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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOY SCOUTS ON THE RANGE ***

**THE
BOY SCOUTS ON THE RANGE**

BY

LIEUT. HOWARD PAYSON

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The Boy Scouts on the Range.

CHAPTER I.

ROB SURPRISES A COW-PUNCHER.

Northward from Truxton, Arizona, the desert stretches a red-hot, sandy arm, the elbow of which crooks about several arid ranges of baked hills clothed with a scanty growth of chaparral. Across this sun-bitten solitude of sand and sage brush extend two parallel steel lines—the branch of the Southern Pacific which at Truxton takes a bold plunge into the white solitudes of the dry country.

Scattered few and far between on the monotonous level are desert towns, overtopped by lofty water tanks, perched on steel towers, in the place of trees, and sun-baked like everything else in the "great sandy." These isolated communities, the railroad serves. Twice a day, with the deliberate pace of the Gila Monster, a dusty train of three cars, drawn by a locomotive of obsolete pattern,—which has been not inaptly compared to a tailor's goose with a fire in it—makes its slow way.

Rumbling through a gloomy, rock-walled cut traversing the barren range of the Sierra Tortilla, the railroad emerges—after much bumping through scorched foothills and rattling over straddle-legged trestles above dry arroyos—at Mesaville. Mesaville stands on the south bank of the San Pedro, a scanty branch of the Gila River. To the south of this little desert community, across the

quivering stretches of glaring sand and mesquite, there hangs always a blue cloud—the Santa Catapina Range.

The blazing noonday sun lay smitingly over Mesaville and the inhabitants of that town, when on a September day the dust-powdered train before referred to drew up groaningly at the depot, and from one of its forward cars there emerged three boys of a type strange to the primitive settlement.

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The eldest of the three, a boy of about seventeen, whom his two friends addressed as Rob, was Rob Blake, whom readers of the Boy Scouts of the Eagle Patrol—the first volume of this series—have met before. His companions were Corporal Merritt Crawford of the same patrol, and the rotund Tubby Hopkins, the son of widow Hopkins of Hampton, Long Island, from which village all three, in fact, came.

"Well, here we are at Mesaville."

Rob Blake gazed across the hot tracks at the row of raw buildings opposite as he spoke, and the town gazed back in frank curiosity at him. Opposite the depot was a small hotel, on the porch of which several figures had been seated with their chairs tilted back, and their feet on the rail, as the train rolled in.

As it pulled out again, leaving the boys and an imposing pile of baggage exposed to the view of the Mesavillians, six pairs of feet were removed from the porch-rails as if by machinery, and their several owners bent forward in a frank stare at the newcomers.

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"Must think a circus has come to town," commented Tubby.

"Well, they know where to look for the elephant," teased Merritt mischievously.

"And for the laughing hyena, too, I guess," parried the fat youth, as the corporal went off into a paroxysm of suddenly checked laughter.

The boys had bought sombreros at Truxton, and in their baggage was clothing of the kind which Harry Harkness—at whose invitation they had come to this part of the country—had advised them to buy. But as they still wore their light summer suits of Eastern cut and make, their generally "different" look from the members of the Mesaville Hotel Loungers' Association was quite sufficient to excite the attention of the latter.

Readers of the Boy Scouts of the Eagle Patrol will recall that in that book was related the formation of the patrol at Hampton Harbor, L. I., and how it had been effected. How the boys of the patrol had many opportunities to show that they were true scouts was also told. Notably was this so in the incident of the stolen uniforms, in which the boys' enemies, Jack Curtiss, Bill Bender and Hank Handcraft, a disreputable old town character, were implicated.

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It will also be remembered that while encamped on an island near their home village, the Boy Scouts put off in a motor dory to the rescue of a stranded cattle ship on which Mr. Harkness, a cattle rancher, and his son Harry, a lad of the boys' own age, were returning from London, whither they had just taken a big consignment of stock. In return for their services, including the summoning of aid by wireless, Mr. Harkness invited the boys to spend some time on his cattle range. What adventurous boys would not have leaped at the invitation? But for a time it appeared as if it would be impossible for Rob and his chums to accept it, owing to the fact that the Hampton Academy, which they all attended, resumed its school term early in the fall.

Just at this time, however, something happened which was very welcome to all three of the Scouts. Serious defects had been discovered in the foundation of the Academy, and it had been decided that it would be unsafe for the scholars to reassemble till these had been remedied. It was estimated that the work would take two months or more. Thus it had come about that the invitation of Mr. Harkness was accepted. To the boys' regret, however, only the members of the Patrol who stood that day on the platform at Mesaville had been able to obtain the consent of their parents to take the long, and to Eastern eyes, hazardous, trip.

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Arrangements had been made by letter for Harry Harkness, the rancher's son, to meet the boys at Mesaville, but the train had rolled in and rolled out again without his putting in an appearance.

"Maybe Harry fell in that river and was drowned," suggested Tubby, pointing ahead down the tracks to the trestle crossing the San Pedro River. At this time of the year the so-called river was a mere trickle of mud-colored water, threading its way between high, sandy banks. The boys burst into a laugh at the idea of any one's drowning in it.

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"He'll be here before long," said Rob confidently. "It's a drive of more than fifty miles to the ranch, remember, and we can't start out till to-morrow morning, anyhow."

Just then a white-aproned Chinaman appeared on the porch of the hotel and vigorously rang a bell. At the signal the lounging cow-punchers and plainsmen rose languidly from their chairs and bolted into the dining-room. From the few stores also appeared the merchants of Mesaville, most of whom lived at the hotel.

"Sounds like dinner," remarked Tubby hopefully, sniffing the air on which an odor of food was wafted across the tracks. "Smells like it, too."

"Trust Tubby to detect grub," laughed Rob.

"He's a culinary Sherlock Holmes," declared Merritt, but his remark was made to Rob alone, for Tubby was beyond the reach of his sarcasm. He had started at once to cross the tracks and find the dining-room.

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"I guess it wouldn't be a bad idea to have something to eat while we're waiting," said Rob. "Let's go over."

Tubby was already installed in a seat at the long table when his chums entered. He had in front of him a plate of soup, on the top of which floated a sort of upper crust of grease. From time to time an investigating fly ventured too near the edge and was miserably drowned. It was Tubby's initiation into desert hotel life, and he didn't look as if he was enjoying it.

On both sides of the table, however, the cow-punchers, teamsters, and Mesaville commercial lights, were shoveling away their food without the flicker of an eyelash. Opposite to Tubby were seated two young fellows in cowboy garb, who seemed to extract much noisy amusement from watching the stout youth eat. They didn't seem to care if he overheard their somewhat personal remarks.

"Ah, there's a lad who'll be a help to his folks when he grows up," grinned one of the stout boy's tormentors, as Rob and Merritt took their seats. [Pg 13]

"Which will be before you do," placidly murmured Tubby, continuing to eat his soup.

A shout of laughter went up at this, and it wasn't at Tubby's expense, either.

The two youths who had been so anxious to display their wit reddened, and one of them angrily said something about "the fresh tenderfoot."

"Here's two more of 'em," tittered the other, as Merritt and Rob came in. Rob wore on his breast, but pinned on his waistcoat and out of sight, the Red Honor for lifesaving, which had been presented to him for heroism at the time of the waterlogging of the hydroplane, as narrated in the Boy Scouts of the Eagle Patrol. Merritt also wore the decoration in the same inconspicuous place.

As the leader of the Eagle Patrol sat down, however, his coat caught against Tubby's shoulder and was thrown back, exposing the decoration. [Pg 14]

"Oh! ho! Look at the tenderfoot's medal," chuckled one of the young cattlemen; "wonder what it's for?"

"The championship of the bread and milk eaters of New York State, I reckon," grinned the other, and another shout of laughter bore witness to the table's approval of this primitive humor.

Rob flushed angrily, but said nothing. He did not wish to stir up trouble with two such ill-mannered young boors as the cattle-punchers were showing themselves to be. Encouraged by his silence, the badgering went on. One by one the other guests had been served by the Chinese attendant, with raisin pie and half-melted cheese, and had arisen and left the room. The two young cow-punchers and the Boy Scouts were shortly left alone in the fly-infested apartment. Rob and Merritt, who found the surroundings little to their liking, hurried through their meal, but Tubby ate conscientiously through everything that was brought him. [Pg 15]

It now grew plain, even if it had not been so before, that the two sun-burned young plainsmen sitting opposite the boys were deliberately trying to aggravate them.

Interpreting the boys' silence as fear, they grew bolder and bolder in their remarks.

"Have to catch up a real cow, I reckon," dreamily went on one of the boys' tormentors, gazing at the ceiling abstractedly, but fingering the condensed milk can.

"What for?" inquired the other, playing into his hand.

"Why, the tin cow might disagree with mama's boys."

"Ho-ho-ho! Say, Clark."

"What, Jess?"

"Reckon they must be overstocked with yearlings East."

"Looks that way. Do you suppose Easterners are born or jest grow?"

The youth addressed by his companion as Jess looked straight at Rob as he spoke, and the insult was unmistakable. Rob's self-control suddenly deserted him with a rush. [Pg 16]

"I'll answer for your friend," he snapped out. "They grow-and-they-grow-right."

Tubby looked up in surprise from his raisin pie, and Merritt's eyes opened wide at Rob's tone. It foreboded trouble as sure as a hurricane signal foretells a storm.

"My! my!" grinned Jess, but it was an uncomfortable sort of a grin, "hear the little boy with the medal talk. Come on, Clark, let's go see to the ponies while the tenderfeet wait for their nurse to come and take their bibs off."

They rose from the table, but Rob, still inwardly raging but outwardly cool as ice, stopped them.

"Say," he said, "are you fellows cattlemen?"

"You bet, stranger, from the ground up," rejoined Clark, with a vast air of self-importance.

"Well, then we've been misinformed in the East," said Rob, coolly brushing a few stray crumbs from his knees.

"How's that?" [Pg 17]

"Why, we'd been told that cattlemen were natural gentlemen; but whoever told us that was

dead wrong. Judging by you fellows, they're not natural, and certainly not the other thing."

Clark's face grew crimson and he muttered something about "fixing the fresh kid," but his companion drew him away.

"We'll have plenty of time to rope and brand these young mavericks," he said, as they left the room.

As they vanished Rob burst into a shout of laughter.

"Score one for the Boy Scouts," he said. "If ever there were two discomfited cow-punchers, those fellows are it."

The landlord, who had entered the room a few moments before, came forward as the boys arose from the table. He was a tall, lanky man, with a look of perpetual gloom on his face. A drooping, straw-colored mustache did not help to enliven his funereal features.

"Say, strangers," he said, in a dismal voice, "you've started in bad."

"How's that?" inquired Rob, in a somewhat peppery tone.

"Why, riling up Clark Jennings and Jess Randell; they's two of the toughest boys in the country."

"Think so, I guess," snorted Tubby.

"Well, wait and see," said the landlord, with a melancholy shrug of his sloping shoulders. "Three dinners, please."

He extended a yellow palm.

"How much?" asked Rob, putting his hand in his pocket.

"Three dollars and six bits."

"What! three dollars and seventy-five cents for that fly-ridden stuff?"

"That's the charge, stranger."

Rob, seeing there was no use arguing, paid over the money, in exchange for which they had received three greasy plates of soup, three portions of ragged, overdone bull beef, and three slabs of raisin pie, together with three cups of muddy, inky coffee. But a sudden impulse of curiosity gripped him.

"Say, what's the twenty-five cents extra all round for?" he asked.

"Fer your ponies," rejoined the landlord, more miserably than ever. He seemed to be on the point of bursting into tears.

"Ponies!" gasped Rob. "We haven't got any."

"Never mind, it's a rule of the house," said the landlord, as if that settled the matter; "and if you ain't got any ponies it ain't my fault, is it?"

There was no answering this sort of logic, and the boys strolled out to the porch to see if they could sight any trace of Harry Harkness. There was no sign of him, however, and after a prolonged period of gazing across the blazing desert, the boys sank back in three of the big rockers that stood in a row on the porch. It was dull, sitting there in the intense heat and drowsy silence, broken only at long intervals by the clatter of a pony's hoofs as some cow-puncher ambled by at an easy lope. A loud snore from Tubby soon proclaimed that he was off, and Merritt and Rob were about to follow him into the land of dreams, when there came a sudden interruption.

Rob felt his shoulder roughly seized from behind, and a harsh, mandatory voice addressed him:

"Say, that's my chair you're sitting in. You'll have to get out."

The boy turned and saw Clark Jennings glaring at him. Close beside him, with a grin on his face, was Jess Randell.

"Even supposing it is your chair," said Rob, "you can ask me for it like a gentleman,—then," he added to himself, "I'll think over giving it to you."

"Oh, I guess you think you're a mighty fine gentleman?"

"I hope I am one, yes."

"Well, out here gentlemen have to fight for their title. Are you going to give me that chair?"

"As you are no more a guest of this hotel than I am, I shall sit here till I get ready to get up."

"Then I'll have to help you out—Ouch!"

The remark and the exclamation came close together. Clark Jennings had bent forward as he spoke, and roughly laid hold of Rob to pull him from the chair by main force. As he did so, however, Rob had suddenly changed from a passive, rather sleepy boy, to a bundle of steel springs full of fight. Clark Jennings, as he laid hold of Rob, had felt himself hurled backward. Unable to check his impetus, he had landed against the wall of the hotel with a force which caused him to give vent to the exclamation recorded.

"Look out, tenderfoot, he'll kill yer," warned the melancholy landlord from the window of the office, where he had been entering in a greasy book the extortion practiced on the boys.

Several cow-punchers awoke to interest at the same time as Tubby and Merritt began to realize what was happening.

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His eyes blazing with fury, Clark Jennings crouched low, and then reaching back drew a revolver from his hip. He aimed it full at Rob, but simultaneously a strange thing happened. Rob was seen to dart forward, diving right under the leveled pistol. The next instant the weapon was spinning through the air. It landed with a thump in the middle of the dusty road. But Clark Jennings didn't see it, for the excellent reason that at that precise moment he was lying flat on his back on the hotel veranda. Before his eyes swam a whole galaxy of constellations. Over him stood Rob, with flushed face and clinched fists.

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CHAPTER II.

NEWS OF THE MOQUIS.

"Wow!" yelled the onlookers, as Clark's body struck the floor with a resounding thwack.

Jess was in an agony of excitement over the sudden downfall of his friend. He was just about to hurl himself upon Rob when a sudden detaining arm fell on his with a heavy pressure.

"Hold on there. We want fair play."

It was Merritt Crawford who spoke, and Jess sullenly dropped his belligerent look. Somehow, the happenings of the last few seconds had altered the aspect of the tenderfeet materially in the eyes of the two young cow-punchers.

"I'll fix you," growled Clark furiously, scrambling to his feet.

"Why did you let him get up?" asked Tubby, his round cheeks glowing with excitement.

"Because I want to give him plenty of rope," said Rob, a grim look creeping over his usually pleasant face.

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A sudden furious onrush on the part of Clark prohibited further conversation.

"Go in and eat him up, Clark!" shouted a lanky, long-legged cow-puncher, one of several who had been attracted by the rumpus.

"Looks as if your friend had developed a sudden attack of indigestion," grinned Tubby delightedly, as Rob's fist collided with the advancing Clark's jaw, much to the latter's astonishment.

"Never seed nothing like it," commented the landlord, somewhat less melancholy now. "Clark's the champeen round here."

"He may be when he's got a gun to back him up, but not when he has to fall back on his fists," retorted Merritt.

"Look out!" he yelled suddenly, as the young cow-puncher, finding that fair methods seemed to have failed, attempted a foul blow below Rob's belt.

But there was no need of the warning. Rob had seen the blow coming halfway, swiftly delivered as it was. The cowardly attempt at foul tactics thoroughly enraged him.

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"I thought Westerners fought fair," he gritted out, gripping the astonished cow-puncher by the wrist of the offending hand. Before Clark could gasp his astonishment, his other wrist was captive.

Then a strange thing happened. Before any one had time to realize just how it occurred, Clark's body was describing a sweeping arc in the air. His heels rushed through the atmosphere fully five feet from the floor. Like the lash of a whip, his powerless body was straightened out as he reached the limit of the aerial curve he had described. At the same instant a dismayed yell broke from his pallid lips as Rob let go.

Over the veranda rail, and out into the dusty road the young cow-puncher followed his revolver. He landed in a heap in the white dust, while Rob yelled triumphantly:

"Now pick up your gun and profit by the lesson in manners I've given you."

So saying, the boy calmly seated himself once more in the disputed chair, only a slight, quick movement of his chest betraying the great physical effort he had been through. After all, surprising as it had seemed, there was nothing very amazing about Rob's achievement. At the Hampton Academy athletics had always been a boast. The trick Rob had just put into execution he had learned from his physical instructor, who in his turn had picked it up from a Samurai wrestler of Japan. But to the cowboys, and other loungers about the Mesaville Hotel, the feat had been little short of marvelous.

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They eagerly thronged about the boy as he took his seat once more, and this time he remained in undisputed possession of it.

"Whip-sawed, that's what Clark was," exclaimed one of the group.

Another, the same tall, lanky fellow who had just been urging the young cow-puncher on to what he thought would be an easy victory, approached Rob.

"Say, stranger," he asked eagerly, "will you teach me that thar contraption?"

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"Couldn't do it," rejoined Rob soberly, although a smile played about the corners of his lips.

"Why not?"

"Because, then, you'd know as much as I do," responded Rob. The assemblage burst into a loud roar of laughter, in which you may be sure, however, there were two voices which did not join. Those two were Clark Jennings' and Jess Randell's. The former had just picked himself up and stuffed his gun in his pistol pocket. A malevolent scowl marked his face as he did so. Nor did Jess smooth over matters by remarking audibly:

"Say, Clark, what was the matter with you?"

"Chilled feet, I guess," chortled Tubby, who had overheard the remark.

"Get away from me, can't you?" snarled Clark irritably, facing round on his well-meaning crony, "why didn't you help me out?"

"Help you out—how?"

"Why, trip that tenderfoot up when I rushed him."

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"Oh, shucks, I thought you fought fair," said Jess, a little disgusted in spite of himself.

"So I do," snorted Clark, "when I'm winning."

"Well, come on round and see to the ponies. We'll think up some way to get even with these grain-fed mavericks before very long," comforted Jess.

"You bet, and in a way they won't forget, either," Clark Jennings promised himself, as he followed his companion to the corral.

Not long after this, the boys perceived, far out on the sultry plain, a sudden swirl of dust.

"Something coming," shouted Tubby, who, strange to say, had been the first to notice the approaching column of dust.

"Team," briefly grunted the landlord, "did I hear you fellers say you was waiting for some one from the Harkness range?"

"Yes, you did," said Rob.

"Waal, I guess that's them now. Must have a bear-cat of a team in to kick up all that smother."

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Closer and closer grew the dust cloud, and presently, from its yellow swirls, emerged the heads of the leaders of an eight-mule team. Behind them lumbered a big, broad-tired wagon, from the bed of which a high seat was reared like a watch tower. By the driver's side was a long iron foot brake. As the team approached the bank of the sandy little dried-up river, where the road took a dip, the driver placed his foot on the brake and a loud screeching and groaning resulted, as the big wagon, with the hind wheels locked, slid down the far bank. As the front wheels thundered across the rough bridge above the thin thread of luke-warm water, the heads of the first mules emerged over the top of the bank nearest the hotel.

"Mountain style," commented the long, lanky cow-puncher admiringly, as the driver, a tall, sun-burned lad of about Rob's age, whirled a long whip three or four times round his head and concluded the flourish with a loud "crack" as sharp and penetrating as a pistol shot.

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An instant later the heavy wagon and its eight, dust-choked, sweating mules swept up in front of the hotel porch. The driver, flinging the single line with which he drove to his companion, clambered from his lofty perch and was immediately surrounded by the three tenderfeet.

"Well, you certainly come into town with a flourish of trumpets," laughed Rob, after the first salutations between the Eastern boys and Harry Harkness, the rancher's son, had been exchanged.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting so long," responded the other, who in order to speak had pulled down a big red handkerchief which had bundled up the lower part of his face and kept it dust-proof while he drove; "but the fact is, we had some trouble on the way. A bunch of Moquis are out, and—"

"Indians!" gasped Tubby, with round eyes.

"Yes, regular Indians," laughed Harry; "the Moquis' reservation is off a hundred miles or more to the northwest, near Fort Miles, but—"

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"They're off the reservation," cut in Tubby, proud of his knowledge.

"Out fer a snake dance, I reckon," put in the long, lanky cow-puncher, who had been an interested listener.

"Why, hello, Lone Star," exclaimed Harry. "I didn't know you were in town. Yes," he went on, "there's a secret valley in the Santa Catapinas which has been used by them for centuries for their festivals, and although they are supposed to be kept within the limits of the reservation,

every once in a while a bunch of them get over here and hold a snake dance."

"I've read about them," said Rob; "they do all kinds of weird things with rattlesnakes, don't they?"

"Well, no white man has ever seen them—or, if he has, never lived to tell about it," said Harry, "so of course nobody knows exactly what they do. But anyhow, when we camped last night we had eight mules, and when we woke this morning there were only six. Jose, there—hey, Jose, wake up!" He prodded the Mexican who still sat on the wagon seat, with the end of his long whip. "Well, as I was saying, Jose trailed them and found them tethered in a arroyo about a mile from camp."

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"The Indians took them?" asked Merritt.

"Yes, Jose, who's as good a trailer as he is a sleeper, found unmistakable tracks of Moquis. I suppose they took the mules in the night and then got scared at something and hitched them in the arroyo, meaning to come back for them."

"Whereabouts did the Injuns cut into you, Harry?"

A new voice had broken into the conversation. That of Clark Jennings. He nursed above his right eye a rapidly swelling "goose egg," marking the spot at which he had collided with the roadway. At his elbow was the faithful Jess Randell.

"Why, hello, Clark, you in town, too? Every one from the Santa Catapinas seems to be in to-day—you, too, Jess. Well, the Indians paid us their little call just this side of the Salt Licks,—why?"

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"Oh, jes' wanted to know. Me and Jess has got to ride home that way to-night, for it's better riding when it's cool; and I thought I'd like to know whar to expect the varmints."

"Well, that's the best information I can give you," said Harry, "but what have you been doing to your eye?"

"Oh, nothing," muttered Clark, turning away, while a loud guffaw went up.

"What's all the joke,—what is it?" asked Harry. It was soon explained, and the young rancher burst into a laugh.

"Say, Rob, you must mean to clean the country of bad men. Trimmed Clark Jennings! Ho, ho, ho!"

"Has he much of a reputation?" inquired Rob innocently, but with a twinkle in his eye.

"I should say so. He won't forgive you in a hurry. He's going to be your neighbor, too, for a while."

"How's that?"

"His father owns the next ranch to us. Jess Randell is Clark's cousin, an orphan, you know. He lives there, too. The two are great cronies, and think a lot of their reputation as tough citizens. The whole bunch have a bad name."

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As the team from the Harkness ranch was tired out by the long, hard journey across the hot desert, it was decided that the boys should spend the night at the Mesaville House, and start for the ranch the next morning while it was cool. This would bring them into the mountains by dusk. Over supper they laughed and talked merrily, recalling the last time they had met, which was in a wet, dripping fog off the Long Island coast. How differently were they now situated!

After the meal Merritt and Harry sat down to a game of checkers, while Tubby, seated in a big chair, indulged in his favorite occupation—namely, taking a quiet doze. As for Rob, he wandered about the little town a while, but found nothing to interest him. Small as Mesaville was in common with most towns of the same character, it boasted several low dens in which the cow-punchers, miners and sheepmen gambled and drank their hard-earned money away. From these dens, as usual, there came the same blasts of foolish talk and loud laughter, as their swing doors opened and closed. A glare of light poured from their blazing interiors to the quiet, moonlit desert outside.

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As Rob, rather sickened, turned away from this section of the town, the doors of one of the places swung open, and the forms of Clark Jennings and his crony, Jess, emerged; with them was a third figure, that of a tall, stoop-shouldered young man. The eyes of all three fell simultaneously on the figure of Rob as he walked away.

"Talk of the train and you hear her whistle," grinned Jess. "There he is now."

The companion of the two young cow-punchers nodded.

"That's him, all right. I recognize him. It'll be candy to me to get even with him."

"We can trust you, Jack?"

"I'll fix him, never fear."

"All right, then, we're going to start. We'll ride into town ag'in in a few days and fix you up."

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"All right. I need the money. How's Bill and Hank making out?"

"Oh, doing odd jobs around the ranch. You know, Cousin Bill has turned out to be quite a cow-puncher; guess he rode horses back East?"

"Yes, his father owned some in Hampton," rejoined the stoop-shouldered young man. (It will be recalled that when Bill Bender left Hampton he spoke of stopping a while with relatives in the

West.)

After a little more talk, the three bade each other good night. Soon the clatter of two ponies' hoofs, growing fainter and fainter in the distance, marked the departure from town of Clark Jennings and his crony. In the meantime, Rob had looked into the hotel, and finding Harry and Merritt still engrossed in a hotly contested fifth game, and Tubby snoring contentedly, had set out on another stroll. This time his aimless footsteps took him in the direction of the desert. By the railroad bridge he paused, gazing down at the moonlit water. Where the bridge abutments projected, the thready current of the San Pedro collected and formed quite a deep pool.

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"If this was the East, there'd be fish in there," mused Rob, when suddenly behind him he thought he heard a furtive footfall. He turned quickly. But, even as he did so, an irresistible shove was given him. Blindly extending his arms, Rob plunged forward down the steep embankment.

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CHAPTER III.

THE DESERT WATER HOLE.

As Rob toppled forward into vacancy, he received a startling momentary impression of familiarity from the tones of a loud laugh which rang out behind him. Fortunately for him, the water at the foot of the bridge abutment was some six or seven feet deep, and he struck it spread-eagle fashion, so that beyond the shock of his sudden fall he was uninjured. He at once struck out for the bank. When he stood again on the dry ground, shaking the water from himself, he began to rack his memory for the recollection of where and when he had heard a similar laugh to the one that had sounded in his ears as he plunged forward into space. Try as he would, however, he could not place it, and giving up the attempt finally, he made his way back to the hotel.

The checker players started up as the dripping figure of the Boy Scout leader entered the room, and naturally began to ply him with questions. Rob's story of the events of the preceding few minutes was soon told, but so far as the shedding of any light on the mystery was concerned, it remained as blank a puzzle as ever.

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"I'd like to think that I dreamed it all," said Rob, "but these"—wringing out his wet clothes—"won't let me."

"Well, there's no doubt that you were shoved over intentionally," decided Harry Harkness, "but who is there out here who would do such a thing?"

"It might have been one of those two cow-punchers you had the row with this afternoon," suggested Merritt.

"No. I saw Clark and Jess ride out of town a good half-hour before Rob could have been shoved over," said Harry.

"Maybe they mistook me for some one else," suggested Rob, as the easiest way of disposing of the matter. Privately, though, he entertained a different opinion. If he could only place that laugh! But try as he would, he could not for the life of him recall where he had heard it before.

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Soon afterward the Boy Scouts and their ranch friend retired to bed, Tubby having been sufficiently aroused to make his way upstairs to their room. Tired out as Rob was, he sank into a deep sleep almost as soon as his head touched the pillow. With Tubby things were different, however. His nap in the chair had rendered him wakeful, and he tossed and turned till almost midnight before he began to grow drowsy. Just as he was dropping off, two persons entered the adjoining room. The partitions, as is usual in the West, were of the very thinnest wood, and he could easily hear every movement made by their neighbors.

"Well, Jack," said one of the voices, evidently resuming a conversation that had been begun some time previously, "so you did the kid up, eh?"

"Yes, sent him head first over the bank. Wish he'd broken his neck. The kid is one of that bunch that was responsible for my leaving Hampton."

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"Is that so? I don't wonder you are sore at him. Why didn't you hit him a good crack on the head while you were about it?"

"Oh, I figured that a cold bath would do as a starter. Wait till that bunch gets up to the mountains. Clark and Jess and my friends, Bender and Handcraft, will attend to them."

Tubby's brain was in a whirl. He had had no difficulty in recalling one of the voices,—that of the one who had spoken of sending Rob over the bank of the San Pedro. Who the other was he couldn't imagine, however, except that he was evidently a crony of the first speaker. Impulsively

the stout youth shook Rob's shoulder, and as the other opened his eyes, enjoined him to silence.

"Say, Rob, who do you think is in the next room?" he gasped.

"I don't know, I'm sure. The emperor of China?" asked Rob in a sleepy voice.

"Hush! don't talk so loud. It's Jack Curtiss!"

"What!"

"It is. I'm sure of it. He was boasting about having shoved you over the bank of the river."

"Whatever can he be doing out here?"

"Living on the allowance his father sends him, I suppose. I heard before we left Hampton that he was some place in the West. I guess his father would soon stop his allowance if he knew he was up to his old tricks. Mr. Curtiss thinks that Jack is studying farming."

"Raising a crop of mischief, I guess," breathed Rob, in the same cautious undertone that the two boys had used throughout their conversation. "I wonder if Bill Bender and Hank Handcraft are with him?"

"That reminds me. I heard him mention them. They are on some ranch up in the mountains—where we are going, I gathered."

"That means trouble ahead," mused Rob.

"Are you going to have Jack arrested?"

"No, how can I prove that it was he who shoved me in? Just overhearing a conversation is no proof. I know now, though, why that laugh I heard sounded so familiar."

