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## **The Broncho Rider Boys Along the Border** **Frank Fowler**

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The weird old Zuni Witch Doctor whirled around, looked at Billie, raised his hand and made a threatening gesture.

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THE BRONCHO RIDER BOYS ALONG THE BORDER

or

The Hidden Treasure of the Zuni Medicine Man

By Frank Fowler

Author of

“The Broncho Rider Boys On the Wyoming Trail,”

“The Broncho Rider Boys at Keystone Ranch,”

“The Broncho Rider Boys Down in Arizona”

A. L. BURT COMPANY

NEW YORK.

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THE BRONCHO RIDER BOYS ALONG THE BORDER

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### **CHAPTER I.—THE THREE RANCH PARDS.**

“We’ll never get another chance like it, fellows!”

“No more we won’t, Billie.”

“And so I say let’s stay around this section till we see all there is.”

“That’s what Adrian remarked, Billie, before you put your oar in.”

“Oh! well if it’s a unanimous vote, why, I reckon the whole thing might be called settled then, eh, Donald?”

“We’ll stay for a while, anyhow. You know our saddle chum, Adrian, is getting just wild to take a run away up into that Northern range country in Wyoming, where in times gone by they used to have big cattle ranches.”

"Yes, I've heard him say he was uneasy about that ranch he owns up there, but hasn't seen for so long. It's being run by an uncle named Fred Comstock, and our pard has a sorter idea that it's more profitable to Uncle Fred than to him. So he thinks he'd better take a jaunt up that way unbeknown to all parties, and see for himself. And Donald, when he starts there'll be *three* of us in the bunch, won't there?"

"Sure thing, Billie. You don't think we'd go and let our right-hand bower trail away off like that alone. Look at him smile when he hears me say that. Adrian knows we'll stick as close to him as a burr, don't you now, old fellow?"

"Well, I'm certainly glad to hear you talk that way, boys," replied the third member of the little group standing on a rocky height, from which a very fine view could be had of that mountainous mining section of Arizona; and the presence of three spirited cow ponies near by told just how the boys, who were in range costume, must have come there.

For the benefit of those who have not had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of these wide-awake lads in previous stories of this Series, a minute or two might profitably be taken up here and now in telling a little about them, so that something of their character and aims may be understood.

Donald Mackay was the son of a ranchman who not only owned a vast tract of land in the Far Southwest range country, but had interests in mines as well. Adrian Sherwood was his chum, and had been for a long time back; while the fat chap, whose rosy and freckled face seemed bubbling with good humor most of the time, had not been out in this wild region many moons.

In fact, being Donald's cousin, and a Southern boy by birth, though his folks now lived in the North, Billie had been sent down on a year's visit to the cattle country for the sake of his health!

To look at him no one would suspect that this was in any degree imperiled; for he was terribly stout, and at times fairly waddled; but that was the trouble; and it was hoped that the free life of the range, with all sorts of hard riding, and kindred sports, would not only reduce his girth, but harden his flabby muscles.

Already Billie was another boy. He had lost twenty pounds, so he claimed, and called himself as "hard as nails," whatever that might mean. Certain it was that he could ride in a manner that astonished those who were liable to secretly sneer at his clumsy appearance; and as for pluck and endurance, why Billie was as stubborn as an army mule, once he set out to accomplish anything.

At first he had ridden a demure old nag named Maudie, that was always trailing so far behind those mounts of his comrades Wireless and Ten Spot, when they rode forth, that Billie just made up his mind he would never stand for it. So he had Mr. Mackay give him an unruly cow pony called Jupiter, that few of the punchers cared to ride; and for weeks in and weeks out Billie had his regular daily stunt with that raging beast.

How many times he went over its head no one knew, for they had lost all count; but somehow the fat boy seemed to bear a charmed life, for his hurts were all of a minor character. And in the end he won out, just as the others knew he would; for given time running water can wear away a stone. And now Jupiter was under perfect control, save for an occasional little spasm, when his old ugly nature tried to show itself for a change.

These three lads had seen considerable excitement around Keystone Ranch, as the home place was called; and later on Donald had been sent down into Arizona when his father, being disabled, could not come; in order to settle some troubles that had arisen in connection with a rich copper mine, in which he and some others were heavily interested.

An unscrupulous syndicate of capitalists, headed by one Colonel Deering, a close neighbor of the Mackays, but who had always been on bad terms with the other ranch-owners, had secured a footing in the copper mine, knowing of a very rich lode that had just been discovered; and tried by every means in their power to freeze out the other stockholders, even engineering a serious strike that threatened to be the ruination of the whole property.

But Donald, assisted by his two chums, had skillfully managed to alter the complexion of affairs during their visit, as related in the second book of the Series; making friends with the leader of the strikers in a way that was at once wonderful and lucky; so that in the end those who had been trying to foment trouble had to throw up their job and decamp, for the miners all came flocking over to the side of Donald, and gladly signed contracts to work for his father for a term of years, under the new and favorable terms.

Of course Billie had another name, and perhaps it would be as well to mention all there is to say in that connection right here and now, so that agony will be over with.

He had been christened William Stonewall Jackson Winkle, for, as can be seen, his father or grandfather must have at one time fought under the most beloved general known to the Southern Lost Cause. Some of his boy friends delighted to call him "Little Billie" and "Wee Willie Winkle," just because he was anything but small. But when he got out there in the cattle country, the cowboys of the ranch, seeing his natural clumsiness, in a spirit of fun quickly dubbed him

"Broncho Billie," never dreaming that the fat boy would show such grit as to conquer that terror of the corral, Jupiter Pluvius. And nowadays no one ever thought of calling him by any other name.

Billie had done considerable reading when at home, and one day while they were still roaming all around the wild rocky region that surrounded the Red Spar mine he had asked a lot of questions about the Zuni Indians, saying that he had always longed to see for himself if half the queer stories he had heard and read in connection with these quaint people of the rock houses could be true.

He knew that they were not more than three days' ride right then and there from a Zuni village, and every little while he had pestered the life out of his chums, hinting at the great and glorious opportunity that was right then knocking at their doors, and which might never come again.

And now that Donald had admitted, under severe cross-questioning, that both he and Adrian had long ago decided to see all there was to be observed while in that section of Arizona, of course Billie was fairly overjoyed.

Billie was the best natured bungler any one ever knew. No matter what a mess he made of things, when one of his chums started in to take him to task, his blue eyes would take on such a reproachful expression, while his jolly broad face was apt to expand in such a smile that made it impossible for them to feel in the least degree angry; and so it always ended in a general laugh all around, and Billie solemnly promising never to do it again—until the next time.

These three lads were seen so much on their ponies that they had come to be known all through the section of country where Donald's father had his ranch as the "Broncho Rider Boys," and they took considerable pride in living up to their reputation as good horsemen.

Having come out from the mine on this particular day to investigate a place that Corse Tibbals, the superintendent at the Red Spar Mine had told them was worth seeing on account of the view, as well as the fact that it had more venomous reptiles to the square foot than any other section of the State, they had prowled around, and used the glasses Adrian carried, until tired.

Then Donald and Adrian had thrown themselves down, saying they would take it easy for another half hour, when it would be time to make a start on the return trip, if they wished to reach the mine before night set in.

Broncho Billie kept on "rooting," for he always loved to "browse around" as he called it, in every old place he could find, looking for curious things to add to the collection he was making of strange objects calculated to astonish his boy friends at home in the East, when he returned there later on.

"I've heard a heap about that blessed Gila Monster," he had told the others on several occasions since starting out on this day's gallop and climb; "and perhaps now we might run across a single specimen, where there are so many venomous toads and rattlesnakes and such. Oh! don't shake your wise old heads, and look at me in that way. Just you make sure I ain't going to touch anything like *that!* I've been duly warned by Si Ketcham the ranch foreman, and also Harris over here at the Red Spar Mine, to keep my distance. But if I could only get a specimen, and stuff it, I'd be a happy Broncho Billie."

Ten minutes afterward the two who were resting heard him calling to them.

"Oh! just come over here and see the rattlesnake cage I've struck, fellows! Must be a regular nest of the varmints, dozens and dozens asunning themselves down in this rocky pit."

"Hold on there, be careful, Billie, what you do!" called Donald, as he and his chum scrambled to their feet; but it was only to hear a wild screech from the fat boy; and then followed a terribly significant rattling of shale that struck them with a cold chill.

## **CHAPTER II.—BILLIE HAS A CLOSE CALL.**

"Oh! Billie's fallen down in that rattlesnake den!" gasped Adrian, even while he and Donald were jumping over the rocks as fast as their legs would carry them, and headed in the direction where just ten seconds before they had seen the fat chum waving his arms excitedly to attract their attention, only to suddenly slip and disappear from view.

In all their experiences with the clumsy Billie, the two boys probably never had such a sensation of absolute horror sweep over them as at that particular minute.

They must have pictured all sorts of terrible results springing from this weakness on the part of Billie to do just the very thing he should have avoided. For him to make a misstep, and fall into that hole in the rocks where he had just told them dozens of poisonous snakes were coiled, and wriggling about, was possibly the greatest calamity that could have happened to him. And it might be the last mistake poor clumsy Billie was ever apt to make in this world of woe.

Spurred on by fear, and almost dreading to peer into the pit, the two boys reached the edge in a very few seconds. Both of them shut their teeth hard as they proceeded to thrust their heads out in order to look downward.

What they saw gave them a new thrill.

Billie was there, but he had not fallen all the way to the bottom of the hole, it appeared. His old lucky streak seemed to still hold good, for he had succeeded, somehow or other,—and Billie could never explain in what way it came about,—in clutching hold of the rocks as he fell, so that he was clinging there, with his fat legs kicking wildly in space, and not more than five feet from the bottom of the rocky pit.

And just as he had so exultantly shouted when he wanted to attract his resting companions to view the strange sight, the floor of the den seemed to be almost carpeted with squirming reptiles, as though this might be a regular breeding place for rattlesnakes.

They were some of them monsters, while others seemed to be of the smaller species so generally found on the plains, and usually inhabiting the burrows of prairie dogs; but which are just as deadly as their diamond-back cousins.

The dropping down upon them of numerous small fragments of rock, caused by the scrambling of Billie when he tried to keep from falling, had aroused many of the half dormant reptiles, so that they were making quite a din with their rattles just then, and showing signs of sudden anger, as they coiled, and waited for the intruder to land among them.

Billie had been looking down at them, but appearing to know that his chums must have arrived above, he turned a white, appealing face up toward them. Such fear the others had never seen in all their lives; but chances were their own faces must have been just as white at that same instant.

“Help me, boys, for goodness sake!” gasped poor Billie, as he squirmed there, unable to find the slightest perch for his dangling feet, so that all of his great weight came upon his arms alone, and they must have been sorely tried when he first clutched hold of the rough face of the rock to check his descent.

“Hold on like everything, Billie!” called Donald, excitedly.

“Ain’t I doing that same; but please get busy and start something to save me, boys!” groaned the one in peril. “It’s just awful hanging here, and listening to them use their old rattleboxes that way.”

“How long can you hold out?” demanded Donald, “for if I could run over to our ponies and snatch up a rope, I’d have you out of that in a jiffy.”

“Go!” pleaded Billie. “Anything, so that you’re on the jump! I’ll do the best I know how to keep hanging here; but it’s pretty tough on a fellow!”

Donald had already disappeared, and was flying like the wind toward the spot where their mounts were fastened, leaping over rocks that stood in the way as if they were next door to nothing.

Adrian, left with the lad who was in such desperate straits, busied himself in looking around, in the vague hope of discovering some means for rendering “first aid to the injured.” He remembered seeing certain queer vines growing from fissures in the rocks in some places, and if one of these only happened to be within reaching distance it might prove valuable now.

Luck seemed to be with him, for what should he sight but an unusually thick specimen of this same vine not ten feet away.

Snatching out his sharp-edged hunting knife, which he always kept in prime condition, Adrian sprang over to where he had discovered this treasure.

“Oh! don’t leave me alone, Adrian!” shrieked the fat boy, piteously; for how was he to know what had caused the other to vanish from his agonized view?

But Adrian was already cutting away fiercely; and although the vine proved very tough, he had it hacked through in next to no time, such was the vigor he put into his work.

Then back he sprang, trailing the vine with him; and when he again thrust his eager face over the edge of the pit, doubtless that was the most delightful vision poor alarmed Billie had ever seen in all his life.

“Oh! ain’t I glad you didn’t leave me, Adrian!” he cried, almost whimpering in his tremendous excitement.

“How are you holding out, Billie?” called the other.

“Only middling! It’s getting worse and worse every second,” replied the one who was hanging on

so desperately below, some ten feet or more. "You see, I haven't got much of a hold, and I don't dare try and change my grip because if I once started going there'd be no stopping me. Is Donald coming back yet, Ad, tell me please?"

"I don't think he's quite got to the horses yet, Billie!"

"Oh! my goodness! what will I do?" groaned the wretched lad, as he once more felt his gaze drawn down to the bottom of the pit by some horrible fascination which he could not resist.

"Keep up your courage, old fellow," said Adrian, feeling that at any cost he must prevent the other from giving way to despair, for that would surely cause his muscles to relax, and should this occur the end was certain. "See, I've got a vine here, and I'm lowering the big end to you as fast as I can. Perhaps now you might get a grip on that, if you felt your hands slipping away from the rock. It's got a rough surface, and would hold better!"

"Thank you, Adrian, that sounds good to me; but hurry it along, please, for I'm afraid I'm slipping off right now!"

So the one above did hasten the descent of the vine; and in another moment he was gratified to realize that Billie had transferred his grip to that. The strain was tremendous, for Billie weighed almost as much as both his chums put together; but Adrian had prepared for this by bracing his feet against a rock, so there was small danger of his being pulled over the edge.

He could not begin to raise Billie alone and unaided, but he expected to hold fast until the coming of Donald.

Then again, Billie, having a new kind of grip now, was able to strain and draw until he had elevated himself a few feet, so that he could get a rest with his toes upon the very small ledge to which he had hitherto been clinging with his hands.

"It's all right now, Adrian!" he sang out with sudden cheerfulness that contrasted queerly with the horror that had been in his voice only a minute previously; "I'm fixed different than before, and I reckon I can hold out till Donald comes up. Oh! you can keep on shakin' your old rattleboxes down there; but this ain't the time you get Broncho Billie. But I tell you now, that was the closest shave I ever had happen to me, sure it was."

Donald soon came panting along, full of dire forebodings, because it had taken him considerably longer to go and return than he had expected; and there was no telling what might not have happened to poor, tired Billie in the meantime. But as he had heard no shouts from Adrian, he kept hoping for the best.

When he saw how cleverly his chum had made use of the trailing vine that had seemed to grow just where it could be utilized, as though Billie's attendant good angel was as always on the job, Donald gave a faint cheer.

"Bully for you, Ad!" he cried, as he flung himself down by the edge of the rattlesnake pit, to lower the loop of his lariat; "trust you to think up some smart trick, while dummies like me can only remember that they own a rope. Hi! Billie, can you kick your legs into that loop, and let me draw it up under your arms?"

"Sure I can, Donald; just try me," came from below; and then ensued a vigorous shifting of the dangling lower extremities of the imperiled boy, until finally the expert user of the rope above managed to lasso them both; after which it was a simple thing to draw the loop to where he wanted.

Then the two above proceeded to pull Billie up. He scrambled over the edge with a red face, and a broad grin on the same that was just the opposite to that look of terror they had so lately seen there. But all the same they were delighted to get him back unharmed; and both boys squeezed his hand in a way that told Billie how tremendously they had been aroused by his sudden peril.

"That was a silly slip of mine, sure it was," he admitted immediately; for Billie was always ready to own up to making blunders, which was one reason they found it so hard to condemn him; "and let's get away from this place as quick as we can, boys. Huh! no Gila Monster for me after this, I reckon. I've had as close a call to being stung as I ever want to get. Gimme a chance to rest up a bit, and then I'll be ready to hike out of this blessed region, where there's more snakes to the square foot than anywhere on earth, seems like."

Less than half an hour later the Broncho Rider Boys were returning to the copper mine by the same tortuous route which they had taken to reach the lofty place where the view had been worth all the trouble the journey had cost them.

Billie was unusually quiet on the return trip. Truth to tell he was feeling as tired as though he had done the greatest day's work of his life; for the strain on body and mind, while he hung there above those hissing and rattling snakes, had been simply terrific. He knew that he would feel it for several days; but his nature was such that past troubles sat very lightly on his mind; and he would soon be joking about his strange experience.

It was pretty certain however, that Billie had had his lesson; and after that should he have occasion to come within a certain distance of any sort of viper the fat boy was pretty apt to make sure of his footing; one experience of that kind ought to be quite enough.

### CHAPTER III.—ON THE TRAIL TO THE ZUNI VILLAGE.

“Well, here we are on the road to the Zuni village, and with pretty near a whole day’s journey to the good behind us!”

Broncho Billie said this as he rode close behind his two chums. Several days had passed since that thrilling adventure with the rattlesnakes of the rocky den; and the boys had made ample preparations for their trip.

As it was so much more comfortable to sleep under some sort of shelter, at the earnest solicitation of Billie, who liked comfort when he could have it, they had accepted the offer of a tent from Corse Tibbals, the overseer and head man at the mine, being one that had served him many a time in the past, but which he felt he could easily spare, seeing that these lads had worked a miracle in the way things were happening at the Red Spar Mine.

This same tent was loaded upon an extra mount, a sorrel mule that the boys had named “Bray,” because that seemed to be his favorite amusement at various times during the day and night. And there were also many bundles fastened to the back of the pack animal, said to contain all sorts of food, and presents from the miners and their wives; all of whom felt so grateful to Donald and his chums because they had brought the dangerous condition of affairs to an end, and by making new contracts with the men, caused happiness to dwell in the shanties that composed the little mining hamlet near the Red Spar.

Billie liked to lead Bray. Many were the glances he cast during the day upon those various packages, the contents of which appealed to him greatly; because it happened that the fat boy possessed a pretty healthy appetite, and the subject of gratifying the same occupied considerable of his attention when awake.

They had really put in quite an arduous eight hours, and boys, as well as ponies, showed more or less signs of being tired as the afternoon shadows lengthened, and it seemed as though the day would soon come to a close, when they might be looking for a decent camping spot in order to pass the first night out on the trail.

Donald turned his head to glance at the fat boy when Billie made the assertion which starts this chapter.

“All of which is true enough, Billie,” he remarked, with a twinkle in his eye; “and given a couple more such days we ought to get to where we’re aiming for. But you know from past experiences, you never can tell what’s going to happen in this Arizona country. Any time a fellow is apt to run across some sort of an outlaw cattle rustler, and be taken in by him as an easy mark!”

At that Adrian could be heard chuckling; while Billie turned fiery red, and appeared to bristle up more or less, as he hastily went on to say:

“Oh! go on and have your little joke, if it gives you any pleasure, fellows. But I’d do that same thing again, I reckon under similar circumstances. That poor chap was in a bad way, what with his cuts, and being nigh starved. I own up I didn’t just like his looks, but he was in a peck of trouble, and I just didn’t have the heart to desert him till he’d got to feeling better, and said he thought he might get on alone. Never thought to ask his name either; and when I told the boys all about it, and described him as a fellow with a squint in his left eye, why, they just laughed themselves sick over it, and told me I’d been playing nurse to the meanest rascal that ever went unhung.”

“Yes, not a man around the Red Spar has a good word to say about that Tod Harkness,” ventured Donald, still grinning; “he’s been a cattle rustler and a general all-round shirk, a thief and everything that’s bad. They thought you’d been sold the worst kind. Why, some of the men wanted to know if the sneak hadn’t stolen your pocketbook while you were helping him walk to a place where you meant to camp, that night you got lost.”

“Well, he didn’t, and that’s all there is about it,” said Billie, firmly. “Mebbe Tod Harkness is everything you say; but he was a mighty sick man right then and there. So please forget it. I know I’m soft, and most anybody can impose on me; but I was born that way; and they say the leopard just can’t change his spots. Let that little episode drop. I ain’t sorry one whit, I tell you. Do it again if I ran across a sick man, don’t care if he was the Old Nick himself. So there!”

Donald gave Adrian a nod as if to say “just see how set he is in his ways;” but neither of them continued making any further remark upon the subject which was such a sore one with their stout chum.

Indeed, further conversation was rendered out of the question by Bray, for the pack mule took a sudden notion to give tongue; and when he let out his voice no human tones could prevail against

the raucous sounds.

"I think I can see where we're going to put up tonight!" Donald called out, some ten minutes afterwards.

At that Billie brightened visibly.

"Oh! that's the best thing I've heard you say for a whole hour, Donald," he declared, with some signs of excitement. "Then, chances are we'll be getting busy with supper before a great while. That always pleases me, you know, boys."

"Yes, and it's a lucky thing for all of us that the wives of those miners saw fit to make up that hunky-dory pack of supplies, when they heard where we meant to head for, before starting back to Keystone ranch," Adrian went on to say.

"Oh! I'm always free to admit that I've got some appetite along with me," acknowledged Billie, complacently; for nothing they could ever say along these lines seemed to disturb him in the least.

Before twenty minutes had come and gone they were proceeding to get the tent in position; at least Billie and Adrian set about accomplishing this task, after the horses had been staked out where they could nibble at the grass growing near the spring hole; while Donald arranged a fireplace out of convenient stones, hunter-fashion, it being wider in front for the frying-pan to set there, while the coffee-pot could straddle the narrow section in the rear.

Billie was as happy as a lark; he always acted that way when a bustle in the way of getting ready to eat came along.

"It's hard for me to believe that, after dreaming about it for years, I'm going to actually set eyes on them queer Zunis in a couple of days," he started to say; and then turning quickly on Donald, as though he had remembered something he may have intended asking, he went on: "didn't you say that this was about the time of year when they had all their dances, and carried on such high jinks?"

"I wouldn't be surprised, from what Corse Tibbals told me, if we just happened to hit it about right for all the ceremonies they go through with every year," Donald replied. "And I reckon, now, that you mean to try and get some snapshots while that native circus is going on, don't you, Billie?"

"Just what I'm thinking of trying," admitted the other, naively. "Course I've got a heap of pictures of the Zunis and Hopis at home, but that ain't the same as snapping 'em off all by yourself. I'd rather have a poor picture that I'd taken myself, than the finest any artist could produce. Ain't that right, Adrian?"

He always appealed to the other when making any statement of this sort; and as usual Adrian quickly backed him up.

"Of course you would, and rightly too, Billie; because that shows you were on deck when the dancing was going on. For a fellow couldn't very well take a picture of a thing unless he was there, could he?"

"Sure he couldn't, 'less he piked a copy from another picture," Billie declared. "And I only hope I'll get chances to use up a whole string of films, with the girls and their queer head-dresses showing like the Hopi Indians do, and p'raps the old medicine-man all dressed up in his togs adoin' a two-step, while he shakes his gourds and rattles, and tinkles his little bells in great style. Oh! I'm cram full of the subject, let me tell you, boys; and I'll never be happy till I see it all with my very eyes."

"Well, what are we going to have for supper?" asked Donald, who knew very well that only in this way could the talkative Billie be made to branch off the subject that had begun to be wearisome to the rest of the little party.

The ruse succeeded, too, as it always did; and Billie was quickly at work undoing several of those mysterious packages which the grateful wives of the miners had made up for the trio of saddle pards.

His various exclamations of delight must have early convinced both Adrian and Donald that the fat boy had made numerous satisfactory discoveries. And later on, when that supper was cooked, and they sat around in easy attitudes, consuming the same, they voted that the women of the Red Spar camp were all "trumps" of the first water; because they knew what hungry boys liked most.

"Had we better keep any sort of watch tonight?" asked Billie, yawning, a couple of hours after they had finished eating; the interval that had elapsed having been occupied with much talk along various interesting lines, during which Billie managed as usual to soak up a great deal of information.

"Well, of course the horses are about as good as a sentry," admitted Donald, who had trained his



pony, Wireless, to snort, and wake him up in case enemies came prowling around; "but all the same we'd better sleep with one eye open. It's a mighty poor policy to wait till the horse is stolen before you lock the stable door, so my dad always says. And there might be some rustler in this section like, well, Billie's good friend, Tod, you know; who just couldn't keep from grabbing our mounts, no matter how hard he tried."

"Yes," added Adrian, as though to put a clincher in the assertion made by his chum, "and it'd be no joke for us to be left on foot away off here, hundreds of miles from home. We'll keep our arms handy, and if any sneak gives us a call, why we can make him sorry he found us at home, that's what."

"Hark! listen to Wireless right now, would you?" exclaimed Donald, in a low, tense voice, as he half arose to his feet, quivering with sudden excitement.

Billie was the only one to snatch up a gun, which he happened to have alongside at that particular moment.

"Look there, will you?" called out Donald; "see him scuttle off into the darkness, of the shadows? An Injun as sure as you live. Oh! if only I had my gun in my hands. Give him a shot, Billie, why don't you?"

But Billie, although he half raised his Marlin rifle, failed to shoot. Possibly the thought of hurting a human being did not appeal to him in the same sense as it did these boys of the plains. Then again, perhaps the haste with which the shadowy figure of the dusky warrior scuttled out of sight rather disconcerted the fat boy. At any rate, Billie only stood there with his gun half raised; and the next thing he knew there was nothing but the moonlight and the shadows before him.

#### CHAPTER IV.—THE STRANGE SHOT.

"Oh! he's gone!" exclaimed Billie.

"Of course he is!" echoed Donald, in disgust; "say, how long did you expect a slick Injun to stay around, waiting for you to make up your mind to shoot?"

"But good gracious, Donald, what should I fire away at him for? He hadn't done a single thing but creep up here to see who was making all this blaze and smoke. That's a mighty little thing to try to kill anybody for. Why, I'd like as not be just as curious myself."

Donald snorted as he turned to Adrian.

"Listen to the innocent, would you, Ad?" he remarked, in half discouraged tone. "Why, what else would a red be prowling around our camp for, except looking for a good chance to steal our horses."

"Is that so, Donald?" Billie went on to say; "then I suppose I ought to have banged away, anyhow, and given him a scare; but you see I was that confused I hardly knew what I was about."

"A scare!" echoed Donald. "Why, don't you know, you innocent, that a cow-puncher would forgive a thief for robbing him of his money, and almost causing his death, quicker than he would for trying to steal his mount?"

"Yes," Adrian went on to add, "they are a good deal like the Arab in that respect. You see, a horse means everything on the prairie, or in the desert; and to take a man's mount is just the same as threatening his life. Did you manage to get any half-way decent look at him, Donald?"

"Well, not so you could mention it," replied the other, who now had his gun in his hand, and was staring out into the mixture of moonlight and dim shadows as if he still clung to a faint hope that he might find a chance to use the weapon. "But there can be no question about what he was."

"Some stray from the reservation, you think?" Adrian continued; while Billie stood near by, listening eagerly.

"Every once in so often some of the hot-blooded young bucks get a notion that things are too tame on the reservation," Donald started to say with the air of one who knew full well what he was talking about.

"And so they start out to take a turn around," Adrian added, "thinking they ought to copy after their ancestors, and feel wild for a spell. Sometimes they play havoc among the white, being filled with firewater; and then there is trouble enough, with some of the same young bucks getting shot. And as Donald says, an Indian can never resist a chance to steal a horse, when he's off on a tear like that, free from all the restraint of the old men of his tribe."

"Perhaps he may think to come back, and make another try?" suggested Billie.

"Chances are he will do just that same thing; and as he must have one or more friends along, we may have to do some business with our guns before morning," Donald told him, positively.

Billie was duly impressed with the serious nature of the case. Still, he hardly liked the idea of being compelled to shed human blood just because of a horse like his Jupiter. Secretly he hoped that if there did come along any necessity for this sort of thing, his companions would accept some of the burden of responsibility, since they did not seem to care as much as he did.

Donald altered his plans more or less, after this plain warning. Now that they actually knew there were thieving Indians around, they could not afford to take any chances of losing their horses.

Accordingly the animals, as well as Bray the pack mule, were brought in closer to the tent. They had been given ample time to procure a supper, and should rest contented during the remainder of the night.

It was a toss-up between the two experienced cowboys as to which should take the first watch. Billie, quite satisfied to see them so eager to sit up, did all he knew how to settle the matter.

"Here, let me be the umpire, and hold these two straws in my hand," he remarked, complacently; "now, one of them is just a mite shorter than the other; and whoever gets the short one is to play sentry first watch, hear that. You draw, Donald!"

Thereupon the party indicated proceeded to do as he was directed, and with the utmost unconcern, as though it mattered not at all to him what his luck might be.

"And you're on deck the first thing!" announced Billie, exultantly, as he held up the remaining straw, so that they could all see it was longer than the one Donald had selected.

"Great luck, that!" the picked vidette remarked, laughingly; "for I was bound to take first choice anyhow, no matter what Ad said. But you closed him up by your little dodge, Billie, and for that thanks. Are you thinking of going inside, and getting your forty winks right now, fellows?"

They said they had intentions along those same lines, if he thought he could manage things without their help; at which Donald pretended to chase the pair to cover; and then remarked that he would find a good vantage place, where he might stand out his spell as guardian of the camp.

Perhaps Billie may not have been altogether free from anxieties as he composed himself under his blanket on that same night. The fact that hostile Indians were hovering around, with the intention of stealing their valuable mounts, caused him to feel a certain amount of nervousness. He feared that he would not be able to go to sleep as easily as was his custom; and that during the entire term of Donald's watch he must just lie there, thinking and listening.

Six minutes after crawling under the canvas Billie's regular breathing convinced Adrian that the fat boy was entirely oblivious to all his surroundings; and that whatever his mental troubles might be, they had for the time being vanished like the mist before the rising sun; for slumber deadens one to the cares of this world, better than anything else that is known.

Adrian himself also went to sleep, but it was in an entirely different way. He simply resolutely put all thoughts out of his mind, and in this way coaxed his senses to allow themselves to be lulled to rest. Habit can do much along these lines.

He may have been sleeping ten minutes, or perhaps it was a couple of hours; for Adrian could not even give a guess as to the truth when he was suddenly awakened by a shot outside.

Like a flash he was up on his hands and knees. Snatching his rifle from the ground he hastily crawled out of the tent; leaving Billie asking a dozen excited questions, as he too felt for his rifle, and started to follow in the wake of the more energetic chum.

When Adrian managed to gain his feet, he looked quickly around him, wondering how he could locate Donald; and if that had been the other's gun he heard.

"This way, Ad!" called a voice just then, and he caught sight of the other waving an arm toward him from a place near by.

So Adrian started toward that quarter; and Billie, coming rolling out from the exit of the tent just then, saw him going, so of course he hastened to "paddle" along after him—that was an expression often used to describe the fat boy's method of locomotion; and somehow it just seemed to hit the mark; since he had a peculiar sidling motion when making an advance, that reminded one of the fins of a big fish moving back and forth.

