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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SCOUTING WITH KIT CARSON ***



“Here I am, Kit! Don’t shoot!”

Every Boy’s Library—Boy Scout Edition

SCOUTING WITH KIT CARSON

BY

EVERETT T. TOMLINSON

AUTHOR OF
SCOUTING WITH DANIEL BOONE, Etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY
JOHN FROST

NEW YORK
GROSSET & DUNLAP

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PREFACE

Perhaps it is unnecessary to explain that the purpose of the author primarily has been to write a story, not a biography. And yet behind the story stands the romantic character of the great trapper, scout, guide, messenger, and soldier—Kit Carson. In every way the aim has been to portray him in a manner that should be true to his unique personality and his adventurous life. There is a basis of truth for the incidents incorporated in the tale. Although exact chronology has been impossible, still an attempt has been made in a general way, to present in order, various phases of Kit Carson's stirring life. The courage and truthfulness of the famous scout, his modesty and determination, as well as his fidelity and his friendliness are qualities of life never more in demand than to-day. Where can our boys and girls learn of their value better than in becoming familiar with a life which, whatever its limitations may have been, surely possessed these valuable qualities. Is it not high time, too, for young Americans to be taught that in the romance and adventure of the early days of our own country there are heroes as deserving of recognition as the semi-fabulous characters in the early life of nations across the sea? Whatever may be taught of the latter, surely American boys and girls ought not to be ignorant of the early heroes of their own land.

Everett T. Tomlinson.
Elizabeth, New Jersey.

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["Here I am, Kit! Don't shoot!"](#)

["Several Indians seated themselves before the mouth of the cave"](#)

["The trembling boy was able to see the scout as he drew his knife"](#)

["Instantly Kit Carson struck the treacherous redskin a blow between his eyes with his fist"](#)

SCOUTING WITH KIT CARSON

[CHAPTER I—THE CAMP ON THE PLAINS](#)

"I am glad we are going to stop here."

"It ees so. The boy ees mooch tired?"

"Yes, I am tired," responded Reuben Benton. "I have been in the saddle since before sun-up. Sometimes it seems to me as if I had been riding forever and a day."

The conversation ceased, and both men, leaping from the backs of their tired horses, first stretched themselves and then danced about in a manner not in the least suggestive of weariness. The action, however, was not so much to express their pleasure as to give relief to the cramped muscles of their backs and legs that now were almost numb.

The ponies manifestly, too, were glad of the respite. It was a long trail from St. Louis, or Pain Court, as the trading post frequently was called ninety years before this story was written, to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. For many days the two weary travellers had steadily ridden across the arid plains. In certain places they had forded rivers or had crossed on boats or rafts, that now were left far behind them. Here and there along the uncertain trail they had camped near the springs that occasionally were to be found. It was a spring which now had caused the two men to halt and to prepare their camp for the night.

For a brief moment both men turned and looked sharply all about them. Not far away, although they were much farther than they appeared to be, the towering Rocky Mountains lifted their summits high in the air. Some of the peaks still were covered with snow, although nearly all of them at this time in the summer were bare and bleak. Gorges and cañons were plainly visible, and the keen look which each of the riders gave them indicated that they were aware that these great defiles among the giant hills might be the hiding-places of savage beasts or of no less savage Indians. Indeed, the latter were much more to be feared, for recently there had been an increasing hatred of the whites manifested by all the tribes of the prairies and the mountains beyond. Not that many white men as yet had ventured into the wilderness, but the few that had done so had aroused feelings of fear and anger lest the pale-faced men might be merely scouts for a larger body that was following them. Rumours of battles fought farther east between the Indians and the settlers had made their way somehow even across the plains. Many of the actions, as well as the activities, of certain of the trappers and hunters, in their occasional visits among the tribes, also had not tended to soothe the fears or allay the feelings of the suspicious redmen.

Although thoughts of such perils were in the minds of the two men who had halted for the night, neither referred to them, nor was there any unusual anxiety betrayed by either. The horses now were hobbled, blankets were spread on the sandy soil, and a few cooking utensils were taken from the backs of the pack-horses, and all things were made ready speedily for the night that was fast approaching.

The horse of Jean Badeau, the elder of the two men, would have been noticed even by a passing stranger. Even after the long ride of the day was ended, there still was a flash in the eyes of Proveau, as Jean called his horse, and splotches of foam were still flying from his mouth when he proudly tossed his head.

The horse of Reuben Benton, though its coat was not quite as sleek and its eyes betokened a greater weariness than those of his companion's mount, still was manifestly fleet and strong. Four other ponies also were in the little caravan, and it was not long before the burdens they carried were removed from their backs and placed together on the ground.

As soon as the contents of the packs were seen it was evident that the men were engaged in what was a not infrequent occupation in these early days: both men were trappers. Indeed, numerous traps tied together were seen among the burdens carried by the patient animals. Powder and lead, two or three blankets, a few cooking utensils, and a scanty store of provisions comprised most of the outfit of the little train.

Of the two trappers, Jean Badeau was a man of medium height, with dark hair, and eyes piercing and black as midnight. His swarthy skin as well as his manner of shrugging his shoulders indicated that he was French. Whether he had come from St. Louis or Montreal, or even from France itself, he had not explained to his companion. It was in St. Louis, however, that Reuben first had met him, and there he had agreed to accompany Jean on his long journey to the Rockies, where they were to trap until late in the fall or early winter.

Their first plan had been to go to the upper waters of the Missouri River. When, however, they learned that several large trapping parties were also planning to go to the same country, Jean

decided that their opportunities would be better and their chances of success much more if they should leave their companions, and set their traps among the hills or mountains farther south, where some of the smaller streams had their rise.

Jean was about thirty-eight or forty years of age. The muscles of his neck and shoulders indicated his great physical strength. His heavy chest and long arms were silent witnesses to the power of the Frenchman.

Nor was Reuben Benton a weakling. Slightly taller than his companion, he, too, had dark hair and black eyes, but the tint of his skin indicated that it was due more to the sun and winds he had encountered on his long journey from St. Louis than to its original colouring. His eyes were expressive of the kindness of his heart, and it was clear that Reuben was not one that easily lost his temper or self-possession. Perhaps it was for this reason that Jean, whose success as a hunter and trapper was well known, had urged the lad to accompany him. He himself was the possessor of neither of these two virtues. Indeed, Reuben had told him that "he was not so much a man who had a temper as he was a man whose temper had him."

The difficulties confronting the two men were many. The food they had brought was not sufficient to provide for their wants more than a few days, and for the greater part they must depend for supplies upon their own skill with their rifles. However, as game was plentiful in the region, neither was anxious concerning the outlook for their immediate future. They were much more fearful of the red-skinned Indians among the defiles of the mountains and of possible rivals whom they might encounter in their visits to their traps.

Of all the trappers that had gone forth that year they were the only ones who had ventured to start with only two in the party. Whether or not they were wise in their undertaking will be better understood as the story of their adventures is unfolded.

In a brief time after they had arrived at the spring their camp had been made, brush had been gathered for a fire, the horses had been hobbled, and Jean had taken his flint and tinder and after two quick attempts had started a fire in the dry brush. The sun was still well above the tops of the mountains, but darkness, when it fell, would come suddenly.

"I'm telling you," said Jean, "that we start on Friday. That is ver' mooch onlucky."

"Why is it unlucky?" laughed Reuben, who was not greatly moved by the superstitious fears of his companion. "Do you think we shall have trouble or that we shan't get any skins?"

"I fear ver' mooch the both things."

While Jean had been talking he had been preparing their simple supper. So engrossed was he in his occupation, as well as in the steady stream of talk he maintained, whether Reuben heeded his words or not, that he was unaware of what was occurring in the vicinity of the camp. It was plain that he had entrusted to his younger companion the guardianship of the camp, while he himself prepared their simple evening meal.

"Look out! Look out!" suddenly shouted Reuben.

At the words of his companion Jean leaped to his feet, grasped his rifle, which he had left upon the sand nearby, and hastily turned in the direction indicated by Reuben. In a brief time the sight which had aroused the younger trapper also stirred the older man.

Not far away a buffalo calf was running directly toward the camp, evidently exerting itself to the utmost of its strength. Behind it in swift pursuit were following two long, gaunt wolves.

"It is so scared," Reuben suggested, "that it probably has taken us for a herd of buffaloes."

The calf by this time had in all likelihood discovered its mistake, but with undiminished speed it was continuing on its way directly through the camp.

The wolves, however, swiftly moved in a circuit outside the camp, so that the fugitive secured a slight gain on its enemies, and in a moment was straining every nerve to reach a large herd which now could be seen at the foot of the hills not more than two miles away.

"Why didn't you shoot, Jean?" inquired Reuben.

The trapper shook his head as he replied, "No waste powder."

"It isn't wasting powder to shoot one of those wolves!" replied Reuben. "It's one of the best pieces of work you can do! Look yonder! It almost seems as if they had come up out of the ground. There's one, two, three, four, five more now that have joined the two already there."

In silence the two trappers watched the pursuit, and in a brief time they saw that the number of wolves had increased to twenty or more. Indeed, the helpless victim was overtaken long before it could find a refuge among its fellows. The little animal fell an easy prey to its savage pursuers and was half devoured even before it was dead.

"I wish I had shot heem," muttered Jean.

"If one of our horses had been saddled I would have helped out the little beggar. I wonder why it is that one always feels that he wants the weaker side to win?" inquired Reuben.

Jean shrugged his shoulders, but made no reply, and once more resumed his task over the fire. Silence rested over the region, for Reuben was caring for the horses while his friend was busy with his labours.

"I no think they fight mooch," said Jean in a low voice.

Reuben hastily glanced up at the words of his friend, as for a moment the flight of the buffalo calf had been forgotten. Looking in the direction indicated by Jean, he saw that four or five buffaloes had advanced from the herd, keeping well together, and were moving toward the pack of wolves that still were busy over what remained of the unfortunate calf.

"Perhaps they won't," responded Reuben, "but they are going to do something which is almost as bad."

Both men stood silent as they watched the herd. Although the animals were two miles distant, as has been said, in the clear air they seemed to be much nearer, and the entire herd was advancing in a body. Out from the ravine was coming a steadily increasing number of buffaloes. Soon the great herd, forming as if some one had been giving directions which they understood, began to move in such a manner that for a moment it appeared as if the prowling wolves would

be surrounded. In a brief time, however, the savage animals were aware of the threatening danger, and with incredible speed fled from the region. The advancing buffaloes, however, did not halt when they saw their enemies disperse. Their speed steadily increased. The earth rumbled beneath the heavy tread of the myriad feet, producing a sound not unlike that of distant thunder.

An exclamation of dismay or fear from Jean caused Reuben to glance hastily at his companion; and it was plain that Jean was anxious or alarmed. Not many minutes elapsed, however, before Reuben understood the source of his friend's excitement and was sharing in his feeling of fear.

The great herd, moving now as if it was controlled by one motive, with steadily increasing speed was directly approaching the very place which the trappers had selected for their camping-place.

CHAPTER II—IN PURSUIT OF A HERD

"Queek! Queek!" called Jean. "At once! Immediately!"

Whether or not it was the call of his excited companion that influenced Reuben, his pony was quickly bridled, and almost at the same time both men leaped upon the backs of their horses. In spite of the weariness of both men and beasts, in a brief time all were alike highly excited. The great rumbling mass was steadily approaching and the horses also were aware of the peril that threatened.

In Reuben's heart there was a thought that if he and his companion should fire at the buffaloes the course of the mighty herd might be diverted. Perhaps even the direction in which they were moving would be turned and they would then avoid the camp. The young trapper had heard many stories of men and horses that had been trampled beneath the feet of a frantic herd of buffaloes.

As the huge animals came nearer and a mighty bull was seen acting as an advance guard, Reuben glanced quickly at Jean to see whether or not he shared in his alarm. Nothing apparently would be able to stand in the way of the rush of the oncoming horde. It was a sight unlike any that Reuben ever had seen.

On, and still on, dashed the animals, moving almost as if the swaying mass was one huge creature. Neither Reuben nor Jean had as yet advanced from the camp, but both were waiting with loaded rifles, unable to discover just what the exact course of the fleeing herd was to be.

"How many are there?" inquired Reuben in a low voice.

"About seven hundred."

Reuben whistled, but made no further response. Two minutes elapsed without any change in the direction in which the buffaloes were going. Then Jean said quickly, "I shall go to one side. It ees good for you to wait. When you shoot you must hit a cow, that ees the only meat that one can eat. Il trouverait à tondre sur un oeuf."

Whenever Jean fell into the use of his native language Reuben was aware that his excitement was almost beyond control. What the words meant he had no conception, but an instant later he saw Jean dashing directly toward the approaching herd. His horse now apparently was as excited as its rider. The weariness of the long journey of the day was forgotten or ignored.

Without any definite plan, Reuben departed from the camp, moving in accordance with Jean's advice toward the rear of the animals. The great mass was now less than a half-mile distant, and as the two hunters separated and approached the herd, Reuben saw that they had come within three hundred yards before the presence of the two riders was discovered. Then there was a sudden agitation in the huge body. The band apparently wavered for a moment, and some of the bulls galloped to and fro along the borders of the herd, betraying the fact that the presence of enemies had been discovered.

The progress of the trappers, however, was not stayed. Riding steadily forward, they drew nearer the buffaloes. To Reuben the interest of the chase had now become so intense that all other things were ignored.

Suddenly the movements of the dense mass were changed. The body swerved in a semicircle and apparently was in swift flight for the foothills. Within a few seconds the entire herd had joined in the flight, a guard of bulls as usual bringing up the rear. Frequently some of them stopped, and faced about as if they intended to test the strength or learn the purpose of the men on horseback. In every case, however, the huge animals speedily turned and once more dashed after the band, only to stop again and gaze at the horsemen. Indeed, as the minutes passed, Reuben was persuaded that the animals were minded to stand and fight.

Whatever may have been the impulse, however, as the hunters increased the pace at which they were riding the confusion in the herd became more manifest. The buffaloes were moving over the ground now with increasing swiftness, while the rumbling and roaring became steadily louder as the speed increased.

Reuben, who had followed directions and was making for the rear of the herd, now lost sight of his companion. He had a momentary glimpse of Jean when he was about thirty yards from the border of the herd, dashing into its midst. He heard the loud shout of the Frenchman, "A beau jeu beau retour!" but as he did not understand any of the words he was ignorant of Jean's purpose. He saw the mass give way, and a half-dozen or more of the bulls, that were less fleet than the cows, turned to face the approaching hunter. Several of them, however, were thrown to the earth by the mass of maddened animals and rolled over and over upon the ground, hardly to be distinguished from the clouds of dust that now were settling all about them.

Aware that Jean's plan was, if possible, to separate one animal and pursue it until he had approached its side and then aim directly at its heart, Reuben became so interested that for a brief time he almost forgot the task which had been assigned him.

Recalled in a few moments, however, and aware that Jean no longer was to be seen, he shouted to his horse to increase its speed and soon was swiftly moving toward the rear. He saw one cow slightly separated from the mass, and in a moment he was pursuing her as swiftly as the wolves had followed the buffalo calf a little while before.

Steadily the young trapper gained upon his victim until at last his horse was alongside the animal he was seeking. Partly rising in his stirrups Reuben, when only a yard separated him from the buffalo, fired. The animal fell headlong at the discharge of the rifle, and then Reuben checked his horse and looked about him for his companion. Not far away he discovered Jean tying his horse to the head of a cow, which he was preparing to cut up.

Filled with the spirit of the chase, Reuben decided that he would try to secure another cow. As he swiftly advanced he heard a shout from Jean, "Le coût en ôte le goût!" Still he did not understand what was said, and in his determination to secure another victim he did not heed the call, and soon was engaged in the mad pursuit of the flying herd.

Whether or not it was due to the weariness of the horse he was riding, or to the increased speed of the buffaloes, Reuben never knew, but at all events he was compelled to continue the pursuit for a long distance. Unaware of the passing time and unmindful of the fact that the sun now was disappearing below the western horizon, intent solely upon securing another buffalo, Reuben still followed in the chase. A thick cloud of dust filled his mouth and eyes and at times nearly smothered him. There were moments, too, when the herd was not to be seen, so concealed was it by the cloud which the hundreds of feet had stirred up in the desert.

He was aware also that the buffaloes were crowding more closely together, and the body was so compact that he was beginning to question whether or not he would be able to force an entrance and cut off any of the animals from the others. The dull and confused murmuring at times was as distinctly heard as was the noise of the many feet. Many times before Reuben had seen herds of buffaloes in the distance, but this had been the first time he had joined in a chase.

Jean had told him often of his own experiences in buffalo hunting, and in his own peculiar way had declared that "Indians and the buffalo provide the poetry and life of the prairie."

Whenever a discovery of a herd had been made Jean had insisted upon hunting alone. Even now Reuben could picture the excited Frenchman shouting to his horse, "Avance donc!" and cracking his whip to urge the fleet animal into its best paces. Often Reuben had shared in the feast that had followed, enjoying the tongues and steaks which his companion insisted were the only choice bits of meat that the buffalo provided. While these pieces were being roasted on sticks held over the fire, Reuben in a measure had been content because of the feast that was promised. Now, he himself was a buffalo hunter and already had secured one victim.

Unaware how far he was leaving his companion behind him, and ignorant of the direction in which he was moving as he followed the herd, Reuben still maintained the pursuit. He was unaware also of another change in the course of the animals. He had ridden near to the border of the terrified mass, but for some reason had been unable to penetrate it, or to separate one from the others.

As the herd swung to the right, Reuben found that he was being crowded by the animals, that apparently either were unaware of his presence or ignored their peril. He was ignorant of the fact that the herd was passing over dangerous ground. Many times in his long rides across the plains Reuben had passed through a prairie-dog village. The sight of the little creatures sitting erect upon their haunches, watching the approaching stranger on horseback, had become so common that he had given slight heed to the little animals. Nor had he once thought of them as a source of danger.

Still the flight and the pursuit were maintained. Several times the horse which Reuben was riding stumbled and nearly fell, but every time the pony was able to regain its foothold and dashed forward with undiminished speed.

Reuben was now aware that the animal he was riding was breathing heavily and doubtless was feeling the effect of its swift pace after the long ride of the day. As soon as he had secured the cow he desired—for now the young trapper had selected the animal which he intended to shoot—he decided that he would give his horse a long rest before he returned to the camp.

Suddenly one of the forefeet of his horse sank into a hole which the prairie-dogs had made. Glancing about him, Reuben saw that he was in the midst of a village of the little animals. With an effort he maintained his seat in the saddle, for he was an expert horseman, and an ordinary fall had little peril for him. This time, however, his horse was unable to regain its foothold. It stumbled and staggered several steps, and then with a groan sank to the ground.

As it fell, Reuben slipped from its back and leaped lightly to the ground. Advancing to the head of his horse, he seized the bridle and attempted to lift the animal to its feet. It was unable to rise, and a brief examination convinced the young trapper that the fall had broken its leg.

The thunder of the flying herd now sounded farther away. In the dim light Reuben saw that the buffaloes were still running swiftly and were headed for a valley or defile among the hills not far distant. Once there, doubtless they would be secure from attack.

His own predicament, however, was too appalling to enable Reuben long to think of the fleeing herd. He was miles distant from his companion, his horse had fallen with a broken leg, and night was upon him, while his perils doubtless would be greatly increased before morning came. For a moment the heart of the young hunter was heavy. A groan of his faithful pony recalled him to the necessity of action. There was no hope of restoring the suffering brute, and, advancing to its head, without hesitating a moment, Reuben fired at the heart of the panting, suffering animal. With scarcely a quiver the horse became still.

His own problem, however, was still unsolved, as Reuben now was fully aware. The cloud of dust in part had disappeared in the dim light. He looked all about him, but not a trace of Jean or the camp was he able to discover. He was alone on the trackless plains and by no means certain of the direction in which he had come or of the way in which he should go.

CHAPTER III—THREE CHEYENNES

Reuben was aware that he was not far from the base of one of the highest mountains. As once more he looked up and peered intently in every direction, he was aware also that no one was within sight. The poor beast on which he had ridden was dead and there was no means by which the young trapper might return to the camp where he had left his friend. In the distance the herd of buffaloes still could be seen, a tiny mass moving across the plains in the dim light. Even while he was gazing at them they disappeared and were lost to sight among the foothills.

Reuben was aware that he had shot one cow, but where the animal had fallen or how far it was from the place where he now was standing he had no means of knowing. He looked behind him, but was unable to discover even his own trail in the sand. All traces had been destroyed by the hoof-prints of the mighty herd of fleeing animals.

In what direction had he come? Reuben was aware that in a general way he had followed the line of foothills, but it was plain to him now that the herd which he had pursued had not moved in a straight course. In and out over the uneven ground, the animals, frantic with fear, had fled for safety.

The young trapper was aware also that he was hungry, and yet he had no food. If he could secure the carcass of the buffalo cow he had shot his wants would be supplied. The light, however, was too dim to enable him to see far away, and even in clear daylight he was doubtful if he could see the body in the distance.

Again he tried to discover the fire or smoke of the camp which he and Jean had made. Not a trace of it, however, was to be seen. It was quite likely that the very fire itself had been scattered by the herd when they had dashed across the plains. The pack-horses, too, doubtless had fled, and Reuben shuddered as he thought what was likely to be their fate before the morning appeared. The pursuit of the buffalo calf by the gaunt, hungry wolves was only an indication of what might occur when the ponies, wearied by their efforts throughout the day, would be in no condition to escape from the attack of the savage animals.

For several minutes Reuben remained standing, slowly turning in his position until he had looked about the entire region. He listened intently, hoping that he might hear the sound of Jean's rifle. The oppressive silence of the great desert, however, was unbroken. Twinkling stars had appeared in the sky, the air was motionless, the solitude was almost appalling, and within a few minutes Reuben decided that he must take his rifle and saddle and proceed in the direction in which he thought the camp was located.

The boy, however, was now feeling the full force of the reaction after his strenuous day. Every muscle in his body seemed to be sore. He advanced with difficulty, and the saddle somehow appeared to be much heavier than when he had thrown it on the back of his pony.

It was impossible for him to think of remaining where he was. He was hungry as well as tired, and the fear of an attack by a pack of hungry wolves was more than a vague impression.

Suddenly Reuben saw the outline of three dim forms approaching on horseback. Startled by the unexpected sight, the boy remained motionless and waited for the strangers to come near him. The sight was not one to soothe the fears of the troubled young trapper, but he was convinced that his safest course was to await their coming.

Accustomed now to the dim light, not many minutes elapsed before the young man was able to see that the advancing party was composed, of three Indians. One of them was much smaller than his two companions and perhaps was a lad. Who they were or why they should be coming at that time he was unable to conjecture.

It was plain, however, that his presence had been discovered, for a slight divergence in the course the Indians were following showed that they were now approaching. In a brief time they drew near and one of them spoke. "How? How?" inquired the leader. At the same time he indicated, by extending his open hands, that no hostile action was intended.

Following their example, Reuben also held forth his hands in a way to indicate his peaceful intentions.

"Where go?" inquired the Indian that before had spoken.

"I want to find my camp," answered Reuben. He was relieved by his discovery that the three Indians were poorly mounted, the beasts which they were riding apparently being well-nigh exhausted. The smallest member of the party he now discovered was an Indian boy, perhaps fifteen years of age. It was manifest, too, that the spokesman was the only one able to speak English.

"Where go? Where go?" repeated the Indian.

"I want to find my camp," again answered Reuben. "I left my partner back yonder somewhere, while I went out to shoot buffaloes. My horse stumbled and fell in a prairie-dog village over here. The poor brute broke his leg and I had to shoot him. I thought I was not very far from camp, but I reckon now I am a good deal farther than I thought I was. Where are you going? Who are you?"

"Cheyenne," answered the Indian promptly. "We go home."

"How far do you go?" inquired Reuben.

The Indian held up three fingers of his right hand to indicate the distance which must be covered before they rejoined their tribe.

"Three miles!" said Reuben, startled by the suggestion.

The Indian laughed and, shaking his head, again held up his three fingers.

"Three hundred miles, you mean?" said Reuben.

The Indian nodded his head several times to indicate that the young white had spoken correctly. Plainly the words "hundred" and "miles" were not in his vocabulary.

Patting himself upon the chest, the Indian said: "Me Breaker of Arrows. Come to Pawnee country. Try to get Pawnee ponies."

"You mean you came out here to steal their horses?" inquired Reuben.

"No steal; *take* horses."

"How many did you get? It doesn't look as if you had had very great success. These ponies you are riding look as if they had been turned loose by the Pawnees. They aren't worth feeding."

"Pawnee heap coward!" said the Indian grimly. "Pawnee shut up horses in lodges at night."

"Did they find you?" inquired Reuben.

"No find. Breaker of Arrows, Cheyenne. Dark Night, no find," added the warrior, pointing to the boy as he spoke.

The third member of the party apparently was ignored.

"Where did you get these ponies?"

"Ponies wild. Get horses on plains."

"They look as if they were wild," said Reuben. "Have you had anything to eat?"

"No eat," replied the warrior; at least the man was posing as a warrior, although the only weapons the three Cheyennes carried were bows and arrows and one long spear, which was in the hands of the spokesman.

"I shot a buffalo cow."

"Where buffalo?" demanded the Cheyenne quickly.

"I wish I knew," replied Reuben lightly. "I am hungry and tired. I ought to have stopped when I shot one, for one was enough, but I kept on, thinking I would get another, and so I passed the place where the cow fell. If you can find it you will have something for supper, for I will be glad to share with you."

The Cheyenne turned and spoke in his own tongue to his companions. After a hasty conversation the spokesman once more turned to Reuben and by the aid of signs and a few words intimated his desire for the young trapper to remain where he then was while the Indians searched for the body of the fallen buffalo.

Somewhat suspicious that if the strangers should succeed in finding the dead animal they might not return, Reuben nevertheless agreed to the suggestion, at the same time striving to conceal his own fears.

At once the Indians departed after they had secured from Reuben his impressions of the direction in which they should go. The boy watched them until the outlines of their forms no longer could be seen in the dim light. It was plain to him that they were moving in parallel lines at a considerable distance from one another.

Casting his saddle upon the ground, Reuben stretched himself on the sand, using the saddle as a pillow. His rifle was loaded and placed beside him, and in a brief time the young trapper was sleeping soundly.

How long he had slept he was unable to decide when he was suddenly aroused from his slumber by the sound of approaching footsteps. Lifting his head but still retaining his position, Reuben peered in every direction to discover the approaching party. At first he was unable to see what had awakened him, but in a brief time he saw a man approaching on horseback. In a little while he was convinced that the man was an Indian, and if so doubtless was one of the party which he recently had seen. His impression was confirmed when in a low voice the approaching Indian spoke: "Find um buffalo."

"Where is it?" inquired Reuben.

The Indian did not reply, but alighted from his pony, for by this time he had drawn near the place where Reuben was standing, and bade him follow.

"Where are you going?" inquired Reuben.

Still the Indian did not explain, and after a brief hesitation Reuben decided to obey the suggestion.

Slowly the Cheyenne, who still was on the back of his pony, led the way toward the foothills that now seemed to be nearer than before. In a brief time the desired point was gained and there Reuben discovered the Indian boy who had been with him a little while before. The third Indian, however, was no longer to be seen, and no explanations were given for his absence, although Reuben asked several times where the other member of the party was.

Sheltered by a huge rocky boulder, the Indians soon kindled a fire and parts of the buffalo tongue and steaks which they had cut from the carcass were roasting on sticks held over the flames.

Conversation ceased until the repast was prepared and eaten. Then Reuben inquired: "Did you see anything of my friend?"

"No see. What do now?"

"Do you mean what I am going to do?" inquired Reuben. "Well, I wish some one would answer that question for me."

"Breaker of Arrows go home. Black Night come, too. White boy want to go with us?"

"No," answered Reuben, "I must stay here. I must find my friend."

Apparently his explanation satisfied his companions, for in a brief time they mounted their ponies and prepared to leave Reuben alone in the little valley or defile where the buffalo meat had been roasted.

It was impossible for Reuben to resume his search for Jean. In the place where he then was he was protected from sudden attacks and he decided to remain there and await the coming of the morning.

The night passed without any adventures, but when morning came the light revealed to Reuben a sight even more startling than that of the preceding evening, when the three Cheyennes had discovered him alone on the plains.

CHAPTER IV—RAT TRUE

In the light of the early morning Reuben saw a man on horseback approaching the place where he was standing. Behind him were two pack-horses, each heavily laden.

Convinced that the man was a stranger and that as yet he had not discovered the presence of any one besides himself in the defile, the first impulse that seized upon the young trapper was to seek some place of safety.

He waited, however, excitedly watching the stranger as he led the little procession up the narrow natural pathway. It soon was evident that the stranger was a white man, and, once convinced of that fact, Reuben's fears in a measure departed. What a man could be doing among the foothills of the Rockies, so far from companions and civilization, was something he was unable to conjecture. The bundles on the backs of the horses indicated that it might be possible that he had come with a purpose not unlike that which had drawn him and Jean to the region. At all events, he decided that he would not flee immediately. Hastily examining his rifle to make sure that it was ready for immediate use if occasion required, he awaited the coming of the man.

There was a slight bend in the valley, which for a moment hid the approaching stranger from sight. As soon as the man turned the bend, however, he discovered Reuben before him, and instantly stopped, grasped his rifle, and gazed intently at the unexpected sight.

"Who are you?" demanded the stranger.

"I was just going to ask you that question myself," replied Reuben, laughing in a manner that served to allay much of the suspicions of the newcomer.

"My name is Rat True. Now that I have told you that much," said the stranger, "tell me who you are."

"My name is Reuben Benton," acknowledged the young trapper.

"Good name," said the other man, laughing boisterously. Now that he had discovered that apparently there was only one man approaching, Reuben's confidence in his own ability to protect himself returned in full measure.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Rat.

"Trying to get out."

"Where did you come from?"

"Last night I came from the plains. I was chasing a buffalo herd and my horse fell in a prairie-dog village and broke his leg. I had to shoot him."

"You weren't alone, were you?"

"No."

"Who was with you?"

"Three Cheyennes came to join me for a little while, but then they went on, so I was left alone."

"Yes, but who was with you before the redskins?"

"Jean Badeau."

"Who's he?"

"A trapper."

"He's a trapper, is he? Well, has he ever tried it before?"

"Yes."

"Where did he sell his skins?"

"Sometimes he took them to the trading-post and sometimes he took them to Pain Court."

"Are you and he the only men here?"

"Yes," answered Reuben with a laugh. "And he isn't here now. At least I can't find him."

"Where did you leave him?"

"I can't even find the place where I left him. You see, as I told you, I started out last night to shoot one or two buffaloes. I got one and then I chased along after another, but I think I must have gone farther than I knew, for I couldn't find my way back before dark."

"Do you think that you can find it now that it is light?"

"I don't know," replied Reuben dubiously. As he spoke he glanced in the direction in which it seemed to him the place where he had left Jean must lie.

"I don't mind telling you," began the stranger, "that I'm a trapper myself."

"Have you ever been here before?"

The man, who was at least six feet three inches tall, and large in every way, threw back his head and emitted a laugh that was proportionate to the size of his body.

"Have I been here before?" repeated the stranger. "Well, just a little. Last year I took in over one thousand beaver skins. I shot more than two hundred buffaloes. I hugged a grizzly bear until he yelled for mercy. I killed two Utes with one bullet."

Reuben was looking intently at the stranger as he spoke and was inclined to believe that he was telling the truth. It was plain that the newcomer was a man of great physical strength, and his exploits, which he described in a loud voice, were not altogether improbable. At all events, the boy decided that the man was in nowise bashful, whatever his other faults might be.