Both boys listened for some time, but they heard no further talk from Jack Curtiss and his companion regarding themselves. Their talk seemed to be about money matters, and as well as they could gather, Jack was in debt to some gamblers for a large sum which he despaired of raising.

"I've only got a month to get it in," they heard him say.

"Well, we'll hit upon a plan, never fear," rejoined his companion.

The next morning Harry Harkness was told of the happenings of the night. He, of course, already knew of the bold attempt of the former bully of Hampton Academy to kidnap one of the Boy Scouts, as related in the first volume of this series, and was inclined to warn the boys to be careful of such a dangerous character. Viewed in the cheerful light of the early day, however, the boys did not regard the matter so seriously. Indeed, they forgot all about Jack and his threats in the bustle of preparation for their long trip across the waste lands.

Breakfast was soon disposed of, and then the boys in a body made for the corral. Jose had been told two hours earlier to catch up and hitch the mules, but the long-eared animals were still browsing at the hay pile, and not a vestige of Jose was to be seen when the boys emerged.

"There he is in the hay," shouted Rob suddenly, pointing to two long, thin legs sticking out of the fodder heap.

"Asleep again, the rascal," exclaimed Harry. "Come on, Rob; you lay hold of one leg, and I'll take the other."

Both boys seized hold of a designated limb, and soon the sleepy Jose, expostulating loudly, was hauled out into the sunlight.

"Why aren't those mules hitched?" demanded Harry.

"Me go sleep," grinned the Mexican teamster apologetically, showing a row of white teeth.

"We don't need telling that. You are always asleep, except when you're eating. Get busy now and hitch up."

Urged thus, Jose soon had his rawhide rope circling, and in ten minutes had caught up the team with far more agility and skill than would have been suspected in such an easy-going individual.

The mules were soon attached to the heavy wagon and the single line which guided them threaded. This manner of driving was new to the boys, but they were soon to find that most teamsters in the far West use only a single rein attached to the lead mules on the right side. The others follow the leader. If the driver desires to turn his team to the left, instead of pulling the single line, he shouts, "Haugh!" and over swings the team.

The boys' baggage had lain at the depot all night, and accordingly the first stop was made there. It was soon loaded on, and then, with a loud cry of, "Ge-ee, Fox! Gee-ee-e, Maud!" from Jose, the lead mules swung to the right. Over the bridge, beneath which Rob had met his misadventure of the night before, thundered the heavy vehicle. Swinging in a broad circle, they then headed toward the south, where the Santa Catapinas, blue and vague, were piled like clouds on the horizon.

Early as was the hour at which the start was made, however, two persons in Mesaville besides the hotel employees were up to see it. These were Jack Curtiss and the friend who had shared his room the night before. They peered out of the window at the four boys with eager glances.

"Look them over well, Emilio," Jack urged his companion, who in the daylight was seen to have a swarthy skin and the cigarette-stained fingers of a Mexican town lounge. Emilio Aguarrdo was

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a half-breed gambler, and a thoroughly vicious type of man. In him were combined the vices and evil passions of two races. His thin lips curled back from his yellow teeth as he watched the boys, who, with shouts and laughter, were loading up their belongings, while Jose slept on his lofty seat.

"I won't forget them, Jack," he promised, as the wagon started off, the long whip cracking like a gatling gun. [Pg 47]

All that morning the wagon lumbered on across the hot plains, an occasional jack-rabbit or coyote being the only sign of life to be seen. As the sun grew higher, the boys saw in the far distance the strange sight of the town of Mesaville, hotel and all, hanging upside down above the horizon. It was a mirage, as clear and puzzling as these strange phenomena of the desert always are.

As the hours wore on, the mountains, from mere wavy outlines of blue, began to take on definite form. They now showed formidable, seamed and rugged. As well as the boys could perceive at that distance, the hills were covered with dark trees to their summits and intersected by dense masses of shadow, marking cañons and abysses. A more forbidding-looking range could hardly be imagined, yet in the foothills to the southeast there grew great savannas of succulent bunch grass on which several ranges of cattle roamed.

The noon camp was made in the foothills near a small depression in which grew some scanty grass of a dried-up, melancholy hue. The wagon road was at some little distance from this, and as soon as a halt was made, Jose, at Harry's orders, took a shovel from the wagon and started for the dip in the foothills. [Pg 48]

"Going to dig potatoes?" asked Tubby casually, as he watched the lazy Mexican saunter off.

"No, water," responded Harry. His serious tone precluded any possibility that he was joking. But the idea of water in that sterile land seemed so ridiculous to the boys that they burst into a laugh.

"I mean it," declared Harry. "Here, you fellows, take those buckets from under the wagon. We carry them to water the mules. Pack them over to that dip and in half an hour you'll be back with them full."

"Huh! guess I could carry all the water that will come out of that place in one hand," commented the fat boy.

"Don't be rash," laughed Harry; "before long you'll take digging for water as a matter of course." [Pg 49]

"Wish you could dig for ice-cream sodas," muttered the fat boy absently, picking up a bucket and starting off after Jose. Rob and Merritt followed, while Harry busied himself unhitching the mules for their noonday rest. This done, he lighted a fire of sage-brush roots, and awaited the return of the boys.

The first thing the boys saw Jose do when he got to the bottom of the dip was to lie flat on his stomach and place an ear to the ground.

"He's going to sleep again," suggested Merritt.

"Looks like it," agreed Rob.

But this time the Mexican did not drop off into a peaceful slumber. Instead, he presently straightened up, and shouldering his shovel, began tramping off once more. The boys followed him over several dips and rises till at last he descended into another depression in which grew some scanty herbage. Here he repeated the other performance and arose with a grunt of satisfaction. Suddenly he began digging furiously. [Pg 50]

"Wow! he's making the dirt fly," exclaimed Tubby, as the industrious Mexican dug as frantically as though his life depended on it. So fast did the work of excavation proceed that soon quite a large hole had been made in the soft ground.

"Pity they haven't got him down at Panama," commented Merritt dryly.

Jose had paid no attention to the boys hitherto, but now he suddenly shouted, pointing downward into the hole: "Mira qui!"

"What's that about a key?" asked Tubby.

"Try to conceal your natural ignorance," rejoined Merritt, with withering scorn. "He said, 'Mira qui.' That means 'Look here.'"

"Oh, and 'latcha-key' means open the door, I suppose," retorted the stout youth. "You're a fine Spanish scholar, you are."

"I've a good mind to throw you into that hole," threatened Merritt.

"Try it," shouted the stout youth, hopping about aggravatingly. [Pg 51]

"I will."

Merritt made a rush at the irritating Tubby, who leaped provokingly away. But suddenly he gave utterance to a yell of dismay, as in his efforts to retreat he stumbled into the hole which Jose had dug. By this time, to Rob's astonishment, for he had been watching Jose's methods with interest, quite a lot of muddy water had appeared, and into this accumulation of moisture the stout youth fell with a resounding splash.

Even the solemn Jose smiled as Tubby spluttered and splashed about in the pool.

"Come out of that water," commanded Merritt.

"Call this water?" demanded Tubby, spluttering some of it out of his mouth. "Ugh! it tastes more like soap suds to me."

"Him alkali," grinned Jose, as Tubby scrambled out and stood, rather crestfallen, on the verge of the magic pool; "mucho malo."

"What's 'mucho malo'?" demanded Tubby of Merritt, the self-appointed interpreter. [Pg 52]

"It means you're a nuisance," retorted Merritt, which reply almost brought on a renewal of hostilities. Rob checked them, however, by reminding the stout youth that the water was for drinking and not for bathing purposes. The boys were anxious to dip their buckets in and return to the wagon, but Jose told them they must wait till the water cleared.

"Pretty soon him like glass," he said.

Sure enough, after a long interval of waiting, in which there was nothing to do but look at the sand and the burning blue sky above it, the previously muddy seepage water began to take on a green hue. With a yell, the boys rushed forward to dip it up.

But as they bent over the brink of the water hole a sudden shout from Jose made them look up. They echoed the Mexican's yell as they did so, for outlined against the sky was a startling figure.

It was that of an Indian, his sinewy limbs draped in a blanket of gorgeous hue, and astride of a thin, active-looking calico pony. For an instant the piercing eyes of the red man and the white boys met, and then, with a strange cry, he wheeled his pony and vanished over the rim of the depression. [Pg 53]

"Was that an Indian?" gasped Tubby, for the figure of the red man had appeared and vanished so swiftly that it seemed almost as if it might have been a delusion.

"Moqui, very bad Indian," grunted the Mexican, who seemed nervous and fearful all of a sudden.

"Oh, I thought maybe it was a jack-in-the-box," said Tubby, with a cheerful grin, which froze on his face, however, as suddenly as it had come.

The rim of the water hole was surrounded by twenty or more wild figures, the companions of the solitary horseman. They had appeared as if by magic.

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CHAPTER IV.

SILVER TIP APPEARS.

The interval of silence which succeeded to the discovery that they were surrounded by Moquis was the most trying any of the party had ever known. Resistance was useless, for each of the Indians carried a rifle of modern make, and even had the boys been armed, they could not have defended themselves.

"What do you want?" demanded Rob at length, of an Indian who, judging by his ornate feather headdress, seemed to be the chief of the party.

"White boys go to mountains?" demanded the chief.

"Yes. We are going to the Harkness ranch," rejoined Rob, a trifle more boldly, as there did not seem to be any active antagonism in the chief's tone.

"White boys got money?" [Pg 55]

"It's a hold up!" gasped Tubby.

"Say, hold your tongue for once, can't you?" snapped Merritt angrily.

"Yes, we have some money. Why?" inquired Rob.

"We want um."

It was a direct demand, and as the boy hesitated, a grim look spread over the chief's face. Rob, like the others, carried most of his money in a belt about his waist, but each lad had a few bills in his wallet and some small change in his pockets.

"Say, what is this—Tag Day?" demanded Tubby, as the chief, having solemnly taken all Rob's small change, drew up in front of the stout youth and extended his dirty palm.

"All right," said the fat boy, hastily digging down into his pocket, as the red man stared steadily at him. "Here's all I've got. Take it, Chief What-you-may-call-um, and I hope whatever you get with it chokes you."

Fortunately for Tubby, the chief did not understand this, or it might have fared badly with the irrepressible youth. Merritt's turn came next, and then Jose, with many lamentations, surrendered a few small silver coins. [Pg 56]

"All right. You go now," said the chief, as with a shrill, wild yell he dug his naked heels into his pony's sides, and the little beast plunged up the steep bank. Echoing his shrill cries, the other Indians joined him, and the body of marauders swept off across the foothills at a rapid pace.

"So that's the noble red man, is it?" demanded Tubby. "Hum! back home we'd call them noble panhandlers."

"What did they want the money for?" asked Rob of the Mexican, who was still wringing his hands over the loss of his pocket money.

"Moqui's go snake dance. Moocho red liquor," explained the guide from across the border.

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said Rob. As he spoke, his eyes fell suddenly on a small piece of paper the Indian chief had dropped when he rode up the steep side of the water hole. He picked it up and opened its folds carefully. It appeared to be a scrap torn from a notebook, and the boy stared as his eyes fell on the name "Clark Jennings, His Book." [Pg 57]

"Say, fellows, look here," he cried excitedly, as he perused some writing on the other side. "That sneak I gave the razzle-dazzle to yesterday is in this."

"What, Clark Jennings?"

"The same. Listen!"

From the side of the paper which bore the writing Rob read as follows:

"They will be near the water hole at noon. All three have money."

"Well, what do you make of it?" asked Tubby in a puzzled tone. "I don't see the connection, quite."

"It's plain enough. I've heard that these Indians are placid enough if they are not interfered with and given money. That fellow Clark knew they were somewhere hereabouts—you remember he asked Harry about them yesterday. He and Jess Randell left Mesaville early, so as to meet them and bribe them to hold us up." [Pg 58]

"But can the Indians read English writing?" asked Tubby.

"Yes. Most of the present generation have been to government schools and are comparatively well educated."

"Hooray for education!" shouted Tubby. "They sure are promising scholars."

There came a sudden shout from above.

"Hey, what's the matter with you fellows, anyhow? You've been gone almost an hour."

Harry Harkness stood at the edge of the dip, looking down at the excited boys.

"An hour isn't the only thing that's gone," wailed Tubby; "all our change has gone, too."

When the laugh at Tubby's whimsical way of putting it had subsided, the situation was explained to Harry, who agreed that there was nothing to be done.

"We had better be pushing on as fast as possible, though," he said; "there's no knowing when those fellows may wake up to the fact that we have more money about us and come back after it." [Pg 59]

A hasty lunch was cooked and eaten, and the mules watered with a bucket of water each. This done, the team was once more hitched, and Jose, who had in the meantime dropped off to sleep again, awakened. But as the Mexican cracked his whip, and his long-eared charges began to move, a sudden surprise occurred. From a little dip ahead a horseman suddenly appeared and hailed the boys.

He was a tall, bearded man in regulation plainsman's costume, and his sun-burned face was shielded by a broad sombrero. On his face was a look of determination and self-reliance. As the boys looked at him they felt that here was a man of action and character.

"Hullo, strangers," he said, checking the splendid horse he rode, as the mules came to a stop. "Have you seen anything of any Moquis hereabout?"

"Why, yes," responded Rob; "they——"

"Saw us to the extent of all our small change," put in Tubby. [Pg 60]

"Mine, too!" wailed the Mexican. "Mucho malo Indiano."

"What! you have been robbed by them?"

"Feels that way," said Tubby, patting his empty pockets.

"That's too bad," said the man. "I am Jeffries Mayberry, the Indian agent from the reservation. I am trying to round those fellows up without making a lot of trouble over it, and having the papers get hold of the story and print exaggerated accounts of an uprising. They are really harmless if they don't get hold of liquor."

"Or money," put in Tubby.

"Well, as far as we know, they swept off to the southeast," said Rob.

"Yes. They are going to have their snake dance in the Santa Catapinas. Every once in a while they break out and head for there. All the renegade Indian rascals for miles round join them, and besides the dance, which is a religious ceremony, they drink and gamble. Well, I must be getting on, and thank you for your information."

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With a wave of his hat, he dug his big blunt-rowelled spurs into his horse's sides and was off in a cloud of dust.

"I'd like to help that fellow get his Indians rounded up," said Rob; "he seems the right sort of a chap."

"Yes, his name is well known around here," rejoined Harry, as the wagon moved onward once more. "He is the best Indian agent that the Moquis have ever had, my father says. He knows them, and can handle them at all ordinary times. He dislikes fuss, however, and hates to see his name in the papers. Otherwise, I guess, he'd have had the soldiers after those fellows."

"I wish we had the Eagle Patrol out here," said Merritt. "We'd soon get after that bunch of redskins."

"Well, why not?" said Harry enigmatically.

"Why not what?"

"Why not form a patrol out here? You know we talked about it in the East in the brief time we had together."

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"Say, that's a great idea," assented Rob.

"Who could we get to join, coyotes, rattlers, and jack-rabbits?" asked Tubby solemnly.

"Say, Tubby, this is no joking matter," protested Merritt.

"I'm not joking. Never more serious in my life. A coyote would make a fine scout."

"Yes, to run away," laughed Rob. "But seriously, Harry, could we get enough fellows out here to form a patrol?"

"Sure; I know of a dozen who would join. We could make it a mounted division, and maybe we could help Mr. Mayberry round up his Moquis."

"Say, fellows!" exclaimed Rob, with shining face, "that would be splendid!"

"Maybe we'd get our money back then," grunted Tubby.

"Tell you what we'll do," said Harry. "To-morrow I'll take you with me, Rob, and we'll ride round all the ranches where I know some boys, and get them to sign up. We ought to have a patrol organized in a week at that rate."

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"Put me in as a commissariat officer, will you?" asked Tubby.

"That goes without saying," laughed Rob.

As the wagon jolted on over the road, which grew rapidly rougher and rougher, the boys eagerly discussed their great plan.

The foothills were now passed, and they were forging ahead through a deep cañon, or gorge, well wooded on its rugged sides with dark trees and shrubs. Here and there great patches of slablike rock cropped through the soil and showed nakedly among the vegetation. All at once Rob gave a shout and pointed up the hillside at one of these "islands" of rock.

"Look, look!" he shouted. "Something moved up there."

"Something moved," echoed the rest, Indians being the "something" uppermost in every mind.

"Indians?" gasped Tubby.

"No; at least, I don't think so. It was some animal—a huge beast, it seemed to be."

As he spoke there came a crashing of brush far up on the hillside, and every one in the party, even the sleepy Jose, gave vent to a perfect yell of amazement. On one of the rock shelves far above them was poised the massive form of an immense bear. His huge body showed blackly against the sunset-reddened shelf on which he stood. With the exception of one spot of white on his great chest, he was almost black.

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"Silver Tip!" shouted Harry Harkness, too excited even to remember his rifle, which lay in the bottom of the wagon.

As he uttered the exclamation, the great ragged brute gave a snort of apparent disdain and clumsily lumbered off into the darker shadows. The next instant he was gone.

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CHAPTER V.

AT THE HARKNESS RANCH.

"Silver Tip!" echoed Rob, as the immense monarch of the Arizona forest crashed his way off through the undergrowth. "Well, when you told us about him on the steamer, you didn't exaggerate his size. He's as big as a pony."

"Plenty of bear steaks on him," remarked Tubby judiciously.

"I guess you'd find them well seasoned with lead," laughed Harry. "Every hunter in this part of the country has shot at Silver Tip, and plenty of them have hit him, but he always managed to get away. The Indians and the Mexicans are scared of him. They think he is not a bear at all, but some sort of demon in animal form. Eh, Jose?"

"Silvree Teep mucho malo bear," grunted the Mexican. "Only can kill with silver bullet."

"What do you think of that," laughed Harry. "But our hunters have wasted too many lead bullets on old Silver Tip to try him with silver ones. But in spite of his wonderful good fortune hitherto, that bear's day will come."

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"Like a dog's," commented Tubby. "You know they say every dog has his day—I guess it's the same way with that old sockdolliger."

"That's so, I guess," rejoined Harry.

Soon afterward they clattered and rumbled down a steep grade leading from the cañon into a wooded, green dip in the foothills. Before them suddenly spread out the vista of apparently illimitable pasture grounds, dotted with feeding cattle. In the foreground, half hidden by big cotton-wood trees, and overtopped by a windmill and water tank, stood a long, low ranch house, with numerous outbuildings and corrals about it.

"That's the range," said Harry, pointing. And as the boys broke into an admiring chorus, the mules plunged forward into a brisk trot. In a short time the outer gate was reached, and opened by dint of pulling a hanging contrivance which worked on a system of levers, that opened and closed the gate at the will of whoever was entering or leaving, without obliging them to dismount.

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Around the bunkhouse stood a group of cowboys in leather chapareros and rough blue shirts, awaiting the call to supper in the low, red-painted cook-house. Some of them were gathered about a tin basin, removing the grime of the day. In a large corral were their ponies, browsing on a railed-off stack of grain hay, and occasionally kicking and biting and squealing, as some fractious soul among them instigated a fight.

Suddenly a door in the ranch house opened, and a figure, which the boys recognized as that of Mr. Harkness, emerged. His hands were extended in a hearty welcome, and a smile wreathed his bronzed features.

"Hulloa, boys!" he hailed. "Welcome to the Harkness ranch."

The boys broke into a cheer, and leaping from the wagon, ran forward to greet their kind-hearted host, whom they had last met on the deck of a stranded steamer on the Long Island shoals.

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After the first chorus of greetings and questions had passed, Mr. Harkness inquired what had delayed them.

"Indians," rejoined Harry. "They tried to steal mules going down, and they robbed the boys here of their small change on their way up."

The face of the rancher grew graver.

In response to his questions, Rob had soon placed him in possession of the facts surrounding the appearance of the Moquis at the water hole and the subsequent events.

"We shall have to keep a sharp eye on the cattle, then," he said soberly. "I've got a bunch over on the far range, right up in the foothills. If these gentry get hungry they are likely to make a raid on them, or they may even do it out of pure wantonness."

"Yes, it wouldn't be the first time," said Harry. "By the way, pop, we met Mr. Mayberry, the Indian agent, on the way up. He's after them."

"That's bad," gravely commented the rancher.

"Bad!" repeated Harry. "Why, dad, I've heard you yourself say that he was the best Indian agent you ever knew."

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"So he is, in a sense. But he is too kind-hearted. What those renegade rascals need is a file of soldiers with fixed bayonets and a burning desire to use them. However, come in, boys. Jose, wake up and put those trunks off. Get two men to help you bring them into the house. Come in, boys, and make yourselves at home in a rancher's shanty."

Mr. Harkness may have called it a shanty, but to the boys' eyes there had seldom been presented a more attractive interior than that of the Harkness ranch house. The furniture was dark and heavy, and the walls were hung with trophies of the hunt. Bright-colored Navajo rugs

were all about, lending a brilliant dash of brightness to the dark woods and walls. At one end of the room was a huge open fireplace, which was now filled with fresh green boughs.

"Why—why, it's great!" exclaimed Rob, glancing about him admiringly.

"Glad you like it," said the rancher, evidently well pleased at the boy's pleasure. "Those heads there are all the tale of my rifle." [Pg 70]

"The collection is only lacking in one thing—a single item," commented Rob.

"Which is—"

"The head of Silver Tip, the giant grizzly."

"You know about him, then?" Mr. Harkness seemed much surprised. At the time of his leaving the stranded ship he had not overheard the conversation between his son and the Boy Scouts.

"We've seen him," put in Tubby, nodding his head very sagely.

Then of course the story of their glimpse of the monster had to come out.

"It is unusual for Silver Tip to be about here at this time of year," commented Mr. Harkness. "He usually does not visit us till later. That's an additional peril to the cattle."

"How is that?" inquired Rob.

"In two ways. In the first place, Silver Tip is what we call a rogue grizzly. He lives all alone, hunts by himself, and has nothing to do with any others of his kind. He is as cruel, wantonly so, as he is formidable. For instance, last winter he killed fifty or more head of steers just for the sheer love of killing. Then, too, he is dangerous in another way. It takes very little to stampede a band of cattle. I have seen them started by a jack-rabbit leaping up suddenly from the brush. The sight of such an appalling monster as Silver Tip would be sure to start them off. No, I certainly don't like to hear that he is about." [Pg 71]

Not long after this remark the announcement of supper put an end to further discussion of Silver Tip and his ways. Then and there Rob determined in his own mind that, if it were possible, the skin of that inaccessible monster would journey East with him when he returned. Absurd as the idea seemed, of him, an Eastern boy, green in the ways of the West, winning such a trophy, still Rob could not help dwelling on it. After the meal Mr. Harkness left the house for the bunkhouse, to give some orders to the night-riding cow-punchers. The news of the near neighborhood of the Moquis had made him nervous and unsettled. [Pg 72]

The evening passed away in further discussion among the boys of the proposed mounted patrol of Boy Scouts, and before they knew it, ten o'clock had arrived. Pretty well fatigued by the events of the day, they were not unwilling to seek their beds, which were situated in three small upper rooms, directly above the big main living room.

Rob was just dropping off into unconsciousness when he heard a clattering of hoofs outside. Somebody had ridden up to the ranch house at full speed.

"Who is it?" he heard asked in Mr. Harkness's voice.

"It's me—Pete Bell," an excited voice rejoined, evidently that of the horseman who had just arrived.

"Well, Pete, what is it?" inquired the voice of Mr. Harkness once more.

"Why, sir, you know I was one of the bunch you sent to the far pasture to-night."

"Yes, yes! Go on, man! What is it—the Indians?" [Pg 73]

"No, sir, no Indians. But, sir, we've seen it again."

"What, that foolish ghost-story thing! Haven't you fellows got over harping on that yet?"

"It ain't imagination, Mr. Harkness, as you seem to think," Rob heard the cow-puncher protest. "I seen it with these eyes as plain as I see you now. It come out on the cliff where the old cave dwellings are, and we saw it wring its hands a few times and then vanish just like it's always done before."

"Nonsense, Pete," replied the hard-headed rancher. "I thought you knew better than to take stock in ghost stories."

"So I do, sir; but when you see the ghost itself, that's getting close to home."

"Well, get back to the pasture now, Pete, and I'll guarantee the ghost won't bother you any more. Come on, get some color in your face. You are chattering like a child."

"Won't you send somebody back with me, sir? That thing ought to be looked into." [Pg 74]

"Nonsense! I wouldn't waste time, men or thought on such rubbish. If you get track of any Indians, let me know, but don't bother me with any ghost stories. Now be off!"

"Y-y-yes, sir," said the cow-puncher obediently, but Rob noted that his pony didn't travel back toward the far pasture as fast as it had come away from it.

"So," thought Rob to himself, "there are haunted cliff dwellings near here, as well as a rogue grizzly and a bunch of bad Indians. Well, it looks as if we had fallen into an ideal spot for Boy Scouts."

CHAPTER VI.

A BOY SCOUT "BRONCHO BUSTER."

The next morning before breakfast Rob recounted to his chums the conversation he had overheard the night before. The story of the ghost of the ancient cliff dwellings was, it appeared, no new thing on the Harkness ranch, which accounted for its owner's apathy in regard to it. Successive batches of cow-punchers doing duty in the far pasture at night professed to have seen the grisly object on its nightly rounds, but nobody had ever had the courage to investigate it.

After the morning meal had been dispatched, Mr. Harkness announced that he expected to be busied about the ranch for the morning.

"But, Harry, you take the boys down to the corral," he said, "and have one of the men catch up some horses for them. You boys know best the kind of stock you want, so I'll let you choose them." [Pg 76]

The boys thanked him, and a few moments afterward he left the room. A short time later he galloped off to make a round of the different sections of the range and to prosecute inquiries about the renegade Moquis.

The corral was, as was usually the case, full of ponies of all colors and grades of disposition, from mild beasts to fiery, half-broken bronchos. As the boys neared the enclosure, a stout little cowboy in a huge hairy pair of "chaps" approached them, airily swinging a lariat. His eyes opened and shut as rapidly as a loose shutter slat in a breeze. Cowboys have nick-names for everybody. His was of course "Blinky."

"Good mornin', Master Harry. Want some cattle this a. m.?" he inquired.

"Yes, Blinky. Have you got some good ones caught up?"

"Why, yes, you can have White Eye, and what kind of stock does your friends fancy?"

There was a twinkle in Blinky's fidgety optics as he asked this, for the boys, although they had donned regular ranch clothes, still bore about them that mysterious air which marks a "tenderfoot," as if they bore a brand. [Pg 77]

"How about you, Rob?" asked Harry, also smiling slightly. "Want a bronc, or something more on the rocking-horse style?"

Now, although Rob could ride fairly well, and both Tubby and Merritt had had some practice on horseback, none of the boys were what might be called rough riders. But something in Blinky's tone and Harry's covert smile aroused all Rob's fighting blood.

"Oh, I want something with some life in it," he said boldly.

"Um-hum! The same will do for me, but not *too* much life, if you please," chimed in Tubby, somewhat dubiously.

"Anything I don't need to use spurs on," ordered Merritt, following up the general spirit.

"All right, young fellers," said the cow-puncher, opening the corral gate. "Come on in while I catch 'em up for you."

The instant the rawhide began whirling about Blinky's head the ponies evidently realized that something was up, for they began a wild race round and round the corral, heads up and heels lashing out right and left. The three tenderfeet regarded this exhibition with some apprehension, but they were too game to say anything. [Pg 78]

"I'll rope my own," said Harry, picking up a lariat which hung coiled over a snubbing post near the gate. The ranch boy stood by the post, leisurely whirling his rawhide and just keeping the loop open till a small bay pony, with a big patch of white round each eye, came plunging by with the rest of the stampede. The lariat suddenly became imbued with life. Faster it whirled and faster, the loop finally sailing through the air gracefully and landing in a rawhide necklace round White Eye's neck.

At almost the same instant that White Eye became a captive, Blinky let his loop go, and roped a small, active buckskin pony which, as soon as it felt the loop on its neck, laid back its ears and began squealing and bucking viciously.

"I guess that's your pony, Rob," said Tubby generously, as the cow-puncher drew the struggling little animal up to the snubbing post, and tying him there, went into the barn for a saddle. [Pg 79]

"If you are in any hurry, you can have him," volunteered Rob.

"No, I guess I can wait. How about you, Merritt?"

"Same here, I'm in no hurry."

"Well," thought Rob, "I'm in for it now, and if that bronc doesn't buck me into the middle of next week, I'm lucky."

After more struggles, the bridle and saddle were forced on the buckskin, and Blinky cast him loose, still maintaining a grip on the bridle, however.

"All aboard!" he said, with a grin in Rob's direction.

Feeling anything but as confident as he looked, Rob boldly put his foot in the heavy wooden stirrup with its big leather tapadero covering, and swung into the saddle. Hardly had he touched it when a strange thing happened. The boy felt as if an explosion must have occurred directly beneath him, and he was being shot skyward by it. The next instant the sensation changed, and as the broncho struck the hard ground of the corral, all four legs as stiff as drum sticks, Rob felt as if every bone in his body was in process of dislocation.

"Stick to her, boy! Yow-ee-ee!"

Blinky, roaring with laughter, shouted the advice. At this moment, too, just when Rob would much rather not have had any spectators about, several cow-punchers appeared as if by magic, and perching themselves on the corral rails, settled down to enjoy the spectacle.

"Whoop!" they yelled. "That's a regular steamboat bucker."

