards a place on the prairie where there were corrals, or yards, to put them in at nights, and where a hut had been erected for his own use.

As long, however, as the weather permitted, they lived in the tent, and as Jack grew stronger every day, he was allowed to accompany the sheep-herder and Señor and help to drive home the sheep in the evening. Although they never saw anyone, Jack was never dull or lonely, as Pedro was excellent company. He showed him how to prepare the different skins of animals they found near their camp, and when Jack was tired of work, he and Señor would go off to hunt for chipmunks and gophers. Chipmunks were like small squirrels, and gophers were pretty striped little animals that played about on the prairie.

It had puzzled Jack very much to find a lonely Mexican sheep-herder could speak English so well, until he learned from Pedro that he had lived from the time he was a boy with English people. He had spent many months every year with his young master, hunting, shooting, or minding cattle with him, and thus had learnt to speak the language fluently. He said when Mr. Stuart married and settled down on his ranch, he wanted him (Pedro) to live in a shanty, and look after things for him, but the love of camp life was too strong in him, and he begged his master to give him a situation as a sheep-herder. Mr. Stuart had done as he wished, and he was as happy and contented as possible in his rough old tent.

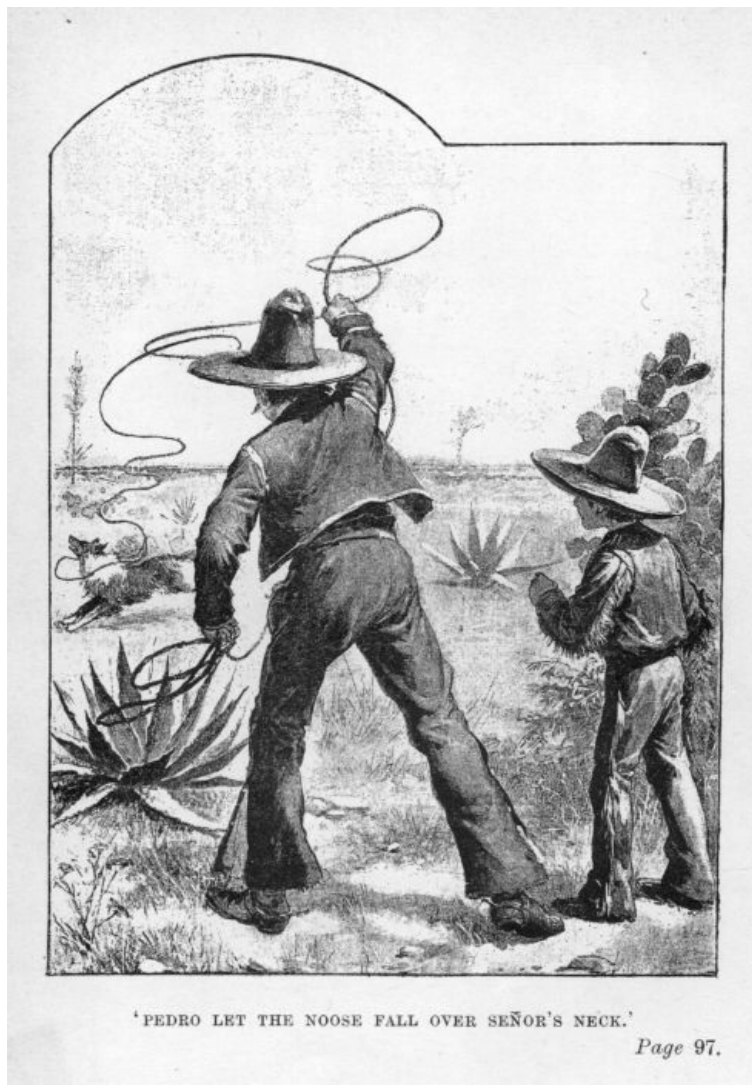
CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT JACK LEARNED FROM PEDRO.

Some weeks passed, and still Jack stayed on with his new friend. The time had not been lost for the boy, as he had learnt many things which he had not known before, and which were very useful to him in after-life. He was quick and deft with his lingers, and Pedro taught him in a few days how to cut and plait long strips of leather into lariats and bridle-reins, and to make ornamental belts.

'I wish you'd teach me to throw a lariat like the cowboys,' said Jack one day.

'Come and try, then,' returned Pedro, taking down a long leather rope that was coiled round the tent-pole and going outside. 'Now watch me. I take the rope up in loops, leaving the noose end out. Then swing it round in a circle over your head, quicker and quicker, while you take aim and try and throw it over the beast's head like that;' and as he spoke, Pedro let the noose fall gently over Señor's neck, who was running past at some distance away.



'PEDRO LET THE NOOSE FALL OVER SEÑOR'S NECK.'

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'PEDRO LET THE NOOSE FALL OVER SEÑOR'S NECK.'

He then put up a post, and showed Jack how to drop the noose over it. It was very hard at first to aim straight, but Jack had a quick eye, and after two or three days' hard practising, he made a very good attempt at throwing the rope in the right place. Day after day he went at it, until one never-to-be-forgotten morning he also succeeded in lariatting Señor as he trotted by. This was a great achievement, and quite repaid Jack for the trouble of practising so hard to accomplish it.

One place that pleased Jack very much was a prairie-dog village close by. Many an hour did he spend watching the fearless little prairie dogs, who came out of their holes and barked defiantly at him like so many cheeky puppies, until the tears ran down his face from laughing at their antics. Sometimes for fun Jack pretended to throw stones at them, and the instant he raised his arm they disappeared down their holes as if by magic, but peeped out again in a minute or two, quite ready to venture forth again.

Jack saw a great many rattlesnakes when he wandered about with Pedro on the prairie. He was very much afraid of them—and no wonder, for their poisonous bite is often fatal. Pedro was so familiar with them from his childhood, that he did not mind them in the least, and killed them by an extraordinary native trick. He would fearlessly follow a retreating snake, seize it by the tail, swing it rapidly round, and with a dexterous twist of his wrist would crack it like a whip, and dislocate its spine. Being thus rendered helpless, the reptile was easily despatched. As a rule, they tried to escape, but if by chance one showed fight, it was harder to kill, as it would twist itself up in a coil, shaking its rattles noisily, with its head out ready to spring and strike.

Jack had a boy's love for possessing things, and in a short time, with Pedro's help, had a small collection of treasures to carry away with him. He found plenty of rattles on the prairie, as the snakes cast off their rattles every year, and Pedro gave him a skin of a horned toad, a curious creature covered with tiny horns all over its body.

One day Pedro killed a strange-looking animal called a skunk. It was very handsome, like a large black-and-white striped cat with a magnificent bushy tail, but it had such a disagreeable smell it made Jack feel ill.

'You surely can't skin that nasty thing?' he asked.

'Wait and see,' returned Pedro, carrying the dead animal towards a creek. 'I'll show you how

the Indians skin 'em.'

He put the skunk quite under the water and kept it there while he took off the skin, as this process destroyed the strong odour belonging to the creature. Jack was very interested, and watched him until the skin was hung out to dry.

Pedro taught Jack to know some of the principal grasses that grew on the prairie. There was the bunch grass, the buffalo grass, and the funny sickle-shaped 'gamma' grass, on which thousands of cattle fed, and amongst others, Pedro pointed out a terrible plant, the dread of many a ranchman. With its pretty white flowers it looked harmless enough; but woe to the poor animals who ate much of the plant, for it contained a deadly poison which had first the effect of driving them crazy, and ended by killing them. It was called 'loco,' which in English means 'crazy,' and some people call it the 'crazy weed.'