"Yes, sir," continued Rat. "I guess if you were to ask the redskins about me there aren't many of them that can't tell you who I am. I've fought them single-handed and alone, and then, again, I've fought them when there were hundreds of them together. I thought at first I would go up along the Oregon this trip, but I soon decided that too many others would be there, too. I don't like company. That's the reason I wasn't very much pleased when I first saw you here."

"Do you own this country out here?" inquired Reuben soberly.

"I can't just say as how I own it," laughed the giant, "but there aren't many who will dispute what I claim. Where did you say your friend is?"

"I didn't say. That's just what I want to know."

"Well, what are you planning to do?"

"The first thing I have got to do is to find Jean. Then I suppose we'll start pretty soon for the place where we are going to begin our trapping."

"I hope you don't trespass on any of my territory."

Reuben did not respond to the suggestion, and a moment later the newcomer said: "Have you had your breakfast yet?"

"Not yet," replied Reuben. "I was just going to have it."

"What have you got to eat?"

"Buffalo tongue and some strips of steak."

"Good! That's mighty good! I'll help you get ready," said the giant. "I'll do you a good turn even if I shan't let you trap along the streams what I preëmt for myself."

Acting upon his suggestion the trapper dismounted and removed the saddle from the horse he was riding. The pack-laden animals, however, he did not relieve in the same way.

"I'm thinkin' I'll stay here and help you with your breakfast," he repeated.

Reuben, who at once had begun to make preparations for the morning meal, was unable to see for a time, at least, where the "help" of his uninvited visitor was shown. As soon, however, as the pieces of buffalo meat had been cooked and the repast was ready, Reuben discovered how capable the giant was to "help" in disposing of the food which he had provided. Indeed, Rat was increasingly free with his advice and directions as to what Reuben should do, and for several reasons the boy did not refuse to obey, or even to follow, any of the proffered suggestions.

When at last the food had disappeared, the giant remarked: "Then you think you will look up your camp, do you?"

"I want to look up Jean."

"Well, isn't that the same thing? I'll tell you what I'll do. You have been good to me and given me a bite, now I'll take the pack off of one o' the ponies and let you saddle it, and then we'll go out and look for your friend. I hope he really is somewhere," added Rat, suspiciously.

"He was, the last I knew," laughed Reuben.

In a brief time the suggestion of Rat had been followed, and after Reuben had carefully adjusted his saddle to the pony of his companion they decided to leave the remaining pony in the defile while they set forth on their search for the missing Jean.

Still Rat was loquacious. Apparently it made little difference whether or not Reuben replied or even listened to what he was saying. "You asked me a spell ago did I own these streams out here where I'm trapping. I told you I didn't know as I did, but I likewise remarked that no one else had been putting in no claim for them. I don't think many of them are likely to, not while I'm 'round."

"There aren't likely to be any here, are there?" remarked Reuben.

"You're here, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, isn't the other fellow that was with you? Isn't he here?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out," laughed Reuben.

"So am I," roared the giant. "If you're here, it may be somebody else will be here, too. Now, let me tell you that there isn't anybody in creation what is going to set traps along the same streams where I set mine."

"How will you stop it?" inquired Reuben.

"Do you see that?" inquired the giant as he held up for Reuben's inspection an immense fist. "With that bunch of bones I have knocked down an ox. If anything happens to that fist, then I have got something else to fall back upon," and with a loud laugh the giant held up his rifle. "And if worst comes to worst," he continued, "I have got something in my belt here that will help take care of me."

As he spoke he drew from his belt a long, slim, sharply pointed piece of steel, which he explained had once been a bayonet, but by repeated filings had been reduced to its present shape and size. That it was a dangerous weapon Reuben instantly understood.

"That time I was hugging that grizzly," resumed Rat, "or, rather, that time when he was hugging me, do you know I just tickled his ribs with that instrument?"

"Did he like it?" inquired Reuben.

"He didn't live long enough to say. There was a grin on his face though when he doubled over, so I guess he didn't feel so bad as he made out, though he was pretty dead when I left him."

"What do you mean by 'pretty dead?'"

"Dead as a door-nail."

"But when one is dead he can't be any deader, can he?" persisted Reuben.

"I don't know about that. That bear didn't look as if he was dead, but he was. Now, suppose I had blown him all to pieces, and couldn't find as much as a nail or a tooth left, I guess he would be deader then than he was when he just had my knife in between his ribs. Where did you say this fellow came from?"

"What fellow?"

"Why this man that you were with—this fellow Jean."

"Pain Court."

"Is that where you belong?"

"Yes."

"Ever heard o' Kit Carson?"

"I have that!" said Reuben eagerly. "I know him. I have seen him."

"How long ago?"

"He was there early in the summer not long before we left. Indeed, he wanted us to go with him."

"Why didn't you?" remarked Rat. His eyes, which were unnaturally small, contracted as he spoke, until the expression startled the young trapper.

"Because Jean thought we would do better not to go with a crowd, but to go off by ourselves."

"That Jean of yours is a fool."

"But I thought that is what you yourself said," suggested Reuben, "and that you wanted to trap alone and not with a good many others."

"There's a mighty sight o' difference when I say it and when this friend o' yours says it."

"What's the difference?"

"Look here, my friend," said Rat, turning sharply upon his companion. "There are better men than you got into trouble from asking too many questions."

"But you asked a good many questions of me."

"Did I get into any trouble by askin' 'em?" demanded Rat, as he laughed loudly.

"Not yet."

"What do you mean by 'not yet?'"

"Oh, nothing."

By this time the two men had proceeded far from the place from which they had started, and still Reuben was unable to recognize any signs of the locality where he and Jean had prepared to make their camp the preceding night.

Suddenly, however, he abruptly halted and, pointing toward a spot not far away, he excitedly demanded: "What's that? What do you make of that?"

CHAPTER V—THE FAME OF THE TRAPPER

In response to Reuben's startling questions both men halted and looked keenly in the direction in which he was pointing.

"Is that where your camp was?" inquired Rat.

"It looks like it," replied Reuben quietly as he hastened toward the spot he had discovered on the plains. Both were silent until they arrived at the place they were seeking. Then, after a hasty inspection, Reuben said quickly: "This is where Jean and I camped last night."

"Are you sure?"

"I know it is," said Reuben positively after further investigation.

"Where is your friend now?"

"That's what I should like to know, myself," responded Reuben, as he peered intently about him in all directions.

"What are you going to do about it?" inquired Rat after a brief silence.

"It's strange where Jean could have gone," said Reuben slowly, almost as if he was unconscious of the presence of his companion. "He isn't a man likely to be drawn into trouble. I have been wondering if the redskins got him."

"If they did they carried him off."

"But there are no signs of any scuffle," protested Reuben, as once more he examined the ground around where the fire had been.

"He may not have put up any fight."

"You don't know Jean," said Reuben positively. "It's strange. The ponies are gone. There isn't a sign of the packs, and Jean isn't to be seen anywhere."

"What are you goin' to do about it?" repeated Rat. "You know I can't stay here forever. I've got to look after my own job. I usually find that if I ever have anything or get anything done it is because Rat True looks after it. Ever noticed that, boy?"

"I wonder where Jean can be," repeated Reuben, almost as if he had not heard the inquiry of the giant.

"Maybe if you stay here long enough he will show up. That's what my father used to tell me about the cows. He told me if I would take my milkin' pail and go out and sit down in the middle of the pasture, pretty soon the cows would all come up and ask me to milk them. So I'm thinkin' it may be a good thing for you to sit down here, and perhaps your friend, if there is such a friend, will come back."

"What do you mean?" demanded Reuben quickly, as he turned and faced his companion. "Don't you think Jean was here?"

"That's what you say; I have your word for it."

Reuben's cheeks slowly flushed, but he wisely controlled his anger and did not respond to the implied unbelief of the huge Rat.

"I told you I couldn't stay here all day," continued Rat. "Now will you go back with me to the place where we started, or do you want to go on alone? I shan't let you have that pony if you don't go back with me, and if you do go I want you to understand right now that we part company when we get back to the gorge."

Still Reuben did not respond to the rough declaration, for he was yet uncertain what his best course would be.

"Come, make up your mind," called Rat, as he turned his horse about so that he faced the direction from which they had come.

"I'm going back with you," said Reuben quietly.

"All right, then, come along."

Together the two men departed from the camp, but they had not gone far before Rat insisted upon drawing his young companion into conversation.

"You was tellin' about Kit Carson a spell ago," he suggested.

"Yes."

"Well, what about him? What is his name anyway? What does 'Kit' stand for?"

"Christopher."

"And they call him Kit for short?"

"Yes."

"Same as they call me Rat instead of Erastus."

"I didn't know but Rat was your real name," said Reuben.

"It is," laughed Rat, "only it isn't all there is of it when my mother speaks to me. Speaking of Kit Carson, you say you have seen him?"

"Lots of times."

"Did you ever talk to him?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about him."

Instantly Reuben's face lighted and it was evident that the request of his companion was one that touched a responsive chord.

"He's the greatest man I ever saw," he declared enthusiastically.

"The biggest?"

"No, I didn't say biggest, I said greatest."

"What's the difference?" roared Rat.

"I cannot explain it to you," said Reuben truthfully, for his feeling toward the boastful Erastus was rapidly becoming one of disgust. The man was so blatant and boastful that the reaction had taken place which led Reuben to believe that he was not all that he claimed to be.

"Where did he come from?" inquired Rat.

"He told me he was born in Kentucky, but that his father moved to the backwoods of Missouri when Kit was a little fellow."

"How old is he?"

"I don't know. I think he is about twenty-five or six."

"Quite an old man, isn't he?" laughed Rat. "Do you think he could throw me?"

"Yes," said Reuben quietly.

"That's a good one!" roared Rat. "I could take him in my hands and crack him the way I would a stick. I am told he is a little fellow."

"Yes, he isn't very large," acknowledged Reuben. "He isn't much taller than I am, and he is light. His voice is as soft as a girl's. Any one might think when he first saw him that he was the most peaceful fellow in the county."

"Isn't he?"

"He never picks a quarrel, but anybody who picked a quarrel with him would wish that he had grabbed a grizzly instead of the quiet, peaceable little Kit Carson."

"Tell me some more about him," suggested Rat.

"I don't know that I know very much. I have talked with him and asked him a good many times to tell me about his adventures, but he is very modest."

"Your modest men are always cowards. They don't say anything, because they are afraid."

"It's plain you don't know Kit Carson. He told me that when he was fifteen years old his father 'prenticed him to a harness-maker. That was a good trade, but such a quick, nimble fellow as Kit couldn't work at it very long. He did stay his full two years, though, and learned the trade, but when his time was out he decided that he would become a trapper. That was what he had always wanted to be. He told me that when he was a little fellow one of the trappers that had come in with his skins let him pull the trigger of his gun. That was the first time Kit had ever fired a rifle, but he wanted to keep at it, he liked it so well, and pretty soon he not only learned to shoot, but he became the best shot in the neighbourhood. The Indians all liked him and they told him a great many things about the woods and the animals that live there. You see, when his father first went into Howard County all the settlers had to live in a log fort for a while, that had guards on the lookout for the Indians day and night. That was a part of Kit's work when he was a little chap. He got so that he knew the war-whoops of every tribe and almost every redskin. My father used to say that if Kit Carson did so well in his harness-making, which he didn't like, he wondered what he would do when he found some work that he enjoyed."

"Did he go to trapping right away?"

"He was on the lookout all the time, and pretty soon he went to the leader of a party that was going to start for Santa Fé. You see, then there were no trails marked out over the plains. That was a good while ago—in 1826."

"And I wish there wasn't any now," suggested Rat. "In those days they tried to hide the trails, and now they try to make 'em plain. The redskins know every time a party starts with their traps, and wherever you find game you find Indians there, too."

"Yes. Kit Carson told me some stories of how parties of Indians surrounded the trappers or traders and took their guns and horses away from them and either tomahawked the men or left them to starve. But every man in Kit Carson's party was well armed, had a good horse, and was up to all the tricks of the Indians. I have seen them start out, every man wearing a deerskin suit, and some of the men all dressed up with bead embroidery, and the fringes of their shirts dyed half a dozen different colours. They had pack mules to carry the traps, and when they all started they marched in Indian fashion, single file. They took turns in going ahead, for the ones that went first had to break the way for the others. Then, there was a bugler at the head of the line. If any of the men strayed away while they were hunting, the bugle was to let them know where the main line was."

"That's all very pretty," said Rat. "I have heard a good many stories about Kit Carson, but I'm wonderin' if he has any nerve."

"I know he has," said Reuben quickly. "On that first trip one of the men in the party had an accident. He shot himself in the arm. Pretty soon the others decided that the only way for the poor chap to save his life was to have his arm cut off. I don't know whether or not Kit Carson did the job, but I know that he helped. They used a razor, a saw, and a redhot wagon-bolt."

"Did the man get over it?" demanded Rat boisterously.

"Yes. And he kept on with the others. He forded the rivers and climbed the mountains and followed along an Indian trail, over the track that the buffaloes had made, and never once dropped behind. When the party finally got to Santa Fé Kit Carson decided that he would not go back to Missouri, so he pushed on alone to Taos. That was eighty miles from Santa Fé. You know that is a trading station for trappers?"

"So I have heard," assented Rat.

"Well, there wasn't much in that place for Kit. He said the little, narrow streets had mud huts along their sides and that water was pretty scarce, but he always liked Taos, because it was there that he met Kincade."

"Who's he?"

"Didn't you ever hear of Kincade? Why, he was one of the biggest trappers that ever got a skin in the Rocky Mountains. He knew all about the wild beasts and the places where the beaver dams were, and he knew where the Indians that troubled the trappers were likely to be found."

"He knew a lot, didn't he?" laughed Rat.

"Yes, he did. Kit Carson says he did. But what he liked best of all was that he knew Spanish, and he taught Kit how to speak it. He stayed there until spring, and then he decided that he would go back home and start out trapping on his own account. So he joined a party of trappers that were going East and started to go home, but he hadn't gone halfway across the prairies before he met some more trappers that were on their way to Santa Fé, and what they said to him made him change his plans."

CHAPTER VI—ALONE

"What did he do then?" inquired Rat, who, for some reason which Reuben did not understand, appeared to be intensely interested in the life of the scout who had already become famous throughout the West.

"Why, they offered him a chance to go back with them, and be their hunter, so he joined the new party. He told me, though, that he didn't find any fun in his work. A good deal of the time he was driving a team, and that was the last thing in the world he wanted to do."

"I suppose he wanted to shoot buffaloes and hunt Indians?"

"That's exactly what he wanted to do. He didn't give up his plan, though, all that winter he was a cook for a man named Young, who had made a lot of money trapping. Kit said that was the worst winter he ever had. Sometimes he used to chase the rats out of the corn-bin and then he would say to himself, 'Here are poor Kit Carson's buffaloes.' When the winter was gone he still did not find any party of trappers that was willing that he should join them. You see he was such a slight, little fellow, and, as I told you, his voice was so soft and his manner was so gentle, that the men all thought he would not be able to stand the work and they would have a sick man on their hands.

"In the spring he made up his mind to go back home again. But that time, too, he met a party that was on its way to Santa Fé. They offered him a job which he took and went back with them. Finally he did find something worth doing. He went down into Mexico as an interpreter for a lot of men that were going to Chihuahua. When he got there he hired out again as a teamster for a man who was going to the copper mines. But he didn't really get his chance to begin his scouting and trapping until he came back to Taos. He had become so used to seeing parties of trappers start off without him that when at last this Mr. Young, the man for whom he had been working, told him that he could join a party he was sending out, he took up with the offer right away. The man that hired him knew that he wasn't afraid of anything on earth."

"Ho!" snorted Rat, breaking in upon the narrative. "I guess he wouldn't have felt that way if he had seen me. What do you suppose a little fellow like Kit Carson would do if a man like me got after him?"

"I'd feel sorry for you, if you tried to go 'after him.'"

"That's a good un! That's a good un!" roared Rat. "Do you think he could run away from me?"

"I don't think he would try."

"Well, if he didn't run and I once got my hands on him I would break his back as easily as I would a stick."

Reuben smiled and did not reply to the boastings of the braggart.

"How many men were in this party you are telling about?" demanded Rat.

"About forty."

"How old was Kit then?"

"About twenty."

"Ho, ho!" roared Rat again. "And yet you say he wasn't afraid of anything on earth? How do you know he wasn't? Because he told you so?"

Still Reuben refused to make any explanations to his companion. He was aware that Rat was deeply interested, although the cause of his interest was not yet apparent.

"Probably your wonderful Kit," suggested Rat, "caught more beaver, shot and scalped more redskins, killed more deer and buffalo than any other man in the band."

"I don't know about that. He never told me. He wasn't the one that told about these other things, either. He did say that scouts were always sent ahead of the men to find out whether any Indians were near. Every night they had guards for the camp."

"They didn't find any Indians, did they?"

"Not until they came to Salt River. There they found they were likely to be attacked by the same redskins that had killed the last party of trappers that had been there."

"This time I suppose Kit single-handed killed every one o' them?"

"I don't know; I suppose he did his part. This Mr. Young played a trick on the Indians."

"What did he do?"

"Why, he sent a few men ahead and hid the rest of them among the bushes and trees, and then when the Indians saw the little party they did not know there were any others, so they chased them clear back into the woods. When they came close to the place where the men were hiding the trappers all fired their rifles."

"And killed all the redskins?" laughed Rat.

"Kit Carson said they killed fifteen. Then the Indians ran and never once attacked them again. They did steal their ponies and traps, but they didn't make any more attacks on them. By the time the men had reached the headwaters of the San Francisco River they had so many beaver skins that Mr. Young sent some of the men back to Taos. He kept some of the best ones, though, to go on with him into California."

"I suppose he kept Kit Carson, of course?"

"Yes, sir, he did. It was a terrible time they had, too. There weren't many trails and they couldn't find much grass for the horses, or water for any one, or even wood enough to make a fire. Out there on the desert there weren't any buffaloes or deer, but there were enemies that were a good deal more dangerous than either of them."

"What were they?"

"Hunger and thirst. The men had a little deer meat and some water bags they had made of deerskin, and Kit said they were mighty careful every day when they measured out the water and divided up the meat. When they had been out four days, all at once the donkeys stretched out their necks and began to run. Everybody knew what that meant."

"What did it mean?"

"Why, they had sniffed water somewhere. Pretty soon they came to a stream. Kit said he never had anything in his life taste as good as that water. It didn't seem as if they could get enough. The men rested up a while and then started on again across the desert. On the fourth day they came to Colorado. There they stopped to rest and to cook an old horse which they had bought off the Indians."

"Pretty fine feast," laughed Rat. "Cold water and horse meat! Which did they take first—the water or the horse meat?"

"I don't know. What difference does it make?"

"Why, I know a man back East who lives on dried apples. He has dried apples for breakfast, cold water for dinner, and swells up for supper. Perhaps the horse meat served in the same way."

"By and by they came to a mission down in the San Gabriel Valley. The priests had taught the Indians there how to make farms. There was everything one wanted to eat."

"What did they do? Help themselves?"

"No, they didn't. They paid for what they took."

"That's a good un," laughed Rat.

"They did, for Kit Carson told me so. He said he paid four butcher's knives for a steer."

"He might just as well bought the steer without handing over the butcher's knives."

"Anyway, the trappers had a good time there. They found lots of beaver and the men had enough to eat and drink. When the warm weather came they went into camp down on the lower Sacramento. They had enough to do, hunting deer and antelope. Kit Carson then was the best shot in the whole band. All the men had somehow come to rely upon him."

"Did he say so?"

"No, sir, he didn't. He never told me about it, but some other men who were with him told me, and they said he was the one man the Indians were afraid of."

"That's a good un, too," laughed Rat.

"Well, the men thought so," retorted Reuben angrily. "One of the priests came over and told Mr. Young how some bad Indians had gone over to an Indian village and wouldn't come out. The priests wanted some of Mr. Young's men to get the runaways. Of course the men said they would, and they said right away that Kit would have to be their leader. So Kit took the men over to the village and told the Indians they must give up the men for whom they had come, but the big chief said they wouldn't do any such thing."

"So they had a fight, did they?"

"Yes, they did."

"And all the redskins were killed?"

"No, not all of them, but they lost so many that they gave up the bad Indians. One night not long afterward a lot of Indians came into the camp of the trappers and made off with sixty horses. Kit said most of the men were angrier to have their horses stolen than they were to have some of the men shot. They were mad through and through, and pretty soon twelve of them, with Kit Carson at their head, started after the thieves. They had a long ride across the mountains and through the valleys, and for a long time they couldn't find any signs of the men they were after. They went more than one hundred miles before they caught up with them."

"Then Kit Carson shot every one of them, I suppose?"

"No, he didn't. He found the Indians in camp, cooking and eating horse meat. Without stopping a minute, Kit called to his men, and they started straight for the camp. They shot eight the first time, and all the rest made for the woods."

"But they didn't get away because Kit Carson chased them into the forest and got them all?"

"No, he didn't; he told the men to get all the horses that had been stolen, and then they started straight back for camp. They were lucky to find some one who bought all their beaver skins. When the summer was over they all started back home, but they kept trapping all the way along. They made a lot of money, and every one got a share. He said he didn't know what to do with the money."

"Probably he found somebody to tell him?" laughed Rat.

"Yes, he did. He said he got into all sorts of bad ways that winter. I don't suppose he was doing anything different from the rest of them, but Kit Carson isn't the kind of a man that could ever find much fun in drinking and gambling. That was about all the other men seemed to care for."

"He must be a wonderful man. I think I must try to see him some time. He wouldn't scare me, would he?"

"No," replied Reuben seriously. "I told you he is as gentle as a girl."

"I am glad," laughed Rat. As he spoke he extended his huge arm, and as he clinched his hand Reuben was almost convinced that even Kit Carson would be powerless in its grasp.

"There's our camp," suggested Rat, as he pointed to the defile in the distance. "There I have got to leave you, if you won't go on with me."

"No, I have got to find Jean."

Not long after their arrival, Erastus True, as soon as he had packed his belongings on the backs of his ponies, bade farewell to Reuben and started on his lonely journey northward.

Reuben had his rifle, his bags of powder and shot, and a saddle and bridle. His pony was dead, but he was hopeful that soon he would find the missing Jean, and then all his troubles would be ended.

CHAPTER VII—MOUNTAIN TROUT

It was not until he was left alone that the full sense of his difficulties came upon Reuben Benton. He watched his recent companion as leading his little train he slowly passed to the north and soon was hidden from sight among the foothills. He might have gone with him, although the man had not been cordial in his suggestion, but the chief barrier was that Reuben had taken an intense dislike to the boastful man. Not the least of the grounds for his prejudice was the ridicule which the giant had heaped upon Reuben's hero, Kit Carson. For a moment, however, Reuben almost wished that he, too, had gone with the man, much as he disliked him. At least he would be certain to go somewhere, and now he did not even know what fate had overtaken Jean Badeau. As yet no suspicion had occurred to him that any serious misfortune had befallen the trapper. Indeed, Reuben was inclined to be angry with the man for having departed without awaiting his return.

He thought, too, of Kit Carson, and the band which he had led into the defiles of the Rocky Mountains on their trapping expedition. He had been eager to join that party, but the same opposition greeted him which years before had been faced by Kit Carson himself. The men were afraid that he was not sufficiently strong to endure the hardships of the long journey and the trying winter that was certain to come. For that reason Reuben had accepted the invitation of Jean to go with him.

Jean did not wish to trap with a band, as we know. And yet he did not plan to be entirely alone. His own thought had been that if Reuben should accompany him, at least he would provide company, and if evil befell him he would not be bereft of all help.

And Reuben had listened to the appeals of Jean, not only because of his eagerness to become a trapper, but also because he was compelled to choose between being bound out to some of the Missouri pioneers or else to learn the harness trade, as Kit Carson had learned it before him.

Reuben's father, a ne'er-do-well, had urged Reuben to accompany his older brother William when he had migrated from Virginia to find a new home in the rich lands of western Missouri. Reuben had been treated with a degree of kindness by his older brother, but his brother's wife objected to his remaining longer a member of the household. She now had six children of her own to care for, and the addition of another dependent had become somewhat irksome. She was a worn, nervous, scolding, irritable woman, and Reuben, after a long talk with his brother, had decided that it was wiser as well as better for him to find a home somewhere else.

It was soon after this decision had been made that the homeless lad had met Jean, who had returned from his annual trip to the fur country. And Jean had not found it difficult to persuade Reuben to accompany him. There were visions held out before him of the great wealth that was to be obtained by trapping, and the adventures which Jean graphically described with many gestures also had their own appeal for Reuben. He was now a well-grown boy of sixteen, strong, skilled in the use of the rifle, and he confidently believed that he was equal to any of the hardships which an ordinary party of trappers might be compelled to undergo.

Not much time was required in preparations for the journey. Reuben's rifle, a few traps, most of which were unreliable, and a few other belongings were collected. A pony was provided by Jean, and when he set forth from Pain Court, aside from his brother William, there was slight regret in his heart for any one he was leaving behind him.

The long journey had been made with but few mishaps. They were now within sight of the land of promise, but on the very border he had lost his companion. And yet, as has been said, Reuben was by no means convinced that Jean was lost. He was inclined to believe that Jean had left him, either expecting to return or that the boy would soon find him. Perhaps he had seen the Indians whom Reuben had met and was fearful of their evil intentions. They might be only the scouts of a large band not far away.

The thought for a moment made even Reuben uneasy and he glanced apprehensively about him. The noisy little mountain brook not far away made the only sound he could hear. Above him in the sunlight towered the summits of the lofty mountains. Trees and grass were about him, and no scene upon which he had ever looked had been more peaceful in its outward appearance.

It was now late in the afternoon. Reuben was aware that he was not only tired, but also

hungry. It was necessary for him to obtain something to eat, although he was uncertain where food was to be found. That, like certain other disagreeable facts, however, must be faced.

Near the little brook he suddenly saw a deer approaching from the upper part of the gorge. A moment later he was aware that it was a doe leading her fawn to the brook for a drink. Reuben, who had been seated motionless, had not been discovered by the timid creatures, and as the wind was blowing toward the valley below him the keen-scented animals had not noticed his presence.

Here was his supper sent directly to him!

The sight of the graceful little fawn, however, caused Reuben to hesitate. He hated to shoot the pretty little creature. He watched the fawn as it glanced up into its mother's face with an expression that was as filled with affection as that which he had seen sometimes in the face of a child. Already he had raised his rifle to his shoulder, but for some reason he did not shoot. The sudden loosening of a stone by his foot produced a sound which made the two animals look quickly in his direction, and instantly he was aware that he had been discovered. For a moment the doe anxiously gazed at the intruder, and then like a flash she was gone, followed by the fawn. The supper which had come to him almost miraculously was lost, and for a moment Reuben was inclined to blame himself for yielding to his feeling of sympathy for the fawn.

And yet what was he to do for his supper? Carelessly he advanced to the border of the brook and looked with interest at the hoof-prints of the doe and the fawn. He was aware that there were occasional pools in the little stream, and as he glanced into one he had a momentary vision of a fish darting under the shadow of the overhanging bank. Reuben had never heard of mountain trout, but the sight of the fish instantly suggested a plan by which he might be able to obtain his supper.

A few yards below the place where he was standing the stream narrowed until it was not more than two feet wide. Quickly he rolled some of the loose stones to the place so that when they fell into the water they served as a barrier in the stream. When a half-dozen stones had been placed in the narrow neck of water Reuben cut a good sized club, and, going up the stream a short distance, stepped into the water. As he advanced he shouted and struck the water and was positive that several times he saw fish dart swiftly down the stream before him. Proceeding cautiously and using his club all the time, he soon drew near the dam he had made. As he did so he began to leap up and down in the water and shout and strike the bank as well as the stream with his club.

The hungry boy was delighted when a few moments later a fish, finding its progress barred in either direction, leaped out of the water. Reuben succeeded in striking it with the club he was carrying, and watched it as it fell on the ground several feet away from the stream. If there was one fish in the water, he concluded there must be others, and quickly he repeated his tactics. After two failures he succeeded in obtaining another fish, and finally threw the third up on the bank. The last was larger than the other two combined.

Again the problem of his supper had been solved. He soon secured the three fish he had taken and, returning to the spot where he had left his belongings, he at once made them ready for cooking. Afterward he collected a mass of branches which had fallen from the nearby trees and was preparing to kindle a fire.

In the midst of his occupation he abruptly stopped. Should he light a fire? It is true it might not only provide a means of cooking the fish, but also indicate to Jean, who could not be far away, the presence of his camp. On the other hand, the Indians he recently had seen had told him that many more redmen were among the mountains. They, too, might see the fire and might steal upon him unaware.

The feeling of hunger, however, was so strong that Reuben soon decided in favour of a fire. Disregarding the danger, by means of his flint and tinder he soon started a roaring blaze. He had made a rude little fireplace by piling some of the stones in such a manner that the top was covered. On this top he placed a large, flat stone, and upon this he laid two of the trout.

It was not long before Reuben had a supper not only "fit for a king," but such a supper as a king is seldom permitted to enjoy. It is true all the salt which he and Jean had brought had been in the saddlebags of the trapper, but the mountain trout were delicious even without salt.

By the time Reuben's supper was eaten he was aware that the brief sunset was nearly ended. Much of his anxiety had now departed and he was quite content, as he said to himself, to let Jean do the searching. He seated himself upon the ground, leaning back against the trunk of a huge tree, and as he listened to the music of the noisy little brook and watched the scurrying clouds pass across the evening sky he was even more decided that Jean might find him if he should search diligently.

Not long after the coming of the night, however, this feeling of confidence gave place to one of loneliness. Indeed, the consciousness that he was alone soon became oppressive. He recalled the sight of the pack of gaunt and hungry wolves that had run down the buffalo calf. Perhaps they would be glad to feast upon a young trapper for supper, just as he himself had feasted upon the trout he had taken from the mountain stream. Aroused by the suggestion, Reuben started to his feet and made a tour of his camp. Although he walked one hundred yards in every direction, he was unable to discover any signs of danger. When he returned to his camp the fire had burned low, but it was plain that everything was as he had left it. His troubles might wait until morning, he finally decided, and not long afterward, stretching himself upon his blanket, he was sleeping soundly.

It was daylight when he awoke, and as soon as consciousness returned Reuben was aware that he had been awakened by sounds that even now he could still hear in the distance.

At first Reuben was unable to decide whether the noises that came into the narrow valley were the howlings of wolves or the yelpings of dogs. Startled by the unexpected sound, he hastily seized his rifle and, taking his stand behind one of the huge boulders, awaited developments.

In a brief time he saw, plunging up the narrow defile, a wounded buffalo cow. Only one glance was required to show the young trapper that the animal had been hurt, for she was limping badly, though her flight was not slow in spite of her trouble.

In a brief time it was manifest that the sounds that came from beyond were the yelpings of several dogs that were in pursuit of the fleeing buffalo. How dogs could be there, far from the habitation or the camps of man, was a problem Reuben was unable to solve. The sight, however, of the fleeing animal recalled to him the possibility of securing breakfast. As the buffalo came near, he raised his rifle and fired at her.

The buffalo was under such momentum that, although the shot had been true, she plunged forward several yards before she fell to the ground. Running hastily to the spot, Reuben quickly saw that his aim had been fatal and the animal was lifeless. He hastily reloaded his gun and prepared to face the dogs. He was aware that his shot might reveal his presence to enemies if they were near. It was well known that the Blackfoot Indians and several other tribes were intensely hostile to the whites. They were determined that the white man should not enter the grounds which they believed belonged to themselves, inasmuch as they had received them from their forefathers. Not only had several parties of trappers been attacked, as Reuben knew from the stories of Kit Carson and Jean, but also some of the white men had been killed and many more had been driven away from the streams where they had set their traps and had been compelled to withdraw from the region.