"What happened, Donald?" asked the other, as he came close up to his chum, whom he found crouched there, gun in hand, and evidently keenly on the watch for some object at which to fire.

"They were at it again, that's what!" replied the vidette, bitterly; and somehow Adrian could see that he looked peeved, as well as puzzled; as though there were certain features connected with the happening that did not altogether please him.

"The reds, you mean?" Adrian went on to ask.

"Sure thing, Ad."

"That looks like they meant to have our horses by fair means or foul; and I just reckon we'll have to sit up the rest of the night, so's to be ready to pick off the first brave who shows himself," Adrian ventured.

Billie managed to reach them just then, and of course he was brimming over with a desire to know all that had happened. But then any one would have felt that way, after being so rudely awakened from a most enjoyable sleep, and compelled to crawl out from under his warm blanket, to experience the chill of the night air.

"Is he dead?" he asked, solemnly.

"Meaning the Injun that gave that screech, I suppose you're asking about, Billie?" Donald went on to say, still gloomily, Adrian thought. "Well make your mind easy, for he got away, all right; though he certainly did let out a yelp that told he'd been pinked by that lead pellet."

"You are sure of that, are you, Donald?" demanded Billie, giving an audible sigh of relief; for he had fully expected that he would be compelled to look upon the stiffening figure of a wretched Apache young brave who had been tempted to stray from the reservation, and try what it felt like to pick up the old pursuits of Geronimo, the fierce chief who gave the soldiers so much trouble years back.

"Well, I can tell you this," replied the other; "as soon as the shot came he let out a whoop that had a lot of pain back of it. Then he limped across that little open piece yonder where the moonlight falls on the ground. I reckon his mate was waiting there in the shadows for him, with their own hosses; because I saw the one that was hurt climb on the back of a pony, whirl the animal around, and vanish in the shadows like a ghost. I lifted my gun to shoot, but thought it would be only throwing good lead away, so I held back, hang the luck!"

"I don't see why you should feel so bad about it," remarked Billie.

"Oh! don't you?" remarked Donald, who was unusually grumpy, Adrian realized.

"Why, no," the fat chum went on to say, "if you had one crack at him, and as you say, managed to give him some sort of a wound that he won't forget in a hurry; besides chasing the beggars away in the bargain. You hadn't ought to kick, Donald."

"Well, I wouldn't, if only I'd had as much fun as you mention," observed Donald, briskly; "but fact is, fellows, it wasn't me that fired that shot at all; but it seemed to come from away over yonder. I heard the crack, and looked out just in time to see that limping Injun pass over, and manage to get on his pony. Before I could remember that I held a gun he was gone. And what's bothering me is, who's our unknown friend, hiding in the rocks over there?"

"Let's give him a call, and ask him to join us," suggested Billie, heartily.

But although they shouted many times, only dense silence answered them; whoever it was fired that mysterious shot, he evidently did not mean to make himself known.

## **CHAPTER V.—RIVAL DEER HUNTERS.**

"It don't seem to be any use," observed Broncho Billie, after they had called out invitingly several times, without getting any sign of a reply; nor seeing so much as the first indication that the unknown might be even then advancing in the direction of the spot where the tent stood.

"Looks like he didn't care to make our acquaintance very much," grunted Donald, still acting peevish, something out of the usual run with him.

"Oh! well, I reckon we can get along without knowing him," remarked Adrian. "And perhaps after all that shot wasn't meant to help us so much."

"Eh? What d'ye mean by saying that?" asked Billie.

"Why, the fellow who fired may have meant to send in a random bullet, just to help scare us; but by mistake, perhaps it went the wrong way, and wounded one of his friends," Adrian concluded; though from his manner it was apparent he himself had very little faith in this rather far-fetched theory.

Donald laughed.

"Oh! no, that don't go down worth a cent, Adrian," he went on to declare. "Why, I tell you there couldn't have been one chance of it in ten thousand. Whoever it was fired that shot, he was quick as a flash on the trigger; and he had a good eye in the bargain. Not many men could have nailed that Injun in the moonlight, and when he just exposed himself a little bit, while crawling along from rock to rock."

They decided that it was useless thinking of sleeping after such an experience. So they sat there in the shadows as time passed on, now and then exchanging low remarks, but always keeping the

horses under observation; and their fingers were in close contact with the triggers of their quick-firing guns, so as to be ready for any sort of emergency that might arise.

But that only applied to two of the boys. For poor Billie, in spite of all his good intentions, could not keep awake to save his life; and during the balance of the night he enjoyed quite a number of lengthy naps all to himself. But between these he let the others know that he was awake by asking numerous questions; and secretly he hoped that neither of them noticed his regular breathing whenever he fell into a doze.

There are lots of just such fellows in this queer world of ours, filled with good intentions, but singularly weak when it comes to trying to put them into practice. Billie always meant well, and did the best he knew how. With him it was indeed a case of the "spirit being willing, but the flesh weak."

There was no further alarm that night.

Why this should be so they could only hazard one of several guesses. The young adventure-loving bucks may have realized that they were up against a snag after having one of their number wounded in that strange way; and concluded that the possible reward was hardly worth the risk of their lives. Then again, since the shot came from a quarter behind them, they may have been seized with a sudden panic, to the effect that they were literally surrounded, and concluded that they had better make off while a chance remained.

Little the boys cared which reason it was that actuated the movements of the Apache braves who had threatened to give them all sorts of trouble.

"I'm going out there and take a little look around this morning, after the light gets better," announced Donald, as they resurrected the fire, and Billie generously offered to do the cooking for breakfast for the crowd.

"I'd like to go along," remarked Adrian.

"Hope now you ain't thinking of trying to follow them fellows up, and leave me here all alone, to attend to breakfast, and guard the ponies at the same time," ventured the anxious Billie, looking up quickly.

"We don't expect to wander out of sight of the tent, make sure of that, Billie," Adrian told him, understanding that the other must feel a little nervous about being left by himself which, under the circumstances, could hardly be wondered at.

"Oh! all right," mumbled the fat boy; "I'll keep my gun handy, and if anything comes along to bother me, why, I'll let you know. But when you hear me give a cooee, just trot this way, because I'd hate to have to eat all this breakfast by myself."

They assured him that there was no chance of such a dreadful catastrophe happening; and then, taking their guns with them, started off to scout around the spot where, according to Donald, the Indian had been at the time the shot came.

"See here, you can make out where he crawled along, for his toes made a track; and here's where his knee knuckled down in the earth," Adrian quickly remarked as they bent low over the ground, the better to pick up the signs.

"Right you are," echoed Donald, coming to his side immediately; "and if ever you felt inclined to wonder whether I dreamed all that about the young buck over here, I reckon now you know it was real, don't you, Ad?"

"I never doubted it in the beginning," replied the other; "because I knew you weren't given to such things. And then, besides, I heard both the shot, and that screech after it. What have you found now, Donald?"

"The plain imprint of a moccasin," came from the other boy. "Looks like this is where he jumped to his feet after that shot came that winged him, for you can see that it heads back and away from our camp. Yes, and here are specks of dried blood on this rock."

"Yes, and notice the smartness of them, would you, creeping up to leeward of our camp, so the horses couldn't scent them?" Adrian went on to say. "You ought to know the mark of a moccasin pretty well, Donald; how about this one?"

"Made by an Apache squaw, for a cooky, I'd take my affidavit on that," the ranchman's son decided, after minutely examining the imprint; for different tribes have their own way of making elk-skin foot gear, so that it is not a difficult task, under ordinary circumstances, to recognize these peculiar characteristics.

A minute later and they stood on the spot where, according to Donald, the wounded brave had managed to straddle a pony, and make off with his friends.

"Just three of them, and all young bucks," Donald decided, after he had carefully inspected the marks around them.

With that amount of knowledge they had to rest content; because it would have been foolish to think of following the would-be horse thieves, even had they not promised Billie not to go outside of sight of the tent.

Accordingly they turned back, and arrived at the camp just as the cook was getting his lips pursed up so as to give vent to a loud "cooee," that was to serve as notice that breakfast was awaiting their attention; and how any mortal boy could linger after that, Billie would never be able to understand, judging others by his own standard.

After they had done full justice to the meal, they saddled up, and having placed the pack on the treacherous Bray, despite his serious objections and swelling of his body to prevent the bands from meeting, they again took up the line of march.

Donald had held several conversations with the one who knew the route to the Zuni village. He had also made a rough map of the trail, and this he verified on every possible occasion. Now it was by means of three queer-looking stones that stood like a tripod; again it was a row of stunted cedars that seemed as though they had originally been planted by some gardener of the wilds long years ago; and later on they were able to make sure they were on the right path by a most remarkable natural stone bridge that the trail passed under; all of which were objects of interest on his rude chart.

But they did not always keep up here on the sides of the mountain ranges. Presently their route trended down into the valley, where they found trees growing, and there was always a chance of striking game.

The boys had declared their willingness to go after the very first deer they might spy. Fresh venison would taste splendid, they assured each other. Even Billie stood ready to sacrifice his comfort and make a try, if the others failed to show an intention of taking up the burden.

When Billie first came out into the Southwest, bearing that fine new repeating Marlin firearm, he had never been much of a sportsman. But ambition seized him; and of late he had been doing wonderful stunts, even to shooting a grizzly bear that had threatened to make things interesting for him, unless he proceeded to turn the tables.

Hence Billie felt that he had a perfect right to inflate his chest, and look of some consequence whenever they talked of hunters' exploits. He might be a clumsy hand with a good many things; but he *did* know how to ride, and also shoot.

It was Adrian who first sighted the black-tailed deer down there amidst the trees, and suggested that he take a try at the animal; so the others halted to rest the horses, while the young Nimrod crept away.

He knew all about stalking game, and his first thought was to work around, so as to approach from leeward, because in that way the deer would not be so apt to catch his scent as if he remained to windward.

So Adrian kept on creeping up, until he began to feel that he was certainly as close as any reasonable being would hope to get in order to make positively sure of his quarry.

After that all he had to do was to gently raise his head until he could see the feeding deer, and then taking a quick aim, let fly.

Even while he was glancing along the barrel of his rifle Adrian was half conscious of the fact that there was certainly something moving among the branches of a tree just to one side of his. But he had reached the point where his quivering finger was already pressing the trigger of his gun; and nothing could stop him then.

With the report he saw the deer give a leap into the air; but Adrian knew instinctively that he had done himself proud, for he was well versed in the ways of deer and understood that the animal had received a fatal wound. It would not run a dozen yards before falling dead, of that he felt positive, even as he started to get his rifle in readiness for another shot if necessary, as a true hunter always should.

As in a dream the boy saw some furry object shooting straight toward him, coming through the air like a meteor. That one glance was enough to tell him that he had stolen in ahead of a hungry panther that at the time was stalking the deer; and in a rage the aroused beast was now springing straight toward him, meaning to settle the question of hunting rights in that patch of woods then and there.

Adrian, more through instinct than anything else, dropped to his knees, and the leaping panther passed just over him, so that he even felt the wind of its flying body.

## **CHAPTER VI.—A LIVELY SCRIMMAGE.**

Even as he dropped flat, and felt that lithe body pass swiftly over him, Adrian heard a shout. Of

course this must mean his chums had made the alarming discovery that he was up against a hard proposition; they had been watching him closely from a distance, and when the deer fell in response to his shot doubtless they were about to give a whoop of delight, but at sight of the leaping panther this was changed into a cry of alarm.

Adrian did not deceive himself.

The fact that he had a couple of good, trustworthy friends so close at hand would not cut much of a figure in his little affair with the hungry panther, perhaps nothing at all.

They were some distance away, and even though making all the haste possible, they must consume several minutes of precious time in reaching him; before that came about his business with the gray-coated terror of the canyons of the mountains would have been finished.

Accustomed to depending on himself in every emergency, the boy was not at a loss as to what he should do under these trying circumstances.

It was lucky, of course, that in making an involuntary duck of his body he had caused the panther to miss his aim. The creature had leaped true enough, but having once left the limb on which he must have been crouched, watching the advance of the human deer-hunter, he could not alter the nature of his spring.

But just as soon as he landed on the ground the chances were the agile beast was going to whirl around, and make another try. It was to meet this attack that Adrian got himself in readiness, thrusting out his rifle so as to ward off the savage claws until such time as he could throw out the old shell, and pump another one into the firing chamber of his gun.

It is true that this operation may be mechanically performed, and that it really consumes a brief space of time; but there may be occasions when even a second counts for a great deal. Adrian considered this such a time, for it was of more importance that he face about and make ready to keep the animal away, than that in the desperate attempt to get his rifle ready he allow his side to go unprotected.

An old hunter would understand the instinct that caused the prairie boy to act in this way; for he could place himself in a similar situation, and realize just what a part instinct rather than reason would be apt to play.

It turned out to be a wise move, too; for hardly had he thus whirled around with gun extended, than the panther, having recovered from his disappointing leap, came straight at him again.

It was far from a pleasant task that the boy had on his hands, trying to thrust that clawing, growling beast away with his gun, all the while he was fairly wild to work its mechanism, and get a good cartridge into the chamber.

You may not suspect what a powerful beast a panther is, just by watching him pace restlessly back and forth in his cage when you visit the Zoo, or see him in a menagerie; but those hardened muscles of his are capable of a tremendous force, once the beast is aroused to a state of fury. Many an unfortunate hunter has rued the day or night when he found such a beast attacking him in the forest; and if he lived through the battle it was to find his garments torn almost to ribbons, while his flesh was badly lacerated by the keen-pointed claws that were in action every second of the time until a fortunate shot or blow from a knife laid the animal out dead.

While he continued to thrust out with all his strength, in the endeavor to keep the beast away from close quarters, Adrian was yelling at the top of his lungs, not for help, but in the hope that the sound of a human voice might gradually wear upon the nerves of the beast, and cause him to slink away.

All the boy wanted was just a few winks of an eye, in order to get that rifle in readiness for action; but as long as he was compelled to use every atom of his strength in fending off these constant attacks, his ambition did not seem likely to be gratified.

After all, the coming of Donald and Billie, also shouting like wild Indians as they skipped over rocks, and rushed headlong toward the scene of action, may have been a factor in deciding the result.

Adrian himself, calmly reviewing the whole affair later on, when he could do so in a spirit of fairness, was ready to acknowledge that he was indebted to them for the chance he yearned to grasp.

Hearing them coming may have slightly disconcerted the panther. It had not been wounded thus far, so that its rage was only that of being interfered with while stalking its legitimate prey, the feeding deer. Consequently it might not be of a mind to face several enemies at once; though a tiger-cat that has been made to feel the agony of a gunshot wound will leap into a regiment at times, and start to make a clean sweep, until borne down by force of numbers.

The animal hesitated at one point in its attack. Adrian was quick to notice this little but significant fact; pressing his advantage he gave a particularly loud whoop, and instead of

standing on the defensive as heretofore, he actually assumed the aggressive.

That proved to be the crux of the whole exciting little affair, for the panther was surprised at the turn of events, and gave evidences of a desire to retreat.

By now the boy's fighting spirit had been wholly aroused, and he was determined that under no circumstances, if he could help it, should that impudent panther get away unscathed. It had attacked him unprovoked; and now he meant to see that the fighting cat got full measure, pressed down, and running over.

Watching his chance Adrian suddenly jumped back, and at the same instant there was heard the click of his gun's mechanism working.

It was all done like a flash, and he had timed his movement with such precision as well as sagacity that before the beast could recover, and either resume the attack or jump away, the young hunter was ready to put the finishing stroke to his warmly contested game.

The other pair, having covered about half the ground by this time, and still coming on wildly, saw their chum once more thrust out his gun; but this time it was with a far different manner than before. There was also a confidence in his action that told the experienced Donald what sort of change had come about during that second or so of time.

Had he been given time to shout no doubt Donald would have voiced his belief to the effect that Adrian had succeeded in rendering his magic fire-stick serviceable again, by those few quick movements of his hands.

Of course it was as good as over now. At such close quarters Adrian, being so accustomed to firearms, was not apt to miss a vital spot. And when the discharge was heard the panther sprang into the air, rolled over on the ground, clawing desperately, while Adrian stood close by, though out of reach, his faithful weapon again in readiness to be used in case of necessity.

But it was not required of him, for by the time Donald and Billie came panting to the spot, the fat boy blowing like a porpoise with his strenuous exertions, the gray-coated beast had stiffened out in death.

"Hurt any, Ad?" gasped Donald, as he surveyed his chum anxiously; because he knew only too well how difficult such wounds as those given by the claws of a carnivorous animal are to heal, and what danger of blood poisoning always hangs over the one who has received the same.

Adrian laughed as well as he was able in his nearly exhausted condition.

"Not a scratch—never touched me!" he managed to tell them; at which both the others took off their hats, and gave a faint cheer.

When they had managed to in part recover their wind they bent over to examine the cat, which both prairie lads declared to be the largest they had ever seen.

"The nerve of the rascal, jumping at you just because you knocked over a deer he had his eye on," remarked Billie, as he poked his toe into the sleek skin of the slain beast.

"Well," said Donald, laughingly, "just put yourself in his place, Billie, and think how ugly you'd feel if you had your mouth made up for a certain sort of meal, and just when you were going to reach out to grab it, some fellow stepped in and scooped the prize. Chances are you'd feel like tackling him, and trying to take it away, now wouldn't you, honest Injun?"

The fat boy screwed up his red, good-natured face as though pondering over the subject; then he nodded his head like one of these automatic dolls you see in the shop windows along about Christmas time.

"P'raps I might, Donald; mebbe you're right about that," he went on to say presently; "because it sure is a mighty aggravating thing to have your mouth made up for a mess of fried onions, and then not get 'em; and it must be worse to be cheated out of everything at the same time. Yes, I don't blame the scamp so much after all; but say, he sure barked up the wrong tree when he thought to scare one of the Broncho Rider Boys off, didn't he, fellows?"

"Looks that way," Donald replied.

"But we got the deer all right, and that means a feast of venison right along now, the balance of our trip to the Zuni village, don't it?" continued Billie, his blue eyes fairly snapping with delight; for while they had had an abundance to eat thus far, fresh meat had been only noticeable, as Billie would say, by its absence.

"Yes," Adrian went on to remark, "we'll have plenty of venison; and I'll get busy cutting the animal up, if you boys will look after the horses; and Donald you might slip that fine gray jacket off my panther; I reckon it'll be worth keeping as a sort of reminder of the sassy way he tackled me."

"I'll take care of the horses, all right," ventured Billie, who knew very little about removing the

skin of a dead animal, and moreover was not anxious to take lessons in that line.

So it came about that for some little while all of them were more or less busy, Adrian in cutting off the choice portions of the deer; Donald in depriving the unfortunate panther of the sleek covering he had borne all his life; while Billie led the horses, and after them the mule, to water, which he found trickling down the face of the rocks near by.

"And," said the fat boy, after he had completed his part of the programme, "seein' how close to noon it is right now, why not stop long enough to let me make a little cooking fire out of these dead branches under the cedar, and try a piece of the venison?" and silence giving consent, he proceeded to immediately get busy.

## **CHAPTER VII.—THE WITCH DOCTOR.**

"Well, it's a little tough, but all the same I like it," was Billie's opinion of the venison, after it had been cooked, and they sat around making a meal of it.

"You couldn't expect anything less," Donald went on to say; "because all meat is more juicy and tender from hanging several days, when the weather allows. Before we're done chewing on this maverick you'll agree that I'm right, for it'll get better with age."

"That's a cinch!" agreed Adrian.

As it was pretty hot around the middle of the day, none of them were very ambitious about making a fresh start, after they had finished eating. In fact, they lay around in easy positions, and waited for the sun to get started toward the west, so that its rays might not be so direct.

"Tell me some more about the Zunis, Donald," urged Billie, thinking that it was a good time to put forward such a plea; for long ago had he not learned that a wise fellow will wait to ask a favor of his father until after dinner, and not when he first comes home, tired and hungry?

"Oh! can't you just hold your horses a little longer, Billie?" observed the other, with a good-natured smile. "Because, you know we'll drop in on the copper colored gents tomorrow, with any decent sort of luck; and then you'll be able to see everything for yourself."

"Yes, that's so, Donald," the fat boy went on in his wheedling, insinuating way; "but I've been told that whenever you expect to take a journey into any foreign country the first thing to do is to get guide books, and read up all you can about the people, their strange habits, and so-forth. In that way you can understand them much quicker than if you didn't know beans about the lot. And so, the more I can hear about these Hopi and Zuni Indians, who all belong to the family of cliff dwellers, and are so different from every other tribe that ever inhabited North America, why, the quicker I'll understand what a lot of queer things they do stand for."

Adrian pretended to clap his hands as if in applause.

"Seems as if he's got you there, Donald," he went on to remark. "A heap of sound sense in what Billie says."

"Oh!" remarked the fat boy, with a shrug of his broad shoulders, "I do have a bright thought once a year, you know. Of course it's only an accident, and couldn't be helped; but strike up, Donald, and tell me something about that old medicine man who is the queerest of the whole bunch I take it, from what I've read, and heard about him."

Donald looked sharply at the speaker. He did not underestimate Billie, and knew that many times the fat boy had proven to be far from being the numbskull he pretended he was.

"Well, whatever put that notion in your head," Donald observed, "it's as true as anything going. Remember that I've only run across a batch of these cliff-dwellers once, when dad took me to see the wonderful Colorado Canyon, where heaps of their rock homes can be seen high up in the walls of the biggest hole in all the world. So that what I know about these Zunis we're on the way to visit I've had only from the lips of others, generally cowboys who like to stretch things, you understand."

"All right; we'll make allowances for the exaggerations of Bunch, Si Ketcham, Corney, Skinny, Alkali or even the chink cook, Ah Chin Chin. Now start in, please, Donald."

"In the first place," began the other, thoughtfully, "the old chap who rattles the dry bones, and plays the part of medicine man to the Zunis has been known all over the country for many years as the sharpest of his kind. He's got a genuine Indian name, of course, which I couldn't pronounce even if I remembered it; but they tell me it stands for Witch Doctor, and that's what we'll have to call him, I reckon."

"A rose by any other name would smell as sweet," muttered Billie.

"I'm not going to try and describe the old fakir, because I never could do him justice," Donald



went on. "Having seen one like him I could picture the Witch Doctor, after both Si Ketcham at the ranch, and Corse Tibbals at the mine had painted a word picture of him. Above all things you've got to snap him off, if you want a jim-dandy card for your exhibit, to stun the boys at home."

"Yes, sure I will, Donald. Ain't I carrying ten rolls of films in my pack right now, just for that same purpose?" Billie assured him.

"What I wanted to tell you most about, though, Billie, was something that's sort of excited my curiosity more'n a little."

"Oh! that sounds kind of interesting to be sure, Donald; so please keep right on, and let's hear all about it," the other pleaded.

"It seems," began the prairie boy, "that this old fellow has surrounded himself with a regular halo of the deepest mystery ever. All of his stripe like to make out that they're in direct communication with the Great Spirit or Manitou of the red man, you know; and this Witch Doctor has got the rest of the bunch beat to a frazzle, as Teddy would say."

"How so?" asked Adrian, as the narrator paused, possibly on purpose to let his strange words sink in, and arouse further curiosity on the part of his hearers.

"It's just this way, as near as I could make out," Donald presently continued. "Every little while the old medicine man disappears from the sight of his people, and always after conducting a series of cracker-jack ceremonies. They say he's gone into the mountain to talk with Manitou; and from time to time queer sounds are heard that set the Indians almost wild—strains of sweet music come out of cracks in the rocks, and then a strange voice like the rumbling of thunder follows. And at such times every Zuni will be sure to flatten himself, face downward, on the ground, listening with all his might, but not daring to look, for fear he might see too much, and be struck blind; because that's what the Witch Doctor has warned them might happen if they got too curious."

Billie was listening with open mouth, and eyes that were round with wonder.

"Oh, my country!" he said, slowly yet with apparent exultation; "then there's a real mystery for us to unravel, ain't there, Donald? What d'ye suppose makes that music; and who does the shouting now?"

"Ask me something easy," remarked the other, shaking his head as though he did not attempt to solve the problem. "That old fellow has them all locoed, is my opinion, and they believe whatever he tells them. Some people call it hypnotism; but I just reckon that they're a lot of fanatics, and ready to sneeze when the medicine man takes snuff. But there's another part of the thing that was a heap more interesting to Si Ketcham and Corse Tibbals."

"What was that?" asked Adrian.

"Why, it seems that on several occasions, when the old rascal has wanted something or other that the whites possessed, and it needed the ready cash to buy it, he's gone into his sacred teepee and come out again with a handful of crude gold. Why, being a miner, and experienced in those lines, Corse says that it looked like he'd just knocked a hunk off a ledge that must have been virgin gold!"

"Tell me that, will you?" gasped Billie. "No wonder, then, so many palefaces wander off this way to watch the Zunis carry on when the time comes along for their rattlesnake dance, and all that fuss and feathers. Say, chances are that the old chap knows of the richest deposit of precious metal ever discovered. And when he disappears inside the mountain to talk with the Great Spirit, why, that's the time he does his chipping of gold. Gee! now you've got me some excited, Donald."

"Well, you want to keep right cool, and not give the thing away," warned the one who was telling of these strange facts. "Whether the Witch Doctor has got a hidden treasure inside that mountain or not, it's certain that up to now nobody has found a chance to spy on him. He's too smart for that. And besides, these Zuni Indians have so many tricks up their sleeves, what with their hundreds of pet rattlesnakes and such, that white men don't care as a rule to make them angry. All sorts of stories have been told about dens of the reptiles into which they cast those who make enemies of them. I reckon these are only yarns, because there's been little, or no trouble between the whites and the Hopis and Zunis; but all the same there's something about the queer habits of these cliff-dwellers that makes miners, hungry for gold as they may be, keep their hands off. Nobody knows what a Zuni is carrying under his fancy blanket; and it may just be a rattler as well as not."

Billie turned pale, and drew a long breath. Of course he was instantly reminded of his recent terrible experience with snakes; and this took away in some measure from the pleasure he was anticipating when he started exploring the quaint village of the Zuni Indians, with the houses chiseled out of the solid rock in tiers, and each door reached by a narrow ledge that ascended at an angle of forty-five degrees.

"I'm only telling you these things," Donald went on to say, "because Billie has asked me to coach him about what we're likely to run across. And perhaps, it's just as well that all of us remember

we haven't got any business to poke our noses into the private affairs of these people. If we do it we must take the risk; and that's what men like Corse Tibbals have always shrank back from up to now."

"I can understand that plain enough," remarked Adrian, soberly; "for when men get the prospecting fever well fixed on them, it's got to be something mighty powerful that's going to keep them from trying to squeeze a secret like this from a red, no matter whether he is a Witch Doctor or not. Yes, our motto must be, 'go slow.' And at the same time we might keep our eyes and ears open, so that if anything out of the ordinary run happens, when we're in that village, we'll be ready to take a look into the same."

Somehow Billie asked no more questions. Apparently what he had heard must have given the fat boy food for thought. He had a pretty lively imagination, and doubtless allowed this to have full swing now; so that he was picturing all sorts of astonishing things coming to pass presently.

They were just thinking of getting the horses, engaged in nibbling such grass as could be found near by, when Billie chanced to look earnestly far up the side of the mountain which formed one wall of the valley in which the panther had been met, as well as the feeding deer.

He seemed to be instantly galvanized into action.

"Looky there, fellows!" they heard him call out, his voice trembling with sudden excitement; "up yonder where that last cedar grows. Don't you see a man and a pony as plain as day; and he's sure been watching us lie around down here. Why, what if it was one of them young Apache bucks we scared off the other night; and say, couldn't he just riddle us with lead, if he took a notion to shoot right now?"

Filled with this alarming idea Billie commenced to roll over and over; while the others stared up toward the spot indicated by their comrade.

## **CHAPTER VIII.—THE MAN WHO VANISHED.**

"There! He's gone again!" exclaimed Adrian, almost immediately afterwards. "He must have seen you pointing at him, Billie."

"My! but he must be a kind of sensitive fellow, if that little thing'd make him sidle out of sight!" observed the stout chum, dejectedly. "One second he was there, all right, and the next he had vamosed the ranch. Now you see him, now you don't. It's mighty queer, I think."

Donald and Adrian exchanged glances.

"What do you make of it, Ad?" queried the former.

"Why, just as Billie here says, it does look queer," replied the other, seriously. "If that had been a cowboy, or an honest miner, or even a prospector in these dangerous mountains, he might have had the decency to wave a hand at us, even if it was too much trouble for him to make his way down here to say how-d'ye."

"Never made a single wave, just backed out of sight," grumbled Billie. "But anyhow, you don't reckon it could have been one of them hostile Indians, do you, boys?"

"Oh! no, not at all," chuckled Adrian. "We'd have seen that fact right away, for they wear feathers in their hair; and besides, you can't mistake an Apache as far as you can see him. It was a white man all right, don't think anything else."

"But you can't guess who, now?" persisted Billie.

"Of course not," declared Donald. "There's always a chance to come across some rascal in this country, a fellow who has been run out of the mining camps, or else is wanted on the ranges for some thieving job, and has to live a hermit life. That may have been just such a man. Fact is, I reckon he was no other."

"And he didn't like our looks one little bit, did he?" pursued Billie. "Seemed to be too honest in our get-up to suit him, mebbe. Well, that's some satisfaction, anyway; though it goes against the grain to have a fellow dodge at sight of you, like you had the epidemic in your clothes."

After waiting some little time to see if the mysterious stranger would show himself again, and meeting with disappointment, the three Broncho Rider Boys determined to resume their journey.

When, however, Billie tried to put the packs on Bray he instantly met with the most strenuous objection. The mule backed away from him, snorting, and with his long ears put forward. In fact he exhibited all the evidences of terror.

"Hey! what's the matter with you, Bray, you silly old thing? Think I'm going to take a bite out of you, mebbe? Well, you've got another guess coming then; because that's the last thing I'd have in my mind. Stand still, can't you, and let me put your pack on. Whether you like it or not, you've

just *got* to carry our things. Put that in your pipe and smoke it, you crazy thing. Hold still, can't you? It's the same pack you had before, only a little fresh venison, and that fine pelt aboard."

The other boys were laughing at the comical exertions of Billie, as he found himself swung around by the prancing mule, with which he was struggling so valiantly.

"That's just what he's objecting to so hard, Billie," remarked Adrian, presently.

"What, that fine venison? Well, if he could only have a taste, perhaps then Bray wouldn't be so mad at being made to carry it," Billie panted, as he still yanked at the stout bridle of the snorting mule.