A great number of cactus bushes grew round the tent; some were quite big, with long arms stretching out, covered with prickles, and others grew close to the ground, and Jack had to look carefully when he walked, or he would have got badly pricked.

Pedro was a grand story-teller, and often as they sat watching the sheep or working in the tent, he would tell wonderful tales. When they heard the dismal howls of bands of coyotes, or prairie wolves, he would tell Jack what cowardly creatures they really were: how they were afraid to attack strong cattle, but would persistently follow a weak, sick animal for days, dogging its footsteps until the poor thing fell from exhaustion. Then they would pounce on it and tear it in pieces.

He would tell him, too, about the time when he lived on the Indian frontier, and had to help to protect the settlers from the bands of fierce Apaches, Utes, and Navajo Indians, who came making raids for cattle over the border, often setting fire to houses and killing the settlers. He described how the Indians had massacred thousands of buffaloes by driving them into deep ravines where they could not escape, and then killing them, not so much to provide themselves with food as to prevent their enemies getting them. It was cruel slaughter, and the result has been that the buffaloes are almost extinct now, where years ago they swarmed in vast herds on the prairie.

As Jack listened to Pedro's tales of wonderful escapes from mountain lions, wolves, and bears, he saw himself that the Mexican was right, when he said it was impossible for a little child like him to attempt to cross the big mountains all alone, and he wisely made up his mind to stay contentedly with Pedro until he got the chance of travelling with some nice companion. He would have been quite happy with the Mexican and his good dog, except for the great longing to see his parents, which sometimes almost impelled him to resume his journey at all risks.

CHAPTER IX.

JACK ARRIVES AT SWIFT CREEK RANCH.

Jack had been two months with Pedro Gomez, and the weather was getting much colder. November had come, and although the sun still shone brightly and warm in the middle of the day, the nights were terribly cold, and Jack was glad enough to have the extra sheepskins to tuck round him which Pedro brought out for his use. There had been one fall of snow, which quickly cleared off the prairie again, leaving the mountains clothed with white above the timber-line. It was a pretty sight to see the contrast of the bright-coloured foliage against the snow, for in the autumn, all along the mountain creeks, the leaves of the oak-scrub turn a brilliant red, and those of the quaking aspen a bright yellow, making a wonderful mass of colour.

One afternoon Pedro called Jack out to look at the mountains. The sun was just setting, and its rays were spreading along the edge of the peaks, making it look as if the whole outline of the range had been marked out with a broad, blood-red ribbon.

'Look at that, Jack!' exclaimed the Mexican. 'Ain't that a grand sight? D'ye know what the old pioneers called them mountains?'

'I've heard, but I've forgot somehow. It's a grand long name as I can't remember,' returned Jack.

'Well, I guess ye'll bear it in mind after to-day, for they called it *Sangre de Christo*, which in English means "Blood of Christ"; and folks say they gave the Range that name because the first explorers saw the mountains with that blood-red streak running along the top.'

'I shan't forget it now, I'm sure,' said Jack, gazing admiringly at the gorgeous scene before them. '*Sangre de Christo*, Blood of Christ,' he repeated slowly. 'I like that name for it.'

'Aye,' returned Pedro, 'the old Spanish explorers gave nicer names to places than the new settlers have done later. Which d'ye think is prettiest, names like *Huerfano* (Orphan), *Buena Vista* (Good View), *Rosita* (Little Rose), and *Rio Dolores* (River of Sorrow); or *Smith's Park*, *Taylor's Creek*, *Gibson's Peak*, and *Georgetown*, and such-like? Mr. Stuart was talking to me once about it, and he said it struck him as his own countrymen were mostly like them folk mentioned in the Bible as called their lands after their own names.'

'I like the old names best, for it seems as if they had some meanin' in 'em,' said Jack. 'I never saw anythin' like them mountains at Longview, and I'm glad to think our new home is somewhere near 'em.'

They stood watching until the glorious colour had quite faded out of the sky, and then turned into the tent, sorry to see the last of it.

The next morning Jack was tidying out the tent, when he saw Pedro and Señor hurrying towards him.

'Here's the boss himself!' cried Pedro, in a state of excitement. 'He's coming across the prairie in the spring waggon. Let's make up a good fire, as he'll be terrible cold after his long drive.'

Jack helped to bring in logs, and they soon had a roaring fire in the stove.

'Pedro,' asked the boy anxiously, 'd'you think he'll take me back with him to his ranch?'

'I'm sure he will,' returned the Mexican, 'and I'll miss you sadly, lad. I believe I couldn't part with you if I didn't know as you were longing to see your father and mother.'

'I've been very happy along with you and Señor,' said Jack, 'but I'm bound to go on to my own folks.'

'You're right. You belong to 'em first,' replied Pedro, 'though I'd give a good deal to keep you. But now we must go and collect the sheep, as the boss 'll want to see 'em.'

With Señor's help they ran the sheep into the big corral, and waited there. The waggon soon rattled up to them, and Jack stood quietly by, while the new-comer warmly greeted the Mexican.

'Well, Pedro, how are you making it this cold weather? Hope you and the sheep keep fit.'

'Couldn't be better,' returned Pedro; 'and how are you all at the ranch?'

'First-rate, thanks. If it hadn't been so cold, I'd have brought the children with me for the drive. But, hello! who have you got here?' And Mr. Stuart stared with surprise at Jack's quaint little figure dressed in his leather suit. As he drove up he had noticed what he thought was a young Mexican by Pedro (as Jack's face was tanned quite brown), but when he had looked again, he was struck with the intelligent look on the boy's face, and began to ask questions.

In answer, Pedro said, 'He's a little English boy who was left behind at Las Vegas by a mining outfit he was travelling with. He tried to follow 'em up, but got lost on the prairie in that bad thunderstorm we had about a couple o' months back. When Señor and I found him, he had an attack o' mountain fever, but I brought him to my tent and nursed him round. He's right enough now, and I thought maybe, when you hear his story, you'd help him on a bit.'

'What's your name, my boy?' asked the gentleman.

'Jack Wilson, please, sir,' answered the boy promptly.

'Well, Jack, you must tell me all about yourself when I come back. I'm going to look at the sheep with Pedro now, and I'll have a talk by-and-by.'

So saying, Mr. Stuart went away towards the corral, leaving Jack in great excitement. He liked the look of this fine young Englishman, who smiled so pleasantly at him, and he felt hopeful he would help him. While the men inspected the sheep, Jack made himself useful by carrying all the small things out of the waggon into Pedro's hut, where the provisions were stored. He had to leave the large sacks of flour, as they were too heavy for him to lift by himself.



'JACK MADE HIMSELF USEFUL.'

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'JACK MADE HIMSELF USEFUL.'

When the men returned and Mr. Stuart saw how busy Jack had been, he said, 'Well done, my boy! I like to see a lad make himself of use of his own free will. It shows he likes to work, without being told. And now I want to know how you came to take up your abode with my sheep-herder?'

Encouraged by the kind interest Mr. Stuart showed in him, Jack told his story in a simple way, from the time he first started out from Longview, to where he had been so opportunely found by Pedro and Señor.