"Go on, boy! Grip her!"

"Don't go to leather!"

These and a hundred other excited exclamations were borne dimly to Rob's ears as the buckskin threshed about, trying in vain to rid itself of the troublesome boy. How he did it Rob never knew, but he stuck like a cockle-burr, and that without "going to leather," or, in other words, gripping any part of the saddle. He must have been a born rider to stand the antics of the maddened cayuse as he did. One second the little brute, tiring of bucking, would rear backward as if it must overbalance, and the next it would be fairly standing on its head. Once it lay down and tried to roll over, but the high horn of the saddle prevented this. As it collapsed to the ground, Rob skillfully slipped off, and when it struggled upon its feet again, the boy was standing over it and was as firmly in his seat as ever by the time the animal was ready for a new performance.

All at once the buckskin made a mad rush for the corral fence. It was five feet in height, and Rob turned sick as he faced what seemed inevitable disaster.

The yells of the cowboys, however, made him determined to stick it out.

"I've stood it all this time. I'll stay with it if it kills me," thought the boy.

The next instant the little broncho rose at the fence. The bars rose in front like an impassable wall.

"He'll never make it," was the thought that flashed through Rob's head.

But even as the fear of a direful crash flashed through his mind, the active little animal he bestrode had cleared the barrier, its hind hoofs just splintering the upper edge of the top rail. The buckskin alighted on the other side, trembling and sweating, with expanded nostrils and heaving flanks, but its ears were no longer back, nor did its eyes show white. The broncho seemed to have realized that it had played its trump card and lost.

"Get up!" cried Rob, kicking the shivering pony in the sides.

Meekly the little buckskin obeyed the rein, and Rob rode it back toward the corral gate—a conquered animal. From that time on the buckskin owned Rob as its master, and a better animal never bore saddle. As the cow-punchers burst into a loud chorus of admiring yells, wrung from them by the plucky exhibition, Rob took off his hat and waved it three times round his head. For the life of him, he could not have abstained from this little bit of braggadocio.

"Yip-ee!" he yelled.

"Good for you!" shouted Harry. "It was a mean trick of Blinky, and I was going to get him in a lot of trouble for it, but—all's well that ends well."

"Say, you were fooling all of us. You must have been out with a Wild West show," exclaimed Blinky admiringly, as Rob patted the wet shoulder of the conquered buckskin.

"I'm glad I could stick on," declared Rob modestly.

"Stick on!" echoed another cow-puncher. "Why, you're a broncho buster, boy!"

"Well, I've had enough of it to last me for a long time," laughed Rob.

Two other ponies were soon caught and saddled, and much to the delight of Tubby and Merritt, they found that the cow-puncher's love of fun had been worked off when Rob was given the buckskin, and that they were each provided with mounts that tried no such tricks as standing on their heads.

"Now, then, come on," said Harry, when all were mounted. "We've got a big round to make. The first ranch we'll head for will be Tom Simmons's. He and his two brothers will join, I'm sure. After that we'll finish up the others and issue a call for a meeting."

The remainder of the day was spent in the saddle, with a brief stop for a noonday dinner at the

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Simmons ranch. By the end of the day the Boy Scouts' list contained ten names, which were as follows: Tom, Jack and Bill Simmons, Eph and Sam Ingalls, Henry Randolph, Charley and Frank Price, Silas Lamb and Jeb Cotton.

All the would-be scouts had been ordered to report, three days from the day of their signing on, at the Harkness ranch. In the meantime the boys wrote to Eastern headquarters for organization papers, which, as Rob and his companions were already so well known, they anticipated no difficulty in receiving without delay, which, indeed, proved to be the case. Rob had, meanwhile, received a letter from Hampton which reported the successful formation of another patrol in that village where the famous Eagles first saw the light. [Pg 85]

The interval between the call for the meeting and the meeting itself the boys put in in practicing riding and shooting. As they all three were familiar with the rifle and revolver, even that brief practice made them fairly expert with firearms and their riding improved every day.

Mr. Harkness and Mr. Simmons had consented to act as Scout Masters, and were present at the first meeting of the organization. Rob, on account of his experience as leader of the Eagle Patrol, was voted in as leader, with Merritt and Harry as corporals. Tubby was appointed a sort of drill master and instructor to the new scouts. This done, they all dispersed, subject to immediate call.

As the ranches of Mr. Harkness and his neighbors, though separated widely by actual distance, were each joined by telephone, it was decided that it would be an easy matter to assemble the scouts at a given rendezvous. The opportunity to test this came sooner than any of the boys expected. One afternoon, about a week after the formation meeting, during which interval Tubby had held two drill nights, a cow-puncher on a sweat-covered horse galloped into the corral. Slipping off his exhausted animal, he dashed at top speed toward the house. [Pg 86]

"The cattle in the far pasture have stampeded," he panted, bursting into the rancher's office, "and are headed for the Graveyard Cliffs!"

"Boys, boys!" shouted Mr. Harkness, hastily springing up from his account books and jamming a sombrero on his head. "Here's a chance to show your boy scouts some action. Here, you, Blinky, saddle my horse and the boys' animals! Sharp work now! There's not a moment to lose! We must head them off!"

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CHAPTER VII.

THE STAMPEDE AT THE FAR PASTURE.

Such a scene of confusion, hurry and mad rushing about of men and horses as ensued, following the first shout of the alarm, the boys had never witnessed. Cow-punchers staggered about under the burden of heavy Mexican saddles. They tried to buckle on spurs and saddle and bridle their wild little horses all at the same time. But confused as the whole affair looked to an uninitiated spectator, there was system underlying it all. Each man knew what was required of him.

At last all was ready. The last revolver was thrust into the last holster, and the last cinch was tightened round the belly of the last expostulating pony. Mr. Harkness, mounted on a powerful bay horse somewhat heavier than the others, rapidly explained to the punchers what had occurred. The cattle were stampeding on the far pasture. Their course led direct for the Graveyard Cliffs, a series of precipitous bluffs over which, in the past, many stampeding steers had fallen to their death. [Pg 88]

Fortunately, the steers had to take a round-about way, owing to various obstructions. The distance to be traversed by the men, cutting off every inch possible, was about five miles. It had to be covered in less than half an hour. No wonder the cow-punchers looked to their cinches and other harness details.

Amid a wild yell from the throats of the score of cowboys who had been about the ranch when the summons was first given, the cavalcade swept forward.

"Wow! this is riding with a vengeance," shouted Rob, above the roar of hoofs, in Harry's ear.

"S-s-s-say!" sputtered Tubby, "I hope my horse doesn't stumble."

Suddenly a voice close at hand struck in. It was one of the cow-punchers shouting to another.

"Remember the last stampede, when Grizzly Sam was trampled?" [Pg 89]

"You bet I do. His pony's foot stuck in a gopher hole, and the whole stampede came lambasting on top of him."

The boys began to look rather serious. Apparently they were off on a more dangerous errand than they had bargained for. It was too late to draw out now, however, and, anyhow, not one of them would, for this would have shown "the white feather."

"Did you give the alarm to the rest of the boys?" asked Rob of Harry, after an interval of silence among the boys.

"Yes. I only had time to call Simmons's place, but they'll get the others. Simmons's place is not far from the Graveyard Cliffs, and the boys will be there ahead of us, likely."

"How about the others?"

"They have to come from greater distances. They may not arrive till it's all over."

It was impossible to see any of their surroundings in the thick cloud of dust. All about them, as far as the eye could penetrate the dense smother, were straining ponies and shouting cowboys. [Pg 90]

"How can we tell when we get to the place?" asked Tubby.

"My father is riding up ahead," rejoined Harry; "that big bay of his can make two feet to a pony's one. He'll call a halt when we get there."

In the meantime a rumor had been passed from mouth to mouth among the cow-punchers. Moquis had been seen near the far pasture the night before, and open accusations were made that the renegades had started the stampede so as to be able to make a feast off the dead cattle in case they swept over the cliffs.

"Mr. Mayberry hasn't succeeded in rounding them up yet, then," said Rob.

"No," rejoined Harry, "and I heard one of the punchers say yesterday that Indians for miles around are coming into the mountains. I guess they won't disperse till after the snake dance."

Suddenly a wild yell from up in front caused them to halt. [Pg 91]

"Got there, I reckon," uttered one of the cowboys. As he spoke there was but one question in every mind.

"Were they in time?"

As the dust cloud settled, and they were able to make out their surroundings, the boys found that they had come to halt on a sort of plateau. Just beyond this was a sheer drop, as if a great hunk had been cut out of the ground. This drop—which was fully sixty feet deep,—formed the dreaded Graveyard Cliff, so called, although, as will be clear from our description, it was more properly a deep, narrow gulch.

The distance across the yawning crack in the plateau—which was undoubtedly of volcanic origin—varied from a hundred feet or more to fifteen, and even less. A queerer place the boys had never seen.

But they had little time to gaze about them. Blinky, who was one of the crowd of stampede arresters, gave a sudden shout as they came to a halt. [Pg 92]

"Hark!"

From far off came a sound that, to the boys, resembled nothing so much as distant thunder. But unlike thunder, instead of ceasing, it grew steadily in volume.

"Here they come!" shouted Mr. Harkness, as the advancing roar grew louder. The solid earth beneath the boys' feet seemed to shake as the stampede swept toward them.

Suddenly, a mile or more off, a dark cloud grew and grew until it spread half across the blue sky, wiping it out.

"They raise as much dust as a tornado," exclaimed Blinky. "Pesky critters! I'd like to get a shot at the Moquis what started them."

But it was no time to exchange remarks. The face of each man in that little band was grave, and he appeared to be mustering every ounce of courage in his body for the struggle that was to come.

To the boys, as to the men, the situation was clear enough. Across the plateau the stampeding cattle were thundering, headed straight for the Graveyard Cliffs. Behind them, like a mighty wall, rose the sheer face of a precipice where a bold peak of the range soared upward. Between this wall and the ominously named gorge was the little band of horsemen. They faced the problem of turning the stampede or being swept with it into the jaws of the deep, narrow gulch. Small wonder that the bravest of them felt his heart beat a little quicker as the cattle rushed on. [Pg 93]

Suddenly Mr. Harkness espied the boys.

"You boys go back!" he shouted sharply. "I should never have let you come. This is too dangerous for you."

"Why, dad, we'll be all right. Let us stay and see it out," protested Harry.

"Go back at once, boy," said Mr. Harkness sternly. "You don't know the danger."

There was no disobeying the stern command, and the boys, all of them with the exception of Tubby, regretting the necessity, turned their ponies away. The stout youth was inwardly much gratified at the idea of avoiding the stampede. [Pg 94]

"Beefsteak is all very fine," he said to himself, "but I like it inside, and not on top of me, at the

bottom of a gulch."

As the boys wheeled their mounts and separated from the main body of the cow-punchers, three other mounted figures swept toward them with wild yells. The newcomers were the three Simmons brothers, the recruits to the Boy Scouts. With them, and close behind, came Charley and Frank Price and Jeb Cotton. All had ridden post haste to the spot on receipt of the hastily 'phoned message from headquarters.

Each boy gave the secret salute of the scouts as he drew rein, and awaited orders. A regular howl of disappointment went up when they learned that they had been ordered off "the firing line," so to speak.

"It's a shame," growled Tom Simmons.

"That's what," assented Jeb Cotton, trying to quiet his little calico pony, which was dancing about, scenting the excitement in the air. Indeed, all the animals seemed to have caught the infection, and were prancing about, almost unmanageable. Perhaps the increasing thunder of the hoofs of the advancing stampede had something to do with it.

"Well, what are we to do?" demanded Frank Price.

"Stay here and wait for a chance to help if we see it," said Rob.

"Oh, pshaw! They're busy. They won't see us. Let's slip in while they're not looking," urged Bill Simmons.

"The first duty of a Boy Scout is to obey orders," said Harry Harkness decisively.

"It's mighty hard to sit here doing nothing, though," grumbled Frank Price.

"That's what our soldiers had to do in many a battle," his brother Charley reminded him.

"That's so. I guess we'll have to be patient."

And now, under the direction of Mr. Harkness, the cattlemen spread out in a long line, so arranged as to be capable of sweeping across the vanguard of the cattle in a compact skirmish line rank. Each puncher had his gun ready for action, and at the word from Mr. Harkness they rode toward the approaching stampede at a quick lope.

Up till now the stampede had not been visible. Only the signs of its approach were manifest. Suddenly, however, over the crest of a little rise, there swept into view an appalling spectacle. Hundreds of fear-crazed cattle, bellowing as they raced forward, and clashing their horns together with a sharp sound, formed the vanguard. Behind them came a huddled mass, goring and trampling each other in their terror.

The boys' faces paled as they watched.

"Yow-yow-yow-eee-ee-e!"

The yells burst from the cattlemen's throats above the noise of the stampede.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

A score of revolver shots crackled as the line swept forward and rode at full gallop right across the faces of the leaders of the mad rush. It was terribly risky work. The slightest stumble would have meant death. At the head of his cow-punchers, like a general leading his forces, rode Mr. Harkness on his big bay.

Clear across the front of the line the cow-punchers swept without appreciably diminishing the speed of the onrush.

A second time they tried the daring tactics. This time they succeeded in checking the cattle a little, but only a bare two hundred yards remained between the leaders and the edge of the Graveyard. In this space galloped the cow-punchers. Could they stop the advance in time to save themselves from a terrible death?

"Father! Father!" shouted Harry, in his painful excitement standing up in his stirrups.

The boys felt a great sympathy for the rancher's son. If the cattle were not stopped in the next few minutes a terrible death seemed certain to overtake the brave man and his helpers.

"Fire at 'em!" yelled Mr. Harkness suddenly.

This was a desperate last resort. Hitherto, the cow-punchers had been firing in the air. Now, however, they leveled their revolvers at the oncoming herd.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Several of the leaders crumpled up and fell to the ground, mortally wounded. In a second they were trampled under foot, but suddenly, after twenty or more had been thus slaughtered, the band began to waver. At last, with mad bellows, and amid frantic yells from the cowboys, their ranks broke and wavered.

"Yip-yip-u-ee-ee!"

The triumphant shrieks of the cowboys rang out as the disorganized herd split up.

"Wow! They've turned 'em!" shouted Harry. "Hooray!"

The next instant his shout of delight changed to a yell of dismay, and he turned his pony sharply.

"Come on, Rob!" he cried. "We've got to get out of here!"

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"They're coming this way!" yelled Tubby, spurring his pony and galloping off at top speed, the others following him. As Rob's pony jumped forward, however, it stumbled and threw the boy headlong. He kept his hold of the reins, fortunately, and was up on its back in a trice. But the second's delay had been fatal.

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Sweeping toward the boy, from two points of the compass, were two sections of disorganized stampede. The cattle were trying, according to their instinct, to reunite.

"I'm hemmed in," was Rob's thought.

He switched rapidly round to a quarter where there seemed a chance of escape, but already it had been closed. The boy was on a sort of island. Behind him was the gorge, deep and terrible. In front of him on two sides, death was closing in on the wings of the wind.

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CHAPTER VIII.

HEMMED IN BY THE HERD.

There was little time to think, and hardly more for action. A more perfect trap of its kind than that in which Rob was caught could not have been devised by the utmost ingenuity.

Shouts of alarm went up from the cow-punchers, and from the little group of Boy Scouts as they saw his danger. But not one of those horrified onlookers could do more than sit powerless. All about them, like waves shattered against a mighty rock, surged the broken stampede, with wild cattle rushing hither and thither. They themselves were, in fact, by no means out of danger.

With an angry bellow, the leader of the advancing left flank of cattle lowered his head. His mighty horns glistened like sharpened sabres. Straight at the boy he rushed, while his companions followed his example.

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An involuntary groan burst from the watchers. It seemed as if Rob's doom was sealed. But suddenly something happened that they still talk about in that part of the country.

Quick as thought the boy decided that there was only one course open to him. Advance he could not. Retreat, on the other hand, seemed barred by the gulch. Yet on the gulch side of the beleaguered boy lay the only path.

Foolhardy as the attempt appeared, Rob decided that the risk must be taken.

A shout burst from the lips of the powerless onlookers as they realized what the boy meant to do.

Leap the gulch on his pony!

A run, or take-off, of some fifty feet lay between Rob and the dark crack in the earth that was the gulch. Short as was the distance, from what Rob knew of the active little beast he bestrode, he believed he could do it. He raised his heavy quirt above the pony's trembling flanks.

Crack!

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The lash descended, cutting a broad wale on the buckskin's back. He gave a squeal of rage and bounded forward.

"Yip-yip!" yelled Rob.

Out of the peril of the situation a spirit of recklessness seemed to have descended upon him. He could have shouted aloud as he felt the active bounds of the cayuse. One hurried glance at the awful gap before him gave the boy a rough estimate of its width—ten feet or more. A tremendous leap for a pony. But it must be done.

"Yip-yip," yelled Rob once more, as he dug his spurs in deep, and the maddened pony gave one tremendous bound that brought it right to the edge of the pit.



Then the brave buckskin gathered its limbs for the leap.

For one sickening instant it paused, and Rob felt the chill fear of death sweep over him. Then the brave buckskin gathered its limbs for the leap. Like steel springs its tough muscles rebounded, and the yelling, shrieking cow-punchers saw a buckskin body, surmounted by a cheering boy, give a great leap upward and—alight safe on the farther side of the chasm.

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Cheer after cheer went up, while Rob waved his hat exultantly and yelled back at his friends.

Nothing like that leap for life had ever been witnessed before.

The amazed cattle, cheated of their prey, wavered, and the leaders tried in vain to check themselves. Desperately they dug their forefeet into the edge of the gulch, but the treacherous lip of the chasm gave under their weight, and with a roar and rattle, a cloud of dust and a despairing bellow, four of them shot over the edge and vanished.

Rob could not repress a shudder as he patted his buckskin, and realized that but for the little steed's noble effort he might have shared the fate of the dumb brutes.

Before long the cow-punchers had the rest of the steers rounded up, and ready to be driven back to the Far Pasture. Many were the threats breathed against the Moquis as they did so. The cattle, as is the nature of these half-wild brutes, having had their run out, seemed inclined to collapse from fatigue. As long as unreasoning terror held sway among them they had galloped tirelessly, but now their legs shook under them and they quivered and drooped pitifully. But the cattlemen showed them no mercy. With loud yells and popping of revolvers and cracking of quirts, they rode round them, getting them together into a compact mass.

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While all this was going on, Rob had ridden his buckskin along the edge of the gulch. Some two miles below the place where his leap had been made, he found a spot which seemed favorable for crossing. The pony slid down one bank on its haunches and clambered up the other like a cat. As the boy traversed the bottom of the Graveyard, he noticed a peculiarly offensive odor. The smell which offended his nostrils, he found, sprang from the carcasses of the cattle which had at various times fallen into the gulch, above where he was crossing.

"Wonder why they don't put up a fence here," thought the boy.

He did not learn till afterward that that very thing had been done, but every time a freshet occurred in the mountains a part of the gulch caved away, carrying with it the fence and all. It had thus grown to be less of an expense to the ranchmen to lose a few cattle every season than to erect new fences constantly.

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By the time Rob rejoined his friends, the cattle were standing ready for the drive back to their pastures. A more forlorn looking lot of beasts could not have been imagined.

"They know they done wrong," volunteered Blinky, gazing at the dejected herd.

"Well done, my boy," exclaimed Mr. Harkness, as Rob rode up. "I never saw a finer bit of horsemanship. But let us hope that such a resource will never again be necessary."

"I hope so, too, Mr. Harkness," said Rob. "I tell you I was scared blue for a minute or two. If it hadn't been for this gritty little cayuse here, I'd never have done it."

"So I did you a good turn, after all, when I roped up that four-legged bit of dynamite, thinking to play you a fine joke," said Blinky.

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"You did," laughed Rob, "and I thank you for it."

"Say, Rob," put in Tubby plaintively, after the other boys had got through congratulating Rob, and wringing his hand till, as he said, it felt like a broken pump handle. "Say, Rob, don't ever do anything like that again, will you?"

"Not likely to, Tubby—but why so earnest?"

"Well, you know I've got a weak heart, and——"

"A good digestion," laughed Mr. Harkness; "and speaking of digestions, reminds me that we haven't had any dinner."

"As I was just about to observe," put in Tubby, in so comical a tone that they all had to burst out laughing, at which the stout youth put on an air of innocence and rode apart.

"But," went on Mr. Harkness, "the 'chuck-wagon' I sent out to the Far Pasture last night should still be there. It isn't more than five miles. If you boys think you can hold out we can ride over there, and we can have a real chuck-wagon luncheon. How will that suit you?"

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"Down to the ground," said Rob.

"From the ground up," chimed in Tubby, who had recovered from his assumed fit of the sulks, at the mention of the immediate prospect of a meal.

"It'll be great," was Merritt's contribution to the general chorus of approval.

"Very well, then. Blinky, you ride on ahead and tell Soapy Sam to cook us up a fine feed."

"With beans, sir?" asked Blinky in an interested tone.

"Of course. And if he has any T bone steaks, tell him we want those, too."

"Say, did you hear the name of that cook?" asked Tubby, edging his pony up to Merritt's, as the cow-puncher spurred off on his errand.

"Yes—Soapy Sam; what of it?"

"Oh, I thought it was Soupy Sam, that's all," muttered Tubby.

"Say, is that meant for a joke? If so, where is the chart that goes with it?"

But Tubby had loped off to join the cow-punchers, who with yells and loud outcries were getting the steers in motion.

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Presently the cloud of dust moved forward. After traversing some rough country a yell announced that the cabins and the chuck-wagon of the Far Pasture were in sight. The cow-punchers immediately abandoned the tired cattle, leaving them to feed on the range, and swept down on the camp like a swarm of locusts.

Soapy Sam, his sleeves rolled up and a big apron about his waist, flourished a spoon at them as they began chanting in a kind of monotonous chorus:

"Chick-chock-we-want Chuck!
Chuck-chuck we want chuck!
Cook-ee! Cook-ee! Cook-ee!"

What's the luck?

As they chanted they rode round and round the cook, whose fires and pots were all on the ground. In a huge iron kettle behind him, simmered that staple of the cow-puncher, beans. The atmosphere was redolent with those sweetest of aromas to the hungry man or boy, sizzling hot steaks and strong coffee. Soapy Sam had fairly outdone himself since Blinky had ridden in with news that the boss and some guests were on the way.

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"Now you go way back and sit down, you ill-mannered steer-steering bunch of cattle-teasers," bellowed Soapy Sam indignantly, at the singing punchers. "If you don't, you won't get a thing to eat."

"Oh, cook-ee!" howled the cowboys.

"Oh, I mean it, not a mother's son of you," yelled Soapy Sam. "All you fellows think about is eating and drinking, and then smoking and swopping lies."

"How about work, cook-ee?" yelled some one.

"Work!" sputtered the cook with biting sarcasm. "Why, if work 'ud come up to you and say 'Hello, Bill!' you'd say, 'Sir, I don't know you.'"

Further exchange of ranch pleasantries was put a stop to at this moment by the arrival of Mr. Harkness and the boys, for the Simmons boys and the other Boy Scouts had been included in his invitation. The cowboys dispersed at once, riding over toward the huts, where they unsaddled their ponies and turned them into a rough corral. Water from a spring was dipped into tin basins, and a hasty toilet was made. By the time this was finished, Soapy Sam announced dinner by beating loudly on the bottom of a tin pan with a spoon.

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"Grub!" yelled the cowboys.

"Come and get it," rejoined Sam in the time-honored formula.

Within ten minutes everybody was seated, and in the lap of each member of the party was a tin plate, piled high with juicy steak, fried potatoes, and a generous portion of beans of Soapy Sam's own peculiar devising. Handy at each man's or boy's right was a steaming cup of coffee. But milk there was none, as Tubby soon found out when he plaintively asked for some of that fluid.

"Maybe there's a tin cow in the wagon," said Soapy Sam; "I'll see."

"A 'tin cow'," repeated Tubby wonderingly; "whatever is that?"

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A perfect howl of merriment greeted the fat boy's query.

"I guess its first cousin to a can of condensed milk," smiled Mr. Harkness. "But if you'll take my advice, you'll drink your coffee straight, in the regular range way."

And so the meal went merrily forward, in the shadow of the frowning, rugged peaks of the Santa Catapinas. In after days, the Boy Scouts were destined to eat in many strange places and by many "strange camp fires," but they never forgot that chuck-wagon luncheon, eaten under the cloudless Arizona sky on the open range.

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CHAPTER IX.

THE HOME OF A VANISHED RACE.

The meal disposed of, the cow-punchers and the boys, all of whom were pretty well tired out by their exertions of the morning, lounged about a while. Then preparations for the return to the ranch began. A guard was to be left over the cattle, however, as they were still restless and ill at ease, and the boys begged hard to be allowed to form a part of it. At first Mr. Harkness would not hear of it.

"Why, dad, the boys are out here to get experience," protested Harry, "and what better training could they have in ranch life than by standing a night watch over restive cattle?"

"That's all very well," rejoined his father, "but you must remember that I am in a measure responsible for the safety of these young men, and you boys have, up to date, displayed quite a capacity for getting into mischief."

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"And getting out of it again," put in the irrepressible Tubby. And the victory was won, as many another victory has been, by a burst of laughter. Soon after, the boys loped to the top of a nearby knoll, and waved good-by to the ranch-bound party. Then they turned their ponies and cantered back to the cow-punchers' huts at a smart pace. Besides the boys, the three Simmons brothers, Frank and Charlie Price and Jeb Cotton were to share the Scouts' watch, Mr. Harkness having promised to 'phone to their various homes explaining their absences. In charge of the four punchers was Blinky, who had also been given orders by Mr. Harkness to keep the boys out of mischief. The cattle, however, grew so restive during the afternoon that the attention of the punchers was fully occupied in "riding them." It seemed to soothe the bovines to have their guardians constantly near them.

"The brutes smell Injuns, just as sure as my name is Blinky Small," declared Blinky emphatically.

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The boys, after riding a few rounds with the punchers, began to find this occupation growing monotonous, and looked about for some other means of diversion.

"I know," shouted Tubby suddenly.

"Tubby's got an idea," laughed Merritt.

"Tell him to hold it. He may never get another," jeered Rob.

"Let's play ball," went on the stout youth, absolutely unperturbed by the laughter Rob's comment aroused.

"Fine," came sarcastically from one of the boys. "Where's the bat?"

"Where's the ball?"

"Where are the mitts?"

"Oh, where's the earth?" interrupted Tubby impatiently, stemming the tide of objections. "Say, can't you fellows play ball without a big league collection of stuff?"

"Well, here's a bit of board I can trim down a bit and make a bat of," said Jeb Cotton.

"Good for you, Jeb. You are a young man of resource and ingenuity. You'll make a good scout. How's this for a ball?"

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The stout youth held up a rounded bowlder, which must have weighed at least four pounds.

"Oh, rats! Say, what do you want to do—brain us?"

"Couldn't," responded Tubby enigmatically.

"Couldn't what?"

"Brain you."

"Why?"

"Haven't got any."

"Any what?"

"B-r-a-i-n-s, brains!" yelled Tubby, retreating to a safe distance.

"I have it!" exclaimed Rob suddenly.

"What, the pip?"

"No, an idea," responded the boy recklessly, forgetting his own comments on Tubby's inspiration.

"Ho! ho! ho!" howled the stout youth delightedly. "Step up, ladies and gentlemen, and see the eighth—or ninth wonder of the world—Rob Blake has an idea. Step up lively now, before the little creature gets away." [Pg 116]

"We can borrow some potatoes from Soapy Sam," said Rob, when some of the laughter at his expense had subsided.

"Borrow them?" exclaimed Bill Simmons. "I guess it will mean giving them. What I couldn't do to a potato with this bat——"

He flourished the piece of lumber Jeb Cotton had shaped, as he spoke. However, Rob's suggestion was tried; but even as Bill Simmons had prophesied, the borrowed potatoes did not prove a success as baseballs. One after another, they were scattered into tiny fragments, and Soapy Sam, on being requisitioned for more, threatened to evict the entire party from his premises.

"Oh, pshaw!" exclaimed Tubby petulantly. "What'll we do?"

"Go swimming," laughed Merritt.

"I have it," exclaimed Rob suddenly.

"He's got it again—a relapse of ideas," grinned Tubby.

"What's the matter with climbing that cliff and exploring those old cave dwellings?" [Pg 117]

"Great!" was the unanimous verdict. Privately, one or two of the boys who had heard the ghost legend, were not quite as eager as they seemed to be, to traverse the mysterious passages and tomb-like dwellings of a vanished race, but they didn't say so.

"It's about three hours to sundown. We'll have to shake a leg to get up there and back," said Frank Price.

Acting on this advice, no time was lost in making a start.

"Have we all got revolvers?" asked Rob suddenly.

"Sure," responded Jeb Cotton. "I brought mine when I heard that it was a stampede we were called out on."

The others had done likewise.

"Say," put in Tubby gloomily, as they set out, "what's the good of taking guns with us?"

"Why, you never know what you'll run into in a cave," said Bill Simmons.

"Huh, I never heard of guns being any good against ghosts," chillily remarked the fat youth. [Pg 118]

"Well, you're a nice cheerful soul, you are," burst out Rob. "Are you scared?"

"Oh, no; I'm not. Go ahead and rout your ghosts out. Stir 'em up, and make 'em jump through the hoops and back again. Fine!" exploded Tubby.

"Whatever is the matter with him?" asked Merritt, looking about for an answer.