"It's the panther skin, more than the venison, though I have known horses to object to carrying home meat," Donald told him. "You see, they don't like the smell of the fresh blood; and that skin just gets poor old Bray wild. He knows just by his instinct that it came from a terrible wild beast, that would jump on his back, and claw him, if it ever had the chance. And the mule isn't intelligent enough to understand that it's dead now, and couldn't hurt him."

"But he's just got to carry it, Donald; you wouldn't think of throwing away such an elegant skin that'll make so fine a rug, just because an old mule makes up his mind he wants to kick?" Billie entreated.

"Yes, and we'll lend you a helping hand, old fellow," declared Adrian.

"He may hold out against one, but three will floor him, you mark my words," Donald told the relieved fat boy.

And sure enough, finding that they were all against him; and perhaps realizing, after Donald had made him smell of the panther skin, that it did not bite, old Bray quieted down a little, so that they loaded him without further trouble. But he often gave a sudden lurch, and a snort during the balance of the day, as though catching a scent of the objectionable object, and feeling new alarm.

Donald had mapped out their course as well as he had been able, from the crude descriptions given to him by others. They knew that as the first day's journey had really been wholly among the mountain heights, and this, the second one was for the most part down in the valley, so the third would differ in every respect from those that had gone before, since they must cross the dreary stretch of sand that was known far and wide as a dangerous desert.

But they would be certain to have an abundance of water along, and by keeping their heads about them, surely there could not be any great peril come upon them while making this passage.

So they thought, for youth is ever optimistic; and a merciful Fate takes delight in hiding the future from mortal eyes.

The middle of the afternoon found them making fair progress onward, still in the valley, though Donald warned them that in all probability they would camp that night on the edge of the wide desert strip that lay between them and the region where the village of the cliff dwellers was located.

"I'm getting awful thirsty," remarked Billie, smacking his lips; "and this water we're carrying along in the canteens is hot, and don't seem to go right to the spot. I hope we'll run across a good spring after a little while; because a nice cold drink would please me more'n I can tell you."

"Cheer up then, Billie, for chances are we'll do that very same before a great while," said Adrian; "because I saw where Donald here has got a mark on his map that means water, and we can't be very far away from it right now."

Donald said nothing one way or the other, though Billie did cast an appealing look in his direction; he just kept on pushing ahead, and turning from time to time to take note of the country they were passing through, for his map was not very lucid, and wise Donald wanted to make sure he was right.

Indeed, hardly ten minutes later Billie was heard to give an exclamation of delight and rapture.

"There she is, fellows, and as fine a spring as you'd want to see in a 'coon's age!" he went on to call out, in his explosive way. "And say, if somebody hasn't gone and planted palms around it, too, just for all the world like the oasis you read about in stories of Africa. And just you watch me lower that same basin, when I get started. We've got to keep the ponies back, though, so they won't muddy things up before we get our fill. See, they've scented water; you can tell it by the way they act."

Both Adrian and Donald smiled, for they had noticed this same thing some little time before. The acute sense of smell on the part of the animals had allowed them to know about the presence of water long before their masters were aware of it.

"Hold on, take your time, Billie," warned Donald; and somehow the other thought he said this in the queerest possible way.

"Oh! I see how it is, you just don't feel like making a rush, and think we all ought to be on a level footing," Billie observed, with as near an attempt at irony as he could attain. "H'm makes me think of that story they used to tell about the parson and his little flock on the coast."

"What was that, Billie?" asked Donald.

"Why, you see, he had for his people mostly wreckers; and one day when he was preaching so fine, some one brought word that there was a wreck floated in down the coast. Of course every man in the congregation started to run, leaving the preacher stuck up there in his high pulpit. So he calls out, and tells them how wicked it was to think of such things on a Sunday; and all the while he talks he's a heading toward the door, calming the men, and holding of 'em spellbound like. But when the parson gets right up to the door he alters his tune immediate, for what does he shout out but: 'Now boys, as every one has an even chance, let's hurry down and see if we can save any poor sailorman from that terrible wreck!' And away he goes at the head of the string, lickety-split for the beach. And p'raps that's what our friend Donald here's got in mind."

Both the others laughed at Billie's story; but Donald did not seem inclined to either admit or deny the truth of the other's accusation. Still Adrian could see that strange look on his face, and noted that Donald had taken up his station close alongside Billie, as though bent on restraining the other.

They quickly reached the palms that waved above the spring. Everyone could see that it was a perfectly lovely resting spot. The afternoon sun was quite hot down in the valley there, and the shade under those palms, with their wide crowns of handsome leaves, seemed particularly inviting.

But best of all was the gleam of the water that nestled in a fair sized cup under the trees. Billie had eyes only for this.

"Oh! don't it look great, though?" he was saying enthusiastically, as he hastened his pace, while the others kept alongside persistently. "Plenty for all of us, and the ponies in the bargain. We might fill up the canteens again with fresh stuff because there's no tellin' whether we'll run across another spring as fine as this one seems to be."

"Yes, seems to be," repeated Donald; but Billie was too anxious to get to drinking to pay any heed to the word.

He led the procession, and reached the border of the pool. It certainly did present a most inviting aspect to those hot and tired boys, and small blame to Billie that he should immediately proceed to throw himself down alongside the spring, as though bent on carrying out his threat to lower it more or less.

To his astonishment he felt someone grip him by the shoulder, before he could even wet his lips; and looking up in wonder, he saw it was Donald who held him.

"Didn't I tell you to go slow, Billie?" said the other, seriously; "and here you are, rushing headlong into trouble, without even bothering looking around. Just turn you head, and take a peep at what you see there."

Billie, his eyes as round as saucers with surprise, did so; and in another second he found himself staring at a piece of paper that was stuck in the cleft of a stick close to the water's rim, and which had in large letters the one word "WARNING."

## **CHAPTER IX.—THE POISONED SPRING.**

All of them were staring at the little placard by now, even Adrian feeling almost as much astonishment as the kneeling Billie. Indeed, what they saw written there in a crude manner was quite enough to give the fat boy a cold chill. Underneath that plainly printed word "Warning!" was the following:

"Don't yu drink here, spring poizened by crazy Injun long tim ago. Dangrous. Go on further down vally, mor water."

There was no name signed, but just then none of the boys thought anything about that little fact.

"What!" burst out the indignant Billie, "poisoned, this lovely spring? Now, ain't that just too bad for anything? And so we don't get a drink after all. But whatever d'ye think any Injun'd want to do such a mean thing as that for?"

"Well," remarked Donald, "I've heard something about this same spring, and that was why I warned you to go slow. Fact is, I expected we'd run across this before we came to the one that's safe to drink from. But I tell you plainly though, I didn't expect to find this kind warning stuck up here. The boys didn't say a word about that. And as sure as you live, Adrian, I begin to believe it was put here *today*, and for our special benefit!"

"Listen to that, now, would you?" burst out Billie, still staring hard at the paper in the cleft stick that had been pushed into the ground; "the mystery deepens, seems like. One night we have an unknown friend wounding an Injun that's trying to make way with our ponies; and now here's somebody mighty anxious that we don't drink from this poisoned spring. It's sure getting interesting, fellers; and I'd give a cookey to know who he might be, wouldn't you?"

But from the blank expression on the faces of his two chums, Billie realized that they were just as far from guessing the truth as he might be.

"Then we don't take the chances of having even a little drink here, do we?" the sorely disappointed fat boy asked, as he sat and looked regretfully at the water that was so tempting.

"Better not," decided Donald. "It might be only some sort of fake; but we can't afford to take the chances, you see. Let somebody else experiment, if they want to. So long as there is another spring hole further down the valley, why, we'd better be trotting along. And just notice the way the ponies sniff the air, will you? I really believe they know that this water is bad to drink."

"What, ponies know better than human beings, do they?" demanded Billie, hardly relishing such a state of affairs.

"They've been given an unerring instinct, where we depend on reason, and that often fails us. Just watch a horse feeding, and notice how he refuses to touch all kinds of weeds, and how a cow drops the same out of her mouth after she's scooped in a whole bunch of grass. Instinct, and nothing else. But there's no use in us hanging out here, when we can soon get to good water."

Reluctantly Billie quitted that beautiful spring. He even turned to look back at it several times, and went on to remark:

"That crazy Injun ought to have been shot, to do such a thing. Why didn't he pick out an ordinary spring, and put his loco weed in the same?"

"Oh! well, perhaps that story is only one of the Indian legends we read about, and it's really something else that makes the water coming from that spring bad, so that people who drink it feel sick right away. I've got an idea myself that it must pass through some sort of copper deposit that poisons the water. Because if this thing happened years and years ago, as the reds say, how could the poison still keep on working?"

"Well, now, that doesn't stand to reason, does it?" remarked Billie. "And I reckon you're right when you say it, Donald. But let me tell you I never was more disappointed in my life. But I didn't notice any bones lying around there, or graves either."

"What makes you say that?" demanded Adrian.

"Why, if the water is really poisoned, lots of fellows must have drank of it, time in and time out, not knowing how dangerous it was; and if they fell down and kicked the bucket, wouldn't we see their bones scattered around, just as the wolves and coyotes had left 'em?"

"Oh! it doesn't kill you outright, they say; just sickens you, until you feel like you'd be glad to die to end it all," Donald assured him.

"I've heard people talk that way about being seasick," Billie observed; and then he seemed to fall into a musing spell, as though the recent strange event had, as was only natural, made a serious impression on his mind.

It was only half an hour later that the ponies again manifested an unusual eagerness to get on. Donald called the attention of Billie to the fact.

"You notice that there isn't the least sign of water, so far as we can see for ourselves, Billie; and yet they scent it plain enough. Doesn't that prove what I said about their being smarter than any human being?"

Billie admitted that it did; for he was very frank, and ready to own up to anything, after he had been convinced of his error.

"P'raps we might let the ponies try first this time," he suggested, cautiously. "If they tackle it right off the reel, then it ought to be safe for us to drink, eh, fellows?"

"Not a bad idea at all, Billie, and does you credit," said Adrian; "sort of taking advantage of their sagacity, you might call it, I reckon."

"Only don't let 'em muddy things for us," admonished the fat boy. "Somebody else will have to lend me a hand with Bray here, because I just can't hold him in when he takes a notion to do something."

"That's easily managed," laughed Donald, coming up on the other side, so that he could lean over, and grip the rope that served as a bridle for the pack mule.

The little trick turned out very well, for none of the animals manifested the slightest disposition

to scorn the water of the second spring. Indeed, they one and all sucked in such huge draughts that Billie immediately became alarmed lest they exhaust the limited supply.

"Hold your horses, there!" he called out, pulling back on Jupiter's bridle, although the horse seemed unwilling to mind; "give a fellow a chance, won't you? Don't go and hog it all, just because we were considerate enough to let you drink first. Have some manners, can't you, I say? Drag 'em back, boys, and let's get a sup ourselves before it's all gone."

"No worry, Billie," said Donald; "because, if you look sharp you'll see that the spring is running at a lively rate, and the cup'll fill up with fresh water right off. It creeps away under this rank vegetation, and is lost in the sand beyond. But there's going to be plenty of water right along. Better let the ponies have all they want while we're about it."

"Oh! I s'pose that's right," grumbled Billie, "but I was always brought up to say 'gentlemen first;' and it kind of goes against the grain to just keep on being thirsty while animals are sucking it all down by barrels full."

However, when a little later on the pool filled again with fresh water, Billie admitted that it was delightfully cool and refreshing. And then besides, they owed the horses something for showing them that the water was uncontaminated, and good to drink.

"I'm going to propose something that will have to be settled by a majority vote," said Donald, a short time later, as he looked smilingly at his two chums.

"I can give a guess what it is; but go on," observed Adrian, nodding.

"What time is it, Billie?" the other continued.

So Billie, consulting the little nickel watch he carried, replied that it wanted just three minutes of four.

"You see, the day is pretty nearly done," Donald continued, impressively; "and we couldn't go much farther if we tried. Besides, we won't find another spring on the trail between here and the edge of the desert, which truth to tell can't be far from this spot. So I was going to propose that we camp right here tonight."

"Eureka! count on my vote in favor of that same!" cried Billie, promptly falling in with the scheme, as Donald knew full well he would; because if there was one thing the fat boy liked above all others it was fresh water; and there were times when it seemed as though he could never drink enough, especially should the weather turn hot.

"Make it unanimous, Donald," laughed Adrian; "for I knew that was what you meant to say. Fact is, I was thinking about broaching the idea myself, when you took the words right out of my mouth."

"Another thing," ventured the pleased Billie; "we can fill up our canteens fresh before we start in the morning; and make the ponies drink all they want; for if we have to cross that sand stretch, why, the chances are it'll be a dry job, and we'll be glad we stopped over night here, see if we don't."

As it was settled that they should go no further that day, the three lads started to get the camp in shape. First they found a place where the animals could be staked out, so that they might pick up some of the grass which seemed only to grow around the spring hole, as is often the case in this country of the Southwest, where arid wastes and rocky regions predominate.

Then the tent was erected, and the fireplace made; so that in a short time things began to take on the appearance of a regular camp. Billie was in his glory at such a time. He knew that soon there would be a delicious aroma filling the air, as they started to get supper ready; and that always tickled him greatly. As the war horse prances when he whiffs the smoke of battle, so Billie became animated as soon as he caught the first scent of onions frying, or coffee boiling; as he would himself say, "simply because he was built that way, and couldn't help it."

And so the second day of their journey across the wild country that lay between the Red Spar Mine and the village of the Zuni Indians, came to an end, with all well. Billie could not see that they had any reason to complain, as, seated on the ground, tailor fashion, with his legs curled under him, and a pannikin of venison, together with fried onions and beans, in his lap, his tin cup of fragrant coffee resting close beside him, he started in to appease the ferocious appetite that had been worrying him for half an hour and more.

Why, the future looked as bright as that glowing sky that marked the going down of the sun in the west. For it did not lie in their power to roll back the curtains of the future for even one day, and see what lay awaiting them on the morrow. Perhaps Billie might not have felt so light-hearted had he known what was coming; but after all it was just as well.

They passed a fairly comfortable night, in camp there by the spring. Nothing occurred to cause an alarm, though Donald and Adrian would not allow the camp to go unguarded, and took turns playing sentry.

Billie, too, was quite anxious to try his hand at the job; and they had to let him have a turn; but not feeling any confidence that the fat boy would stay awake Donald made sure to keep one eye open. And sure enough, later on he found Billie calmly sleeping, with his gun across his knees.

At first Donald was half tempted to give the other a scare by firing his own gun close to the slumbering sentry's ear; but on second thought he decided not to do this. Billie meant well, and was so good-natured; besides, it was hard for any one to get provoked at the fat chum, no matter what happened; because he was always trying to do his level best. Then again, the report would give Adrian a shock, which must seem cruel and unnecessary.

Morning found them much refreshed, and ready to take up the new duties of the day. Although Billie had now been quite some time in this country of the Southwest, he had as yet never had but one experience in crossing a desert, and nothing had happened at that time to strike him as odd.

Donald warned him that perhaps he was going to experience something now he would not be apt to soon forget.

"For they told me," he went on to add, "at the mine, that this same strip of burning sand lying short of the Zuni village is a particularly wicked place to be caught out on, should one of those sand storms come along."

"Sand storms, did you say, Donald? Now what under the sun can you mean by that? Does it rain sand out here?" Billie wanted to know immediately.

"You'll think it does before long, if we're so unlucky as to run across such a thing," Donald told him.

"You see," Adrian explained, "the sand is so fine that when the wind increases to a gale, instead of rain, the air is filled with clouds of sand that choke you, and cause those hills and windrows to come and go, changing after each storm. Over in Africa the Arabs fear them worse than anything else going. They have animals in the camels that are fitted best of all to live through such a storm; and so they just give up, and hide their heads until it's all over; then dig a way out, and continue their journey."

"Whew! that sounds interesting like," commented Billie; "and do you think we'll strike it as bad as that?"

"Nobody can say," continued Donald; "but let's hope by all means that we get across without any experience of the kind. Perhaps you think it sounds interesting, but take my word for it, Billie, if it comes, you'll sure believe you're having the worst time of your whole life."

After that Billie did not seem quite so anxious to know what a sand storm was like. He realized that when his chums took a thing so seriously there must be something about it that was menacing.

Donald was right when he said that they had camped not a great ways from where the mountains came to an end, and the glistening desert lay beyond; for two hours after leaving the spring they found themselves on the border of the wide sandy stretch.

Billie looked out over that sizzling desert, and began to realize the meaning of what Donald and Adrian had said when they told him about its terrors. But there was no other trail by means of which they could reach the Zuni village; and unless they wished to give that project up for good and all, they must proceed, come what would.

As Billie was the one who wanted to look upon the strange sights connected with the quaint homes of the cliff dwellers, he held his peace; though truth to tell the prospect of a ride of hours across that desert did not appeal very much to him now, after he had heard such dismal stories about what it could do when it took a notion.

The sunshine was very vivid, and half blinded them when they tried to look far away to where Donald said the other elevation undoubtedly lay, amidst which the Zuni village was to be found. From another quarter it could be reached without any necessity for crossing the desert, but not from the south.

"Kind of like buying a pig in the poke, ain't it, this thing of starting out there without seeing where you're heading for?" remarked Billie, a little uneasily; for now that he was gazing on the sandy waste, its tremendous possibilities began to really awe him; and then the way the sun was shining on the billows of sand made him feel as though they must come near being roasted before they had gone a great ways.

"Oh! we know that we've got to keep heading straight into the northwest; and what's the use of having compasses with us if we can't keep our course?" said Donald, who did not appear to be worried at the prospect.

So they started off.

It soon began to feel uncomfortable for the fat boy; and he was heard to mumble more or less to himself; but Billie was a "stayer," as Adrian called it; and once he embarked on an undertaking he would not easily give up. So he mopped his reeking forehead, and kept everlastingly at it, even urging his pony to renewed exertions; though the wise animal seemed to know there was no use trying to make haste while plodding through these sand hills.

"Well, I never knew before I came out here, that a desert was like this," Billie had blurted out once, when Adrian came alongside, and he just felt that he had to say something.

"Few people do know anything about it until they see with their own eyes," returned the other boy; "for of course you believed that it must be perfectly flat, and as level as a billiard table, didn't you?"

"That's right," returned the frank Billie; "and here it's all sand hills, many of 'em equal to little mountains, and all frilled and scalloped like. That's where the wind makes its fancy work, I take it. Many a time I've seen dry snow cut like that; and sand acts just the same way, don't it?"

"Exactly," answered Adrian; "and as we've been moving along for nearly two hours now, look back and see where the mountains we left lie."

No sooner had Billie turned his head than he gave a cry of wonder.

"Why, they've gone!" he exclaimed; "blotted right out of sight, too. Never saw anything like it before, believe me. It must be the glare of the sun on all this white sand that does it. Only for the dark glasses we're wearing, that same would be making us nearly blind, I take it."

"Sure thing," Adrian told him, and then almost immediately he went on to say in a different tone of voice, that had a vein of new anxiety in it, Billie thought: "I wonder why Donald is rubbering so much for toward the southwest. Perhaps he feels the hot breeze that's beginning to blow from there. I hope it doesn't mean we're going to have a sand storm."

Billie pricked up his ears, so to speak; that is, he showed considerable interest, and himself turned to watch Donald.

"He does look like he had got on the track of something out of the usual run, for a fact," he muttered, uneasily.

Then he sneezed several times in quick succession, at which Adrian looked as if even this simple event had its significance.

"Beginning to be dust in the air, and I always sneeze when it tickles my nose," Billie started to say, as if in apology for his explosion.

"Yes, the breeze is picking up, and already the air is starting to get full of the fine sand," Adrian told him.

"Does that mean we're bound to run up against a real sand storm?" Billie wanted to know at once, scenting trouble.

"Donald's coming this way, and we'll soon hear what he thinks," was all Adrian would say.

"Looks to me as if we're going to get caught out here in a lovely mess," Donald told them, as he came up.

"Sand storm, is it?" demanded Billie, trying not to show any apprehension, for he never wanted others to know when his heart was beating faster than its wont.

"Yes, and coming down on us like two-forty," the other declared. "Watch the nags, and you'll see that they know what they're in for. Here's *Wireless* been looking over that way every little while for ten minutes past. The wind's rising, and all around us the sand is stirring, so that the air's getting thicker all the while. Before half an hour we'll have the worst of it around us. It's about noon now, and let's hope that we get to the hills before night sets in."

"What's the programme?" asked Billie, undaunted Billie, carelessly enough.

"Keep as close together as we can travel, and go straight ahead," answered Donald; "there'll be all sorts of queer noises around us, so pay no attention to them. Be sure and keep your mouth shut all the time; and have water along with you, every fellow, so that in case one of us did stray away, he wouldn't die of thirst before he could be found. Now, let's push on again."

His words were more than verified, for presently the wind grew to the proportions of a gale, and the way that fine sand whirled through the air was something that Billie had never expected to experience in all his life.

It was a terrible task to press on, but luckily the prevailing wind was from the southwest now, and so they had the worst of the sand storm to their backs. Only for that they could not have



ventured to attempt any progress whatever; but must have camped where they were, to wait for the whirlwind of sand to cease.

Billie, with his head bowed, and drawing his breath with great difficulty, kept steadily moving on. He managed to keep in close touch with his chums for some time, and then, falling into some sort of a dreamy state, possibly brought about by his sufferings, and the effect of the blinding sand with which the air was charged, he forgot to keep constantly on the alert. The consequence was that suddenly Billie aroused to the startling fact that neither to the right nor to the left, nor yet ahead of him could he discover the faintest sign of the others. All about was the whirling, blinding sand; while strange noises made his head ring, and he fancied that he could see tempting pools of cool water close at hand, which his common sense told him were only the effect of imagination.

And then and there Billie had a cold sensation in the region of his heart that contrasted strangely with his torrid surroundings, for he knew that he was lost!

## **CHAPTER XI.—AN UNPLEASANT EXPERIENCE.**

At first poor Billie was almost wild with the fear that swept over him, when he realized his true condition, and that he was lost in that sand storm in the heart of an Arizona desert.

He started to shout, but made a sorry mess of it. The fine sand almost choked him as soon as he opened his mouth; and the fierce wind that was sending it scurrying all around in little whirlwinds carried his feeble cry away, so that he knew it could not be heard twenty feet distant.

He sat there on the back of Jupiter, and waited, still hugging the hope to his heart that his chums would immediately miss him, and come hastily back on their course to find him. And if that happened, Billie knew that his chances would be considerably improved did he stay where he was, rather than start roaming this way and that.

But the minutes lengthened into nearly half an hour, and there was not the slightest sign of any one being near him. The storm still kept up, and Donald had said that the probability was it would continue until sundown, when the wind might lull, so as to allow the choked atmosphere a chance to rid itself of the floating gritty sand.

By degrees Billie began to get his nerve back. He was far from being a coward; only he lacked experience; and was moreover hardly fitted either physically or through education for butting up against these rude experiences.

"I've just got to do something, and I can't stay here, that's plain," he told himself; "which means I've got to go on. But I want to be mighty careful about how I travel. I've heard tell how people are apt to go round and round in a circle till they're played out, and exhausted. None of that for me; and why should there be when I'm carrying that precious little compass."

Thereupon Billie fumbled around in the various pockets of his khaki hunting coat, meaning to find the said compass, and get his bearings. He had quite a fright at first, for he failed to find it where he expected; and was running through all his other pockets wildly, when he happened to remember placing it in his hat at the time he last looked at the instrument, which was when one of his chums mentioned the fact that they would have to depend on the magnetic needle should they be overwhelmed in just such a storm.

It was a great relief to the fat boy to discover the little brass bound compass safely lodged in his hat when he hastily looked. Owing to the air being filled with the flying sand it was only after considerable difficulty that he could see just which way the indicator pointed. So he started off, urging the unwilling Jupiter to put his best foot forward, though the animal gave evidences of being more inclined to stand still, with his tail toward the storm.

Billie would never be likely to forget that terrible experience. Why, the worst he had pictured came far short of the reality.

He suffered keenly constantly, and many times thought he could not bear it any longer; but it is wonderful how much any one can do when they are compelled to by a merciless fate; and so as the time dragged on poor Billie kept moving along, always keeping toward the north, as best he could decide.

When he came to examine his little watch, and saw how late it was getting, he was ready to throw up his hands, and quit. It looked as though he was just bound to spend a lonely night out there on the wild desert, no matter how he fixed it; and that being the case, why not give in now, and have it done with?

Besides, he was utterly worn out with trying to urge the unwilling Jupiter on; as well as from his own physical sufferings. Half blinded, and hardly able to get his breath on account of the fine dust that settled in both nostrils and throat, Billie was an object of pity to himself about that time.

When he made up his mind that he must grin and bear it, even if compelled to camp there all by

himself on that dreary waste, Billie started to dismount. Why, at first he could hardly move, he was so stiff with sitting there in the saddle so long, and in a cramped position; but exerting himself again, he managed to half tumble to the ground.

Jupiter did not offer to run away. Indeed, the horse seemed to cower close to his young master, as though trusting to his sagacity in this emergency. Billie noticed this, and somehow it struck him as curious; it also did more than a little to bolster up his courage. For if the broncho felt such confidence in him, surely he must exert himself to prove that he was worthy of such sublime faith.

After all it was little he could do save cower there, patiently waiting for sundown to come; for he remembered that one of his chums had said the sand storm was very apt to peter out at about that time.

How glad he was that he had water with him,—not enough to share with Jupiter, to tell the truth, for he could not tell how long he might remain lost, and was apt to need every drop himself, to keep life in his body.

The animal whinnied whenever he opened his canteen to wet his parched throat, and somehow the sound made sympathetic Billie feel badly. After that he made it a point to step aside when he meant to quench his own thirst, just to avoid having Jupiter reproach him for being stingy. But it was not to be thought of for a minute, because the horse would exhaust the flask, and then not be a quarter satisfied, leaving him in a desperate state indeed.

Fortunately he had a little food with him, and this he proceeded to munch as he sat there behind the shelter of the horse.

He asked himself if the storm showed any signs of diminishing its fury; and after taking several estimates joyfully admitted that at least the wind was not so fierce as formerly.

This in itself was a glorious sign, for without the wind the sand could not fill the air; and by degrees it must settle down once more, so that one might breathe without feeling choked.

If that would only come about Billie felt that he could easily stand anything and everything else that was liable to happen. But should he have to endure that agony another few hours he believed he would go out of his mind.

Yes, there could not be any mistake about it, the storm was surely subsiding, and if conditions kept on improving as they seemed to be doing now, by the time night set in fully it was going to be a thing of the past.

Billie even began to tell himself that he had no reason to complain, because it might have been a great deal worse. Except for the fact that he was compelled to keep a lone camp, away out there on that desert, and was tired almost to death, he could not say that his condition was in any way dreadful. Yes, he even believed he had plenty of water to quench his thirst; though it was evident that he would have to cut his allowance down to half rations, for his repeated sips had already caused the big canteen to feel considerably lighter.

Looking up toward the heavens when he found that night had really set in, he was surprised to find that he could not see a single star; and the moon was also absent. This must mean that there were clouds sailing over him, something quite out of the common where a desert is concerned; since rain seldom if ever is known to fall there; for if it did the desert would not long remain such, but blossom like the rose with fertility.

“Going to be a black night, in the bargain,” he grumbled; “seems like a fellow just has to rub up against all sorts of things when once they get started. But so far I hadn’t ought to complain. I only hope the other boys fare as well. Wonder how about them now; and if they got off the desert? Chances are they hunted around for Broncho Billie more’n half the afternoon. P’raps they’re keeping everlastingly at it even now. Huh! reckon Billie ain’t a baby, and can look out for himself some, if I do say it myself, as hadn’t ought to. Huh! I’m alearning right fast, seems to me.”

The fact that he had come out so well thus far seemed to inspire a new confidence in the stout boy. He even patted himself proudly on his chest, and congratulated himself on having snapped off several pictures of the gathering cloud of sand as it bore down upon them. If these turned out halfway decent, he would have something worth while to exhibit to his schoolboy friends away off in the East, when he went home again after his vacation was over.

The wind having died down fully now, the sand settled, and Billy believed that if it were daytime he might see where the hilly country lay in the midst of which was the Zuni village. But of course, in the darkness of a moonless night he could not make any sort of a discovery, and must apparently be satisfied to remain there in his makeshift camp until another day dawned, and brought new hope in its train.

He had secured Jupiter the best way he could, not wanting the pony to wander away during the time he, Billie, might be asleep. That would be a calamity the fat boy disliked to even contemplate. It was bad enough having to ride over that scorching sand; but to be compelled to

go afoot, with the heat burning through the soles of his shoes, must be ten times worse.

The pony had evidently made up its mind that what "could not be cured must be endured." He stood there, close to where Billie had camped, and hardly moved. Perhaps later on he would lie down to rest, for he too must be weary, after such a strenuous day.

Billie found himself nodding presently. He was tired clean through, and knew of no reason why he should not secure his fair portion of balmy sleep, the strength renewer.

Once he had thought he might try shouting as loud as he could, but gave the idea up as useless. Even if his chums heard him in the far distance what good would it do to start them out on the desert again, roaming all around in search of him? No, it was best that he simply make the time pass by what means lay in his power, and with the dawning of another day he would feel refreshed, so that he could set out toward the north, always toward the north, he kept on telling himself, as he fondly touched the pocket where the compass was securely hidden.

Again Billie was nodding as he sat there. Had he been left undisturbed the chances were that before five minutes he would have rolled over in his blanket, and settled down to sleep; and after that the hours would slip along, for Billie was a famous sleeper.

But this was not to be, for a certain sound came stealing along over the desert and struck upon the ears of the boy, causing him to instantly sit up, wide-awake:

"Wolves, as sure as anything!" he told his pony, already whinnying the alarm.

## CHAPTER XII.—THE LONG NIGHT.

"That's right, it never rains but it pours," Billie went on to say, as he fondled his Marlin repeating rifle, which had of late proven its value in many ways; one of which accounted for the skin of a grizzly bear which the overseer at the Red Spar Mine had promised to cure for the boy, and send to the ranch later on.

He listened and soon made up his mind that the howls were approaching.

"Course they just seem to know there's a chance for a fine meal, out here on the wild old desert; and there they come, licketty-split, as fast as they can run. But they needn't think they've got an easy mark to deal with. Reckon that if I could knock over an old he-grizzly, I ought to be able to take care of a pack of cowardly wolves and coyotes. Huh! let 'em come, I say. But I wish that old moon'd peep out from behind them clouds; it'd sure be a heap more sociable like."

Brave words these were, and Billie doubtless meant to prove that he did not fear the coming of the four-footed pirates of the plains and the desert. All the same, his hands trembled more or less as he handled his gun, nervously drawing back the hammer several times, as if to make certain that it worked mechanically.

There could be no doubt but that the wolves were heading straight toward him. Billie was amazed. Why, had it been daylight, so that they could see him with their sharp eyes, they could not be taking a more direct course toward the spot where he and Jupiter were encamped.