Mr. Stuart was greatly surprised, as he listened and learned how far the boy had already travelled.

'Do you really mean to tell me,' he asked, 'that you started out alone, with strangers, to try and reach your parents living at a place nearly three hundred miles away? I'm astonished that you have got as far as this. Indeed, I can hardly believe it;' and he looked searchingly at Jack.

'It's the truth, sir, all the same,' said the boy quietly, but there was a hurt expression on his open face which convinced the Englishman more than anything else of his honesty.

'Well,' he said kindly, 'I shall trust you, anyhow. At first it seemed impossible to me that a little lad, not ten years old, would dare to venture on along, perilous journey alone; but your straightforward answers have satisfied me, and I will gladly give you all the assistance I can. I'll take you back with me to my ranch; but I'm afraid you must give up the idea of crossing the mountains until next spring, as it is so dangerous at this time of year—very few people care to attempt it.'

Jack's face flushed with pleasure as he thanked the Englishman, and, although he could not but feel sorry at the thought of saying good-bye to Pedro and Señor, yet it was satisfactory to make a fresh start towards home, after the long delay.

He made his little collection of curiosities into a small parcel, and soon had all ready. It was quite touching to see the parting between the boy and his two friends. Over and over again Jack thanked the Mexican for his kindness to him, and a few tears fell on Señor's rough head.

'We'll remember you for many a long day,' said Pedro, 'and don't you forget Señor and me.'

'I'll come and see you again, when I'm bigger,' said little Jack, half crying. 'Good-bye, Pedro; good-bye, Señor.' And the waggon rolled slowly away.

'Adios!' cried poor Pedro huskily, and turned away with a tear in his eye. He had got so fond of his bright little visitor, and for the first time he felt really lonely in his tent, as he sat down to his supper the evening after Jack's departure. For some days he kept looking around at times, half expecting to see the well-known little figure playing about. Señor, too, seemed very disconsolate, and wandered about uneasily, coming from time to time to look up in Pedro's face in an inquiring way, as if to ask—'Where is he gone to? I can't find him.'

It was a long drive to the ranch, but Mr. Stuart was very kind in talking to Jack, and he enjoyed himself very much. It was a nice change to be borne so fast over the prairie, and when his new friend let him take the reins for a short time, he was exceedingly pleased.

Once he saw a flock of big birds a short distance off, feasting on the carcase of a dead beast. He got very excited, and exclaimed: 'Look there, sir! Ain't them eagles?'

'No, no, Jack!' replied Mr. Stuart. 'Those are not eagles; they are buzzards, or prairie scavengers, and are more like vultures than eagles. They are nasty creatures, but so useful in carrying away and devouring all carrion, that the State authorities won't allow them to be shot.'

The birds rose slowly in a great cloud as the waggon approached. There were about thirty of them, and they had picked nearly every particle of flesh off the animal's bones, which already looked white.

'The buzzards do their work quickly,' remarked Mr. Stuart. 'That beast had not long died when I passed it this morning.'

But after a while Jack got very tired and drowsy, and by the time they reached the door of the ranch-house, he was lying fast asleep at the bottom of the waggon, rolled up in rugs.

As the horses stopped at the door, Mrs. Stuart came out to welcome her husband, and the bright blaze of light that streamed from the house looked pleasant in truth to the cold and hungry man after his long drive.

'I'm glad to see you back safely,' said his wife. 'How did you find Pedro and the sheep?'

'In grand form,' he answered; 'and look here, in the waggon! I've got a surprise for you and the children.'

Mrs. Stuart looked at the bundle curled up and asked, 'What have you got there, Tom?'

'A little English boy, who'll take your heart by storm when you hear his story. He's quite tired out, so I'll just carry him quietly in and not disturb him.'

As he spoke he lifted the sleeping boy in his arms, and carrying him into a nice warm room, laid him on a sofa near a stove, where a fire was crackling merrily. Mrs. Stuart brought a soft blanket, and covered him gently, and as he did not stir, they wisely decided to leave him to finish out his sleep.



'CARRYING HIM INTO A NICE WARM ROOM.'

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'CARRYING HIM INTO A NICE WARM ROOM.'

The tired horses were looked after by one of the ranch hands, and Mr. Stuart sat down to his supper. While he was eating it, he told his wife Jack's story. It at once roused her sympathy, and she said, 'Brave little fellow! What miles he has come, to be sure! We must do all we can to help him on to his people.'

'Yes; but I don't see any chance of his crossing the mountains until next spring,' returned Mr. Stuart. 'It's very late now, and no one is likely to come past here who would go over the divide at this time.'

'That's true,' agreed Mrs. Stuart, 'so we must do our best to make him happy, and keep him here during the winter months.'

'I only hope he'll find his mother alive, if he does get to their ranch,' remarked the Englishman dubiously. 'From what he told me, she must have been very ill when she left Longview, and I should be afraid the shock of his supposed death might have killed her.'

'Oh, Tom! How dreadful!' exclaimed his wife, quite distressed. 'I can't bear to think of such a sad thing. I am sure the little fellow's heart would break with grief.'

'Well! We will sincerely hope for the best, dear,' said her husband, 'and trust he will find her strong and well. She ought to be proud of her son, for it's a plucky thing for such a child to attempt a journey like this.'

'Come and look at him,' said the lady, rising and leading the way into the other room, while her husband followed her.

'Poor little Jack!' she said softly, 'and poor mother! How thankful she will be to see him again, after such a long separation! Fancy, Tom, if it had been our own little laddie!'

Her heart went out to the sleeping boy, and bending down, she kissed him lightly on the forehead. Jack stirred uneasily in his sleep and muttered, 'Mother.'

The word brought tears to Mrs. Stuart's eyes as she turned again to her husband, saying, 'Do you hear that, Tom? His thoughts are with her by day, and he dreams of her at night. It is most touching.'

'He is certainly a devoted little chap to his mother,' said Mr. Stuart. 'I wonder what the children will think of him?'

'They will be delighted to have a playfellow, and I expect they will never tire of listening to his adventures. We must leave him now till to-morrow;' and with another tuck in of the blanket round the boy, they left him still undisturbed for the night.

CHAPTER X.

JACK'S VISIT AT SWIFT CREEK RANCH.

The next morning Jack felt someone shaking him gently, and murmured drowsily, 'I'm so sleepy, Pedro. It can't be time to get up yet;' and then he opened his eyes to find Mr. Stuart standing by the sofa.

Jack woke up thoroughly at the sight of him, and remembering where he must be, jumped up, exclaiming, 'Am I very late, sir?'

'No, my boy; but we have all finished breakfast, and as I felt sure you must be ravenous after your long fast, I thought it wiser to wake you up. You'll like to have a wash and a brush, and then come into the kitchen.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Jack, following him, and after a good wash in a big basin of clear creek water, he felt quite refreshed and terribly hungry.

'There's the kitchen,' said Mr. Stuart, pointing to a door; 'find your way in there and they'll give you your breakfast. I must go to the corral.'

Jack walked to the house and knocked shyly at the door before entering. Mrs. Stuart opened it and gave him a welcome.

'Come in, come in, Jack,' she said; 'I hope you are quite rested. I saw you last night, but you were so tired and fast asleep, we decided not to wake you up. We are very glad to see you here, and when you have had your breakfast, you must make friends with my little boy and girl. Look after him well, Martha,' she said, as she turned to leave the room, 'and give him plenty to eat.'