Thoughts of his own danger now returned with increased force. He did not believe the dogs belonged to any Indian tribe, but if they were owned by trappers, how had it come to pass that white men were now in this region? He had understood from Jean that Kit Carson's party had gone far to the north and that in all probability no men of their own colour were likely to be seen until they returned to Pain Court.

Reuben's meditations were interrupted by the coming of the dogs. He saw four of the savage animals approaching, and the sight convinced him that he would as willingly face the gaunt and savage timber-wolves as the animals he now saw before him. It might be necessary for him to defend himself against their attack.

By this time the dogs had discovered the young trapper. Instantly stopping in their tracks, about one hundred feet distant, they were all silent for a moment as they stared at the unexpected sight. A moment later, however, all four, throwing back their heads, emitted the most plaintive and prolonged howls to which Reuben had ever listened. They did not, however, make any advance upon him.

This fact caused Reuben to decide that he would attempt to drive the animals away. Doubtless the men who owned them were not far distant and if they had heard the shot they soon would appear. Seizing two stones and still holding his gun, Reuben ran toward the brutes and shouted in his loudest tones, "Get out! Get out!" At the same time he hurled one of the missiles and was delighted when he saw all four of the dogs turn about and run swiftly down the defile.

Reuben waited half an hour for the return of the dogs or the appearance of the party to which they belonged. The minutes passed, however, and he was still alone. At last, persuaded that his hiding-place was unsuspected, he hastened to the spot where the body of the dead buffalo was lying and cut from the carcass the pieces which he already had learned were the most eatable. In a brief time he had his fire kindled and was busily engaged in the preparation of his morning meal.

Frequently he glanced toward the entrance to the valley below him, still aware of the possibilities that his hiding-place might not escape the attention of others who might be in the vicinity. If they were white men he believed that his safety would be assured. His great danger lay in the fact that the dogs which he had seen might belong to some roving band of Pawnee or Blackfoot Indians.

Time passed, however, without interruption, and when his hunger had been appeased, Reuben took his rifle and cautiously began his descent of the valley. When he came out into the more open country he was startled at the sight of a campfire not far away. Gathered about it were half a dozen men, and to them doubtless belonged the dogs which he had seen. Indeed, while he was looking at the camp he saw these same dogs moving about near the spot.

Assured that he would find help there, Reuben started toward the place where the fire was burning. He had left his saddle and bridle and a few other belongings in the defile among the mountains, but he was convinced that if he could secure aid from these men it would be an easy matter to obtain his possessions which for a little while he had abandoned. As he came near the camp the dogs discovered his presence and, with loud barking, started toward him.

At the sound the men about the campfire instantly leaped to their feet and seized their rifles, and all were looking in the direction from which the young trapper was approaching. Apparently convinced by what they saw that they were in no danger of an immediate attack by enemies, they waited for Reuben to approach the camp.

Greatly to the astonishment of the lad when he had come near enough to distinguish the faces of the men, he saw that the leader of the little party was none other than Kit Carson himself. How it was that the trapper and guide was so far south of the region into which he with his company originally had gone Reuben did not understand. There was no question, however, as to the person before him, and he was greatly pleased when a moment later the guide said to him: "You are Reuben Benton. The last time I saw you was in Pain Court. What are you doing out here on the plains?"

By this time Reuben had been admitted within the circle. The glances of suspicion which were given him when first he had appeared were gone as soon as the leader explained that he

personally knew the young trapper.

"I came out here with Jean," explained Reuben.

"Jean? Jean who?" inquired Kit Carson.

"Jean Badeau."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. I don't know where he is. I wish I did. We came out here day before yesterday. We made a camp, and while we were there a herd of buffaloes came along and Jean and I started after them. I haven't seen him since."

"He may have been trampled by the herd," suggested Kit Carson.

"I don't think so," asserted Reuben. "There was a man here who helped me look for the place where we had camped and after a while we found it, but the ponies and saddles and traps and everything were gone."

"A man with you?" inquired the guide, glancing keenly at Reuben as he spoke.

"Yes."

"Who was he?"

"Rat True."

For a moment Kit Carson was silent as he looked steadily at Reuben. "What has become of him? Where is he?" he inquired at last.

"He left last night and took his ponies and his traps and said he was going up among the hills. He said he wanted to trap alone. That's what Jean said, too, and that was the reason why we camped down here."

"He cannot be very far away, then?"

"I don't know how far. He took his ponies with him, and the little beasts were tough, and they may have been able to make good time."

"And you haven't any idea what has become of Jean?"

"No. I don't know where he is. I must look him up to-day. He may have been captured by the Indians and they may have carried off his ponies and his belongings."

"So they might," said Kit Carson in a low voice. "Very likely that's just what they did. We'll have to give you a lift, however, and help you try to find him. Have you had any breakfast?"

"Yes. Your dogs chased a wounded buffalo into the gorge where I was and I shot it."

"Yes," explained Kit Carson. "We saw a big herd this morning and cut out two or three cows, but two of them gave us the slip and the third we wounded, but it got away, though the dogs took after it."

"It is only a little way back yonder; you'll find the carcass there now."

"I don't think we shall go back for the carcass," said the guide quietly. "There are too many herds around here for us to bother about a little thing like that. How are the streams?"

"I don't know," answered Reuben. "The only ones I have seen were in that valley where I was, and there they were not very full."

"Did you see any beaver?"

"Yes. Jean and I found several dams."

"Have you seen any Indians?"

"Yes, the night I lost Jean I met three Cheyennes, two braves and a boy. They had been out trying to steal horses from the Pawnees. They said the Pawnees were cowards because they kept their horses shut up every night."

A smile appeared on the face of the guide as he said: "The redskins are like the rest of us. When we don't get what we want we're down on our luck, or blame the other fellow. How old a boy was the young Indian?"

"About fifteen or sixteen."

Turning to his men Kit Carson related the story which Reuben had told him, and in response to his suggestion the men all declared that they were more than willing to join in a search for the missing Jean.

Soon afterward, Reuben conducted the men to the place where Jean's camp had been made, but a careful investigation failed to reveal any signs of the fate which had overtaken the trapper.

The men then separated into three parties and, moving in different directions, tried to ride in circles about the camping-place in their efforts to discover some indications of what might have befallen the missing Jean. Their search was continued throughout the day, but when night fell it was still unrewarded. Not a sign had been discovered as to what had been the fate of the trapper.

Upon the suggestion of Kit Carson, Reuben then led the way to the defile where he had passed the preceding night. Abundance of food had been secured, because late in the afternoon a herd of buffaloes, numbering no less than five hundred, had appeared. Several of the animals had been shot by the hunters, who brought the meat which they had secured to the place that had been selected for the camp.

Although Kit Carson did not refer to his fears, it was evident that he was somewhat uneasy, as several times signs of Indians had been discovered by the men in their search of the afternoon. Although he still did not refer to his fears, when arrangements for the night were made he insisted upon a guard being established.

Before darkness had fallen upon the region the trappers became aware that their hiding-place had been discovered.

Excitement first arose when the dogs, growling, and the hair on their backs standing erect, began to circle the camp and peer angrily into the darkness. The action of the animals caused the men at once to look more carefully to the horses. Every one of the beasts had been hobbled, and were all within the circle of the camp. Although few words were spoken, it was plain every man was suspicious that enemies were not far away.

Soon in the deepening twilight several long, gaunt, shadowy forms were seen creeping about the place. They were the timber-wolves, the most savage of all the wolf tribe. Reuben, congratulating himself that he was no longer alone, thought what his own feelings would have been if, without the presence of the other trappers, he had heard these hungry and savage animals prowling about his camp. He was positive that he would not have given in without a struggle, but his confidence certainly was much stronger now that he was in the company of Kit Carson and his men.

The actions of the guide, however, were peculiar. Only two of the wolves had been seen, and the sounds which they emitted were unlike those which had been heard when they had been farther away. Occasionally one or the other seated itself upon its haunches and, throwing back its head, sent forth its mournful howls. At the same time it was manifest that, although they kept well out of sight, the wolves were stealthily creeping nearer the horses, which now had been assembled at one side of the camp.

Kit Carson, too, was unusually watchful, although he had little to say to any of his friends. When some of the men suggested that it would be wise to shoot the treacherous animals, he had quietly and yet sharply objected. "There isn't one of you," he said, "but might hit a dog, mistaking it for a wolf. I would rather have a dozen timber-wolves yelling around here all night than to lose one dog."

The actions of the dogs also increased the uneasiness among the trappers. Now they either were afraid or had lost the first fierceness of their desire to drive away their foes. All four were whining and, although the hair about their necks was still erect, they displayed less inclination than before to attack the marauders. Crouching and growling, they slunk back toward their masters.

For several minutes Kit Carson remained seated near the border of the camp, holding his rifle in his hand and listening intently to the sounds made by the two wolves. These animals had acted peculiarly from the first. Both now were near the horses, and the terror of the frightened animals was almost pathetic.

Beckoning to his friends to remain where they were, Kit Carson suddenly raised his rifle to his shoulder and shot one of the wolves.

A strange, well-nigh unearthly sound followed the report of his rifle. A scream, loud and prolonged, in no way resembling the howl of a wolf, broke the silence. For a moment the men in the camp stared blankly at one another, while Reuben was appalled by the weird and unnatural cry.

The guide, however, apparently was unmoved by the alarm of his friends. Laughing lightly, he ran quickly to the place where the wounded wolf was lying. The other beast had instantly turned and fled into the darkness.

The approach of the guide produced an immediate effect upon the wounded animal. Struggling desperately, it rose upon its hind feet and for a brief time struggled to escape. The effort, however, was unavailing, and it soon fell to the ground again and became motionless and silent.

Every one in the camp now was watching the leader with intense interest, Reuben being the most excited of all. Indeed, the lad had followed Kit Carson and was only a few yards behind him when the guide stopped to watch the struggles of the animal before him. When at last the wolf became motionless, Kit Carson advanced upon it and at once lifted it to an upright position.

The strange events which had occurred were followed by those that were stranger still. Seizing the wolf by its fore-shoulders, the guide alternately with his foot and knee kicked the animal, compelling it to walk in advance of him on its hind feet.

"Look out there, Kit!" called some one in the camp. "If you let that fellow bite you it will be sure poison!"

No response was made by the guide, who had been intently watching the wolf, which when standing up on its hind feet was as tall as he. Strange to say, the animal made no attempt to bite its captor. As soon as it was discovered that all efforts to free itself were useless, the wolf was forced to approach the campfire, where the men curiously were watching the antics of the strange animal. Never before had Reuben seen a sight like the one he was now beholding. Why the wolf did not fight he was unable to understand. The very fact that it had been wounded was sufficient to arouse its anger, but, as far as he could see, it was advancing as meekly as if it had been a lamb instead of a wild animal in the hands of Kit Carson.

When the guide had brought his victim nearer to the fire in the camp, he suddenly forced back the head of his prisoner, and then with one quick motion tore back the skin, revealing the head and face of an Indian. The sight, startling as it was, caused most of the men to laugh. Reuben recalled now the stories which Jean had told him of how some of the Indians, disguising themselves as wild animals, in the darkness of the night had crept near the camp of the trappers to steal their furs or run away with the ponies that belonged to the outfit. The howlings he had heard then had been made by the Indians, and yet as Reuben looked at the prisoner it was difficult for him to believe that the human voice could so closely imitate the cries of a prowling wolf.

Meanwhile Kit Carson, who not for a moment had relaxed his grip of his captive, suddenly tore away the skin in front, and as it fell to the ground the entire body of a young Indian was revealed to the excited assembly.

"Kill him!" shouted one of the men. The cry was taken up by others, and for a brief time the

fate of the young Indian was in the balance.

It was marvellous to Reuben at this time to see the young leader quietly step in front of his men and say in a low voice, "We will have none of that. He is my prisoner, anyway." The guide, slight and boyish, in his figure, speaking in a tone so low that it did not betray any excitement under which he might be labouring, instantly checked the anger of his men.

As they made no further effort to advance, he said: "This redskin is only a boy. I shot him in the leg. I suspected just what he was trying to do, and though he played the trick well, he lost. Come up here!" he said to his captive, as taking him by the arm he led him near the fire.

A hasty examination of the wound disclosed the fact that it was slight, the ball having not more than grazed the calf of his leg. A bandage was soon made and applied, and after the feet and hands of the prisoner had been securely bound he was placed upon the ground between the fire and the trappers, who were soon asleep.

Meanwhile a guard had been established by the leader and a careful watch was to be maintained throughout the night. If Indians were as near as the presence of the prisoner indicated, Reuben was at a loss to understand why the fire should have been kept up. However, as he had complete confidence in the leader, he asked no questions, and soon he, too, was sleeping as soundly as his companions.

When morning dawned and Reuben arose, he found Kit Carson talking to the prisoner. "Come here!" called the leader when he saw that Reuben was awake. "Have you ever seen this young redskin before?"

Reuben looked keenly at the captive before he replied. "He looks like the young Indian that I saw two or three nights ago," he said. "He was one of the three I told you about that had been trying to steal horses from the Pawnees. At least that's what the Indian said who could speak English."

"Doesn't this one talk English?"

"He didn't that time, and the one who did speak it said he was the only one that understood it."

The trapper turned again to the Indian boy and tried to engage him in conversation, but either the lad did not understand what was said or he did not want to, for he stolidly refused to reply.

Once more the guide examined the young Indian's wound, and soon afterward turned to his followers, explaining that as soon as they had all had breakfast and the horses had been watered and permitted to gather such food as they could obtain in the little valley, the entire band would resume its journey.

"But what shall I do?" said Reuben. "Shall I go away without trying to find Jean?"

"Jean can take care of himself if he is alive," said Kit Carson quietly, "and if he is dead he will not need your help. I think the only thing for you to do is to come with us."

"Where are you going?"

"That will depend somewhat on what comes to us. We shall go back to join the main camp pretty soon, but just now we are busy on some other work. You will be safe with us, and if you stay here you may not see another white face in a year."

"But I don't like to leave Jean," persisted Reuben.

"As far as I can see you are not the one that left him. He left you. Come, my lad, there's nothing else to be done."

"I have no pony."

"What became of it?" inquired Kit Carson.

"While I was chasing a buffalo I ran into a prairie-dog village and the horse stumbled and fell, and broke its leg. I had to shoot it."

"We can fix you up. We have several ponies that are not being ridden. You may have one of them to use."

Somehow, feeling as if the matter had been decided for him rather than that he had had any part in the decision, an hour later Reuben found himself astride a stocky little pony riding beside Kit Carson, who was leading the way. Conversation ceased, for still the guide did not explain the purpose of their journey.

A brief time later he selected two men to go in advance of the others. It was evident to Reuben that they were following what appeared to be an Indian trail. The captive Indian was still in their midst, although, he was no longer bound. What had become of his companion no one in the party knew. He had vanished in the night as soon as his comrade had been hit by the bullet of Kit Carson.

The journey was uneventful until the noon hour had passed, then when the guide began to look about for a suitable place where they might halt and prepare such food as they possessed for the mid-day meal, he said abruptly: "Do you see what that is ahead of us?"

"Where?" inquired Reuben, who still was nearest the leader.

"Right ahead on the right. Close to the trail. Look at it closely and tell me what you see."

Doing as he was bidden, Reuben soon discovered an object that instantly aroused within him a keen feeling of excitement.

"I see it!" he said, turning quickly to Kit Carson. "I see it! What are we going to do?"

CHAPTER X—ATTACKED

Not far in advance the body of an Indian was seen lying directly across the trail. The entire band stopped abruptly at a signal from Kit Carson, and a moment later all were running forward to the place where the Indian was seen.

"He may not be dead," suggested one of the men. "He may be playing 'possum."

"That's right, too," suggested another. "They may be fixing a trap for us."

At the bidding of the leader the men all halted, every one holding his rifle in readiness for instant use, and all alike striving to keep watch on the various points from which they thought an attack upon them might be made.

Alone and cautiously, Kit Carson advanced, and in a brief time he returned saying: "The man is dead. He had the smallpox. I don't want any of you to go near him."

It was well known by the trappers what a terrible scourge smallpox was among the Indian tribes. Entire villages had been wiped out of existence by its ravages.

"What do you think, Kit?" inquired one of the men. "Is this redskin left here for us, or do you think the village was trying to run away?"

"Perhaps both," replied the guide quietly. "At all events we'll go around the hill."

"Better than that," suggested one of the men. "I have had the smallpox and I'll go ahead and drag the body out of the way."

At last the advice of the volunteer was accepted, and as soon as the dead body had been removed from the pathway the advance was resumed.

Although he did not explain nor share his feelings with his companions, it soon became evident that Kit Carson was suspicious of the presence of other foes. Several times he had dropped behind the little cavalcade and as frequently had gone in advance of the body. It seemed more and more strange to Reuben that a man so boyish and slight as Kit Carson, in spite of his youth, should have such absolute control and such loyal support of the men who made up the little company.

Late in the afternoon Carson, who had been serving for an hour as the advance guard, hastily rejoined his fellows and said: "There are twenty-five redskins ahead. They have stopped right near the trail."

"What are they?" inquired one of the men in a whisper.

"Blackfeet."

"Are they armed?"

"Yes."

"How many horses have they?"

"There are as many horses as there are men."

"Do you think they know we are coming?"

"I have no doubt of it."

"What shall we do?"

"Drive them out."

"It can't be done! It can't be done! We haven't but seven men."

"Yes, it can be done," said Kit quietly. "Now if you'll do just what I say, I'll show you how."

Seeing his calmness and confidence, a new spirit of enthusiasm entered the hearts of the men, and they all cordially and willingly followed the directions of the young scout. Three of them were selected to advance along the trail toward the Indians. The other four, together with their prisoner, were to be concealed in a cluster of bushes near which the halt had been made. Just what the young Indian in their midst would do if left to himself no one of the trappers knew, but as they were fearful that he might try to betray them it was deemed wiser to compel him to remain where he then was.

"Now, men," said Kit Carson, as he and one of the trappers, named Jake, and Reuben prepared to leave their companions, "see that you do not expose yourselves. Every one of you hide and keep hidden until we have joined you. You may think when you first see us that you ought to fire right away, but hold your powder until we come. Now, don't forget that!"

As soon as these instructions had been given, the scout, together with his two companions, started along the trail in the direction of the place where the Indians had been seen.

Reuben was excited and yet he was so elated over the consent which had been given him to accompany Kit Carson on this perilous adventure that he was almost unmindful of the danger that confronted him. They had left their ponies behind them, and now as they drew near the place where they were expecting to behold the Blackfeet Reuben glanced excitedly at his two companions. Neither of them, however, betrayed any alarm, and in a brief time they had come within sight of the camp.

"I want both of you to show yourselves directly behind me," directed the scout, "and then I want you to jump back into the bushes on either side of the trail, run back a few feet, and then come out where you can be seen again. We must make these redskins think there are at least a dozen of us. You'll have to move fast, too, because we aren't going to stay here very long."

A few moments later the men came within sight of the Indians. The discovery of their presence was greeted by a shout, but as yet none of the braves manifested any desire to start in pursuit of the white men.

Acting promptly upon the suggestion of Kit Carson, Reuben and Jake darted into the bushes, emerging several times in a manner that might confuse their foes and lead them to believe that there were more in the party than at first appeared. Soon after the war-whoop of the Blackfeet had been heard Kit Carson and his companions started swiftly back over the trail by which they had come. Their flight was greeted with a loud yell, and instantly most of the Indians started in swift pursuit.

"It's the same band that killed the last party of trappers," said Kit Carson in a low voice to Reuben. "We'll fix them this time so that they won't make any more trouble of that kind."

Reuben was running rapidly, but all three knew that they were a considerable distance from the Indians and that their own friends were not far back on the trail; so he was not unduly alarmed. Somehow his complete confidence in the young guide caused him to believe that even in their present peril he would find a way out.

The yelling band of braves soon appeared. They were running swiftly and it was evident that

they had cast aside their usual caution. The confidence of the attacking party was unabated. If Kit Carson was correct in his statement that the band following them was one which had destroyed the company of trappers the preceding year, it was plain now that they were equally sure the whites were afraid of them.

At all events they were swiftly pursuing and were steadily gaining upon the three fugitives. The air resounded with blood-curdling war-whoops. The faces of the warriors, smeared with war-paint, were terrifying, and every time Reuben glanced behind him his fear increased, although he still was convinced that Kit Carson was not attempting any trick for which he was not fully prepared.

Strong in their belief that the men who were fleeing were afraid, the Indians pressed still closer in their pursuit. Indeed they were almost upon the heels of the fleeing men. A few steps more and the venturesome trappers would be in their power.

At last Reuben and his companions arrived at the thicket in which their friends were concealed. Darting quickly into the midst of the band, they cast themselves upon the ground, concealing themselves behind the trees, and prepared to join in the counter-attack which was about to be made. At that moment a shower of arrows fell among the bushes, and almost as if in response to this action the thicket resounded with the reports of the guns. The resounding yell of triumph from the eager Blackfeet was lost in the midst of the roar of the guns. Clouds of smoke slowly rose above the bushes and hid the scene from the sight of the anxious defenders. However, as soon as the smoke lifted a little, the bodies of the fallen Indians were seen upon the ground. On every side was the neighing of the terrified and the riderless horses. The startled Blackfeet in the midst of it all heard the click that indicated the reloading of the guns of their enemies. Too late they were aware of the mistake they had made.

The band of warriors instantly broke and fled, and in the midst of the wild confusion that followed the first attack the weapons of the trappers had been reloaded and again the reports of the rifles rang out. With wild cries of terror the Indians continued their flight. Nor did they stop until they had disappeared from sight and had run far into the wilderness.

Then it was that Kit Carson, bidding his men follow him, led them once more upon the trail. Scattered on the ground nearby were the bodies of ten of the Indians that had fallen under the fire of the trappers. Brave as the redmen had been, too late they had discovered that their bows and arrows were of no avail when they were fired upon by men armed with rifles and who were expert shots.

Convinced at last that the danger was passed, Kit Carson summoned his men about him and first of all inquired whether or not any one had been hit in the shower of arrows that had fallen upon them. Fortunately no one had been injured, for the Indians had fired without any sight of the white men, simply trusting to their knowledge that some of them at least were concealed within the underbrush.

"What will happen next?" inquired Jake.

"No man can say," replied Kit Carson.

"Do you think they will attack us again?"

"Not soon. They have learned a lesson which they will not forget right away."

"Then we can go right ahead?"

"We shall keep on," replied the guide quietly, "although I am sure that we are not done with our troubles."

"What are you afraid of?"

"I am sure they will not leave us. They will follow us, and when night comes they will try to steal our horses, and if we were trapping here they would try to get our traps. I shall be surprised if we do not find that they are watching us all the while."

"Don't you think we had better turn back?"

"I have never travelled that way," replied Kit Carson lightly. "The safest thing for us will be to show the Blackfeet that we are not afraid of them and are prepared to meet them."

In accordance with the suggestion of the scout, preparations were made at once for resuming the journey. It was plain, however, that not all of the men were of the same mind as their leader and that some were still fearful of attacks by the band which they had successfully driven off. Some time elapsed, however, before the true purposes of the Blackfeet were discovered.

CHAPTER XI—A TRYING EXPERIENCE

Meanwhile the little band continued steadily on its way. Reuben now thought of the missing Jean less frequently. He was confident that the French trapper was abundantly able to protect himself, and, besides, there was less peril for a man alone than there was for a large force of the trappers. The Indians were intensely jealous, fearful for the safety of their possessions, and angry at the intruders for daring to come in numbers to trap along the streams which the redmen had been taught to believe belonged to them by inheritance.

There were occasions when the presence of the prowling Indians was evident, for horses several times vanished from the camp and were not found again. The traps, too, which were used by the men in their advance, frequently disappeared, and there was slight question in the mind of the young leader that the Blackfeet, although they had not dared to make an open attack since the ambuscade, none the less were steadily following their enemies.

At last it was decided that the division should go on toward the Sacramento River, while part of the force already had been sent back to Taos to dispose of the beaver skins which had been secured and also to get more traps. All the remaining men agreed to continue on to the Sacramento, and in this company was young Reuben Benton. To the lad the days were all filled

with interest the chief of which was in the expeditions for hunting the savage grizzly, whose reputation for blind and savage courage increased as the men journeyed farther among the towering mountains.

The Indians, however, whom they met as they proceeded on their way, proved more and more friendly. The stories, too, which the redmen told of the marvels of the valley of the Sacramento increased the desire of Reuben and his companions to see the land which was declared to be not only marvellously beautiful and fertile, but also to abound in beaver.

To reach this land of promise, however, it was necessary for the little company to make its way across a country upon which neither grass nor trees grew, and where water was seldom found. Even the wild animals avoided these desert plains. Not a deer was likely to be found in the course of the journey, and the buffaloes were far behind the mountains, which now were in the rear of the advancing trappers.

Before entering upon the final stage of the journey it was decided that there should be a rest of several days. Accordingly the entire party went into camp. The horses were fed far better than had been the daily custom and were not compelled to carry any burdens. The trappers employed the time thus afforded in hunting. There was need of food in the party, and to supply this need Kit Carson and a half-dozen others, among whom was Reuben, devoted much of their time to hunting for animals that would provide meat.

On the second day, while Reuben, Kit Carson, and a man who was called Jack were about six miles from the place where the camp had been pitched, they discovered a herd of deer. The curious animals plainly were not familiar with the sight of men. They were discovered near a spring on the border of a grove that grew far down into the plains. At least a dozen of the creatures were seen by the keen-eyed leader.

"We mustn't lose any of them," said Kit Carson in a whisper, as he turned to his followers. "The best thing we can do is to spread out and come up to them in a semicircle."

"They have seen us already," suggested Jack.

"That's true," replied Kit Carson, "but the very fact that they have not run away will make it easier for us to get more of them, and we must have them. Our very lives may depend upon our aim. I hope every one will hit his target."

In accordance with the directions of the hunter, the party spread out and prepared to creep nearer the spring, advancing in a semicircle. Even when they had come within fifty yards of the water the inquisitive animals were still standing, gazing almost stupidly at the approaching hunters. Indeed to Reuben it almost seemed as if the timid creatures were unable to flee. Even the fawns, with ears erect, stood gazing open-eyed at the men.

In this manner the trappers approached, as has been said, within fifty yards, and then at a given signal all arose and fired upon the timid animals. Two of the deer were seen to fall. Then with a loud summons to his followers, Kit Carson, after he had hastily reloaded his rifle, darted toward the spring from which even yet the startled deer had withdrawn only a few yards.

In a brief time the guns were reloaded and almost together the trappers once more fired at the graceful creatures that were still gazing at them. A third deer fell to the ground, but all its companions instantly fled from the spot.

"We didn't get as many as we ought to," said Kit Carson quietly when the men approached the place where the fallen deer were lying. "I shall be surprised if we do not find that some of these deer are pretty well filled with lead. We ought to have arranged for no two men to fire at the same animal." The trapper's suggestion was found to be correct, for six bullets were found in one of the bodies.

In response to the directions of the scout, the men at once took their knives and skinned the creatures, and then, while part of them sewed the skins into water-bags, the others prepared to smoke the meat which had been secured.

Haunches of venison were dried on the branches of trees above the reach of prowling wolves, and fires were kindled beneath them which it was believed would last throughout the coming night. The smoke from the flames soon hid the suspended bodies, and, satisfied that their work for the day had been completed, the hunters turned and departed for the camp in the defiles of the mountains.

To Reuben Benton these experiences were all so novel that he had ceased to think often of the missing Jean, and he was thoroughly enjoying his adventures. Such a life was wholly new to the eager-hearted boy. In the vicinity of his home he often had trapped and hunted, but nothing had occurred like the exciting incidents of his hunting with the great scout. Perhaps the honour of being associated with Kit Carson, whose name was already familiar in all the West, provided the greatest enjoyment of all. More and more Reuben was impressed by the quiet self-control of Carson and the respect which was paid him by all the men in the company.

Reuben, who was a strong and rugged boy, had found no difficulty thus far in keeping up with the men. Indeed, his spirit of eagerness several times had led him far in advance of his companions. Kit Carson, however, occasionally had rebuked him for his foolhardiness and told him that his safety depended almost entirely upon his remaining in the company of his fellow trappers. There was slight question in his mind that the Indians had followed them all through the defiles of the mountains. Whether or not the pursuit would be maintained was a question which could be solved only by the events which might occur when once the party had entered on its way across the pathless desert.

On the day after the shooting of the three deer Reuben and Jack, together with two other trappers, were sent to obtain the carcasses, which had been left hanging from the boughs of the tree under which the fires had been kindled. For the meat to be thoroughly cured a longer time would be required, but as the horses were now rested, the men were eager to push forward.

Just before the departure from the camp was made three Indians were seen approaching, leading a poor old horse that was soon found to be blind as well as lame. By the use of signs the

Indians finally agreed to sell the poor old creature and then departed with the money which they received. After they were gone the horse itself was killed and roasted, and the trappers that night enjoyed a feast of tough horse-meat and water from the mountain springs.

The following morning the entire band set forth on their long and difficult journey across the plains. When three days had elapsed, the riders, wearied by their journey and nearly parched with thirst, were well-nigh exhausted. The supply of water which they had brought with them had proved to be inadequate.

All the efforts of Kit Carson were required to keep up the courage of his followers. The heat had been intense, and the brief rest which had been given the horses and mules had not been sufficient to restore their full strength. Even the animals were dejected as they lifted their feet from the heated sands and slowly moved forward.

Not a word of complaint, however, had escaped the lips of Reuben. Fearful that the objection which had been made at St. Louis against his joining a party of trappers would be repeated here, the boy had done his utmost to bear the hardships that he was compelled to endure. His lips were swollen and cracked, and the intense feeling of hunger which he had the preceding day had given place to a dull ache. His manner was thoroughly dispirited as he slowly followed his companions. The mule which he was riding had lagged behind the other animals, until Reuben was several yards in the rear of the little company.

It was at this time that Carson, noting the plight of his young friend, dropped behind and waited for Reuben to approach.

"Well, lad," he said, striving to speak cheerfully, "how is it?"

Reuben, almost unable to speak, shook his head as he tried to smile in response to the query of his friend.

"It's a pity, lad," continued the guide, "but there's no going back. We have got into a hard piece of work, but the only thing to do is to go ahead. That is the only way out, so keep up your heart and don't give in."

Reuben nodded decidedly to show that his determination was still unbroken, and as he did so the mule he was riding suddenly lifted his head and, after he had sniffed the air, lowered it almost to the sand, and emitted several prolonged, heart-breaking, agonizing brays.

The stentorian blasts were quickly answered by similar sounds from the other mules in the train. Despite the efforts of the weary men to control the beasts, they all immediately began to run, followed speedily by the horses.

CHAPTER XII—A PUZZLING MESSENGER

"What's wrong? What's the matter?" demanded Reuben excitedly of Kit Carson, who was riding by his side.

"Don't you know?" laughed the leader good-naturedly.

"No, I don't know, that's why I asked," replied Reuben in the disjointed words he was able to speak, while the mule which he was riding increased the speed at which he was running.

"They have sniffed water."

"But I can't see it anywhere!"

"That's likely," replied the hunter, smiling as he spoke. He was having less difficulty than his young companion in controlling his mount.

The animal which Reuben was riding had stretched forth its neck and its muscles were almost as tense and stiff as if they had been made of bone. Occasionally one of the excited mules stopped, and, planting its feet firmly in the ground, stretched forth its neck, elevated its tail, and at the same time emitted another prolonged and discordant bray.

The minutes passed swiftly and no signs of the longed-for water were discovered. An hour passed in the wild flight and still the stream was not found. To Reuben's protest that the mules had been mistaken, Kit Carson made no reply save to smile in the quiet manner which was characteristic of him, and slowly shook his head as if he still had faith in the instinct of the strange beasts.