Once he thought that perhaps he ought to jump on the back of his pony, and let the broncho shoot off over the desert as he pleased; feeling certain that Jupiter would do everything that lay in his power to keep out of the reach of the wolves.

Hardly had this idea occurred to him than he turned it down.

"That would be fool's play," he declared, aloud, so that Jupiter might hear him, and perhaps understand what motives influenced his actions. "They'd keep right on after us, and sooner or later we'd just have to haul up and fight it out. So what's the use changing base? If it's got to come, this is as good a place as any. And if I've been and got anywhere near the border of the desert, what a goose I'd be to head back into it again, when that sand storm may commence in the morning. No sir-ee, here I take my stand, come what will; and that's all there is to it!"

Somehow Billie felt better after all that heroic talk. It does brace one up to exhibit such defiance, say what you will about it.

He no longer lay there on his blanket, but was on his feet. The first thing he did proved that Billie was getting on, and no longer the greenhorn he had been; for he made sure to secure the canteen; in case Jupiter took it into his head to run away, he would not carry off this priceless article with him.

That proved to be one of the smartest things the boy had ever done in all his life, and showed how he was waking up these days, under the new conditions which surrounded him, making him think for himself. For the terrified pony did presently jerk loose, and go galloping away, much to the chagrin of his owner.

However, there was no time now for crying over spilt milk, as Billie told himself. The approaching wolves were very close, and would soon be upon him.

Billie tried to figure out whether the cowardly creatures would attack him immediately; or after their customary manner, hang about in a circle at an ever decreasing distance, waiting for him to be overpowered by sleep.

"Looks like I'm up against it," he said aloud; "and let's see how a Winkle can pull through. There's lots of 'em been soldiers, and never yet did one turn out to be a *coward*; and I ain't meaning to be the first, hear that?"

Whether he was addressing the wind, or the nearby wolves, Billie did not say; but his defiance was meant all the same.

He tried to penetrate the darkness so that he might see some object at which he could fire, for he wanted to make every bullet count, if possible. There was no telling how many of the wolves and coyotes there might be. If he kept on shooting them down, and more continued to arrive, the dreadful moment must come when he would run out of ammunition. What then? The programme ceased to interest Billie after that stage. True, he would still have his trusty hunting-knife, and that possessed a keen edge on both sides; but what a puny weapon it must always be in the hands of one unaccustomed to wielding a blade like that, and with an unnumbered throng of four-footed adversaries leaping about him.

Now the howls were along a different order. Billie fancied that he could trace exultation among other things in the last series; just as though the wolves began to feel sure of their supper, and rejoiced accordingly. Many a time had Billie himself shouted with glee because of that call to the spread; and now he was experiencing how it felt to be on the other side of the fence, with these hungry wolves springing to the feast.

Well, first he would at least have some satisfaction in knocking over a few of his lupine enemies—he believed that was what they were called in books he had read concerning their characteristics.

There was certainly something moving close at hand, and coming toward him too. Billie swung his ready gun that way. Looking closely he felt sure that he could make out a dark, slinking form—yes, and there were two shining dots that made him think of a cat's eyes as seen in the dark, such as he had often done at home.

Billie waited for no more. He knew the first of the wolves had arrived, and that he could not get busy any too soon now. The quicker he taught these varmints a much needed lesson, the better. Besides, if he could only succeed in killing a few of the gray rascals perhaps he might take that keen edge off the appetites of the others, for he knew that they would lose no time in pouncing on any of their mates from whom blood was drawn.

With this in mind he leveled his rifle, took as good aim as was possible under the conditions, and pulled the trigger.

Instantly a wild screech arose, proving that his bullet had not been wasted. He instantly got his rifle in readiness for further operations, and then grimly waited to see what followed.

There was a great scurrying around out there in the gloom, accompanied by all sorts of snapping noises, some growls, and the sounds of a battle.

"Glory!" ejaculated the boy, as he crouched there, trying to pierce the darkness that shrouded the scene so completely, "I do believe the rest of the gang have tackled the one I hit, and are tearing him to pieces right now. Ugh! hear 'em snap and growl, would you? Don't I wish it was light enough to see, and wouldn't I just like to send another chunk of lead straight in among the lot? Oh! why can't the beggarly old moon peep out, just to encourage a poor fellow once in a while?"

Apparently his earnest plea must have been heard, for just then there did come a break in the clouds, allowing the moon a chance to look out. Billie seemed to take it for granted that he was being favored, and that he must make a quick use of the golden opportunity.

He was already looking straight out toward the place where all this commotion seemed to be in progress, so that as soon as he saw the whirling figures there he started in to send several shots that way.

That he did not waste his ammunition was evident, for there was a wild scattering among the fighting animals; and he could plainly see several forms lying there, before the moon again hid her smiling face.

"Good boy! do it some more, can't you?" Billie cried out, being wildly exultant by this time, because of his success.

The wolves kept at some little distance after that. They had learned a lesson, and would be careful how they attacked the one who apparently had it in his power to deal out death at will.

Half an hour later he could hear sounds again in the same old quarter. He understood from this that the hungry beasts were making a meal off the unlucky victims of his fire, but as this suited him very well, Billie did not attempt to interfere.

That threatened to be the longest night in all his experience, for he knew that he dared not go to sleep, even for a minute, lest those daring beast of prey jump upon him; and once at close quarters, where the repeating rifle did not count for more than a cudgel, get the better of him.

Sometimes it was almost impossible for the boy to keep his eyes open, despite the fact that he was fully aware of the serious consequences, that would follow, should he forget himself. He fought fully fifty battles while night held sway; and often victory was gained only by a close margin; for more than once he had nodded until his head fell forward, and this served to arouse him again.

He had matches with him, and once in a long time used one so that he might have the consolation of learning the time of night.

It seemed to Billie that his little nickel watch must have stopped, though he had surely wound it up, and so far as he knew it was not subject to tricks of any kind. But those minutes did drag most terribly, and when four o'clock arrived he began to look toward the east most expectantly, though he knew full well that he could not possibly discover the first gleams of coming day for at least an hour and a half.

All was well, however, and that gave the boy considerable solid satisfaction. He experienced the pleasure that always accompanies a task rightly done; and even fancied that Donald and Adrian must find reasons for congratulating him, when they heard how he had kept guard all through that dreadful night.

He could hear the wolves moving around every little while, but as a rule they had learned their lesson well, and kept at a certain distance away. Then again it was of course possible that, not being so ferociously hungry as they had been in the beginning, they were no longer ready to take desperate chances.

Twice Billie had discovered a pair of glowing eyes shining in the darkness like twin stars; and thinking that he might as well do what execution was possible, while the chance remained, he had on both occasions carefully aimed his gun, and then fired. And as he gleefully told himself on each occasion, from the clamor that ensued he felt pretty positive that he had hit something. The other wolves did the rest; because that was what they were on the spot for, to secure a meal.

But now it was almost time when he felt he must detect those welcome signs in the east that would tell of coming day.

Billie rejoiced to know that he had really come through that terrible night in such decent condition. He was not a particle sleepy now, for all that had worn off, and he felt that he could hold his own. All the same, he continued to look anxiously toward that promising quarter of the horizon where he must soon discover the first gray streaks of morning.

### **CHAPTER XIII.—THE PANGS OF STARVATION.**

"I really and truly believe that's it, coming along at last; and say, I give you my solemn affidavit right now, that I never saw daybreak as thankfully as this same morning!"

That was what Billie was telling himself, as he strained his eyes, and perhaps his imagination at the same time, in staring into the magic east, where all his hopes lay. As the reader has found out before now, this same Billie was something of a talker, and could ask more questions in ten minutes than most fellows would think up in an hour. And when he had no one else to impose on as an audience, he did not hesitate to talk to himself, yes, and often carry on a regular conversation in that way.

But at least his hopes with regard to the breaking of day were not doomed to be disappointed this time; for that was really the first faint streak beginning to light up the horizon, where it lay low and flat against the east.

He watched it slowly broaden, and kept telling himself that he was a mighty fortunate boy to be able to see the morning, after all his troubles.

At the same time Billie felt a dash of real pride, to think that he had managed to hold his own, even when pitted against the perils of the desert.

"Oh! yes, I'm getting to be a veteran, that's what," he remarked, complacently, when he found that he could begin to see a little over the sandy range, where the small dunes showed the fury of the previous day's dry storm; "and mebbe I won't have a stunning story to spin for the benefit of my two chums, when we get together again. Say, by the way, I wonder where they are right now; and if Broncho Billie after all will have to do the rescue act for the rest of the bunch?"

That was certainly putting on airs for you; it would be the climax of all his experiences if some time or other he, the late greenhorn, could run across an opportunity to stretch out his hand and render assistance to those seasoned prairie range boys.

All at once Billie remembered something.

"Wow! I have got a fine lookout before me, now, haven't I; without a broncho to help me along my weary way? Hang that measly Jupiter, why couldn't he have stuck by me? He ought to have known Little Billie better than that. I was able to keep them fierce wolves from devouring him, sure I was; didn't I prove it by knocking over a whole lot of the critters. And that reminds me I ought to step out to see what became of my game."

This he at once started to do; and it gave him a creepy sensation when he made the discovery that all there was left of the slain animals were some scattered and clean-picked bones, together with fragments of gray hide. The balance had completely vanished before the assaults of the rest of the wolfish pack.

"Whew! that's what I call going some!" exclaimed the astonished boy, as he surveyed the battlefield ruefully; "and I reckon I ought to feel thankful they didn't get a chance to try their sharp teeth on me. I owe a heap to this faithful gun of mine; and after this nothing will ever tempt me to sell the same, or give it away. It ought to be handed down to my grandchildren, and kept with a red ribbon tied on the same, hanging from the wall; like that old Revolutionary musket is in our house, which was once owned by my ancestor, who fought under General Marion, the Swamp Fox. Oh! but I'm hungry, though; and that reminds me my troubles ain't over yet by a jugfull. I could eat a petrified loaf of bread, or even a—a—well, a muskrat; and I used to think they were the limit when I saw that trapper in the marsh cook one, and call it musquash, fine and dandy."

The prospect for breakfast certainly looked pretty slender to poor Billie.

He stared hard all around him, as the light grew stronger, and a rosy flush told where the coming sun would presently break above the horizon, to start another hot day. Not a thing in sight was there, that gave promise of succor. As on the previous day, one could not see any great distance accurately, on account of a peculiar haze; and this prevented him from making out the hilly ranges that he felt sure must lie to the north, and not such a tremendous distance away either.

So Billie heaved a big sigh, as he reduced his girth by drawing in his belt.

"If this keeps on I'll soon be as thin as a living skeleton," he told himself, as he counted the remaining holes in the leather, and figured on how he would look when he had by degrees reached the end of the string.

Gathering up his blanket, and making as small a bundle of it as possible, he shouldered this, and then set his face toward the Promised Land, which, in his case, lay directly to the north.

His little compass again came in handy, and showed him his course. Every few minutes the anxious boy would consult it feverishly, for he was dreadfully afraid that he might wander away from his prearranged route, and get to making that fatal circle he had heard lost people usually traveled.

When not staring at the face of the small, brassbound compass Billie was casting his eyes ahead, and trying with might and main to make out something hopeful there, the dim outlines of rocky elevations perhaps, anything to break the horrible monotony of that dreary sandy waste of which he was already so heartily sick that he hoped he might never set eyes on another desert in all his life.

And of course the more he considered his deplorable condition, the worse his sensation of hunger became. It seemed to Billie that he could not have eaten much of anything for a whole week, and he feared he would soon become so weak from starvation that it must be impossible for him to put one foot in front of another.

And yet this was the same boy who had devoured almost as much of that cooked venison at noon on the second day previous, as his two chums combined; followed that up with a hearty supper; then a breakfast and a lunch on the day they pushed out on the desert, and finally finished what food he had with him on the preceding evening.

Still, he was frightfully hungry, just as boys who never have missed a regular meal in all their lives, do get, when up against it for a change.

Billie plodded on.

The sun was now an hour high, and getting very hot, he thought, as he stopped to drop his burden and rest; while he took his red bandana handkerchief and mopped his streaming brow with it.

"I wonder how long I can hold out this way?" he asked himself, with a most forlorn air, and a dismal shake of the head. "If I only had some dried beef, or venison like the Injuns call pemmican,

to gnaw on, it wouldn't be so bad; because then I'd keep my strength; but seems like there's a gnawing inside me like my appetite was beginning to start on my vitals. I wonder if all starving people feel that way first. Oh! how ashamed I ought to be about the many times I've thrown away good crusts of bread, and such things. I'll never be guilty of such a sinful waste again, so help me. I've reformed, I have, and I'm going to lead a different life after this, licking my platter clean every time. If I only had some of the stuff I've wasted right now," and he fairly groaned as the delightful array came before his mental vision to tantalize him.

All at once Billie seemed to feel an electric flush. He rubbed his eyes, and looked again, as though fearing that he was dreaming.

Why, that peculiar haze, which is so often met with in dry seasons of the late summer, and hides the features of the landscape even within a mile of the observer, had apparently mysteriously lifted, so that he could see hills ahead; yes, and at no great distance either, the green trees looking like heavenly dashes of color after his eyes had been so long accustomed to only that deadly white of the desert.

"It is, I really and truly believe it must be my goal!" he exclaimed, almost in passionate delight. "Oh! there may be a chance for me yet; unless this is just one of them mirages they say dying men always see on the desert, before the end comes. But I must press on. One more notch I'll take my belt up, and after that you watch me toddle for that Paradise ahead. Oh! don't it look inviting, though? Will poor old Broncho Billie ever live to reach it?"

He did press resolutely on, although the heat began to tell upon the fat boy very seriously. It seemed to Billie that he was baking, yet he was that stubborn he refused to drop his blanket, or gun, or the first thing he was carrying like a pack horse.

"What's that I see over there?" he suddenly asked himself, shading his eyes from the glare of the sand by holding one trembling hand above them. "Moving figures, eh? Now, I wonder if they're Injuns, and p'raps them same hostile young Apache bucks we had trouble with before. Well, here's my faithful Marlin ready for business as always. It kept me from being made a supper for them wolves, and I reckon now it ought to do the same—but hello! seems to me I ought to recognize the way them fellers ride! Glory hallelujah! if it ain't my bully chums, for sure; and say, if that ain't Jupiter trailing along after 'em, I'll eat my hat! Oh! joy unbounded; for now I don't have to starve to death."

That was his first thought, and seemed to afford him the most consolation; for in the mind of Billie there could not be a more terrible fate meted out to any mortal here below than having to go without his regular meals; which proved that the fat boy was not made out of the same stuff as the suffragettes over the sea.

Swiftly the two others bore down upon him, swinging their hats above their heads, just as cowboys always will when excited, and giving vent to the wildest cheers. Billie grinned with happiness as they came closer and closer. He even began to champ his teeth, as though desiring to make sure that his jaws were still capable of doing their customary duty, before starting in to make up for lost time.

"Hurray for Billie!" cried Adrian, as he drew in his reeking pony close by. "He's all wool and a yard wide, sure he is; and his pards are proud of him," Donald shouted. "Here, give us your hand, Billie; this is the biggest round-up ever. We were afraid you'd come into a peck of trouble; but we ought to have known you better than that. Ain't he just the jim-dandy fellow, Adrian? Full-fledged by now, and taking nobody's dust. Yes, I say with you, hurray for Broncho Billie!"

But the wanderer, though undoubtedly gratified by this expression of confidence shown by his chums only stretched out his hands and exclaimed:

"Food! gimme something to eat, fellows, because I'm starving!"

#### **CHAPTER XIV.—THE ZUNI SNAKE CATCHER.**

Whatever the other boys may have thought about it, knowing that Billie could not have gone a great while without food, they understood his weakness too well to make any remark.

Fortunately they had something along with them; for as cowboys Donald and Adrian had long ago learned to always look ahead, since no one could tell when he would need food when abroad on the range. And so they quickly thrust into Billie's eager hands quite a quantity of stuff.

He ate like a hungry wolf, while his chums sat there in their saddles, and waited patiently for him to take the first savage edge off his appetite. Billie was mumbling to himself meanwhile, just as a starving boy might when food has come into his possession. In imagination he had been pretty far gone; but it was all right now; and soon Billie was feeling himself again.

"Thought I could make way with a cartload of grub," he said, "judging from the way my empty stomach kept griping me; but seems like I'm stalled already. P'raps it wasn't *quite* so bad as I believed; but excuse me from ever going through such a terrible experience again. Just thinking

you're starving to death is mighty near as bad as the real thing!"

"You're right, Billie; and more than one man has just died from the effects of imagination, believe me," said Adrian.

"But ain't you going to tell us all that happened to you since you lost touch with us yesterday?" demanded Donald, showing how anxious he and Adrian must be to know what their lost chum had been doing all this while; and how he had been able to keep steadily on, headed into the north.

"Yes, when we found Jupiter grazing along the border of the desert this morning," Adrian went on to say, "we thought at first you must be in camp, and we looked everywhere but couldn't see hide nor hair of you. Then Donald here noticed that while the pony had his saddle and bridle on, you'd roped him; and from that we guessed he must have broken away when you had him staked out, for your pin was at the end of the lariat. Then we *were* in a stew, because we knew what it meant to be left on foot out on the desert."

"What made the pony break away, Billie?" asked Donald, suspiciously.

"When the wolf pack came down on me, the beast got frightened, and just left his poor master in the lurch," returned the rescued one, calmly, yet watching out of the corner of his eyes to notice the others exchange quick looks, and nod their heads, as if to say: "see, just like I told you, Billie was equal to anything that came along; he's all right, Billie is!"

"Wolves, eh?" remarked Adrian, presently.

"So the hungry critters got scent of you last night, did they, Billie?" questioned the other chum, eagerly; "and you must have had a tough time staying awake to chase the pack away. Knock over any?"

"Oh! I don't know how many, because as fast as I bowled one over the rest would jump in, and gobble him up. This morning all I could find there, was a lot of bones scattered about, and some chunks of hair."

Billie said this as coolly as though after all it were a very little matter, and hardly worth mentioning, after a fellow had alone and unaided slain a grizzly bear.

"And you've really not had any sleep all night, then?" Adrian asked; as though that was the most astonishing part of the whole business in his eyes.

"Never a wink I can truthfully say," the hero of the occasion declared, holding up his right hand in affirmation; "but I'm feeling all right again now. I could stand the wolf part of it, yes, and the keeping on guard a thousand hours, like it seemed to me; but the *starving* was just awful. I'm mighty glad to be with you both again. And p'raps, when noontime comes, we can cook something warm."

"Oh! we'll promise you that, old fellow," laughed Adrian; "but let's be getting out of this blistering heat. I think it's even worse after that sand storm. Over yonder we've got our camp, with poor old Bray waiting for us. He pulled through in good shape, because a mule is tougher than most horses. Come, jump up in your saddle again, and see how it feels to ride."

Billie had stepped over and secured Jupiter. The truant horse actually seemed glad to greet his stout master again, for he had given several snorts, and rubbed his velvety muzzle against Billie's hand, as though apologizing for having deserted him so basely. But Billie was of a forgiving nature, and could not hold a grudge. He was moreover so delighted to see his mount again that he just forgot his grievance.

It was with some difficulty, however, that he climbed into his saddle, for his limbs seemed more or less stiff after such a wakeful and uneasy night of it. Once mounted, and they started to gallop over the billowy surface of the desert, heading toward the nearby hills.

Billie soon began to experience the old familiar sense of exhilaration as of yore.

"This is what I call great!" he called out, as he urged Jupiter on after the flying steeds of his chums; "they say you never miss the water till the well runs dry; and I'm sure I never really appreciated what a joy it was to ride till I had to peg it afoot this same morning. But I've had a great experience all around, boys, and I've learned my lesson, yes, lots of 'em."

"Glad to hear it," said Adrian, over his shoulder; "and what might one of the same be, Billie?"

"Never to scorn small things, and to lick the platter clean," responded the fat boy, promptly; "why, all morning long I've been haunted by remorse, I tell you. Seemed like I could see the ghost of every bit of food I've wasted for years rising right up to accuse me. You notice how different I'm agoing to live after this. No scraps going to waste from *my* dish, let me tell you."

The others laughed heartily, and remarked that such noble sentiments did their author proud; also more to the effect that from that time forth they would expect to see Billie putting on additional weight, since, if he wasted nothing, his rations must increase in proportion.



Presently they reached the border of the desert, and Billie gave a cheer as he found himself actually under the shelter of the trees, whose green branches he had seen when far out on the sandy waste.

The tent was soon rounded up, with Bray tethered close by; and it seemed to Billy, whose heart was overflowing with gratitude and thanksgiving, that the old pack mule's salute was meant in honor of his coming back from the dead, as it were.

"So this is the country where the Zuni village is located, is it?" Billie asked, later on, when they began to make ready to break camp, and start off once more, this time avoiding the desert, and sticking to the hills.

"Yes, somewhere not a great distance off we can expect to run across the canyon where the rock houses that are really caves, were cut out, hundreds of years ago by the ancient cliff dwellers," Adrian went on to say.

"And," added Donald, "it wouldn't surprise me if we ran across some of the Indians any old time now, because this must be their stamping ground. Get your cayuse, Billie, and we'll be off. Course you feel rocky after not getting any sleep last night, but it'll wear away. Don't I know what it is, after night wrangling the saddle band of horses, when there were cattle rustlers hanging around, ready to stampede the herd, so the boys couldn't set out after them? All ready to start, Adrian? Then here we go!"

So the three of them set out, with the pack mule bringing up the rear, as unwilling to move as ever, and having to be half dragged along, until the fit of stubbornness wore away.

Donald remembered all that he had been told concerning the ground they were now passing over and accordingly laid his course toward the northeast.

Sometimes they were surrounded by rocks, and then again trees would add a pleasing change to the landscape.

"There's the first Indian!" remarked Donald, suddenly, as he reined in *Wireless*, and pointed ahead.

"Whatever do you s'pose he's adoin' there, a-bending down, and hunting like he'd lost something precious?" Billie wanted to know. "They don't pick up diamonds around here, now, I shouldn't think, do they, Donald?"

"Well, the diamondbacks are found in another part of the country," replied the other, with a laugh; "but these smaller prairie rattlers are just as poisonous, I'm told, even if they don't look so terrible."

"Oh! do you mean that warrior is ahunting rattlesnakes?" demanded Billie, with a shiver; for, as we happen to know, he had lately found reason to conceive a great aversion for the scaly reptiles, one and all.

"Looks like it to me," replied Donald. "You see, their big dance comes along soon now, and as they need a lot of the wrigglers to show off before the people who come here just to see them do their stunts, why, of course they've got to hustle, and call in every one that lives around this section."

They slowly advanced toward the spot where the Zuni brave was bending down, and with a stick tickling a coiled snake, in order to induce him to straighten out, so there would be little danger of his striking when he was snatched up; for it is a peculiarity of the rattlesnake that he cannot defend himself unless coiled, which is the reason they instantly throw themselves that way when alarmed.

"Oh! a heap of people believe they draw out the poison fangs, and the little sack that holds the green fluid, so that there ain't no danger after all," remarked Billie, in rather a loud voice, as they halted close by to watch the Zuni finish his risky task.

He must have heard what Billie said, and understood the implied slur, though he kept right on with his job. They saw him finally succeed in inducing the rattlesnake to uncoil, and start to wriggle away; when quick as a flash that dusky experienced hand shot out, the fingers closed upon the neck of the snake, and thus it was lifted triumphantly from the ground.

"He's beckoning to us to come up closer," said Donald, guessing what the dusky Zuni brave wanted with them; and a minute later they were bending over from their saddles, watching him, while he squeezed his captive in such a fashion that its jaws spread wide open, and revealed two long fangs projecting from the upper jaw, and from which drops of a greenish fluid were slowly exuding.

"There, what do you say to that now, Billie?" exclaimed Donald, as he turned to see the fat chum staring at the snake, with whitened cheeks, and a horrified expression on his plump face.

"Gosh! it ain't so that they take out the poison sack, is it?" muttered Billie; "and that stuff must be the deadly thing they push into a fellow when they strike! Oh! ain't they the limit, though, them rattlers? And I ought to be thankful every day I live that I didn't go all the way down into that hole when I slipped."

The Zuni never even smiled as he saw how easily he had convinced the three white boys that this snake at least had not been tampered with before caught. He did not appear to be surprised to see them here. Doubtless at this particular season of the year they were accustomed to having quite a number of white people visit the village, to examine its wonders. And of course the shrewd Zunis always made it a point to have plenty of curios to dispose of, at fancy prices, to these palefaces who had heard the story of their wonderful rock homes, and had come hundreds of miles it might be, to gaze on the same with their own eyes as one of the curious things of Arizona.

He turned and stalked away, his keen black eyes evidently on the watch for signs of other snakes; though from the way his bag was filled out, he must already be carrying several at the time.

"Looks kind of interesting, eh, Adrian?" remarked Donald.

"I reckon we're going to be well paid for that tough ride across the desert," was the other's reply; but as for Billie, he only shrugged his plump shoulders, and muttered something to the effect that it was queer what some people saw in horrible sights; but as for him, he would rather spend his time going through a county fair, where they had all sorts of good things to eat, than to witness a dozen of these hideous rattlesnake dances; though of course, since they were on hand, and his chums seemed so set on witnessing the ceremony, he supposed he'd just have to stand for it.

"Anyhow, I got a snapshot of that queer looking Zuni holding that snake by the neck, with its jaws open," he added proudly, at which the others complimented him on his smartness, though this was not news, since both had heard the sharp "click" when Billie pressed the button.

Donald was taking careful note of his surroundings. His prairie education really enabled him to tell which way a certain trail he had struck run; and it seemed plausible that by following this up they must sooner or later arrive at the cliff where all those ancient homes had been hollowed out centuries back. To tell the truth Donald already had a good idea where it lay; judging from the trend of the ground, and what he saw beyond, where the rocky elevation started upward.

Several times they discovered moving figures, and in each instance these proved to be other braves who, carrying bags slung over their shoulders, seemed to be also hunting for the crawling reptiles whose day was so close at hand. Rattlesnakes were apparently held in great respect by these simple people of the cliffs, perhaps because from ages back they had been looked upon as an oracle, or an object of worship.

Once or twice they even had a friendly nod from these searchers, who were apparently accustomed to seeing whites around the neighborhood of the village.

Donald had just drawn rein close to one of these young braves, meaning to ask if he were following the right trail to the village, when an exclamation from Billie caused both he and Adrian to raise their eyes.

What they saw was surely enough to cause them to stare; and as for Billie, he fairly gasped for breath.

A strange and hideous figure was coming along a cross trail, and both boys knew instantly that thus early in their visit had a lucky freak of fortune enabled them to gaze upon the wonderful Witch Doctor, the medicine man of the Zunis.

He was about as wonderfully rigged out as the wildest imagination could picture him; though Donald noticed that just then he did not wear the tinkling bells, and the little gourds that had stones inside to cause them to rattle with his every motion; these were only assumed on state occasions, when driving away the evil spirit that came with sickness; or when leading the wild dance of the tribe.

But all the same he struck Billie as the most fantastic figure he had ever run across in all his life; and the boy stared as hard as he could, almost forgetting to even breathe, as the medicine man crossed their trail, and started to move off in a stately manner, as though he realized that as the recognized head of the ancient Zuni tribe he had an office to hold that always demanded respect on the part of those with whom he came in contact.

"Whew!" muttered Adrian, "ain't that the limit, though?"

"He beats the one I saw in the Yellowstone Canyon all hollow," admitted Donald.

"My stars! what a great get-up!" whispered Billie, as though half afraid lest even such low tones might cause the Witch Doctor to turn upon him, and put him under some mysterious spell.

Donald turned to the young brave, who had salaamed when the old humbug strode past, and looked after him a little uneasily; for evidently the medicine man was greatly feared by the other members of the tribe, to whom he seemed "the real thing," as Adrian put it.

"Is that the Witch Doctor?" Donald asked, in a low tone as he bent down.

The brave nodded his head. Perhaps he wondered why these paleface boys did not exhibit more evidences of respect and fear when the wonderful fakir was passing. Perhaps he also secretly envied them their courage, too; for no Zuni brave dared to refrain from making that salaam when coming upon the man of magic, who could make the very rocks sing, and whose incantations frightened off the angel of death *sometimes*, when all conditions were favorable.

"Where is he going now?" continued Donald, just as though he may have been entertaining a suspicion as to the truth, and wished to substantiate the same.

The rattlesnake hunter lowered his voice so that the dreaded Witch Doctor might not hear him speaking; and this was what Billie heard him say in fairly good English at that:

"He go make much talk with Great Manitou—come back bimeby—much must do 'fore can lead rattlesnake dance. Ugh!"

With that, as though fearful that he may have said too much, the brave scurried away, his head bent low in the endeavor to locate still another of the reptiles, the presence of which was so vital to the carrying out of the great annual festival and its strange ceremonial dance.

The boys exchanged looks.

"Do you believe that, Adrian?" asked Donald, as he looked after the Witch Doctor, still close by, though receding from the spot where the three Broncho Rider Boys sat in their saddles.

"It sounds on a par with what you heard told at the mine, and at home among the punchers who've been over this way," answered the other, quietly. "And sure that young buck ought to know when the Zuni people expect their wonderful medicine man to hold daily talks with the Great Spirit in the mountain."

"Yes, the story runs that he disappears from sight for hours, and that while he's gone the Zunis who dare to listen hear the most wonderful strains of music coming from the inside of the mountain; and then perhaps that awful voice which they believe belongs to Manitou, the Great Spirit, with whom the medicine man is conversing, grumbles in the depths of the rocks."

"Hello! what's up now, Billie?"

Adrian asked this as he saw the fat boy suddenly slip out of his saddle, and start to run toward the receding figure of the Witch Doctor. The only reply which Billie deigned to make was to wave a hand in the air, while he kept his attention riveted on the object of his feverish advance ahead.

"Oh! I know what ails him!" exclaimed Donald, with a laugh; "see, he's gripping his little kodak in his hand. Billie has suddenly remembered that one of his purposes in coming here was to snap off some pictures, and that strikes him as the finest thing ever."

"And I reckon Billie knows a good subject when he sees it," chuckled Adrian, as he sat at ease in his saddle, and watched operations on the part of the kodak fiend.

Billie had judged where he might get a fine, unobstructed view of the retiring medicine man; and it was really laughable to see how quickly all his past troubles were forgotten when this glorious chance to get a splendid snapshot came along.

He stumbled several times, and once the boys feared he had smashed his camera against a rock; but as Billie kept right along they concluded that he had been smart enough to protect it in some way, possibly at the expense of his hands.

"Now he's got to the place he was aiming for; watch him shoot!" said Adrian.