'I'll see to him, marm,' said the servant, who was a rough girl, but good-nature itself. She proceeded to heap his plate with food, and poured him out a cup of nice hot coffee, which smelt delicious to the hungry boy. She was very proud of her hot buckwheat cakes, and Jack did ample justice to them, smothered as they were in butter and syrup.

When he had finished, he pleased Martha very much by helping her to wash up the breakfast-things, and she was surprised and delighted to find how careful he was in drying and putting by the cups and saucers tidily in the cupboards.

He carried her in some buckets of water from the creek, and cleaned the knives.

'Is there anything else for me to do?' he asked presently.

'Can you work a bucksaw?' she said dubiously.

'Yes, I can,' returned Jack. 'I cut all my uncle's wood at Longview with one.'

'Well, I'd be glad enough for a few logs,' she said, 'for the boys are so busy this morning, they've quite forgot it's baking day, and I want plenty o' wood.'

'I'll cut it,' cried Jack, delighted to be of use, and hastened off to the wood pile. Here he found the bucksaw, and cut off a number of short lengths of wood. He was proceeding to split them with an axe, when he found himself being surveyed by a little boy and girl who were standing in front of him hand-in-hand. The boy was about six, and the girl a year younger, and they gazed at Jack with admiring eyes.

'Are you Jack?' asked the boy shyly.

'Yes, I am,' answered Jack, smiling at him.

'Well, I'm Teddy Stuart,' answered the new arrival, evidently anxious to converse, 'and this is Rita. She's my sister. Have you a sister?'

'No, I haven't,' returned Jack, 'but I've got a mother, though,' he added, not to be outdone.

'I know that,' said Teddy approvingly, 'and you've come *hundreds* of miles to find her. I'd go a *million* to see my mother if she went away.'

'No, you wouldn't, Teddy,' broke in Rita, speaking for the first time, 'cos you're too little.'

You're ever so much littler than Jack. Jack,' she went on, with a funny grave look in her face, 'my daddy says you're a little hero, so I want to shake hands wiv you.'

She held out a small hand, and shook Jack's brown paw very solemnly, as if it was an important ceremony. Teddy, not to be behindhand, shook hands also.

'I like heroes,' Rita went on. 'Daddy tells me stories about them doing such brave things in battles. What grand things have you done, Jack?'

Jack looked puzzled at this question, but Teddy helped him by asking, in an awe-stricken voice: 'Did you *kill* anybody, Jack?'

'Oh, no!' returned our little friend; 'I never hurt nobody but those Mexican boys as set on me at Las Vegas. I tried to hurt *them* all I could,' he said honestly, 'but they were too many of 'em and they whipped me.'

'I wish I'd been there,' cried Teddy valiantly. 'I'd have helped you, Jack, and p'raps we'd have beaten them between us.'

'I'm afeared they'd have had the best o' it anyhow,' returned Jack, shaking his head.

Rita listened to this conversation with a frightened look in her brown eyes, but she felt a greater respect than heretofore for Teddy after his brave speech. Mrs. Stuart joined them at this moment, and seemed very pleased to see the work Jack had got through since breakfast.

'You are a useful boy,' she remarked pleasantly. 'You've wasted no time this morning. Now, children, I see you have already made friends with Jack. Help him to carry this firewood into the kitchen, and then take him about and show him the animals.'

Delighted to be useful, Teddy and Rita helped Jack to carry in the logs, and soon the big wood box behind the stove was quite full.

Then they took him off to a stable, where they showed him their two little ponies which their father had brought them from New York. Jack had never seen such tiny creatures before. They were real Shetlands, and their shaggy manes and long flowing tails delighted the Western boy, who lingered near them as if quite fascinated. He utterly failed in his attempt to decide which he liked best, Teddy's black pony Raven, or Rita's white one called Snowball; for if the latter was the *prettiest*, Raven went the *fastest* of the two. They were dear little ponies, and so quiet; they followed the children about like a couple of big dogs when they loosed them.

They came in their wanderings to the big corral, or yard, where a great excitement was going on. Some cowboys were breaking in a very wild colt, and it was giving them no end of trouble. Mr. Stuart was present, and when he saw the children he put them into a safe place to watch the proceedings. Jack was very excited, as he had never seen a really wild broncho broken in before, and was most anxious to see it done.

It was so unmanageable, a cowboy had at last to lasso it with a lariat and throw it down. While two or three men kept it prostrate, the others quickly put on a saddle and bridle, and strapped the 'cinches,' or girths, up tight. The cowboy who was to ride the colt then gave a signal. The men let the animal struggle to its feet, and before it was aware, the youth with a quick bound was seated in the saddle.

Then began a terrible fight between the man and the horse. The latter tried to get its head down between its fore-legs, arching up its back and bucking wildly about, trying to unseat its rider, who, however, sat firm as a rock, holding the reins tight. After the horse had plunged and reared for some time, the bars of the corral were let down, and the cowboy worked the refractory steed towards this opening and out on the prairie. Here the animal made a fresh fight for victory; and, as if inspired to try another method to get free of its unwelcome burden, it suddenly darted away full gallop across the plain. They thundered along for miles, the rider quite powerless to check the runaway, nor did he wish to. He let the horse go, and at last it began to weary, and, of its own accord, lessened its speed. Slower and slower it went, until it would have stopped altogether, if the cowboy had permitted it. But this was his opportunity to show he was master, and accordingly he kept the colt going on; and when at last he turned its head towards home and trotted it back to the corral, its sweat-stained coat and drooping tail showed that the victory was won and the wild spirit subdued. As it carried the cowboy quietly enough up to the waiting group of spectators, they knew that the worst was over, and the colt, after such a struggle, would never give the same trouble again.

Jack was very happy at the ranch, as everyone took an interest in such a little traveller and was good to him. Mr. Stuart made him wild with pleasure, as he said he would like to do Steve Byrne a good turn for his kindness, and intended to write on the chance of his coming to Longview, and offer to make him one of his cowboys. Jack knew Steve would like nothing better, and it pleased him to think that his good-natured cousin would benefit through him.

Jack had been only three days with the Stuarts, when one evening a strange-looking vehicle, called a buckboard, drawn by an old white mule, approached the ranch, and a tall, wiry old man jumped out and knocked at the door. He held himself very erect, and although his hair was gray,

he looked many years younger than he really was. His appearance was hailed with shouts of delight, for he was well known and a favourite with all.

'Come in, man!' cried Mr. Stuart, greeting him like an old friend. 'No one could be more welcome than yourself. I've not seen you for months.'

'I've been up in Nebraska till lately,' returned the man. 'I've stayed there a bit too long, as I ought to be in the Gunnison by now. Anyhow, I couldn't cross the Range without running in to have a look at you all.'

'That's right, Joe,' said Mr. Stuart. 'You'll stay here the night, of course? Get your mule to his alfalfa, and come on in to supper.'

The man went off to the stables, and Jack felt in a great flutter of excitement, wondering if Mr. Stuart meant to ask the stranger to let him accompany him. A cowboy told him the man's name, and in Jack's eyes the new-comer was to be looked upon with respectful awe, for he was one of the most famous hunters in the West. He had long since earned the sobriquet among other hunters of 'Champion Joe,' from the long list of triumphs he had achieved in the destruction of wild animals.