"That idea he had a while back has gone to his head," laughed Harry.

And such was the general opinion.

As has been said, the cliff, at the summit of which were the cave dwellings, lay about half a mile back from the huts of the Far Pasture cow-punchers. The cliff was in itself a remarkable formation. It towered sheer up and down like the wall of a house. It was just as if a giant cheese-knife had shaved a neat slab off the face of the mountain—a slab some four hundred or more feet in height, and a mile or more wide at the base.

From where the boys were, however, they could perceive an old cattle trail winding up the mountainside, off beyond one edge of the smooth cliff. It traced its way among the scrub growth and stunted trees almost—so far as they could judge—to a point near the summit, and afforded an easy way of reaching the top of the cliff. [Pg 119]

An hour or more of tough climbing brought them to the top of the mountain—or high hill—

which formed a sort of plateau. No time was lost in making for the edge of the cliff, in the face of which, some twenty feet or more from the top, were bored the entrances to the cave-dwellers' mysterious homes.

"Well," said Tubby triumphantly, as he gazed over the dizzy precipice "no cave man's home for us."

It looked as if the stout youth was right. A narrow ledge, forming a sort of pathway against the naked side of the cliff, ran below the cave dwellings as a shelf is seen to extend sometimes below a row of pigeon holes. But from the summit of the cliff to the ledge was, as has been said, all of twenty feet, and there seemed to be no way of bridging the distance.

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"Those cave men must have been way ahead of the times," mused Tubby.

"How do you make that out?" inquired Jack Simmons, Bill's younger brother.

"Why, they must have had air ships. They couldn't have rung their front door bells any other way."

"Nonsense they must have had some way of getting down," interposed Rob, who was looking about carefully—"Hooray, fellows! I've got it," he exclaimed suddenly, "look!"

He pushed aside a clump of brush and exposed to view a flight of steps cut in the face of the rock. So filled with dust were they, however, that they had not been visible to any but the sharp eyes of the Boy Scout leader.

"What are you going to do?" asked Merritt, as Rob made for the lip of the cliff.

"Going down there, of course," rejoined Rob.

Merritt, as he gazed over the brink and viewed the sheer drop, down which one false step would have sent its maker plunging like a loosened stone, was about to utter a warning. He checked himself, however, and, with the rest, eagerly watched Rob, as the boy made his way down the precipitous steps, or rather niches, cut in the face of the rock.

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It was breath-catching work. The descending boy was compelled to cling to the surface of the cliff like a fly to a window-pane. Between him and the ground, four hundred feet under his shoe soles, nothing interposed but the narrow ledge of rock outside the cliff-dwellers' "front doors."

Rob made the descent in safety, and presently stood in triumph on the ledge. One after another, the Boy Scouts of the Range Patrol followed him, and presently they all stood side by side on the narrow shelf.

"Say, I hope the underpinnings of this don't give way," said Tubby, as he joined them, his round cheeks even ruddier than usual from the exertion of his climb.

"You ought to have been an undertaker, Tubby," exclaimed Merritt. "All you can think of is death and disaster and ghosts."

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"Well, if you feel so good about it, you can have the first chance at going into one of those holes," parried Tubby.

"Very well, I will," rejoined Merritt, flushing. He privately did not much relish the idea of being the first to enter those long-untrod passageways. They looked dark and mysterious. An oppressive silence, too, hung about the boys, and half-unconsciously they had dropped their voices to a whisper, as they stood on the threshold of a civilization long passed to ashes.

"Go ahead," said Rob, coming to Merritt's side. Together the two boys, followed by the remainder of the newly recruited Boy Scouts, entered the rocky portal of the first of the dwellings.

A faint, musty smell puffed out in their faces.

"Smells like grandpa's cellar in the country," remarked Tubby, sniffing it.

"Where you used to swipe milk and apples, I suppose," laughed Merritt. Hollow echoes of his merriment went gurgling off down the dark passage, almost as if distant voices had taken them up and were repeating the joke over and over, till it died away in a tiny tinkle of a laugh, like the ghost of a baby's whisper.

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"Ugh, I guess I won't laugh again," remarked Merritt.

"Say, Rob, how about a light?" asked Jeb Cotton suddenly.

"I've got a bit of candle here in my pocket," rejoined Rob. "I put it there the other night when Harry was developing some pictures. By the way, I wish you'd brought your camera, Harry."

"So do I. This would make a dandy flashlight in here."

The boys gazed about them admiringly, as Rob struck a match from his waterproof match-safe and lit the candle. They had penetrated fully a hundred feet into the cliff by this time, and the walls about them were marked with curious paintings and carvings, the work of the long-vanished cave-dwellers.

Under their feet was a thick, choking dust, that entered their eyes, ears and noses as they breathed, almost suffocating them. But not one of them was inclined to notice this, when there was so much to take up his attention elsewhere.

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"I wonder what the cave-dwellers ate——" began Tubby, when his words were fairly taken out of his mouth by a startling occurrence.

A sudden puff of wind, chill as the breath of a tomb, blew toward them down the tunnel, and at the same instant Rob's candle was blown out. It was all the boys could do to keep from shouting aloud with alarm as they stood plunged into sudden blackness.

The next instant there came an appalling sound, an onrush like the voice of a hundred waterfalls. The wind puffed in their faces in sharp blasts, and something swept by them in the darkness with a strange, muffled shriek.

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CHAPTER X.

THE GHOST OF THE CAVE DWELLING.

"L-l-let's get out of here—*quick!*"

Tubby gasped the exclamation, as with a resounding rush the mysterious sounds swept by.

"Ouch, somebody hit me in the face!" howled Jeb Cotton suddenly.

"Me, too!" yelled Bill Simmons.

"Say, fellows," shouted Rob suddenly, as the noise lessened, "be quiet, will you, till I light a candle. I've an idea what that noise was, and it was nothing to get scared at."

"Oh, it wasn't, eh?" protested Tubby angrily. "Well, something hit me a bang on the nose."

"And me on the ear," chimed in Jeb Cotton.

"And me——" Bill Simmons was beginning, when Rob checked him.

"Let up a minute, will you, and give me a chance? All that racket was caused by nothing more than a lot of old bats." [Pg 126]

"Cats, you mean, or flying rats," said Tubby scornfully.

"No, bats. Look here. I knocked down one."

Rob held his candle high above his head, and the astonished boys saw lying under a projecting bit of rock one of the leathern-winged cave-dwellers.

"Huh," remarked Tubby, "and I thought it was ghosts. The ghost of the cliff. The one the cow-puncher said he saw."

"I guess that ghost has leather wings and a furry body, if the truth were known," laughed Rob, as he flung the bat he had knocked down into the air, and the creature flapped heavily off toward the cave mouth.

"Yes, ghosts are——" began Merritt, when he broke off suddenly. His mouth opened to its fullest extent, and his eyes grew as round as two big marbles. "Great hookey—what's that?"

His frightened expression was mirrored on the rest of the countenances in the candle-lit circle, as a strange sound was borne to the ears of the Boy Scouts. [Pg 127]

"It's footsteps," gasped Jeb Cotton.

"Coming this way, too," stuttered Tubby, edging back.

"Nonsense," said Rob sharply, but nevertheless loosening his revolver in its holster. "It's the wind or something."

"The funniest wind I ever heard," interrupted Tubby scornfully. "It's got feet—hark!"

Nearer and nearer came the mysterious sound. They could now hear it distinctly—a soft "phut-phut" on the dusty floor of the passage.

"Wow-oo, I see two eyes!" yelled Tubby, suddenly taking to his heels. His toe caught on a hidden rock, and he fell headlong in the choking dust.

Scarcely less startled than the fat boy was Rob, as he made out, glaring at them from beyond the friendly circle of light, two big green points of fire.

"Who's there?" he cried sharply.

There was no answer, but the two green globes never moved. [Pg 128]

"Speak, or I'll fire!" cried the boy.

"A-choo-oo-o—o-o-o-o-o!"

The tense silence was shattered by a loud sneeze from Tubby, whose nostrils had become filled with the irritating dust. At the same instant an unearthly howl rang through the rocky corridors—

a cry so terrible that it set Rob's heart to beating fiercely.

He pulled the trigger more by instinct than anything else, and six spurts of flame leaped from the barrel of his automatic. With a howl more ear-piercing than the first, the points of fire vanished, and there was the sound of a heavy body falling.

"Dead! whatever it is," was Rob's thought, but nevertheless he proceeded cautiously. It was well that he did so, for as he held his candle aloft, the huge, dun-colored body, which lay on the ground directly in front of him, made a convulsive spring. Rob, on the alert as he was, leaped back, and avoided it by a hair's breadth.

"A mountain lion!" cried Harry.

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"That's what, and a whumper, too," exclaimed Merritt. "I guess we've laid the ghost all right. In the moonlight a light-colored creature like this would look white against the cliff face."

"I wonder if that last sneeze of mine killed it?" remarked Tubby, who had leisurely sauntered up. There was now no doubt that the great tawny creature was dead. Its final spring must have been a purely convulsive act, for Rob's bullets had pierced its skull in three places.

"Say, fellows," exclaimed Rob suddenly, "the fact that this brute was in here proves a mighty interesting fact."

"And that is, that it's dead."

"Please be quiet for two consecutive minutes, Tubby, if you can do it without injuring yourself. It means that there is another entrance to this place somewhere."

"How do you make that out?" asked Jeb Cotton.

"By applying a little scout lore. There are no tracks at the mouth of the cave, yet this lion is fat and well-fed, so that it must get its food outside somewhere. Therefore, there must be another entrance to the cave."

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"Quod erat demonstrandum," quoth Tubby learnedly.

"Which is all the Euclid you know," teased Merritt.

"Well," asked Rob, while Harry Harkness skillfully skinned the lion, "shall we go on or turn back?"

"We'll go on!" shouted everybody.

"If you guarantee no more scares," amended Tubby.

With the tawny pelt slung over Harry's broad shoulder, the little party therefore pressed on into the darkness.

"We'll have to hurry," said Rob suddenly, regarding his candle, of which not much was left.

"How far do you guess it is from the entrance?" questioned Harry.

"I've no idea," was Rob's rejoinder. "I half believe now we were wrong to try to find a way out this way."

He said this in a low voice, so as not to alarm the others, who were behind the leaders. It did indeed begin to look as if the young explorers had placed themselves in a predicament.

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Presently, however, the air began to grow fresher, and, uttering a cheer at this sign that they were near to daylight, the lads rushed forward. Still cheering, they emerged into a place where the passage broadened, and in another moment would have been out of the farther end of the tunnel but for an unexpected happening that occurred at that moment.

Rob, who had been slightly in advance, gave the first warning of the new alarm. As the welcome daylight poured upon his face, and he gazed into a sort of cup-like valley beyond the passage mouth, he heard a sudden "z-i-ip!" past his ear, like the whizzing of a locust.

The next instant fragments of rock scattered about his head and he heard a sharp report somewhere outside.

Like a flash, the boy threw himself flat on his stomach and wriggled back into the tunnel.

"They're firing at us!" cried Tubby.

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"Yes, but who?" demanded Merritt.

"That's the question," was Rob's rejoinder. "I guess it must be Indians, but then, again, it may be hunters, who, having seen something move, fired. I'm going to try to find out."

"Oh, Rob, be careful," begged Merritt.

"That's all right. Here, Bill, lend me that long pole you've got."

Bill Simmons obediently handed over a long branch he had broken off to use as a guiding staff, before they entered the dark passageway. Rob pulled off his sombrero and stuck it on the pole.

Then he cautiously poked it out of the rocky portal.

"Bang!"

Rob drew in the hat and examined it.

"Phew!" gasped Tubby. "That's a fine way to ventilate a fellow's lid."

A bullet had bored a hole right through the soft gray crown.

"Guess that's Indians, all right," said Harry; "nobody else would be able to shoot like that."

"It is Indians," announced Rob. "I saw one dodge behind some brush when I looked out."

"Well, what are we going to do?" gasped Charley, the younger of the Price brothers, a lad of about fourteen. His face grew long, and he began to whimper.

"Hey, hush up, there," admonished Tubby. "Boy Scouts don't cry when they get in a difficulty; they sit down and try to figure some way out of it."

"And, in this case, that is easy," said Rob.

"Huh?"

"I said it is easy. All we've got to do is to go back again."

"What, without the candle? Make our way through that dark place?"

"Of course. That is, if you don't want to get drilled full of holes by those Indian bullets."

"But supposing they follow us?"

"We'll have to take our chances on that," rejoined Rob.

"Well, you're a cool hand, I must say. You calmly propose that we shall walk back through a dark tunnel, with Heaven knows how many Indians at our heels?"

"It's all we can do, isn't it?"

"Um-m-well, I suppose so. Come on, then, if we've got to do it, the sooner we start the better."

"Wait one minute," said Rob, and, stooping down, he pulled up some dry brush that grew near the cave mouth. He piled this in a heap and set fire to it.

"Whatever are you doing that for?" asked Tubby.

"I know," said Jeb Cotton, "so that the Indians, or whoever it is firing at us, will see it and think we are still there."

Rob nodded approvingly.

"That's it," he said, and plunged off into the blackness of the tunnel. He led the others through it at a rapid pace, but they did not travel so fast that they beat the daylight, however, for when they emerged at the other end it was dark, and the stars were shining above them. Far below they could see little flickering points of fire, where the cow-punchers were keeping watch.

"Wish we were down there," muttered Tubby, as they all emerged on the ledge. "I'm hungry."

"So am I," agreed Rob, "and the quicker we get down the mountain the quicker we'll get some hot supper."

As he spoke, from the mouth of the tunnel, which acted as a sort of gigantic speaking-tube, there came what seemed to be the hollow echo of a shout.

"The Indians!" gasped Rob; "they're after us! Up the steps, everybody, quick!"

A rush for the rough stone steps followed, and so fast did the boys press forward that Rob had to warn them of the danger of speed.

"If you slipped you'd be over the edge," he said.

It was enough. The rush moderated. The thought of slipping off into black space was enough to alarm the stoutest hearts among them.

Tubby was the last up but Rob, who remained behind with drawn revolver. He had nerved himself to fire at the first Indian head that showed out of the tunnel.

"Come on, up with you," Rob urged, as the fat boy placed his foot on the rough flight hewn in the sheer face of the cliff.

"All right, Rob," rejoined the stout youth, scrambling upward. "I'll be up before——"

He broke off short, with a terrible cry that rang out far into the night.

Rob, speechless with horror, saw the stout youth's feet slip from under him, and his hands clutch unavailingly at the smooth face of the cliff.

The next instant—for the whole thing happened in the wink of an instantaneous photographic shutter—Tubby was gone.

With a dreadful sinking of his heart, Rob stretched far over the edge of the ledge, which hung like some flying thing, between heaven and earth. Below him was utter blackness.

CHAPTER XI.

CAPTURED BY MOQUIS.

Too frightened to utter a sound, the others, who by this time had reached the summit of the cliff, gazed over into the inky depths beneath them. It was Merritt who first found his voice.

"Rob, oh, Rob! What has happened?"

"Don't ask me yet," gasped the boy below him, and, throwing himself flat on the narrow shelf, he peered over into the black void.

"Tubby, Tubby!" he called softly.

"Gee, that was a drop, all right!" came up a voice from below him.

The astonished Rob almost fell over the edge of the ledge himself in his excitement.

"Oh, Tubby, is that really you?"

"I guess so," came the voice below, "but I wish you fellows would hurry up and get me out of this; I'm hungry."

"Gracious!" thought Rob; "fancy thinking of hunger in such a position as he is in."

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"I'm clinging to a tree," came up Tubby's voice. "I grabbed it as I was falling. It's only a very little tree, though, and I don't just know how long it'll bear me."

"Get in as close to the roots of it as you can," breathed Rob, hardly daring to speak above a whisper for fear of dislodging his chum by the mere vibration of his voice.

"All right," said Tubby, and Rob could hear him cautiously making his way along his slender aerial perch.

Rob turned his face upward and hailed his corporal.

"Say, Merritt," he cried, "take the fellows, and get back to camp as quick as your legs will carry you, and then get back up here again. Bring ponies and ropes with you—all you can get of them, and maybe Blinky and some of the men had better come."

"All right, Rob. But how about you?"

"I'll wait here. Hurry back, now."

"We will," and an instant later Rob was alone, and his companions were making full speed to the camp.

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"How are you making out, Tubby?" called down Rob in a low tone.

"All right. But my legs are cramped. Gee! I was lucky to strike this tree."

"You bet you were. I noticed a few small ones clinging to the rocks as we peeped over, but I didn't think they'd ever be the means of saving a life."

"Don't holler till we're out of the wood. It's bad luck."

"Well, they ought to be back within an hour with the ropes. I guess they can get ponies up that trail."

"I hope so," groaned Tubby. "I don't think I can hold out much longer."

"Good gracious!" gasped Rob, "is the tree beginning to give?"

"No, without grub, I mean. I tried to eat some of the leaves off this tree, but they're bitter and don't taste just right."

"What! You've been moving about?"

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"Sure. I've got to have something to do."

The very idea of any one's stretching their limbs in such a position as the fat boy's, almost made Rob's hair stand on end.

"Tubby must have nerves of steel," he murmured, "or else not know the meaning of fear."

Then he went on aloud:

"For goodness' sake, don't move any more, Tubby. The slightest false move might send you off into space."

"All right, I'll keep still," Tubby assured him, but in a free-and-easy tone.

"Well, perhaps it's a good thing he isn't scared," thought Rob; "if he were, it would make the job of getting him up twice as difficult."

For a long time he lay silent on the narrow ledge, so absorbed in the difficulties of the situation that he forgot everything. Even the recollection that there was a strong likelihood of the Indians pursuing them down the passage had entirely gone out of his mind—displaced by Tubby's accident. Suddenly the boy started up with a bound, which almost projected him over the ledge after Tubby.

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A hand had been placed on his shoulder.

Before Rob could utter a sound another hand was placed over his mouth and he felt himself lifted from his feet. Peering down into his face, the startled boy could make out, in the faint

starlight, half a dozen cruel countenances.

How bitterly he blamed himself for being thus caught off his guard! The simplest precaution would have kept him safe, but he had allowed the soft-moccasined red men to slip up on him without placing the slightest difficulty in their path. If ever a boy felt foolish and angry, it was Rob, as his silent captors slid noiselessly as cats into the black mouth of the tunnel of the cave-dwellers.

"I'm a fine scout to be caught napping like that," was his thought.

But as the redskins bore him into the narrow portal, they were compelled to release one of his hands. Rob took advantage of this to break a shrub, in a way which he knew would indicate as plain as print to any Boy Scout who saw it which way he had been carried off.

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The next instant they were in the black tunnel. The Indians ran swiftly but noiselessly, bearing in their sinewy arms the powerless boy. Frightened Rob was not. His brain was too busy thinking up some plan of escape for that. His uppermost emotion was impatient anger at his folly. Even a loose rock, placed at the mouth of the passageway, would have been tripped over by the Indians, and thus have given him warning of their coming. Bitterly he blamed himself for his oversight. More bitter still were his thoughts, as his mind reverted to poor Tubby, hanging alone in space, without any means of knowing what had become of Rob, for the shelf, or ledge, on which the sudden drama of his taking off had been enacted, overhung the cliff face as an eyebrow does an eye.

On and on traveled the Moquis, almost noiselessly pitter-pattering along the dusty floor of the passage. They skillfully avoided treading on the carcass of the skinned mountain lion, and it was not long before they emerged in the bowl-like valley in which Rob had seen the solitary marksman who had made a sieve of his hat.

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At the rocky portal the Moquis paused and grunted gutturally, and then started forward on a steady jog-trot once more.

"Well, this is a luxurious way of riding," thought Rob, as he reposed in the sort of armchair the arms of the Indians formed, "if the circumstances were different, I wouldn't mind taking a long trip like this."

It was so dark in the cup-like valley that the boy could see but little of the country. He only knew they were in the strange depression by noting how the dark walls upreared against the lighter hue of the star-sprinkled sky.

Before long, however, his tireless kidnappers began to trot along over rising ground. For what seemed hours they traveled thus. Presently the boy became aware of a faint glare in the near distance. At the same time, the short, sharp yapping of a mongrel dog was borne to his ears. Before many moments had passed, they came in sight of several tepees, pitched under a grove of trees in a small, and seemingly inaccessible, cañon. The cook fires were lighted, and big pots hung over some of them. Children, squaws and dogs swarmed about, the curs yapping and snapping at each other. As the Indians who had captured the boy gave a shrill screech, the village literally boiled over with activity. From the tepees poured braves and squaws and more children. All rushed forward to meet the returning redskins.

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"Well, they seem glad to see us," thought Rob to himself; "wish I could say the same for myself. If only I knew how Tubby came out, I'd feel better."

As he was borne into the circle of firelight, the boy was surrounded by a curious, chattering crowd, who pulled his clothes about, and poked him inquisitively. Suddenly, a tall Indian, his face hideously daubed with red, yellow and black, emerged with a stately stride from a tepee covered with rude pictures of hunts and battles. He regarded the boy with a piercing eye for a moment, and then, raising his arm, pointed to another tepee, and gave some sort of an order.

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Instantly Rob's arms were seized and pinioned by the Indians who had brought him from the cliff, and he was hustled over the ground and flung roughly into the tepee.

"So that's their game, is it," gritted out Rob savagely, every drop of his fighting blood aroused by the cold-blooded ferocity of his manner of entrance into the patched and smoky tent.

"Well," he went on, "there's no use getting mad, I suppose. Anyhow, it's a strange experience—captured by real Indians. That's more than any of the Boy Scouts at home can say, anyhow."

No attempt had been made to bind him, and Rob therefore peeped out of the flap of his place of confinement to see what was going on about him.

His experience of Indians had hitherto been confined to the Wild West show variety. He was deeply interested in the life of the tepee village, as he watched it busily moving about him. The savory smell of the Indians' supper, as they dispatched it, caused a strange sensation of emptiness about Rob's ribs, but no one came near him with food.

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"I'll be hanged if I'll ask them for it," grunted Rob to himself, "especially after the way they chucked me in here."

When the meal was over, the braves pulled out their clay-bowled pipes and smoked stolidly. Not one threw even a glance at his tepee, and Rob began to think they must have forgotten him. He grew terribly thirsty, and not far from the camp there must be a brook, as he realized, by hearing the silvery tinkle, tinkle of its waters over the rocks.

"Well, as no one will bring me a drink, I'll go and get one," thought the boy to himself, and he boldly threw back the flap of the tent and marched out.

For an instant a wild hope flashed across him that he could escape. No attempt was made by any member of the smoking circle to check him, and the boy reached the bank of the stream without the slightest interference being opposed to his movements.

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"I'll try it," thought Rob. "I believe they've forgotten me."

He placed his foot on a rock and was about to spring to the farther bank of the little creek, when a sharp voice behind him checked him abruptly:

"White boy, come back!"

The words came in the guttural, grunting tone that was unmistakably Indian.

Rob wheeled, and found himself looking into the muzzle of a gleaming rifle-barrel.

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CHAPTER XII.

TUBBY'S PERIL.

"That's queer; I don't see a sign of him."

Merritt Crawford, on the return of the Boy Scouts with ropes and help, peered about the ledge for a trace of his leader, but in vain.

"He can't have gone over, too."

It was Blinky who suggested this alarming possibility.

"Don't suggest such a thing," protested Merritt. "Hullo, Tubby!—below there—are you all right?"

"Fine and dandy, but snake down a rope as soon as you can, will you, and you might tie a sandwich on it, if you don't mind."

"You can have your sandwich when we get you up," promised Merritt, as the others, despite their worry over Rob's disappearance, broke into a loud laugh at Tubby's unconcerned manner.

"Come on, now, and lend a hand with the ropes," ordered Blinky, who had brought several lariats up on his pony, and was busily engaged in tying them together so as to form a long lifeline. Tubby had not yet been informed of Rob's disappearance, as it was feared that it might unnerve him.

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A fresh difficulty now presented itself. On the narrow ledge there was not sufficient room for the holders of the rope to brace themselves. To haul up the stout youth, therefore, it was necessary to return to the summit of the cliff. This was quickly done, but you may be sure that great caution was exercised in mounting the steps cut in the rock face. The fate of Tubby was fresh in their minds, even without the reminder that he was still clinging to his uncertain support, so far below them.

Blinky began looking about for a suitable tree, around which to take a turn of the rope, as soon as they reached the summit. One was found about fifteen feet back from the lip of the precipice.

"Now, then," ordered the cow-puncher, as he tied a big loop in one end of his long line, "we'll see if this will reach."

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He dropped it over the edge of the cliff and dangled it about so that it rattled against the rock. This was in order that the fat boy could hear it and indicate in which direction he wished it swung.

"Is it near you, now, Tubby?" shouted Blinky, peering down into the darkness and tentatively swinging the rope.

"A little more to the right," came up the stout boy's voice, as steady as if he was asking for another helping of ice cream.

"That boy's grit clear through, even if he does like to play the giddy goat sometimes," muttered the puncher.

"How's that?" he asked a minute later.

"Wait, I'll reach out and grab it."

"Don't you dare do any such thing!" almost yelled the cow-puncher. "You might lose your balance, and——"

He stopped with a gasp. A jerk had come at the other end of the rope. Down there, out of sight, Tubby had hold of it. A succession of jerks told the holder of the rope on the cliff edge that he

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was making the loop fast about him.

"All right!" finally hailed Tubby. Then in imitation of an elevator runner:

"Go—ing up!"

"Hold on a minute," croaked out Blinky, even his iron nerve a trifle shaken now that the crucial moment was near.

He ran back to the tree and took a deft turn round the trunk. Then he extended the end of the rope to the boys and told them to "tail on."

"What are you going to do?" asked Merritt.

"I'm going to stand at the edge of the cliff and transmit orders from below. Mind you, obey them the instant you hear them."

"All right. We will, Blinky," came in chorus.

"Very well. Now hold on and when I tell you to start hauling, pull with all your might. That boy's a heavy load."

"A hundred and forty pounds and still growing," volunteered Harry Harkness.

"Well, that rope held a six-hundred-pound steer, so I guess it'll stand his weight. All I'm afraid of is a knot giving. I made them in the dark, you know."

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The cow-puncher, after giving a few more final instructions, ran to the cliff edge.

"All right?" he shouted down.

"All right!" rejoined Tubby.

Blinky straightened up and turned back toward the boys, holding onto the rope.

"Haul away, boys," he ordered.

A cheer burst from the throats of the Boy Scouts as they tailed on the lifeline, and walked backward from the tree with it.

"Whoa!" came a shout from below suddenly.

"Whoa!" yelled Blinky, repeating the word.

"What's the matter?" he hailed down, as the hoisting movement stopped.

"Why, I'm bumping my delicate knees," came up in Tubby's voice.

"Can't be helped," yelled down Blinky. Then hailing the hauling line:—

"Pull away, boys."

Steadily they pulled till the fat boy had been raised twenty feet or more from his tree. Suddenly he hailed Blinky.

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"Whoa!" roared the cow-puncher.

Instantly the hoisting ceased.

"Now, what is it, Tubby?"

"I just thought of something."

"What?"

"Say, lots of folks would pay money to see this, wouldn't they?"

"Never mind that now. Are you all right?"

"Yes, except my knees."

"Ha-ul a-way."

The boys on the other end of the rope hauled steadily now, and the fat boy drew nearer and nearer to the ledge.

As he rose higher, hanging suspended like a spider from the end of his gossamer thread between the sky and the ground, a sudden thought struck Blinky. It would be manifestly impossible to haul Tubby over the edge of the ledge which projected like the eaves of a roof. Hardly had the thought flashed across his mind before a shout of alarm came from the boys, simultaneously with a sharp:

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Crack!

"The rope!" came a wild yell from the tree.

"It's broken!"

Blinky went white, and his knees shook. At the same instant the rope began to snake hissingly over the edge of the precipice. It had parted. Tubby was once more dropping downward like a stone.

"Catch it!" roared Blinky, regardless of his own peril, throwing himself onto the fast-retreating rawhide. He gripped it, but was carried like a feather before the wind toward the edge of the cliff by the descending Tubby's weight. In another moment—for he obstinately refused to let go—he would have been over the edge, when the line suddenly tightened.

"Hooray! I've got it."

The shout came in Merritt's voice.

The boy, with great presence of mind, had managed to catch the rope, and secure it before its end whipped round the trunk of the tree. As the knot which had parted was in the section of the rawhide above the tree, this was possible. Had the rope broken between the tree and the cliff both Tubby and Blinky would have been dashed to death.

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"What parted?" roared Blinky, as soon as he had recovered his senses.

"One of the knots. It slipped. It's all right, now we've fixed it!" hailed Merritt back.

"Merritt, you're all right," shouted the cow-puncher, "if it hadn't been for you, I'd have been down among the cattle now. I'd have traveled by lightening express, too."

As it was dark, the boys had not been able to see what the cow-puncher had done, so it was not till long afterward that they found out the meaning of his remark and learned of his courageous action.

The cow-puncher feared that the sudden drop and the danger of the rope breaking again under the renewed strain might have frightened Tubby into a swoon. To his intense joy, however, in reply to his hail there came up a cheerful:

"Say, what are you fellows doing? Having a game up there? You almost jolted the daylights out of me."

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"All right, we'll be more careful in future, Tubby," breathed the puncher, not daring to tell the boy what had actually happened.

"Are you near the ledge, Tubby?" hailed the puncher suddenly, after an interval of hauling.