Ten minutes later a cry arose from the dry throats of the men when a stream not far in advance was seen by them all. In a brief time the entire line had gained the banks and men and animals alike plunged into the water and drank their fill.

"I never knew before how good it seemed to have all the water I wanted to drink," said Reuben with a sigh of relief when he returned to the bank and once more stood beside the leader.

"It's just like air and sunshine and other things that are so common that no one thinks they are worth much," replied Carson thoughtfully. "It is only when we lose them that we think they are worth having."

"This certainly is worth having," said Reuben fervently.

"It's so good that I think we'll stay here for a little while. Turn in, boys," the leader added, calling to his companions, "and we'll make camp."

The courage and hope of the men had now returned in full force, and the long journey across the desert was forgotten or ignored. Eagerly they responded to the call of their leader, and in a brief time a comfortable camp had been made on the banks of the little stream.

For two days the weary men remained in the camp. In a few spots near the spring grass had grown, and this, together with the leaves of the trees, provided food for the horses. No wild animals were seen during the stay of the men, and on the third day, when the journey was resumed, there were few traces to be seen of the suffering which the trappers had endured in their ride across the desert. There still remained, however, a long and toilsome journey between them and the region which they were seeking. Occasionally a stream of running water was found,

and then the party went into camp for two or three days.

When at last they arrived in the beautiful valley of San Gabriel they were nearly exhausted, but the sight which greeted their eyes did much to restore their spirits.

In the valley was the Mission of San Gabriel, established many years before this time by the Spanish padres in their labours among the Indians of that region. Already the fruits of their devoted work were to be seen. In the valley there were many fields of waving grain and great orchards whose trees were bending under the loads of fruit which hung from their branches. In certain parts of the valley there were large herds of cattle, and many flocks of sheep were to be seen, almost as numerous as the cattle.

The sight of all these good things instantly revived the drooping spirits of the trappers. It is true they had little to offer in exchange, but the people of the mission and the Indians of the vicinity were kind to the newcomers, and in a brief time the wants of the nearly famished men were all supplied.

Perhaps some of them rejoiced more over the fact that water and food for their horses abounded than they did over the reports that were given them of the multitudes of beaver that were to be found in the nearby streams. To Reuben the region seemed to be a land of plenty. The Indians were peaceful and apparently happy, and the few white men that were to be seen in the vicinity were prosperous and contented.

After the men had been thoroughly rested, Kit Carson explained to Reuben that the time had come for them to enter upon the work which had been their object in seeking the marvellous valley.

"We'll go down the San Joaquin River," he explained. "We shan't have any trouble in getting the skins we want, and at the same time we'll find game enough to supply all our needs. All you have to do," he added, with a laugh, "is to look at the men. A little while ago they were half-starved and as lean as bullrushes. Just look at them now! Almost every one is getting so fat he won't be able to do his trapping."

"Yes," laughed Reuben. "They all look as if they would rather stay here than go on any farther."

"That's just what they must do, though," said Kit. "I have seen a good many men in my life who did all right until they came to the last thing that had to be done and then they gave out. I believe there are more men that lose because they don't follow up to the very end what they have begun than from any other one thing. Who's this coming?" he added abruptly as he turned and saw a stranger approaching on horseback.

At first the approaching man was thought to be a priest, as he was dressed in a strange garb that somewhat resembled that worn by the priests in charge of the mission. As he came nearer, however, they discovered that he was not a priest, and when he spoke, his words confirmed Kit Carson in his conclusion.

"I am looking for a man named Kit Carson," explained the newcomer.

"You won't have to look very far," replied the guide quietly.

"Where is he?"

"Not very far away."

"Tell me where he is and I will go to him."

"I reckon I am the man you're looking for."

"You?" exclaimed the stranger in surprise. "You? Are you Kit Carson? Why, you're nothing but a boy."

"I'm not very old," replied the guide with a smile, "but that's a fault I hope to correct some day. Meanwhile let me tell you that my name is Kit Carson. If you have any message for him you had better give it to me."

"I came from the Mission San Gabriel," explained the newcomer, after a brief silence in which he had steadily looked into the face of the young hunter. "One of the padres sent me. He says that some Indians have run away with some of our sheep. It is the same band that stole some horses from the mission a few weeks ago. Before that they stole some of our cattle. The padre wants to know if some of your men will help us to punish them."

"Where are they?" asked Kit Carson.

"We don't know exactly, but we suspect that they have gone to one of the strongest of the Indian villages."

"Will they fight?"

"I think they will."

"Then we will go," said the guide quickly. "You tell the padre that we'll help him out. How many men does he want?"

"All you can spare."

"Tell him we'll be at the mission to-morrow morning. There will be as many of us as care to go, whether it is the whole eighteen or only one."

"You will be the one?" inquired the stranger.

"I will be one," laughed Kit Carson, "but I do not think I will be the only one."

Reuben had been silent throughout the conversation and seldom had turned his face away from the man who had brought the message from the San Gabriel Mission.

When the messenger departed Reuben turned to Kit Carson and said: "That man looks enough like Jean Badeau to be his own brother."

"Who is Jean Badeau?"

"Why, he's the trapper that I came with from St. Louis."

"The one you lost in the camp when we first saw you?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure he isn't the same man?"

"No, I am not sure, and that's just the trouble. Of course it is some time since I saw him."

"Don't you know his voice?"

"His voice certainly sounded like Jean's."

"Why didn't you ask him if he is Jean?"

"I don't know why I didn't," replied Reuben. "He looks like him, and yet if it is another man it might make trouble."

"How would it make trouble?"

"Oh, I don't know," replied Reuben somewhat uneasily. "I cannot see why Jean should be down here in this valley, anyway, unless he wanted to get away from everybody."

"Is that the reason why we came?" demanded Kit Carson quizzically.

"No, we came for the beaver skins."

"Perhaps your friend came for the same reason. You'll soon know, though, whether he's the real one or not, because when we go over to the mission to look up these thieving redskins, you probably will see the man again and can find out just who he is and why he is here."

For the time Reuben was forced to be content, and yet on the following day, when with eleven others he went to the San Gabriel Mission, the question in his mind still remained unanswered. He looked about on every side, but did not discover the messenger. Nor was he able to make inquiries, for he understood neither the Spanish nor the Indian tongue.

In a brief time, however, his thoughts were withdrawn from Jean to the task which immediately confronted them. A band of twenty-five or more soon set forth from the mission, half the men belonging to the force which Kit Carson had led into the valley.

The trappers and the volunteers from the mission rode swiftly away, and not more than three hours had elapsed when they arrived at the Indian village which they were seeking. When they drew near, the advancing party halted, while one of the white men advanced to meet three Indians who had now come forth from the village. It was impossible for Reuben to hear what was said, nor would he have understood the conversation had he been able to hear it. It was not long, however, before the white man returned to his followers with the statement that the Indians had absolutely refused to give up the redmen for whom they had come.

The village was not large, but the warriors plainly outnumbered the white men. To attack seemed foolhardy.

Greatly to Reuben's surprise, after a brief consultation had been held between Kit Carson and the leader of the men from the mission, the hunter turned to his followers and said quietly: "There is only one way for us to get those rascals. We must attack the village."

CHAPTER XIII—PURSUIT

For a moment the startled men gazed silently at their leader. Every one had been confident that when they drew near the Indian village the redmen would give up the culprits. However, the quietly spoken declaration of Kit Carson speedily aroused a spirit of determination, and every one of his followers was willing to do his utmost to carry out his directions.

Before an attack was made, however, the daring hunter approached the village alone and noisily summoned the braves to a second conference. Doubtless the slight form of the hunter and his boyish appearance created a false impression in the minds of the Indians. That such a man could really be the leader of the white men and that his courage would be equal to an attack upon their village was plainly something the braves did not believe. A brief conference followed, but the result of it was not any more satisfactory than had been that of the former interview.

Turning sharply about, Kit Carson quietly went back to his companions, and then before the Indians were fully aware that he was gone, he said in a low voice to his men: "Fire on the village! Every one pick his man, and don't one of you miss!"

Instantly dropping upon their knees the men obeyed the order. Almost like the report of one gun the rifles rang out together.

Without waiting for the smoke to clear and reveal the result of their attack, every man hastily reloaded his rifle and raised his gun to his shoulder, ready for instant use. The Indians were not armed except with bows and arrows, and the distance at which Carson's followers had fired was believed to be out of range of the warriors.

Cries of alarm and confusion arose from the village. Few of the redmen had believed that the white men would dare attack, and the unexpected action had thrown the entire place into confusion. It is true the Indians greatly outnumbered the little attacking party, but as soon as it was discovered that the white men were deadly in earnest and determined to secure the culprits for whom they had come, their greater numbers did not afford much comfort to the startled braves. Many of them fled from the village, and those who remained speedily decided to give up their guilty comrades who had sought refuge among them. It was impossible to resist the onslaught of the band which had attacked them, when it was led by such a man as the quiet, courageous scout.

For the third time the rifles were loaded, but before they were discharged an Indian was seen approaching, extending the palms of his hands in token of his peaceful purpose.

Directly behind him appeared a young Indian on horseback. He followed the chief, who was advancing toward the white men, until he came near the place where the spokesman halted. Although the followers of Kit Carson were prepared for any event, no gun was fired, while all the men awaited the coming of the messenger. It was believed now that there would be no further attempt to shield the guilty parties for whom the padre at the San Gabriel Mission had sent the expedition.

For a moment, although none of the watchful observers was able to discover the cause, the herald remained silent. Reuben, who was deeply interested in the exciting event, now saw,

approaching from the village, a young squaw. Just what was her purpose in coming was not apparent.

The herald began his speech. "We shall no longer protect the men for whom the white brothers have come," he explained. "We did not ask them to come to our village. They were in trouble and they sought us out. We would punish them for the evil they did to the good padre, but now that the padre's men have come to take back to the mission the men who have done evil, we shall no longer try to hold them in our village. The brothers of the padre when they see the evildoers coming forth from our village will not then make any more attacks upon us."

The spokesman paused as if he was waiting for Carson to respond to his implied question. As the hunter remained silent, the Indian herald continued his appeal. "Already we have children that are fatherless because the white men have killed our braves. You can hear the wailing of the squaws whose husbands and sons you have slain. Is not this enough punishment for the white men to visit upon us? We shall no longer try to shield those who fled to us for refuge."

"Will you give us every one?" demanded Kit Carson abruptly.

"Every one," replied the Indian.

"Then tell them to come out to us now."

The Indian turned back toward the village and then, abruptly halting, once more faced the scout. "And will my white brother promise that no harm shall befall us? That he will take the bad Indians only? Will he promise that they shall be dealt with justly, and that no harm shall come to them on their way back to the mission?"

"I make no promises except to tell you that every man will be treated as he deserves."

"That's just the very thing they don't want," muttered Jack, who had been listening as he stood opposite Reuben. "If they got what they deserved there wouldn't be many left in the village."

"I'm afraid there wouldn't be very many left among us either," suggested Reuben quietly.

"What do you mean?" demanded Jack.

"Why, I mean that if every man got what he deserved perhaps he would be worse off than he is now."

"I never got all that I deserved," said Jack sharply. "I've seen a good many men who passed for more than they were worth and then again I've seen others who didn't pass for what they were worth."

"Which is your class?" said Reuben, laughing. Throughout the conversation he had not turned away his gaze from the exciting events which were occurring before him.

"It doesn't make any difference which is my class," retorted Jack. "All I say is that Indians are all in one class—"

Jack stopped abruptly, for at that moment it was seen that the young squaw who had come from the village had now turned quickly toward the young Indian who had approached on horseback. Suddenly the mounted Indian darted ahead, his horse apparently breaking into its swiftest paces at its first leap forward.

The action of the Indian girl, however, was most startling of all. As the young brave fled from the spot she grasped the tail of the horse he was riding, and, clinging tenaciously to it, she was partly dragged and partly helped forward as both fled from the spot.

At the first sight of the unexpected happening the men with Carson laughed loudly. To them it was apparently a joke of some kind that was being enacted before them. In a moment, however, Kit Carson turned to Reuben and Jack and said: "Take your horses and follow that redskin. He's trying to get away and he's using the squaw as a shield. If he thinks that she is going to protect him, just show him how mistaken he is. Take after them and don't come back until you get them both."

Instantly Reuben and Jack obeyed the command which had been given them, and putting their horses into their best paces started in pursuit of the fleeing pair.

It was not long, however, before they discovered that the Indian pony, in spite of the load he was carrying and the weight that was attached to his tail—for the Indian girl still was clinging tenaciously to her hold—was much swifter than those of his pursuers.

The marvel of it all was the fearless manner in which the young squaw still clung to the tail of the running animal. There were moments when she was dragged over the sands, and then again she would regain her footing and, running swiftly and leaping wildly, continue her flight. But whatever befell her, whether she was dragged or drawn, her grasp was not relaxed.

The horses which Reuben and Jack were riding were old and slow. The main thought in the minds of the men when they departed from the mission did not concern any possible pursuit. They all had confidently believed that as soon as they approached the Indian village the culprits whom they were seeking would be delivered into their hands.

Their plans, however, had undergone a change, owing to the attack which they had been compelled to make. And now the wild flight of the two Indians convinced the pursuers that the brave was a man of importance in the tribe and that there were special reasons why he was eager to escape.

Doggedly the white men held to the pursuit, but as they fled across the level plains toward the defiles of the mountains not more than ten miles away, they were soon aware that there was slight probability of their overtaking the fugitives.

"My horse is winded!" called Jack sharply. "Let's turn back!"

"We can't turn back," replied Reuben.

"We can, and I shall," retorted Jack.

"You'll have to go alone," said Reuben. "Kit Carson told us to follow this redskin until we got him. We have been following him, but we haven't got him yet."

"Well, I can't follow any farther," said Jack, and as Reuben glanced at the horse of his companion he was convinced that the man had spoken truly. The sides of the poor beast were heaving convulsively and its suffering was clearly apparent.

"You stop here!" called Reuben. "I'll go ahead alone. I have a rifle and the redskin hasn't any, so I'm not afraid."

In response to his suggestion Jack drew rein on his horse, and when Reuben glanced behind he saw that the poor animal was barely able to stand. The necessity of urging his own horse forward, however, soon caused him to ignore the plight of his companion and he continued his well-nigh hopeless pursuit.

Reuben was convinced that the Indian, although now he had stopped and had taken the squaw behind him on the back of his pony, would be able to outdistance him. In the pursuit they had steadily drawn nearer the foothills and once among them Reuben was convinced that the fugitives would escape. Doubtless they were familiar with the valleys and the gorges and would speedily find some place in which to hide. But remembering the words which had been spoken to him by Kit Carson, and in a measure unconsciously imitating the spirit of the young scout, which knew no such word as turning back, Reuben still clung to the chase. The horse he was riding was slow, but its wind apparently was holding out. Again the boy glanced behind him, and quickly discovered that he was no longer able to see his companion. What had become of Jack was not plain, but without any thought of giving in, Reuben urged his steed forward.

In a brief time he was approaching the valley which he had seen when the pursuit first began. It was a narrow pass between the foothills. What lay beyond it he did not know, but his spirit of determination was so strongly aroused that when the Indian whom he was following turned into the narrow defile he decided at once to follow him.

Not long afterward Reuben found himself in the gorge. It was several hundred feet wide and on one side there was a steep, precipitous rock. On the opposite side the valley extended for several hundred feet to the right, and apparently much of it was under cultivation. Surprised by his discovery, Reuben still did not stop. He was relying chiefly upon the rifle he carried for his defence.

He had not advanced more than two hundred yards beyond the narrow opening before he was aware that further pursuit of the fugitives would be useless. Both had disappeared from sight and doubtless were hidden in some one of the many caves past which he had been riding.

Still keenly alert, Reuben turned and began to retrace his way toward the entrance of the valley. He had advanced only a few yards, however, when his progress was abruptly halted.

CHAPTER XIV—CAPTURED

Directly in front of Reuben five Indians stepped from behind a huge rock and halted his progress. Two of them seized his horse by its bridle, while two more advanced upon him, one from each side.

Startled by the unexpected sight, Reuben gazed at the men a moment, and then when he tried to bring his gun to his shoulder his arms were held powerless in the grasp of his captors. A moment later he was thankful that his enemies had prevented him from using his weapon. If he had succeeded he was well aware that instantly he would have been overpowered and doubtless slain by the young redmen.

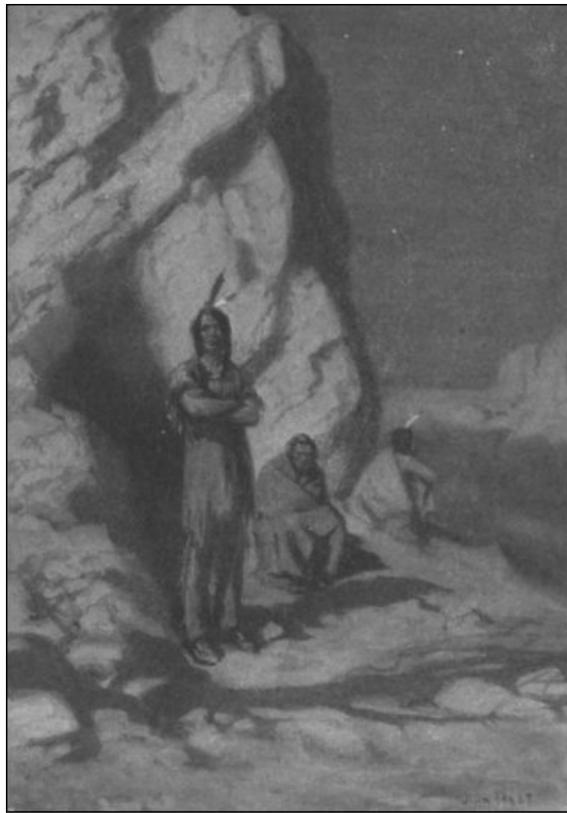
Several times one of the Indians questioned Reuben, but the boy was unable to understand what was said, and consequently attempted no reply. In a brief time the conversation ceased, and his hands were securely bound behind his back. He was compelled to dismount and to follow the men, who now took his pony and led the way farther within the valley.

They were moving cautiously, too, an act which Reuben did not understand. His confusion, however, was soon gone when, after a walk of a half-hour, he was conducted to a camp in which fifteen Indians were seated around a fire over which they were roasting pieces of meat that he strongly suspected had been cut from the cattle stolen from the mission.

As the young prisoner was ignorant alike of the language spoken by the Indians and of the few words of Spanish which one of them was able to speak, he was at a complete loss to understand not only who they were and what their plans might be, but also what was likely to be his fate. His hands had been freed after he had been brought to the camp, but he was not permitted to leave the enclosure. When night came he was conducted to a cave among the nearby rocks and there by signs was informed that he was to remain throughout the night.

Several Indians seated themselves before the mouth of the cave, and Reuben was convinced that escape for the present at least was impossible.

Three days slowly passed. Not once was he permitted to leave his prison, although he was not treated unkindly. Food was given him every morning and night, and a gourd of water every morning was placed at his disposal.



“Several Indians seated themselves before the mouth of the cave”

As the afternoon of the third day wore on, Reuben became aware of a partly suppressed but increasing excitement among his captors. At first he was hopeful that the place was about to be attacked by some of his friends, in which event he might hope for release. It was impossible for him, however, to obtain any information from the Indians, and indeed few of them now even glanced at him as they apparently prepared to depart.

Reuben was disappointed when he learned that only half of the Indians were to leave the place. The excitement among the others, however, did not die away, and they frequently talked with one another in low voices and pointed anxiously in the direction in which their friends had gone. When darkness fell Reuben stretched himself upon the hard floor of the cave, and although he was aware of the excitement which still possessed his captors, he was convinced that he would be unable to learn the cause of it, and soon was sleeping soundly.

The first faint streaks of daylight were seen when Reuben was awakened by the return of the men who had departed the preceding night. Instantly it was plain to him what the purpose of their journey had been. With them now were at least threescore horses, and as he looked keenly at the animals Reuben recognized some of them. They had belonged to the men whom Kit Carson had been leading. Had their owners perished? Had there been a night attack by the redmen and had Kit Carson's band been destroyed? Excited as Reuben was he was not able to find any answer to his questions, though he eagerly interrogated several of the redmen with signs. Not one of them, however, gave any heed to their prisoner and his demonstrations. All about the camp the redmen were in action, and it was plain to the boy that they were planning to depart quickly.

His surmise proved to be correct, for within a few minutes all their weapons and belongings had been packed on the backs of their horses and they were ready to start. For a moment Reuben was hopeful that he was about to be left behind, but this was not to be, for one of the Indians approached and motioned for him to follow. Obedient to the command, Reuben accompanied his captor, who led the way to the spot where several of the Indian ponies were standing. Altogether there were not more than twenty of the Indian braves. How they had been able to secure so many horses and to return to their camp without any one having been injured was still a puzzle to Reuben. In obedience to the motion of his captor he leaped upon the back of one of the horses and took the reins in his hands.

The excitement of the band increased when at last it set forth from the place. Every rider was leading two or three horses. It was plain, too, that the Indians were fearful of pursuit. Frequently they would glance behind them, as if expecting an attack. They had not gone far, however, before a brief halt was called and three of the braves were sent back to form a rear guard.

Throughout the day the flight was continued, with only two or three breaks, when the men and horses stopped to quench their thirst at a running stream. Even when night fell the march was continued. Occasionally the band halted, while the men who formed the rear guard joined them and a brief conference was held. In every case, however, either the guard or those who were to take their place returned to the rear and the journey was resumed.

There were only slight and occasional rests during the second day. It was becoming increasingly plain to Reuben that the men were not only in desperate haste, but were in great fear of pursuit.

Grimly the young prisoner assured himself that their fears were well grounded, if their horses had been stolen from the band of which Kit Carson was the leader. Still Reuben was not ill-

treated, although his conviction became stronger that if he should try to escape his fate would be quickly sealed.

The way over which they had come had been rough, and in places it was only with great difficulty the horses were able to advance. The ride was hard and all the braves by this time were showing the effect of their almost continuous ride. The distance which they had covered, however, had been much less than if they had been fleeing over the plains.

When the darkness of the third night fell the wearied warriors halted, and Reuben suspected from their actions that now a longer time for rest was to be granted. It was also plain that much of the fear which had urged the Indians forward was gone. And even Reuben did not dare to hope that his friends would follow the redmen so far. One hundred miles or more had been covered in the three days, he assured himself. With a sinking heart he was beginning to believe, with his captors, that the possibility of pursuit no longer existed. Evidently the Indians all felt now that they were safe. The silence which had rested over the party gave place to noisy calls and shouts.

Not long after the halt had been called, Reuben was startled when he saw that the Indians were preparing for a feast. Two of the poor beasts that had carried them safely throughout their flight and were nearly exhausted were taken apart from the others and killed. The skins were stripped from the bodies, and then over the fires, which were speedily kindled, the flesh was roasted, and a wild feast followed.

With strength restored by the food they had eaten and their fears of pursuit now gone, the Indians were like children. They laughed and even played pranks upon one another.

After the hunger of the band had been appeased Reuben was given a portion for his own needs. It was almost impossible for him to bite through the tough flesh, but hunger provided a strong incentive and soon he, too, was sharing in the changed mental attitude of the entire group. As he glanced behind him at the hills among which they had passed he saw that the moon had risen and that night was at hand. There was still sufficient light, however, to enable him to see distinctly all about him as he watched the antics of his childlike captors.

Suddenly in the midst of their pranks there came a rude and sharp interruption. The reports of rifles were heard from two sides of the camp. Several of the Indians fell to the ground, and Reuben instantly followed their example, although he was uninjured.

With wild cries the redmen now ran for their horses, but as they approached the place where they had corralled them there were fresh shots, and others of the Indians fell.

With renewed and louder shouts they now turned and ran swiftly toward the plains beyond. Many of them had been able to secure mounts and some of the horses were carrying double loads. Most of the animals, however, had been abandoned in the sudden flight.

By this time the men who had attacked the camp were near enough to enable Reuben to recognize them as his recent companions. Among them he saw the youthful form of Kit Carson riding at some distance to the left of his comrades and evidently fearful of an attack from the redmen who might still remain in the camp.

Aside from those who had fallen, Reuben was convinced, as he lifted his head and gazed about him, that he was the only one left there alive. All those who had been able to escape had fled from the place.

"Here I am, Kit! Don't shoot!" he called loudly, afraid to lift his head lest instantly he should be made the target of the excited trappers.

"Who's calling? Who is it?" demanded Kit Carson quickly, as he and his companions stopped to stare blankly all about them at the unexpected hail.

"Here I am!" repeated Reuben. "If you won't shoot I'll stand up."

"Go ahead, show yourself!" called Kit Carson.

At the command Reuben instantly arose and was recognized by the scout and his band.

CHAPTER XV—A LONELY RIDE

The surprise of the trapper at first made him speechless, as he gazed at his young companion. He had been aware that Reuben had left the camp, but as yet he was without any suspicion that evil had befallen the lad.

"Where did you come from? Why are you here?" he demanded slowly, as he advanced to the place where Reuben was standing.

"I came because they made me come," replied the boy somewhat ruefully. "They cut me off in the valley, so I couldn't get back to the camp, and then they tied me up and made me come."

"You were very good to consent," replied Kit Carson dryly.

"That wasn't the point," laughed Reuben, immensely relieved now that he was once more among his friends. "It wasn't whether I wanted to come, it was simply because I couldn't get away!"

"How far do you think you have come?"

"I haven't any idea. It seems like a long way."

"It's a hundred miles."

"Whew!" whistled Reuben. "The way we came when we first started made me think that you were close on our heels. I never saw a band go faster than they did, and they kept the horses well together, too. Why didn't you overtake us?"

"The redskins had too good a start. Some of the men thought we ought not to keep on."

"Why not?"

"Because they said they were hiding among some of the gulches in the Sierras, and we never would stand any chance of getting them, while there was every chance that they would get us."

"But it has turned out all right," laughed Reuben. "You have found me and you have got back

your horses."

"Yes, and we got some redskins, too," added the guide quietly. As he spoke he turned toward the place where several of the fallen bodies were lying, and after he had examined every one to make sure that all were lifeless he turned once more to his followers and said: "I don't think there is much danger of the rascals following us, but at the same time I think we had better start back for camp."

His suggestion was speedily acted upon. The horses of the trappers had travelled so fast and so far that some of them were well-nigh exhausted. In spite of their condition, however, Kit Carson insisted upon the men rapidly withdrawing from the region. Reuben, as a matter of course, had joined the band, his heart lighter, now as he was confident that his troubles were ended. His own pony was in better condition than those of his companions, and it was not difficult for him to maintain the speed at which they were riding.

When two hours had elapsed and the sun had disappeared from sight, at the word of Kit Carson the men halted in a narrow ravine, and after guards had been established on each side of the camp, preparations for supper were made speedily.

These preparations, however, did not require much time, as the supplies which the men had brought with them had been mostly consumed. Kit Carson and his young companion entered into the nearby region hoping to discover a deer or some birds which they might secure for supper. Their efforts, however, were unavailing, as no signs of any living animal were seen. When they returned to the camp the jerked venison which had provided the diet for the past twenty-four hours was all the food in the possession of the trappers.

To Reuben the supper was tempting, because in the swiftness of the flight of his captors they had stopped only twice to eat, although they had halted several times for rest or to discover whether or not their enemies were close upon their trail.

Before midnight, at the call of the leader, the men once more rode forward, and driving before them the ponies which they had reclaimed, they resumed their journey toward their camp.

No signs of pursuit had been discovered, and the quiet declaration of Carson that the redskins would not attempt to follow them was accepted by all the men as correct. The loss of so many of the warriors—for eight had fallen at the first fire—doubtless had alarmed the Indians, who in their flight were not fully aware of the numbers in the attacking party.

On the fourth day the band, with the horses which they had retaken from the Indians, reentered the camp. Kit Carson and Reuben at the time formed the rear guard, so that they were unable to hear the words of welcome which were given the returning men when first their presence was discovered. In a brief time, however, the shouts were redoubled when the stolen horses were all made secure and the leader and Reuben rejoined their companions.

"How did you do it, Kit?" called Jake.

"We just kept at it."

"How far did you go?"

"Better than one hundred miles."

Jake whistled and said: "We never believed you would keep up. When you didn't come back at the end of the first day we began to think something must have happened to you and we were going to send a party out to rescue you."

"That was mighty good of you," replied Kit Carson demurely, "but I'm not in the habit of giving up when I start."

"So it seems," laughed Jake. "I begin to understand why it is that the men are all willing to follow you."

"Why should we give up?" inquired the scout simply. "We started out to get the horses, didn't we?"

"Yes, but I've seen a good many men who were willing to start, but that's as far as they ever got."

"Well, we started and we came back, and when we came back we had the horses with us. That's all there is to the story."

The words of Kit Carson, however, belied the feeling of the camp. There was great enthusiasm among the men, who were loud in their praises of the young leader who had followed the fleeing Indians far beyond the regions where they had believed he would be able to make his way or to discover their trail.

"It's all right now, anyway," said Kit quietly. "I'm ready to turn in for the night."

As soon as the simple supper had been prepared and eaten, all the men in the camp sought their blankets. The horses which had been restored had been hobbled, and the various guards of the camp had been so placed that the approach of any one would be known at once.

The following day, after a long conference between the young scout and several of his men, Carson approached Reuben and said: "Do you think you could find your way to San Gabriel if you were to go alone?"

"Yes," replied Reuben quietly. "I am sure I can."

"Through the Sierras?"

"Yes, through the mountains. It is a simple path to find."

Kit Carson smiled as he said: "I hope you'll find it so, because we want to send you back to the mission."

"When am I to go?"

"Just as soon as you can get ready to start."

"I shall be ready in five minutes."

"That's the way to talk," said the scout quietly. "I'll tell you what we want just as soon as you are ready."

Within the time which he had allotted for his preparations Reuben had all things in readiness for his departure. He had selected a pony which he was confident would be fleet and sure-footed,

and his few belongings had been packed on the back of the faithful animal. Kit Carson handed him a letter, sealed and addressed to "Captain White, at the San Gabriel Mission."

"It is very important," said Kit Carson in a low voice to Reuben after the latter had mounted his pony. "Come back just as soon as you have an answer. As I told you, it may be that there will be a man who will come with you, but of that I am not sure. At all events you are to look out for yourself, and don't get caught again by the redskins."

"Do you think I shall meet any?" inquired Reuben, startled by the suggestion.

There was a quiet smile on the face of the scout as he said: "I don't think you'll have any trouble. About all the Indians out here on the coast do is to steal our horses or traps and get away with our skins. Take care of the letter and don't lose it!"

Armed with his rifle, and with provisions sufficient for his journey strapped upon the back of his sturdy little pony, Reuben departed from the camp. The way he was to follow lay for a time among the hills. In the heart of the excited boy there was a feeling of elation that he had been selected for this journey. He was eager to show Kit Carson and his comrades that they could depend upon his coolness and that he would be able to make his way in safety to the old mission and there deliver his message. He was mindful of the heat of the plains and of the length of the journey and consequently he did not urge his pony. At last he found himself among the narrow defiles of the bleak and towering Sierras.

It was not difficult for him to retrace the way by which he had come from the old mission the last time he had visited the station. It was now early in the morning, and he was hopeful that before sunset he would once more be among the friendly Indians and the whites who dwelt at San Gabriel.

The morning passed without any adventures, and the afternoon sun was waning when at last Reuben entered a defile that was, as he recalled it, several miles long. On his left were stunted growths of trees and the sides of the mountains sloped gently back with the valley. On the opposite side, however, the cliffs were steep and the mighty crags in places hung directly over his pathway. He was following the bed of a stream, which was nearly dry, as the snows had largely disappeared from the slopes of the mountains. The sense of his absolute loneliness was resting more heavily upon him now that he was tired from the long ride.