Numberless mountain lions, bears, wolves, and other wild creatures had fallen victims to his unerring aim, and many a fierce fight for life had he had with dangerous foes. The hunter's fame had reached even the lonely village of Longview, and his name was quite familiar to Jack.

When Joe came in again, Mr. Stuart at once opened up the subject, told Jack's story briefly, and asked him to allow the little lad to be his companion.

'The boy can't go alone, Joe,' he said, 'and I'd sooner trust him to you than anyone. I was going to keep him here this winter, but as this opportunity has occurred, I think it is a pity to miss it, if you'll take him along. His people are somewhere on the Cochetopa Creek, and that can't be so very far the other side of the divide.'

'I'll take him for you,' said the hunter. 'Where is he?'

'Here, Jack, come along!' called out Mr. Stuart. 'I can tell you, you're in luck to have fallen in with such a travelling companion. Here's the safest man to cross the mountains with, and he is going to take you with him.'

Jack came forward, and looked in the grizzled, tough old face with something akin to awe. The bright, keen eyes looked searchingly at him in return, as if their owner would read him through, and then the veteran held out his hand, saying in a deep mellow voice that sounded pleasantly in Jack's ears: 'Well, young un, so you and me's to be mates for a spell, eh? And I'm to keep the track clear of bears for you—is that so?'

'I'm awfully skeared of bears,' returned Jack truthfully; 'but I don't believe I'd be skeared of anything much if I were along with you;' and he looked confidently at the stalwart figure of the hunter.

'There's a genuine compliment for you, Joe,' remarked Mr. Stuart, laughing. 'You ought to appreciate that.'

'Aye, so I do,' returned Champion Joe, well pleased at the boy's unfeigned admiration. 'And now, kid, can you tell me whereabouts on the Cochetopa Creek your folks have located themselves?'

Jack shook his head. He had come over two hundred and fifty miles on that one word 'Cochetopa,' and now, when only about sixty miles from the nearest point of the creek, he had not the remotest idea if his parents lived near any town or village. He knew nothing beyond the name of the creek, and said so.

'That's a bit awkward,' said Champion Joe, 'for that 'ere creek runs down from the Range for about forty miles afore it joins the river; so I guess it'll be a trifle hard to find your folks.'

'My dad does freighting where he is,' ventured Jack.

'That's good,' returned Joe hopefully, 'for there's more chance o' hearin' summat o' him as we get over the Range in some o' the villages we'll pass through.'

'I think you'd better run off to bed, Jack,' said Mrs. Stuart, 'as you will have to be up early to-morrow morning.'

'Yes,' joined in the hunter; 'get all the sleep you can. I start first thing in the mornin', as we ain't got no time to fool away. For all the sky's so bright, I'm mighty sure there's a snowstorm not far off, and I ain't one as enjoys a blizzard on the Range.'

Jack felt too restless to sleep much; and at last, when he dozed off, he dreamt he was being pursued by a bear, and it was just catching him, when Champion Joe came to his rescue and carried him away, while the bear vanished at the sight of the hunter.

CHAPTER XI.

JACK CROSSES THE RANGE WITH CHAMPION JOE.

The next morning there was a small crowd to see the two travellers off, and everyone seemed sorry to say good-bye to Jack. The children gave him little keepsakes, and made him promise to come and see them again.

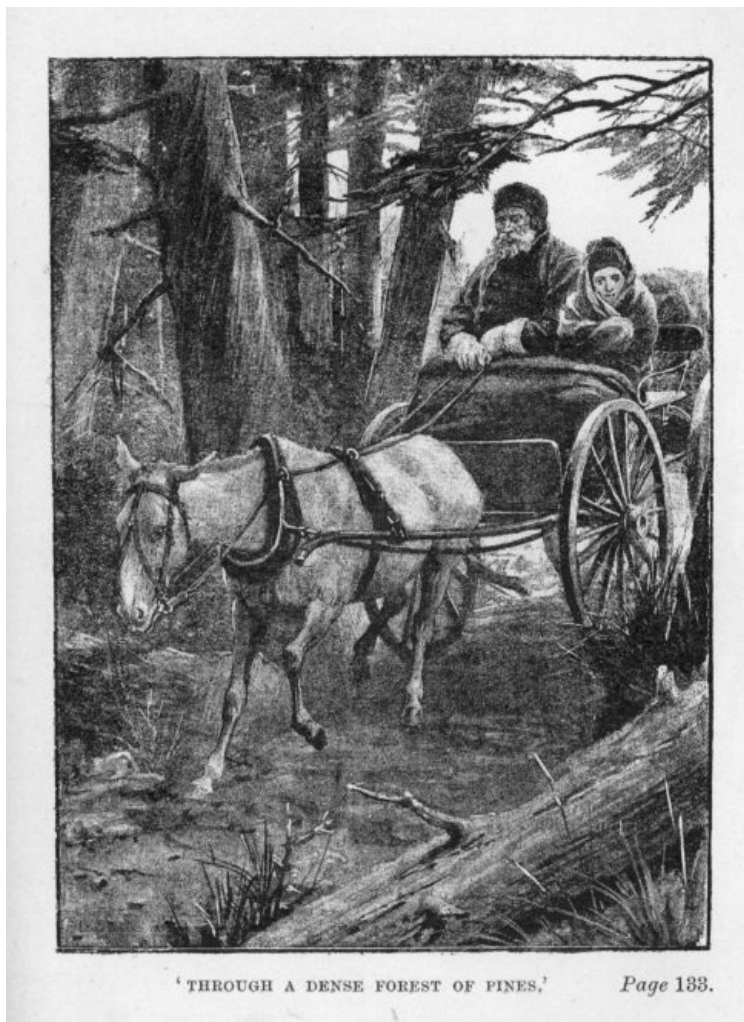
'Good-bye, Jack,' said Mrs. Stuart kindly. 'I hope you will get safely to your journey's end, and find your father and mother well. We hope we shall hear good news of you later on, and, remember, we shall always be glad to see you here. Next time you must pay us a longer visit.'

'Thank you very much, ma'am, for being so good to me,' said Jack, who was too overcome to say much. The Stuarts had, indeed, treated the little wanderer kindly. That morning he had begged his hostess to take some of his packet of money (which Pedro had already refused), but she declined to accept it.

'My dear child!' she exclaimed, quite horrified at the idea, 'how could you suppose we would dream of taking any money from you?' And when he said good-bye to her husband, the good-natured Englishman slipped a twenty-five dollar bill into his hand, saying, 'There, Jack, my boy! you're an honest lad, I feel sure, and I'd like to give you this little nest-egg to help you on.'

No wonder Jack was almost speechless; but his new, kind friends understood and appreciated his silent gratitude far more than if he had poured forth volumes of thanks.

Mrs. Stuart had given him a warm blanket and a woollen helmet for his head, and Jack found the comfort of them very soon, as—though the morning was bright and clear when they started—it got intensely cold as they got higher up the mountains. The road was very steep and rocky, and covered with small boulders, so that it was impossible to go faster than at a walk. They quickly left all ranches and signs of civilization behind, and came into a wonderfully wild region. Part of their way lay through a dense forest of pines, where some of the trees had been cut down, and dragged on one side to make a rough road for travellers. It was very lonely, and not a sound to be heard except the noise of the wheels and the mule's feet moving over the rocks.



'THROUGH A DENSE FOREST OF PINES.'