"Yes, I think so. I can see a dark thing like a shelf right above me."

"Stop!" shouted the cow-puncher to the rope handlers.

The most difficult part of the enterprise was yet to come. They had to get the boy up on the ledge. To accomplish this at first was a poser, but Blinky finally solved it. Enjoining the rope handlers not to make a move till he hailed them, he slipped down the stone steps and reached the ledge. Arrived there, he peered over into the black void under his feet. Swinging a short distance below, he could distinguish a blacker object than the surrounding night. He could also make out a sound of humming. It was Tubby crooning to himself as he swung on the end of the frail rope:

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"See-saw! see-saw!
On a s-um-mers day!"

"Well, I'll be extra special, double-jiggered!" breathed the puncher, as he heard.

He knelt on the edge of the ledge and spoke to the vocalist.

"How's your nerve, Tubby?"

"Fine, but it needs feeding," was the cheerful response.

"All right, you'll do," rejoined the cow-puncher. "Now, then, Tubby, I want you to hang to the edge of this ledge by your finger tips for just two minutes. Think you can do it?"

"I'll have to, won't I?" innocently inquired the stout youth.

"Yes, or——"

"Take a tumble," Tubby finished for him.

"Never mind about that," spoke Blinky sharply. Then cupping his hands to his mouth, he shouted upward:

"Haul away! Slow, now!"

He placed his fingers on the taut rope and felt it slip upward through them.

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"Good old ropes," he murmured; "stretched like a fiddle string and sound as a ship's cable."

Presently Tubby was hauled up level with the ledge.

"Stop!" roared Blinky.

He could have reached over in the darkness, and, catching the stout boy's hands, have hauled him up beside him—he could have, that is if Tubby had been able to assist him by digging his feet into the rock face. But this he could not do, as he was dangling from the lip of the ledge, fully three feet out from the face of the precipice, and with four hundred feet of empty space under the soles of his shoes. Moreover, in such case the cow-puncher would have nothing to brace himself with, and there would have been grave danger of his being dragged over by the other's suspended weight. Instead, therefore—necessity being the mother of invention—he had thought up a daring plan. What this was we shall soon see.

"Can you grip the edge with your fingers, Tubby?" whispered the cow-puncher.

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"Yes," rejoined Tubby, reaching up.

"All right, then, grab it—and in Heaven's name, hold on!"

With a single swift stroke of his knife, the cow-puncher slashed the rope, leaving Tubby with the loop draped uselessly under his shoulders. The fat boy's hold on the edge of the ledge was all that now lay between him and eternity.

Blinky's breath came sharp and hard as he rapidly adjusted the rope around himself just under the shoulders. Then leaning forward, he seized the stout boy's wrists in his steel-muscled grip.

"Haul!" he bellowed.

The line tautened just as the cow-puncher braced his muscles.

"Stop!"

The line became motionless, holding the cow-puncher firmly on the ledge, while his hands gripped Tubby's wrists.

"Now," breathed Blinky to himself, bracing every muscle till they seemed to crack. The sweat rolled down his face, and his features became contorted. Tubby was a heavier load than he had bargained for. But pluck and grit won out, and after a few seconds of this Titanic struggle the stout boy stood safe on the ledge beside his rescuer. [Pg 160]

"Got him!" muttered Blinky triumphantly. But even as he spoke he almost lost the rescued boy. All at once Tubby became as limp as a half-emptied sack of grain, and seemed about to slide backward out of the cow-puncher's arms.

"Hey, hold on, there! What's the matter?" roared Blinky in amazement, dragging him back.

"Gone out, by the great horn spoon!" he exclaimed, as the rescued boy sank heavily in a dead swoon on the ledge beside his rescuer.

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CHAPTER XIII.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

"Hum!" said Rob to himself, with an accent of deep conviction. "Evidently these chaps keep a closer watch on their prisoner than I had imagined. I guess I'd better retire to my boudoir again."

The Indian sentinel lowered his rifle as the boy turned, and eyed him stoically without any more expression on his stolid features than would have shown on the features of a mask.

"All right," Rob said to him, nodding cheerfully. "Don't worry about me, old chap. I'm going to bed."

If the Indian understood, he made no sign. Instead, he wheeled and solemnly followed the boy back to the tepee. Rob entered it and lay down. Presently, to his delight, some blankets were thrown in to him.

"Well, if I can't eat I can sleep, anyhow," he said philosophically, and in a few minutes he was curled up in the coverings and off as soundly as if he was slumbering in a cot at the ranch house. [Pg 162]

It was dawn when Rob awoke, as he speedily became aware when the tent flap was thrown open, and he saw facing him a rather pretty young Indian girl who bore in her hand an earthenware dish.

"Hullo!" said Rob, sitting up in his blankets.

"Hullo," rejoined the girl in a more friendly tone than Rob had yet heard in the Indian camp.

"Who are you?"

"My name Susyjan," was the response, as the girl set down the steaming dish, in which, as a concession to Rob, an earthenware spoon had been placed.

"All right, Susyjan," smiled Rob. "If you don't mind, I'm going to eat."

"All right, you go ahead," acquiesced Susyjan, who, as Rob guessed, had been named after some white Susy Jane.

"You talk pretty good English, Susyjan," remarked Rob, between mouthfuls of the contents of the dish, which had some sort of stew in it. [Pg 163]

"Um! Me with Wild West show one time."

"Is that so?" asked Rob, interested. "So you've been East?"

"Um! New York, Chicago, Bosstown, every place."

"Maybe I've seen you in the show some place?"

"Maybe."

"What did you like best in the East, Susyjan?" asked Rob, after a brief silence.

"Beads," rejoined Susyjan, without an instant's hesitation.

"Beans?" inquired Rob, puzzled. "Oh, in Boston, you mean?"

"No beans—beads," pouted the young squaw. "Ladies' beads. Round neck—savee?"

Rob nodded.

"Oh, yes, I savee, Susyjan. So you like beads, eh?"

"Plenty much," rejoined Susyjan, nodding her smooth black head vigorously and showing her white, even teeth in two smiling rows.

A bold idea came into Rob's head. Perhaps out of this young squaw's vanity he might contrive a means to escape. But he would have to go to work gradually, or she might betray him, and that would result, as he knew, in closer captivity than ever for himself.

"What have they got me here for, Susyjan,—you know?" he asked.

"Um-hum. Big Chief Spotted Snake him say bimeby get plenty much money for you. Have big dance."

"Oh, that's the game, is it?" mused Rob. "Holding me for ransom. In that case, then, no wonder they are guarding me closely."

"Say, Susyjan," broke out Rob presently, "how you like to have lots of beads—fine ones, like white ladies wear?"

The Indian girl clapped her hands, which to any one familiar with these unemotional people indicated that she was hugely excited over the idea. Presently her face clouded over, however.

"How can?" she asked.

"Me give um you."

"You?"

"Yes. I'll give you the finest set of beads ever strung together, but you have got to do something for me."

"What that?"

"Bring a pony round to the back of the tent to-night."

The girl shook her head positively. But Rob saw that mingled with her refusal was an admixture of keen regrets for the loss of the promised beads. She knitted her brow in deep thought for a few seconds, and then sprang up, radiant once more.

"All right, white boy. Me get you pony. Charley One-Eyed Horse him very sick. I get you his pony."

"All right, then, that's settled," said Rob cheerfully. "But how about you? Won't you get into trouble over it? I don't want that, you know."

"Oh, no," laughed the girl. "Charley One-Eyed Horse my uncle. Him very old man. Pony very old, too—plenty mean. I break rope. Braves think pony bust 'em and get away."

Although the ethics of this didn't seem just straight to Rob, he was in no position to be very particular. More especially as the girl went on to tell him that the tribe expected to move on the next day, making for the valley in which the great snake dance was to be held. In the event of his being carried with them, Rob knew that his chances of escape would be problematical. If he was to make the attempt, he would have to carry it out as soon as possible.

How the rest of that day passed, the boy could never tell. The feigning of sleepy indifference to things about him cost him the hardest effort he had ever known. The hours seemed to drag by. It appeared as if night would never come.

Susyjan did not come near him again that day, and although he saw her moving about the camp at various times, she gave no sign of recognition. Once a dreadful thought flashed across Rob's mind. What if the girl had been used as a spy, and had betrayed his secret. This put him into a fever, but he was, of course, powerless to resolve his doubts. Suspense was all that was left for him.

As evening closed in, the agony of waiting grew worse.

"Those fellows must have made up their minds to keep awake all night," thought Rob, as hour after hour went by, and the Indians still sat, blanket-shrouded, by their fire, playing some sort of game with flat slabs of stone. Finally, however, even the most persistent players ceased and went to their tepees.

By the dying fire there now stood only two figures, tall, motionless and apparently wooden. But Rob knew that they were sentinels posted to watch the tepee in which he was confined. He knew, also, that even though they did seem unconscious of everything, their little black eyes were alert and awake to the slightest move on his part.

"I guess I'll have to give it up for to-night," thought Rob, casting himself down on his blankets. He felt more despondent than he had at any time since his capture. The camp was now as silent as a country graveyard. In the intense stillness he could even hear the occasional crackle of an ember falling to ashes.

Suddenly the boy started, and gazed, open-eyed, at the back curtain of his tepee.

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Surely the flap had moved.

After a few seconds' gazing there was no doubt of it. The flap slowly rose, and presently Susyjan's flat-nosed countenance peered into the gloom of the shelter.

"Come, white boy," she whispered. "Me got pony."

"Blessings on your black, clayed head!" breathed Rob under his breath.

Silently as a stalking cat, he moved toward the back of the tent. In another moment he was out of it and under the starry canopy of the sky.

"Come," whispered the young squaw, gliding like a snake into the dark fringe of forest behind the tepee. Rob followed as quietly as he could, but alas! he was not as expert as the girl. His foot struck a twig which snapped with a loud "crack!" under his tread.

Instantly the motionless Indians by the fire galvanized into life. They looked about them in a startled way, and for one dreadful moment Rob, crouching in the shadow and hardly daring to breathe, thought that they were about to examine his tepee. To his intense relief, however, they contented themselves with gazing about them, and seeing nothing unusual, resumed their statue-like vigil. [Pg 169]

"White boy like lame cow. Plenty tumble," snickered Susyjan, while Rob's cheeks burned wrathfully. He took greater care from that time on, and managed to follow the noiselessly gliding girl without causing another alarm, while she led him in a circuitous route round the back of the encampment.

Suddenly they came to a hillside covered with wild oats, on which several dark objects that the boy made out to be ponies were hobbled. Deftly seizing one by the nose, the girl forced a rope "hackamore" she had brought with her into its mouth, and cast off its hobbles.

Rob, with one hand on the little animal's rump, and the other on its withers, vaulted to the pony's back in a second. [Pg 170]

"Which way I go?" he whispered.

"Over there," rejoined the girl, pointing to the eastward. "Bymby find trail."

"All right, Susyjan; you're a brick," whispered Rob, "and I won't forget the beads."

"Real ones, like white lady," insisted Susyjan.

"Sure, and the whitest of them isn't any whiter than you," Rob assured her, as he dug his heels into the pony's bony sides and the little animal plunged forward. As he did so, Susyjan wheeled and vanished. It was important for her to be in bed in her tepee in case the alarm was given.

"Slow and steady's the word, I guess, along here," mused Rob, as the pony picked his way among rough rock and stubby brush. "If this little animal doesn't stumble and wake the whole camp, I'm in luck. Anyhow, Susyjan won't get in trouble over it now. That's one thing, and——"

Crash!

The little pony had done just what Rob dreaded. Nimble as it was, a loose rock had proved its undoing, and it had come down on its knees with a crash. Instantly it scrambled up again, but as it did so a series of demoniacal yells rang out behind the boy. [Pg 171]

The alarm had been given.

Suddenly there was added to the general confusion the sound of confused shooting.

Bang! Bang!

"Waking up the camp," muttered Rob, swinging the end of his rope hackamore and bringing it down over the pony's flanks with a resounding "thwack." "Now get a move on, Uncle One-Eyed Horse's pony, for if ever you carried a fellow in need, you've got one on your back to-night."

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CHAPTER XIV.

A TOBOGGAN TO DISASTER.

Pluckily forward plunged the pony, as if anxious to redeem his untimely stumble.

"It'll take them some time to get to their ponies and unhobble them," thought Rob. "If I've luck, I may get away yet."

Keeping steadily to the direction the girl had pointed out, the boy pressed on at as fast a clip as he dared. The farther he rode ahead of the pursuing tribe, the better chance he stood of getting

beyond their earshot.

It was risky riding, though, through an unknown country on such a dark night. What sort of going it was under foot, Rob could only tell by the uncertain gait of the beast he bestrode. Bushes occasionally brushed in his face, scratching it, and once in a while an extra strong bunch of chaparral would press against his legs, almost brushing him from his pony's back.

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Suddenly the way took a steep downward pitch.

"I hope this isn't another precipice," thought the boy, as the pony half-slid, half-clambered down in the darkness. Presently his hoofs splashed in water, and Rob knew they were crossing a creek. He drew back on his single rein and listened intently. Fortunately the wind, what there was of it, set toward him.

Borne on it he could hear distant shouts and cries. To his intense satisfaction, it seemed to him that they were farther off than when he had first heard them.

"Gained on them!" muttered Rob triumphantly. "Now, if daylight would only come along——"

But it was long to wait till daylight, and in the meantime Rob did not dare remain where he was. The Indians probably knew the mountains like a book, and would work them on a system. In such an event his only salvation lay in keeping moving. All at once he stopped, with a sudden heart leap, as his pony scrambled up the farther bank of the creek.

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A shrill cry sounded close behind him.

Could it be possible that the advance guard of the Indians had approached him so nearly?

The next instant Rob gave a laugh of relief. The shrill cry came again.

"Whoo-to-too, who-o-o!"

"Only an owl," exclaimed the boy. "Hullo, though, that's funny! There's another answering it—and by George! there's another!"

From the woods to the right and left had come similar hoots to the owl-like sound he had noted behind him. At the same instant, the unmistakable sound of a dislodged stone bounding and rattling down the steep incline he had just descended was borne to his ears.

"That's no owl," gasped Rob, "it's Indians!"

As he realized how badly he had been fooled, his pony topped the rise. To any one below in the hollow, the outline of the pony and the boy showed blackly against the stars. Suddenly a sound like an angry bee in full flight hummed close to Rob's ear, and the next moment there came a sharp report behind him.

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Instantaneously the hoots to the right and left flanks redoubled, and began closing in. All at once one of the birdlike cries sounded right in front of the escaping white boy.

He was hemmed in by Indians!

The craft of the red men had proven too much for Rob. Even the darkness had not prevented their unerringly tracking him. By their skillful woodcraft and keenness of perception they had succeeded in discovering him and surrounding him.

For an instant Rob's heart stood still. Then, as a second shot whizzed by his ear, aimed by the unseen marksman below, he urged his pony on over the rise.

The advance, however, over the rocky ground sounded as loud as the approach of a squadron of cavalry. Wild cries and yells rang out on every side of the boy. What was he to do?

One of those inspirations born in moments of keen stress came to him in his extremity. If all went well, he would fool the Indians yet, hard as they were to deceive.

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Slipping noiselessly from his pony as he rode under a dark clump of piñon trees, the boy turned it loose. The little animal, to his surprise, immediately turned backward, heading round toward the camp. But this turn of events, at first alarming, ultimately proved to be the very best thing that could have happened for Rob, who had at first hoped that the pony would trot forward.

The Indians, hearing its rapid footsteps galloping back, reasoned that Rob, realizing that he was headed off, had turned his mount in a desperate effort to escape that way. Yelling like demons, and discharging their rifles in an almost continuous fusillade, the Indians wheeled and rode after the retreating pony. Naturally, the more they shouted and fired, the faster the little animal ran, and every step took them farther from Rob, who was crouching under his piñon trees.

Not till they got back to their camp did the redskins discover that the white boy had served craft with strategy, and outwitted them. It was then too late to follow up the pursuit that night. The redskins knew that any one cunning enough to have devised such a trick would not have stood still while they were chasing a will-o'-the-wisp in the opposite direction to their desired quarry.

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And they were right in this assumption. Rob, as soon as the beat of their ponies' hoofs had grown faint, had chuckled to himself at their mistake, and silently as possible resumed his journey. If it had been a hard ride, it was a doubly hard tramp he had before him.

Susyjan had told him that a trail lay not so very far ahead. In the darkness it was possible that he might have lost it. If he had, without food or water, he would soon be in a serious position. But Rob, nevertheless, determined that his best course lay in pushing on, and through the darkness he steadily and pluckily advanced.

Presently he began to ascend what he knew must be a hill or mountainside. This complicated the problem. To go on along level ground was one thing, but to attempt to continue his way over an acclivity as steep as the one that faced him seemed foolhardy. Every step he took might be leading him farther and farther astray.

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"Oh, for a nice soft bed!" muttered Rob. "But not having one, a good flat stone would do."

Soon afterward, following a lot of feeling about, he managed to find a flat-surfaced rock which seemed to promise well for a rough and ready couch. To the boy's delight, it retained some of the warmth of the sun which had beaten on it all day, and had he possessed a blanket to throw over it, might not have proved unacceptable as a sleeping place.

Casting himself down on it, Rob soon dozed off, nor did he awaken till the blackness turned to the gray that preceded the dawn. Viewed by daylight, Rob found his surroundings such that he was glad that he had not proceeded any farther during the night. He lay on a hillside behind a screen of chaparral. But what caused him to feel some apprehension, when he thought of what might have happened had he continued his journey, was the fact that below his rock quite a steep slope dropped down to the valley below. It was a drop of some thirty feet, and while in the daylight any active man or boy could have clambered down it without injury, in the dark night it might have meant broken bones.

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But Rob had little time to think of such possibilities. Something else suddenly occupied all his attention, and that something was an odor of frying bacon!

Mingled with it came the unmistakable aroma of tobacco. Somebody was camped near him, that was a certainty. His first impulse was to shout, but he checked it. It speaks volumes for the Western training that the boy was rapidly acquiring when it is said that before he showed himself from behind his chaparral, he gazed cautiously through that leafy screen.

Below him he saw three figures seated about a fire, over which was frying the bacon that had aroused his hunger almost to the exclamation point. The three campers, whose ponies were tethered a short distance from them, had their backs turned to Rob, but presently one of them turned to reach something from a saddle bag. Rob came very near to uttering a startled exclamation and betraying his hiding place as he saw the man's features.

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It was Hank Handcraft.

The former beachcomber wore Western clothes and had trimmed his once luxuriant and scraggly beard, but he was none the less unmistakably Handcraft. Nor, as almost simultaneously Hank's companions turned, was Rob's astonishment at all lessened, for one of them was Bill Bender and the other was the ranch boy to whom he had given a lesson in jiu jitsu—Clark Jennings.

"Hurry up and stow your grub, Hank," Clark was saying. "We've got to light out of this neighborhood for a while and stick around the ranch."

"You think that old Harkness is suspicious, then?" inquired Hank.

"No, our disguises were too good. I'll bet they're cussin' the Moquis now."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Bill Bender. "That was a great idea, dressing up like Indians. I guess we got even on old Harkness for driving those sheep off his pastures."

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"You bet! and we'll do worse to him before we get through," grunted Clark. "It's pie for me. More especially as I can get even, at the same time, with that young sniffer, Harry Harkness, and his friends from the East—your old pals, Bill."

"No pals of mine. You can bet your life on that," grunted Bill. "The best thing I'd heard for a long time was when you told me about Jack Curtiss shoving that kid Rob into the river. I'd like to have seen it. If it hadn't been for those Boy Scouts, as they call themselves, Hank and Jack and I would have been East now, instead of in this God-forsaken country."

"What are you kicking at?" laughed Clark. "You've done pretty well since you've been here, and if we can get that bunch of mavericks of Harkness's, we'll all have a pocketful of money."

"When are you going after them?" asked Hank, placing a big bit of bacon on a hunk of bread and gnawing on it in a satisfied way that set Rob half crazy to watch.

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"Soon as they are turned out on the Far Pasture. When they get over the scare of the stampede, they'll leave the place unwatched, and we'll have our chance. We ought to get five hundred apiece out of it, anyhow."

"That would look good to me," grunted Hank.

"Oh, the scoundrels!" breathed Rob to himself. "They're plotting to steal some of Mr. Harkness's mavericks. I remember now hearing him speak of turning them out in the Far Pasture."

"Then we can clear out and get back East," concluded Bill, "and take poor old Jack with us. He isn't making out very well."

"Sort of hanger-on in that gambling place, isn't he?" asked Clark.

"I guess that's what you'd call it."

Soon after the group saddled up their ponies and prepared to leave their temporary camp. That they were on the trail, after having concluded their dastardly attempt to stampede Mr. Harkness's cattle, Rob had no doubt, judging by their conversation.

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"Better put that fire out!" warned Clark. "Scatter the ashes. We don't want any one trailing us."

The three worthies bent together over the ashes, while their saddled ponies stood eying them at some short distance.

"Guess I'd better pull back out of this before they take it into their heads to look around," thought Rob, who in his eagerness to hear what was going forward below had thrust his head out through the bush which screened him.

With the object of drawing back again, he braced himself on one hand and pushed backward. How it happened he never knew, for he had been very careful, but suddenly the small rock on which the pressure of his hand rested gave way with a crash.

Clawing wildly at the bush, Rob sought to save himself from being flung headlong down the hill into the camp below him, but it was too late.

Down the hill he shot at lightning speed, in the midst of a roaring, rattling landslide of rocks and earth. [Pg 184]

The men in the camp started and turned as the sudden uproar of Rob's involuntary toboggan slide reached their ears.

"What the——" shouted Hank Handcraft.

"Who is——" began Clark, when Rob's feet caught him in the stomach and cannoned him against Hank Handcraft. Clutching wildly to prevent his own fall, Hank caught Bill Bender's sleeve, and the next instant all three of the campers were rolling in a confused mass in the ashes of their fire.

"It's a bear!" yelled Hank.

"Bear nothing!" bellowed Clark Jennings, as Rob scrambled to his feet and darted off like a shot. "It's a boy!"

"After him!" shouted Bill Bender, snatching up a rifle and aiming it. "That kid's Rob Blake."

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CHAPTER XV.

WHAT BECAME OF THE SCOUT?

But even as the former Long Islander raised the weapon to his shoulder, it was dashed down by Clark Jennings.

"Look out, you idiot!" he bellowed. "Do you want to kill the ponies?"

Rob, the instant he had recovered his self-possession, which preceded the recovery of the surprised plotters by some seconds, had made a dash for the ponies, which, as has been said, stood, saddled and bridled, near at hand.

"Yip-yip!" he screeched, as he leaped onto the back of the first one he reached.

Excited by the shouts and cries of the three amazed campers, and half-crazed by Rob's sudden leap onto its back, the animal plunged forward and vanished in a flash into the dark woods which veiled an abrupt turn in the trail.

"Now, shall we shoot, Clark?" urged Bill Bender. [Pg 186]

"No, no; waste no time doing that. Hank, you stay here and look after things. Come, Bill—quick—the ponies!"

In a second Bill and Clark were mounted and dashing off down the trail in a cloud of dust, in hot pursuit of the lad.

"Do you think he heard what we were talking about?"

Clark Jennings propounded the question as they clattered down the trail. Not far in front they could hear the rapid hoof beats of Rob's mount.

"Don't know. The minute he came sky-hooting into the camp I'd a notion it was some one I've seen afore some place," rejoined Bill vaguely.

"Yes, yes; but do you think he overheard?"

"Dunno. We weren't expecting company, and therefore didn't lower our voices. Say, Clark, what if—what if he did hear?"

"Then Harkness will find out everything."

"Yes, if——"

"Well, if what?"

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"If we don't bring him down. If we should kill him, we could easy blame it on the Indians. In fact, I guess the ranch folks would conclude the redskins did it, anyhow."

Clark's ruddy face grew pale at Bill's sinister suggestion.

"If he overheard, he knows enough to send us all to jail," prompted Bill.

"That's right, too. Do you think you could——"

Clark hesitated, as if the thought his mind held was too dreadful for him to voice.

"Bring him down, you mean?" inquired Bill cheerfully. "Don't know. We're hitting up a hot pace for good shooting."

"Say, Bill, I think you are the most cold-blooded fellow I ever met."

"Oh, I'm cool, all right, in such a case as this," rejoined Bill. "Hark!"

Both drew rein for a second and listened. The beat of hoofs in front of them suddenly slackened. So near was the sound that it seemed as if it could not have been more than a few feet ahead.

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"Right through that brush there!" whispered Clark, and hot as the day was, he shivered as if stricken with a sudden fever.

Bill Bender coolly raised his rifle. He deliberately aimed it into the leafy screen. The next instant its deafening report rang out. It was followed by a loud crash from beyond the bushes, as if some heavy body had fallen.

Clark fairly turned his pony round. He was too much of a coward even to dare to ask the question that forced itself to his lips. No such qualms assailed Bill Bender, however. He pressed spurs to his pony, and in a second flashed round the trees that hid what lay on the trail beyond. A second later a loud cry of astonishment broke from his lips. It was mingled with curses.

"What's the matter?" hailed Clark tremblingly.

"Come here."

"Oh, Bill, I don't want to. I——"

"Come here, I say. There's nothing to be afraid of."

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Thus urged, Clark, whose cheeks were still ashen under the bronze, urged his pony forward, and presently joined Bill. The latter had dismounted, and was standing over a dark, still object in the road.

It was the pony Rob had borrowed so hurriedly.

It lay stone dead, pierced in a vital spot by Bill Bender's bullet.

"But the b-b-boy, is he——" stuttered Clark.

"He's gone!" exclaimed Bill.

"Gone?" echoed Clark in an amazed tone.

"Yes, clean wiped out."

"But how?"

"Ask me an easy one."

"Hasn't he left a trail?"

"No, that's what makes it so queer. He must have had an aeroplane."

For half an hour or more both youths searched the dusty trail and beat in and out of the dense brush, but not a trace of the missing boy rewarded their close scrutiny of the surroundings. Had the earth opened at that spot and swallowed Rob up bodily, he could not have vanished more utterly. The only trace of the missing boy was his sombrero, lying by the dead pony.

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Absolutely dumfounded with amazement, the two worthies finally gave up their search, and taking the saddle and bridle off the dead pony, made their way back to their camp, carrying Rob's broad-brimmed hat.

At about the same hour that Clark and Bill were searching among the piñon and scrub growth for some solution of the mystery of Rob's inexplicable disappearance, an equally perplexed party was assembled on a small rise some miles away. The latter group consisted of Mr. Harkness, his son, the Boy Scouts of the Ranger Patrol, Corporal Merritt Crawford and Tubby Hopkins, Blinky and two other cow-punchers.

The day before, following the rescued Tubby's return to the ranch with his companions, the expedition to find the missing Rob had been hurriedly formed. The cliff face had been reached in quicker time than would have seemed possible, and an examination by the cow-punchers and the Boy Scouts soon showed which way Rob had been carried off.

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The broken shrub at the entrance to the tunnel, with the end pointing into the darkness, indicated clearly enough to Merritt that Rob had made a Boy Scout sign that his trail lay that

way.

Leaving their ponies in charge of one of the cow-punchers who had accompanied them that far, the party had proceeded through the tunnel on foot. They were led by Blinky, who was almost as expert a trailer as an Indian, and had at the present moment arrived near the site of the Indian camp from which Rob had escaped the night before. Had the boy only known it, on his wild flight he had passed within a few miles of those who were searching for him in the darkness.

With the earliest light they had picked up the trail once more, and now they had reached its termination, the camp of the Moquis. But to reward their activity and perseverance they found only black ashes and scattered traces of cooking and stabling. Of the camp itself, all trace had vanished.

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Blinky bent over the ashes and stirred them with his fingers.

"Been gone some hours," he announced, after an examination. "The ashes are plumb cold."

"How far do you think they will have proceeded by this time?" inquired Mr. Harkness.

"Maybe twenty miles or more," rejoined the cow-puncher. "It's hard to tell. These redskins travel fast, boss, as you know."

"Yes, I do know," rejoined the rancher bitterly; "especially when they have a good reason to. But what do you suppose they carried off the poor boy for?"

"Maybe they figgered he was a spy from the Indian territory, and maybe they thought they could get a good price for him if they held him long enough."

"I guess you are right, Blinky," said the rancher sadly, sitting down upon an outcropping rock.

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He flicked his riding boots meditatively for some seconds with his rawhide quirt, which he still carried, and then spoke.

"Boys," he said, addressing the little party, "those Moquis have carried off Rob. There's no doubt of that. The question now is, shall we follow them up, or shall we go back and get the ponies, and thus lose valuable time? I think it only fair to tell you that I am for going forward."

"I guess there's no need to take a vote, Mr. Harkness," smiled Merritt, gazing at the determined faces of the Boy Scouts of the Ranger Patrol. Every member of the body was there. Harry and the telephone had seen to that as soon as they had made certain that Rob had been carried off.

"We've got enough to eat with us," put in Tubby, "so there's no reason why we shouldn't go ahead."

As Tubby said, the party had brought rations with them which, though not very plentiful, were enough to last until they struck a further food supply.

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"Then forward it is," said Mr. Harkness.

"Ye-ow!" yelled the cow-punchers.

The boys joined in their wild shouts, but their enthusiastic start was suddenly thrown into silence by an unexpected incident. Hoof beats sounded on the trail, and as everybody turned expectantly in the direction from whence the sound had proceeded, they were astonished to see two ponies emerge, carrying three men.