They plainly heard the sharp "click" of the shutter as Billie made his exposure. So did the Witch Doctor, evidently, because Donald always said he gave an involuntary "duck," as if that metallic sound might have made him think of the hammer of a gun being raised.

The weird old Zuni humbug whirled around, and looked at Billie. He even raised a hand, and made some sort of threatening gesture. When he took a couple of steps in his direction poor Billie really believed he must be about to visit some terrible punishment upon his head as a judgment for his rashness; at any rate the boy spun around, and came hurrying back toward his chums, looking quite concerned.

But he need not have worried, for the medicine man was apparently not annoyed enough to give chase, or else he proved to be averse to exerting himself when he had serious business on his hands. He turned again, and walked away, vanishing among the rocks and brush.

"Oh! I got him, and believe me that was a splendid snapshot!" gurgled Billie, as he joined the

others; and after finding that he was not being pursued, showing signs of considerable relief.

Again Adrian and Donald exchanged glances. It was as though the same thought might have come suddenly into both their minds.

"I dare you to make the try!" said Donald, aggressively, as though he knew how such a proposition would meet with instant favor from Adrian, who would not be held in contempt for anything.

"I got you!" was the ready response, as the other jumped to the ground.

"What are you fellows meaning to do?" demanded the surprised Billie.

"Oh! just trail after that old humbug, and see where he goes," replied Donald.

## CHAPTER XVI.—THE BLANK WALL.

Billie wanted to go with them very much; not that he felt any great desire to come into close contact with that grim looking old medicine man; but he disliked being left alone worse still. After his recent experience on the desert he felt like having company, no matter under what conditions.

Of course the others would have much preferred that Billie stay with the animals, but neither of them dared hint as much. He had as much right to go as they did, if he felt so inclined.

So Donald hastily started to fasten the pack mule to a branch. As for *Wireless*, the broncho had been well trained, as a cow pony always is, and when his reins were dropped over his head he would stand a long time unless something unusual occurred to frighten him.

Adrian was of the same mind, as could be seen from the way he threw his bridle forward, and then landed on his feet.

"Me too," said Billie, promptly; and with the words he proceeded to fix *Jupiter* after the same fashion, knowing that the horses would be quite content to stand there in company.

All this had taken place in much less time than it takes to tell it. The Witch Doctor had disappeared from sight, but could not be so far ahead but that they might quickly overtake him, if they were spry.

Donald led off, as it had been his proposition which the others had accepted; and on this account, as well as his familiarity with the customs of these strange cliff dwellers, he might be accorded the position of pilot, during the time they remained in the neighborhood of the Zuni village.

The boy had taken particular note of the place where the strangely attired old medicine man had last been seen; and it took the three chums but a few seconds to arrive there.

Just as the guide anticipated, he found that there was something in the nature of a path worn along the rocks, and among the dead fragments of brushwood. It was as though the Witch Doctor had gone back and forth along this same route many times a week for years and years.

What influenced Donald and Adrian to accept of this sudden opportunity to spy on the Zuni medicine man it would be hard to say. Perhaps Donald, whose father was a mine operator as well as a big rancher, may have had a little notion that he would like to know more about the source of that precious metal which report said the old magician knocked from some wonderfully rich ledge inside the mountain nearby the village. That would not be so very strange after all, though the boy might be taking fearful risks in thus following such a vindictive old fellow as the Witch Doctor was reported to be.

As for Adrian, he did not have the same sort of temptation beckoning him on. In all probability the subject of mines and rich ore deposits would have failed to lure him; whereas the prospect of a pleasant little mystery to be solved would act as a spur.

And somehow, what Donald had told about that mysterious music, the strains of which often floated faintly to the ears of the Zuni people after their medicine man had betaken himself off to one of these famous audiences with Manitou, had taken a firm hold on the mind of Adrian. He hoped that before they quitted the country of the Zunis a chance would arise whereby they could find out if there was really any truth in these stories; and should it prove to be so, learn just what caused the music that the ignorant natives believed supernatural or angel voices.

And as has already been said, Billie went along simply because he was afraid to stay there alone, and not that he felt any particular interest in either gold mines or cherub voices.

Two minutes later, and Donald held up a hand warningly. That was enough to tell the others he had sighted the object of their pursuit. And as they did not wish to let the hideous figure that stalked along ahead know how he was being followed, they hung back until their guide again beckoned them on.

"He's just gone back of that line of brush yonder," Donald whispered, as they joined him. "Let's wait here a minute, to give him a chance to move along. And we can keep an eye on that cliff over yonder; because, unless I'm mistaken, he was heading that way when last I glimpsed him."

They crouched there and waited, Billie nervously fingering his camera, as if in readiness to use it again should the chance arise.

"There he goes!" ejaculated Adrian, suddenly.

"Oh! where?" asked Billie, giving a start, as if he had at first suspected that the old fellow might have stolen a march upon them; and from the way Billie looked above his head one would think he half expected that that hideous figure would come tumbling down upon them, his arms filled with rattlesnakes, perhaps.

"Over near the cliff, just as I said," replied Donald, pointing as he spoke.

"I see him, all right," announced Billie, immediately, as though that were something worth mentioning.

"Looks like he meant to climb up somewhere," suggested Adrian.

"We'll watch, and see the circus, then," added Donald; "but better keep down, so he won't glimpse us if he happens to look back this way."

"That's good advice!" muttered Billie, dropping flat, and then poking his head up as best he knew how, so that he might see without betraying his presence; Billie had not been in the company of these two prairie boys for weeks without picking up at least a smattering of the things they knew.

"Why, he's gone!" he exclaimed, a second or two later; and commenced to rub his eyes vigorously, as though inclined to suspect that they had played him a trick.

"Did you see that?" remarked Donald, of Adrian; for they had been looking all the time Billie was fussing, and getting himself so nicely fixed that he had temporarily lost track of the medicine man.

"He went behind that twisted cedar, and then seemed to just melt away in thin air," the other replied, with a vein of wonder in his voice.

"Then he *is* an old wizard after all, ain't he?" remarked Billie, hearing this.

"That remains to be seen," declared Donald. "Shall we go over there, and take a look around, Ad?"

"Sure he ain't just hidin' behind some rock?" asked Billie, grown cautious, it appeared, after his recent experiences.

"You can see for yourself that the whole face of the cliff looks open, and there isn't an outlying stone that would shelter a cat, much less a fellow of his heft," Donald told him; "how about it, Ad?"

"If you think it's right, why let's walk over, and make out to be interested in the formation of the wall of rock," replied the other. "If he chances to pop out on us, then we can make him believe we're geologists, and interested in the history of these old-time hills."

"A good idea, sure it is!" admitted Billie, always wanting to put in his oar, and at the same time willing to give praise where it was due.

Donald no doubt thought the same, even if he only smiled, and nodded his head.

Having thus decided they stepped out from their place of concealment, and in an apparently careless manner walked toward the cliff that reared its head far above, being fully a hundred feet from base to summit.

Billie trailed along in the rear. He did not feel wholly at ease, although in the society of his chums, whom he knew to be capable of holding their own with any ordinary peril. But somehow Billie had an idea that they were taking big chances when they accepted the risk of spying on the Witch Doctor. And he wanted to be in a position to render a good account of himself, in case anything happened.

He had slung his little camera over his shoulder by means of the strap attached for this very purpose; and now held his rifle in both hands, feeling very much of responsibility, somehow or other, because he came in the rear, and let them do all the looking for an explanation of the mysterious disappearance of the old Zuni, while he kept his eyes on the alert for trouble.

Just as Donald had so positively said, there were no outlying stones of any size along the base of this cliff. The two boys had even glanced eagerly upwards more than once, half expecting to discover signs that might tell how the mountain here had once been used by some of the cliff dwellers; but so far as they could see there was not a single hole hewn in that blank wall from top

to bottom.

Adrian picked up a piece of stone, as though carrying out the little scheme he had suggested about their pretending to be geologists; and while he and Donald put their heads together, as though they were examining the same, they were exchanging remarks.

"See any sign of the old fraud, Ad?" asked Donald.

"Not around here, that's flat," answered the other.

"But we're directly behind that crooked cedar," urged the rancher's son; "and as sure as I'm here, that's just where I saw him last. And you know as well as I do, Adrian, he couldn't have slipped away to either side, nor yet climbed the face of this cliff!"

His chum shook his head as he glanced all around; and then stepping closer to the face of the height that arose far above, he scrutinized it carefully.

Then he laughed.

"Tell you what, Donald," he said, "this makes me think of plays I've seen on the stage, where the magician disappears through the face of the rock in a wonderful way; but everybody knows that it's only canvas, painted to look like the solid wall. Here, though, there's no such thing; and yet you say he came to this spot and then just went up like a puff of smoke. Take it from me now, that there must be some secret way of getting in back here, if only we had the key to the mystery!"

"Whew! is that what you think too, Donald?" asked Billie, taking time to stare at the wall of rock, which up to now had interested him very little, since it was the Witch Doctor himself for whom he was looking.

"I reckon it must be something like that," Donald admitted. "We don't believe in magic, and all that stuff; there must be a real explanation for everything that looks so queer; if, as Adrian says, we only had the clue to the trail. But even the rocks here show no trace of his footsteps, so we can only give a guess how he gets in and out."

"Huh!" grunted the incredulous Billie; "I reckon, then we're up against a blank wall right now, in more ways than one; and the old chap's got us guessing, all right."

## **CHAPTER XVII.—A SECRET OF THE SACRED MOUNTAIN.**

"If we hang out here any length of time, Adrian, we'll try and come back to this place again, and see if we can make a discovery," suggested Donald, presently.

"You'll find me agreeable," replied the one addressed; but Billie made no remark, and doubtless secretly hoped they might change their minds.

"I've got the exact spot marked in my mind, so we won't make any mistake about it," Donald continued, seeming to have set his mind on solving this mystery, concerning which there was so much talk among the miners, and the visitors who came to the Zuni village from time to time, led by curiosity, and a desire to see the queer customs of this ancient people.

"It's his secret, all right," muttered Billie.

"And like as not," Adrian went on to say, thoughtfully, "handed down to him from his ancestors, or some other medicine man; for they tell me that at some time in their lives each Witch Doctor selects the one he thinks ought to succeed him, and teaches that party all the things he knows, that go to make him different from the other men of the tribe."

"Yes," added Donald, "as you say, this secret way of getting into the mountain has been known all the way back, for hundreds of years; but so much afraid are the Zunis of their medicine man, that never once would a brave dream of following the same, to watch him talk with Manitou in the heart of the Sacred Mountain."

"It's a trick, then, you believe?" questioned Billie.

"No doubt about that, Billie," Adrian replied, wishing to settle the matter once and for all in the mind of the other chum; "if you could once find the 'Open Sesame,' here to this rock, the same that Ali Baba did, you remember, in the '*Forty Thieves*,' ten to one you'd learn that the inside of the mountain has passages running through it every-which-way; and that once he gets inside the old humbug just feels able to appear and vanish whenever he feels like it, because he's right at home."

"Now, that sounds like hard, common-sense; and I'm beginning to think you're on the right track after all, fellows," Billie told them.

"That's comforting, anyhow," chuckled Adrian. "When we've advanced the argument so far that Broncho Billie approves of it, things begin to move, eh, Donald?"

"I s'pose now, that if one of your miners came along here, and set off his little dynamite cartridge right at the base of this same cliff, there'd be something showing after that, a hole in the rock that somehow we just can't seem to find now?" was the next suggestion on the part of the stout chum; who liked to think up all sorts of strange ideas that often bordered on the ridiculous; though he had been known to give his comrades a hint once or twice that had led to good results in their hands.

"We haven't any more business around here, have we, Ad?" asked Donald, with a little chuckle, as of amusement.

"I can't remember having lost anything," replied the other; "and if you've looked all you want to, and marked the place with a white stone in your mind, why, I reckon we'd better vamose the ranch."

"Second the motion; all in favor say ay—motion carried unanimously, so come on, fellows, let's back track to the ponies," Billie went on to say, hurriedly before Donald had half a chance to get a word in.

"All right, let's see if you can lead us there, Billie," suggested Adrian. "You've been showing some pretty clever stunts lately; and keeping track of things as you go, in case you want to return the same way, is part of the education of a true plainsman, you know."

Billie looked dismayed. The fact of the matter was that while they were on the way to this place he had been so busily engaged in keeping a bright lookout for signs of the dreadful medicine man, that he had paid little or no attention to the surroundings.

Still, that was no reason he should expose his ignorance to his chums, who, as Adrian had just said, were coming to have a good opinion of his abilities.

"Oh! all right, just as you say about it, boys!" he declared, cheerily; "but I'm hardly myself after my late terrible experience; and it might save time and bother if one of you took charge of the return trip. Not but that I'm able to do the thing, if it seemed really necessary—you understand that, of course."

Neither of his comrades made any remark, though able to read between the lines, and judge for themselves just how capable Billie might prove.

"Looks quite different in here to what it was out on the sand desert, don't it, boys?" Adrian remarked, after they had started away from the cliff.

"I should say it did," replied Billie, "with the trees around, and these bushes too. Ain't that a hazel bush, Donald, and this one, say, didn't you call it a rattlesnake weed once, when we were on the ranch?"

"Yes, but it doesn't get the name from being eaten by the crawlers, Billie. And here's another bush you ought to know," Donald told him.

"Buffalo berries, as sure as shooting," said the stout chum, eager to show that his memory was good. "I hid in a patch of the same that time I tried to coax an antelope up close enough to nail him, by waving my red bandana every little while. And he did come trotting along, now retreating, and then getting closer, till I just couldn't stand it any longer, and blazed away; but somehow I didn't get my game, though I thought I hit him, all right."

"But you could do much better than that now, Billie," said Adrian, soothingly; "because you've had ever so much experience since that try. Yes, and brought down game worth talking about, too."

"Thank you, Adrian; it's kind of you to say that, and I won't forget it soon, either!" declared Billie, as he turned his head to take one last look at the beetling cliff before they passed out of sight of it.

Immediately they heard him give an exclamation.

"Well, I declare!"

"What is it?" asked Donald, also whirling around.

"Why, he must have been watchin' us all the time, fellows; just think of the cunning of the old rascal!" continued the fat boy, whose face was filled with a mixture of surprise and alarm.

They did not have to question him any farther, because both of the others had by now made the same discovery that had arrested the attention of Billie when he turned to say good-bye to the mysterious cliff.

There, about three-fifths of the way to the top they sighted an object marked plainly on the white face of the wall. It was indeed the old medicine man, dressed in all his panoply of feathers and skins and colored beads until he looked like a gay advertising sign.

"Whew! he's staring right at us," said Billie, uneasily; "just like he knew we had gone and follered him here, and wanted to ask us what business it was of ours if he chose to sneak away and talk with the Manitou of his people?"

"Try your kodak on him, then, Billie, and have something to show to prove your story when you come to spin it," suggested Donald, who did not appear to be very much concerned over the new happening.

Apparently Billie thought this might not be a bad idea, for dropping his rifle he hastily swung the little camera around until he could grip it in both hands.

"Better hurry," warned Adrian, "because I think he's on to your dodge, and objects to being potted without having his palm crossed with silver. That's the way with most of the Indians along the line of the Southern Pacific now; they dodge, and hide their faces whenever they see a camera coming, or poked at them, until you throw them a quarter, when they'll pose."

"Click!" went the shutter, followed by a satisfied exclamation from the operator.

"That was another good one, I'm telling you!" Billie affirmed, triumphantly; "mebbe I won't have a dandy lot of views to pay for all my trouble in toting this same little black box all the way over desert and mountains."

"He still watches us," observed Donald; "and I'd give something just to know what is passing through the mind of that sharp old humbug right now; because he must guess that we're interested in his actions, or we wouldn't have followed him the way we did."

"Oh!" remarked Adrian, "chances are he's been followed many times before now, without anybody ever picking up any information worth while. Trust the crafty old scamp for knowing his business through and through. If you were close enough right now to see what he's doing I reckon you'd find him laughing in his sleeve, as they say, because we ran smack up against a dead wall over there. We're not the first, by a long sight, because the story of that lump of gold would be apt to lure lots of prospectors over this way. And they've been fooled every time by his disappearing so queer like. Perhaps some of them, being ignorant and superstitious like the Zunis, really began to believe the Witch Doctor did have the power to open the side of the mountain, whenever he wanted to talk with Manitou."

"Anyhow, it's plain he means to stand up there and watch us out of the place," Billie went on to say; and then being overwhelmed with his customary desire to acquire information he added: "looks like the face of that cliff is as flat as any house wall; so what d'ye think he can be standin' on up there all this while?"

"Some sort of small ledge, you'd find, if ever you got there," Donald advanced, positively enough, as though it did not admit of a doubt in his mind.

"Oh! that's it, eh?" Billie continued; "then he must have come out through some crack that we can't see from here."

"But we may, some fine day not a great while off," remarked Donald, lightly.

"That is, if you can find the way in down at the base?" said the fat chum, who did not like to take things for granted when they seemed to be barricaded with all manner of unsolved problems.

But as Donald turned away and resumed his progress along the trail he was heard to say, half to himself, though the others caught his words plainly enough:

"That hidden entrance down below shouldn't bother us any, if once we make up our minds we mean to see for ourselves what the old chap has got concealed inside his Sacred Mountain; because cowboys always carry ropes along, and it wouldn't be such a hard job, after all, to drop down from the top there, and land on that same ledge, some time when we knew the Witch Doctor was busy in the village. I've got the spot marked to a certainty in my mind, and all of you notice that there's the finest cedar growing directly above him on the top of the wall, just as if it had been meant to fasten a lariat to. Leave it to your Uncle Donald, and perhaps before a great while we'll make a try to solve the secret of the hidden treasure of the Zuni medicine man."

## **CHAPTER XVIII.—THE STRANGE HABITATIONS OF THE ZUNIS.**

Both of the others of course heard all that Donald said. Adrian only smiled, and nodded his head, as though the idea rather took his fancy; but Billie put up his broad shoulders in a way he often did when in sore doubt.

If his two chums made up their minds to try and invade the secret quarters of that hideous old medicine man, in the heart of the Sacred Mountain, why, Billie realized that he would have to accompany them. This would not be because they insisted on it, but on account of his never being of a mind to find himself left out, when an enterprise was planned, as though he might not be equal to the strain, for Billie was very touchy, and proud, for a good-natured boy.



This being the case he shuddered to imagine himself dangling at the end of a rope, far down the face of that sheer hundred and more foot cliff, with a drop beneath, in case the rope slipped, or broke, sufficient to insure a smash that was going to end his pilgrimage in this world.

But then Billie had learned that it was folly to cross a bridge before one came to it. While his comrades might lay great plans, there was always a chance that something would happen, making it impossible to try and carry the same out.

What was the use in borrowing trouble, anyway? To-morrow had not come, and wasn't his good mother always telling him that old maxim "sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof?"

So Billie concluded he would live in the present, and let the future take care of itself.

They were heading for the queer Zuni village right now, and before long he expected to get busy with his camera, taking all sorts of entertaining snapshots that later on must astonish and delight hosts of friends in the faraway East, after he returned home.

That they were now drawing very close to the Zuni settlement all of them knew to a certainty. Plenty of signs pointed that way—they could hear loud voices, and the laughter of children, just as though they might be approaching a village of white people; for after all, children do not differ very much, whether they be white, black, copper-colored or yellow; it is only when they grow older and copy the characteristics of their parents that they change, and follow the groove of their species.

"I can see the cliff, all right!" announced Billie, in some little excitement, as he stretched his fat neck to a dangerous degree, "rubbering," as he himself described it.

"Yes," said Adrian, "that's the top row of homes we see yonder; and if things are anything like I expect, from what I've heard we'll find a dozen other rows of holes in the rock most all the way down the cliff."

"But not near the bottom," corrected Donald; "because, you see, the only object that ever made these people, away back many hundreds of years ago, build their homes in this way was to feel free from their enemies, whoever they might be; and so far as I've been able to find out, nobody really knows who they were afraid of."

"P'raps the Injuns got on the warpath every little while; and made a raid, looking for scalps and plunder?" suggested Billie, quickly.

"You might think so," Adrian told him; "but it's been agreed on that when these same old cliff-dwellers held out in these valleys, making their homes high up in the air, and digging them out of the solid rock in certain places where it was easy to do the job, why, there were no Indians. That was long before the time of the red man, as we know him in history. So there you are, Billie."

"All of which is true," added Donald; "so think it over, Billie, and some time let us know what sort of an explanation you get to. Look, there are several more lines of holes in the rock, and you can see the many crazy ladders that lead up and down, like the lines of a puzzle."

"Sure thing," declared Billie, excitedly, "and there are some people climbing and coming down right along. Hurry up there, Jupiter, and quit your poking. I'm all of a quiver to get right in, and see these sights at close range. Oh! mebbe it ain't going to be in clover for me, with this jolly little kodak of mine. Won't I be able to snap off some of the funniest pictures you ever saw, with fat squaws and papooses ahanging to them ladders in all sorts of ridiculous positions? Well, let me tell you before we go any further, boys, I'm real glad I came."

"In spite of the scare you had when you fell into that rattlesnake den, eh, Billie?" ventured Adrian.

"And no matter if you did get lost on the desert, while a nasty sand storm was raging?" added Donald, mischievously.

"With the wolves keeping you awake all night in the bargain; can you say that, remembering all these things that have happened, Billie?" Adrian concluded.

The fat boy placed one hand in the region of his heart.

"Really and truly I'm glad right now," he went on, "and I'll be a dozen times more so before long, I'm thinking. All the things you mention belong to past history; and what's the use crying over spilt milk?"

"Hurrah for you, Billie!" cried Adrian.

"Remember what we used to write in our copybooks at school when we were kids," the fat boy went on, seriously; "mebbe I ain't got the words just right, but the sentiment is the same: 'The wheel of the mill ain't ever agoing to run again, with the water that is past.' Them's my sentiments every time, boys."

"Bully for Willie Winkle!" laughed Donald; "he's better to have along than any school teacher that

ever lived. But here we are, boys; and now look your fill, both of you, because you'll see sights such as few people ever get a chance to set eyes on, let me tell you."

And they did.

They had now turned a bend in the trail, so that the whole Zuni village was before them. It was a bustling scene, too, for there were scores of persons moving all about on the ground, among the rocks, and in the central plaza, where doubtless the ceremonial dances were wont to take place from time to time, according to the customs of these strange people.

The Zunis are very clannish, and never marry outside of their own people. They believe themselves to be far and above the common herd, and can look back to a past that antedates the history of all other tribes. Some of those wise men who have tried to study out their traditions associate them with the Aztecs or sun worshippers of Mexico; but they claim to go back centuries beyond the time of those really modern people.

Their dress is as picturesque as their mode of living, so vastly different from that of any Indian tribe in America. They are accustomed to meeting whites, and in reality shrewdly welcome strangers to visit their village, because they love to shine in the lime-light; and most of them are natural-born actors. Besides, they make a great deal of money in various ways, such as posing for pictures, selling quaintly woven baskets, pottery made after their tribal custom, and all sorts of souvenirs such as tourists with fat pocketbooks love to pick up, to prove that they have journeyed to the land of the "original people," known as the Zunis.

"Why, we ain't the only strangers here, after all!" ejaculated Billie, shortly, as he and his two chums came closer to the scene. "There's a bunch of palefaces over yonder atalking to that old squaw, who looks like she might be a gypsy queen, or some sort of fortune-teller."

"Perhaps she is," laughed Adrian, "because these people have gotten so used to having the whites visit them, especially at this time of year, that they're on to all sorts of schemes to coax the nimble dollar out of the pockets of the pilgrims. Am I right there, Pard Donald?"

"You're cleaving close to the line, let me tell you, Chum Adrian; and you'll find that money talks even among the Zuni and the Hopi Indians, just as it does, they say, over in Switzerland or Italy, where every blessed person, young and old, has the itching palm as they call it, so you can't ask a civil question without fishing around in your pocket for a tip. But let's forget all that, now, and mingle with the crowd."

"First of all," suggested Adrian, wisely, "don't you think we'd better be making a camp for ourselves? The ponies will have to have water and grass; and as we've got a tent, it ought to be stuck up somewhere to show where the Broncho Rider Boys have their headquarters."

"Right you are, Ad; and here comes the very party we had ought to speak to, unless I'm mistaken. Now, it happened that Corse Tibbals was able to do these people a mighty good turn, once upon a time; and he told me if I mentioned the fact that I was a friend of his, it might make things pleasant for us; which I expect to spring on this old fellow who's got our number, and means to find out who we are, and what we want here."

The man who approached them was evidently one of more or less authority among the Zunis; for his manner, as well as a difference in his style of dress, told that he must exercise the authority of a chief.

Billie had been wondering what sort of Choctaw or Greek he was about to hear the Zuni use in addressing them, and how Donald could understand him. Billie, having once taken a few lessons in the sign language, had even been trying to brush up his memory, under the faint impression that he might have to join in the conversation, and assist his chums, when he heard the other ask in very good English who they were, and why they had journeyed hither.

Of course it was only a sort of ceremonious way of introducing himself, because all the palefaces who came to the Zuni country had only one object in view, which could be set down as an overwhelming curiosity to see for themselves these wonderful things of which they had heard or read so much.

Donald gave the name of each of his chums, as well as his own. He told how they had been down to the copper mines on business; and finding that they would be in time to witness the famous rattlesnake dance, which once a year the Zunis indulge in, they had crossed the burning desert in a sand storm to visit their brothers.

And when he mentioned that Corse Tibbals was a very good friend of his, and really in the employ of his father, the sober face of the old Zuni actually lighted up with what seemed to be pleasure.

He and Donald chatted for some little time in an animated way, after which the old chief took himself off, and the boy returned to his friends, a satisfied look on his face, that told them things were "panning out" well.

## CHAPTER XIX.—WHERE LADDERS WERE STAIRS.

"It's all right, fellows," said Donald, as he joined his chums; "the chief remembers our foreman at the mine, and is glad to have us here. Fact is, he gave me to understand that he'd look on us as his special guests during the ceremonies connected with the yearly dance to the Little Father, as they call the rattlesnake, under the impression that it was connected with the religion of their forefathers, away back thousands of years."

"Huh!" grunted the unbelieving Billie, "take my word for it now, that's the same kind of talk he gives every new batch of strangers that shows up here. You see, I'm something of a reader of character, though I've never let on to you two fellows about it before; and if ever I saw a shrewd look on the face of a human being it was written large on his phiz."

Adrian chuckled.

Possibly that was his own private opinion, for he believed that the annual gathering of numerous whites, deeply interested in the religious ceremonies, and dance of the Zunis, had by degrees come to make it somewhat of a commercial affair. They found so many chances to "bleed" the good-natured travelers that the spirit was now rife in the community, just as you find it in every gypsy camp.

After that they wandered around for quite some time, "visiting," Billie called it. They talked with the natives, finding that the vast majority could not only understand English, but speak it fairly well in the bargain.

Donald led his comrades up a crazy ladder to the lower strata of rock houses, as the holes in the face of the high cliff were called.

They found that they were singularly lacking in what white boys were accustomed to look upon as actual necessities in their homes. The sleeping places, instead of being comfortable beds, consisted for the most part of some skins thrown down in a corner.

"But then," ruminated Billie, who was given to speculating on occasion, "I reckon now that an up-to-date brass bed would kinder look queer and out of place in this antique hole in the wall. The beds and other furniture are about in keeping with the people and the habitation, ain't that so Adrian?"

"Well," observed the one addressed, "what else would you expect to find in a living place that had been used for hundreds and hundreds of years by these people, and those who went before them? But you admit that it's all mighty interesting, don't you, Billie?"

"That's what it is, Adrian," heartily replied the other, "and from the way these other visitors are prowling around every-which-way, seems to me they think just the same as we do. Several look like cowboys; you don't happen to know any of the same, I suppose, Donald?"

"No," Donald answered, after taking a good survey of the parties in question; "never ran across them before; but that isn't queer, when you come to think how many ranches there are in this Southwest country; and how seldom punchers go outside of the limits of their own range."

"Then there's a bunch of real tourists," continued Billie; "father, mother and two half-grown children, people of means, they must be, for they look like it; and they've got three guides along with 'em too, so's not to get lost on the desert, like some sillies have a habit of doing. Chances are these Zunis will get considerable graft from that free-and-easy crowd."

"Among the balance of the strangers in town there's one man I've been watching, and he somehow gives me a bad feeling," remarked Adrian.

"P'raps, now, I might pick him out, and then not half try," added Donald; "just because I felt the same way about him. See here, Ad, is he that tall, domineering man, with the inky-black mustache, who looks about like the frisky gambler you see in the moving pictures of this Western country?"

"Hit it the first guess, Donald; but I took the trouble to ask a few questions about him from that smart looking young brave you saw me talking with a bit ago; and it seems that his name is Mark Braddon; and he's some sort of showman."

"Oh! you mean a circus proprietor, out here in the Wild and Woolly West to pick up novel attractions for his outfit in the East, is that it?" demanded Donald, quickly.

"That's what he claims; and the youngster told me Braddon was trying to induce the chief to take a big party of braves, squaws and papooses, and go with him to exhibit this same rattlesnake dance in his circus. Says it would be the biggest card ever put before the public, and insure him crowded houses all through the winter in Chicago."

Donald looked grave.

"I don't like his ways, that's all I can say," he remarked, still watching the important looking man

in question, who was not far away at the time, showing the family of tourists the largest cliff dwelling, with an air of proprietorship; as though he already felt that he had acquired an interest in the whole village by reason of the fact that he was daily and hourly increasing his offer of big pay, until the chief *must* give in, and accept a contract.

"And from what you told me about these people," Adrian went on to say, gravely, "it seems to me they never could give that strange dance day after day, and have it still hold its solemn, religious character."

"Never!" declared Donald, who knew so much about these Indians of the rock dwellings; "it can be danced only once a year, at a most particular season. Everything has to be just so, the moon at a certain age, and all sorts of other conditions are to be suitable, or it loses its significance. But then money is a strong factor nowadays, and if that tempter only made his offer *big* enough, he might get the old chief to consent."

"That would be bad enough in itself," remarked Adrian; "but between you and me, Donald, I've got a big suspicion that this circus man is something of a fake."

"You mean that he would have some other scheme up his sleeve, in trying to tempt the chief to start out with him, taking the best part of the tribe along, is that your idea, Adrian?" asked the other, earnestly; as he again cast his gaze toward the big man with the deep, loud voice, and blustering ways, whose manner had seemingly struck them both as peculiarly offensive.

Adrian simply nodded.

He saw Billie listening with open mouth, and eyes that were distended, as though the information regarding these suspicions on the part of his chums was thrilling him through and through; and Adrian did not think it wholly advisable to get the fat boy started in the question line, because he would never stop quizzing them.