Jack looked once or twice at fallen trunks of trees, half fearing that a bear might be concealed behind them; but Joe assured him there was little chance of their seeing one at that time.

'Most of 'em 'll be hibernating—going to sleep in their dens for the winter,' he said; 'and if we did meet one, he'd be more likely to run away than to face us.'

'Is that so?' asked Jack in surprise.

'Yes,' replied the hunter; 'a bear 'll avoid a man as a rule, unless it's wounded, or it's a she-bear with cubs. Those 'll fight, sure enough, and dangerous things they are to tackle. We'll camp to-night at a log shanty near the top o' timber-line, where a mate of mine nearly lost his life. I'll tell you the story after supper.'

'I'd like that,' cried Jack, pleased at the promise of an adventure story.

Before long they had to get out of the buckboard and walk, to help the mule, which found it hard enough to drag up any weight at all. It was very tiring for all, and none were sorry when they reached the lonely little hut where they were to stay the night. Captain, the mule, was seen after first; he was put into a tiny corral, or yard, close by, and given plenty of baled or compressed hay, which is always carried by people in waggons travelling long distances, when fodder is hard to procure. Captain at once set to work to enjoy his well-earned meal and rest, while Joe and Jack lit a fire and cooked their supper, which they also relished.

After they had finished, Champion Joe got out his pipe and started it; then, seating himself on a clump of wood he had rolled into the hut, he began his story:

'This mate of mine, who got into this trouble with a bear, was a rash young fellow who didn't know what danger meant, and often laughed and said he'd like to meet a bear as could scare him. About four years ago he was mining up here, and living in this very shanty. He was drilling in the rock for ore, and had a fair-sized prospect-hole, when one day as he was comin' back here for his grub, he came face to face with a bear with two cubs. Of course he ought to have run back to his prospect-hole, where he'd have been safe enough till she'd cleared off from the spot, but no—he was that reckless, he went straight for her and attacked her with his pickaxe, which was the only weapon he had. He'd no chance, however, against her; and many a time has he told me the terrible feeling he had when he struck out at her with all his might and jest missed her. The next moment she sent the pickaxe flying out of his hands, leaving him quite at her mercy. She caught him, and hugged and mangled him terribly. He'd jest sense enough left to remember that he once heard as a bear won't touch a dead man, so he, poor chap, tried it on as a last chance for life. He lay quite stiff and quiet, and lucky for him the trick succeeded. She loosed her grip of him, and sniffed and sniffed round him, until I guess she thought she must have finished him off. Then she went away with her cubs and left him. My mate jest managed to crawl in here and shut the door, and here I found him an hour later, as near dead as any man I ever saw. The bear had torn him dreadfully and bitten him, and, I tell you, he took some nursing to pull him through; but he did live, and is going still. However, you may be sure as he don't scoff and joke any more about bears.'

'I should think not, indeed,' said Jack. 'What an escape he had! Did the bear come back again?'

'No,' answered Joe. 'I followed her up carefully, and shot her with that 'ere rifle of mine as you see there in the corner. But I didn't fool with her, for I've done more bear-hunting than any man in the States, and know by experience you must be cautious. Yes, I killed her, and the two cubs as well. She was a grizzly, and a fierce un, too.'

'Are there many different kinds of bears on these mountains?' asked Jack, who was very interested in the subject.

'A good many,' returned the hunter. 'We've got the black, brown, and cinnamon bears, which 'll avoid you if they can; and then we've the grizzlies and silver-tipped bears, which are a kind of grizzly. The latter ain't quite so fierce as the real grizzly, but ain't pleasant to face when they're wounded.'

Joe went on to tell how hunters tracked the creatures by the way they tore up ant-holes and rolled over big stones in their clumsy way of walking, and how they were often caught in traps set for them at the time when the wild raspberries and gooseberries were ripe, as then they came wandering down along the creeks, looking for the berries they liked so well.

Next morning, before they started, Joe showed Jack the exact spot where the fight had taken place between the miner and the bear; and then they put Captain into the buckboard, and began the last stage of the ascent.

It was a wonderfully clear day, and as they looked down, the country lay spread out below them like a gigantic map. The ranches, creeks and villages all looked so tiny and scattered to them, gazing as they did over hundreds of miles of prairie land.

Above them the sharp peaks seemed to pierce the keen blue sky, and the snow still lying on the mountain-sides was so dazzling from the sun's rays, that Champion Joe put on a pair of dark blue 'goggles,' and tied a piece of black veiling over Jack's face, to protect their eyes from getting snow-blind.

Higher and higher they went slowly on, and Joe remarked: 'Well, Jack, I guess we're about as near heaven on earth to-day, in one way of speaking, as you've ever been in your life afore, eh? Don't it look close? But, I say, young un, what's up?'

'I don't know,' said Jack very faintly. 'I've gone to feel so queer. I can hardly breathe, and my head aches as if it were going to burst.'

'Lie down, Jack, for a bit,' said the hunter kindly. 'It's the great height as we're up. This air affects some folks terribly. I've seen strong men helpless and hardly able to move, lower down than we are. We're close to the top now, so we'll wait till you feel a bit better.'

Jack did feel better after a short rest, and, with Joe's help, managed to creep slowly on, although he felt very ill and confused. At the top they found it bitterly cold, as some clouds had rolled rapidly up and obscured the bright sun. Jack shivered in spite of the blanket Joe wrapped him in. The descent on the other side of the Range was even harder on the mule than the terrible uphill drag, and Joe had to tie the wheels of the buckboard to prevent it running on to Captain. The road was so steep and stony, he could hardly keep his footing at times, and in one place there was nothing but a broad ledge cut out of the side of a rock, with a natural wall on one side and a terrible precipice sloping away on the other.

It made Jack feel so giddy looking down such an awful depth, that Joe, seeing how white he was, advised him to hold on to the back of the buckboard and keep his eyes fixed on the mule.

'Trust yourself to Captain,' he said, 'and I promise you he ain't likely to go over that, if caution is of any account. He ain't the one to lose *his* head on roads like this, as he knows 'em so well.'

Jack followed the advice given him, and got on much better, and when they had gone down a mile or two his head felt less heavy, and he was soon all right again.

Towards evening they approached a small settlement at the foot of the pass, called Redwood. As they drove in they found the people in a state of great excitement. A few hours before, the Sheriff of the county had run down and fought a band of horse-thieves just outside the village. The Sheriff and his men had won the fight, captured the thieves, and secured the stolen horses in corrals through the village. The place was almost in an uproar, and our travellers had some difficulty in finding a place where they could lodge themselves and their mule for the night. The Sheriff and his party seemed to fill the village, and some of the crowd round the gaol, where the horse-thieves were imprisoned, never moved away all night, fearing the robbers might try to break out before morning, when they were to be escorted by a strong body of men to the nearest town, to await their trial. Jack, however, was too tired to enter much into the great excitement going on, and was glad enough, after some supper, to wrap himself up in his blanket, and go to sleep on the floor of a tiny shanty outside the village.

CHAPTER XII.

AT LAST.