The new arrivals were Clark Jennings and Bill Bender, and, seated behind the latter, Hank Handcraft. The faces of all three took on a guilty, confused air as they perceived that, instead of riding, as they had expected, into a camp of Moquis, they had unexpectedly encountered the last persons whom at that particular moment they wanted to meet.

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CHAPTER XVI.

BLINKY SPOILS A SOMBRERO.

If astonishment and uneasiness were depicted on the countenances of Clark Jennings and his companions, equally amazed looks were cast upon the newcomers by Mr. Harkness's party. The rancher was the first to recover his voice.

"Well, Clark," he said rather sternly, "what are you doing here?"

"We're not stealing sheepmen's land and feed from them, Mr. Harkness," spoke up Clark boldly, as soon as he saw by the rancher's manner that the party was not, as he had at first feared, aware of Rob's strange fate.

"We won't discuss that old question now, Clark," said Mr. Harkness leniently. "As long as there are sheepmen and cattlemen that question will always be productive of strife, more's the pity. Besides, certain fence-cutting incidents——"

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"You can't say I cut your fences!" sputtered Clark angrily.

"Certainly not. I never dreamed of doing such a thing—without the proper evidence."

The rancher threw a grim emphasis into these last words.

"What we want from you now, Clark, is information."

"Well?" asked the other in sullen tone.

"We have lost track of a young man who was my guest at the ranch," explained Mr. Harkness, his dislike of being compelled to ask information of Clark Jennings showing in his face. "His name is Rob Blake——"

"Those two fellows know him well enough," broke out Merritt, pointing at Bill Bender and Hank Handcraft. The faces of those two worthies grew green as the boy pointed accusingly at them. Unwittingly Merritt had come near hitting the nail on the head when he connected them in a vague way with Rob's disappearance.

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"Well, what if we do know him?" growled Hank sullenly.

"Mr. Harkness knows the mean tricks you put up on us in the East, so you needn't try to pretend you never met us before," went on Merritt angrily.

"Come, come, Merritt," interrupted Mr. Harkness, "this will do no good. Whatever happened in the East is past and gone. What we want to know now is if they have seen Rob?"

"No, we ain't," declared Clark boldly. "Why, do you think he's lost hereabouts?"

"That's what we are afraid of. The Indians carried him off, and here, as you see, they were camped last night. I cherished a hope that he might have had the good fortune to escape."

"I don't know anything about it," rejoined Clark in a more amiable tone, now that he saw that no suspicion attached to him.

"What yer ridin' two on one pony for?" asked Blinky suddenly.

"None of your business," rejoined Clark. "I guess we can ride the way we like."

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"Well, I guess so," echoed Hank. "Fine way they interfere with gentlemen's preferences out here in the West."

"You had three ponies when you started out," pursued Blinky, looking at the spurs on Hank's feet, and noting the extra saddle which Clark carried behind him.

"We did not."

"What yer got the extra saddle for, then, and what's he got on spurs for, just ter decorate his handsome figure?"

"Well, I can if I want to, can't I?" demanded Hank.

"We're looking for a stray pony," explained Clark glibly. "That's why we're carrying the saddle—to put on him when we find him. That, too, accounts for the spurs. Anything else you'd like to know?"

"Yes," demanded Merritt, his eyes blazing and his voice shaking with excitement as he stepped forward. "*Where did you get Rob Blake's sombrero?*"

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His eye had fallen on that article of headgear just as Hank had clumsily tried to conceal it. Merritt instantly recognized it by the stamped band about its crown.

"Why, I—we—that is—it's my hat," lied Hank clumsily.

"That's not true, and you know it!" shouted Merritt, carried away by rage. "You know where Rob Blake is. You——"

Crack!

The boy staggered back, half-blinded, as Bill Bender raised his heavy quirt and cut him full across the face with it.

"Come on, boys!" shouted Clark, as Merritt reeled backward. "Let's get out of this."

The two ponies sprang forward, leaving the ranch party half-stunned by the suddenness of Bill's brutal blow. But it was only for a second. In that interval of time Blinky's face had grown wrinkled and drawn with anger, and his hand had slid back to his hip and produced his forty-four. In another instant Bill would have paid dearly for his blow, but the rancher's hand fell on the cow-puncher's arm.

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"Not that way, Blinky," he said.

"All right, boss," rejoined Blinky regretfully; "but it would have been a heap of satisfaction to have let daylight into that coyote's carcass."

"Those fellows know where Rob is!" shouted Merritt, across whose face an angry red ridge lay, marking where the quirt had struck him. "Stop them!"

"Steady on, boy, steady on," said Mr. Harkness in an even, cool tone.

"And we without a spavined cayuse to follow 'em!" raged one of the cow-punchers.

As he spoke, the three tormentors of the ranch party topped the little rise.

As they did so, Clark Jennings rose in his stirrups and faced back.

"Ye-ow!" he yelled defiantly, waving his hat mockingly toward them.

Bang!

The sombrero was suddenly whirled out of the youth's hand as if some invisible grasp had been laid upon it. [Pg 201]

Blinky looked apologetically at Mr. Harkness, and then carefully blew the smoke from the barrel of his pistol, the weapon with which he had just punctured Clark's headgear.

"Awful sorry, boss," he said contritely, "but I just plumb couldn't help it."

"Well, I don't know that I blame you," said Mr. Harkness, as the Clark Jennings party vanished in a hurry.

The encounter with the three ne'er-do-wells had, however, changed the rancher's plans. Deducing from the fact that Hank Handcraft had Rob's hat in his possession, that the boy must have escaped from the Indians in some miraculous way, it was concluded that it would be a mere waste of effort to pursue the Moquis. The search must now be made for Rob himself. Even Tubby's spirits were dashed by the disturbing occurrences of the last few hours, and he and Merritt were both silent as the party made its way back to the cliff where the ponies had been left the day before. The plan now was to mount and scatter through the range. [Pg 202]

"We'll run a fine-tooth comb through it," was the emphatic way Mr. Harkness put it, "and if we don't find the boy, it'll be because he isn't on the top of the earth."

All that day they retraced their steps, and at night made camp not far from the entrance to the tunnel. They did not dare to proceed in the dark, for fear of once more losing their path, and even more valuable time. It was not a lively party that settled down in the evening glow for a hastily cooked and not over-abundant supper. Even Tubby seemed distracted and worried.

Suddenly Merritt, who was walking up and down, trying to evolve some theory to fit the facts in Rob's case, gave a shout and pointed over to the southwest.

"Look, look!" he shouted. "Off there—what is it?"

The boy's keen eyes had espied a thin spiral of blue smoke ascending from a hilltop against the burnished gold of the sunset.

"A signal fire!" announced Blinky, after an interval. [Pg 203]

"It may be Rob signaling for help!" exclaimed Merritt, as the smoke rose and vanished and rose and vanished at regular intervals.

"No, it ain't him. The Boy Scouts use the Morse, don't they?"

"Yes. What has that to do with it?"

"Well, this is Injun code."

"Indian?"

"Sure. The Injuns have as distinct a smoke-signal code as we have a wireless system. It works just as good, too, from what I can hear. Now, if we had their code book we——"

"What, the Indians have a code book?"

"You bet."

"Where?"

"In their rascally heads, son, where it's safe," rejoined the cow-puncher.

"Hullo, look! There's an answer," cried Tubby, suddenly pointing to another hilltop some distance from the first.

Another thin column of smoke was rolling upward from it in evident answer to the first. [Pg 204]

"Those fellows are making a date," decided the rough-and-ready Blinky. "I'd like to be on hand when they keep it, and maybe we'd find out something about Rob."

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CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE CLUTCHES OF THE GRIZZLY.

Blinky's conviction that the signaling had something to do with Rob would have been strengthened if he could have been so stationed as to watch the making of the first smoke telegraph Merritt noticed. On the distant hilltop Clark Jennings, Hank Handcraft and Bill Bender were stooped over a fire of green wood, alternately covering and uncovering it with a horse blanket. The signaling was being done under Clark's direction, as neither of the Easterners knew anything about the Indian smoke language. Clark, during his long residence in the West, had picked up his knowledge of it from Emilio Auguardo, the halfbreed who had once worked on his father's ranch. Through this man, too, he had become quite an intimate of the Moquis, as we have seen.

"Douse it! Uncover it. Douse. Uncover. Douse. Uncover."

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Clark Jennings's commands came in regular rotation, with differing intervals between each order. In all essentials, those three enemies of the boys were using a telegraph code antedating by centuries the system in use to-day on our telegraph lines.

"Ought to be getting an answer soon," muttered Clark, shading his eyes with his hand and standing erect on an upraised slab of rock, the better to command a view of the distant hills in the section in which he had reason to believe the Moquis had proceeded.

"Hold on! Douse that fire!" he cried suddenly.

Against the sky, not more than five miles distant, an answering thread of smoke had unrolled, like the coils of a slow serpent. Up it wavered and then stopped abruptly, to be followed by another puff. It was as if a locomotive lay beyond the distant hill. The puffs of smoke resembled the vaporous belchings of an engine stack when it is starting up.

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"They say for us to wait here and they will send a messenger," announced Clark finally.

"Well, I guess we can wait as well as anything else," rejoined Hank Handcraft, extending himself lazily on the sun-warmed ground. "Are they going to send a pony?"

"Don't know," rejoined Clark shortly. "Wonder what we'll do if Harkness hits our trail?"

"Don't bother about that. He'll be too busy rounding up that boy Rob," replied Bill Bender. "Queer where that kid went to."

"Queer is no word for it," agreed Clark; "and what bothers me is that we are likely to have trouble with him yet if we're not careful."

"You think he is alive, then?"

"Must be, unless he melted into thin air."

"That's so."

"By the way, Clark," struck in Hank Handcraft suddenly, after a period of deep thought, aided by the consumption of sweet grass stalks, "wouldn't the present time be a good one to drop in on Harkness's mavericks?"

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"By thunder! you're right," was the reply. "Harkness is pretty sure to have the whole ranch force, or every one he can spare, spread out, seeking for that young cub. The Far Pasture will be pretty sure to be left unguarded. You're right, Hank; we'll see what the chief has to say, and then, if we can get a few Indians to help us, we'll make the big drive. Ha, ha! won't Harkness be sore if he finds the boy, to discover that it's cost him the loss of a few thousand dollars' worth of beef!"

In further discussion of their plans the three worthies spent the next hour or so. By that time it was dark, and the thin, silver nail-paring of the new moon showed above the eastern hilltops. It grew very still, the deep silence being broken only by the hoot of an owl or the chirping of some night insect.

Suddenly, and quite near at hand, a twig snapped loudly. Instantly the hands of each of the three flew to their weapons, but an instant later they perceived that they, at least, had no cause for alarm from the newcomer who had thus announced his arrival. It was an Indian that stood before them while they still stared in a startled way into the dark shadows.

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"Chief Black Cloud!" exclaimed Clark, as the figure silently glided into the small circle, shrouded in the folds of a heavy blanket.

The chief had tied his pony some distance away, and had advanced with customary stealth on the camping place of his allies.

"How!" grunted the chief, squatting down on his haunches. "You want talk?"

"Well, that's the reason we lighted up our little wireless plant," grinned Hank.

"Hum! My brother with the hair on his face is foolish," snapped the chief, while the others laughed aloud at Hank's discomfiture. He did not again adopt a flippant tone toward the impressive figure which sat in council with them.

"Chief Black Cloud," began Clark, "in the Far Pasture of Harkness, the rancher, below the places of the dwellers in the cliff, are many young cattle. They are unbranded, and if we can cut them out and get them away we can all be rich—make heap money."

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"Um!" grunted the chief, waiting for what was to come.

"Harkness and his men are all away, seeking for a lost boy——"

"Hum! Black Cloud know," interpolated the Indian.

"Then you *did* take him off!" burst out Bill Bender. "Why didn't you have sense enough to keep him?"

"Hush!" ordered Clark sharply. He was sufficiently conversant with Indian character to know that the chief might be mortally offended by adverse comments on anything his tribe might have seen fit to do. But Black Cloud paid no attention to the interruption.

"What you want Moquis to do?" inquired the chief, going right to the heart of the matter, for he had quite acumen enough to reason that from the conciliatory tone Clark adopted he had some service to ask.

"That you will help us on the cattle drive," rejoined Clark boldly.

The Indian shook his head.

"No can do," he said decisively. "Mayberry, the Indian agent, is in the mountains seeking us now."

Here the chief permitted himself a grim smile.

"But Mayberry kind man. If we go back to reservation, make no trouble, everything all right. All the same as before. But if we steal the cattle of the white men, then the white man visit us with his anger."

"It will be easy and no chance of being found out," urged Clark.

But the chief shook his head.

"No. My people here for snake dance. Not for steal white man's cattle."

"Then you won't help us?"

"No."

"You'll be sorry for it, you old idiot!" snapped out Clark, foolishly letting his temper get the better of him for an instant.

The Indian drew himself up with haughty dignity. Slowly he gathered the folds of his blanket about him. Then, and not till then, did he speak.

"Black Cloud is never sorry for his deeds. But perhaps white men will sorrow for theirs," he said, with extraordinary dignity and force, and the next instant he was gone.

"Say, Clark, it seems to me you've put your foot in it," muttered Hank, as the offended Indian strode off.

"He looked Black Cloud by nature, as well as by name," commented Bill Bender. "He glared at you as if he would read your thoughts, Clark."

"I hope not," laughed the young ranchman, though with a rather uneasy note in his assumed carelessness, "for they had a lot to do with him, I can tell you."

"What do you mean?"

"That we'll have to do the Indian act again."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, steal the cattle, disguised as Moquis. But come on, hit the trail. We'll be getting back to the ranch. I'll tell you as we go."

As my readers will have seen, the above conversation throws a strange side light on Indian morality. The Moquis, of whom Chief Black Cloud was patriarch, had had not the slightest objection to "hold up" the boys and to capture Rob for ransom, but at the seriously punishable crime of cattle stealing they balked. What the consequences of this decision were to be to Clark Jennings and his companions we shall see later on. At the Jennings ranch they met Jess Randell, and here the four sat late, discussing the big coup which they hoped was to retrieve all their fortunes. At length they arrived at a decision, and arranged a plan which they deemed offered every security against discovery.

It is now time to revert to the fortunes of Rob, of whom we last heard when the three worthies into whose camp he had been catapulted with such velocity were searching in vain for a clew to his whereabouts. As will be recalled, after leaping on the back of Hank Handcraft's pony, the boy had dashed off down the trail at top speed, without a very clear idea of where he was bound for. As he rode he heard the sounds of the pursuit, and simultaneously with the sharp report of Bill Bender's gun, he felt his pony halt and stagger beneath him.

For an instant of time it seemed to Rob as if he was bound to be captured by his pursuers, but in his extremity his mind worked with the lightning-like rapidity common to quick intelligences in moments of great stress.

At the precise instant that his little mount gave a groan and plunged forward into the dust of the trail, Rob reached above his head and seized the low-hanging branch of a small, stout tree. With the activity of the practiced athlete, he swung himself up into the thick greenery as the poor pony lay in its death struggles below. Rapidly working his way among the branches, he was soon several feet from the trail.

While Bill Bender and Clark Jennings were hanging over the dead pony and searching in vain for the boy's trail, Rob was noiselessly making his way over rocks and stones down into a deep-timbered gully. He could hardly keep himself from an exultant laugh as he pictured the chagrin and amazement of his old enemies at his total disappearance.

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He rapidly sped on, and after an hour or more of traveling, feeling himself safe once more, he halted. Up to that moment he had pressed on without feeling much fatigue. The excitement of the rapid happenings since he had slipped upon the Indian pony's back had sustained him. Now, however, that he felt comparatively safe, the inevitable relapse came. Rob's knees began to feel strained and weak, as they had never felt before. His head, too, buzzed queerly, and a feeling of overpowering lassitude assailed him in every limb.

"Good gracious! am I going to play out?"

The boy asked himself the question with every feeling of dismay.

He was in a solitary, remote part of even those wild mountains, and although he was on a small eminence, he could see nothing at any point of the compass but dreary, monotonous woods or rocky patches of sun-burned wild oats and foxtail. By the height of the sun and its direction, he guessed that it was about noon, and that he had been traveling in a southerly direction, but even of this, in his sudden collapse, he had no very clear notion. All he really knew was that he craved food with a wild, aching longing in his every fibre that had never before assailed him.

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"I wonder if starving men in cities ever feel like this?" the boy asked himself. "Woof! I could eat a horse raw cheerfully."

Then came an interval of utter lassitude of mind and body, in which the boy lay stretched out on the hot ground, without a thought of anything. A strange ringing began to sound in his ears and his head felt dizzy.

"Got to get out of the sun," he thought in a dim, remote sort of way.

He voiced his thought aloud, and his tones sounded faint and far away to him, like the accents of another person.

"Brace up, Rob, brace up," he began repeating to himself, as he made for a patch of deep shadow under a bush covered with a kind of purple berry.

But in spite of his determination to "brace up," even the slight effort of crawling to the grateful shade bothered him so badly that, having reached it, he could only lie on his side and pant like an exhausted creature.

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All at once a sound was borne to his ears that made him sit up erect—the bright light of hope gleaming in his eyes.

Heavy footsteps were coming toward him. The boy cared little whether the advancing individual was friend or foe. His coming meant food, at least; for surely no enemy could be so inhuman as to refuse nourishment to a boy in the pitiable condition of Rob Blake.

"There's something queer about those footsteps, though," mused the boy, as the sounds drew nearer, accompanied by a sort of low, growling grumbling.

What can it be?

"Sounds like—like—Great Scott! Silver Tip!"

Into the small clearing on one side of which Rob lay beneath his sheltering bush, there had suddenly lumbered the half-legendary monarch of the Santa Catapinas.

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It was Silver Tip, the giant grizzly! For a second the monster's small, piglike eyes glared in blank astonishment at the encounter. He was hunting honey, and this sudden meeting with a white boy in the wildest part of his own particular domain evidently had struck him "in a heap," so to speak.

The next instant, however, the expression of his wicked little optics changed to one of active malevolence. He swung his great bulk savagely about—like the giant heavings and swayings of a picketed elephant. The small spot of snow-white hair that gave him his name shone out on his dark, shaggy hide like a bull's-eye. It was right over his heart. If Rob had had a rifle, he could have pierced it as unerringly as a target.



With a crazy yell, the boy leaped to his feet and rushed straight at his monstrous shaggy opponent.

But the lad was weaponless, and almost unconscious from fatigue and exhaustion. Indeed, delirium had been dangerously near when Silver Tip came lumbering into the clearing. The sight of the monster had tipped the delicately adjusted balance.

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With a crazy yell, the boy leaped to his feet and rushed straight at his monstrous shaggy opponent. In sheer astonishment, Silver Tip reared his immense bulk upward.

"Ha, ha! I'll kill you, you old thief, you old murderer!" yelled Rob deliriously, as he hurled his slight form straight against the monstrous hairy tower of rugged strength.

The great forepaws—armed with claws as sharp and heavy as chilled-steel chisels—extended. In another instant the lad would have been in the monster's death grip, when an intervention, as sudden as it was unexpected, occurred.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

THE INDIAN AGENT.

From the dense surrounding clumps of chaparral there had suddenly emerged the figure of a tall, bearded man, with keen blue eyes and a striking air of self-reliance and resolution. It was Mr. Mayberry, the Indian agent. Over his arm he carried an automatic rifle, which he instantly jerked to his shoulder as his amazed eyes fell on the extraordinary scene before him. Surely Jeffries Mayberry was the first man who had ever gazed upon the spectacle of a boy, unarmed and alone, attacking the hugest grizzly in that part of the country.

"The boy is mad!" was his first thought, and, as we know, he was not far wrong in this surmise.

But it was no time for speculation as to the causes of this strange scene, and Jeffries Mayberry was not the man to indulge in rumination when the necessity called for immediate action.

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Bang!

For the twentieth—or was it the hundredth?—time in his eventful life, Silver Tip felt the impingement of a bullet. But with the monster's usual good fortune, the ball did not pierce a vital

part. Instead, it buried itself in the fleshy part of the brute's forequarters, inflicting a wound that made him bellow with pain and face round on this new foe.

As Silver Tip, in regal majesty, swung his huge form about, Rob crumpled up in a heap and lay senseless on the hot ground.

For an instant it looked as if the great monarch of the Santa Catapinas meant to attack the Indian agent. But it seemed that he changed his mind as he faced him. An animal so relentlessly hunted, and so often wounded as Silver Tip, becomes endowed with almost human cunning and reasoning power, and part of Silver Tip's immunity from mortal wounds had doubtless been due to this. Most grizzlies, when wounded, charge furiously on their tormentors, thus assuring their fatal injury. These had never been Silver Tip's tactics. He had always preferred to "fight and run away, and live to fight some other day."

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So it was now. For the space of a breath, the two splendid specimens of human kind and the animal kingdom stared into each other's eyes. In his admiration of the magnificent brute before him, Jeffries Mayberry held his fire. He could not bring himself to kill the splendid creature unless such an action became necessary in self-defense. Were there more hunters like him, our forests and plains would not have become devastated of many of the species once so plentiful among them.

Suddenly the bear's eyes turned away under the steady scrutiny of the plainsman, and with a growl that was half a whine, he dropped on all fours and lumbered off.

"Lucky for you you didn't hurt this boy, or even your splendid majesty wouldn't have saved you," muttered Jeffries Mayberry, reaching the unconscious Rob's side in three or four rapid strides.

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"Hum! in bad shape," he murmured, laying open the boy's blue flannel shirt and placing a hand over his heart. "Good thing I happened along when I did, and—Hullo!" he gave a long, low whistle of astonishment. "It's one of those kids that my bad boy Moquis held up this side of Mesaville. Well, here's a discovery."

He stood erect, and placing his fingers to his lips, blew a shrill, piercing call.

The next instant a splendid cream-colored horse came bounding into the clearing, shaking his head impatiently and whinnying as his large liquid eyes fell on his master.

"Here, Ranger," said Mayberry, addressing the beautiful steed as if it had possessed the faculty of understanding. "Here is a poor boy overcome for want of food and water, and I think he's got a touch of the sun. We've got to get him home, Ranger."

Ranger pawed the ground with one forefoot and his nostrils dilated. His keen senses indicated to him that a bear had been about, and if there is one creature of which Western horses are thoroughly afraid it is his majesty, King Bruin.

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Perceiving this, Mayberry spoke a few reassuring words to the splendid horse, which instantly quieted down, though it still glanced apprehensively about it. The Indian agent's next action was to place Rob's senseless form across the saddle, while he himself swung rapidly up behind the cantle.

Lightly pressing the rein to the left side of his horse's glossy neck, the Indian agent urged it forward into the chaparral. Ranger's dainty skin shivered at the rough touch of the prickly stuff, but he went unflinchingly in the direction his master guided him.

After an hour or more of riding, Mayberry emerged on a curiously located open space. It lay at the bottom of a saucer-like depression, which might, in some remote day, have been a volcanic fire basin. Now, however, it was covered with a luxuriant growth of wild oats, and at the bottom bubbled up a little spring. All about it shot up scarred mountain sides, with scanty timber hanging to their rocky ribs. In the midst of this isolation and wilderness it looked strange to see a small cabin located. It was somewhat tumbledown, to be sure, and had, in fact, been erected there in the early fifties by a wandering prospector. Jeffries Mayberry, seeking a convenient spot from which to keep up his surveillance over his Moquis, had stumbled upon it by accident, and with an old woodsman's skill had rendered it quite habitable.

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So, at least, Rob thought, when half an hour later he recovered consciousness in the cool gloom of the shanty. He was lying on a bed of fragrant boughs, and above him was the shingle roof of the hut, through holes in which he could see the blue sky.

"Where on earth am I?" was Rob's first thought, as consciousness rushed back like a tide that has been temporarily stemmed.

Gradually the events preceding his collapse grew clear to him, and he retraced recent happenings up to the appearance of the grizzly. Of his delirious attack upon the monster, he had, of course, no recollection.

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"I must get up and find out where this is, and how I got here," was Rob's first thought, and with this intention he rose to his feet. To his intense astonishment, the room instantly whirled dizzily about him, and the earthen floor seemed to rise and smite him in the face. What had happened was that the weakened boy had fallen headlong. As he lay there, a hearty voice rang out in an amused tone:

"Hello, hello! Pretty weak, ain't you, for a boy who wanted to fight grizzlies with his bare hands?"

Rob looked up. The big form of Jeffries Mayberry stood framed in the doorway.

He came forward and, gently as a woman, placed Rob on the couch.

"Why—why, it's Mr. Mayberry!" gasped Rob, as his eyes fell on his companion's kindly, bearded features.

"Yes, it's me, right enough," laughed the Indian agent. "And now, if you'll lie quiet for a minute, I'll see how some rabbit stew is getting along. How does that sound?" [Pg 227]

"Fine!" smiled Rob, and, indeed, the mention of food had set all his appetite on edge again. "But see here, Mr. Mayberry, I don't want to be babied this way. I'm going to get up and——"

"You are going to do nothing of the sort," exclaimed the Indian agent. "Here, Ranger." Again he gave the peculiar whistle, and Ranger's dainty head appeared inquiringly in the doorway.

"Watch that boy, Ranger, and if he tries to get up—grab him!"

With these words, the kind-hearted Indian agent vanished, to superintend the composition of the stew he was making over a camp fire outside.

"Well," thought Rob, "this is a funny situation. I'm in a hut, and haven't the least idea how I got here. A horse is set to guard me, and—I wonder," he went on, "if that horse is really a watch dog, or if that was just a bluff."

It was a good evidence of Rob's returning vitality that he stretched out a foot to test Ranger's watchfulness. [Pg 228]

Instantly the sharp, pointed ears lay flat back on the horse's head, and the whites of his eyes showed menacingly.

"I guess I'll stay here!" laughed Rob.

As soon as he resumed his posture, Ranger's ears came forward, and the kind light came back into his eyes.

"I've heard of horses that were broken that way," thought Rob, "but this is the first I have ever seen."

Had Rob known it, such horses as Ranger—animals trained to the same wonderful pitch of intelligence—are not uncommon in the Southwest. Presently Mr. Mayberry appeared with a bowl of what to Rob smelled more appetizing than anything he had ever known.

"Ah-h-h-h-h!" he exclaimed, as his nostrils caught the savor.

"Wade in," said Mr. Mayberry, placing the dish on a rough, home-made table by his side. And "wade in" Rob did. He could have finished half a dozen more bowls like it—or so he felt—but Mr. Mayberry told him that after such a fast as he had endured it was important to "go slow." [Pg 229]

So much better was the boy after dispatching the meal that he was able to get up, and after a short time spent in staggering about, he quite recovered his faculties.

"Now," said Mr. Mayberry, "tell me how you came to be where I found you?"

Rob told him, his narrative being interrupted from time to time by exclamations of astonishment from the Indian agent.

"This youth, Clark Jennings," interrupted Mr. Mayberry once, "has been a thorn in my side for years. His father is almost as bad. They have frequently committed all sorts of outrages on ranchers and implicated the Indians in them. Not only that, but they have paid the most unprincipled of the Moquis to help them in their cattle stealing and fence cutting."

"I wonder they haven't ever been captured," said Rob.

"Well," said Mr. Mayberry, "as the saying goes, it is almost impossible to 'get the goods' on them. And you say you know this cousin of his from the East, and his companions?" [Pg 230]

"Very well," rejoined Rob, "some time I will tell you about our experiences in the East with their gang. They actually kidnapped one of our Boy Scouts, and imprisoned him in a hut."

"Why, they could have been imprisoned for that!"

"They would have been if it had not been for the fact that they fled to the West."

Rob soon concluded his narration, and Mr. Mayberry then related to him some of his own movements of the last few days. Despairing of rounding up the Moquis by moral suasion, he had telegraphed to Fort Miles for a detachment of troops. He was to meet them the next evening at Sentinel Peak, a mountain about ten miles from his present camping-place. The Indian agent had succeeded in locating the valley in which the great Snake Dance was to be held, and, in consequence, was ready to raid it with the troops at the height of the ceremonies.

"Such an action will break up their practices for many years," he declared. [Pg 231]

"When are you going to start for the peak?" asked Rob.

"I had not intended to leave till to-morrow," said Mr. Mayberry, "but since you have told me you are anxious that your friends should be informed of your safety, I must start this evening in order to reach a settlement from which I can telephone to the Harkness ranch."

Rob's heart sank. Mr. Mayberry had not said "we." The boy had hoped it would be possible for him to go along. The Indian agent saw his manifest disappointment and hastened to reassure him.

"I would gladly take you," he said, "but it is too arduous a trip for even Ranger to carry more

than one. You will be safe here till I return with the troops. I will come by here with an extra horse, and, if possible, with your friends, and then we will ride together on the Moquis."

A shrill whinny suddenly sounded outside.

"Hullo, what's the matter with Ranger?" exclaimed Mr. Mayberry, springing up, followed by Rob.

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Outside the hut the boy saw a strange sight. The splendid horse was gazing about him apprehensively, and stamping the ground impatiently. His nostrils were dilated, showing red inside, and his whole appearance was one of intense nervousness.

"What's the matter with him?" asked Rob, noting in a swift glance that Mr. Mayberry's face had become suddenly clouded.

"Well," said Mayberry succinctly, "there are only two things which make him act like that—Indians and bears—and I reckon there are no bears about right now.