Suddenly the pony stopped and trembled violently in every muscle. An instant later the frightened animal did its utmost to leap forward, and it was only by using all his strength that Reuben was able to restrain him. Then it was that he glanced behind him to discover the cause of the terror of his horse. His own alarm was hardly less when not more than twenty yards behind him he saw the crouching figure of a mountain lion. The savage beast evidently was following him, occasionally seeking the shelter of some huge rock, or climbing among the bushes. It was unusual, however, for such treacherous animals to come into the open, as the one behind him now was doing, and for a moment Reuben was at a loss to account for the tenacity with which the powerful beast had been clinging to his trail.

Instantly Reuben raised his rifle to his shoulder and fired. At that very moment, however, his pony, maddened by terror, suddenly leaped forward, and the aim of the young hunter was destroyed. It was plain an instant later that the savage mountain lion was unharmed.

CHAPTER XVI—A MOUNTAIN LION

Reuben was aware that if he permitted his pony to run, the beast would instantly pursue him. He knew also that it would not be long before the mountain lion would overtake the fleeing pony. As long as he moved slowly, he had been frequently informed by his companions, a lion, though it might creep close upon his trail, would not be likely to attack him. On the other hand, if he should show his fear by flight the courage of the lion instantly would be strengthened and it would follow and attack any man or animal that fled in this way from his presence.

The snorting and trembling of the pony he was riding were pitiful. The flanks of the swift little animal already were wet, and its eyes were rolling and bloodshot with terror. By a supreme effort, however, Reuben succeeded in bringing the pony to a walk, and though there were moments when his mount was so terrified that it almost crouched upon the ground, still he was able to prevent it from running. It was impossible now for the boy to reload his gun. The actions of the pony prevented him from holding his rifle sufficiently quiet to enable him to ram home the bullet.

Occasionally Reuben glanced behind him, and he was aware that the one long leap forward which the mountain lion had taken when the pony had first darted ahead had given place to a more wary and careful approach. The savage beast was creeping along the ground. For several yards it would advance in this crouching manner, and then when Reuben looked behind him it would leap back into the bushes or seek the shelter of some huge crag.

Reuben was carrying his rifle in his hands, ready to defend himself if the beast should leap upon the flanks of his pony. The lion was now not more than thirty feet behind him, and why it did not attack him the young trapper was at a loss to understand.

Reuben glanced anxiously at the sky, and his fears increased when he discovered that already the afternoon sun was below the rim of the mountain. Darkness would soon approach and would come, as he was aware, after the manner of the sunset among the towering mountains. Usually there was only a brief period of twilight. The day abruptly ceased and night with equal abruptness swept over the land. Confident that his perils would be greatly increased with the coming of night, Reuben was at a loss how he was to prevent the lion from following him, until in the darkness in some narrow defile it would leap upon its victim.

Again he glanced behind him at the beast, which now was motionless, crouched as if it had

been a cat ready to spring upon a helpless and unsuspecting bird. A moment later, however, he saw it leap gracefully into the bushes and disappear from sight.

The young trapper was still compelling his horse to walk. His arms were aching from the strain of the pull upon the bridle, and he was nearly as wet as the horse he was riding. Several times he glanced back, but the pursuing mountain lion was not to be seen. Could it be possible that the beast had abandoned the pursuit?

The attitude of the animal when last it had been seen was not such as to convince Reuben that there was any ground for such a hope. Suddenly he recalled a statement he had heard made by Kit Carson. One time when the young scout had been relating an experience which he had had with one of the savage mountain lions, he had told how the beast after following its victim for a considerable distance, sometimes disappeared within the forest and later was seen far in advance when the unsuspecting party it had been following had relaxed his watchfulness, believing himself to be safe because the pursuit had been abandoned. The thought was not reassuring, and instantly Reuben gave rein to his sturdy little pony.

The terror-stricken horse dashed forward. The ground was uneven, and several times the little animal nearly fell as it bounded ahead. It was a wild and a mad flight, and Reuben not only did not hold back the pony, but continually urged it to a swifter flight. In this way he rode forward for a half-mile or more until the heaving sides of his horse gave evidence that its strength was nearly exhausted.

At the time he was entering a narrow passage in the valley. The light was becoming dimmer, but he was able to see that still about one hundred feet of the defile was before him.

Soon after he had given a brief breathing spell to his pony he was startled when the horse suddenly emitted a snort of terror and once more bounded forward. Glancing swiftly behind him, Reuben's fears all returned when he saw approaching from among the trees on the mountainside the same mountain lion which had pursued him and whose savage attack he had hoped had been abandoned.

Yelling loudly, Reuben once more urged his horse into its swiftest paces. There was a scream of anger from the pursuing lion, and Reuben's heart almost ceased to beat when he saw that the animal already was leaping forward in swift pursuit.

Abandoning his grasp on the bridle, Reuben seized his gun by the barrel and turning partly around in his saddle, with his uplifted gun he awaited the attack. The snarling beast advanced until it was within a few yards of the terrified boy. The pony, meantime, was running swiftly, snorting with terror and groaning with every breath it drew.

Abruptly Reuben turned still farther about in his seat, and yelling in his loudest tones shouted: "Get out! Clear out! Get away from here!"

He followed his words with a hissing sound, and to his delight the beast suddenly stopped, gazed in surprise or alarm at what he had evidently believed was a terrified victim, and then with long leaps instantly turned, bounded into the forest, and disappeared from sight.

Whether or not the pursuit had been abandoned Reuben did not know. He quickly gave all his attention to the horse he was riding, and as he passed beyond the border of the defile and was unable to discover any signs of the presence of his recent pursuer, he decided to continue the flight and do his utmost to escape from the savage animal.

For ten minutes the wild flight continued, until the pony no longer was able to maintain its pace. Again and again Reuben had glanced behind him, but not once had he seen the mountain lion. What pleased him still more was the fact that in advance of him he saw the end of the narrow valley. Once there he would be able to move down upon the plains, and he did not believe that the hungry brute would dare to follow him beyond the protection of the mountain. However, he halted and with trembling hands reloaded his rifle. He had decided that it would be safe as well as wise for him to take this precaution. If the beast should appear again he would stop his horse and fire at the animal. Resuming his flight, not many minutes had elapsed before Reuben found himself upon the plains.

The night now was upon him, but the light was still sufficient to enable him to see, though somewhat indistinctly, the outlines of the rocks and trees behind him. But the valley was no place of shelter, although he was aware that the Mission of San Gabriel was not more than seven or eight miles distant.

Only a brief time had elapsed before the young trapper was convinced that the mountain lion had abandoned its pursuit and turning back had sought the shelter of the defiles of the mountain.

Satisfied now that he had nothing more to fear, Reuben allowed his horse to proceed more slowly, though the manner in which the poor beast was holding its head as it advanced clearly indicated how nearly exhausted the pony was.

In this manner he moved steadily forward until he had come near to one of the farms owned by the mission and cultivated by the Indians. A rude little house was plainly to be seen in the distance, but as no light was shining from its windows, the young trapper decided to push forward and not stop until he had arrived at the destination he was seeking.

He had left the farmhouse far behind him and was moving forward over the dusty road when suddenly he saw before him the outlines of an approaching man. The man, however, was advancing in a strange manner. He was moving from one side of the road to the other, and yet as Reuben keenly watched him he was sure that the stranger was not intoxicated. Why then was he approaching in such a strange manner? He was carrying no burden upon his back, and both hands were free.

Still keenly watching the man who was steadily coming nearer, Reuben suddenly was startled by a motion that seemed to him strangely familiar. It reminded him of the companion whom he had lost among the foothills of the Rockies. But not a word had been heard from Jean Badeau.

Still believing that it was impossible that anything more than a resemblance had been discovered in the man, when Reuben came close to him he halted his horse and peered intently

into the face of the stranger. The face strongly resembled that of the missing French trapper. And yet it was so unlike his friend's that Reuben was at a loss to decide whether or not his former companion was indeed now before him.

The strangest part of all was that the man appeared to be entirely unaware of the presence of Reuben. He seldom glanced at him, and even when he did so Reuben felt a shiver creep along his spine, for there was something uncanny in the expression of the man's face. Reuben somehow had a feeling that the man was not so much looking at him as looking through him. Indeed, his fear increased when he became aware that the man not only did not reply to his questions, but that he did not even seem to be aware of his presence.

"Jean, Jean!" called Reuben in a low voice. "Is that you?"

As no answer was given to his query, the excited boy in a trembling voice again said: "What are you doing here? How did you escape from the Indians?"

Either ignoring or unaware of the questions which had been asked, the man continued his zigzag journey and soon passed out of the sight of the perplexed young trapper.

Partly convinced that he had mistaken the strange man for Jean Bateau, and that it was impossible for his former companion to be among the men assembled at the San Gabriel Mission, Reuben quickly resumed his journey. His pony now was somewhat rested, and in a brief time, of its own accord, it broke into the swifter gait it had maintained most of the way since the camp of the trappers had been left.

Reuben was still thinking of the two strange adventures which had befallen him on his ride when at last he drew near the walls that surrounded the old mission, and in response to his pull upon the bell-rope the gate was opened and he was admitted.

CHAPTER XVII—THE COMING OF RAT

The man to whom Reuben was to deliver his message was not to be found at the mission. However, the tired young traveller was warmly welcomed, and soon after he had eaten his supper he was soundly sleeping.

The following morning his message was delivered to Captain White, who was in command of a schooner which had sailed from New York around Cape Horn. The captain read the letter which Reuben had brought, and then looking keenly into the face of the lad, he said: "How many skins have they?"

"There are a good many," replied Reuben, "but I don't know just how many."

"Do you think they have got enough to fill the hold of the *Charming Nancy*?"

"I've never seen the *Charming Nancy*!"

The captain, who was a large, good-natured man, laughed noisily at the response and then said: "I guess you're a Yankee?"

"I am not a Yankee," retorted Reuben. "I come from Pain Court."

"Whew!" whistled the captain. "You're a youngster to be so far away from home. How old are you?"

"I'll be sixteen my next birthday."

"Is that so? You'll be quite an old gentleman soon if you don't look out. I guess you had better go back and tell your boss that we can strike up some kind of a deal, if he doesn't want too much for his furs."

"Shall I take that message?"

"Yes."

"Aren't you going to write a letter?"

"I hadn't thought anything about it. Can you write?"

"Yes," answered Reuben.

"Well, then, you write the letter. I'll tell you what to say."

Suspecting that the handwriting of the captain was perhaps not of the best, Reuben obtained a quill pen and some paper and ink and soon had written a letter at the dictation of the man. Just why he should be asked to do this he did not understand, inasmuch as it would be as easy for him to report what was said as it was to write out the direct message of Captain White. However, he discreetly held his peace, and the following day, with the letter in his pocket, set forth on his return to camp.

In spite of his determination to be brave, Reuben's heart was beating rapidly when once more he rode into the ravine where the mountain lion had threatened to attack him. It was speedily manifest also that the pony had vivid recollections of his experiences in the narrow valley and was eager to be beyond its confines.

Without any reluctance Reuben gave the hardy little beast free rein and at a rapid pace rode through the place of peril without any mishap. He maintained a keen outlook on both sides of the gorge, but did not discover any signs of the presence of the enemy which had so nearly attacked him two days before. Nor was Reuben molested in the remainder of his journey back to the camp.

When he arrived he at once delivered his message and explained to Kit Carson and others the questions which Captain White had asked him.

"We can fix this all right," said Kit Carson quickly. "I think we have skins enough to fill the hold of the *Charming Nancy* so that neither Captain White nor her owners will have any reason to complain."

Several days elapsed, however, before the bargain was completed. In this time the scout himself went to San Gabriel and had two or three personal interviews with the jovial sea captain.

When Kit Carson returned, Reuben was particularly interested in the description he gave of an attack which had been made upon him by the mountain lion.

"Where did you find him?" inquired Reuben.

"Why, it was among the foothills about seven or eight miles this side of San Gabriel."

"That's exactly where I met one. Did you kill it?"

"I think so," replied Kit Carson quietly. "The beast crept up behind me and I had all I could do to keep my pony from running away with me."

"That's exactly what happened to me. I don't see how you shot him."

"I think it must have been pure luck. I got the pony quiet for a minute and turned around and fired at the beast when it was not more than ten or twelve feet away. A blind man couldn't have missed it."

Reuben had his own thoughts as to the truthfulness of the modest declaration, but he did not give expression to them. In response to the questions of the scout, he modestly related the incident which had befallen him in his own journey in the same region.

"You were a lucky lad," said Kit Carson warmly. "And you couldn't have acted better if you had been sixty-one instead of sixteen. You never had seen one before, had you?"

"No."

"I don't understand yet why it was that you didn't put your pony into a run and try to escape. It was lucky for you that you didn't, for if you had tried it the beast would have got you as sure as fate."

"I had heard Jean tell about the lions, and all that he had said flashed into my mind in a minute. And I saw a man at San Gabriel that looked so much like Jean that I was almost sure that it was he."

"Are you sure that he wasn't?"

"No, and that's what puzzles me most of all. You see I left him the other side of the Rocky Mountains. It can't be possible that he made his way all alone through the Rockies, and across the plains and over the Sierras into San Gabriel. Besides, this man looks as if he was either crazy or a fool. There's something the matter with him anyway. He stared at me as if I was like air and he could look straight through me."

"I never met a man like that," said Kit Carson quietly, smiling as he spoke. "I guess it will turn out all right, and, besides, you may have several chances to see him again in the next few days. We're going to load up our ponies with the furs we have taken, or at least with a part of them, and send them down to Captain White."

"What is he going to do with them?"

"Take them to New York for us. We shan't let him have all that we have taken, but it will save a long hard ride if we let him have some of them here, and besides, I think now we shall trap much of the way back to Taos. By the time we get there we ought to have a load that will satisfy every man, to say nothing of our horses."

In the three weeks that followed, all the ponies of the camp were brought into service. They were heavily loaded with the skins that the trappers had secured and then began their long journey to the *Charming Nancy*. A careful record was kept, and a division among the trappers of the amount received from the sales of furs was to be made later.

Soon afterward the men returned to their camp and for several days were busily engaged in other tasks. Indeed, they were unusually successful, and the piles of beaver skins steadily mounted higher and higher.

At last when it was decided to break camp the trappers delayed a day in order to make a *cache*. A long trench was made in an unusually dry bank of earth not far from a stream on which the men had been trapping. A deep hole or excavation was made in this bank until a trench several yards wide and many yards long had been fashioned. All the time the men maintained guards and also took the utmost pains to hide every trace of their labours so that none of the prowling Indians would suspect either the task in which they had been engaged or the place where the skins had been hidden.

The turf was cut with great care and placed on one side of the hole. Much of the top soil then was placed on blankets or buffalo robes. The rest of the dirt which they dug while they were making the excavation was carried in pails by the men to the middle of the stream and there poured into the rushing waters.

At last when the hole was as large as they desired, twigs and dry grasses were cut and with these the trappers carefully lined the hole which they had dug. After all this had been done the furs were tightly packed and stored in the place. Last of all, grass and loose skins were placed over the bundles of furs and pounded with the top soil, which had been saved and had now been brought back from the place in which it had been stored. Then all the ground was watered and the turf was replaced with utmost care. After the task had been accomplished, unless a man had been informed of the work which had been done, it would have been almost impossible for him to discover any signs about the place that the trappers had made a storehouse in which they had concealed their furs.

A little later, when the September days came, it was decided by the trappers that they would start homeward. But it was also agreed that they would trap throughout their journey. They were to escape the hardest part of the ride across the desert because they now planned to follow the Colorado River in its course until they came to the Gila. Then their course again was to be changed and they were to follow that river on their homeward way. In this manner they were confident that they would be able to trap as they journeyed and, if fortune should favour them, they would add many skins to those which they already had taken.

The plan was speedily approved, and as the men sat about the camp talking of the return which they were now eager to make, the proceedings were interrupted by the approach of a stranger.

Instantly Reuben recognized him as Rat, the braggart whom he had last seen when he was among the foothills of the Rockies.

Confidently, as if the man himself had been a member of the band for a long time, the stranger approached and said: "I want to stop with you over night."

"You're welcome," replied Kit Carson, nevertheless gazing keenly at the stranger as he spoke.

"I have taken about fifteen hundred skins," said the visitor, laughing loudly as he spoke.

"Where are they?" inquired the scout.

"They are where I have hidden them so that neither you nor anybody else ever will find them, if I don't want you to. There isn't a man this side of Pain Court that can make a *cache* as good as the one I made."

"You're fortunate," said Kit Carson quietly. "You're lucky not only to have the skins, but to be able to hide them so that no one will ever find them."

"That's where you're right," laughed the stranger. "What have you done with all your skins?" he added as he looked about the camp.

"We have been lucky, too," said Kit Carson quietly. "Captain White of the *Charming Nancy* has shipped a lot of our furs as a part of his cargo."

"Maybe he'll take mine, too."

"It's too late. He has sailed before now."

"That's a pity," said Rat. "I'll have to tote mine clear across the desert. I think I'll have one or two of your men go with me."

"That cannot be done."

"Oh, yes, it can!" roared the man.

"No," replied Kit Carson, still speaking in low tones. "There isn't any one of us that wants to go with you."

"What do you mean by that?" roared Rat, leaping to his feet as he spoke. "Do you mean to say my company isn't desired?"

"That isn't what I said."

"Is that what you mean?"

"I usually mean what I say."

"Is that what you mean?" again thundered the angry giant, who acted now much as if he had been striving to pick a quarrel with some one.

"I haven't anything more to say. If you want to pick a fight with some one you had better go on to some other place."

Rat now was angry and he took no pains to conceal his feelings. As yet he had not recognized Reuben, and the lad was too keenly excited by what was occurring in the camp to call the attention of the quarrelsome man to himself.

"I don't have to go on. There isn't any American in this camp that I can't switch."

A silence followed the speech of the boastful man and it was not broken until Kit Carson said quietly: "It's plain you're not an American. I am, and I demand that you take back what you said."

CHAPTER XVIII—A FIGHT

Instantly a silence that was tense and could almost be felt fell upon the entire camp. All the trappers gazed in surprise first at the tall, awkward boaster and then at Kit Carson, who in comparison with the other man seemed to be little more than a boy in size. Brawls and quarrels were not uncommon among the lonely men, but this was the first time any one had known Kit Carson to join in the petty bickerings of the camp.

Reuben, startled at first by the quiet manner in which his friend had spoken, now looked at him in alarm. It did not seem possible that so slight and light a man as the guide would be able to defend himself against the braggart, who was known as the bully of the West. It is true Rat had no friends among the trappers. Every one had looked upon him as one who talked much but whose deeds were lacking. It was commonly reported that he was better able to tell other men how to trap the beaver than he was to secure the little animals in his own traps.

To the excited Reuben the huge shoulders of the bully looked broader than ever he had seen them before. And yet for some strange reason Rat did not leap forward to attack Kit Carson when the latter in his quiet manner had demanded that he take back his remark that he could "switch any American in the camp."

The silence, however, was soon broken. Rat hesitated a moment and then, turning abruptly, with long strides walked to his tent. At the actions of the bully Kit Carson also started for his own tent, and every man present understood at once what was about to occur. The two men, who seemed to be so unequally matched, were to fight, and each had gone to his tent for his weapons. This method of settling quarrels was the one commonly used on the border.

With this thought in mind, every member of Kit Carson's band was eager to see the coming contest. At once they all drew more closely together, and although many were fearful for the life of their brave little leader, there was no one that ventured to express his opinion.

In a few moments the swaggering Rat, holding his rifle in his hand, and his face fierce in its expression of rage, rushed forward on his powerful horse. Almost at the same moment Kit Carson, light and graceful in every movement, approached on horseback from the opposite side of the camp. He carried no rifle, but from his belt there protruded the stock of his pistol.

Kit Carson had always been a lover of good horses. Several times in the journeys along the streams and in the valleys of the mountains he had turned aside a part of a day from his regular task of trapping and had caught the leaders of several bands of wild horses. The horse upon which he now was mounted was one of these captives. Its black coat was shining in the sunlight and its expression of intelligence almost seemed to convey the idea that it understood the peril of its master and was determined to do its utmost to aid him. Carson rode without any saddle. No

man in all the camp was considered a better rider, or more able to compel the animal he was riding to obey his every word. At full gallop the young scout advanced swiftly toward Rat, who, as has been said, was also mounted upon a powerful horse.

Suddenly checking his horse as he approached Rat, Kit Carson in a low voice said: "Am I the man you are looking for?"

For a moment the two men gazed steadily each into the face of the other, and then Rat replied, "No."

As he spoke, however, he lowered his rifle, and although his actions apparently were without any design, his gun was pointed directly at the heart of the scout.

But Kit Carson was not to be taken unaware. He had heard Rat's declaration that he was not looking for trouble, but the action of the treacherous boaster when he had lowered his rifle so that it was aimed directly at his heart did not escape him. He understood fully what the plan of the treacherous man now was likely to be.

Like a flash he pulled his own pistol and fired at his enemy. True to his aim the bullet struck the arm of Rat, even while his fingers were almost upon the trigger of his rifle. Indeed, as Kit Carson fired, Rat's rifle also was discharged, but the wound which he had received caused his arm to turn and the ball which he had intended to send into the heart of the scout passed harmlessly above his head. Instantly the men of the camp ran forward and surrounded the two fighters.

Kit Carson smiled quietly as he saw his friends approach, and then waving them back, said in a low voice: "I have done just exactly what I planned to do. I have prevented him from shooting me, and I think I have given him a lesson that he will remember for some time, and yet I have not killed him."

"That's right, Kit! That's right!" spoke up Jack. "We know that you're not quarrelsome, and this is the first time I ever saw you draw a gun on a white man."

Meanwhile the bully, groaning loudly and holding his wounded arm in his hand, was led from the spot, while two of the trappers, with water from the spring, washed his wound and bound up his hand after the fashion employed by the men of the frontier. In the days that followed Reuben was not able to induce Kit Carson to refer to the fight into which he had been drawn.

Not many days elapsed, however, before Rat declared that he would no longer stay in the camp, and true to his word, he soon afterward withdrew from the place. Nor was he seen again until several months had elapsed, and then it was under conditions that caused every member of the band to remember his coming.

"It's time for us to be turning back," said Kit Carson early one morning, not long after the contest which has just been described.

"Go back where?" inquired Reuben quickly. "To Pain Court?"

"No. I don't intend to go back there for years."

"Where are we going?"

"To Taos."

"We'll have to come back here again," suggested Reuben. "We have cached our furs."

"Oh, we shall come back," replied Carson, smiling as he spoke. "Very likely we'll be back here the next trapping season."

In accordance with the word of the leader, it was not long before the few wagons in which the trappers had brought their provisions, in addition to the supplies which had been carried on the backs of their ponies and mules, were loaded with the furs which had been secured after the cache had been made. Then following the course which already had been decided upon, the men slowly made their way down the Colorado, trapping as they went, until they at last arrived at the Gila. Then, turning once more in their course, they trapped along the banks of the latter river and finally, well laden with the skins they had taken, set forth on their journey to Taos.

After their arrival there and in the days that followed, Reuben Benton made many visits with his friend Kit Carson among the Indians, until he, too, had learned much of their language and also had learned enough Spanish to express his wants in that musical tongue. He shared fully in the feeling of respect and love which the Indians manifested for the young scout, who now was becoming famous among the scattered people on the border. In this manner the days passed until at last the time had come when once more the trappers were to return to the region from which they had recently set forth.

As they advanced, the friendly Indians gave place to those who were more hostile. The fame of Kit Carson already had preceded their coming, and many of the redmen, although they hated the whites, nevertheless were fearful of an encounter with them. Indeed, the trappers were not molested throughout their long journey, until at last there came a night which was long remembered by Reuben.

At that time, when the trappers had gone into camp, they had established a guard for their horses. This guard was on duty throughout the hours of the day, being shifted several times so that no one man would be compelled to serve an undue length of time. When night drew nigh the horses were hobbled. Frequently, however, the fear of the prowling Indians caused Kit Carson to direct his men to tie the animals to stakes which had been driven into the ground.

All these precautions, however, did not avail. There were times when prowling Indian bands stealthily crept near the camp, and while the men were sleeping the redskins cut the ropes by which the horses were fastened to the stakes and either led them quickly away or tried to secure a larger number by driving some of their own horses directly through the camp, the Indians themselves closely following the frightened animals and yelling in their loudest tones. At such times there was danger that even the picketed horses would break away and join the herd that was rushing upon them.

And this very event occurred on a never-to-be-forgotten night. Before morning dawned Carson, having discovered the loss, quickly selected a half-dozen of his followers and upon the

backs of the horses that were still left in the camp hastily followed the fleeing Indians.

Reuben, who was permitted to follow the men, although his friends strongly urged him to remain in the camp, was soon aware that the Indians were well armed and were not inclined to give up the prizes they had taken without a struggle.

Many of the Indians now were armed with rifles, and the members of the thieving band far outnumbered those of the little party that was pursuing them. Several times among the mountains the Indians stopped and from behind huge rocks fired upon the approaching white men.

Reuben was aware soon after the party had set forth that the night was to be intensely cold. Indeed, his fingers soon were so numb that he was scarcely able to hold the reins of the pony he was riding. However, he was determined not to give way to his suffering, and without a word of complaint steadily maintained his place in the line.

The men were confident that the Indians were not far before them. Already they had had two brisk encounters, in which each party had fired at the other, but whatever the results may have been among the Indians, no one among the whites as yet had been hit.

Kit Carson's men were making greater haste than they would had they not been so eager to recover the horses they had lost. Because of this fact they had advanced boldly into a long and narrow valley and had not stopped to make sure that a part of the force they were pursuing had not been left at the entrance while others had gone in advance to draw the white men forward.

When the angry trappers had arrived at the place midway in the valley, suddenly shots were heard not only in front of them but also from the rear. In an instant it was plain that an ambush had been made and the whites had been caught between the two lines of their foes.

As the party still continued on its way, Kit Carson ordered every man to hold his fire. Suddenly one of the trappers, who was riding on Reuben's right, uttered a loud cry and, dropping his rifle as he threw up his arms, almost fell from the back of his horse.

"Go on, men!" called Kit Carson, instantly, while he himself dropped back to assist his companion in his peril.

An instant later, however, a cry went up from all the trappers when it was seen that Kit Carson himself had been hit by a rifle ball and was reeling on the back of his pony.

CHAPTER XIX—TRAPPED

The confusion among the trappers instantly was almost overwhelming. The affection which every member of the party had for the brave little scout was strong, and all the men were fearful now that with the fall of Kit Carson the destruction of the band might follow. There was no one to take his place as leader.

It was the wounded leader himself, however, who in his quiet tones reassured his comrades as soon as they had carried him to a place of safety. "Don't be scared," he urged them, when they had placed him upon the blankets which they spread upon the ground.

"Where were you hit?" inquired Reuben, his voice breaking as he spoke.

"The fellow got me in the shoulder," replied Kit Carson. In a moment his hunting shirt was torn away by his excited friends. The weather was intensely cold and the blood from his wound had quickly frozen on his clothing.

After one or two attempts had been made to lay bare the wound, the young scout, who was suffering intensely, said: "It will be better if only one of you tries to help me." His face was drawn and colourless, but his courage in the midst of his suffering appealed so strongly to his friends that his directions were instantly followed.

"Go down to the brook," suggested Kit Carson to Reuben, "and bring back your cap full of water."

At his utmost speed Reuben ran down the slope of the valley to the noisy brook at its base. In his excitement he dashed into the stream unmindful of the fact that he might obtain the water he desired without wetting his own clothing.

He was still unaware, however, of his condition when he rushed back to the place where his friend was lying, and in a brief time the trapper that had been designated for the task was washing the leader's wound.

Once during the operation the face of the patient became deadly white. He did not lose consciousness, however, and although he was suffering intense pain not a murmur escaped his lips. This heroic endurance of suffering was one of the cardinal requirements of the hardy men of the frontier. No one was surprised at their leader's power of endurance, but the fact that he still directed his friends in their efforts to aid him, sending Reuben several times to the stream for fresh supplies of water, nevertheless impressed them all. Throughout this time guards had taken their places to make sure that the horde of Indians did not break through and attack them again while they were unprepared. In a brief time it became manifest that the Indians were unaware of the damage they had wrought, for they did not offer to advance from the rocks behind which they had been concealed.

When at last the wound had been bathed and bandaged as best the men were able, and a hunting shirt from one of the trappers had been tied about the shoulders of the suffering man, preparations for the return to camp were speedily made.

"The best thing to do is to make a litter and take me home on it," said Kit Carson in a low voice. "Cut some poles and swing two of the blankets on them. I think that will be the best way to carry me."

In accordance with these directions a rough hammock-like litter was soon made and the wounded trapper was tenderly placed upon it. His friends gently lifted the poles to their

shoulders and then, after advance and rear guards had been established for the little line, they proceeded on their way back to the camp. Fortunately they were not molested on their way. Once in the camp, the men no longer were afraid, and quickly a bed was made for their leader upon which he soon was placed.

The clean life and the strong constitution of the young trapper now came to his assistance. In spite of the fact that the wound was painful the precautions which his friends had taken had prevented the development of serious trouble and not many days had elapsed before Kit Carson declared that he was as well as ever. Indeed, only a few weeks had passed before Kit Carson's activities in visiting his traps were as great as they had been before his unfortunate adventure with the Indians. It was upon one of his daily rounds, in which Reuben accompanied him, that the lad gained a fresh insight into the character of the man of whom now he was intensely fond.

Meat was needed in the camp, and Kit Carson, whose skill as a hunter was acknowledged by all, promised to provide fresh game. His traps already had been visited and much of the day's work had been done when he turned to Reuben and said: "Lad, would you like to go with me?"

"Where are you going?" inquired Reuben.

"I want to get some game."

"Yes, I'll have my rifle in a minute."

Hastening into the tent he occupied, Reuben soon returned with his rifle, powder-horn, and bullet-pouch. Together the two men started on their hunt among the mountains. They had not gone far before they discovered that they would be able to obtain as many rabbits as they might desire.

"I want bigger game than that," said Kit Carson dryly. "If you want to turn back you may go, Reuben, but I'm going on a little farther. I have seen some signs that make me think there are some elk not far away."

"Have you seen their tracks?"

"Yes, there are some now," replied the scout, pointing, as he spoke, to some spots in the ground before him.

Reuben was unable to discover any resemblance to the track of an elk, even after he had carefully inspected the places indicated, but his confidence in his companion was supreme and he quickly said, "I'll go on with you."

He was rejoiced when not long after the advance was resumed they saw near a clump of trees in the distance a small herd of the animals they were seeking.

"The thing for us to do," whispered Kit Carson, "is to try to get closer to those trees. If we once get under cover there I think we can bag two or three."

Cautiously and slowly the two eager hunters worked their way toward the trees in the distance. Both were aware how keenly alert the elk were and how difficult it would be for the hunters to obtain the shelter they were seeking. Frequently the animals lifted their heads and gazed in their direction. Less than a half-hour had elapsed before Kit Carson said abruptly in a low voice: "They have seen us! The only thing to do now is to try to bring down one of them. Be quick, Reuben!"

Both men knelt and aimed at the animals, which already had turned to flee from the place where they were feeding. Together the reports of the two guns rang out and a moment later one of the running elk fell to the ground.

"I missed him," said Reuben dolefully.

"You don't know whether you did or not," laughed Kit Carson. "Only one was hit, that's plain, but whether it was by your gun or mine no one can say. Come on, we'll get this one anyway."

Advancing rapidly, the two hunters ran toward the place where the body of the elk was lying. They had approached within a few yards of the body when both young hunters were startled by the sound of branches snapping in the bushes nearby. As they looked up they saw two immense grizzly bears advancing upon them. It was instantly clear that the bears were as hungry as the men and that they, too, had been doing their utmost to obtain fresh meat. Perhaps also the huge bears were angry that unexpected rivals had appeared in the hunt. At all events, the only safety for the two young hunters was to seek flight instantly.