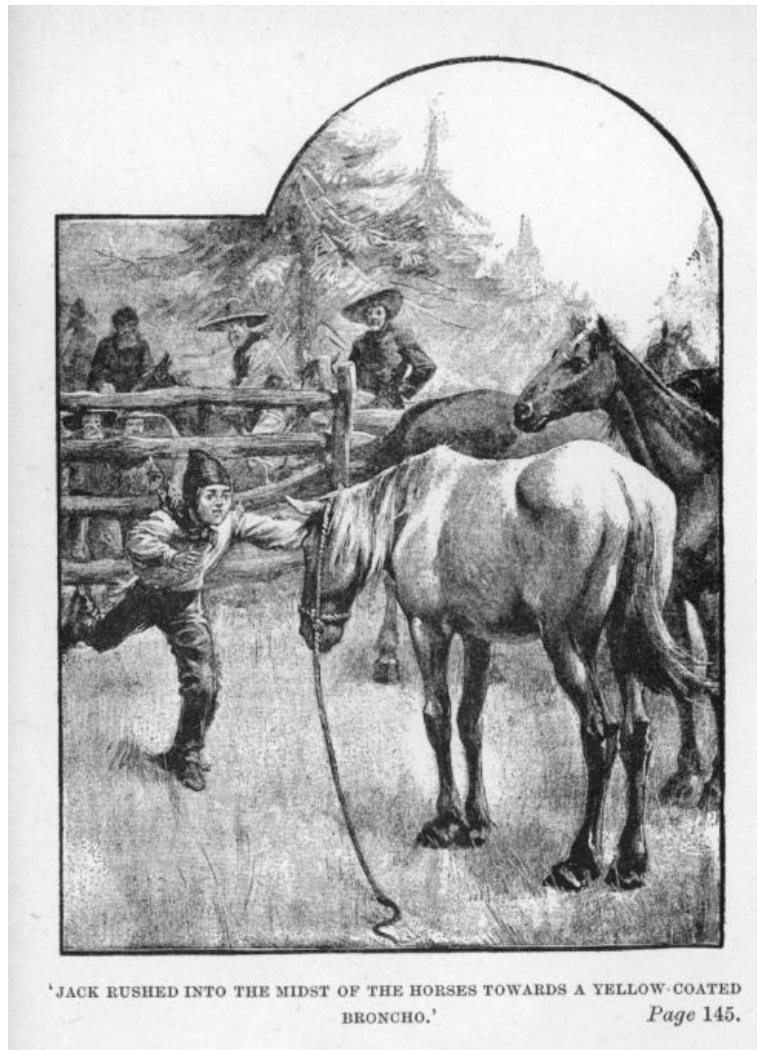
The next morning Jack was quite rested, and very eager to join Joe, who proposed they should go and see the start of the prisoners. They walked towards the gaol, and arrived there just as the party were starting. The horse-thieves, eight in number, were all pinioned, and were riding in the midst of a band of well-armed horsemen, who were ever on the alert to detect the first attempt to escape from any of the prisoners. They were a sullen, desperate-looking set of men, who scowled fiercely at the restless crowd as they surged round them, almost pushing against the horses in their efforts to see all they could of the far-famed evil gang, who at last had fallen into the hands of justice. At a signal from the Sheriff the little band moved away and slowly trotted out of sight. When they had disappeared from view, everyone followed the Sheriff (who had remained behind with two of his men) to the big corral, where the captured horses were still standing.

Jack and Joe went with the crowd and stood looking at the horses, while the Sheriff began busily entering in his notebook the different brands marked on the animals.

'What's that for?' asked Jack.

'To help find out the owners,' returned Joe. 'You see the Sheriff 'll advertise these brands, and the colours of the horses, and then folks as have lost any 'll come and identify 'em.'

Suddenly Jack gave a cry of delight, and clambering over the bars of the corral, rushed into the midst of the loose horses towards a yellow-coated broncho. He flung his arms round the horse's neck and fairly hugged it. Then, keeping hold of the shaggy mane, he led the animal towards the bars, where his friend stood staring in astonishment.



**'JACK RUSHED INTO THE MIDST OF THE HORSES
TOWARDS A YELLOW-COATED BRONCHO.'**

'Joe!' he shouted joyfully. 'Just see! Here's Buckskin, our old "Buck," as I've told you about!'

Everyone looked at the excited boy, and the Sheriff glanced rather suspiciously at him, for, strange to say, the brand on the yellow broncho had puzzled him more than all the others, being quite unknown to him.

He called out sharply, 'Say! what does that boy know about that horse? Tell him to come here.'

Jack led Buckskin up to where he stood, and said quietly, 'This horse belongs to my dad. Here's his brand, V.C., on his hip, and he has an old scar that was done once when he was shot just afore we got him.'

'Where is it?' asked the Sheriff dubiously.

'Here!' returned Jack promptly, as he lifted Buckskin's mane and showed the place, plain enough, where a bullet had once passed through the neck. 'I could swear to Buckskin anywhere.'

'You're right, my lad,' said the Sheriff, after looking carefully at the scar. 'And who's your dad?'

'George Wilson,' answered Jack. 'He lives on the Cochetopa Creek, and freights up and down the mountains.'

'Does anyone know George Wilson, of Cochetopa Creek?' asked the Sheriff, appealing to the crowd.

A man stood forward and said, 'I guess I saw the man you want last week, if he's an Englishman. I didn't know his name, for he's only just moved up to a small ranch about fifteen miles from here. I do believe when I met him as he was drivin' a sorrel broncho, the same colour as that one, but I never noticed the brand.'

'Joe! Joe! d'you hear that?' exclaimed Jack, in his joyful surprise forgetting the Sheriff and everyone else. 'We're close to home after all. Isn't it grand?'

The Sheriff looked puzzled at this outburst, until Champion Joe, who was well known to him, came forward and briefly told Jack's story. He also testified to Jack's good character, and finally persuaded the officer to give over the stolen horse into their hands. A proud boy was our hero when, a few hours later, he drove out of Redwood in Joe's buckboard, having Buckskin securely fastened on behind.

The weather had decidedly changed since the day before, and the sky looked dark and lowering as they drove along the prairie road. Jack, however, was in high spirits, for he was drawing close to the end of his long journey, and was thinking he would soon see his dear father and mother.

'We'll make your home by evening if we have good luck,' said Joe cheerfully; 'but I'm feared as we're in for a snowstorm, and maybe a blizzard.'

Joe was right. As they got a little further on their way, the snow began to fall in heavy flakes, and faster and faster they came down. Worse still! Far away up in the mountains above them they could hear a warning roar that proclaimed the advent of a prairie storm. Joe urged Captain on with all his might.

'We're in for a blizzard,' he cried. 'It's coming on quick, and 'll soon overtake us. Cochetopa Creek is only a few miles ahead of us now, and if we could get that far we'd find quaking aspens that would break the worst of the storm, and we could shelter there till morning.'

On they struggled, but the cold was intense, and long before they could reach the creek the blizzard struck them with full force. The snow froze as it fell and cut their faces, while the icy tempest whirled up clouds of these sharp particles, blinding Joe. He made Jack get under the tough buffalo robe, but the fierce cold was penetrating even through that. In a short time Joe found they had wandered off the road, and after driving aimlessly about in the storm, trying to find it again, he had at last to give it up and acknowledge that they were *lost*. It was an awful sensation, and when they had once pulled up, Captain refused to stir and stood with his back to the storm.

The hunter knew they must all freeze to death if they stayed there any length of time, and he determined to try the only expedient left, which was to abandon the buckboard and trust themselves to the animals. With difficulty he put a bridle on Buckskin, who was trembling with fright and cold, and, hoisting Jack up on his back, managed to tie him on with a bit of rope. He then unharnessed the mule and scrambled on it himself.