"But Ranger scents danger," he went on. "I am certain of it. Old horse, you'll have to carry double, after all."

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CHAPTER XIX.

BLACK CLOUD'S VISIT.

It was mid-afternoon of the day following the start of Mr. Mayberry and Rob, riding double, from the shanty in the lonely basin. Gathered in the big living room of the ranch house of the Harkness range was a cheerless little group, consisting of the Boy Scouts of the Ranger Patrol, Mr. Harkness and several cow-punchers, including Blinky. They had returned, disheartened and apprehensive, a few hours before, from a painstaking search of the mountains for a trace of Rob. But they had found absolutely none, and as Mr. Harkness had just said, felt as if they had indeed reached "the end of the rope."

"You don't think, then, there is a chance of our finding him?"

It was Merritt who spoke.

"I'm afraid, much as I dislike to say it, my boy, that we have used up every possible resource at our command," rejoined the rancher.

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"Then what are we to do? We can't give up the search like this. He may be wandering about in the mountains now."

"With nothing to eat," put in Tubby tragically.

"I only wish you could suggest something," said Mr. Harkness in a weary tone, that made Merritt ashamed of his querulous speech.

"What your experience has been unable to suggest it is unlikely that we could think of," he rejoined. "I've only one thing to say, Mr. Harkness, and that is that we delay notifying his parents in the East till the last flicker of hope has died out."

"You mean that we may still hear some news of him?"

"I know Rob Blake," rejoined Merritt, "and if he has an ounce of strength he will make his way back."

"But the tracks of the big bear?"

"Silver Tip," put in Harry.

"That looks bad, I know," stubbornly rejoined Merritt; "but somehow I feel that Rob will yet come out all right."

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"I hope so, I am sure," breathed Mr. Harkness fervently.

As the reader will have guessed by the rancher's remark, the searching party had encountered the tracks of the big grizzly in the course of their wanderings. Huge as were the monster's paws, there was no danger of mistaking them for those of any of his kindred. The fact that the huge brute was on that side of the range had proved a disturbing factor in the hunt for Rob Blake. It indicated another source of danger to the missing boy, aside from the peril of Indians, hunger and thirst, and many other dangers that he might have to face.

Suddenly Mr. Harkness started up from the big hewn-oak chair in which he had flung himself, and sat up, listening intently. The others did the same, Blinky running to the window.

"There's some one on a pony coming over the foothills like blazes bent for election!" he announced.

"Wh-o is it?" demanded Mr. Harkness.

"Can't make out. Doesn't ride like any of this outfit," said Blinky.

"Maybe it's news of Rob," exclaimed Merritt.

The same thought flamed up in the heart of each of the returned searchers.

"It's an Indian!" cried Blinky suddenly.

"How do you know?"

"Can tell by his riding. I can see his blanket flapping out, too."

"Perhaps he has news of the boy."

"He knows something of importance; he wants to get here quick," was the cow-puncher's rejoinder. "He's spurring on that plug of his for all he's worth. Indians don't ride that hard unless they are in a hurry."

Everybody was on their feet now, and by common consent a movement toward the door began.

They had not long to wait before the rider galloped up, and drew rein so violently as to cast his mount back on its haunches. As Blinky had said, the newcomer was an Indian. He had evidently ridden long and hard. His pony's coat was covered with a coating of dust, and his blanket was whitened with the same stuff. The paint on his face was almost obliterated by the same substance.

"How!" he exclaimed, gazing with a hawklike intensity into the ring of faces.

"How!" said Mr. Harkness in the same manner. "Black Cloud!" he exclaimed the next instant, as the chief slipped from his pony.

The chief nodded gravely, and then looked about him uneasily. He evidently did not like to be the centre of so many curious faces. Divining his thought, the rancher invited him inside, ordering one of the cow-punchers to take the chief's pony.

"Has—has he news of Rob?" begged Merritt, pressing forward.

"Now, see here, Merritt," said Mr. Harkness, not unkindly, "the way of an Indian is one of the wonders of the world. You leave him to me, and if he does know anything of the boy I'll get it out of him."

Together the Indian chief and the rancher passed into the living room of the ranch house, and the door closed on them.

For more than an hour they remained closeted, and then they emerged once more. Black Cloud, so the eager boys noticed, looked more than usually grim and determined, while Mr. Harkness's face bore a stern look. The Indian's pony, which had been fed, watered and rubbed down, was brought round for him, and he cast once more a searching glance about him. Then, without a word, he leaped upon his little animal's back and dashed off.

"He—he had news?" demanded Merritt, the foremost in the rush that instantly surrounded Mr. Harkness.

"Yes, grave news," was the reply; "but come inside. I will tell you all he told me. In the first place, to relieve your anxiety, I must tell you that while Rob was for a time a prisoner of the tribe, he is so no longer, having, as we surmised after we saw his sombrero on that scamp's saddle, escaped."

"Then nobody knows where he is?"

"That's it."

Blank looks were exchanged as they clustered about the rancher to hear what the chief of the Moquis had visited him for. Evidently, from the rancher's manner, there were graver thoughts still in his mind.

"To explain to you what is to follow," he said, "I must say that things are now at a crisis as regards the leadership of the Moquis tribe. For the first time in many years Black Cloud's power is threatened. A younger chief, named Diamond Snake, has attained great supremacy in the tribe, and is using his influence to undermine the leadership of Black Cloud. Diamond Snake is not a full-blooded Indian, but he once worked for Clark Jennings on his father's ranch, before the family moved here."

"Gosh-jigger them!" burst out Blinky devoutly.

"Black Cloud, who is a pretty sensible Indian, refused to have anything to do with Jennings and his gang, and as late as last night, he tells me, warned them not to try to implicate his tribe in trouble. In spite of that, an attack is to be made on our mavericks in the Far Pasture by Jennings and his crowd, disguised as Moquis, and——"

"It was Jennings and that bunch, for a bet, that stampeded the cattle!" cried Blinky.

"I think so. They could easily rig themselves up as Moquis and deceive any one, particularly in the excitement. Black Cloud became suspicious after his interview with Jennings, and laid in hiding in the brush. What he heard confirmed his suspicion that Jennings meant to disguise himself and his helpers as Indians, when they raided the cattle, and so throw the blame on the

tribe. Old Black Cloud readily saw that this would work him immeasurable harm, so rode right off to warn me."

"But why should he do this?" asked Merritt.

"It's clear enough," rejoined the rancher. "He knows I'm pretty influential, and he also knows that there's a hot time coming for his tribe when they are finally rounded up. By coming to me and telling me of Jennings's plans, he figures that I, on my part, will go to the front for him and save his tribe from any severe penalty."

"But will you?" asked Harry.

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"I promised him to," rejoined Mr. Harkness. "His visit may be the means of saving me thousands of dollars. But now I am in a serious predicament. Most of my punchers are off on the Bone Mound Range, rounding up mavericks. Jennings will have quite a force, and how are we to oppose him?"

"We'll help you," spoke up Harry boldly.

"Who?"

"Why, the Boy Scouts. Except Merritt and Tubby, we can all rope, and not one of us is scared of a little shooting, or anything like that."

"Well, I don't like the idea of taking you boys into danger."

"I guess you'll have to take them," put in Blinky soberly.

"Why?"

"Well, there's only myself and three other punchers, and we'll need at least a dozen to take care of the raid. Let the kids help. They'll do all right. I watched 'em carefully while we were trailing poor Rob, and they're made of the right stuff."

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So it was arranged that the boys were to take part in protecting the Far Pasture against Clark Jennings and his marauders. There was now little doubt in the minds of Mr. Harkness and the others that the stampede had been instigated by Clark and his friends, disguised as Moquis. In fact, we know from the conversation we overheard in the mountains that such was the case.

"Where has Black Cloud gone, to join the snake dance?" asked Merritt, when this had been settled.

"No; at least, he has gone there, but with the object of preventing it, if possible. In some way he has learned that Mayberry has sent for soldiers, and that he means to surprise the tribe at the height of their revelry. Black Cloud, for this reason, is determined to stop it if he can."

"Can he, do you think?" asked Harry.

"I don't know. He told me that Diamond Snake, in order to make himself more popular with the tribe, was a red-hot advocate of giving the dance with all its trimmings."

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"I'd like to see it," said Merritt suddenly.

"See them eating rattlers, eh?" put in Blinky.

"Do they eat them?" asked Tubby, interested at once at the mention of his favorite topic.

"Eat 'em alive," was the startling reply; "that is, except the ones they throw into a red-hot pit of coals."

"Did you ever see a snake dance?" asked Merritt eagerly.

"No, but I heard my grandpop talk about 'em. He's one of the few white men that ever saw one and got out alive."

"What do you mean?"

"That by Moqui law if a white man is caught looking on at their fal-de-lals and fandangos, he is tortured to death."

"Hum! I guess I don't want to see one as badly as I thought I did," muttered Tubby.

At this instant there came a sharp ring at the telephone. Mr. Harkness hastened to the instrument and took up the receiver. His face paled, and then broke into a joyous smile as he heard the voice at the other end.

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"News of Rob!" he shouted, wheeling about.

Instantly they pressed forward about him, eager to hear.

"He's—Hullo! Yes. What's that? Oh, yes. Boys, Rob was at Red Flat some time ago. He is now mounted and on his way here. I am talking to Mr. Mayberry, the Indian agent, who saved him from a terrible death."

"How far is Red Flat from here?"

"About twenty miles, and the boy has a good horse."

"He ought to be here in a couple of hours, then?"

"About that," rejoined Mr. Harkness, resuming his conversation with the Indian agent. Suddenly they heard his voice raised as if in expostulation.

"Don't do any such thing, Mayberry!" the boys heard the rancher exclaim. "You are mad to

attempt it!"

"Oh, I know, duty is duty, but it's no man's duty to place his head in a trap. Why, man alive, it's courting death, you——"

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"He's rung off," he exclaimed, turning to the inquiring group behind him. "I don't know what I wouldn't give to be able to stop him in what he is about to do."

"Is he in trouble?" asked Harry.

"No, my boy, but he soon will be. He is going to '*reason*' with the Indians. Reason with them!" he burst out bitterly. "Reason with a rock, a rattlesnake, a coyote, or anything else senseless or cruel, but don't reason with an Indian."

"If you're enjoyin' this here present life," put in Blinky sagely.

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CHAPTER XX.

THE WATCHERS OF THE TRAIL.

Had Jeffries Mayberry and Rob Blake possessed the wonderfully sensitive intuition of the Indian agent's beautiful horse, they might have been able to feel, as they set out from the shanty in the clearing, that they were being followed and observed by more than one pair of cruel, beady eyes. Not being endowed with any such faculties, however, they followed the trail without any misgivings.

The Indian agent, fortunately, had the good sense to accept the uneasiness of his steed as a sign of nearby danger. He had, for that reason, altered his previous determination to leave Rob behind in the hut till he returned with the soldiers from Fort Miles. And it was well that he did so, as we shall see.

Hardly had the ring of Ranger's hoofs died out than a dozen dusky forms slid from the brush into the clearing and looked cautiously about. Seeing no cause for alarm, they entered the shanty and stripped it of everything they considered valuable. The Moquis, for such they were, then returned to the spot where they had tethered their ponies, and took the trail after Mayberry and his young companion. It was the scent of the ponies that had aroused Ranger's uneasiness, although the Indians, with their customary caution, had, as has been said, tethered them some little distance from the shanty.

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All that night, as Mr. Mayberry and his young companion rode steadily forward toward Red Flat, the objective point at which the Indian agent had determined to aim, the redskins stealthily dogged their tracks. Never by so much as an incautious move, however, did they betray their presence. Red Flat had been chosen as their destination by Mr. Mayberry on account of the superior attractions in point of distance it offered to the other station of Sentinel Peak. It was out of his way, it is true, but he determined to tax Ranger with the extra miles rather than expose Rob to peril, or keep him separated from his friends longer than needful.

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It was early dawn when they clattered into Red Flat, a small settlement with the essential store and post office. Its communication with the outside world consisted of the telephone and a stage which once a day trundled through. To the chagrin of the two travelers, however, the store in which the 'phone was located had been locked up during its owner's absence, and it was necessary to await his return before they could use the instrument. This opportunity, as we know, did not occur before the afternoon. In the meantime, Rob had hired a pony from the blacksmith of the place, and started off for the Harkness ranch.

He had not been gone ten minutes when Ben Starkey, the storekeeper, drove into town. He had been off on a distant pasture, rounding up some sheep, which had kept him away till that time.

"Hullo, Mr. Mayberry," he hailed, as he saw the Indian agent. "What brings you here? Come to buy a plow, or a shotgun to manage those 'babies' of yours?"

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"Neither," smiled the agent; "but if you will open up the store, Ben, I'd like to telephone."

"All right. Want to use the talk box, eh?" chattered the storekeeper, as he unfastened sundry locks and bolts. "There you are. Now talk your head off."

Presently, as we know, Mr. Mayberry was communicating the news of Rob's astonishing rescue to Mr. Harkness. He also told him something that he had not confided to Rob, and that was that he intended to hold the soldiers in reserve and go by himself to the valley in which the snake dance was to be held, and, as he expressed it, "reason with the Moquis."

Now, there is little doubt that, had Black Cloud been in supreme control of the tribe at that

time, Mr. Mayberry, with his knowledge of the red men, and the many little kindnesses he had done them, might have been able to "reason with them." But, as has been said, conditions in the tribe were not normal. The unscrupulous Diamond Snake, who was as ambitious as he was senseless, had determined on giving the snake dance, and equally determined that the logic of the little circle who still kept their heads and counseled saner measures should not prevail. Unfortunately, the wisest counsel is not invariably the most acceptable, and so it proved in the case of the rival chiefs. Black Cloud was even spoken of as "timid" by some of the young bucks. This, however, was behind his back, as none dared to fling such a taunt in the face of the veteran.

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In counsel, Black Cloud, supported by three or four of the elder Indians, had pleaded the many years of comfort Mr. Mayberry had provided for them. If they did nothing to thwart his wishes, he reasoned, the good times would continue. If they deliberately rebelled, however, no one knew what would happen.

This sage advice had been jeered down by Diamond Snake's followers. The ancient lore of the tribe had been quoted, the spirits of their ancestors invoked, and Black Cloud denounced as a traitor to the traditions of the Moquis. A similar situation has often prevailed in the counsels of the white men, who vaunt themselves so much the red man's superiors. It was simply the case of one leader bowing to the will of the populace, the other sternly stemming the tide, bidding defiance to the element which he knows stands for what is wrong and foolish.

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So it had come about that a band of young braves engaged in hunting had stumbled across Mr. Mayberry's hiding place, and, having discovered it, had decided that it was their duty to trail its occupant, whom they not unnaturally, perhaps, regarded as their enemy.

No such thoughts were in Jeffries Mayberry's mind, however, as he rode slowly out of Red Flat in the early twilight. On the contrary, a smile played about his usually rather stern features, and his whole countenance was relaxed in an expression which, to any one viewing him, would have said as plain as print that Jeffries Mayberry was in a pleasant mood.

In fact, the crisis that he had feared seemed to the Indian agent's mind to have passed the crucial point. The cavalry from Fort Miles would be at Sentinel Peak that evening. From there it was not a long ride to the valley in which the dance was to be held. By midnight, he felt certain, things would be in train for the peaceful return of the Moquis to their reservation. Jeffries Mayberry was, as our readers have doubtless decided by this time, a man to whom the idea of bloodshed or violence was abhorrent, but also a man who looked upon duty unflinchingly. He regarded the Moquis more as children to be looked after, and chided, and reasoned with, than as bloodthirsty and cruel savages, in whom a thin veneer of civilization only skinned the savagery festering below. Men had often told Jeffries Mayberry that his view of the Indian character was wrong, but he had always defended his views. They were shortly destined to be put to the severest test a man's theories ever were called upon to bear.

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The Indian agent had ridden easily down the trail some two miles or so in the direction of Sentinel Mountain, when Ranger suddenly swerved so violently from the trail as almost to unseat him.

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"Steady, boy, steady!" soothed the agent, patting the alarmed animal's neck. "What is it?"

Ranger snorted violently and then, trembling in every limb, came to a dead stop.

"Why, Ranger, I—" began Mr. Mayberry, when, with hideous yells, several dark forms rushed from the surrounding gloom. As their soul-chilling yell burst from those hideously painted faces, distorted with the vilest of passions, a terrific blow was dealt the Indian agent from behind, and he fell forward, almost beneath the trampling hoofs of the maddened Ranger.

His assailants were the same Indians who had been trailing him all the previous night, and who had lain in wait for him outside the settlement.

The taste of blood is said to transmute a hitherto peaceful sheep dog into a creature more dangerous to his flock than even a marauding wolf. In like manner, the Moquis' dash off the reservation had converted them into a ferocity of mind which had speedily wiped off the varnish civilization had applied so painstakingly.

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While one of the Indians, seemingly the leader of the band, possessed himself of the agent's fine rifle, another hastened to seize the plunging Ranger's bridle. But the animal, beside himself with rage and fear, reared straight upright. Angered, the Indian dealt him a blow with a heavy rawhide quirt. With a squeal of rage, Ranger struck with his iron-shod forefeet at the redskin, and striking him on the head, toppled him over in the road beside his master.

The fellow, however, was not badly hurt, and was soon on his feet again. Meanwhile, the other red men hoisted the agent's unconscious form over the back of one of their ponies.

Jeffries Mayberry lay as if he were dead. Blood flowed from the wound that the weapon with which he had been struck had inflicted on the back of his head. Only the regular rising and falling of his deep, massive chest showed that he still lived.

Glancing furtively about them, the Indians, including the one who had been felled by Ranger, remounted and prepared to proceed. The chief, however, on whose pony the still form of Jeffries Mayberry lay, found himself thus without a mount, and essayed to ride Ranger. Splendid rider as the fellow was, he met more than his match in the Indian agent's steed. Time and again he attempted to mount, only to be driven off by Ranger, who rushed at the member of the hated race, with bared teeth and ears wickedly set back.

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With a laugh that acknowledged his defeat, the Indian finally gave up the attempt, and

mounted his pony, sitting far back on the animal's rump. In the glance he threw at the fiery Ranger there was an expression of admiration and respect. There are few horses that an Indian cannot master.

Attempts to lead Ranger proved equally hopeless, but as he seemed to be inclined to follow his master's form, they allowed him to trail behind. And so the procession wound on, sometimes following a trail and sometimes striking off through the trackless wild. Never once did the redskins falter, but kept on as unhesitatingly as if following a beaten track.

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Occasionally, as they journeyed on, poor Ranger gave vent to a pathetic whinny, but the master he loved so well lay still and motionless on the back of the Indian pony that bore him.

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CHAPTER XXI.

THE MAVERICK RAID.

"Hark!"

Through the dark, low-lying mass that marked the feeding maverick herd, a sort of convulsive shudder suddenly ran. The movement, somewhat like the undulation of a long wave, had not been lost on the keen eyes of the Boy Scouts lying crouched under the night sky behind a chaparral-covered rise.

It was Rob who voiced the warning. Since we last heard of him at Red Flat, the boy had arrived at the ranch, and been welcomed with—well, let each one of my readers imagine for himself how he would greet his chum if he had been separated from him under such trying circumstances, and if, for a time, he had even feared that his friend might be dead. Suffice it to say that it was fully half an hour before Rob could be released from his chums and tell his story to Mr. Harkness, including confirmation of the Indian's story, that Clark Jennings and his evil companions meant to steal the mavericks while the rancher's attention was diverted by the hunt for the missing boy.

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A hasty supper had been dispatched soon after, and then the Boy Scouts, Mr. Harkness and the cow-punchers had set out for the Far Pasture. They reached there at nightfall, and found everything apparently in orderly shape. Owing to the uncertainty from which quarter the cattle thieves were likely to make their attack, Mr. Harkness had decided to distribute his little force in two wings, so to speak. To the south of the feeding bunch of mavericks he had deployed his cow-punchers under his own leadership. The northern flank of the feeding band was placed under the guardianship of the Boy Scouts.

"Now, boys," had been Mr. Harkness's parting words, as he rode off, "the signal that they have arrived will be two shots in quick succession. Remember, don't fire at the raiders unless you have to. Concentrate your efforts on saving the cattle. If Jennings and his outfit once succeed in getting them headed up toward the mountains, they are as good as lost. Jennings has some sort of secret pasture where he can keep them till he finds time to clap his brand on and dispose of them in the open market."

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"But in the meantime you can have him arrested," objected Rob.

"That is true, but a bunch like that always has secret agents. If all the men whom I know to be implicated in the Jennings' escapades were in jail, there would still be men on the outside of the prison walls to carry on their nefarious work."

For an hour or more no sound had come to disturb the great silence which brooded above the grazing grounds. The herd moved easily and steadily over their feeding places, displaying no symptoms of alarm as they croppped the half-dry grass.

Rob had enjoined perfect silence among the Boy Scouts of the Ranger Patrol, and the boys, composed, lay like veterans to their arms behind their shelter.

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Suddenly a maverick that had been lying down on the outskirts of the herd lumbered heavily to its feet, and raising its head, sniffed the air for a moment. Then it emitted a shrill bellow. A thrill ran through the boys as the young steer gave its alarm.

Simultaneously, almost, with the maverick's cry had come marked restlessness among its mates. They stopped feeding and moved uneasily to and fro. They huddled together as cattle do before one of the electric storms of the Southwest breaks over them.

"They hear something coming," whispered Merritt, who lay next to Rob.

"Must be scared, to stop eating," put in Tubby, from his position alongside Harry Harkness, on Rob's other side.

"Hush!" breathed the young leader. "Listen!"

"I don't hear anything," said Merritt.

"Yes, you do. Listen again. Off there to the north."

"You mean that sort of trampling sound?"

"Yes."

"I thought that was the cattle," put in Merritt.

"No. I hear what Rob means," whispered Harry. "It's riders, and they're coming this way."

The slight sound that had first attracted Rob's keen ears now grew in volume till it resolved itself into the rattle of ponies' hoofs approaching at a smart gallop.

"Here they come!" exclaimed Rob, half unconsciously clasping his rifle.

"Well, they don't seem to be anxious to disguise their approach," commented Harry.

"No, why should they? They figure that only three or four punchers at most are guarding the herd. With the force they have with them they suppose, I guess, that they can scare the punchers off."

"I reckon that's it," agreed Merritt.

Closer and closer drew the galloping, and Merritt began to shift uneasily. The others, too, began to stir about, eager for the word to advance and mount their ponies, which were concealed behind a high rampart of chaparral a few paces off. At last Rob gave the word.

"Crawl over to your ponies, boys. Don't show a head."

Silently as so many snakes, the Boy Scouts retreated, and managed to gain their little mounts without making any suspicious sounds.

"Ready for the signal yet, Rob?" asked Merritt, noticing that the young leader had slipped his revolver from its holster.

"Not yet. Give them a little more rope. We want to see what their plans are before giving the alarm."

"All right. But don't let them give us the slip."

"Not likely. Remember, I've got a few scores to even up with Master Clark Jennings and Company myself."

Suddenly out of the darkness before them came an ear-splitting "whoop."

"Yip-yip-y-ee-e-e-e!"

Bang! Bang!

Rob's pistol cracked out the signal that the attack had begun at the same instant.

But quick as he was, the boy had delayed a little too long. In his anxiety to make sure from which quarter the drive was to begin, he had allowed the raiders to get between his line of scouts and the cattle, thus permitting them a free and open path to the mountains. In a flash Rob realized this, as he swung on his pony's back.

Silence was of little moment now, and the Boy Scouts uttered a loud cheer as they swept forward behind their leader.

Bang! Bang!

It was the answer to Rob's signal, from Mr. Harkness's party. But it sounded faint and far off. The rancher, in his anxiety to allow ample room to head off the cattle, in case they started for the Graveyard Cliffs, had stationed his men too far to the southward.

Already the drive had begun, and the mavericks were trotting off before the onrush of a dozen or more dark figures garbed like Indians.

"Whoop-whoop-whoop-ee-ee!" yelled the raiders, the better to keep up the illusion that they were Indians.

"I guess they don't know that they are not throwing any dust in our eyes," muttered Rob, as he dug his spurs in deep, and his pony answered with every pound of speed in its active little body. By his side was Harry Harkness and all about them surged the other Boy Scouts.

"Spread out! Spread out!" commanded Rob, as the charge swept forward. "Each Scout take a man and rope him if he can."

With the exception of the Eastern boys, every lad in the Ranger Patrol was, as a matter of course, an efficient roper, and could handle a lariat as well as they could their ponies. Rob's command to use the rawhides, therefore, met with shouts and yells of approval.

The consternation created in the ranks of Clark Jennings's raiders by the chorus of shouts and yells behind them may be imagined.

"I thought you told us there wouldn't be more than a few cow-punchers here," said Bill Bender angrily, as they pressed on behind the cattle, which were now loping fast toward the mountains.

"Well, I thought so. How was I to know they'd have an army out?"

"That's what they've got. Hark at that!"

A fresh yell from the Boy Scouts broke out behind the disguised raiders, and this time it sounded closer.

"Speed up those cattle," shouted Clark Jennings desperately; "we've got to get to the mountains before they close on us."

A volley of pistol shots was the answer, but the raiders fired above the cattle's backs. A fresh burst of speed followed from the frightened animals, which were now fairly stampeding. The shouts and yells and the constant cracking of pistols drove them into a frenzy of fear. On and on swept the mad advance.

"If once they get to the hills, we may as well give them up!" shouted Harry, above the deafening hammer of the galloping Boy Scouts. [Pg 266]

"Yes, we'd better pump some lead into them!" yelled Bill Simmons.

"On no account," shouted back Rob. "Use your ropes, but no shooting."

Fast as the mavericks were urged on, they could not make the same speed over the rough ground that the ponies of their tormentors achieved. This fact naturally held back the line of disguised white raiders and permitted the Boy Scouts to close up on them. Before long they were so close that they could see the headdresses and blankets of the supposed Indians, waving above the dark line of racing steers.

In the excitement of the chase, the boys had quite overlooked the fact that they were in close pursuit of some of the most desperate men in Arizona, and had carelessly come within pistol range.

Suddenly a bright flash spurted from one of the raiders' revolvers, and a bullet whizzed past Rob's ear. [Pg 267]

"A miss is as good as a mile!" he yelled exultingly.

The boy, to tell the truth, did not feel any fear of being "pinked" by a raider's bullet. Added to the darkness was the fact that the whole body was sweeping forward over rough ground at tremendous speed. A man, to aim true under such conditions, must have been a phenomenal marksman.

"Aim low! Fire at their ponies!" he heard Clark Jennings yell suddenly.

"Ah!" thought Rob. "Now you are talking. If a pony gets hit, it puts his rider out of the race."

Hardly had the thought flashed through his mind before there came another spurt of fire from the raiders' line, and Rob felt his mount collapse under him.

He leaped from the saddle just in time to avoid being crushed as the pony crashed down in a dying heap. The boy had been riding off to one side of the Scouts when his pony was shot, and in the darkness not one of them seemed to have noticed that Rob was dismounted, for yelling and cheering, the chase swept on. [Pg 268]

"Well, I'm out of it," thought Rob dismally. "I hope they get them, though. I'd like——"

"Up with your hands, and drop that rifle!"

The command came out of the darkness behind him like a bolt out of the blue.

Rob recognized that whoever had voiced the command meant business, and down fell his rifle with a crash, while his hands extended above his head.

"Now I've got you where I want you," were the next words, coming in a vindictive voice from his captor. The next instant the speaker rode round the motionless Rob, and brought his pony to a halt directly in front of the boy.

Despite the shrouding blanket and the waving feathers on the rider's head, Rob recognized his captor, with a thrill, as Clark Jennings. He was absolutely in the power of the vindictive ranch boy.

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CHAPTER XXII.

CLARK JENNINGS GETS A SURPRISE.

"Lucky thing for me my pony went lame and I had to drop out," muttered Clark Jennings triumphantly. "I've got a few things I want to say to you, Rob Blake."

"You'd better say them quick, then," rejoined Rob. "I'm not overfond of your conversation."

"Don't try to be fresh, young fellow!" warned Clark, raising his rifle menacingly. "I've got a corrective for back-talk in here."

"But you daren't use it."

"Don't be too sure."

"Well, what do you want to do with me?"

"All you have to do now is to obey, and obey pronto—see? Now march."

"Which way?"

"Toward the mountains."

"Very well." Rob wheeled obediently, and began to march off, but already he had conceived a daring plan, and unexpectedly an opportunity suddenly presented itself to carry it out. As Clark Jennings swung his pony, the animal spied, lying on the bare ground, a gleaming white skull—the relic of some dead and gone steer. With a snort, he gave a wild sidewise leap that almost unseated Clark, practiced rider though he was. [Pg 270]

Rob heard the snort and the jump and Clark's sharp exclamation. In a flash his mind was made up. He wheeled like a streak, and bending down, grabbed his rifle. In far less time than it takes to tell it, the muzzle of the weapon was covering Clark Jennings's breast.

"Drop that rifle, Clark!"

The tables were turned with a vengeance now. But Clark Jennings, to do him justice, was no coward. Disregarding Rob's command, he instead raised his own rifle and aimed point blank at the lad. A stinging sensation cut through Rob's right shoulder and his muscles involuntarily contracted. His rifle was an automatic, and the "safety" slide was open. As Clark's bullet penetrated his shoulder, Rob's finger twitched on the light trigger. [Pg 271]

Bang!