Neither had stopped to reload his rifle, so eager had both been to make sure that the elk which had fallen was killed.

Without a word to his companion Kit Carson instantly ran for a nearby tree, leaving Reuben to use his own devices. And Reuben was not slow in following the example of his friend. In spite of his fear he recalled the conversation which he had had with the scout not long before this time. Kit Carson at that time had declared that it was much better when a man was hunting for him to go alone. In response to the protests of Reuben he had said: "If two go together and something comes up that makes it absolutely necessary for quick action, if there are two hunters they will stop and talk before they decide what to do. The result will be not only that much valuable time will be lost, but the plan they will follow will probably be neither that of one nor of the other, but a sort of compromise. The only way is for a man not to stop to discuss things when he must make up his mind in a hurry. If he's alone, there won't be any trouble, and he will not only do what he wants to, but probably will do what was the best thing for him to do under the circumstances."

Recollections of this conversation were in Reuben's mind as he ran at his utmost speed toward a sapling he saw not far before him. Fortunately the boy was able to gain the shelter up which he was confident the bears would not attempt to climb. It is true they were able to climb almost any tree which a man could use, but the one in which Reuben had sought shelter was so small that he did not believe the lumbering bears would attempt to climb it. He was satisfied, when at last he rested in a crotch of the tree, that he was twelve feet from the ground and beyond the swing of the paws of the angry beasts.

Assured of his safety, Reuben excitedly turned to see what had befallen his companion. His own gun he had dropped at the base of the tree when he had made his ascent. He was therefore

without any means of defense or of aiding his comrade.

Not far away he saw the scout just as he arrived at the base of a tree. Without hesitating a moment Kit Carson nimbly seized a branch and swung himself up into the tree, while the two bears—for both had started in the pursuit of the fleeing scout—were several yards behind him.

Excitedly Reuben watched the grizzlies as they bounded forward. The steady swing from side to side which marked their course while they were running had disappeared. Reuben's heart almost stopped beating while he gazed at the awkward and yet swift animals. Would they be able to reach the tree before the scout could climb higher among the branches? Reuben speedily was aware that the bears had by no means abandoned the chase. As soon as they arrived at the base of the tree one of them quickly began its ascent.

The trembling boy was able to see the scout as he drew his knife after he had ascended as far up the tree as evidently he had planned to go. Quickly a sturdy branch was cut and trimmed. The grizzly was steadily mounting, but the victim that he was seeking now held a stout club in his hands and was preparing to defend himself.

"And yet," thought Reuben, "what can Kit Carson do with only a club to protect himself against the savage brutes?"

The bear which had remained on the ground several times threatened to climb the tree after its companion. Apparently, however, it was satisfied to leave to the other bear the task of securing their dinner, or else it was fearful that the tree would not bear the weight of both.

At that moment the climbing bear had approached close to the crotch in which Kit Carson was standing. With one arm around the branch the hunter leaned forward in such a way that he was able to lift his club and look directly down into the face of the savage animal. Suddenly drawing back with all his force Kit Carson brought his club down directly upon the nose of the grizzly.



"The trembling boy was able to see the scout as he drew his knife"

The hunter was aware of the fact that there is no part of the body of the grizzly bear quite as tender as its nose. Reuben laughed excitedly when a roar of pain came from the animal as soon as the blow had been struck, and he saw the brute slowly make its way backward down the tree, shaking its head and occasionally roaring with pain in the descent.

When the bear at last had regained the ground, as if by a mutual understanding, the second bear at once began to climb the tree. Kit Carson meanwhile had obtained shelter in a crotch somewhat lower than the one in which he had first stood. In the place he now occupied he was able to obtain a greater sweep for his club, while his foothold was equally safe.

Rapidly the climbing bear came to the place where the hunter was waiting. Again Kit Carson drew back his club and with the fuller sweep which now he was able to obtain he dealt a still more savage blow directly upon the nose of the approaching bear.

Again there was a roar of mingled pain and rage, and the grizzly, like its companion, quickly decided to retreat. As soon as the lumbering animal, still roaring with pain and shaking its head, regained the ground at the base of the tree, its companion, having somewhat recovered from the results of its former attempt, once more began to climb.

But Kit Carson, now more confident, met the ascending bear with a second resounding blow upon its nose. Evidently the spot was somewhat tender, for the grizzly emitted a loud roar of pain and with still greater haste started to the ground.

Once more the second bear attempted the ascent, but the result which had followed its former efforts speedily compelled the attack to be abandoned. Both bears now were steadily shaking

their heads, growling and in pain, and yet neither apparently was inclined to withdraw from the spot where they had trapped the scout.

CHAPTER XX—WILD HORSES

Apparently the two grizzlies were confident that they would be able to wait as long as the man whom they had compelled to seek refuge in the tree. The slow minutes passed, and even Reuben, who was watching from the distance and as yet had not been discovered by the bears, was becoming cramped and impatient. He was not willing to call to his friend, for he dared not do anything to attract the attention of his enemies. He was well assured that he would not be able to drive them away as successfully as had Kit Carson by wielding a club.

At last when what Reuben was convinced was at least two hours had passed, apparently the two bears decided to abandon their vigil. Apparently, too, they did this not because they were discouraged, but because their feeling of hunger drew them in another direction. With the strange lope or rolling motion with which bears run, both grizzlies advanced to the place where the elk which Kit Carson had shot was lying. This was not far distant from the trees in which the young trappers were hiding, and in a brief time the sounds of the repast were distinctly heard. Snarls and occasional growls were frequent. Once one of the bears rose to a sitting posture and viciously struck his companion on the head with his paw. The action apparently did not arouse the anger of the second bear, who was thoroughly busy in his task of devouring the body of the slain elk.

Would the animals never eat their fill? Reuben, cramped and with every nerve tingling, had watched the savage beasts, hoping that they soon would be satisfied and then would depart from the region.

At last, when the grizzlies had devoured most of the body, apparently satisfied with their repast, they both turned and for a moment threatened to come back to the place where they had tried to climb the tree in which the young scout had found refuge.

Apparently, however, recollections of their experiences at the hands of the fearless young hunter were still vivid. Abruptly they turned away, and, swinging and swaying, made their way toward the mountains and soon disappeared from sight.

With the departure of the bears Reuben was confident that he and his friend might safely leave their places of refuge. As Reuben started to descend the tree he was startled by a call from his comrade.

"Don't do that, lad!"

"But they have gone," protested Reuben.

"You can't trust them. No one knows how far away they are. They may simply be waiting for us."

"But I'm all cramped, I have been here so long. It doesn't seem to me I can stay much longer."

"Oh, yes, you can," called Kit Carson encouragingly. "We can stay here all night, if we have to."

It was late in the afternoon when at last a low call from Kit Carson caused Reuben to descend the tree. His muscles were so stiff from remaining such a long time in his cramped position that it was with difficulty that he was able to walk. His friend stopped for a moment as soon as he drew near and showed Reuben how he stretched his own weary muscles and exercised his arms which were almost numb.

"Do you think the bears have gone for good and all?" inquired Reuben.

"I think so. You had better load your rifle, though I don't know that it would do you very much good. I have known a grizzly to be shot in the head, and, as far as one could see, pay about as much attention to the bullet as he would to a pebble. They must have heads that are mighty strong and thick. However," he continued, "see that your rifle is all ready and we'll start."

Cautiously the two trappers made their way from the place where both had been so nearly caught, and after a quarter of an hour had elapsed Kit Carson declared that the bears must have gone in the opposite direction from the one which they were following and were no longer to be feared. Somewhat assured by his companion's confidence, Reuben nevertheless kept a careful watch as with his friend he advanced through the valley.

The young hunter was greatly surprised when they came near to the end of the valley to discover a small Indian village before them. He had been unaware of the presence of the redmen and now that he saw this camp his fears returned.

"Come on, lad. Don't be afraid," said Kit Carson quietly. "I have been here a great many times."

"You have?" exclaimed Reuben. "I didn't know there was an Indian camp within ten miles of ours."

"Well, you see there is," replied the scout dryly.

"How long has it been here?"

"A year or more."

"How do you know?"

"I told you I have been over here a good many times and I know all about it. I have talked with some of the braves and they think I'm almost fit to be received into the tribe." Kit Carson spoke quietly, and yet there was a tone in his voice that caused Reuben to glance sharply at him. There was no change, however, in the expression of the face of the scout, and as apparently he did not wish to continue the conversation the subject was dropped.

Not long afterward, however, both trappers were welcomed into the Indian village. The suspicion which possessed Reuben he was not able entirely to conceal. Even the dogs that came

sniffing about his feet seemed to be treacherous. Few words were spoken to him, although his companion was cordially received and the statement which he had recently made to Reuben was manifestly confirmed. The Indians all looked upon him as a friend, and in the spirit of friendship bade him and his companion welcome.

Reuben, who was eager to be back in camp, found it difficult to understand why Kit Carson insisted upon remaining longer in the village. Indeed, an hour elapsed before he gave the word and the journey was resumed.

"I'm going to marry the daughter of the chief," said Kit Carson, speaking almost as if he were referring to some ordinary occurrence.

"What!" exclaimed Reuben, as he spoke gazing in amazement at his companion.

"That's just what I'm going to do," said Kit Carson, smiling slightly at the astonishment of his friend.

"But I don't see—" began Reuben.

"No, you don't see, but I do, and that's enough."

"Well, you're the one to be pleased," said Reuben. "I wish you much joy."

"Thank you," replied the scout, laughing quietly. "I reckon some of my friends back at Pain Court would think I was out of my head to marry an Indian squaw. From the expression on your face, Reuben, I can see that you, too, have something of the same idea in your mind."

Reuben did not respond, and for a time the two men continued in silence.

"I have known that little Indian girl," explained Kit Carson, after a long silence, "more than a year. She is as pretty as a picture and as good as she is pretty. It was a long time before the old chief would give her to me, but to-night he told me that he had decided that if I wanted her for my wife and would promise that she might stay in the village while I was trapping he would not oppose me any longer. And he doesn't like the white men, either," he added with a laugh.

"How is it that he is willing for you to have her, then, if he doesn't like the whites?"

"Oh, he has a notion," replied Kit Carson simply, "that he can trust me. He says if I say I will do a thing I don't try to lie out of it."

"He's right about that," said Reuben warmly. "That's just the way everybody that knows you feels."

"Thank you." There was a tender expression in the eyes of the young scout that prevented Reuben from making any further protest against the action of his friend.

"I am going to take you with me to-morrow into the village and let you see how they treat me. Just now, however, Reuben, I would rather you would not say anything about what I have just told you."

Abruptly both men stopped, and in a low voice Reuben said: "What is that? It sounds like thunder."

"It is a drove of wild horses," answered Kit Carson quickly. "Come with me and we'll see what they are."

The sun was now about a half-hour above the horizon. In the soft light of the closing day the sound of the approaching body was almost weird. The band of wild horses was steadily drawing nearer the place where the two scouts had concealed themselves. The wind was blowing toward them, or otherwise the horses would not have approached the spot. They were almost as keen in their ability to detect by their sense of smell the presence of an enemy as were the prowling beasts.

In a brief time the drove came within sight. At the head was the leader, a powerful and beautiful creature, running easily, his head carried high and his pride showing in his every movement.

"Did you ever see such a tail on a horse?" exclaimed Kit Carson in a low voice. "Look at it—it sweeps the ground! Do you know, I believe I'll get that fellow. If there is anything I am fond of it's a good horse."

The scout's fondness for fleet-footed ponies was well known by his friends. Not a man in the camp was his equal as a rider. He seldom used a saddle, and whatever the motion of the animal he was riding might be, Kit Carson bestrode it almost as if they were parts of the same being.

Reuben, whose heart was beating wildly as he saw the drove approach, said in a whisper: "How will you get him?"

"We'll fix that up to-morrow. We'll see to-night where they go."

The approaching horses soon swept past the hiding-place of the two trappers, and turning abruptly disappeared from sight at the entrance to one of the valleys.

"They will stay there all night," said Kit Carson quickly. "Come on now, lad, we'll go back to camp."

"What makes you think they will stay all night? They may leave before morning."

Kit Carson smiled and shook his head, but made no further response, and in a brief time, delaying only until they had secured a few rabbits and a deer which they chanced to see, soon rejoined their companions.

For some reason Kit Carson was silent concerning their visit at the Indian village, and Reuben himself naturally did not refer to it. The leader, however, made much of the drove of wild horses, and it was plain that the young scout's enthusiasm increased as he described the strength and beauty of the black pony at its head.

"I must have him," he said.

"That's easy to say," suggested one of the men. "I have heard others talk the same way, but when you run down a pony like that you'll have your work cut out for you."

"But I'm going to get him," said Kit confidently. "And I'll tell you how."

In a low voice he explained to his companions the plan which he had formed for catching the black leader. Every man in the camp was interested, but when at last they sought their tents it had been decided that only Reuben and two others were to share in the attempt.

CHAPTER XXI—THE CHASE OF THE LEADER

Long before daylight the following morning Kit Carson and his three companions mounted their horses and departed from the camp.

The plan which had been agreed upon was for Kit Carson himself to go into the valley into which the drove of wild horses had disappeared and await their return to the plains. It was confidently believed that the horses would leave their place of shelter about sunrise or a little before. The three companions of the scout had been stationed at intervals of two or three miles among the foothills in places where they would be concealed from the sight of any passerby. It also was planned that the scout, if it was possible, was to separate the leader from the other horses in the drove and to chase him at his highest speed. If it was in his power to do so, the scout expected to turn the black leader toward the south, where Reuben and Jack were to be ready to take up the pursuit as soon as Kit Carson drew near their hiding-place. In this manner it was believed that however swift the paces of the leader might be he would be soon worn out by the swiftness of the pursuit of the three horses, every one of which was fresh at the beginning of his part of the chase.

Never before had Reuben seen Kit Carson so eager to secure one of the wild ponies. Frequently the men in the camp had caught and broken horses, which they had taken on the plains. Indeed, almost every horse in their possession now was one that had been captured and broken and trained to service by the trappers. Several times men had secured these horses by firing at them, stunning the animals without injuring them. However, only the most expert shots were able to do this, and even with them the danger of killing or harming the horses they were chasing was so great that the plan was seldom tried.

In the present case long ropes of a lariat or noose were hanging from the horn of Kit Carson's saddle. It was not often that the fearless scout deigned to use a saddle, as we know, but in this case, as he needed his rope and at the same time was aware that occasions for the use of his gun might arise, he consented to use a light saddle.

"Now, then, every man look sharp!" he said in a low voice, as he parted from his companions. "One of you go to the north and the other two to the south. Be sure to hide in places where you can take up the chase without having to climb very much. The most important thing, however, is to find some rock or hill behind which you will not be seen, for this leader, unless I am much mistaken, will be off like a shot the minute he sights you, and you'll need to be fresh to keep close to him in the chase."

The directions of the scout were carefully followed, and Reuben secured a place behind a rocky barrier near the border of the foothills. His companion proceeded two or three miles farther before he, too, concealed himself. By the time each of the trappers had found his hiding-place, Kit Carson had disappeared from sight. Cautiously the scout made his way up the narrow valley or gorge in which the wild horses had sought refuge for the night.

The sun had not yet risen above the eastern horizon, but the light of the coming day was already beginning to appear. This hour was selected because, as has been stated, it was believed by the trappers that the horses would leave their shelter among the hills at the approach of day.

Reuben, who had dismounted and thrown the bridle over the head of his horse, an act which as effectually prevented his horse from leaving as if he had been tied to a post, impatiently awaited the coming of the day.

He now was almost as eager as his friend to secure the wonderful leader of the drove of wild horses. The shining coat and the proud air of the black horse had marked the animal as one not only of unusual beauty, but of marked speed and power as well. In his mind Reuben again saw the arched neck, the long sweeping tail, the high step, and the pride of the animal as in response to his call the twenty-five or more horses followed his lead. Surely he was worthy of all that the effort to catch him might cost.

The horses which the trappers had selected for the chase were all fleet, but as Reuben glanced at his own beast he smiled as he thought of the possibility of the black leader being overtaken by such an animal. To divide the pursuit into relays was the only feasible plan. And his own part, provided the wild leader turned southward, would not be slight. There was, however, the possibility that instead of turning either northward or to the south the black leader might move directly toward the east. In that event pursuit would be well-nigh hopeless. There were no horses in the possession of the trappers that would be able to overtake the fleet-footed leader in a straight chase across the plains.

A half-hour slowly passed and still no signs of Kit Carson or of the wild horses had been seen. A second half-hour passed and still the silence was unbroken. The sun was now well above the horizon and the peaks of the mountains were capped with light. Indeed, the glory of the coming day was already reflected from the snowclad mountain peaks, from the occasional little lakes on the mountainside, and from the crags and rocks that were to be seen in whichever direction Reuben looked. The air, too, was marvellous, and Reuben said to himself that, as he breathed it, it almost seemed to him as if he could bite it, it was so strong and bracing.

The young trapper was becoming impatient. He was almost convinced that Kit Carson had failed to discover the hiding-place of the wild horses. If that were true, it was strange that the scout did not return. Reuben smiled, however, as he recalled the fact that when Kit Carson had decided to follow any line of action it was almost impossible to divert him from his purpose. Quiet the scout always was, but it was the quiet of confidence and strength.

Suddenly Reuben darted forward and seized the bridle rein of his waiting horse. At the same time he was peering eagerly toward the outlet of the valley into which Kit Carson had entered not long before. A moment later the young trapper was convinced that his surmise was correct. Forth from among the rocks suddenly the black leader appeared, running swiftly and yet lightly.

Indeed, it almost seemed to Reuben as if the feet of the animal scarcely touched the ground, so lightly did he step. What pride and confidence, too, were in his very air. Occasionally he glanced behind, snorting with anger, but his swift pace was unbroken. Behind him came the other horses of the drove, the colts running in the centre, protected by the others. The presence of the colts prevented the leader from increasing the speed at which they were moving.

Not long after the appearance of the wild horses Reuben discovered Kit Carson. The scout was riding at the pace which the leader had first taken, and it was quickly plain that he could increase his speed at any moment. Several times the black leader halted and turned as if he almost had decided to stop and give battle. Each time, however, apparently he thought better of the project and returned to his place at the head of the drove.

For a mile or more the flight and the pursuit continued, Kit Carson not gaining, or even apparently attempting to gain, upon the horse he was so eager to secure. The scout, however, had outflanked the wild ponies and had succeeded after a time in turning their flight southward.

Assured now that the chase would lead directly to the place where he was waiting, and that he was almost certain to have a share in the exciting pursuit, Reuben drew his horse a little closer to the rock and in such a manner that he would be able to peer around its edge and watch the events that were occurring not far away.

Try as he might Kit Carson had been unable entirely to separate the black leader from his companions. Several times the wild horse had circled the body without permitting them to lessen the speed at which they were running. In this manner apparently he had satisfied himself that the pace he had set was not too swift for the colts.

On every such occasion the leader had stopped behind the running drove, watching the man approaching on horseback. Evidently he was suspicious of the danger that was threatening him, as indeed he well might be. Had he ever before been chased by the white men? The question was in Reuben's mind, as he watched the actions of the departing animal, and the young trapper was convinced that the horse never had been in captivity. His spirits were not broken and his confidence in his own ability apparently was supreme.

When the chase had led two or three miles beyond the entrance to the valley, Kit Carson succeeded in turning the flight of the horses he was pursuing. Shouting and brandishing his gun, he rode directly toward the band, and in a moment the leader had changed the course and swung southward.

Kit Carson still remained upon the outer flank and once he discharged his rifle, an act which, as Reuben believed, was intended only to frighten the horses. If that had been the hunter's purpose it was easily achieved, for the speed at which the drove was running quickly increased. At the same time it was equally clear to the leader that he had been unable to shake off the enemy that was pursuing him.

Shouting still more loudly and persistently increasing the swiftness of his pursuit, Kit Carson succeeded in steadily pressing the horses to his right and at the same time compelling them to move much more rapidly.

Reuben's excitement increased as the band steadily drew nearer the place where he was awaiting their approach. As yet Kit Carson had not succeeded in separating the black horse from his companions. It was not until the hunter drew near the place where Reuben was hiding that he suddenly, with a renewed shout and a second discharge of his gun, dashed swiftly in between the leader and the drove. Again shouting in his loudest tones, he forced the startled animal southward and at the same time glanced all about him, evidently expecting Reuben to appear.

Only a few moments elapsed before Reuben decided that the time had come for him to join in the chase. He dashed forth from behind the sheltering rock and, urging his horse into its swiftest paces, took up the chase as Kit Carson dropped behind.

CHAPTER XXII—A WHITE MAN IN THE INDIAN VILLAGE

As Reuben dashed forward he speedily discovered that swift as was the pony he was riding it was unable to overtake the wild leader he was following. Indeed, in a brief time it became plain to the young trapper that his own horse was steadily dropping behind.

Aware, however, of the plan which was in the mind of Kit Carson for chasing the horse they were all so desirous of securing, he sturdily continued his efforts, all the time urging his horse to still greater endeavours. It seemed to Reuben that never before had he ridden so swiftly. The air appeared to strike him in the face, the hoofs of his flying animal barely touching the sand. And yet every time he glanced ahead he saw the black horse running easily, his neck arched and his head held high, the long tail sweeping the ground at every leap.

What a magnificent animal the leader of the drove was! And how easily he maintained his lead! Frequently the horse stopped and seemed almost to be tempted to turn and dash past its pursuer and rejoin his companions that had started toward a valley several miles distant.

And the hopeless part of his task was, as Reuben soon discovered, that the animal he was following did not seem to be tiring. It still ran easily when two miles or more had been covered by the pony which Reuben was riding. Jack could not be far away now, Reuben thought, and he began to peer anxiously ahead of him for the coming of his ally.

For some strange reason the black leader did not turn toward the plains. He was running nearer the hills than was Reuben's mount, holding to his course, doubtless from the very fact that his pursuer was coming from the same direction.

On and still on fled the pursuer and the pursued. In spite of all his efforts, Reuben steadily dropped behind until, as he estimated the distance, there was at least one hundred yards between him and the pony he was so desirous of capturing.

Again Reuben rose in his stirrups and shouting into the ears of his horse urged it to still greater efforts; and the pony responded nobly. Its sides were heaving now and a sound very like a groan came with every breath. He could see by an occasional glance that the nostrils of his pony were red and dilated. There was no time for mercy, however, and with every forward leap now Reuben shouted into the ears of his horse.

He was wondering why Jack did not appear. He was confident that he had passed more than the number of miles that had been assigned to him in the race, but his friend still was nowhere within sight.

In a brief time, however, riding forth from behind one of the foothills, Jack suddenly appeared. And it was high time for his aid to be given. The poor beast upon which Reuben was mounted was now trembling in every muscle and its strength was so nearly gone that when Reuben halted it was barely able to stand.

Hastily dismounting, as soon as the young trapper was aware that the chase was to be taken up by his friend, Reuben patted the neck of his pony and in low tones spoke soothingly to it. The poor animal was standing with lowered head and with an air of such complete dejection as Reuben thought he never before had seen displayed by any living animal.

His meditations, however, were interrupted by the report of a gun in the distance and the faint sound of a shout that came across the sands. Glancing hastily in the direction from which the hail had come, Reuben saw that soon after his friend had appeared to join in the chase the black horse had swerved in his course and instead of continuing on his way had turned backward and now was directly approaching the place where Reuben was standing.

And still the horse was running easily and apparently without fatigue. To overtake him seemed almost a hopeless undertaking. Again Reuben assured himself that never before had he seen such strength combined with swiftness and grace.

Aware, however, that he must do something now to help, Reuben leaped upon the back of his tired horse and urged it once more to join in the pursuit. A challenging neigh now came from the swiftly running black horse, and almost as if he ignored the puny efforts of his foes to overtake him, the course he was following again was changed and with a sudden burst of speed the animal, like a thunder-bolt, dashed past the place where Reuben was standing.

The young trapper now joined in the shouts and he, too, discharged his gun as a warning to Kit Carson, who was doubtless waiting at the place where he had abandoned the chase. The efforts, however, were useless, as in a brief time once more, swiftly swerving to his left, the black horse dashed into what at first seemed to Reuben to be an unbroken mass of rocks. In an instant the animal had disappeared from sight.

As rapidly as his horse was able to bear him, Reuben rode to the place where the leader had so strangely disappeared. As he came near he discovered a narrow opening or gorge apparently caused by some great crack in the formations centuries before. As Reuben entered the narrow place he saw eight or ten feet below him a stretch of more level land, though it was dotted here and there with stones and boulders.

It seemed impossible to the young scout that a horse could have leaped to the ground below. However, at that moment he heard the sound of a defiant neigh and in a brief time was able to discern the outline of the form of the black horse speeding along a narrow trail which was at least twenty-five feet above the plain on which he was riding.

It was plain that the horse was familiar with every foot of the region. Along this narrow ledge the black horse now was running with confidence unbroken, although the pathway was not more than a yard wide. Indeed in several places it seemed to the astonished Reuben that the width was still less.

Every moment he expected to see the black pony lose his foothold and fall to the rock-covered ground below him. His expectations, however, were not fulfilled, for the sure-footed animal, scarcely pausing in his flight, steadily continued on his way. At one place Reuben saw him leap across a narrow ravine and without any slip regain his footing on the opposite side. Although the young trapper's admiration of the horse increased, he was now well-nigh hopeless that the animal ever could be taken.

Indeed it was not long before the horse disappeared from sight, and Reuben was unable to determine which of the numerous gorges he had entered, as several converged at the point where the black leader was lost to sight.

It was impossible for Reuben's horse to attempt to follow. Not only was the leap from the rock one which few animals would be able to make with safety, but also the nearly exhausted condition of his mount made such an attempt worse than reckless. There was nothing to be done except to return and join his companions.

"Did you get him, Reuben?" inquired Kit Carson dryly, as the young trapper, discovering his friend, rode slowly to meet him.

"No, I didn't," said Reuben glumly.

"I'm surprised. Still, when we have him broken, I think you'll enjoy a spin on that black demon as much as any of us."

"If you ever take him," suggested Reuben dryly.

"Why," said Kit Carson in apparent surprise, "you haven't any question about that, have you? Of course we're going to take him."

"Not to-day," suggested Reuben.

"No, not to-day," acknowledged the scout; "but there are other days to come."

"Do you believe that that black leader, after to-day's chase, will stay around this part of the country any longer? He will take his followers and start for some other part of the mountains."

"Perhaps he will," acknowledged Kit Carson, "but before that time comes we'll have another chance at him."

"You never can take him," asserted Reuben. "I never in my life saw anything run the way that

pony did. And it doesn't make any difference whether he's running on the plains or along a ledge of the rocks. Why, he followed a narrow little ledge for three hundred yards. I expected every minute to see him tumble into the bed of the stream that was twenty-five or thirty feet below him. As far as I could see he didn't slip once."

"Oh, yes, he's a wonderful animal," said Kit Carson quietly, "and we shall appreciate him all the more after we have had a chance to break him in."

"You won't break him in very soon," said Reuben, shaking his head. "You stand just about as much chance of getting that black horse as you do of grabbing a streak of lightning by its tail."

Kit Carson smiled and made no response to the assertion of his young companion, and then at his suggestion they all started on their way back to camp.

In silence the men advanced, and when two hours had elapsed, Kit Carson suggested: "I think I'll go over to the Indian village. Do you want to come, Reuben?"

The lad hesitated a moment and then said, "I'm hungry."

"Come along with me and the squaws will feed you. And Jack, too, if he wants to come," added the scout amiably. Jack, however, insisted upon returning to his companions and rode away alone as Kit Carson and Reuben started toward the Indian village.

It was not long before they found themselves in the little settlement, where the words of the scout were confirmed, for food was soon provided for the hungry hunters, and, as Kit Carson had said, the squaws seemed to vie with one another in their efforts to please their white visitors.

Soon after Reuben had finished his repast he was startled by the sight of an approaching white man. To all appearances the man belonged to the village. He was, however, neither dressed as were the Indians nor did his appearance suggest that he was a newcomer or a stranger in the midst of the redmen. Reuben's surprise, however, was caused by his conviction that the man before him was the same one he had seen at San Gabriel, and if he was not the missing Jean, at least he so strongly resembled him that a stranger might take one for the other.

"Look at that man," said Reuben in a low voice as he turned to Kit Carson. "Do you know who he is? He looks to me like Jean Badeau."

In response to the suggestion of his young friend Kit Carson glanced hastily at the man to whom Reuben had referred and then said, "Are you sure?" As he spoke the scout glanced at the young trapper, but he quickly was aware that Reuben had not heard his question. He was staring blankly at the white man.

CHAPTER XXIII—BAFFLED

In his excitement Reuben, almost unmindful of his companion, started at once toward the place where the man whom he believed to be Jean Badeau was standing. As he approached he was speedily aware that if the man before him was his lost friend there was no evidence of recognition of that fact in the expression of his face. Indeed the man scarcely seemed to be aware of the coming of the young trapper.

Puzzled and slightly alarmed by the strange appearance of the man, Reuben stopped a moment and then said: "Who are you? What is your name?"

To the lad's amazement the man to whom he had spoken gazed into his face and smiled in a manner that was like that of a little child. He did not speak, however, and for a brief time the two men stood and looked, each into the face of the other.

"What is your name?" again demanded Reuben.

Once more the bland expression appeared on the face of the stranger, but no reply was given to the query.

"Are you Jean Badeau?" demanded Reuben sharply.

Again the smile was seen, but still there was no answer.

Reuben was almost persuaded that the man before him was indeed his lost companion, but the expression in his eyes and the childlike smile on his face certainly were not characteristics of the missing French trapper. He was a man strong and of slow speech, even when he spoke, as he did only on rare occasions. Unlike most of his race in the North, apparently he did not show any signs of the impulsive temperament which many of the early French possessed. Now the lad felt that his flesh was creeping. There was something in the uncanny bearing and expression of the man, who, if he was not the trapper, Jean Badeau, at least strongly resembled Reuben's former comrade.

"Lad, don't you know?"

Reuben turned quickly at the unexpected question and saw that Kit Carson was beside him. "Don't you know," repeated the leader, "that this man is crazy?"

"No, I didn't know anything about him. He looks so much like Jean Badeau that I was sure at first that it was my friend."

"It may be and it may not be."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is this: this man is the same one we found at San Gabriel. Somehow he made his way to the North and the Indians have taken him into their village."

"Why did they do that?" inquired Reuben.

"The Indians are always good to crazy people. They think they are under the special guidance and protection of the Great Spirit. Perhaps they are. I don't know," said Kit Carson, thoughtfully. "Certainly they act as if there was something in their life different from what we see among the trappers."

"That's so," said Reuben in a low voice, as he again looked keenly at the subject of their conversation, who, apparently unmindful of the attention he had aroused, had now turned away.

In a low voice he was speaking to himself and apparently was unmindful of the presence of any one near.

"That may be Jean Badeau," again suggested Kit Carson. "If it is he has a long and strange story to tell."

"What do you suppose happened to him?"

"I haven't the remotest idea. Of course, I am not even sure that he is your friend, nor are you positive that he is, but I am willing to take your word for it. No one in the tribe here knows where he came from nor what made him crazy."

"What do you think did?"

"As I told you, I have no idea, and I am not even sure that it is your friend. All I am saying is that he may be and that something may have happened after you left him that brought this trouble upon him." Reuben was silent throughout the remainder of their stay in the village and indeed seldom spoke when they rode back to the camp of the trappers.

Early the following morning Kit Carson appeared and at his suggestion Reuben accompanied him in the round of his traps. An unusually good catch was made, and the spirits of both trappers were high when soon after noon they returned to the camp.