As Donald caught his meaning, he gave him a wink and a nod, after which he dropped all mention of the dark-haired man with the loud voice, and the bold stare.

When they became tired of climbing ladders, and investigating the quaint homes of the Zuni people, the three chums went back to where they had erected their tent, and had their animals staked out so they could secure their fill of grass.

Billie, of course was hungry; it was very seldom he could be found any other way these days; and so they thought it might be wise to start a fire, and cook something in the line of food.

Some of the Zuni boys gathered around to watch their operations, but as Donald had said, these people were strictly honest, the chums had no fear of their tent being entered during their absence, and anything stolen.

While dinner was being prepared Adrian noticed that Billie was unusually quiet and thoughtful, for him. He wondered what ailed the stout chum. Once he thought that what he and Donald had said concerning the big man with the loud voice and overbearing ways had affected Billie; and he was busying his brain in trying to figure out what sort of game the circus man could be engaged in carrying out.

Desiring to ease his mind on this score, and let him feel that after all their suspicions might not amount to anything, as the other was possibly just what he claimed to be, the proprietor of a Wild West Show, on the keen lookout for new and taking novelties to offer the public, Adrian presently introduced the matter to his companion.

"What makes you so sober, Billie; not feeling sick, I hope?" he remarked, while Donald was doing something over where the horses were tethered, and the pair of them found themselves temporarily deserted by the Zuni youths.

"What, me?" exclaimed the other, starting, and looking quickly up at the speaker; "oh, not at all, Adrian; far from it, because I never felt in better shape, only I'll be stronger after we've had our grub, of course."

"But something's worrying you, Billie!" persisted the other.

"Oh! well, I wouldn't be happy, Ad, you know, unless I was badgerin' this old think-box of mine over something or other," answered the fat chum, with a nervous laugh.

"And what is it now?" asked Adrian, fully expecting to hear him say that he was unable to get the conversation he had heard between them concerning Mark Braddon, out of his mind, to his surprise it turned out to be a very different affair entirely.

"Why," said Billie, soberly, with three lines across his broad forehead, such as always appeared there when he found himself up against a hard proposition, "you see, Adrian, I just can't get it through my mind who he can be at all. Bothers me right along now, and the more I pound my head the worse it gets."

"But suppose you decide that he's just what he claims, and let it go at that," suggested the other.

Billie's lower jaw fell, and he turned to stare at the speaker.

"Say, now, who d'ye suppose I'm talking about?" he demanded.

"Why, that man Braddon, of course," replied Adrian.

Then Billie laughed merrily.

"Why, bless your innocent heart, Ad," he said, in his jolly way, "I wasn't bothering my head the least bit about that gruff-voiced fellow. What's been on my nerves is the mystery we're up against."

"Mystery!" echoed Adrian, in a puzzled way; and then, as a light suddenly broke in upon him he went on to say hastily; "oh! I see now what you mean, Billie; you're still badgering your poor brain about the unknown who shot the thieving young Apache buck when he was trying to rob us; and who you think must be the same party who put that warning in the split stick at the poisoned spring?"

"That's what, Adrian!" declared the other, with a big sigh; "and it's keeping me awake nights wondering just who our unknown friend can be."

## **CHAPTER XX.—BILLIE AND THE SHOWMAN.**

It was some time after the Broncho Rider Boys had finished their dinner that Adrian, while wandering around the village, chanced to come upon the old chief again.

As the other beckoned to him, and started a conversation, Adrian found himself irresistibly impelled presently to tell the chief what he thought about such a scheme as the one he had heard the circus man propose.

Adrian was something of a good talker; indeed, he some day expected to study to be a lawyer on this very account. And as the chief seemed glad of a chance to get some other person's opinion concerning the honesty of Braddon, and the likelihood of his keeping a contract to the letter, he asked many questions.

But of course Adrian was too wise a boy to state boldly that he believed the other to be a fakir, when he had no evidence along that line, save his own conviction backed by that of his chum, Donald; and they were supposed to be only a pair of boys, hardly capable of forming judgment on another.

He confined the line of his argument upon other grounds, and succeeded in making the old chief very uncomfortable by his questions concerning the religious nature of the famous snake dance, and whether it would not be next door to sacrilege to perform it daily, just to amuse thousands of careless white people, for the mere sake of gain.

In other words, Adrian was hinting that possibly the Great Spirit might take it as an insult to have this same ceremonial dance made a common byword among the palefaces, and visit some terrible judgment upon the heads of those who were concerned.

He even asked what the medicine man thought about the scheme, and was not surprised to learn that the Wizard Doctor violently opposed anything of the sort; and it was his opposition that had caused the arrangements to hang fire so far.

The chief seemed very friendly, and Adrian believed that he had succeeded in influencing him to go slow about making such a radical change, without in any way reflecting upon the honor of the circus proprietor.

As he turned away after this long and earnest talk with the old Zuni chief he felt impelled to look to one side, as though some influence forced him to turn his eyes that way. And just as he half expected, he discovered that Braddon had been intently observing him, possibly much of the time he and the old chief held their heart-to-heart talk.

There was a dark scowl on the strong face of the big man. He smiled in a queer way, as he saw Adrian looking toward him; and somehow the expression on his face seemed anything but agreeable.

The boy half expected that Braddon would stalk toward him, and demand to know what he and the old Zuni leader had been talking about so earnestly; he was bracing himself to decline to answer, when he saw the other whirl around, and hurry after the chief, evidently meaning to get that information at first hands.

"I reckon that might spell trouble for me," mused Adrian, as he walked on; and having somewhat tired of observing the strange sights of the village by now, or perhaps feeling that the company of his chums would be more agreeable, he headed toward the tent where Billie lay taking a nap in the shade, and Donald was busily engaged writing up some incident in his daily log.

Half an hour afterwards who should turn up there but Mark Braddon. When Adrian saw the big, dark-faced circus man approaching, with a set look on his countenance, he knew that there was going to be an explosion.

And he was not far wrong, either.

Donald stopped his writing, and jumping to his feet, hurried to the side of his chum, recognizing the signs of a storm when he saw them.

"See here, youngsters," said the man, in his big bass voice, while he tried to look as fierce as possible, under the impression that in this way he might send a spasm of fear and dismay to the hearts of the boys whom he addressed, "it'd be a mighty good thing for you to stop poking your noses into my business, and look after your own affairs. Get thet, don't you? Well, unless you want to find yourselves hurt rather sudden, just keep hands off, and allow me to run my own circus."

He even shook his finger threateningly at them; and somehow the action angered Donald, who was quicker to flare up than Adrian. Billie was sitting up by now, and listening, with widely distended eyes, and open mouth.

"Oh!" said Donald, "I reckon, now, you're doing all that talking about my chum advising the old chief that his medicine man was right in saying they would risk the ill will of the Manitou of the Zunis, if they took their sacred dance away from the spot where it has been done year after year for centuries, and made it the laughing stock of a rude crowd of white people at a circus. Well, the chief asked his opinion, and he had a right to give it, as any other person might."

"Yes," added Adrian just then, "of course it doesn't matter a red cent to any of us whether the chief takes up your offer or not; but I've got my opinion about whether he'd be a fool to try it, and so I told him. I don't know you, Mr. Braddon, and I'm not saying that you wouldn't deal honestly with these simple people; but I do know that they would never be the same again after they came back. That was what I asked him; and I'd do just the same again if any of the other Indians wanted to know my opinion."

The big man looked at the speaker in surprise. He had doubtless counted on being easily able to cow these young fellows, who were only boys at best, while he had a fierce look, and in his own mind at least a resistless way of domineering.

"I give you fair warning right here and now," he went on to say, furiously, "that unless you keep your hands off my personal business you're going to think you've run up against a buzz-saw. I ain't in the habit of knuckling down to a set of kids, when I plan a big thing for my show; and I won't stand for it, hear that? Why, I've got a good notion to give you a lesson right here and now."

He had assumed an attitude that looked dangerous, as though his passions had run away with his judgment; and Adrian was sorry that neither he nor Donald chanced to have anything along just at that critical moment in the way of firearms, with which to make things seem more even.

"Oh! I wouldn't do that, mister, if I was you," drawled a voice just then.

Of course it was Billie, and as all of them glanced toward the spot where he was squatted, they saw him handling his pet Marlin repeater.

Somehow the sight of that gun seemed to make the fierce showman change his mind. He shrugged his broad shoulders, and allowed a cynical smile to cross his face.

"Never mind raising that weapon, son," he called out; "on second thought I guess I'd have been a fool to lay a hand on any of you. But just keep my warning in mind, and leave my plans for amusing the public alone, will you? I give you my word you'll be sorry if you bother me any more."

He wheeled, and hurried away. Billie chuckled a little, as though amused, and as the showman turned and shot a vindictive glance back toward him it was evident he must have heard the sound, and also that it rankled in his soul.

The three boys soon had their heads together, and of course this time the subject of their talk was the man who had made such a fool of himself as to threaten Adrian, because he had spoken his mind when the old chief asked his opinion.

"He's a sure enough bad egg," Billie affirmed, and neither of the others seemed inclined to differ with him on that score, at least.

"I saw him talking to two different men awhile back," remarked Donald. "It was after you and the chief had been having that nice little confab, Adrian; and from the way he pointed over this way several times, I got the idea in my head he was telling them about what he'd seen you doing."

"In that case then, you would know who two of his crowd might be?" suggested the other chum, quickly.

"That's right, I do; and let me tell you both while I'm about it; because, if it seems we're just bound to have a rumpus with Braddon and his set, the sooner we spot the whole outfit the better."

"Go ahead then, Donald," urged Adrian.

"First, there was that little sawed-off we were watching awhile back; he seems to be a lively specimen, even if he is so short; and I don't fancy the cut of his jib any more'n I do that of Mr. Braddon, the showman."

"Call him Shorty, then, since we don't know his real name," remarked Billie.

"The other was that young fellow who is dressed in the loud check suit, and who might be a son of the showman, for all anybody could say to the contrary. Seems to me they do look a bit alike, eh, Ad?"

"All right, let's take that for granted, and call him Mark Braddon Jr.," Billie went on to say, before Adrian could give his opinion; for it seemed as if the fat chum was feeling rather lively since he had surprised his comrades by his prompt holding up of the furious showman when he was threatening violence toward Adrian.

"Then we know three of the crowd," Donald went on. "There may be others still, and we'd better keep our eyes open to pick the same out, from time to time."

"You talk as if you thought we'd sure have trouble with the bunch yet," remarked Adrian.

"Oh! you never can tell; but the signs all point that way right now," Donald went on to say; "and you know, we've been brought up to keep on our guard all the time. They might take a silly notion to try and run us out of here."

"Say, I hope not before that old dance comes off!" cried Billie, "because I've got my heart set on taking some fine snapshots of the same, and it'd grieve me a heap to have to toddle out of here before then."

"Make your mind easy, Billie," said Donald, with a firm closing of his jaws together, and a gleam in his eyes that proclaimed the spirit of the prairie boy, "we don't leave this same village until we're good and ready, no matter what Mr. Mark Braddon and his crowd think, or want us to do. And if it came to a fight, I've got an idea those several cowboys from the ranches would flock to our side, once I told 'em who I was, and that my dad owns the good old Keystone Ranch."

Adrian looked up at that, with a smile on his face.

"Now that isn't half a bad idea, Donald," he remarked, hastily; "and if I was you I'd just stroll out, and make the acquaintance of some of those same punchers. There are three of them, and they seem to be a jolly lot. Not much danger that they're in touch with Braddon in his game, whatever it may be."

"I'll do it, right away," announced Donald, as he went into the tent to strap on his belt with its dangling six-shooter, without which no cowboy would care to be seen abroad; and waving his hand to his chums, he sauntered off on his mission.

## **CHAPTER XXI.—A TREMENDOUS SCHEME.**

Billie began to tire of lying around, and once more started out to investigate things for himself. He carried his little kodak along with him, for there were a couple of pictures he had thought of which he wanted very much to get, if the opportunity arose, and he could induce some of the Zuni boys, in their peculiar costumes, to pose for him, and he thought that would not be hard for a fellow whom his chums both said had such an insinuating, wheedling way about him.

He spent a good hour in the task, while Donald still remained absent; and Adrian put in his time in various ways, now with the horses, and again at the tent.

The one who had remained behind was somewhat surprised at seeing Billie hurrying toward the camp after a while, and to note the look of deep anxiety upon the rosy face of the fat chum.

"Hello! there, what's been happening to you now, I wonder?" Adrian remarked, as Billie threw himself down on the ground beside him, seemingly short of breath, for he was panting heavily.

He made a gesture to indicate that after he had managed to get in half-way decent shape again, he would proceed to enlighten the stay-at-home chums; and so Adrian had to take it out for a minute or two in vague guessing.

"Chances are three to one that it's got something to do with that same Braddon?" he proceeded to say, presently, when Billie failed to start explaining.

A violent nod of the other's head announced that his first shot had hit the mark in the bull's-eye.

"Don't tell me he tackled you, and abused you in any way?" demanded Adrian, with a look of gathering anger on his face.

Billie shook his head, this time in the negative. Then he seemed to have reached the opinion that he had recovered enough of his breath to explain.

"No, it wasn't that, you see; but what I managed to hear them say," he exclaimed.

"Meaning Braddon and some of his bunch; is that it, Billie?"

"Yes, and the very pair Donald was warning us against, Shorty and Junior," the fat boy went on to declare eagerly.

"So, they were having a nice little confab all by themselves, were they?" asked the other.

"Just what they were; and say, Ad, d'ye know the temptation was really too much for me, and I *had* to make the try, even if I did know what I'd rub up against if they discovered me listenin' to 'em talk."

"Do you mean to say you crept up close enough to hear anything?" demanded Adrian, as though he could hardly believe it possible on the part of the stout chum to attempt such a bold thing, in the first place, and actually carry it to a successful issue in the second.

Billie wagged his head, and a proud gleam came into his sunny blue eyes.

"I got away with it, though how I did the same will puzzle me lots," he started to explain. "But when I saw that bunch with their heads so close together I just made up my mind they must be plottin' like fun; and I wished I could get a chance to listen. Then, all at once I noticed that there *was* a way a fellow might crawl up back of the rocks, if only he knew how to do it. How I wished either you or Donald was with me; because you see I was afraid that I'd make a bad job of the thing, and only get a few nice kicks for my trouble. But all at once I gritted my teeth this way, you know; and when I do that there's going to something happen, make up your mind to that."

"Yes, I know, Billie, there surely is; and so you concluded to try the crawl by yourself, did you?"

"I just got down on my ham-bones, and began to sneak along the best I knew how," the enthusiastic fat boy went on to say, excitedly, as though even the remembrance of his recent feat stirred him to the core. "Inch by inch, and foot by foot, I went crawling along, till at last I landed in the snuggest little nook you ever saw, and where I couldn't go any further because there wasn't any more cover."

"And what did you hear?" asked Adrian.

"I just managed to pick up a few words now and then, when one of the bunch talked a little louder than common; and at first it was like a lot of Choctaw to me, because, you see, I hadn't got my clue yet. After a little I could put things together better, and then the whole thing flashed on me like an avalanche."

"Yes, go on, Billie, I'm listening," urged the other, beginning to himself feel the thrill of eager expectation, which of course was what Billie was leading up to all this while.

"Let me tell you what I reckon that schemer Braddon is planning to do with his big pay promises to the old Zuni chief," Billie continued, impressively; "he wants to get the greater part of the tribe to flock away after him; and when he finds a chance he means to give 'em the slip, come back here, and force the old medicine man to show him where that wonderful treasure of his lies, that has been talked about so much all through this region for years! What d'ye think of that for a grand scheme, now, Pard Adrian?"

The other sat there for a full minute, as though digesting the tremendous idea in his mind, while Billie waited to hear what his opinion might be, his face reflecting the various emotions that controlled him.

Finally Adrian looked up.

"First of all, let me congratulate you, Billie, on doing what you did. It was the work of no greenhorn. After this Donald and myself have got to look out, if we don't want to wake up some fine morning, and find ourselves only has-beens. You're getting there with a rush. But I reckon you hugged that hiding-place till they went about their business; you never tried to crawl back again, and take new chances?"

"I guess I knew enough for that, Adrian. I just lay there, and waited. They went off after a bit; and when the coast was clear, I stepped out and walked around, like nothing was the matter. But as soon as I got the first chance, let me tell you I scooted for the camp, lickety-split. I was fairly bursting with that news. And it's nice of you to pay me such a compliment, that's right. I feel as if it was worth all it cost, just to know that one of my chums appreciates me."

"And the other will say the same when he hears what you did," Adrian hastened to declare. "But I wish Donald would show up; he's been gone all of two hours."



"Say, you don't think they could a got hold of him, any sort of way, do you, Adrian?" questioned Billie, as though a sudden terrible suspicion had gripped him.

"Well, hardly, in broad daylight," laughed the other; "if it was night, now, there might be some little reason to think that way. He'll be along soon. P'raps he's found those cowboys good company, and is clinching them as friends, so we could rely on their backing, if it came to such a showdown."

"Oh! I hope we don't have trouble with that bunch," remarked Billie; "because I'm opposed to violence, you know; but then, if they try to chase us out of this Zuni town, I reckon I'd get my back up, and kick just as hard as the rest of you. But you believe what I told you, don't you, Adrian?"

"It seems almost too terrible to believe, but when I remember the look on the face of that man, Mark Braddon, I'm tempted to say that nothing would be too dreadful for him to try, if he thought he saw a chance to make a big haul by it."

"Well, he would, if his game worked well, and they could force the old medicine man to give up the secret of his hidden treasure," Billie went on to say in a reflective sort of way. "Goodness knows we've heard a heap about the same; and if even one tenth of it is true, he must know where a mighty rich gold vein lies in the heart of this old Sacred Mountain of theirs."

"Still, do you know, I'm not so very much surprised at what you've been telling me," the other chum went on to say.

"You sort of had an idea he was up to some dodge like that, didn't you, Adrian?" Billie asked; for he had fallen into a way of believing that these two wide-awake comrades of his could see through puzzles that bothered him greatly.

"He looked like a man who would engineer a big game, and yet I couldn't seem to get it through my head what sort of a play he could make by luring the chief away with more than half the tribe. Then what I heard about the tremendous pay he offered, which he kept on increasing every new time he talked it over with the head man, made me suspect that he never meant to do the right thing. But honest now, Billie, I never once thought of such a clever scheme as you've been telling me about."

"Well, what'll we do about it?" demanded the fat chum.

"Nothing right away, I should think," replied Adrian, after apparently thinking it all over.

"What, not even tell the chief how he's been taken in and done for; would that be fair and square for us, Adrian?"

"There's no hurry, you see," answered the other, calmly; "look at the thing without getting excited, Billie, and you'll agree with me. To-morrow comes the day for all this Zuni ceremony business to reach a head, for they're going to give the rattlesnake dance then. After that's once over with we can get the chief to listen, while you tell all you heard. He'd be a fool after that to take any stock in the big offers of money that Braddon is making, to coax him to be an attraction for his Wild West Show, which, between you and me, I never heard of, and don't believe ever had any existence."

Billie sighed. Perhaps he still thought they should "make hay while the sun shone," and it may have been that he secretly feared lest the schemer Braddon find some way to get the better of them; so that his path might be cleared, and nothing interfere with the carrying out of his villainous scheme.

But then he was so accustomed by now to yielding to the better judgment of his two chums that he did not offer any further objections.

"We'll see what Donald says about it when he comes in," added Adrian; "though I feel pretty sure he'll think the same that I do. We don't want anything to interfere with our enjoying that wonderful affair tomorrow, you know. And this fakir of a showman can't just swoop off with the main part of the village in the wink of an eye. If they concluded to go with him they'd have to take some time to make preparations, you see; and that'd let us have a chance to whisper a few interesting things in the ear of the old chief, that might make him sit up and take notice."

"You're right, Adrian, quite right," admitted Billie, as though fully convinced by this time; "there's no desperate need of hurry; and just as you often say, many a well laid plan's gone to pieces because of too much haste. But we'll soon know what Donald has to say about it, because here he comes right now, and with a wide grin on his face, as though he'd made good friends of those cow-punchers!"

## **CHAPTER XXII.—ANOTHER WARNING.**

That night saw many strange things going on in the Zuni village, to all of which our three young

friends gave close attention; for they were deeply interested in the quaint ceremonies of these people who traced their ancestors far back beyond the time of the red man on the continent of North America.

They did not forget to keep close together after the shades of night fell; for both Donald and Adrian were agreed on that subject, to the effect that a man with such a lack of conscience as Braddon, who would scheme to rob these poor Indians, and lure them away from their home on a false trail, just to endeavor to learn the old medicine man's secret, and profit by the same, would not stop at anything.

Donald had been of the same mind as the other chum, with regard to keeping their secret for a short time, until the Zuni ceremony of the rattlesnake dance had been gone through with. And accordingly none of them had made the first move looking to interviewing the old chief, who was so much taken up with his duties that he had no time for talking now.

When they finally came back to the tent, cautious Adrian made it his business to carefully examine it all over. Billie watched this operation with interest. He finally demanded to know what the other expected to find, and if it could be anything in the nature of a bomb.

"I know that away Down East, around New York City, the Italian Black Hand do that sort of thing regularly; but I never dreamed it could happen out here," he went on to say, uneasily; as though it was not very pleasant to suspect that in the middle of a sentence a fellow might be suddenly hoisted heavenward by some infernal machine exploding under his blanket.

"Oh! I hardly expected to find that," Adrian assured him; "but this is a queer country, and all sorts of strange things happen. Remember, now, about that poisoned spring. With so many crawling critters around here, it struck me that a fellow would be only showing ordinary wisdom to look under his blanket before he lay down."

"That's right," added Donald; "and I'm going to put that horse-hair lariat of mine in a double loop around the tent; because cowboys say that a snake will never crawl across one of that sort. The hair tickles 'em, and scares 'em off, I understand."

"Besides, we're going to keep watch, you know, Donald," Adrian remarked.

Billie was on the point of stoutly announcing that he must have his assignment in this part of the camp duty, when he suddenly remembered the mess he had made of it the last time they let him try. So he was forced to gulp down his bitter disappointment, and let it pass him by. If Billie's ability to accomplish things were only as good as his ambition to try, there would never have been any trouble; but the fact was, he could not keep awake after a certain hour any more than he could refrain from eating when hungry, and the opportunity came along.

But after all, there was no sudden alarm during the night, although the sentry sat there with a gun across his knees every minute of the time he was on duty, and ready to give any creeper the surprise of his life.

Perhaps those whom they fancied might want to disturb them guessed that the boys would be on the watch; and knowing that they possessed rifles, they did not care to take the risk of being shot.

At any rate, morning found them just as the sinking sun had left them, making preparations for a meal; and in the eyes of Billie this was the essence of delight, as we have learned long since.

The morning was to be given up to a number of minor events that would be of considerable importance, though it was in the afternoon that the culmination of the whole ceremony would come about in the thrilling rattlesnake dance, the reputation of which had gone all over the land.

The Broncho Rider Boys were deeply interested in everything, and Billie used his little kodak freely, in snapping off pictures that appealed to him as worth preserving.

Like all other tribes of Indians, the Zunis have a test through which their boys have to go before they can be called real braves, and be looked upon as full fledged warriors, capable of taking arms, and doing the fighting for the tribe; though it has been a long time, doubtless, since the Zunis have gone upon the warpath, because their old-time enemies, the Apaches, have been on a reservation for many years.

Still, that must not interfere in any degree from the making of warriors; and as might be expected, the ability to stoically endure terrible bodily pain is the main feature of these tests.

There were half a dozen applicants, being young boys who aspired to assume the privileges of the warrior class, perhaps select a future wife, and settle down to having homes of their own, up among those tiers of rock houses.

They showed what they could do in all manner of contests, and after winning the admiration of all observers, these young lads submitted themselves to the committee, headed by the old medicine man, and which had a programme laid out that caused some of the paleface observers to shudder, and turn away.

Those dusky sons of the desert allowed their judges to pass splinters of tough wood through certain muscles of their arms and shoulders, and not one of them by so much as a single groan manifested any interest in the matter. A stolid look on their faces told that they had steeled themselves to endure anything, rather than be disgraced by a cry of anguish.

They were then hung up from the supports erected for this especial purpose, the ropes being actually secured to the wooden splinters that had been passed through their flesh.

It made even Donald shudder when one of the judges, at an order from the awful-looking medicine man, actually started to turn the victims around; for the agony must have been terrible indeed.

One of the wretched candidates actually fainted dead away, and hung there in that condition; but there was not a groan, not even a sigh, or a look of pain on any of their faces.

It was the greatest exhibition of courage, and ability to suffer in absolute silence, that any of the spectators had ever witnessed. Billie had to put his quivering hand before his eyes, and finally turn away, being utterly unable to stand it any longer.

Still, this had been the custom of these people for all the centuries. They believed that no man could assume the name of a warrior who was not able to laugh at his mortal foes as they invented all manner of fiendish cruelties in the way of torture, should he by chance fall into their hands during war times.

Other things not so fearful were carried out, some of them ceremonial dances that had to do with the "sacred meal," and such things. Billie had taken pictures of everything that came along; even the six dangling candidates for honors as budding warriors had not been neglected, though his hands did tremble so much at this spectacle that he could hardly press the button of his camera.

And now it was all over but the one grand final scene that the afternoon was to witness, and which was the culminating event of the whole occasion.

The boys wandered back to their camp, bent on cooking something for a meal, and then lounging around until from the bustle and confusion they knew that it was high time they sought their places on the elevated rocks above the little plaza, where these interesting things were taking place.

Everything seemed to be just as they had left it, as Adrian, a little suspicious perhaps, made up his mind, after he had cast a quick look around.

Billie started in at once to gather some wood, so as to make a fire. When there was anything in the line of cooking going on, he could show an astonishing amount of spryness for a fellow so stout.

"You never saw anything like this before, I reckon, Donald?" Adrian asked, as the two of them busied themselves getting things ready, so that when Billie had his blaze started they could put the coffee and frying-pan on, and thus begin dinner.

"No, and I've always wanted to have a chance to watch how they did these queer stunts," replied the other; "but between us, Ad, I've pretty nearly got my fill of Zuni practices."

"Same here, Donald," replied his chum, with a shrug of his shoulders that spoke even more plainly than his words, "I felt a cold chill run all over me when I saw those boys hung up there, with their whole weight supported by those skewers run through their shoulder muscles. Ugh! made me think of a beef that was put in the ice-house to hang, till it got tender. But they never whimpered once. Talk to me about your grit, did you ever see any equal to that?"

"I think any one of those brave chaps would sooner have died outright than let his folks and friends hear a groan from his lips. And how long do you suppose they'll let those boys hang there, Adrian; why, perhaps until sheer tomorrow morning, unless by good luck one of them chances to twist and squirm around, until he actually breaks loose, when he can crawl to his father's hole in the rock, and lie down on a blanket. But under no circumstances must one of them be taken down until a certain number of hours have passed."

"Well, I'm glad I ain't a Zuni!" Billie was heard to say about that time; "but what's that fastened to the flap of the tent just behind you, Donald? I declare if it don't look like a dirty piece of paper."

Donald turned quickly, and in another instant had the object which Billie's sharp eyes had detected, in his hand.

"It is a piece of paper, and here's some writing on the same!" he exclaimed.

"Wow! another letter of warning, mebbe, just like that was at the poisoned spring!" cried Billie, crowding close to the shoulder of Donald, as the other read out what he found written there, in a rough way, but evidently meant in sincerity:

"Yu want to watch out fur that showman Hes aplannin to git yu all into a bad hole sos yull be

kicked outen thee plac Hes ben an fixed the sam with a pair of his crones to steal the ole fraud medcin mans belt that he valles moren his lif an hid same in yur tent Keep yur eyes peeld an ketch the pizen snake at his game No mor at presnt but look out yu dont git nabbed A Frennd”

No sooner had Donald finished reading this scrawl than Billie broke out with:

“Looky, will you, boys, just the same kind of crooked writing and bad spelling there was in that other warning letter. Yes, sir, it’s from that same unknown friend that keeps watch over us, and never shows himself. Don’t it beat all who he can be?”

### **CHAPTER XXIII.—THE STEALING OF THE SACRED BELT.**

“You hit the right nail on the head, Billie, when you said that,” was the way Donald told how he agreed with the remark of the other.

In fact, all of them had been struck with the similarity of the crooked handwriting that they saw upon the soiled piece of paper before them, and that which had been upon the warning at the spring.

To make doubly sure Billie pulled out the latter, he having secured it at the time; and a hasty examination proved to be all that was necessary to convince the three boys that their suspicions held good.

“The same hand wrote both!” declared Adrian.

“All right,” spoke up Billie, instantly; “don’t that prove the other warning was meant right for us, and not stuck there in a general way, as Donald here seemed to think?”

“I own up that the proof is overwhelming, Billie,” admitted the party in question; “but just to think of them laying such a measly plot to get us in bad favor with our new friend, the Zuni chief. I remember seeing that belt right well, and remarked at the time that it was the finest one I had ever set eyes on, and I’ve seen quite a bunch of the same among the Indians on the reservations; for they try to excel each other making them valuable with precious stones and little nuggets of gold.”

“Yes,” added Adrian, “and I could hardly take my eyes off it this very morning, when the medicine man took a share in the first part of the programme. Then he left the rest to some sub-chiefs, and went away with the head of the tribe. It’s a beauty of a belt, and must be worth considerable, just in money alone.”

“Huh!” grunted Billie, “didn’t this unknown friend of ours say right there that the Witch Doctor values it more’n his own life. And the meanness of them to think to steal it, and fasten the job on us for keeps! It makes my blood boil, I tell you! Yes, I’m opposed to violence of all kinds, except when it’s necessary to teach a rascal like Braddon that the Broncho Rider Boys can take care of themselves, thank you. Why, I’d almost feel like puncturing one of his arms or legs with a bit of hot lead from my trusty rifle, so as to teach him the lesson he needs.”

“Hold your fire, Billie; we may need all the ammunition we’ve got before we’re through with this thing,” advised Donald.

“Oh! I’m only saying what I’d *like* to do, not what I expect to,” remarked Billie, as he carefully placed the two “warnings” away in one of the pockets of his khaki hunting coat. “Wonder how many more times this bully friend is agoing to do us a good turn, without showing his face?”

Adrian and Donald exchanged looks, and then the former went on to say:

“Seems like we’ll have to pass that by, Billie, because nobody knows. Just who he is, and why he keeps so shy, is more’n I can guess. Perhaps some day he’ll come out into the open, and let us see who we’ve got to thank. If you asked me to give my best guess now, I’d say he’s one of those same punchers Donald was making friends with yesterday. He’s keeping it up just for a lark, to sort of bother us. There’s no accounting for some people’s sense of what they call humor. He may think it’s the best joke he ever had to do with, just keeping us guessing.”