'We must try and keep together if possible,' said he; 'and now, off we go!'

The animals plunged forward amidst the drifting snow and shrieking storm, but in a few minutes they were swept apart, and Jack missed his companion. He pulled up, and called in vain for Joe; but the storm roared round, drowning everything in the darkness. At last Jack felt the wisest thing was to leave himself entirely to Buckskin, and not even try to guide him. The cold was beginning to stupefy the boy, and he had a strange feeling of numbness growing over him. The good old horse plodded steadily on, while Jack laid the reins on his back, saying with a sob, 'Go on, Buck. I shall die soon if you don't save me.' Suddenly Buckskin stopped, and, although Jack had just sense to be aware of it, he was quite unable to rouse himself from the deadly stupor he had fallen into. If he had not been secured by a rope on Buckskin, he would have slipped off long before on to the ground. But help was at hand. Buckskin had stopped by some bars. Like all prairie horses, he was very clever, and finding his rider made no effort to get off and put the bars down for him, he set to work to try and do it himself. He got his head under the top pole, and lifted it up from its place until one end fell down. He was working at the second when a dog's bark sounded close by, and very soon a light appeared in the doorway of a small log-house inside the bars, as a man came out and looked about.

It was too dark for him to see the horse outside, and Jack was quite unconscious by this time, so it would have fared badly with our friends in the storm, if the dog had not plunged forward over the snow and commenced barking frantically round them. This surprised the man, and procuring a lantern, he came towards the bars.

'What is it, Jim? Only coyotes, I believe. You silly old rogue!' he said as the dog rushed back to him; but as he got closer, he perceived the dark form of a horse.

'Hello! What have we here?' he exclaimed, as he let down the bars. 'A loose horse! Why, I declare, it's old Buck back again! But what has he got on his back? It looks like a child!'

He quickly led the horse to the door, and by the light of the lantern untied the rope, and carried the motionless figure into the house.

'Here, wife,' he called out, 'come and see to this child, while I take the horse to the stable. It's the strangest thing I ever knew. Buck gets stolen, and to-night I find him at the bars in this blizzard, with a kid on his back!'

A woman took the boy, and laid him on a couch some distance from the fire. She then removed the blanket, and was chafing the stiff limbs to bring back the circulation, when her husband returned, having made Buckskin as comfortable as possible in his own stable.

'Look! He's coming round a bit,' said the woman hopefully. 'Pour some warm coffee between his lips.'

The man obeyed, and the liquid seemed to revive the unconscious boy. He sighed and opened his eyes. He saw a gentle face bending over him, and knew his troubles were ended.

'Oh, Mother darling! I ain't dead, and I've found you at last!' was his joyful cry, and the next moment he was folded in her loving arms.



"OH, MOTHER DARLING! I AIN'T DEAD, AND I'VE FOUND YOU AT LAST!"

Such a meeting as this one between Jack and his long-lost parents is indescribable, and we must draw a veil over the first few hours of their happy reunion.

'Oh, George,' said the comforted mother later on, when Jack had quite recovered, 'isn't it wonderful how it all happened? To think that old Buck should have brought our own little Jack to our very door.'

'Yes, indeed,' returned her husband. 'What a merciful thing it was that Jim heard them at the bars, for Jack was very nearly done for with the awful cold!'

Tears of joy had poured down the cheeks of the parents when they discovered it was really their darling who had come to them in the storm, and they did not forget to kneel down and thank God for His marvellous preservation of their child.

'Mother,' said Jack, 'you were right: you told me to ask God to take care of us until we met again, and He has done it.'

'Yes, that He has,' returned his mother; 'and we have much to thank Him for.'

'You stick to Him right through your life, Jack, as you've begun,' said George Wilson solemnly, 'for He's the best guide and protector any man can have.'

'I will, Daddy,' answered the boy firmly.

Jack was soon able to give an account of his adventure in the blizzard, and expressed great anxiety about the fate of his friend, Champion Joe.

'It's madness to look for him to-night,' said George Wilson, 'but I'll be out first thing and seek him in the morning.'

It was a great relief to them all when about daybreak the next day they were roused by a knock at the door, which proved to be the hunter himself. He had come to ask for help in finding his missing companion, and you may imagine his joyful surprise to learn that Jack, in spite of the storm, had safely reached home and his journey was over! The mule had managed to struggle to the creek, where he and his master had sheltered among the quaking aspens until morning, the latter being in an agony of mind all night about Jack.

The buckboard was brought to the Wilsons' house with great difficulty during the day, and Buckskin and Rufus had to lend their services to drag it, light as it was, through the terrible snowdrifts. The road was so bad, Champion Joe had to stay two or three days with Jack's people; but he did not grudge the delay, as he had become very fond of his little travelling companion, and he was delighted to see the happiness of the three who had been parted so long.

Jack's mother had grown much stronger, and there was every hope of her perfect recovery after a longer residence in their new home.

The evening of the next day after his return home, Jack was sitting with the others round the stove, and, with his hand clasped tight in his mother's, gave them an outline of his adventures, through which we have followed him. They listened breathlessly, and the mother grew pale at the description of his desertion and subsequent illness. What risks her child had run!

When he had finished they were all silent for a short time; then his mother said, 'God has been good to us. Here have we been mourning you as dead, and all the time He was leading you to us through all these perils and dangers. Have you forgot the hymns we used to sing at Longview, Jack?'

'No, Mother; I've sung them many a time. Jeff and Pedro liked to hear them ever so well. Let's have some to-night.'

'We will, Jack,' said his father. 'It would be quite like the old days.'

Soon the log-house resounded with their voices as they sang their favourite hymns. When they had finished up with the last lines of

'And nightly pitch my moving tent
A day's march nearer home.'

Jack exclaimed, 'Somehow I feel as if I've got safe home now!'

'Nay, laddie, not yet,' said his mother gently. 'We can never get to our true home until we have passed through the dark valley of death. We are all wanderers here, and in the same way as the thought of this earthly home and Dad and me cheered you on through your journey, so should the thought of our heavenly home, and our Father awaiting us, help us to face the trials and troubles we must meet all our lives through. And now, my dearie, it's getting late. Let me put you to bed.'

Shortly after, with her loving kiss on his forehead, Jack, who had so often felt sad and lonely at Longview, fell asleep with a happy smile on his face.

For the sake of dead Aunt Sue the Wilsons never wrote a word of reproach to their deceitful brother-in-law, who left Longview very soon after Jack's disappearance.

Jack had not seen the last of the good friends he had made on his journey. He went often to Swift Creek Ranch, where he saw not only the Stuarts, but also Pedro and Señor at times. Steve became one of Mr. Stuart's cowboys, where he was perfectly happy and gave every satisfaction.

Mr. Stuart also promised Jack that when he was old enough, if he still wished it, he should join his band of cowboys, and with this promise Jack was quite content. About a year after Jack's reunion with his parents, Steve, in one of the 'round-ups' of cattle, came across Jeff Ralston, who was thankful to hear that, contrary to all his sad anticipations, the boy had not perished on the prairie.

And now, safe in his happy home, after all he had gone through, we must say good-bye to little Jack, leaving him growing up still the same devoted boy to his parents as the little fellow who so bravely set out on his tremendous journey, determined, in spite of all danger and difficulties, to find Mother and Cochetopa Creek.

THE END

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