Directly after dinner had been served Kit Carson suggested to his young friend: "I think it is time for us to see if the wild horses have not come back. I don't want that black leader to get away from us."

Reuben laughed as he said: "Do you still believe that you're going to catch him?"

"I know I am," said Kit Carson. "It's only a question of time."

"He certainly is able to make good time," retorted Reuben. "He ran away from us day before yesterday almost as if he didn't know we were on earth. My horse was almost winded and that fellow trotted along almost as if he were laughing at us. Do you think a horse *can* laugh?"

"I have heard of a 'horse laugh,'" replied the scout, smiling dryly.

"I have not only heard of one, but heard one."

"Well, if you heard one you haven't forgotten it. Tell Jack, and we'll start right soon."

A half-hour later the three trappers, after they had carefully looked to their mounts, departed from the camp and again saw the valley where the black leader and his drove had first been discovered. A careful search was made, but no signs of the presence of the wild horses were discovered.

"We'll wait until night," suggested Kit Carson. "It was after sunset when they put into this gorge before."

The men waited in accordance with the suggestion of their leader, but when darkness fell the horses had not been seen.

"There's no use," said Kit Carson. "They aren't coming here to-night."

"How do you know?" inquired Reuben.

"Why, you can see for yourself. The wild ponies, as a rule, do not travel much after dark. It is almost dark now, and if they were coming here they would have shown up before this time."

"Where do you think they are?"

"I don't know where they are. I thought they were here. If I knew just where they were I would go there, wouldn't I? I think they will come back here, though, and the only thing for us to do is to keep watch and be sure to be on hand when they do come."

On two successive days the eager trappers returned to the valley, but the wild horses were not seen. Alone Kit Carson made excursions for many miles in the immediate vicinity, but his efforts were unrewarded and not a sight of the handsome black leader was had. Still the scout did not abandon his efforts. A few days later, at his suggestion, Reuben and Jack once more accompanied him, departing from the camp soon after dinner.

Quietly they rode among the foothills, keeping careful watch on every side. They had almost returned to the place where first the wild horses had been seen when Kit Carson abruptly stopped and, pointing to a place in advance of them, said in a low voice: "There are ponies yonder. Do you see them?"

"I can see something moving," replied Reuben, after a long silence.

"Well, that's a drove of ponies. The only thing for us to do is to put out for it and find out whether or not the horse we are after is still there. It may be some other drove. You know they are likely to break up into smaller bands when they get too many together." Swiftly the trappers rode forward, and their disappointment was keen when they discovered that the horses before them were not those for which they were seeking.

Apparently still as confident as before that he would capture the animal he was so eager to have, Kit Carson either alone or in the company of Reuben daily returned to the valley until more than a week had elapsed. Their efforts were rewarded at last when late one afternoon they discovered the horses making for the same valley in which they had sought shelter when first they had been seen. There was no elation displayed in the manner of the scout, but the determination expressed in his face was so plain that Reuben was deeply impressed.

"Give up? Give up?" said Kit Carson in response to a suggestion of his friend. "I never learned to do that and you can't teach an old dog new tricks. I simply am going to have that black rascal. It's too bad that Jack isn't here, for we'll need him, but we'll go ahead without him and do the best we can."

Together the two horsemen rode swiftly forward, doing their utmost to gain a point nearer the valley than the one where the horses were first seen grazing. Apparently they had succeeded, when the startled leader lifted his head, neighed sharply, and instantly warned his family of the danger that was near.

"Come on, Reuben! Come on!" shouted Kit Carson, as putting his horse into its swiftest paces he advanced far into the entrance of the valley.

The efforts, however, of the trappers were doomed to failure. With a disregard of their attempt

to head him off that was almost ludicrous, the swift horse led his followers almost directly into the entrance and in a brief time all, including the colts, had disappeared from sight among the boulders of the ravine.

"No use, Reuben. No use trying to do any more to-night. We have got to think up some other way of trapping that black rascal. Did you ever see such a handsome animal in your life?"

"I never did."

"Nor I. And every time I see him I simply am more determined than ever to get him. I am going to catch him just as sure as the sun rises!"

Several days later it seemed as if the words of the scout were about to be fulfilled. Accompanied by Reuben and Jack and two others of the campers, Kit Carson succeeded in locating the drove and immediately attempted the plan which he had already formed for capturing the daring leader.

CHAPTER XXIV—A FRESH ATTEMPT

So eager was Kit Carson to secure the wonderful leader of the drove that he had spent much time in thinking out various plans by which the black pony might be captured. There had been times when he acknowledged that it seemed a pity to try to take such a noble-looking animal from its state of freedom and compel it to become a servant. And yet, although the trapper's feelings were tender and he seldom permitted his men even to shoot game without some necessary purpose in view, nevertheless the eagerness of the leader to obtain possession of the beautiful animal increased with every passing day.

When at last he explained his plans to his friends he said: "I have discovered a pocket about ten miles below that gorge into which the black rascal led his followers. I think it will be possible for us to run him into that. There will be no use in trying it until we have tired him out, but I think we shall be able to do that."

"How?" inquired Reuben.

"I have found that the wild horses come about two nights a week into that valley where we drove them. They seem to have regular rounds. The old fellow that leads them is smart, and if any bears or wolves have thought they could lie in wait for him they have been mistaken, for he never is two successive nights in the same place."

"But how do you think you are going to drive him into that pocket?"

"I'm telling you, lad, to-night the wild ponies will be in the place where we drove them the last day we chased them. We mustn't let them get inside. Probably the leader will do just what he did before—send his family and his friends off in one direction and he will start for another. Then the thing for us to do is to chase him back and forth over the ten miles."

"But you'll need an army of men to do it," suggested Reuben.

"I have already sent ahead four men. They are as full of the game as we are. They haven't seen that black horse, but what I have told them about him makes them all hungry to join in the chase. I'm going to put you and Jack down below that pocket. You two must turn back the fellow if he tries to get past you. I don't think he will, for he won't want to leave his charges quite so far away. I have got some pieces of tin and I want you both to pound on them and yell like good fellows. Turn him back anyway. Chase him. Make him go as far as the place where I am going to have two other men waiting. Then I'll have two more up near the valley."

"Where will you be?" inquired Reuben, who was becoming deeply interested in the project.

"I'm going to be where I'm needed most, for my horse is the swiftest in the camp. I want to be in at the finish, too, for I'm going to lasso the rascal. And this time we're going to succeed."

In spite of the failures of the preceding attempts somehow Reuben was convinced that a greater measure of success was likely to crown their efforts in the present chase. Obedient to the word of their leader the lad and his companion rode in the direction indicated and in a brief time had arrived at the position they desired.

Upon their arrival they were speedily convinced that the description which Kit Carson had given of the spot was more than fulfilled. A narrow space not more than forty feet wide seemed almost to provide an end for the long valley. Beyond it was another valley, the passage between being like an isthmus joining two larger spaces.

Every rider carried his gun, and in addition to these weapons Reuben and Jack had tied to the pommels of their saddles some large pieces of tin which had served as the bottoms of certain pans that had been used in the camp.

As soon as they had taken their positions, they threw their bridles over the heads of their horses and climbing to the shelter of the overhanging rocks seated themselves to await the signal that might be given for the approach of the horse they were so eager to capture. Between the places occupied by Reuben and his friend two other men were stationed, but they were hidden from the sight of their companions.

Slowly the afternoon waned, but patience was a lesson which Reuben had learned from the scout. Never yet had he heard an impatient word or a word of complaint escape the lips of Kit Carson. For one whose natural temperament was so fiery, who was so quick in his movements, and so thoroughly alive to every form of physical activity, his powers of repression and self-control were marvellous. In part it was due to his natural disposition, but still more it was the result of his training. The school in which he had studied was hard and the lessons were not taught by a schoolmaster. In order to succeed as a hunter or trapper infinite patience was required. The very success which had attended the efforts of the young scout had been a part of his duties, and Kit Carson had been a diligent pupil. In all his experiences with him the only time Reuben had ever seen him respond to the words of his comrades, which easily aroused the anger

of one another, had been the time when Rat had declared that he would thrash any man in the camp who declared himself to be an American.

Even now the recollection of the boaster caused Reuben to smile, and turning to his friend he said: "Do you know what has become of Rat?"

Jack laughed as he said: "I reckon he evaporated. He hasn't been seen near here nor in these parts for a long time."

"Do you suppose he will ever try to get even with Kit Carson?"

"I don't think he will even try any such thing. What he will try hardest to do will be to put all the space he can between him and the scout."

Reuben laughed as he said: "I wouldn't have believed that a little fellow like Kit Carson would have dared to fight such a great hulk as Rat."

"You don't know him. He's afraid of nothing on earth, and yet, like other men who are good fighters, he doesn't fight often. There is a big difference between a man who is always picking a quarrel and one who can put up a good fight."

"I reckon Rat knows that now."

"He surely does, and I don't think he will want to take the lesson over again either. He won't have to stay after school to learn the rules of that game."

"The only thing I have heard Kit Carson talk much about of all the things he has done was what he did in his fight with the two grizzlies."

"That's right," replied Jack, laughing loudly as he spoke. "I have heard him tell that story a good many times. He almost makes me see that big grizzly swinging and snorting and swaying his head when Kit struck him on the nose with his club. The nose is about as tender a spot for a grizzly as his shins are for a ducky."

"It was mighty funny," laughed Reuben. "I saw both of them. When the first one came down the tree the other one acted just as if he was giving his opinion of a fellow who would back out like that. He would show him how to do it; so up he goes, and Kit Carson gets a good swing on his club and lands it right plumb on the snout of that grizzly. The way that bear snorted and shook his head almost made me laugh."

"I should think it would have made you laugh."

"The only reason I didn't was because I was afraid the bear would see me, and turn around and come for the tree where I was. I hadn't any desire to have him know any more about me than he did right then."

"'Ignorance is bliss,' they say."

"It was with me when I thought of that bear. Can you see anything of Kit Carson and the horses?" Reuben added as he peered intently in the direction from which the expected approach of the black leader was to be seen.

Jack was silent a moment before he said: "I see something moving up yonder."

Instantly Reuben leaped to his feet and gazed long and earnestly in the direction indicated by his companion. Not many minutes had elapsed before both men were convinced that some large animals were approaching. Both were hopeful that the cloud of dust which was now steadily increasing as it drew nearer concealed the black horse and his pursuers. The cloud approached rapidly, but it was long before Reuben was able to discover the outlines of a horse running swiftly and pursued by two riders.

"There they come! There they come!" exclaimed the boy excitedly. "The old fellow is making straight for this place where we are."

"We had better hide so that he won't turn off," suggested Jack. "Then when he comes a little nearer we'll take the tin pans and sticks and serenade him."

"We'll have to be quick about it," suggested Reuben as he saw the black leader now swiftly approaching. Apparently he had been chased far and long, for his body was flecked with foam and his breathing was laboured. In spite of his appearance of distress, however, the steed was such a noble-looking animal that Reuben's admiration was keener than when he first had seen him. There was a wildness in his manner now, however, that had not been seen on the former occasions. The poor beast, fighting for his liberty, and perhaps believing that he was struggling for his life, was now thoroughly alarmed. His speed had diminished, and, pursued by fresh horses, he was no longer able to outdistance them easily.

The horse now was within fifty feet of the place where Reuben was standing. Quickly he and his companion began to pound upon their tins and at the same time they shouted in their loudest tones.

The startled horse swerved in his course, and, snorting with anger or fear, started for the familiar entrance. Evidently he was fearful that a trap of some kind had been laid, for, turning sharply about within the narrow valley, he started swiftly back over the way by which he had come.

"Chase him! Chase him!" called one of the pursuers. "You and Jack take your ponies now and give him a good run. We'll go into the other end of the pocket so that he won't go through there, and when he runs in the next time, why, we'll let Kit Carson take him."

In response to the suggestion Reuben and Jack speedily were mounted and in swift pursuit of the running horse. Their own mounts were somewhat fresh now, and as neither was slow, the speed at which they advanced was marked. It was plain, too, that the leader was distressed. Occasionally when he glanced backward his nostrils seemed like coals of fire and an expression of fear as well as of anger flashed from his eyes.

"Keep it up! Keep it up!" called Jack. "Spread out a little! Drive him back so that Kit Carson can start after him! This time I think he will get him for sure."

It was fortunate for Reuben and his companion that their own horses were not compelled to cover all the distance between the pocket and the valley. Both ponies were soon labouring hard and with difficulty maintaining the pace into which their riders had urged them. Hard, however,

as they soon were working, their distress was markedly less than that of the animal they were following.

Spreading out when they came nearer the place where they expected to find some of their comrades, the boys were not surprised when suddenly Kit Carson and four of his companions, yelling in their loudest tones and brandishing rifles, several of which were discharged, dashed after the startled wild horse. Again he retraced his way, but his distress was increasing so rapidly that it was a question whether or not he would be able to gain the pocket before he would be taken.

Kit Carson was carrying his lasso, and it was plain to Reuben that at almost any moment now he was prepared to dash ahead and try to cast the rope over the neck of the suffering steed. For some reason, which Reuben did not understand, the action was delayed. Kit Carson, however, was riding in advance of his followers, and, his pony being comparatively fresh, he was able to make swifter time than the horse he was following. All now were near the entrance to the pocket, and a shout arose when the black horse dashed through the narrow opening.

CHAPTER XXV—THE CAPTIVE LEADER

Instantly Kit Carson and Reuben, together with the men who were still on the open plain, dashed toward the entrance. Reuben was able to see the tired horse when he dashed through the little valley and fled to the exit on the opposite side.

In a moment, however, the two men who were waiting there, shouting in their loudest tones and vigorously beating upon their tins, advanced upon the startled animal, which immediately turned back in his tracks and again started toward the opening by which he had entered. Again the terrified beast turned back when he found the passageway blocked by several of his pursuers.

The noble animal stopped and gazed partly in fear and partly in anger at the men, and then with repeated snorts of defiance began to circle the little enclosure. Several times he stopped, and to Reuben it seemed as if he had decided to turn and attempt to fight his way through.

Kit Carson and his friends, however, gave the pony no rest. Whenever he stopped some of the men bore down upon him with shouts mingled with an occasional discharge of a gun and loud beatings upon the tins. In this manner they compelled the horse to keep running and prevented him from obtaining any rest.

Around and around the enclosure the poor beast ran until it seemed to Reuben as if the weary animal must drop from sheer exhaustion. Not once was he permitted to stop for rest. The men were shouting, discharging their rifles, beating upon their tins, and continually doing their utmost to prevent the leader of the drove from passing them or pausing in his flight.

To Reuben the pitiful aspect of the noble animal soon became doubly strong. The expression in his eyes as well as his manner showed that he was nearly exhausted. His breathing was very laboured and his heaving flanks showed how difficult his flight had become.

For an hour the maddening chase continued. By that time the black horse had stumbled and almost fallen several times. Indeed, it seemed to Reuben as if the poor beast each time would be unable to regain his footing and continue his mad flight. Once more there welled up in Reuben's heart a feeling of pity for the animal which had made such a desperate struggle for freedom.

In the midst of all these things, however, Kit Carson was unmoved. The expression on his face did not change. He simply was determined to carry through to its completion the plan which he had formed for the capture of the leader of the ponies that had so strongly appealed to his admiration.

Suddenly the scout wheeled and shouted: "Now is the time! Look out for the openings! All I want is for you to keep him from breaking through."

At that moment Carson started swiftly forward on the animal he was riding. Trembling, weak, and streaked with froth and sweat, the black horse stared at the unexpected advance for a moment, and then with a desperate effort tried to renew his flight.

There was no display of anger now. The fierceness of the black beast was gone. His head was drooping and his weakness was apparent in every forward step that he took. No longer was there the flash of fire to be seen in his eyes. There was in them now an expression of agony mingled with fear.

Kit Carson, however, advancing slowly until he was within ten yards of the animal he was determined to secure, swung his lasso several times above his head and then cast it toward the black horse.

Silence had followed the action of the scout, and almost breathless in their excitement every one watched the curling, twisting leather strip as it slowly made its way toward its mark. A sigh of relief escaped Reuben's lips when the noose, almost as if it were conscious of what it was doing, dropped over the head of the black horse and settled about his neck.

The pony which Kit Carson was riding was familiar with his task. It was not the first time the scout had captured wild horses, although never before had he attempted to take one so beautiful and fleet and strong. The pony braced its feet and stood back in its tracks to throw its strength against the pull that would be made upon it.

The black horse, now conscious of the tightening noose, leaped forward in one final despairing effort to escape from his pursuers. How vain it all was. As the powerful animal dashed ahead, the noose tightened, the line became taut, and he was thrown, almost turning a somersault as he came to the ground.

Quickly the scout rushed forward, and a moment later, before the captive was able to rise, his forefeet were hobbled, and the beautiful wild pony, which only recently had been the proud leader of a drove, was helpless in the hands of his captors.

For a moment sounds of mingled rage and terror were emitted by the trembling animal as he lay helpless upon the ground. His eyes, however, had now taken on an expression of intense hatred, and suddenly by a supreme effort he arose to his feet and remained standing. His ears were flattened against his head, and for a moment even Kit Carson hesitated before he approached the angry and trembling beast.

Turning to his companions the scout said quietly: "I want every one of you now to go back to camp."

"But we don't want to leave you here with that black demon," suggested Jack.

"I'm going to stay here alone," said Kit Carson quietly. "You need not have any fears that I shall be hurt, and it will not be long before I shall come to the camp myself."

Reuben glanced appealingly at the scout, seeking permission to remain without voicing his wish. Kit Carson, however, smiled and shook his head. Reuben was to go back with the other trappers. Reluctantly the half-dozen men rode slowly out of the opening in the enclosure and started toward the camp.

"I don't like to leave him there," said Jack, slowly shaking his head as he spoke. "That horse is as dangerous as a grizzly and twice as powerful."

"That may be so," admitted one of the men, "but I don't care how strong it is Kit Carson has a way of taking all that out of it."

"I knew a man once who had his head bitten off by a horse," suggested one of the trappers.

"I reckon his head must have been about the size of a walnut," laughed the trapper.

"Never you mind," said the first speaker; "a horse has a powerful big mouth and its teeth are strong. Did you ever see two horses fight?"

"Yes."

"Well, there's no sight like it in the world. They make you think of two demons. A good many times they'll fight until one or the other is killed, and sometimes neither one comes out of the fight alive."

"Well, I would rather have them fight one another than to fight me," said the first trapper. "I don't envy Kit his job back yonder."

Reuben had been silent throughout the conversation, and his fears for his friend were greatly increased in consequence of it. He was becoming alarmed for the safety of the lithe little scout, but there was nothing to be done except to carry out his desires, and in silence he proceeded on his way to the camp.

When the men arrived they found their companions eager listeners to the story they had to tell of the capture of the black horse. Others of the men also were concerned now for the safety of the scout, but against the suggestion that they should go to his relief the strong protests made by the men who had accompanied Carson in the chase at last prevailed, and no one departed from the camp.

Meanwhile, although it was seldom that reference was made to the fear in the heart of every one, the anxiety among the trappers increased as the slow moments passed. When an hour had elapsed the suggestion was renewed by Reuben that the men should go to the aid of their leader. But the suggestion was again refused. Another hour passed, and still there were no signs of the coming of the missing trapper.

A half-hour later, however, Kit Carson was seen approaching the camp, riding his own pony and leading his captive. The black horse was following meekly, his dejected bearing clearly showing the sufferings he had undergone. The scout made no comment when he rode into the camp. He at once quietly dismounted and threw the bridle rein over the head of the pony he had been riding and then turned to his captive.

At first it seemed as if the spirit of the black horse was broken. In a moment, however, when Kit Carson tried to lead forward the nearly exhausted animal, the wild pony reared and with a scream of anger attempted to strike the scout with his forefeet. Carson, however, was too quick, and the attempt of his prisoner to injure him proved futile.

Again the scout pulled upon the halter, although as Reuben watched him he was puzzled to understand how the daring man had succeeded in placing a halter on the head of the powerful animal. The pony this time responded, and although he was apparently unaware of what he was doing, he followed his captor as he led him to a stake which had been securely driven into the ground on the border of the camp. There the captured horse was tied. Once more, however, Kit Carson barely escaped the onrush of the beast as he dashed upon him with wide-open jaws. It was impossible for any one in the camp now to hobble the animal, and for a time he was left to his vain efforts to escape. Desperately the poor beast pulled upon the thongs that held him, but without avail. After a struggle of a few minutes the attempt was abandoned, and for a time it seemed as if the black horse, his spirits drooping and his whole bearing dejected, had at last decided to yield to his fate.

Kit Carson declared that the horse should not be fed or watered throughout the night. When morning came, with some oats in his hat which he was holding in his outstretched hand, the scout again approached the captive. Hunger and thirst by this time had deprived the beast of still more of his fiery energy. He was weak now as well as suffering. Stretching forth his head, he ate a few oats, and then, apparently overcome by his recollection of his humiliation, with a scream of anger he arose upon his hind feet and again endeavoured to crush the scout.

CHAPTER XXVI—THE RETURN OF RAT

"Come on, shoot the brute!" shouted Jack, greatly excited as he saw the peril of the scout.

In response to his appeal several men ran for their rifles, but Kit Carson himself, quickly

turning to his followers, said quietly: "None of that, boys. This fellow isn't to blame for what he's doing. Leave him to me."

In surprise the trappers drew back and watched the scout, as quickly avoiding the rush of the black horse he soon quieted the excited animal, which was more nervous than savage. Indeed, in the days that followed, the methods which Kit Carson employed to "break" the high-spirited animal were different from those which any of his friends had ever seen or employed. In most cases horses were broken by the most brutal of means. Cruelty was so common that it was looked upon as commonplace. The new method which the scout used was so different as to cause surprise among his followers. Indeed, many of them expressed their open belief that he would never succeed and his plan would only result in damage to the one who employed it.

Kit Carson, strong and quiet, a man who did not hesitate to use the very utmost of his strength and the greatest of his resources when he was fighting, in most ways was quiet and gentle as a woman. Following his plan persistently, not many days had elapsed before the black horse was following the scout almost as a dog follows his master. Indeed he seemed to develop a feeling of strong affection for his captor, and it was plain to all the campers that they never before had seen their leader become so fond of any animal.

In the days that passed, the horse, which was named Black Jack, became the pet of the entire camp. There was one strange trait, however, which the horse developed, and that was that he was unwilling for any of the trappers to mount him save Kit Carson and, on rare occasions, Reuben. Several times Reuben had been permitted to ride the swift-footed steed, but it was plain to the beholders as well as to the rider that there was no enthusiasm in carrying the boy. The excitement attending the capture of the wild horse passed in a brief time, although Black Jack still remained a great pet of the trappers.

There were busy days that followed. The season was proving to be unusually successful, and the number of skins taken by the men rapidly increased with every passing day. The daily round of visiting the traps, the labour of skinning the animals that had been caught, and the work of drying and curing the catch occupied most of their time.

Indeed it was soon decided that the furs must be cached after the plan which had been followed once before. This time it was Reuben who assisted in selecting the spot where the hole should be dug in the ground, and it was he who looked after the preparations of the place to receive the valuable skins which represented so much toil and time.

Still the labour of trapping was steadily continued. One day while Reuben was alone, engaged in the task to which he had been assigned, he was startled when he saw before him near one of the traps the stooping figure of a man. The stranger was bending over a trap, and for a moment the lad was angered by the sight before him. He was suspicious that the visitor was striving to steal the catch of the night. And there was no crime considered more heinous among the trappers, unless it was that of horse stealing.

Hastily Reuben looked to the priming of his rifle and then advancing, quickly shouted: "Who is there? Who are you? What do you want?"

To the amazement of the startled lad the huge form of Rat arose from the opposite bank of the stream and quickly turned to face the one who had hailed him.

"Huh!" exclaimed Rat. "It's only you, is it?" as he discovered who the party was that had hailed him.

"That's all," said Reuben dryly, "and I see you're just Rat. Tell me what you're doing here."

"I'm 'tending to my own business, and that's more than some people are doing."

"You don't look as if you were," retorted Reuben, still more angered by the manner of the man.

"What do I look as if I was doing?"

"You know as well as I do," said Reuben quickly, "and you know what sometimes happens to men for doing that very thing."

"You little cub!" roared Rat. "I've a great mind to treat you as——"

"As you were treated by Kit Carson?" laughed Reuben.

For a moment the expression of anger on the face of the huge man caused Reuben to regret the hasty words he had spoken. He felt safe, however, as the brook was wide and deep, and he had little fear that Rat would venture into the cold waters of the mountain torrent. Water had ever been one of the pet aversions of the huge Rat, and he had never listened kindly to suggestions of his camp mates as to its use. For a moment the angry face of the man glared upon Reuben, and then as if by a supreme effort, Rat, striving to look more pleasant, said: "And what luck have you had this winter?"

"Good. How has yours been?"

"My luck is against me," replied Rat, shaking his head as he spoke. "Everything is against me."

"Including Rat," suggested Reuben.

"What do you mean?" thundered the trapper, his face once more expressive of his anger.

"Nothing, except that you stand in your own way. That's what everybody about the camp says. They would like to be friends with you, but you won't let them."

"Why won't I let them? I would like to be on good terms with everybody."

"With Kit Carson?" inquired Reuben.

"Yes, even with Kit Carson." As Rat spoke, Reuben was conscious for an instant of a deep scowl that appeared on the face of the trapper, but it disappeared so quickly that he was not even positive that it had been there at all. "What would Kit Carson say if I came back to camp?" inquired Rat at last.

"That would depend very much upon what you yourself said, I reckon. If I remember right, that's the way it was before, wasn't it? If you had kept quiet Kit Carson would have been quiet, too."

"I hear he has married a squaw," suggested Rat.

"You can hear all sorts of things."

"Did he?"

"Yes. He's not ashamed of it."

"Perhaps she'll be when he runs off and leaves her."

"I advise you not to suggest that thing to Kit Carson the next time you see him. You'll have more than a lame wrist to show for it if you do."

"He took me off my guard," protested Rat. "I wasn't ready for him."

"That wasn't any fault of yours. He caught you before you could get ready. You were doing your best to get the drop on him."

"That's a lie!" shouted Rat. "I wasn't doing anything of the kind! But then," he added a moment later, his voice becoming lower, though it was plain that he had regained his self-control only by a great effort, "but then I have no desire to quarrel with Kit Carson nor any one in the camp. I would like to be friends with all, if they'd let me."

"Do you mean you want to come back to camp?" inquired Reuben.

"Yes."

The lad whistled and made no response until Rat said: "Don't you think they would let me come?"

"If you will promise to be on your good behaviour, they'll be glad to have you come. They wouldn't have you there a minute, though, if you tried the trick you did before."

"I haven't any trick to try. I'm hungry and I'm tired. If they'll give me some supper and let me spend the night in camp, that's all I want. I'll leave to-morrow morning if they want me to. If they will let me, though, I'll stay and do my share, and be glad to do it."

"I can't say what they'll do. The only thing for you to do is to try it."

"Maybe you'll go ahead and find out for me?" suggested Rat, his voice becoming almost a whine in his eagerness.

"No, come along. Go back up the stream about a mile and you'll find a place where you can jump across. If you want to you can come over on this bank now."

"I don't want to," said Rat quickly, glancing at the rushing torrent, as if it was threatening him. "I'll walk back up the bank and wait for you. How long will you be?"

"I don't know," said Reuben. "I wasn't coming back this way anyway. I'm going to visit the traps and set them. I have brought bait with me and I'll fix every trap before I leave."

"Would you like to have me help you?" inquired Rat, striving to speak pleasantly.

Reuben hesitated a moment and then said: "Yes. You had better come across here, though, and not wait to go back up the stream."

In response to the suggestion the huge man, with many groans and protestations, finally entered the stream, and as the depth of the water increased he held high above his head the two pistols with which he was armed. The sight was ludicrous and Reuben laughed heartily. As the man came nearer the bank on which he was standing Reuben's heart almost misgave him for the invitation he had given. Nor was it long before Reuben had greater cause for regret that he had been willing for the huge Rat to join him.

CHAPTER XXVII—THE THEFT

The dripping body of the huge trapper when he stepped at last upon the shore made Reuben once more aware of the immense size and strength of the man. As he recalled the contest between Kit Carson and the giant before him, and was reminded of the slight, almost delicate form of the scout, he was amazed at the courage of the latter in accepting the challenge of the braggart.

At present, however, there did not appear to be anything to fear from Rat, and it was manifest that his thoughts were mostly concerned with his own condition. The cold water perhaps had cooled any heated tendencies he may have had. At all events, he was subdued in his manner and even tried to laugh at the sight he declared he must present.

"I'll help you, lad," said Rat, at the same time stooping and assuming a part of the burden. "You're going back to camp now, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I'll go along with you."

Reuben glanced in fresh surprise at the man, for the camp of the trappers, and especially Kit Carson, he was positive Rat had no real desire to see. Indeed, he wondered at the temerity of the man in daring to return, knowing as he did the feeling against him when he had fled from the place.

"I suppose you've got the same trappers as ever, haven't you, Reuben?" inquired Rat.

"Yes," replied Reuben in a low voice.

"Kit Carson still at the head?"

"Yes."

"He's a great little Kit. He was too quick for me," said Rat, striving to laugh as he spoke.

"He always is," suggested Reuben.

"That don't mean that he always will be, does it?"

"I think it does."

"He certainly has a good friend in you, Reuben. He makes every one bow down to him."

"If they do, it's not because he makes them, but because they want to."

"It's all the same, it's all the same."

Silence followed, and steadily Reuben led the way back to the place where he had left his comrades. Occasionally he glanced keenly at his companion, but he was unable to discover any

signs of fear or even of shame. Apparently Rat was returning to the trappers as a matter of course and expecting that he would be received in the same spirit with which he came. And yet in spite of his manner Reuben was keenly suspicious of the huge boaster. The very fact that he had suffered at the hands of the boyish scout doubtless had aroused a feeling of resentment which could not be quieted until Rat had obtained satisfaction.

To the surprise of Reuben, however, when they entered the camp Rat was greeted without any protest, though it could not be said that there was manifest any feeling of special pleasure at his return. Apparently accepting the condition as one which he had expected, Rat soon made himself at home in response to the quiet invitation of Kit Carson. It was plain, however, within a few days that the prejudices of the trappers were still keen. Indeed there was not one who was not suspicious of him, though there was none as yet who had shown any unfriendly attitude.

Why had the man come back to camp? What had he expected? If he had returned to take vengeance upon Kit Carson, why did he postpone his attack? These questions and others like them were frequently in the mind of Reuben, but when several days had elapsed and no answer had been found, he concluded that the boaster had been taught a much-needed lesson and that now he was cured of his overbearing ways.

On the fourth day after his arrival Rat suggested to Reuben that they should visit their traps together. Unwilling though he was, Reuben nevertheless quietly assented, and not long afterward the two men set forth on their rounds.

The season had been wonderfully successful. Never in their experience had so many skins been secured as the trappers had taken within the preceding few weeks. The noisy Rat was loud in his declaration that Kit Carson knew better than any one the streams where the beaver lived. Whether his statement was true or not, beaver, otter, mink, and other animals were caught in great numbers, and many of the skins, as has been said, had been cached.

It was when Reuben and his companion had halted in the middle of the day for luncheon that Rat quietly said to the lad: "Where have you made your caches this time?"

Reuben laughed as he replied: "There's one within ten feet of you now."

"What!" exclaimed Rat, glancing keenly about him as he spoke.

"That's right," replied Reuben, "there's one within ten feet of you. I don't know what Kit Carson would say, but I'm so sure you can't find it that I would almost be willing to say you can have half the skins there if you dig out the place."