“Well, I only hope that some day I’ll be able to tell him how much we think of him for watching out for us like he has,” ventured the fat chum, looking all around as he spoke, as though half hoping he might see a laughing, sun-burned face projecting from behind nearby rocks, waiting to be invited to join their circle; but nothing of the kind was visible.

Adrian happened to think of something just then, and spoke to Donald, who, not being engaged at that particular moment, arose, and slipped inside the tent.

“Whee! I wonder none of us thought of doing that before now!” burst from Billie, showing that he had noticed the movement, and instantly jumped to some conclusion concerning the same.

There was heard a sound from within, as though Donald might be turning things over in a hurried

search. Then they heard him give vent to a low ejaculation that somehow sent a thrill of expectancy through both the chums without.

Immediately Donald came rushing into the outer air. He was gripping something in one of his hands, and half holding the same aloft, while his face was indeed a study, being both triumphant and grim at the same time, a curious combination indeed.

There was no need for him to shout aloud, and tell the others what he had discovered secreted under some of their traps in the tent; for both Adrian and Billie had eyes, and could see for themselves.

It was the sacred belt of the old Zuni medicine man, which they had seen fastened about his waist only an hour or two previous, and which he undoubtedly valued above all price, as a part of his insignia of office—the magical belt which was believed by his people to have come down to him from the home of the Great Manitou in the Happy Hunting Grounds of the red men in the other world.

Billie tried to say something, but although his jaws were seen to work, only a queer gasping sound proceeded from between them. His very breath seemed to have been taken completely away by the astounding nature of the discovery made by the other chum, inside their tent.

It was not so bad with Adrian. He could command his speech, though almost as much staggered as poor Billie at sight of the Indian belt.

“They didn’t lose any time in getting busy, did they, Donald?” was what first came into his mind to say.

“I should say not,” replied the boy who held the belt. “While we were away some sneak crept into our tent here, and hid this under our traps. You can see what the game is; later on the medicine man will learn of his loss, and set up the biggest howl ever. Then somebody’ll kind of give him a sly hint that perhaps the paleface boys may know something about that same belt; for one of them was seen hanging around the rock lodge of the Witch Doctor—which was you, Billie, while trying to get a picture of the medicine man just coming out of his place, which the Indians believe is bewitched, so that nothing could hire one of them to even peep inside.”

“That’s about the way they mean to work it, as sure as you’re born,” agreed Adrian, nodding his head in confirmation.

“When d’ye reckon they’d get here, to look for the lost belt?” asked Billie, eyeing the dinner that was by now cooking merrily; and his plaintive manner declared even more than his words expressed; for Billie was worrying as to whether or not they would be allowed to enjoy their meal in peace.

“I was just thinking that it might be a dangerous thing for us to keep that belt here any longer than we can help,” remarked Adrian, thoughtfully.

“Yes,” added Donald, “because we don’t know the minute the medicine man will discover his loss; and then things will get pretty hot around the old town, as sure as you live. Perhaps I’d better hide it under my coat, and hunt up the old chief right away. I’ll tell him how it is, and that some enemy has done this just to make him drive us out of the village, so we can’t influence him any more against accepting the offer of this pretended showman.”

“Do it while you may, then, Donald; we’ll keep some dinner piping hot for you, make sure of that!” declared Billie, in a great perspiration lest he turn and see a crowd of the Zuni braves on the run toward the spot where they had located their tent, and headed by that terrible figure of the aroused medicine man.

Donald immediately crushed the glittering belt into an inside pocket of his hunting coat.

He next stooped down and took hold of his rifle; for things were getting a bit too exciting around that Zuni village to allow of his going without some means for self-defense.

“Watch out for signs of trouble, boys!” were his last words, as he started to walk hastily away, heading for the rock settlement.

The pair thus left in the camp proceeded to continue cooking their dinner as though they had nothing to worry about. All the same, Billie was forever casting suspicious glances all around, as though he expected at any moment to discover a band of excited braves coming on the full run for their camp, and with the wizard of the tribe leading the march, bent on conducting a search, and with a hope of finding the lost sacred article.

Donald had been gone possibly ten minutes at the most when an exclamation from Billie announced that he had at last caught sight of the object his excited fancy had been conjuring up every second of the time since Donald vanished among the outcropping masses of stones, which would offer the spectators good seats later on from which they could observe all that went on, and at the same time feel perfectly safe from any of the crawling things that had a big share in the ceremony of the rattlesnake dance.

"Coming, are they, Billie?" asked Adrian, as calmly as he could, although there was a trace of unsteadiness in his tones as he quietly laid down the frying-pan he had been attending, and stood up, the better to see.

Yes, it was true, there could not be a solitary doubt of that. From out of the Zuni village a group of figures had burst, and these now came hurrying along toward the spot where the boys had raised their tent, and put out their ponies to graze.

"Whew! Look at the medicine man striding along at the head of the bunch, would you, Adrian?" burst out Billie. "There's that Braddon along, also one of his cowardly helpers, the young chap we believe must be his son, Hey! Adrian, shall we let 'em come into camp, and nose around, or do you mean to hold the lot up with a show of guns?"

Billie had made sure to have his repeating rifle close at hand all the while. Just as soon as he learned there was a strong likelihood that the camp was going to be invaded sooner or later, and themselves accused of a crime they had never dreamed of carrying out, the fat boy trailed his gun all around with him, no matter if he only stepped out to pick up another armful of fuel, so that the fire could be kept going, and their lunch continue to cook.

"If I've learned one thing since I came out to this country," Billie often said these days, "it's this: that whenever you do want a gun you want it in a mighty big hurry; and I don't calculate to get left more'n I can help."

"We've got to let them make a search; but neither of those white men shall take a step inside our tent," declared Adrian, resolutely, as he too picked up his gun. "Because I wouldn't put it past them to drop something else there, and then make out to find it. Let me do the talking, please, Billie, that's a good fellow!"

#### **CHAPTER XXIV.—A DESPERATE SITUATION.**

For once Billie was perfectly willing that his chum should undertake to do all the talking. He felt himself that he might not be equal to such a tremendous undertaking as handling this job. And he had perfect confidence in Adrian, who always managed to keep his wits about him under the most exciting conditions.

Indeed, it looked as though they were close upon the edge of serious trouble. That aroused old wizard of the Zunis was bearing down upon the little camp among the rocks like a pirate craft under a full spread of canvas. While his "get-up" was of such a character that he always impressed Billie as a "holy terror," according to the boy's way of expressing it, still right then and there he had such a black and forbidding look on his face that he seemed doubly ferocious.

No wonder the old wizard was furious, when his most highly prized possession, the Sacred Belt, said to have come down direct to him from the Great Manitou of the Zunis, and looked upon with the highest veneration and awe by every member of the tribe, had mysteriously disappeared.

He knew full well that no Zuni, young or old, could be induced to take one step inside the magic confines of the stone house which he used as his quarters; for they believed that instant death would follow such a daring move.

Hence, it was quite patent that only a reckless paleface, who had no such dread of the necromancer's power, must have entered, to carry away the precious possession.

And if, as seemed probable, he had learned that one of the white boys had been seen prowling around in the vicinity of his den, and acting in a suspicious manner, what more likely than that he would turn out to be the guilty party?

The group, native and white combined, bore down rapidly on the little camp. Adrian braced himself to handle the situation properly. He did not wish to do the slightest thing to incur the enmity of the Zuni people, for the boys were really their guests. At the same time he did not mean to be driven to the wall, and not put out a hand to defend himself and chum.

It was naturally toward the make-believe showman and his ally that the anger of the Broncho Rider Boy was turned. Only for this desire on the part of Braddon to have them chased out of the Zuni country, so that he could work his evil scheme, and profit thereby, at the expense of the poor natives, there would have been no trouble whatever.

And so Adrian set his teeth together, inwardly resolving that if circumstances did compel him to make use of the weapon he was gripping in his steady hands, it would be turned upon the showman the first thing.

Perhaps Mark Braddon realized something to this effect. That would account for his gradually falling back as he ran, allowing the others to outstrip him in the race. Adrian believed him to be as cunning as he was bold, and that was saying a good deal.

But now the medicine man and the three Zuni braves who accompanied him were close to the

tent, and still coming under "full steam," as Billie muttered to himself, while crouching there, nervously handling his Marlin, as he waited the rush of events.

Adrian threw up his gun. At the same time he made an imperious gesture with his hand that could not be misunderstood.

He knew that the old medicine man could speak English almost as well as the chief of the tribe. Intercourse with the whites for all these years, with visitors frequently stopping over for days at a time to study the interesting ways of the Zuni people, had brought this about.

Besides, unless Adrian had been misinformed, the Witch Doctor had been away from his home in the desert on several occasions; and while his people believed he was at these times holding an extended audience with the Manitou, deep in the heart of the Sacred Mountain, Donald and Adrian, on talking it over, had come to the conclusion that the keen-witted old fraud may have been visiting civilization, to see for himself some of the wonderful things of which these white pilgrims had told the Zunis.

"Stop!" said Adrian; and singularly enough they all came to a standstill, just forty feet or so on the other side of the lone tent; because there was something commanding in both the voice and gesture of the white boy.

Besides, those two rifles looked more or less ready for business; and it is well known that firearms may be as dangerous in the hands of boys, as when grown men possess them.

"Now, tell me what all this means, Pick-ne-quan-to?" called out Adrian, purposely making use of the Indian name by which the medicine man was known, and which doubtless had more or less to do with his strange calling as a magician.

Thereupon the medicine man drew himself up, and restraining his anger as much as possible, he answered with great deliberation:

"From the lodge of Pick-ne-quan-to has the wonderful Sacred Belt been taken. No Zuni would brave the wrath of Manitou by touching the gift of the Great Spirit. It has been said that one of the paleface boys was seen near by. I have come to demand that the Sacred Belt be restored again to my keeping. And if this is done the white boys shall be allowed to depart in peace; but before another night; for if they stay after darkness comes again even the power of Pick-ne-quan-to could not save them from the vengeance of the warriors, who would seek the blood of the foolish ones. I have spoken."

"But we did not take your Sacred Belt; and not one of us has ever been inside the lodge of Pick-ne-quan-to!" urged Adrian; who was trying to gain precious minutes of time, for as yet he could see no sign of Donald coming with the old chief to save the day.

The medicine man shrugged his shoulders at this. Doubtless he fully expected to hear a flat denial; Braddon may even have hinted that the boys would vehemently declare they had never set eyes on the stolen article; but that a search of their belongings might bring it to light.

"The white boy may say that, and yet how do we know he does not speak with a forked tongue, like the Little Father of the rattles? Will he let us enter his tent and see for ourselves?" the medicine man went on to say, doubtless following out a suggestion from Braddon, who hovered close to his elbow.

"We are willing that Pick-ne-quan-to and one of his braves enter, and search our tent, but not the white men," answered Adrian, boldly. "We do not trust them, and if they try to pass in, it will be bad for them, for we will shoot, and straight."

A hoarse laugh that jarred on the ears answered him.

"Don't worry about us, youngster," called Braddon; "we're ready enough to let the Indians do the searching. Then they'll believe what their eyes show them."

He then said something in a low tone to the medicine man. Perhaps he was telling him to be sure and turn over the skins that lay upon the floor of the tent, since it was evident that if they had stolen the Sacred Belt the white boys would have been cunning enough to hide the same. And it was under these that Donald had discovered the strange object, one end of it being partly uncovered by a lucky chance.

So the two Zunis, the medicine man and a brave whom he selected, advanced eagerly, and vanished inside the tent.

They could be heard moving hastily around there, and evidently tossing the contents this way and that in their endeavor to locate the missing object.

Those without listened with vastly different emotions. The two boys were quite satisfied that nothing would result from this raid on their property; because, did they not know for a surety that the Sacred Belt had been carried away, concealed on the person of their chum, Donald; and that ere now it must be in the possession of the old chief himself, to whom was being told the

whole story of the amazing duplicity of the pretended showman, who was only a thief in disguise, and planning to rob the Zuni people?

As for Braddon himself, it was hard for him to repress the triumphant grin that would force itself upon his dark face. He believed positively that the belt must be quickly discovered, and that his end would have been accomplished when the three Broncho Rider Boys were chased out of Zuni-land in disgrace, with such an angry crowd threatening them that they must needs hurry all they could to place many miles between themselves and the excited populace of the village.

As the seconds crept into minutes, and there was no loud shout of discovery made from within the tent Braddon began to manifest signs of uneasiness.

What if after all his ally had hidden the belt so securely that it could not be found? Adrian, watching closely, even saw the showman turn toward his companion and hastily say something; it must have been in the nature of a question concerning the place where the stolen belt had been secreted in the tent, for the younger scoundrel nodded back, and made a reply that gave Braddon comfort for another minute.

But this could not last much longer. Evidently those inside the tent had exhausted their resources, without finding anything worth while; for just then they came dejectedly out, the medicine man looking blacker than ever.

"What's all this?" roared Braddon, so surprised that for the moment he forgot his caution; "do you mean to say you haven't found the belt? Did you look everywhere—under the skins on the ground, and in their bags? Ten to one my friend here would find it, if only you made them let him go back with you. Nothing escapes his eagle eye. Tell them that, Pick-ne-quan-to; make them let him accompany you! The belt must be found, and there is no more likely hiding-place than in the tent of these paleface boys, who have been prowling around your lodge so much!"

This sounded like good logic to the medicine man. When his powers failed why should he not take advantage of those belonging to another? If one of the white men were allowed to accompany him back into the tent, three pair of eyes might be better than two. He would demand that this be done. If the white boys still refused would it not look as though they were guilty, and that they feared lest the keen eyes of a paleface see through their trick?

And so, filled with this new determination, he turned toward the spot where Adrian and Billie stood, with their guns still pointed towards the party.

"You have heard what my white brother has said, and why should not his companion go with Pick-ne-quan-to into the tent, to look once more? The paleface boys do not dare refuse. If they say it must not be, then will the Zunis make them prisoners; and after that even the hand of the medicine man might not be able to save the despoilers of the Sacred Belt from the vengeance of the furious tribe."

## **CHAPTER XXV.—THE COMING OF DONALD.**

"Oh! the brazen face of that old rascal, Braddon!" muttered Billie. "*Please* let me give him my compliments in his shoulder, Adrian! I'm looking along the barrel of my trusty gun right now, and have got the nicest bead on him you ever saw. Not that I'm savage by nature, or like to inflict pain; but he deserves it, sure he does, Adrian. Can I pull the trigger, did you say?"

His voice was really pleading, showing that Billie had been considerably worked up by the duplicity of the pretended showman; for, as he said, usually the stout chum was averse to scenes of violence, and avoided them whenever he could, without feeling that he was bringing disgrace on his head in so doing.

"No, no, don't think of it—yet!" said the other, hastily, but positively. "We haven't got to the end of our rope. If they do attack us, remember that under no conditions are you to injure a hair on the head of a Zuni brave. Give the white men all the wounds, because it is their doing."

"But what can we do to stave it off any longer, Adrian?" begged the fat chum.

"I hardly know," replied Adrian, himself at a loss to grasp any idea that promised hope; "if only Donald would hurry along everything might be well. You don't see anything of him, do you, Billie?"

"Not a thing, Adrian; and the way you say that makes me think of the old fairy story of Bluebeard, where the wife who is to go down to the old fellow, because she has seen the room where the heads of all his other wives are hanging, asks her sister to look, and see if the brothers are not coming on their horses to save her. Don't you remember she cries again and again: 'Sister Ann, sister Ann, look and see if there isn't a cloud of dust along the road; don't you see anybody coming this way?' But Adrian, I don't glimpse even a cloud of dust. Donald sure is aholding back the worst ever; looks like he might get here too late, after all."

Once Billie got started talking it was difficult to stop him. Besides, Adrian did not make any



attempt to do so, because every second they could delay matters counted for just so much in their favor.

Of course the medicine man was waiting impatiently to hear what the result of his last demand would be. When he saw the two lads talking he supposed they must be conferring, in order to reach a definite conclusion. And after all, what did a minute, or several of them for that matter, count; there was plenty of time still, before the exercises of the afternoon would be starting.

So he waited, calm and reserved, yet undoubtedly anxious; for the recovery of the precious belt meant much to him; even some shreds of his sacred office might be associated with the return of the belt, for unless this were done how could he convince his people that nothing was impossible with him?

No matter what happened, Adrian was grimly determined that neither of the white men must be allowed to enter that tent. He would, if pushed to the wall, advise that it be taken down, and everything connected with it appropriated by the Indians. Surely that ought to assure the medicine man that they had nothing concealed under the old canvas that had been donated to the trip by their friend at the mine.

The question was, how could he continue the delay any longer? Already he believed that Braddon was beginning to grow suspicious, for several times the showman cast quick glances toward the village beyond the rocks, as though half anticipating seeing some one coming on the run, perhaps the third paleface boy.

So Adrian once more started to speak, being as slow and deliberate as possible.

"Pick-ne-quan-to would be fair with his white brothers," he said. "He has looked in their tent, and did not find the Sacred Belt. If it were there it could not escape the eye of Manitou's messenger. Then why should a white man be able to find it? These white men do not like us. They have tried to drive us away from the village of our friends, the Zunis. The chief knows why this should be so. Send then a warrior to the village to fetch your chief here, Pick-ne-quan-to, that he may be the one to judge what shall be done. If he says that a paleface can do what a Zuni medicine man is unable to accomplish, then we will agree to letting that man enter our tent. But not unless the chief says it. I have spoken."

Apparently the medicine man hardly knew what to say to this. Adrian had managed to get several clever little hints in his speech that appeared to satisfy the other he meant to be honest with the Zunis. And his proposal that they send for the head man of the tribe, was not that right?

Braddon immediately saw that there was a chance of a cog slipping in his cleverly arranged scheme unless he could manage in some way to inflame the other; so as to cause him to order his men to seize upon the two boys. He had found a convenient rock behind which he could drop, in case he had cause to believe the others meant to open fire on him; and this gave him new assurance.

"Don't listen to him, Pick-ne-quan-to!" he called out, lustily; "he's got a glib tongue for a boy, and means to deceive you. While we are waiting for the chief to come they will be doing something to make away with that belt. I tell you the chances are it must be there inside that tent; and if they let my friend assist you in the hunt, he is sure to find it. Don't you see that they are afraid to say yes to that, Pick-ne-quan-to? And if they were innocent would it matter at all to them who made the search? There is only one thing to be done, then; you should order your braves to make them prisoners. Then whatever you say, it shall be done."

Adrian himself was afraid that the old medicine man might be tempted to give the word that would send those three sinewy warriors flying across the ground that separated them from the two white boys. He hardly knew what they should do under such distressing circumstances, except that he hoped Billie might succeed in at least giving that treacherous pretended showman a severe wound when he fired, as he had promised to do.

It is always darkest before dawn, they say, and in his own limited experience Adrian had found the truth of this more than once. It happened now; and Billie, with his cheek pressing on the butt of his leveled gun, was suddenly electrified to hear his comrade call out:

"Wait! it will be all right now, because there comes the chief!"

"Hurrah!" cried Billie, even raising his head to see for himself, no matter if he did lose that splendid aim on the left shoulder of Braddon, which he had been holding so steadily for at least one full minute now.

Yes, there were two figures approaching on the run, one of them the Zuni chief, and the other their own good chum, Donald.

No wonder Billie immediately felt so happy that he tore off his cowboy hat, and waved it wildly in the air as he let out a couple of whoops that would have done credit to Bunch, Corney, Alkali, or any of the other punchers who were his friends at Keystone Ranch.

Braddon seemed to be furious at sight of the two who were advancing so hurriedly. It may be that

he feared the worst—something in the situation began to warn him that his missile had recoiled on his own head, and that the signs were not altogether so promising as they may have seemed a short time before.

He could be seen arguing with the medicine man, and the boys felt sure he must be trying to induce him to make prisoners of the young palefaces before the chief arrived, and took the power out of his hands.

But Pick-ne-quan-to was shrewd enough to see that Braddon was unduly excited over a matter that should not have concerned him to any great extent at all. He may have begun to entertain a dim suspicion of the truth about that time, and wondered just how it was one of the white men could be more successful than himself with regard to finding the lost emblem, *unless they knew just where it had been placed!*

At any rate he persistently shook his head in the negative, nor could any of the other's arguments convince him that he should proceed to act before the arrival of the head man of the Zuni tribe, who was coming at a faster gait than he had been known to undertake for many moons, he being an old man.

"Is it all right, Adrian?" asked Billie, his voice trembling with excitement.

"Looks that way," replied the other, scarcely able himself to restrain his feelings, so as to appear reasonable and calm.

"Then I don't get my chance to peg that Braddon, do I?" continued the fat chum, with a vein of dejection in his voice.

"Well, just keep an eye on him, Billie; and if either of them tries to rush the tent, let him have it; because they might mean to drop some other article they've gone and stolen, so as to put it on us," was what Adrian advised.

But neither Braddon nor his younger ally, whom the boys had dubbed Junior, seemed willing to take the risk of being shot; at any rate they gave up trying to induce the medicine man to lead a sudden swoop down on the boys, and standing moodily there, waited to see what was going to happen.

Of course the two defenders of the camp knew full well; since Donald had left them with the full intention of telling the old chief everything; and the presence of the latter at this critical juncture was pretty plain evidence that he had finally come to understand what a narrow escape he had had from falling into a trap, and being deceived by the man who claimed to own the greatest Wild West Combination in the country, and which allowed him to offer them wonderful terms to travel with his show, in order to exhibit the customs of the Zuni people in the Far East.

Donald had doubtless been very anxious when he first saw that the camp was in peril; but on discovering how his two dauntless chums seemed to be holding the allied foes in check, his face relaxed in a broad grin; and he waved his hand toward Adrian and Billie, as in company with the chief he arrived on the spot.

In his native tongue the head man addressed the Witch Doctor, and there could be no doubt but what he was asking what all this excitement meant. Then Pick-ne-quan-to started to reply, in his slow and vigorous way. From his gestures—for of course they could not understand his words—the boys knew he was telling how he had made the startling discovery that his lodge had been entered during his temporary absence, and the wonderful gift of the Manitou, being nothing less than the Sacred Belt, carried away. Then must have followed an account of how his suspicions were directed toward the white boys, and how he had come, backed by the strangers in the village who had expressed much interest in the recovery of the emblem, to demand the return of the belt; but that a search of the tent had failed to disclose the same.

And then came the grand surprise, just as Adrian and Billie anticipated, when the chief suddenly drew something out from under his blanket, and held it aloft, so that every one might see—the glittering Sacred Belt that had come from Manitou!

## **CHAPTER XXVI.—THE RATTLESNAKE DANCE.**

"Yes siree, that was about the closest shave I ever knew; and you couldn't have dropped in on us at a more fortunate minute, Donald, that's what!"

Billie was saying this, as he had done half a dozen times before, while he himself and two chums were seated on the pile of rocks that overlooked the little plaza where the Zunis were preparing to go through the last ceremony of their yearly feast and tribal observances, the rattlesnake dance, weirdest of all scenes ever witnessed by the eyes of white men and women.

"Well," remarked Donald, with one of his rare and engaging smiles, "I give you my solemn word, boys, I didn't time our coming so as to make it seem dramatic, like a Frenchman might have done. Fact is, I urged the chief to hurry all I could, after I'd told him everything I knew, and given

him the old belt that I had hidden, and which he was afraid to even touch at first."

"But you were gone nearly a whole hour, Donald," said Billie, reproachfully.

"That's right, I was," replied the other, "but I couldn't help it, because you see, I was unable to find the chief, who had disappeared, and no one could tell me where he was. After all, it turned out that he had gone into some secret chamber back in the mountain to carry out some of the observances of the day. In the end I ran across him, and, well, it all came out right after all, you know."

"So far as we're concerned, it sure did," agreed Billie; "but just think how Braddon and his two chums had to get out of here in a big hurry. Why, the Zunis just acted like they'd be glad to tear them to pieces, when they learned that one of them had snuck into the sacred lodge of their medicine man, and actually hooked that silly old belt."

"A good riddance of bad rubbish, we all say," declared Adrian.

"And," added Donald, "if they know what's good for them they'll be mighty slow to stay anywhere within striking distance of this place; because the chief told them plainly that as soon as the ceremonies were all over, he would shut his eyes if several of his young and hot-blooded braves chose to go forth looking for game."

"Ha! ha! guess Braddon knew only too well what that sort of game would be if he and his pards could be found!" exclaimed Billie, laughing at the thought. "Say, just to think of it, while we're squatted here on this rock pile, waiting to see the blessed old rattlesnake dance they talk so much about, them fellows must be aheading away just as fast as their ponies'll carry 'em; and chances are they'll keep hitting up the hot pace half the night, for fear of being overtaken, and shot all to flinders. Things turned out all right for us; and it was sure the darkest just before dawn, as Adrian said."

"Well, pay attention, now, to what's doing in front," interrupted Donald, "for unless the signs go wrong the bucks are getting in their togs to start this dance."

There were little knots of observers scattered all around, and it might be noticed that where the lookers-on were whites they had been very careful to select their seats on some pile of rocks; though the Zuni women and children were massed here and there on the lower tiers, or the level ground itself.

There was a good reason for this. Rattlesnakes may be all very well in cages, with a strong sheet of glass separating them from you; but no ordinary person cares to run across them in the open, where they can suddenly throw themselves into a coil, and be ready to thrust out their venomous jaws at a nearby leg.

And it was generally understood that in the wonderful and thrilling ceremony about to take place as the wind-up to the yearly festival, the Zuni braves would introduce scores of the crawlers, so that there was always danger that one might break away, and wriggle in among the bystanders.

So the white visitors were not taking any chances that they could avoid, though eager enough to see all that would take place in the arena below.

The music of the native tomtoms and reed instruments was exceedingly doleful. Yet it must have possessed a peculiar significance for the people who gathered around, their dusky faces filled with the keenest appreciation. To them this dance meant the greatest religious frenzy, and was of deepest significance; while to the whites it stood only for a queer proceeding in which danger lurked in every dusky hand that gripped a serpent back of the neck.

Presently the ring began to form.

Those who have observed the dances of savage people in many far distant parts of the earth have noticed a strange similarity in the methods and customs of different nations. Men and women seem to dance pretty much the same, whether it be among the Zulus of South Africa, the Bontoc Igorottes of the Philippine Islands, the Hottentots of Darkest Africa, or the Indians of our own West. There is the same crouching attitude, the bending of the knees, a springy step like unto that of the tiger or panther, and very much the same monotonous chant that rises and falls in a thrilling cadence.

Donald was not so deeply interested as his two companions, for he had seen something very similar to this dance before. Billie squatted there, and his eyes grew as round as circles, while he stared, and noted many remarkable things in connection with the dusky dancers, carrying on their grotesque ceremony.

"Oh! look at that lanky fellow holding his rattler between his teeth!" he called out, as he pointed at the object of his discovery. "All the money on this same old earth couldn't coax me to try that dodge, no siree bob!"

"But he knows just what he is doing," said Donald; "and hasn't the slightest idea that he'll be struck. If he is, they have some sort of remedy, and in most cases they get over it. But you see

how careful they are never to try and touch a rattler when he's *in coil*; because they know how he can strike out like lightning, so that the quickest hand couldn't draw back in time. They keep the reptile extended at as near full length as they can, for then he's practically helpless to jab you, and the snake knows it too, so he seldom tries."

"Yes, I know that all right," affirmed Billie, "but no matter, I haven't got any use for the species, let me tell you again. They make me have a funny shiver run up and down my spine, because, don't you know, I get to thinking of how near I came to dropping down into that nest when we were on the road here. Ugh! for one I won't be sorry when this same dance is over with."

But Adrian did not echo these sentiments. He was finding a world of deep interest in everything that went on. The antics of the dancers, the wrapt attention paid them by the squatty women clustered here and there, and who never once took their eyes off the circle of braves passing round and round in endless procession; even the way the children were fascinated by the sight—all these things Adrian was taking note of, for he wished to tell of his experiences later on.

"Don't forget that you've got a kodak along, Billie!" warned Donald, after the affair had been in progress so long that some of the dancers had fallen out of the circle utterly exhausted by the continuous movements, though others immediately took their places, just as the substitutes on a football team are injected into the game when injuries cause some of the players to drop out of the hot scrimmage.

At that Billie awoke from his trance with a jump.

"Oh! thank you for telling me about it, Donald!" he exclaimed; "whatever could I have been thinking about to forget that? And as I never expect to see another snake-dance in all my life, why, how could I have remedied the blunder? But thank goodness it ain't too late yet."

Accordingly he set diligently to work to repair his error, and for some time the clicking of the rapid shutter told that Billie was getting snapshots of the whole scene, and individual parts of the same, as fast as he could work it.

As the afternoon was now waning, the last act in the list of ceremonies bade fair to soon close in a blaze of glory.

The wild dancers, spurred on by the continued incantations of the weird-looking old medicine man, and their own desire to show off before their people, seemed to be vying with one another in the endeavor to excel in grotesque acts. They wrapped the writhing snakes around their necks, and held them between their teeth in seemingly reckless fashion, much to the horror of some of the white spectators, but adding greatly to the delight of the dusky horde that gathered there, and gaped, and admired, and applauded in their own fashion.

After all human nature is pretty much alike, when you come to take off the outward veneer that is given by different associations and methods of living. Adrian had seen just such sights as these, minus the rattlesnakes, and the weird dress of the participants, in many a gathering in the East, where thousands went fairly wild over a fiercely contested football game.

As the twilight began to fall the furious dance came to an end at the command of the medicine man, whose word was law with the Zunis. He knew it had now reached its proper conclusion, and that the warriors were almost at the point of utter exhaustion.

"All over but the shoutin', and perhaps it's safe for us to get down off this rock pile now," remarked Billie, as the last of the dancers went staggering away, leaving the arena that had been the theater of their weird ceremony to the thronging squaws and boys and girls.

So they sought their tent, to prepare the evening meal. Of course their talk was mostly about the remarkable scene they had just witnessed, and which would never entirely fade from their minds.

"And if my pictures only come out good, as I reckon they ought," Billie went on to remark, "I'll be able to stagger some of the fellows at home, when I get there. But there's one thing I'm ahoping, and that is that none of them wrigglers got away. I'd sure hate to wake up tonight from a jolly good snooze, to find a big old rattler perched on my chest, and ready to jab me with his business end if I so much as moved my little finger. Wow! it makes me creep just to think of it."

And indeed, the subject was on Billie's mind so much that he later on made sure to thoroughly examine every inch of space inside the canvas, shaking their blankets carefully, and finally getting Donald to again encircle the tent with that horse-hair lariat of his, over which he had said no snake would ever dare crawl.