The bullet ploughed into the flank of Clark's pony. The animal gave a frightened, pained squeal and a terrific buck. Utterly unprepared as Clark was for such a contingency, he was shot through the air over the pony's head, and landed with a crash on the hard ground. His rifle flew out of his hand in the opposite direction, while his pony, which was only slightly wounded, galloped, riderless, off.

"Well, I hope you're satisfied now," growled Clark, raising himself on one elbow and gazing vindictively at Rob, who this time took no chances and kept his enemy covered. Clark, for all he knew, might have a revolver concealed about him.

"I'm not the one to be satisfied," rejoined Rob. "That is for Mr. Harkness to be. I should advise you to tell him the truth."

At that instant the sound of trampling hoofs was heard off to the south. It was the belated band of cow-punchers, headed by Mr. Harkness, sweeping at top speed in the direction of the retreating chase. [Pg 272]

"Co-ee-ee!" yelled Rob.

"Who is it?" came back the hail.

"Rob Blake. I want to see you."

"Don't stop us now, Rob," came back Mr. Harkness's voice, "unless it is something serious. We don't want to lose that rascal Jennings."

"If you'll come this way, you can't miss him," called Rob cheerfully.

"Confound you, Rob Blake! I'll get even with you some day for this!" growled Clark, utterly dumfounded by the unexpected arrival of Mr. Harkness. A few seconds later the perhaps equally astonished rancher and his men loped up. A shrill cheer broke from the punchers as they saw the leader of the cattle raiders ingloriously squatted on the ground, nursing a sprained wrist and scowling like a cornered wildcat.

"Well done, Rob," cried Mr. Harkness, as he saw the crestfallen raider. "Here, Blinky, just take a few turns round this fellow with a rope. Joyce," to another of the punchers, "you stay here and guard him. We'll take no chance with so slippery a customer." [Pg 273]

The rancher drew out an electric flash torch and illumined the scene. Suddenly his eyes fell on a dark, wet patch on Rob's shoulder.

"Why, boy, you are wounded!" he cried.

"Oh, just a touch. The bullet tore the flesh. It isn't anything," protested Rob.

"What, he fired at you?"

"Yes," Clark answered brutally, "and I'm sorry I didn't kill him!"

An examination of Rob's injury showed that it was only a slight flesh wound, and after it had been wrapped up with a strip of his shirt to keep dirt out till proper remedies could be applied, he mounted Joyce's pony, and the cavalcade swept on once more, leaving the appointed cow-puncher behind to guard Clark Jennings.

"Hullo," exclaimed Mr. Harkness suddenly, as they rode on. "I believe something's happening up ahead."

Indeed, it seemed so. Shouts and yells and imprecations filled the air.

Suddenly a volley of shots sounded, and a sharp cry rang out.

"Good gracious! They're shooting to kill!" cried Rob, dashing forward.

Mr. Harkness and the cow-punchers were close on his heels.

It was a strange scene into the midst of which they rode at top speed. Harry Harkness, Bill Simmons, Jeb Cotton and Frank Price each had their ponies "backed" on their lariats, and at the end of each taut, stretched rope lay a dark object, rolling about and muttering angry imprecations.

Round the group rode the Boy Scouts, yelling at the top of their voices and cheering vociferously. And no wonder. At the end of the different lariats lay four cattle raiders, their clumsy disguises dragged half off, giving a grotesque appearance to them.

The captives were examined one by one, and found to be Hank Handcraft, Bill Bender, Jess Randell and old man Jennings. None of them would say a word except profanity, and so they were each tied and left, while the cow-punchers and victorious Boy Scouts set out to round up the crazed mavericks. The steers had now scattered in every direction, and getting them into a bunch was no slight job. Of the rest of the cattle raiders no trace could be found. It was learned afterward that they had galloped off when the Boy Scouts roped their leaders, and they made good their escape later across the border. The Boy Scouts, however, had not escaped lightly. Several of them had minor wounds, none serious, where the bullets of the cowardly raiders had struck them. It took a good hour or more to round up the cattle and quiet them, and then a sort of general inspection was made of the ranch forces. This resulted in a startling discovery. No Tubby Hopkins was to be found.

"Who saw him last?" asked Rob.

"I did," said Jeb Cotton. "He was riding off after a tall fake Indian."

"Any one see him since?"

No, nobody had.

At this moment, while things looked grave, there came a sudden yell, off in the distance. A few minutes later Tubby's rotund form appeared. To the boys' amazement, the fat boy led behind him a mounted figure, bound up like a valuable parcel, with fold on fold of rawhide.

"Why, Tubby, wherever have you been?" demanded Rob.

"On special duty," announced the fat boy importantly. "I have made a prisoner of war."

"What! Why, how?" gasped Merritt.

"Who is it?" shouted Merritt, edging round to get a look at the muffled prisoner.

Mr. Harkness turned his searchlight in the captive's face. In vain the fellow tried to bury his features in the folds of his blanket. His attempts at concealment were useless. A shout of amazement went up as Rob and Merritt recognized the face of Tubby's captive.

It was Jack Curtiss!

Arriving unexpectedly at the Jennings ranch that evening, he had been persuaded to take part in the raid. Knowing little about riding, the former bully of Hampton Academy had boastfully declared he would outride any of the raiders. He had been accommodated with a pony and had taken part in the onslaught which had had such an unexpected conclusion. Tubby, carried away by excitement, had chased the huddled figure, little knowing whom the blanket shrouded. Suddenly Jack Curtiss's pony stumbled, throwing the bully headlong. Tubby had immediately pressed his rifle to the fallen figure's head with the curt command:

"Shut up!"

As soon as his astonished eyes had recognized Jack Curtiss, he saw a fine chance to redeem himself as a hero in the eyes of the Boy Scouts. Tricing Jack up with his lariat, he had led him back in triumph to the rest.

"Hooray, Tubby, I didn't think you had it in you!" cried Merritt, clapping the fat boy on the back.

"Hum! I don't show all my good qualities at once," remarked Tubby, grandiloquently strutting about.

"I wonder what you'd have done if it had been a real Indian?" laughed Harry Harkness.

"Just the same—just the same," rejoined Tubby.

A roar of laughter greeted the stout youth's complacent remark, but it was suddenly checked as a horseman came dashing up to the party.

"Hullo, what's up now?" exclaimed Mr. Harkness amazedly, as the rider drew rein almost at his feet.

"It's an Indian!" exclaimed Merritt.

"Another fake," declared Tubby sagely.

But this time it was a real Indian, and he drew Mr. Harkness aside and spoke some rapid words. The rancher's face showed traces of great excitement, although his voice was calm

enough as he turned to the interested group, after some moments of conversation with the red man.

"Ray and Sumner, you join Joyce back there and take these prisoners to the ranch, and see that they are kept under strong guard," he ordered.

"What! Aren't we going back?" inquired Rob.

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"No, my boy. I have grave news. The Moquis have rebelled against Black Cloud's authority, and Mr. Mayberry is a prisoner in their camp."

"Is he in danger?"

"He is in the gravest peril. Only prompt action can save his life. Such is the message Black Cloud gave this Indian to bring to me."

A few moments later Rob, mounted on a pony previously ridden by old man Jennings, a tough, wiry little cayuse, was riding beside Mr. Harkness, listening eagerly to the details of his kind-hearted friend's predicament. Behind them spurred the Boy Scouts and the few cow-punchers remaining after a guard had been detailed. Minutes counted, as they well knew, and no rider in the party spared his pony as they pressed rapidly forward, under the Indian's guidance, for the valley of the snake dance.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

WORSHIPPERS OF THE SNAKE.

About a deep pit, filled to the brim with red-hot, glowing coals, swayed a long line of naked, copper-colored bodies. The glow of the flaming torches illuminated weirdly the surroundings. Steep, rocky walls, bare of timber or vegetation, and the flat, basin-like floor of the deep depression in the mountains formed the secret valley of the Moqui snake dancers.

In lines behind the braves, who were swaying their lithe bodies so rhythmically above the red-hot pit, were grouped scores of stolid-faced Indians. By not the twitch of a single muscle did they display the frenzy that was already at work within them, but their beady, dark eyes glittered as they watched the weird gyrations of the swaying line above the fire.

All at once a low chant arose from the line. Its regular rhythm and booming inflection marked it as being of religious character. Steadily it grew in volume, till half the Indians in that rock-bound basin in the hills were intoning it.

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As the line of chief chanters swayed back and forth, from time to time the firelight gleamed on a row of earthen vessels, quaintly illuminated, which stood behind them.

Suddenly one of the dancers turned, and while the shrieks of his fellows grew more and more frenzied, he plunged his hand into the mouth of one of the vessels. He drew his arm forth again, embellished by a hideous ornament—a writhing, struggling diamond-back rattler!

The creature's flat head darted at the man's face, and its fangs seemed to bury themselves in his arm, but his bronze form danced more furiously than ever, and the singing grew louder and more frenzied. The Moqui had reached a pitch of exaltation in which the venom of the serpent was harmless to him.

As the other Indians witnessed the sight their expression of stoicism changed as if by magic. The excitement of the dance was upon them. Suddenly a blood-curdling yell echoed against the rock-bound walls.

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A young brave, one of those who had been seated in the front row of the onlookers, sprang to his feet. He cast off his blanket with a shout, standing upright in the firelight, a nude figure of bronze. The play of his muscles showed plain as day in the glare of the glowing pit. Straight up to the earthen jars he gyrated, chanting the refrain of the weird ritual.

Uttering a wild screech, he plunged his arm up to the elbow into its wriggling, deadly contents, and drew forth a vicious-looking sidewinder, or desert rattlesnake—a distinct species from the big diamond-back—and even more deadly.

Without the slightest hesitation, he thrust the monster's spade-shaped head into his mouth, and with one clean bite severed it. He then spat it forth into the glowing pit, where it fell hissing.



Uttering a wild screech, he drew forth a vicious-looking desert rattlesnake.

This was the signal for yet wilder frenzies on the part of the Indians. One after another the young braves cast off their blankets and rushed forward to repeat the nauseous performance of the snake eater. The ground at the feet of the chanters of the ritual was littered with limp reptiles' bodies. An overpowering, musky stench arose on the air, the odor of scores of burnt envenomed heads.

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In the midst of that maddened throng there was but one quiet, unmoved countenance, and that was that of a bearded man, who stood back some distance in the shadows. He eyed the ceremonies with a look that was half contempt and half pity. But he made no motion to interfere, nor did he, in fact, move at all. And for a very good reason. He was bound hand and foot to a post.

His face was white as ashes under its deep bronze, but not from fear, for not a tremor crossed his features. Perhaps a deep wound on the back of his head accounted for it. But Jeffries Mayberry—for our readers must have already recognized the Indian agent—never knew less fear than he experienced as he stood at that moment, captive among a dangerous tribe, rendered doubly formidable as they were by copious doses of cheap liquor and religious frenzy. The Indian agent knew well that the rattlers which the young braves were beheading were far less harmful than the human beings, of whom he was, perhaps, the only self-possessed one in that rocky bowl.

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But if Jeffries Mayberry gazed on the ceremonies with contempt, mingled with pity, there was another in the valley who regarded them with almost similar feelings. That person was Black Cloud. The old chieftain had made as stiff a fight as he dared for Jeffries Mayberry's liberation, but had been hooted and jeered down. Diamond Snake was now in full control of the passions and adulation of the tribe, and Black Cloud, the only friend Jeffries Mayberry had within it, at that moment gazed powerlessly on the snake dance. One friendly turn, however, he had been able to do for his white friend, and that was to dispatch the messenger to the ranch of Mr. Harkness. But as Black Cloud, not daring to raise a voice of protest, gazed on the dance, his mind was busy with intense speculation. Even in the event of Mr. Harkness having been reached, it was doubtful if the rancher would arrive in time. The old Indian recognized the symptoms of an approaching climax in the ceremonies, and what that climax was to be he guessed only too well. No white man had ever seen the snake dance of the Moquis and lived to tell of it, if his presence were known. That Jeffries Mayberry was to share the fate of many another unfortunate victim in the tribe's past history, was what Black Cloud feared. That his fears were well grounded we shall presently see.

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Suddenly the frenzy died down with the same rapidity with which it had arisen. Above the rim of the rocky basin the silvery edge of the new moon had shown. The height of the excitement was at hand.

Diamond Snake stepped forward from his place in the row of chanters and began to address the tribe in a high, not unmusical voice. As Jeffries Mayberry gazed at his almost faultless form, gleaming like polished bronze in the glare of the fiery pit, he realized what an influence this fine-looking, fiery young Indian must sway among his people. His talk was listened to with deep attention, and seemed to be impassioned and fervid to the last degree.

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Although Diamond Snake spoke fast in his excitement, the Indian agent managed to pick out

enough of the sense here and there to make out that, as he had suspected, he himself was the subject of the chief's address.

Had he been in any doubt of this, his uncertainty would soon have been dissipated, for all at once every eye in that assemblage was turned on him with a baleful, malignant glare. If Jeffries Mayberry had ever felt one ray of hope, it died out of even his brave heart in that instant.

"Well, I guess Indians are all they say they are, after all," he thought to himself. "Just to think that, after all I've done for those rascals, they've no more gratitude for me than that! Go on, stare away!"

Jeffries Mayberry fairly shouted these last words.

"I wish, though," he continued to himself, while the young chief's voice went on addressing his people, "I wish, though, that they'd turned Ranger loose. I kind of hate to think of him ever being an Indian's horse, for of all maltreaters of horse flesh, they are the worst."

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He turned his head—the only portion of his body which was free to move—and gazed back into the shadows where he knew Ranger was tied. For hours after his capture the splendid horse had fretted and raged, but now he had grown quiet.

"Poor old fellow, they've broken his spirit!" thought Jeffries Mayberry. Which goes to show—in the light of what was to come—that a man can get "pretty close," as the saying is, to a horse and yet not know him.

Mayberry could not forbear winking back a little moisture that arose in his eyes as he saw the well-known form of his horse dimly outlined in the darkness behind him. Ranger's head was abjectly hanging down. His whole attitude spoke dejection. As Jeffries Mayberry had said, the horse indeed seemed to be spirit-broken.

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All at once, while Mayberry's mind was busy with these thoughts, the young chief ceased his oratory, and the moment for action appeared at last to have arrived. With a concerted yell, the band of naked warriors who had chanted the solemn ritual of the snake dance rushed at the Indian agent. Even in that trying moment he did not flinch. He gazed at them unmoved, as they cast him loose from the post, and then instantly rebound his hands. His legs, however, they left free.

Strange to say, the dominant feeling in Jeffries Mayberry's mind at that moment was one of curiosity. He wondered what they were going to do with him. For one instant a shudder passed through his frame. The fiery pit! Could they mean to thrust him into that?

Such, however, was evidently not their intention, for they led him round to the farther side of the glowing coals, past the rows of seated Indians and squaws, who growled and spat at him as he passed.

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"You ungrateful bunch of dogs!" shouted Mayberry, fairly stung into speech. "I hope after I'm gone you'll get what is coming to you!"

If only the soldiers would come, he thought; but realized that without him to guide them it would take the troopers hours, perhaps days, to find the secret valley. No, there was no hope from that quarter. It should be explained here that, although Mr. Mayberry knew about the Indian messenger, he had little faith in the ultimate arrival of Mr. Harkness and the Boy Scouts. They *might* come, but it would be too late. However, any one would judge Jeffries Mayberry's character very much awry who should conclude that there was any bitterness in his soul. He accepted his fate as a brave man should, without complaint.

"Now what are they going to do?" he thought, as the young braves, having led him past the hissing, spitting ranks of the squaws, arraigned him close to the edge of the pit, which now lay between him and the crowd of cruel faces beyond. His eyes pierced the darkness keenly, but the glare thrown up at his feet prevented him seeing whether or not Ranger still occupied his same position.

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Jeffries Mayberry was not to be left long in doubt as to what his fate was to be. A shudder ran through even his strong soul as he saw what the inhuman ingenuity of the Moquis had contrived for his execution.

His legs, which had remained free, were rapidly bound, and he was forcibly thrown upon his face. As he measured his length, the chanting began once more, and the hand of Diamond Snake himself dived into the biggest of the earthen snake jars. He withdrew it, clasping the largest rattler that Jeffries Mayberry had ever seen,—an immense creature of the diamond-back species, fully eight feet long.

As Mayberry's eyes encountered the leaden glint of the deadly rattler's dull orbs, he felt that this was the beginning of the end.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

BOY SCOUTS TO THE RESCUE.

Amid wild yells from the assemblage on the farther side of the pit, the young brave who had attained temporary ascendancy over the tribe cast the snake down on the ground before the recumbent form of the Indian agent. The reptile at first appeared dazed, and made no move, hostile or otherwise. Presently, however, as a deep hush fell over the Indians gazing on the scene, the creature began to sound his rattle.

It was a dull, "horny" sound, like the rattling of dried peas in a bladder. The veins on Mayberry's forehead swelled as he made a desperate effort to burst his bonds, but the green hide held like iron, and he realized that all resistance was useless. Breathing a prayer, he resigned himself for what was to follow. Suddenly the serpent seemed to become endowed with furious rage. It lashed its mottled tail, and then carefully gauging its distance from the captive, coiled itself for the death strike.

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Not a sound was to be heard above the deep, expectant hush, as the red glow fell on the strange, cruel scene: the agonized man, helpless, and the flat, triangular head of the deadly reptile, drawn back as if to give greater force to its death blow.

The Indian agent, as he had abundantly shown, was no coward, nor was his a heart to be stirred by any ordinary ordeal. But the cruel suspense that now ensued broke down even his iron nerves. As he gazed like a fascinated bird into the leaden eyes of the menacing rattler, his courage faltered, and he uttered a despairing cry.

It was answered by a cruel jeer from the frenzied Indians. In the tense excitement none of them had, however, noticed the first moves in an act that was destined presently to change the whole complexion of the scene.

Old Black Cloud knew that the agent's heart was wrapped up in his horse. So far as any one knew, Mayberry had neither relative nor close friend in the world. In the Indian's eyes, then, the captive would surely wish his horse near him in the hour of his doom.

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For one as skilled in silent movement as the old chief, it was an easy matter to slip from his place in the shadows at the rear of the fascinated horde, and with a couple of deft strokes of his knife set Ranger at liberty. Then he silently stole back, and was seated in his former place in a less space of time than it took Ranger to realize that he was free.

The captive's despairing cry reached the horse's ears, and he knew his master's voice.

While the mocking laugh of the tribe was still echoing from the rocks, four iron-shod hoofs struck the earth in a mighty leap, and Ranger alighted heavily in the midst of the amazed throng. With yells and cries of terror, the Indians, who did not know what had occurred, were bowled over right and left. One young brave lay groaning with a pair of broken ribs. Another's arm was snapped where Ranger's hoofs had struck.

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Without pausing one instant, the animal, whose only anxiety was to reach Jeffries Mayberry's side, once more shook his head and, with a shrill whinny, sprang forward. This leap brought him over the heads of the red men, to the very brink of the fiery pit.

Overcoming his natural dread of fire—a far greater terror to horses than almost any other—Ranger gathered his clean-cut limbs for a mighty leap. In one clean jump he cleared the glowing coals. Diamond Snake and his attendant masters of ceremonies had not, in the brief space of time allotted to them for comprehension, made out what was occurring on the opposite side of the pit.

They had not the slightest warning, therefore, when, through the lurid glow, the form of Ranger, crimsoned by the reflection, came leaping like a thunderbolt.

Over went Diamond Snake, toppling backward to avoid the terrible hoofs. With a yell of superstitious terror, the other "priests" gave way. Right and left they ran, shouting that the Great Spirit had sent an infernal messenger among them.

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But above all the shrieks, and confusion, and angry shouts rang out one terrible cry. It issued from the lips of Diamond Snake. The hind hoofs of the alighting horse had struck him, and, as has been said, he toppled backward.

Too late he saw behind him the glowing pit of fiery coals. Nerving every muscle in his sinewy frame, the young Moqui warrior strove to avert his doom, but try as he would he could not check his impetus.

He reached the edge of the pit, and with one dreadful cry pitched over backward. For a brief space the red glow grew blackened where he had fallen, but an instant later the intense heat had consumed him, and nothing remained to mark the end of the ambitious young Moqui.

At the moment that Ranger had alighted, the rattlesnake, terrified by the near proximity of the trampling hoofs, released its body as if a steel spring had been set free, and gave its death strike. But as the poison-laden fangs drove toward him, Jeffries Mayberry jerked his head to one side. The rattler had missed. Before it could gather itself for a second attack, it lay, a trampled mass, under Ranger's hoofs. The horse whinnied with pleasure as it gazed at its master. Then it stamped with impatience as it received no response. For the first and last time in his life, Jeffries

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Mayberry had fainted.

With a howl of rage, like the angry voice of a storm, the Moquis, gathering up their weapons, rushed forward to avenge themselves for the tragic death of Diamond Snake. But they had not reached the edge of the fiery pit before a loud cry halted them. It was Black Cloud. The old Indian stood upright upon a boulder, and pointed to the entrance of the rocky bowl.

"Now will my brothers listen to the voice of reason?" he shouted above the tumult.

A chorus of jeers and shouts greeted him. The mind of the tribe was a single one in that moment. The death of Jeffries Mayberry, in the same pit as that into which his steed had cast the popular young Diamond Snake, was their raging desire. [Pg 297]

"Then look!" rang out the voice of Black Cloud, as he pointed to the rocky path at the westerly side of the bowl.

As the eyes of the redskins followed the patriarch's pointing finger, a perfect howl went up once more. The moonlight illumined the figure of a solitary horseman.

A score of rifles were instantly leveled at him, but as the weapons came to the marksmen's shoulders, the lone rider vanished as suddenly as he had appeared.

"Fools!" shouted Black Cloud, as the Moquis, with cries of rage, pressed on to Jeffries Mayberry's side, "that horseman is the forerunner of the white man's vengeance!"

As he spoke, a rifle cracked, and the noble old chief vanished from the rock. Apparently a bullet from the rifle of one of his own followers had felled him. But, as a matter of fact, Black Cloud, with native cunning, had perceived that in the mood his rebellious followers then were, his safest plan was to keep out of sight. As the bullet hummed past his ear, therefore, he toppled from the rock as if dead. From behind the big boulder he watched the events that were to follow. [Pg 298]

A young brave, anxious to earn the plaudits of his tribesmen by being the instrument of vengeance on Mayberry, rushed forward, and throwing himself on the unconscious man, seized him by the waist and was about to swing him into the flaming pit, when, with a shrill whinny of rage, Ranger's forefeet struck him down. He lay breathing heavily, an ugly wound gaping in his head. As if maddened by this, the great horse plunged, striking and kicking, into the crowd of hated Indians, bowling over and injuring several. But the temporary panic thus created lasted but a minute.

A volley was fired at the noble figure of the raging horse, and he fell, still fighting, by his master's side.

At the same instant a young redskin sprang forward with an uplifted "agency" axe. He raised it above his head, and was about to bury it in the horse's skull, when something struck the axe and sent it whizzing out of his hand. Simultaneously a sharp crack sounded from the upper end of the rock bowl. [Pg 299]

Shouts of alarm sounded on all sides. The Moquis realized they were attacked, and that it was a bullet that had sent the axe spinning out of the murderous young brave's hand.

"Hooray!"

The cry rang out loudly above the Indian whoops and cries, as Rob Blake swept down the rocky trail, followed by the Boy Scouts, cheering as if their throats would split.

Right and left the Moquis went down under their ponies' hoofs, too terrified by the very suddenness of the attack to offer any resistance. A few half-hearted shots were fired, and one or two sombreros were drilled, but, aside from that, no one was injured. The arrival of Mr. Harkness and his cow-punchers ended what little resistance there had been. It was soon over, and the Moquis herded in a sullen, defiant band at the lower end of the bowl.

Rob and his friends hastened forward to Jeffries Mayberry's side, and cut his bonds; and the first thing that the rescued man gazed upon when he recovered consciousness was a circle of friendly faces. [Pg 300]

"Well, Mayberry," burst out Mr. Harkness, "I told you so. I hate to say it, but I told you so. If it hadn't been for the Boy Scouts here, we'd never have saved you."

"No, I guess not, Harkness," breathed the agent, "and this is not the place to tell you all how I feel. But, but——"

His voice faltered as he gazed at Ranger, who still lay on the ground. Blinky and some of the cow-punchers had been examining his injuries.

"Is Ranger seriously hurt?"

The agent's throat sounded dry. He could hardly bring himself to ask the question.

"No, he'll be around in a while," announced Blinky; "only a tendon on the off front leg is sprained. He'll carry a few scars, though."

And so it proved, for, though Ranger was soon as well as ever, he carried with him to his last days the marks of that night. But his owner, as you may imagine, treasured every one of them, for each blemish spoke to him of his horse's affection and nobility. [Pg 301]

"Hullo, here come the soldiers!" exclaimed Tubby suddenly, with that fleshy youth's usual indifferent manner.

A bugle call and a loud cheer announced the news at the same moment.

"So they are!" exclaimed Mr. Mayberry, who by this time was standing upright, although he still had to lean weakly on the shoulder of Mr. Harkness.

"A good thing you didn't wait for them," remarked Blinky; "they'd have come too late."

"That was not their fault," put in Mr. Harkness. "The messenger I sent to Sentinel Peak could not have reached there more than an hour or two ago. They must have ridden like the wind."

Indeed, as the bronzed troopers clattered, cheering, into the rocky basin, their steaming, dripping horses bore ample testimony to the pace they had kept up. [Pg 302]

"Confounded luck, arriving just too late for the music!" exclaimed the young officer at their head, after first greetings had been exchanged. "I see, though, that you have handled the situation well."

"Yes, thanks to the Boy Scouts," said Mr. Harkness.

"Ah, that is an organization of which I have often heard," observed the soldier. "They are destined to do great work for our country in the future."

"We hope so," said Rob simply.

Little more is left to be told of the Boy Scouts' adventures on the range. The rebellious Moquis, thoroughly cowed by their lesson, went peaceably back to the reservation, and accepted Black Cloud once more as their chief. Their break from the place set aside for them, though, was paid for by the stoppage of more than one privilege. In course of time Mr. Mayberry recovered some of his faith in the Indian character, but even he admits that his optimism has been severely shaken. [Pg 303]

Possibly, if you were to pay a visit to the tribe, you might be tempted to ask who a certain graceful young squaw is, whose buckskin garments are literally covered with wonderful bead work, and round whose slender neck hang so many chains of red, yellow, amber and blue globules that you might be inclined to think it would make her stoop-shouldered.

If you asked her her name you would be told that she is Susyjan. She is regarded as the most attractive young squaw in the tribe, and her fortunate husband will have to give her old father many ponies and blankets before he can hope to win her hand. The source of Susyjan's beady splendor, however, has always, as you may imagine, remained a mystery to the tribe.

Clark Jennings and his unworthy accomplices were tried in due course for their offenses against the law, and received various heavy sentences. In a Western community few more serious crimes, for obvious reasons, can be committed than cattle stealing. [Pg 304]

The days following the surrender of the renegade tribe were happy ones for the young Eastern scouts. In due course of time, the uniforms Rob had ordered for the Ranger Patrol arrived, and the organization is now one of the most flourishing in the B. S. of A.

Hunting trips were organized and many excursions made into the mountains. The boys, too, shared in the excitement of a round-up, and proved themselves of use in many ways. Altogether, the Boy Scouts has become a name to conjure with in that part of Arizona.

What became of Silver Tip?

Well, the story of how Rob had Silver Tip at his mercy, and let the huge brute go, has become a ranch classic. This is no place to relate it at length, but one day on a mountain hunt the monarch of the hills and the boy who had once rushed wildly upon the monster's shaggy form, met face to face.

Did Silver Tip recognize the lad? Who can tell? Animals possess many faculties and instincts we do not credit them with. Be that as it may, it seemed to the imaginative Rob that the monster's eyes bore a craven look, as if he realized that judgment was come upon him. Rob stood alone upon a rocky ledge. Below him the great brute gazed upward, in the position he had frozen into on his first discovery of the young hunter. Rob raised his heavy rifle to his shoulder. The great creature was at his mercy. He paused an instant and then slowly lowered the weapon again. [Pg 305]

"Go on, old Silver Tip!" he said. "Let some one else wipe out your wicked old life."

Tubby was highly indignant when he heard of this.

"Gee whiz!" he exclaimed, "you ought to have thought of me, Rob. I've been hearing about bear steak ever since I've been out here, and now I've lost about the only chance I've ever had to stick my teeth into one."

One day a letter came to the ranch house which caused several long faces to be drawn. It announced the opening, within a week, of the Hampton Academy. [Pg 306]

And so—as all good things have to draw to a close—the happy, eventful days of the Boy Scouts on the Range ended. But had they realized it, the exciting scenes through which they had passed were only a milestone in their adventurous lives.

We shall meet our young friends again, and follow them through many more stirring incidents and scenes in the next volume of this series. Some of these will be connected with the wonderful new science of aërial navigation.

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Some inconsistent hyphenation and spelling in the original document has been preserved.

Typographical errors corrected in the text:

Page 26 Samuri changed to Samurai
Page 89 struck changed to stuck
Page 113 Charlie changed to Charley
Page 151 croked changed to croaked
Page 206 Jenning's changed to Jennings's
Page 226 earthern changed to earthen
Page 243 fandangoes changed to fandangos
Page 297 safest changed to safest

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOY SCOUTS ON THE RANGE ***

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