"That's all very well," replied Rat; "of course I can't find it." At the same time he glanced all about him, and if Reuben had been more experienced he would have discovered that the trapper was protesting too much. Again and again he begged of Reuben to show him the place where the skins were concealed, declaring that he was unable to discover any trace that had been left. Reuben, however, refused to disclose the location of the cache, and when at last they proceeded on their rounds he was convinced that Rat had no suspicion as to its exact location.

"I'm wondering," suggested Rat as they moved down the stream, "if Kit Carson would have any objection to letting me bring some of my furs and putting them in the cache along with his."

"You'll have to ask him."

"I will just as soon as I go back to the camp," declared Rat.

True to his word, that very evening the huge boaster, approaching the scout, said: "Kit, have you any objection to letting me cache some of my furs along with yours?"

For a moment the scout glanced keenly at the face of the inquirer before he spoke: "How many furs have you got?" he inquired at last.

"Not very many just yet. I expect to have more, for I've never seen the catch as good as it is now."

"You come and talk to me when you get more and we'll see what can be done," said Kit Carson quietly at last.

Slight attention was paid to the conversation, and even Reuben had almost forgotten it, as well as his own talk the preceding day with Rat concerning the location of the cache near the stream on the bank of which they were trapping. These things were brought strongly back to his recollection, however, when on the following morning it was discovered that the black horse was gone and that two other horses also had disappeared. Nor was this all that the camp had lost, for Rat also was missing. When the men assembled for breakfast, the discovery of the loss of the black horse and the report also that two other animals were gone caused them to declare that Rat had not fled from the place without taking more than the horses. Just what he wanted of three horses was not plain to the trappers.

Suddenly, however, Reuben called Kit Carson to one side and said to him: "Did Rat ask you to let him cache some of his furs?"

"Yes," replied the scout, looking keenly into the face of his friend as he spoke.

"Well, he wanted me the other day, when we were trapping together, to show him where our cache was. I told him there was one within ten feet of the place where he was standing and that if he could find it he might have half the skins. You don't suppose that he's found the place and taken those horses to carry off some of the skins, do you?"

For a moment Kit Carson was silent. Although he was aware that Reuben was keenly mortified by the confession he had made, he did not speak any word of reproach. Not many minutes had elapsed, however, before Kit Carson, selecting two of the swiftest ponies in the camp, said to Reuben: "Do you want to go with me?"

"Yes. Where are you going?"

"I'm glad you put your answers in that way," replied Kit Carson with a smile. "I'm glad you're going, and you'll soon find out where I'm going. First of all, take me to the place where you told Rat there was one of our caches."

Both trappers carried their rifles and mounting the swiftest ponies, they speedily departed from the camp. Reuben easily led the way toward the place where he and Rat had stopped for

their noontime meal and where also he had foolishly told the braggart that one of the caches was not far away.

Reuben was not surprised when an hour later, after they had arrived at the place they were seeking, he discovered that the hiding-place had been opened and that many furs had been removed. It was plain, too, from the marks left by the feet of the horses nearby, as to what disposition had been made of the stolen furs. The anger of Reuben was intense, but to his noisy protests no response was made by Kit Carson, whose quiet manner was still unchanged.

"There's nothing for us to do, lad," suggested the scout, "except to go after the rascal and get our skins."

Already convinced that this was the purpose of the scout in coming, Reuben made no response except to quicken the speed at which his horse was moving and do his utmost to follow the scout when they set forth on their journey.

They already had taken the precaution of providing supplies sufficient for two days, although Kit Carson was depending upon game to provide much of their food.

Occasionally the scout paused to examine the ground and try to discover the imprints left by the feet of Rat's horses. Frequently the trail was almost lost, but Kit Carson, after circling the spot and carefully examining the ground, every time succeeded in discovering the signs for which he was searching, and then with increased speed the pursuit was renewed.

Reuben was thinking of what would occur if the scout should overtake the burly boaster. The quiet determination expressed in Kit's face plainly indicated what was in his mind. And the thief would be overtaken soon, Reuben was convinced, because when Rat had fled, although he had taken Black Jack, swiftest of all the ponies in the camp, the speed at which he was fleeing could not be greater than the pace of the horses which were following him and carrying the stolen furs on their backs.

CHAPTER XXVIII—THE RETURN

In spite of the efforts of the scout, two days elapsed before any signs of the immediate presence of the thief were discovered. And even then he was not positive that the huge Rat was near at hand.

"I think he's gone," suggested Reuben.

"Did you have any question about that?" laughed Kit Carson quietly. "That he had 'gone' was the reason why we started after him."

"Yes, but I think he's gone where we can't find him."

Carson smiled as he shook his head, but made no response to the discouraged lad.

An Indian village was located in the valley not far ahead of them. The signs which had aroused the interest of Kit Carson had been the discovery of the bones and part of the hide of a horse which had been left on the sands by its border. "That's one of our horses," said the scout quietly to Reuben.

"Is it?" inquired the younger scout as he quickly jumped from his horse and began to investigate the remains of the unfortunate animal. "I could not say," he said at last when he arose and resumed his seat in the saddle.

"I am sure it is," said Kit Carson in a low voice, "and we shall find that the Indians either are having a feast on horseflesh, or that they have just finished one. The best plan, Reuben, will be for you to stay here while I go alone into the village."

Reuben glanced nervously about him, for his confidence in his own ability to protect himself in case he should be attacked was not strong. However, he made no reference to his own feelings and watched his companion as he slowly rode toward the wigwams, the tops of which could be seen in the distance.

Two hours passed before Kit Carson returned to his companion. At first the scout was not inclined to relate what had befallen him in his visit. In a brief time, however, he said: "I found the Indians all friendly."

"Did you?" inquired Reuben. "Were they having a feast?"

"Yes."

"Didn't they object to your interrupting them?"

"No. I found them all friendly, as I said. Indeed, the chief of the village is a cousin of my wife. What horse do you suppose they have been eating?"

"Not Black Jack?" demanded Reuben, startled by the suggested question.

Kit Carson nodded his head to indicate that the beautiful animal had indeed been the one which had provided the feast for the Indians.

"Why did they do that? How did it happen?"

"It seems that when Rat came into the village the black horse had broken a leg. It was just able to drag itself along."

"Was Rat there?"

"He was, but he isn't now."

"What has happened to him?"

Kit Carson smiled slightly as he looked keenly into the face of his angry friend, and then he said: "I advised him to leave."

"And he left?"

"He did."

"Did you do anything to him?"

"Nothing except to advise him to depart. I am glad to say that to all appearances he seemed to be willing to follow my advice. He decided, however, to leave our furs behind him."

"Where are they now?"

"They are in the village and I can get them any time I want them."

"What did Rat have to say for himself?"

"Nothing much. He tried at first to explain that it was all a mistake, that he didn't know the skins belonged to us, and when he found them he thought it was a great find and he would make away with them himself."

"What did he have to say about Black Jack?"

"He claimed that Black Jack was outside the camp and that he didn't intend to run away with him. He was going to bring him back just as soon as he disposed of the furs. I have just come back to tell you, Reuben, that I'm not going back to camp just now. Do you think you can find your way alone?"

"Yes. Why don't you want me to stay with you?"

Kit Carson shook his head as he said in a low voice: "It will be better, Reuben, for you to go back to camp. Tell the men that I shall be there some time to-morrow."

Reuben looked suspiciously into the face of the scout, but there was nothing in his expression to betray what his intentions were. Convinced that there was nothing more to be said, Reuben reluctantly spoke to his horse and started on his journey back to the camp. Occasionally he glanced behind him, but after a few minutes had elapsed he was unable to discover the scout anywhere on the plains. Doubtless he had returned to the village, though just what his purpose in doing so Reuben was unable to conjecture.

Steadily Reuben continued on his way, and the return, inasmuch as he was able to proceed directly and was not compelled to stop in order to study the signs in the sand as to the course which Rat had followed, did not require as much time as had been consumed in the journey in pursuit of the thief.

Near noon of the day following that on which he had left his companion Reuben entered the camp. In response to the eager questions of his friends he related what had befallen him and Kit Carson in their efforts to overtake Rat. There were exclamations of anger over the fate which had befallen Black Jack and many expressions of wonder as to why Kit had permitted the braggart to depart from the Indian village before severe punishment had been inflicted upon him. Nor did Kit Carson offer any explanation when he returned two days later.

The steady routine of the camp life continued during the weeks that followed, and when at last the entire party once more made its way back to Taos every one was well satisfied with the success which had attended their combined labours.

With Kit Carson now went the young Indian girl who was his wife. The long journey at last was completed and preparations were made for the quiet weeks that must ensue at the little Spanish settlement. The weeks ran into months, and a baby girl that had been born to Kit Carson and his wife had grown into a laughing, though quiet, dark-eyed little beauty. She was the pet of every one in the settlement, and the pride of Kit Carson in the little maid was apparent to all his friends. Indeed the unusual demonstration of affection which the scout displayed as he played with the little girl was the cause of much comment among his friends.

One day, however, there came a sadness upon all who knew the scout. His young Indian wife had been taken ill, and despite all the efforts of the people in the little settlement to help her, their work proved unavailing. In a brief time the dark-eyed wife of Kit Carson was dead. Not long after her death the scout came to Reuben and said: "I'm going to start for Pain Court. Do you want to go with me?"

For a moment Reuben was silent. He recalled the circumstances under which he had departed from the place years ago. His mother was dead and his father, either made unfeeling by the death of his wife or hardened by the conditions of his life, had become indifferent to Reuben. He had insisted that he would no longer be responsible for the care of the lad, and it was partly because of the hardships which in this manner were thrust upon him that Reuben had started with Jean Badeau across the long plains.

Not a word in all the months that had intervened had been heard from his father. Whether or not he was living now he had no means of knowing. And as for Jean, he had strangely disappeared, as we know, and whether or not the harmless insane man whom Reuben had seen at San Gabriel and in the Indian village, where Kit Carson had found his wife, really was the lost trapper he had no means of fully knowing.

These thoughts passed quickly through Reuben's mind, but he was accustomed to quick decisions, and in a moment he said: "Yes, I will go."

"I am going to take my baby with me," said the scout.

"What?"

"I am going to take the baby with me. I don't dare leave her here to be brought up by the squaws. I am going to take her back among my own people and have her looked after as the daughter of her father ought to be, for I am a man of means now," added Kit Carson quietly, smiling as he spoke. "A few more skins and I shall have enough to make me rich, or at least some time ago I would have thought I was rich if I had had any such amount of money."

"She'll die on the way," protested Reuben.

"Well, she will have to die some time. It's no worse to die on the plains than it is in a town. I think she would die here at Taos if I left her, and I'm going to take my chances and see if I cannot take her back with me."

"But she'll starve. You cannot get any milk for her."

Kit Carson smiled, but said no more, and Reuben was surprised when two days later, after arrangements had been completed for the departure, he discovered that an Indian brave and his wife whose baby had died two days before were to accompany them.

Of the long journey that followed Reuben retained many vivid recollections. There were nights when their camp was surrounded by the howling coyotes; there were times when they were

unable to see far before them because of clouds of dust which passing herds of buffaloes had raised. Several times, too, they were visited by Indians from the various tribes. Twice there were delays of two or three days each because Kit Carson was fearful that his little girl was becoming weaker under the stress of the long journey.

At last the scout insisted on turning aside from the immigrant road for a visit to the old settlement on the borders of Missouri where he had been born. His visit, however, was not prolonged. He found that the old cabin in which his family had lived was now a deserted ruin. As he recalled the place it had been filled to overflowing with the large family which had made it its home. Now, not one member of his family was to be found in the region. Whither they all had gone or what had become of them he was unable to discover.

Disappointed by the results of his visit, the scout renewed his journey to Pain Court, and at last the travellers found themselves within the limits of the place they were seeking.

But what a change had come over all things there. The little trading-post had become a large town. Streets had been laid out which to the trappers seemed to be crowded with people passing to and fro. In amazement the strangers looked all about them as they entered, unable to recognize any familiar faces.

It was not long, however, before Reuben decided that he would leave his companions for a time and do his utmost to discover whether or not his father was still living.

CHAPTER XXIX—THE GREAT SCOUT AND THE GREAT EXPLORER

Several days elapsed before the young trapper obtained any definite clue concerning his father. At that time, however, he was informed by the woman with whom he was boarding that she also had been making inquiries for him, as she had become greatly interested in her young boarder. She had been informed by a woman who occasionally visited her place with vegetables for sale that she had heard of a man named Benton who was in the poorhouse in a nearby town.

Faint as the clue was, Reuben decided to follow it. When at last he was admitted into the room in which the man who bore the same name as he was found, he said quickly: "That's not the man. He isn't my father."

"Better look again," suggested the keeper of the place. "You say it has been a good many years since you saw him."

"Yes, it has been a long time," replied Reuben slowly, as again he looked keenly at the old and decrepit man before him. The man's hair was long, his clothing unkempt, but what appealed most strongly to Reuben was the fact that the man was totally blind.

At the sound of his voice there had been a strange and sudden movement on the part of the blind man. He turned his sightless face in the direction from which Reuben's voice had been heard and a change in his expression quickly came over his countenance. There was a change, too, in Reuben at the same moment, for in the face upon which he was looking there now were certain features that somehow dimly reminded him of the father he had known in the years long gone.

"Your voice sounds like the voice of a boy of mine," suggested the old man in trembling tones.

"What was his name?" inquired Reuben.

"Reuben Benton."

"And what is your name?"

"My name is William Benton."

"How long have you been here?" inquired the young trapper.

"I don't know. It seems like many years."

"Do you like it here?"

"Do I like it? I wish I was dead."

Reuben's face was glowing with a more tender expression than had been seen upon it in many a day. "We'll try to arrange it so that you won't have to stay here much longer," he said.

"What do you mean?" demanded his father so eagerly that Reuben's heart smote him again.

"I mean that I am your son and that I have come here to make arrangements to take you out of this place."

Abruptly, and to Reuben's intense surprise, his father suddenly buried his face in his hands and cried and sobbed as a little child might have done. It was long before Reuben could comfort him, but when at last the sightless old man was convinced that Reuben had in reality returned and that he was able to provide for his wants in his declining years, the countenance of William Benton was lighter than it had been for many days.

Nor was Reuben disappointed. In a brief time he was able to obtain the release of his father and also to purchase a little house in which they both might live. Reuben's share in the furs which had been secured, as we know, had brought him no small amount of money, and through the influence of Kit Carson he had been able to save most of that which he had received. Because of this he was now able to provide for his father, and there was no hesitation on the part of the young trapper in deciding to remain at Pain Court, or St. Louis, as the place now was commonly called.

With Kit Carson, however, the case was radically different. He had not found any trace of his own family, and when a few days had elapsed his stay in St. Louis was ended. The strange sights of the life in the city and the activities of the busy city people were all interesting, but as Kit explained to Reuben, he wanted to be where there weren't so many others, where there wasn't so much noise, where he could have all the air he wanted to breathe and all the sky there was to be seen. Accordingly on the first steamboat that departed westward on the Missouri River, Kit Carson was a passenger.

Among those who were also on board was a man to whom Kit Carson felt drawn almost instinctively when first he discovered him. It was not long before he learned that the name of the stranger was Lieutenant John C. Fremont, who at that time was conducting a band of men to explore and survey certain regions of the great West.

When at last young Lieutenant Fremont found himself talking to the famous scout he explained that the guide whom he had expected to meet him had not appeared and that it was now necessary for him to find another. Kit Carson, in his quiet manner and smiling as he spoke, explained that he himself had had considerable experience in the western country and that he would be willing to accompany the party as its guide. Somewhat suspicious at first, Lieutenant Fremont's fears soon were allayed, and Kit Carson became the guide of the expedition.

As they proceeded on their way more and more the daring young lieutenant became interested in the modest story which Kit Carson had to tell of his experiences in the great West; more and more convinced was Fremont that he had secured a man who was certain to be very valuable in the perilous expedition in which he was engaged. At last the party left the boat when it arrived at the mouth of the Kansas River, and at once the explorers set forth on their pathless journey.

To the men it seemed as if the necessities of life which they were taking with them had been reduced to the smallest possible number, but the scout looked on their equipment with amazement. It had never been his privilege to sleep under canvas tents or cross streams in rubber boots. We may be sure, however, that simple as were the tastes of Kit Carson, he found the conveniences which his new friends were carrying a source of comfort before many days had elapsed.

Steadily the party pushed forward on its journey westward. All day long the great stretches of level plains extended in every direction. The herds of buffalo were so many that only the choice bits of those that were shot were eaten. Indeed, some of the men saved for cooking only the marrow-bones and the tongues of the buffalo.

Then came the first sight which many of the explorers had ever had of the wonderful Rocky Mountains. And what a sight they were and are. Some of them stood with their summits hidden above the clouds and with great chasms cut into their sides. Some had heavy borders of trees as far up their sloping sides as the timberline, and others had rushing, noisy, clattering streams dashing down their sides from the fields of melting snow near the summits.

And now Kit Carson's experience became of steadily increasing value to the young lieutenant. More and more the friendship between the two men became close. Kit Carson, who knew all about the buffalo and the other animals of the plains, who was modest in his manner and yet wonderfully well informed concerning most of the points about which Fremont wished to learn, his skill as a hunter and his knowledge and friendship of the Indians, daily became of greater help to the explorers.

Indeed, it was not long after this time, when Kit Carson was carrying a message to Santa Fe, that the great scout showed his fearlessness even among the most hostile Indians. At that time all the tribes in the vicinity were on the warpath, and Kit Carson was compelled to go alone on his long ride to Santa Fé, because most of the white men were afraid of the painted savages. The scout, however, selecting a different route from that which he had followed before, confidently continued on his way. Suddenly a band of braves were seen not far before him. Slipping to one side of his horse and clinging by one arm and one leg to the animal, which was running at its swiftest paces, he passed directly in front of the band of warriors without exciting any suspicion that they beheld anything more than a stray pony, which was fleeing in terror at the sight of the red-skinned warriors.

When Kit Carson returned from his long journey, his friendship with the daring explorer had become very strong. Fremont had come to value not merely the immense fund of information which the scout possessed, but also the traits of character which had endeared him to almost all his acquaintances.

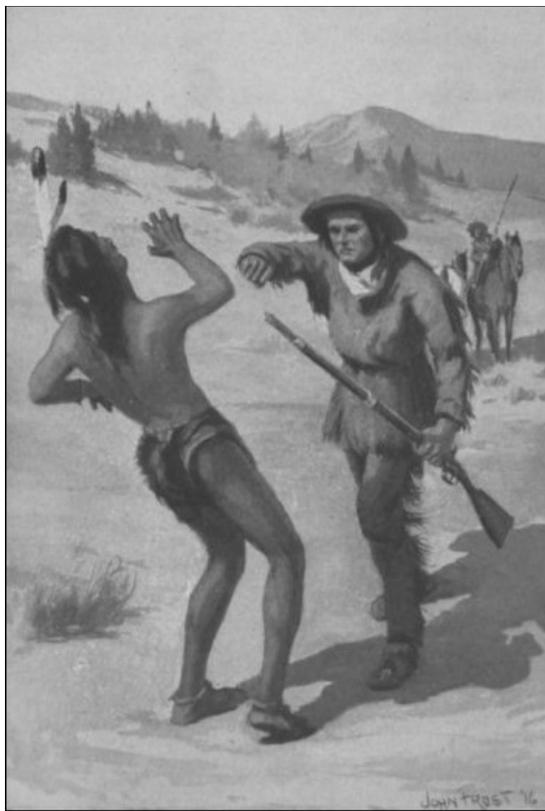
When the scout was returning, accompanied only by a young Mexican, they met a party of four Indians. Although Kit Carson was suspicious of the men, for he was aware of the discontent among the tribes, he nevertheless disguised his feelings, and when one of the Indians advanced toward him with outstretched hand Kit Carson approached him in the same manner. When the brave was about to grasp his hand as a token of friendship he suddenly changed his tactics and tried to seize and obtain the gun which the scout was carrying.

Instantly Kit Carson struck the treacherous redskin a blow between his eyes with his fist. The Indian fell to the ground, but he instantly leaped to his feet and ran back to his friends as swiftly as he was able. Immediately all four Indians turned and fled from the place. They were not accustomed to that method of fighting.

When at last Carson and his young companion arrived at the place they were seeking, it was to learn that Fremont already had gone on his westward journey.

Determined to overtake him, the scout quickly set forth from the fort. It was not difficult for him to rejoin the party which was moving in advance of him, and plans were quickly made by which he was once more to become the guide of the explorers. He explained, however, to Fremont that he wished to return to Fort Bent to secure mules which would be necessary to carry their burdens when they were journeying over the mountains.

It was not long before Kit Carson had secured the animals for which he had left his companions, and in a brief time he rejoined the men on their march. After they had failed to find a better route for the wagons through South Pass they decided to go to Salt Lake, of which they all had heard but which none had seen.



“Instantly Kit Carson struck the treacherous redskin a blow
between his eyes with his fist”

On that difficult journey across the plains it is impossible to describe all the sufferings through which the men passed and the hardships they were compelled to endure. Throughout them all, however, it was Kit Carson who proved to the lieutenant that he was equal to every emergency. When the men were near starvation it was his prowess as a hunter that secured meat for them. When their horses nearly dropped upon the sands through exhaustion and hunger again it was the scout who discovered the place where grass was to be found. When the leader one day fell into the depths of a rushing torrent it was Kit Carson who saved him from drowning. When they were threatened by the Indians, again the scout was the one upon whom all depended to obtain their friendship and secure permission to pass through the country without molestation.

Again Fremont decided to explore the region of the Oregon or the Columbia River. When their work was ended the explorer decided to go southward to California. This was a difficult journey and compelled the band to cross the lofty range of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Snows that were so deep that a man might be buried in them had to be crossed. Paths for the mules and horses had to be made. Sometimes it was necessary for the men to set fire to the fallen trees so that the snow nearby would be melted and they might obtain places where their blankets might be spread for the night.

The determination of the leaders was shared by their followers, and at last they arrived at Fort Sutter, where, with an abundance of food and other fresh supplies, they soon regained their strength and spirits.

While they were returning from this expedition Kit Carson, who had been the life and inspiration of all the men, chanced to meet a Mexican and his little boy, who apparently were in great sorrow. As Kit Carson spoke Spanish fluently he entered into conversation with the man and soon learned that the Indians had stolen his horses and carried away his friends. Without stopping to consult Lieutenant Fremont, Kit Carson succeeded in inducing one of the explorers to accompany him, and together the two men set forth in their endeavour to regain the lost horses for the Mexican.

There was swift riding that night for the two men. Nor did they stop until the sun peered above the eastern horizon, and then they stopped only because they had discovered not far before them the camp of the Indians which they were seeking. Instantly Kit Carson and his companion urged their tired horses forward, and yelling as loudly as their lungs permitted, the riders dashed into the camp.

At that time the Indians were busy in their preparations for their breakfast. Before they were fully aware of what was occurring the Indian chief fell before the sure aim of Kit Carson. Without retreating, although they were two against thirty or more, the two hardy men seized their pistols and continued the attack.

The astonished redmen turned and fled from the place. Doubtless if they had known how many were in the attacking party that would have been the last we ever should have heard of Kit Carson and his deeds. As it was, however, the redmen, without waiting to discover the numbers of their enemies, fled from the spot, leaving behind them the horses which they had stolen. These were secured by the scout, and with them he returned to the camp and gave back to the heart-broken Mexican the ponies which he had lost.

CHAPTER XXX—CONCLUSION

Meanwhile Reuben Benton was highly prosperous in St. Louis. With the money which he had saved from the sale of his skins he had been able in a modest way to go into the business of buying furs when they were brought to the trading-post by the trappers. In this way he had been able to maintain a home of his own, in which his father remained a member as long as he lived.

Whenever Kit Carson returned to St. Louis, although there were occasions when he was highly honoured by people of the highest standing, he did not forget the man who had been with him as a boy on his trapping expeditions in the Far West. The friendship between the two deepened with the years, and among those who were loudest in their praises of the scout when he had become most famous was Reuben Benton of St. Louis.

There came a time in the life of Kit Carson, after he had left Lieutenant Fremont, when he thought he would be able to settle down and become a farmer. Not long before this time he had married a Spanish girl, whose beauty was famous all along the border. On the great ranch which he purchased he erected a house in which his wife was to make her home, and there he was busily engaged in building barns that would be adequate for the stock he expected to raise.

Abruptly, however, there came a message from Fremont urging Carson to rejoin him at once; and the scout was unable to decline. Perhaps he did not wish to. At all events, he sold his farm, provided for his wife during his absence, and then set forth with one companion to join Fremont's expedition.

The Indians had told many stories of the region known as the Great Basin, a desert so bleak and perilous that no human being might expect to cross it safely. This was the region now to be explored by Fremont and his followers. Fortunately they discovered that the reports had exaggerated the difficulties as well as the desert nature of the region.

All this, however, was not known until after the work of the explorers had been completed. So fearful were the men that the reports they had heard were well founded that they were extremely cautious in all their movements.

Kit Carson, with a few men as hardy as he, kept well in advance of the main party. Whenever they discovered a place where water was to be had and there was grass for the horses, there they built fires, the smoke of which served as an invitation to the other members of the party behind them to advance.

At last they made their way into northern California and there encountered their first serious difficulty with the Indians. The little band was attacked by one thousand of the savages, but fortunately the redmen were ignorant of the use of rifles, and as soon as the guns were discharged they fled in wild confusion.

About this time the object of the expedition speedily changed. There was war declared upon Mexico and immediately Fremont and his followers enrolled themselves as soldiers of their country. Other men joined them and soon there were sufficient soldiers to form a regiment. Lieutenant Fremont was extremely eager that the President should be informed concerning his plans and work. The only way by which word could be sent him was by messenger, and there was no messenger like Kit Carson. Accordingly in response to the fresh appeal of Fremont, Carson set forth as a messenger to carry the dispatches to the capital of the nation. His letters, however, were very brief, for Fremont relied upon Kit Carson's own ability to explain conditions as they existed on the Pacific Coast.

Before the scout had completed his journey he met a body of soldiers on their way to California. General Kearny was in command of them, and as soon as he was informed of the purpose of Kit Carson he at once urged him to permit some one else to carry the dispatches to the President while the scout himself should return with the men. Kit Carson, however, was a man who did not consider any task completed until he himself had personally done all that had been assigned to him. When, at last, General Kearny ordered him to do as he had suggested there was no other course but to obey, and accordingly the scout returned with the men. It was not the last time, however, that he was sent over the perilous way with messages for the men at Washington.

On his arrival he was amazed to find that the people of the capital already knew of his life in the West. To the modest scout this was a great surprise. He did not understand how any one could have heard of his work among the fur-bearing animals and the Indians of the West. Perhaps he was more surprised than any of his friends to find himself so much in demand. When one of the United States Senators said: "To me Kit Carson and truth mean the same," we may be sure the modest scout was almost overwhelmed by the words of praise.

When his last journey to Washington was ended the scout was glad to return to his family at Taos. There he had a house built of adobe, in which there was always a welcome for his friends. Even the Indians came and went with more freedom than they visited any of the homes of the white men. Affectionately the redmen called him "Father Kit," and the confidence of the good Indian was as strong as was the fear of the Indian who had done wrong. About forty miles distant from Taos Kit Carson had his ranch. There his family spent much of their time and there, too, there was always a welcome not only for his old friends, but for visitors as well.

Lieutenant Fremont had now become a colonel and his name was famous throughout the United States. He, too, visited the scout of whom he had been so fond, and in his letters, which are still in existence, he relates what a good time he had at the home of Kit Carson, the famous scout, trapper, guide, and messenger.

Kit Carson looked well to his farm, but his love of hunting was still strong. Indeed, it is said that his table was kept well supplied by the aid of his own rifle with game throughout most of the year.

If Kit Carson believed that his roving days were ended now, he was soon to learn of his

mistake. Of all his expeditions, however, only two can be mentioned here. On one of these, with some other men, mostly Mexicans, he drove nearly seven thousand sheep from Taos to California. Across the desert, through the lofty mountain ranges, the strange procession led by Kit Carson slowly made its way. At last, when the drovers arrived at their destination, they were able to sell their sheep for such high prices that every man received an ample reward for his labours. It was at this time that Kit Carson insisted upon going down the Sacramento to San Francisco. It had been many years since he had seen the settlement, and meanwhile the gold fever had drawn men of all kinds to the little place until it had increased very rapidly in its population.

The scout, after his arrival, looked about him in amazement. Thirty-five thousand people were living in the place, which he had known only as a little hamlet. Even here his fame had preceded him and there were many of the reckless men who tried to induce the famous scout to join them in their wild dissipations. With the same quiet strength which he had shown in his early life, Kit Carson steadfastly refused the invitations, and when he departed, his record was as clean as when he had first come.

Another time Carson with a large band of the men who once had trapped with him returned to the scenes of their early experiences. Again the men were trapping the beaver, and their success amazed even themselves. Many of the trappers had become so possessed with the desire to find gold that they had neglected or forgotten the wealth to be won by trapping. As a consequence the success of Kit Carson's band was marvellous, and when they returned they felt more than repaid for their labours.

It was on this expedition that Kit Carson lassoed a huge grizzly bear. The lasso, however, was not sufficiently strong to tame the savage beast, and at last the men, for the sake of their own safety, killed the grizzly. The following day, which was the Fourth of July, there was a great feast in which bear-steak was one of the chief articles of food.

It was not long before the war between the States broke out. And again Kit Carson found that it was impossible for him to remain quietly in his home on the ranch near Taos. In response to the call of the men who knew and loved him he consented to serve as the colonel of a regiment which was raised in New Mexico.

In the campaign which followed there is a quaint statement that perhaps the most striking service rendered by the brave colonel was when his regiment one time was ordered to attack the Navajo Indians, who had thought the time was fitting for them to rebel against the white men. It is related that with a few of his chosen men Colonel Kit departed from his camp early one morning and attacked and scattered the warring Indians and then returned to the camp before the soldiers who had been left there under the command of the lieutenant-colonel were aware that there was any fighting to be done.

There are some who believe that the best work Kit Carson ever did was later, when he became an Indian agent. His knowledge of the Indians and his understanding of their character enabled him to deal with them as few white men could have done. There were times when alone he entered the councils of the tribes when they were planning war and by his quiet and earnest appeals he induced them to abandon their warlike plans. But even his efforts were unavailing at times and with certain of the more blood-thirsty Indians. His activity and knowledge, however, were felt most when there were uprisings that sometimes were terrible in their effects upon the scattered settlers.

Even to the last of his life he insisted upon occasional vacations. At such times he would return with some of his chosen friends to his old occupations and the places which had known him when he was only a boy scout.

It is reported that when at last Kit Carson became ill with the sickness that ended his life, the doctor who was attending his case, and who was one of his warmest friends, spent much time reading to the old scout the story of his life which had recently been published. There is no doubt that Carson keenly enjoyed the narrative, although in his modesty he declared that he did not see why any one should ever have considered it worth while to write in a book an account of his experiences and adventures.

It was May 23, 1868 when Kit Carson breathed his last. To-day, however, if you visit the region in which his scouting was done you will find many men who claim that they knew the famous scout, and if you are willing to listen they will tell you many marvellous tales of his bravery and his adventures. It is also quite likely that some of these stories are true.

THE END

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July 31st, 1913.

TO THE PUBLIC:—

In the execution of its purpose to give educational value and moral worth to the recreational activities of the boyhood of America, the leaders of the Boy Scout Movement quickly learned that to effectively carry out its program, the boy must be influenced not only in his out-of-door life but also in the diversions of his other leisure moments. It is at such times that the boy is captured by the tales of daring enterprises and adventurous good times. What now is needful is not that his taste should be thwarted but trained. There should constantly be presented to him the books the boy likes best, yet always the books that will be best for the boy. As a matter of fact, however, the boy's taste is being constantly vitiated and exploited by the great mass of cheap juvenile literature.

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Signed
James E. West

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