And so ended the great day at the Zuni village, which the Indians looked forward to each year with the liveliest anticipations; and the three chums had reason to feel thankful that the bold plot of Braddon the showman had not resulted in their being expelled from the place without a chance to see the "circus," as Billie called it.

Billie was also a little bit worried for fear that Braddon and his two companions might not have gone far away; but, feeling so badly toward the three chums for having nipped their scheme in the bud, he dreaded lest they return under cover of darkness, bent on evening up the debt they thought they owed the Broncho Rider Boys.

"Don't you believe anything of the sort, Billie," urged Donald, when the stout chum ventured to mention his fears on this score.

"No," added Adrian, positively; "they knew that the medicine man meant every word of it when he warned them that the old chief would set some of his braves on their track, after nightfall. Make your mind easy, for Braddon isn't the kind of man to take chances, when he can get away. They're whipping their ponies for all they're worth, so as to cover as many miles as they can before another dawn."

As the others were so confident, Billie began to lose his nervousness. Perhaps after all this was more the result of the terrible scenes he had looked upon that afternoon, than any real fear of the three rascals whose departure from the Zuni village had been so hurried.

"On the whole," said Adrian, "I don't think any of us will get too much sleep this same night."

"Why so?" asked Billie, as though wondering what new tribulations might threaten them now.

"Listen!" said the other, holding up his hand.

They had finished their supper, and were lying around taking their ease at the time this conversation sprang up.

"Well, they *are* pretty noisy over there in the village, for a fact," admitted Billie, as he caught the sound of wild shouts, and a sort of native song that many voices chanted in unison; "but once let me snuggle down, with my head under my good old blanket, and nothing like that will keep me awake."

"From what I've seen of some of your performances," admitted Adrian, "I reckon you're right, Billie. But Donald has agreed that we pull up stakes here tomorrow some time, and make a start for home."

"Is that so, Donald?" demanded the fat chum.

"Yes, by afternoon we might pull out, though we'll not get very far by night-time, it may be," came the answer.

Perhaps Billie caught a certain significance about it, for he instantly went on to remark:

"Huh! guess you mean to have a look-in at that Sacred Mountain racket, and find out what the old medicine man keeps hidden there?"

The others exchanged glances.

"Talk a little lower when you're saying things like that, Billie," cautioned Donald.

"I hope you don't think there's a spy ahangin' around camp right now, one of those Zuni braves, awantin' to hear what we might be saying after our supper?" Billie asked, anxiously, as he sat up, to stare around at the rocks seen beyond the circle of firelight.

"No, but sometimes they tell us the walls have ears, and nobody can tell who might catch what we happened to be saying," Adrian observed. "But answering your question, I'll just remark that we do mean to make a try to find out about the strange noises they say come out of that mountain at times, when the Witch Doctor is talking with the Great Spirit."

"Yes," added Donald, "it's none of our business, that's right, and perhaps we hadn't ought to poke in there; but we've heard so much that we just feel we can't go away from here without one good try to solve the mystery."

"But remember, Billie, we haven't got the same motive that Braddon had," Adrian hastened to remark, seeing the other smile faintly.

"Not much," added Donald; "if there's a treasure cave in there it belongs to the Zunis, and we'll never tell anybody what we've discovered."

"Because," Adrian continued, "that would start a rush of crazy prospectors and miners over this way, and you never could tell what the end would be; all sorts of fights, and in some way or other the Zunis would be turned out of the homes their people have occupied for hundreds and hundreds of years."

"And we couldn't stand for that, you know, Billie," said Donald.

"Huh! I should say not," agreed the other.

Adrian changed the subject abruptly, showing that whatever he and Donald had settled upon as a part of their future programme, he did not think it wise to continue the discussion of it under the existing conditions.

The night wore on.

Up to the time they were ready to lie down and get some sleep, the racket still kept up over at the village. It seemed as though the Indians were bound to wind up their gala time with a grand hurrah. No doubt on the next day they would have relapsed once more into their ordinary prosy state of existence.

Just as he had said, Billie seemed to have no trouble whatever in going to sleep, and Donald, who also lay down while Adrian took the first watch, really envied him the ease with which he passed away into dreamland.

There was nothing occurred to disturb them all the night through, and both sentries managed to secure a fair amount of rest before dawn came.

During the day that followed they saw the other visitors and their guides take their departure. The three chums purposely delayed leaving until the afternoon had well advanced, for they did not mean to get a great distance away by nightfall, since they expected to retrace their steps, returning to the side of the Sacred Mountain.

Having marked the spot well where the cliff arose, which they knew concealed the secret tunnel the medicine man seemed to use in entering the mountain, they felt sure they could easily find it again, when the time came for action.

Billie succeeded in securing a few more snapshots to complete his collection; and was very happy over his success. In fact, the only cloud upon the horizon, so far as Billie was concerned, lay in his inability to guess the identity of the mysterious party who had three times done them such a favor.

If he was one of the cowboys who had been present to witness the snake-dance, why would he not have admitted as much before leaving the village? Billie had taken particular pains to be in the society of these fellows more or less during the morning before they went away, and not by the faintest sign did any one of them give him a hint that he might be the good friend.

The mystery was as dark as ever, it seemed; and Billie wondered very much as to whether he would ever know the truth.

"If Adrian keeps his word," he said to himself, as he sat there, pondering the aggravating matter all over, "we'll just as like as not be starting for Wyoming soon after we hit the Keystone Ranch country; for he's getting wild to set eyes on his own cattle ranch up there, that his Uncle Fred Comstock has been running so long. And if that comes about, why, I reckon, then, I'll never know just who to thank for all these splendid favors."

Whenever he tried to picture this unknown friend Billie always seemed to have in mind some sort of splendid looking man, who was just amusing himself going around doing good wherever he found a chance. And it grieved him very much to realize that his chances of ever thanking him were growing less and less all the time.

About the middle of the afternoon they said good-bye to all their Zuni friends and rode away. The old medicine man was among the crowd that saw them off; he even condescended to shake hands with each of the lads. Doubtless it had dawned upon the mind of the conjurer that he and the Zuni tribe in general were under heavy obligations to these boys for what they had done. Had it not been for them that fraud of a showman might have succeeded in coaxing the chief to start away, with most of the people, tagging after him, to leave them stranded and helpless in some faraway station; while meanwhile he returned to try and find the secret treasure which report said the Witch Doctor knew of in the heart of the Sacred Mountain.

"I want to tell you, boys," remarked Billie, after they had gone far enough on the other trail that would avoid crossing the main desert to no longer see any sign of the wonderful home of the cliff dwellers; "I'm not sorry to get away from that place. Too many creeping things to suit me. I don't much mind standing up and waiting to receive the charge of a mad bull elk; or calmly puncturing the tough old hide of a whopper of a grizzly bear; but excuse me from all sorts of scaly things. No alligators, lizards or Gila Monsters need apply for a job to Broncho Billie. Set that down with a red stone to mark it, will you?"

After going as far as they thought fit the three boys turned aside from the main trail, and finding a good place where camp could be made, as well as water secured for themselves and ponies, they settled down.

Supper came next in order, with Billie plying his old trade, and apparently doing about all there was to accomplish, yet actually performing very little through lack of system.

Night had now closed in about them, but they did not mean to be in any undue haste about attempting to carry out the little scheme they had on foot.

In fact, both Adrian and Donald were somewhat ashamed of this spirit of curiosity that was coaxing them back, to pry into the secret of the medicine man. They assured each other many times that they did not mean him any harm in the least, and only entered into the game on account of a natural feeling, such as all boys possess to a greater or less extent—a desire to know “what makes the wheels go around.”

They had heard so much concerning this wonderful voice in the heart of the mountain that they just felt that it would be a shame for them to go away without at least making one good effort to learn what it all meant; and how, when a man with a high-pitched, screechy voice like that of the Witch Doctor went alone into the rocky uplift, there came pealing out the deep tones of a strange voice, thrilling those who heard, under the belief that it was Manitou who spoke.

Three hours after sunset Donald arose, and said that it was time they made their start. Adrian quickly joined him, and Billie also stretched himself; for while he did not feel very much enthusiasm about the affair, he was determined not to be left there alone.

So the three boys went forth, carrying their guns along, of course; and in addition Donald made sure of a couple of ropes, which he judged would be plenty long enough to reach from the top of the cliff down to that ledge the wizard had used.

### **CHAPTER XXVIII.—AT THE END OF THE ROPE.**

“Careful, everybody; we must be near the edge of the drop right now!”

When Donald said this in a low but thrilling tone, Billie drew himself up into as small a space as possible, and strained his eyes in the endeavor to discover for himself any danger that might threaten them.

He chanced to know what it meant to feel himself plunging downward through space, and was in no hurry to repeat the experience.

“There’s the crooked tree you marked down, Donald,” whispered Adrian; “right off there to the right.”

“So it is,” came the pleased response; “and that means we are just a little to the left of where I calculated to strike. Slowly now, all; and in three shakes of a lamb’s tail we ought to be there.”

Crawling carefully along the rough surface of the mountain in the direction of the crooked cedar that grew close to the edge of the steep precipice, which had appeared to their eyes when seen from below as a cliff, they presently reached their destination.

“That part’s done, anyhow,” the others heard Billie say to himself, with a certain air of relief that told how strained his nerves must be, what with all the excitement through which he had lately been compelled to pass.

Now, although they had as yet not told Billie about it, his chums had talked the matter over, and determined that one of their number should by rights stay there on the top of the precipice, while the others descended the rope to the shelf they felt sure lay just one-third of the way down the rocky wall.

And of course this should be Billie, for everything combined to mark him as the victim. He was so very heavy that it would be a task to get him up, once he managed to slide down the rope. Then again, he was inclined to be clumsy, and might in some way make a slip that would result in a sad tragedy. Last but far from least in the list, Billie was not fitted as well as they were to take part in a desperate enterprise like this.

And so all that remained to be done now was to tell him. Neither of them liked the job, but it must be done; and when Donald nudged Adrian, and whispered in his ear that he ought to speak, the other lost no time in doing so.

“You know, Billie,” he said, getting his lips as close to the ear of the stout chum as possible, “all of us can’t go along, because there’s got to be one stay up here to help pull, when we’re ready to come back.”

“Oh! why to be sure,” replied Billie, sweetly; “and of course you’ve selected me to be that one? But then, what’s the difference? I’m that heavy I might break the rope; or drag somebody down with me. I’m just as well satisfied; though it’ll seem awful lonely while you’re gone, fellows; and I sure hope you won’t stay all night.”

This was a pleasant surprise, for they had fully anticipated that Billie would set up a great opposition to their plan. But apparently he had himself been thinking it over, and settled on his plan of campaign, should they give him the choice of going or staying.

“Nothing is apt to bother you up here, Billie, make sure of that,” said Donald, reassuringly.

"And you have your gun along in case you need it," added Adrian.

"Don't you worry about me a single minute, boys," the stout chum went on to say, in what was meant to be a firm and even buoyant tone as though he could see no reason for any undue anxiety.

That point having been settled in a satisfactory way, they began to prepare to make the descent. First Donald fastened the two lariats together in a fashion known particularly to cow-punchers. Then he made sure that the loop at the lower end ran free; after which he attached the other end to the crooked cedar that grew so close to the edge of the descent that it seemed to be there especially to serve their particular purpose on this occasion.

Adrian wanted to be the first to go down; but somehow Donald seemed to have assumed the position of master of ceremonies, and he also usurped that privilege as coolly as you please.

"When I get safe on that platform I'll shake the rope twice," he announced as he prepared to swing himself over the edge.

"That will mean for me to start down, I reckon?" asked Adrian.

"Yes, and be careful, please, old fellow; don't forget that a slip might throw you down all the way to the bottom," Donald went on to say, a bit uneasily.

"Speak for yourself, Donald," remarked the other, with a chuckle. "I like your nerve, to caution me when it's you that goes about everything in such a hurry, you're always apt to get in trouble. But it's all right, Donald, I'll hold tight; and be sure you do the same."

Adrian shook the hand of his chum, as did also Billie, before the other swung over the edge, and began his downward journey.

It was all dark below him, even though fairly light above; but then Donald depended more on his sense of touch than his eyesight, in a case like this. He kept dropping, a yard or so at a time, with one leg twisted around the rope; and the other foot feeling for what he sought below.

Crouching there, Adrian kept feeling of the rope, and in this way knew how the other was getting on. As long as he caught that periodical jerk he realized that Donald was making satisfactory progress.

Finally the strain seemed to be off the rope, so that he could even pull it up a few inches as he chose. Either Donald had reached the shelf, and thus relieved the rope from his weight, or else—but Adrian would not allow himself to even consider the other possibility; and besides, they had heard no cry, no heavy thud.

Ah! immediately he felt the rope twitch violently; yes, and a second time this came about. That must be meant as a signal by the one below; and he remembered how Donald had said he would give two distinct jerks after he had safely landed.

"My turn now, Billie; look out for yourself; and when you find that one of us is coming up the rope, stand by to pull, if you get the word. It might be a bigger climb than we counted on, and some help needed before we could get to the top."

"Count on me, Adrian," Billie said simply; and if his heart seemed in his throat as he shook his comrade's hand lingeringly, no one knew it, because the night concealed all traces of his emotion.

Adrian went down in just the same way the other had adopted, a little distance at a time, then a brief interval, after which he would again allow himself to slide some more.

Presently, when he thought he might have come about far enough, something touched his foot that sent a thrill through his whole body, until he realized that it must be the hand of Donald, reaching up to reassure him.

"All right, Ad; just one more drop, and you're there," came a low whisper; and he found himself guided into the haven, so that he could plant both feet on the solid rock.

Leaving the rope to swing free, they began to look around them, in order to learn just how the old Witch Doctor came out upon that same shelf. In this they were greatly helped by the little electric hand torch which Donald had with him; and by means of which they quickly discovered a fissure in the face of the cliff, wide enough to allow the passage of a man.

Leading the way, and using this useful means of illumination, Donald felt confident of being able to serve as a guide to the expedition.

The path was very rough, so that at times they had to almost crawl; but then as they moved along it they could see from time to time that another had walked this way many times, undoubtedly the old medicine man of the Zunis, and those who had occupied his place years and years ago.

"I wouldn't be surprised," remarked Adrian, in a low tone, as he caught hold of his companion's



arm, "if that dip yonder proves to be the passage which he uses whenever he enters below at the base of the cliff, and ascends, like he did that time we followed him here. The Zunis are that afraid they would run like wildfire if they thought they stood any chance to see him enter the mountain; so he must have fallen into a sort of a free-and-easy way. After seeing us around, he tightened up, and would only come here at night-time."

"H'st!"

When Donald made that hissing sound his chum closed his lips, for he instinctively understood that it meant danger.

"Look down the shaft, and you'll see signs of a light!" whispered Donald, close to his ear now.

"What do you reckon it can be?" asked the other, as he too saw the faint glow.

"It's getting brighter all the while, Ad, and that tells us whoever holds the torch is coming up from below!"

"You mean Pick-ne-quan-to?" whispered Adrian, in no little excitement.

"Well, as we don't believe in spirits, it must be the old medicine man," replied his chum; "and I only hope our comrade, Billie, kept back from the edge above, for he might have been seen."

"Or either of us while crawling over the edge," continued Adrian. "Looks like we might be lucky boys tonight, Donald; but of course you won't stay here, to be seen when he gets up even with us?"

"I should say not," replied the other; "and it happens that I noticed a splendid *cache* right back here that will hold both of us. Come on, let's make our get-away before it's too late."

Three minutes later they had secreted themselves in the cavity noticed by Donald, and were waiting, more or less anxiously, to see if the party approaching did turn out to be the Witch Doctor.

Donald, peeping out of a cranny, whispered in the ear of his comrade that sure enough it was the medicine man. He walked serenely past where they were hiding. Once, when he seemed to stop and look around, Adrian could feel the arm of his chum fairly quiver; and he realized that the old Witch Doctor must be furiously angry did he discover these intruders, come to spy upon his secret, which he kept from even the chief of the tribe.

Adrian was more than half sorry he had consented to come; but this feeling passed away when he saw the glow of the torch moving on again; and from the indications realized that the queer medicine man had gone about his business.

"Let us follow him at a safe distance," whispered Donald; and they started forth, when it seemed as though the coast were clear.

## **CHAPTER XXIX.—THE MEDICINE MAN'S SECRET.**

It was with considerable difficulty that the two chums made forward progress under such a handicap as confronted them. The medicine man knew every foot of the passage he was following. Besides that, he had a blazing torch, by means of which the route was made clear; whereas they were traveling over new territory, and in almost pitch darkness.

Several times when the beacon ahead vanished completely they were compelled to make use of the little electric light; but on such occasions Donald made sure to keep its glow confined to the rocky floor directly in front, so that no glancing ray might startle the mysterious man they were pursuing.

As these lapses of illumination in front were undoubtedly caused by the Witch Doctor turning some bend in the passage, the boys felt that they were taking only a small amount of risk in thus using their own torch.

It saved them from numerous stumbles, and possibly a bad fall; because the way was rough, with many outlying rocks to serve as traps for unwary feet.

"We must be getting right into the heart of the mountain," whispered Adrian, after they had been advancing in this manner for quite some time.

"That's right," replied the other, with equal caution; "and still the old fraud seems to be pushing ahead."

"Do you think this passage can lead through the pile of rocks, so that if we kept on far enough we'd come out on the other side?" Adrian asked.

"Hardly that," his chum chuckled. "Pretty soon we'll find out just why Pick-ne-quan-to comes in

here every once in a while. It used to be only so many times a year, they told me at the village, but now he has a talk with the Great Spirit nearly every day."

"Yes, I heard that brave tell you so; and every time, some of them say they can hear that heavenly music, and the heavy voice of the dread Manitou, coming out from the heart of this Sacred Mountain. It's mighty queer, Donald, what it can all mean."

"Well, let's hope that after all the trouble we've taken we are on the brink of learning his secret," the ranchman's son observed.

"That doesn't mean anything about his treasure, though," put in Adrian.

"No, we made up our minds to have nothing to do with any deposit of precious metal he might have found in here; because we don't want to send ten thousand white prospectors rushing this way, to overturn things, and really wipe the Zuni people out, in their craze for gold. We'll listen, and look around, and then go away again as quietly as we came."

While he did not know it, this remark on the part of Donald, and which really reflected the sentiments of both lads, did them great credit. It was not every boy who could look at things in such a humane light.

They had been greatly interested in the strange life of the Zunis, and just the very thought of all this history, which extended far back beyond the discovery of America by Columbus, being snuffed out in the greedy rush of modern gold-crazy miners was repulsive to them.

"There, he's turned another bend, I reckon, Donald; and it's so pitch dark here don't you think we'd better make use of the hand torch again?" said Adrian, presently.

"Just as you say," replied the other; "but we must be careful about it, because one flash of the ray would put him wise to the fact that there was something going on back here that ought to be looked into. And I'd hate to have that grim old chap trying some of his witchcraft on us."

"Huh! on my part I'd be more afraid of his letting loose a nest of rattlesnakes to trap us, or some such awful game. When we get to that bend ahead—" but Adrian did not finish his sentence, for just then a strange sound broke forth upon their hearing that caused both boys to stand there as though transfixed; while Donald shut off the little illumination with a movement of his ready thumb.

It was music that greeted them, the sweetest music either of them could ever remember of hearing in all their lives. Of course there instantly flashed through their minds the recollection of all they had heard about heavenly choirs singing, and celestial instruments playing, according to the crude notions of the Zuni people.

Well, it seemed as though the reality far exceeded the many descriptions which they had picked up from various sources; and both boys stood there for several minutes, hardly breathing, so stunned had they been by this outburst of wonderful melody.

Then all at once it burst upon the mind of Adrian that there was something familiar about the music; just as though he may have heard it before while asleep and dreaming.

He gripped his hands in an endeavor to remember where it could have been; and trying to unravel the thread of memory.

"Ad!" came in a whisper, close to his ear; and he suddenly remembered that he had a chum alongside, who must be thrilled just as much as he was by these fairly ravishing strains.

"Yes, what is it, Donald?" he asked, reaching out so as to come in contact with the arm of the other, which he immediately pressed reassuringly.

"Sounds for all the world to me like a violin!" continued the other.

Then a great light suddenly burst upon Adrian, just as a clap of thunder during a summer shower will startle one.

"It *is* a violin, or as the boys call it out here, a fiddle!" he said, quickly; "and I remember hearing that same tune played some years ago when I was East. Yes, it's the same melody, and I'd know it among a thousand. Listen to that, would you, Donald? Could anybody beat such skill, and wonderful handling of the bow?"

"But Adrian, however in the wide world would such an old heathen as the medicine man manage to master the fiddle, so as to play like that? I never heard its equal in all my life!"

"No more you didn't," chuckled Adrian, "for you're listening now to the drawing of a bow that has charmed millions of music lovers in all the great cities of the wide world, I reckon."

"Oh! you mean—" started Donald, when the other took the words out of his mouth.

"He's gone and got a talking machine in here, that's the truth of it all, Donald, don't you see?"

When he was away on one of his secret trips, trying to find out how the white people lived, he must have heard one of these same music boxes sing and make speeches. It set him fairly wild, for he may have a love for music in his soul, you know. So what does he do but buy one, with a lot of records; and somehow get the whole business carried into the heart of the Sacred Mountain."

"Yes, yes," added Donald, "and the music appeals so much to old Pick-ne-quan-to that his visits are getting of daily occurrence now. No wonder the Zunis say he is becoming so very familiar with the Great Manitou, that he can't let a day pass without having an interview with the Master. Oh! Ad, this is a rich joke on us now, ain't it?"

"Well, I don't see how you make that out," replied the other. "We came in here to discover the source of that heavenly music, and the loud thunder voice that nearly frightens the Indians to death; and looks like we've done it. I think we've reason to feel satisfied. There, now the violin has sobbed itself out, and perhaps we'll have a Caruso sending his robust voice through all these underground passages next; or it may be a Melba warbling like a bird in the forest. Ain't this the most wonderful explanation of the mystery you ever could have dreamed of? And to think that it never struck either of us once!"

"How could we guess it," said Donald; "when we didn't have the least clue? But listen, he's started the machine to going again."

This time it was a song bird who filled the underground retreat with music; and as the two spellbound lads, crouching there in the darkness, continued to listen, soon they heard the loud, heavy voice of a well-known statesman filling the chamber with the echoing eloquence of a stump speech, which doubtless had done full duty in the last political campaign, but was now thrilling any listening Zuni with the belief that it was the sonorous voice of Manitou.

"Hadn't we better be getting out of this now?" asked Adrian, after they had stayed to listen to several more wonderful reproductions of the human voice and various musical instruments, among which was a military band.

"Yes, we've had enough for our money," returned Donald. "Let the shrewd old wizard have his concert out by himself; Billie will be getting anxious about us, especially if the poor fellow hears a faint sound of all that's been going on here."

"Perhaps he'll begin to fear that we've been taken up into the other world by a host of angels, or something like that," chuckled Adrian, as they started to once more cover the ground they had traversed before, Donald using his hand torch now, as the danger of discovery seemed next to nothing.

"Do you really think the medicine man meant them to believe that was the voice of Manitou, when he brought this talking machine here?" questioned Donald, after they had been walking for some time along the tortuous passage, and must be drawing close to the exit at the ledge.

"No one knows, and perhaps no one ever will," came the reply, showing that Adrian had been figuring on this matter himself, and arrived at a conclusion. "He may have in the beginning just wanted to enjoy a feast of civilized music by himself, without letting his people know that he had departed that far from their customs; and then learning how they believed him to be talking with the Great Spirit, why, he encouraged the idea, you see. And all the while he's been getting more and more in love with *real* music as compared with the horrible racket the Zunis make with their old tom-toms and wailing reed instruments. Perhaps the time will come when that talking machine will be installed in a lodge in the center of the village, to be listened to each fine night by every brave, squaw and papoose in the settlement. Times are changing fast all over the world, even with savage people; and I've heard men say that this same talking machine is doing more to educate savages than all the missionaries in the world."

"Perhaps that's so," remarked Donald; "but here we are at the ledge, and let's hope we'll have little trouble in getting up where Billie is."

"Let's hope," urged his chum, "that the same Billie is awake, and attending to his business; because we may need the help of his strong arms before both of us climb the rope to the top."

### **CHAPTER XXX.—BILLIE MAKES A DISCOVERY—CONCLUSION.**

"Hold up, boys, I thought I heard some one shouting just then; and seemed like they might be calling for help!"

When Donald said this, the little party drew in their horses, as well as the pack mule, Bray, and sat there listening.

They were well on their journey, with the Zuni village many miles distant. Donald and Adrian had found little difficulty in climbing to the top of the cliff after reaching the ledge. There they were eagerly greeted by Billie, who confessed that he had for half an hour been lying there, with his ear to the ground, catching the faint sounds of the most heavenly music he ever heard. And as he was wild to hear what they had learned, they had to tell him.

Billie considered it the best joke he had ever run across. Often since then the others had heard him chuckling, at times, and knew that he was drawing a mental picture of that grim old necromancer, clad in all his savage attire, squatted before that talking machine, and drinking in airs from the opera, rollicking songs by Harry Lauder, and then the ponderous speeches of ex-presidents and other statesmen.

"You're right, Donald," said Adrian quickly, "I heard it as plain as anything right then; and seemed to come from down this queer little stream that we're just going to cross, after the horses have drank their fill—you don't often run across such a jolly flow of water in this region of rocks and deserts. There it comes again, a cry for help; and there goes a gun of some sort!"

"It couldn't be a trap, now, could it?" asked Billie, a bit nervously; for he could not get the remembrance of those Apaches off their reservation out of his mind.

"That's a white man calling, so let's head that way, and see what ails him," Donald decided, after they had heard the call several more times.

After following the little wandering stream for half a mile they suddenly made a strange discovery. In the midst of the water there was a human head, with a pair of shoulders—only that to be seen, and nothing more.

"Whatever is he adoin' wading in there, and where it's nearly over his head?" asked Billie, wonderingly.

But the others knew.

"He's being sucked down in a quicksand!" cried Donald.

"And we've got to get busy, if we want to save the poor wretch!" echoed Adrian, as they urged their horses forward.

While the two ranch boys got their ropes out, and made arrangements to have one of the horses pull, after a noose had been placed under the man's arms, Billie made a sudden discovery.

"Say," he called out, from the shore, close by where his chums were working like a pair of beavers, "I think I know that man, even if his face is covered with mud. It's Tod Harkness, that's who it is, the worst rascal along the border, so lots of people say."

"But the man you saved once before, Billie," remarked Donald, as he too now recognized the ugly face of the fellow.

"Don't let that same keep you from yankin' me out, gents," whined the man, who had rather lost his nerve when he believed that his doom was certain; he might have faced pistol fire without flinching, or almost any other form of death; but this thing of being sucked down, inches at a time, until the end came, was worse than Indian torture.

"Rest easy, Tod, we're not the kind to let any man, no matter how much of a bad egg he may be, go to such a death," said Adrian.

"Out you will come, as soon as I get this loop fixed," added Donald. "It'll hurt some when the horse pulls; but you've got to stand for that, Tod."

"I kin stand anything, if on'y I git out," said the border desperado.

When they had all arrangements made, he did come out, though the strain was so great that the man fairly shrieked, and then swooned before they had him safe on land.

Donald proceeded to examine him, and Adrian as well said that no damage had been done except to bruise his body a little. He would soon be himself again. His horse was calmly grazing near by, and had apparently paid no attention to the calls of its master, while it could find green grass to nibble.

In running his hands over the man's person Adrian happened to draw out what seemed to be an old and much used notebook. He opened the same in idle curiosity, and hardly had he done so than Billie gave a whoop.

"Oh! look, would you, fellows?" he cried; "don't you see several pages have been torn out right here? Wait a minute, Adrian, and watch me fit them two warnings we got to the torn edges of the balance of the pages. There, they match like magic! Don't you see, it was *him* that kept watching over us all the time—only for Tod Harkness we might have drunk some of that poisoned water at the spring; if *he* hadn't seen that Injun sneaking up and wounded him, who knows what would have happened to us; and last but not least, *he* let us know about that measly game the showman Braddon was putting up on us. Now the mystery is all clear. It was only poor old Tod Harkness atrying to pay back the debt he thought he owed me, because I helped him that time!"

The three Broncho Rider Boys stood there by the side of the slowly recovering border desperado, and stared at each other. It was almost too strange to believe, but they had all the evidence necessary in that soiled notebook, with the two warning notes fitting snugly in the torn places.

"Well, after this," said Donald, slowly and earnestly, "I'm never going to believe any man is *all* bad. Even Tod Harkness has human feelings; and if he had had a home like mine perhaps he'd have been a good man today. I only hope he's found it so fine to be doing decent things, that he'll keep it up after this. If I thought so, I'd even try and get dad to give him a job at the Keystone."

And strange to say, that was what really came about; for Tod, after he had come back to his senses, told them he was determined to turn over a new leaf, and gladly accepted the chance to get employment under a man so highly respected as Mr. Mackay.

As he will probably never be heard of again in these stories it may only be right and proper to say here and now that Tod *did* make good. The little seed sown by honest Billie on that occasion when he assisted the desperado, had been working over-time in the brain of the man, with the result that his regeneration was brought about. While he had meant to hover around, and be of some assistance to Billie, Tod had not wanted his identity to be known, and on that account he kept in the background while at the Zuni village, which accounted for their not having seen anything of him.

"Everything has now been cleared up," remarked Donald, as they sat around their camp-fire that same evening, Tod being one of the number, a quiet man who had begun to *think*, for possibly the first time in his whole life, and was very grateful to these lads, not only for saving his life, but for promising to give him a chance to redeem his bad past.

"Yes, and there's nothing now to keep me from heading north, after we get back to Keystone Ranch," added Adrian. "I'm thinking of my place up there most all the time now; and it seems like I couldn't keep back any longer. I must know the truth about what my uncle is doing there. If he's acting square by me I want to forget I ever felt uneasy; and on the other hand, if there is any crooked work going on, which would account for the poor returns I've had of late years, why the sooner I make a change in my manager the better."

"Yes," added Billie, with a tender look over to where Adrian sat on the opposite side of the glowing camp-fire, "and don't forget, please, that we're going to ride with you when you take that long trip."

"Sure we are," declared Donald, heartily. "We've been pardes so long now that what's the injury to one is the same with all. When you start for your faraway ranch, Billie and Donald will be in the bunch, believe me!"

And that this prophecy was later on fulfilled the reader may readily guess when he examines the next volume in this series, which is now on sale under the title of "The Broncho Rider Boys On the Wyoming Trail; Or, The Mystery of the Prairie Stampede;" and those who have come to admire the sterling nature of Adrian; the rugged honesty and get-there qualities of the ranchman's son, Donald; and the humorous make-up of Billie, will find adventure and fun to their heart's content between the covers of the succeeding volume.

THE END.

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