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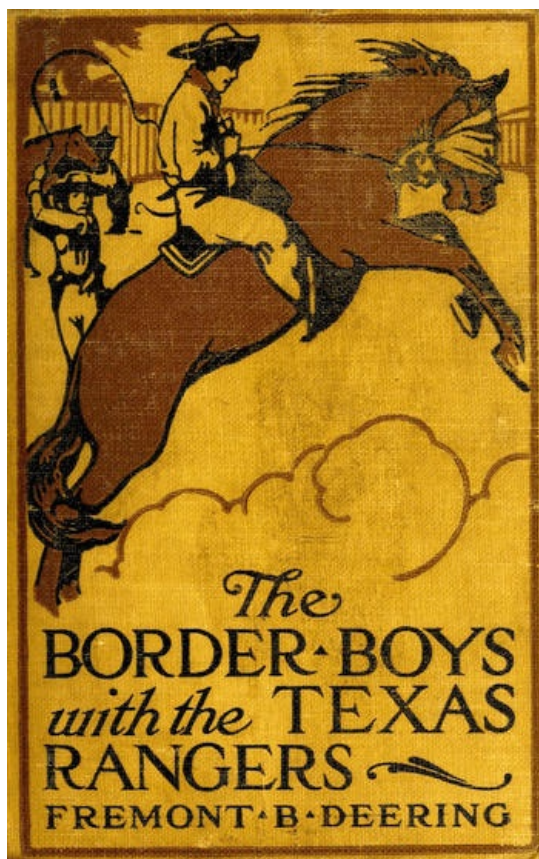
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BORDER BOYS WITH THE TEXAS
RANGERS ***



THE NEXT INSTANT JACK AND THE PONY WENT ROLLING AND PLUNGING OFF THE TRAIL DOWN TOWARD THE RIVER.—Page [36](#).

THE BORDER BOYS

WITH THE TEXAS RANGERS

By FREMONT B. DEERING

AUTHOR OF

"The Border Boys on the Trail," "The Border Boys with
the Mexican Rangers," "The Border Boys Across
the Frontier," "The Border Boys in the Canadian
Rockies," "The Border Boys Along the
St. Lawrence."



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The Border Boys With the Texas Rangers

CHAPTER I.

"IN TEXAS DOWN ON THE RIO GRANDE."

"Yip! Yip! Y-e-e-e-ow!"

"Gracious! What's coming, a band of circus Indians?"

"Not knowing, can't say; but there is evidently something to the fore in the strenuous line."

"Well, I should say so. Hark, what's that?"

"Shooting; maybe some of those Mestizos from over the Rio Grande are attacking the town."

"Hardly likely. The last heard of them they were fifty miles from the Border fighting hard with the Federals. But it's something, all right."

[6]

"Hullo! Look there. It's—it's the Rangers!"

The red-headed, sun-burned last speaker reined in his impetuous, plunging, gray broncho and, shielding his eyes with his hand, gazed down the dusty main street of San Mercedes. Above the trio of lads who had halted their cayuses at the sudden sound of distant uproar, the sun hung in the steely blue sky like a red hot copper ball. Jack Merrill, alert and good-looking, with his frank, bronzed face and easy seat in the saddle, followed the direction of red-headed Walt Phelps' gaze. Ralph Stetson, equally excited, studied the situation with equivalent interest.

And now at the end of the street, which had suddenly become thronged as if by magic with slouching Mexicans, blue-bloused Chinese and swinging-gaited cow-punchers with jingling spurs on their high-heeled boots, a novel procession swept into view.

Out of a cloud of yellow dust, which hung like a saffron curtain against the burning cobalt of the sky, appeared the foremost of a group of riders.

[7]

"Here they come! Look out, fellows! Let's sidetrack ourselves and let the Texas limited go by!"

As he shouted this advice Ralph Stetson, a lad of slightly more delicate build than his youthful companions, swung his wiry little pony in a pivotal sweep, and made as if to retreat.

"Hurry, boys!" he shouted.

But Jack Merrill stood his ground, and Walt Phelps, seeing that the leader of the three Border Boys did not swerve in the face of the onrush, did not budge an inch either. But on the street excitement was rife. Cayuses, hitched to the long, strong hitching racks, or simply left to stand with the reins dropped to the ground over their heads, plunged and squealed. Men ran about and shouted, and even the usually stolid Chinese restaurant keepers and laundry men seemed stirred out of their habitual state of supreme unconcern. As for the Mexican residents of San Mercedes, they merely drew their serapes closer about them and from beneath their broad brimmed, cone-crowned sombreros gazed with a haughty indifference at the group of galloping, shouting horsemen.

[8]

As Ralph Stetson cantered off, Jack Merrill backed his pony up to the very edge of the raised wooden sidewalk. The little animal was wildly excited and plunged and whinnied as if it felt the bit and saddle for the first time. But Jack maintained his easy, graceful seat as if he had formed part of the lively little creature he bestrode. Walt Phelps, also undisturbed, controlled his equally restive mount.

"Why don't we cut and run, too, Jack?" asked Walt, as the hind feet of their ponies rattled on the wooden walk. "Those fellows are taking up the whole street. They'll run us down."

[9]

"Inasmuch as they are just the men that we are here to meet," responded Jack, "I propose to stand my ground."

The Border Boys had arrived in San Mercedes that morning,

having ridden from El Chico, the nearest town on the Southern Pacific Railroad. They had come almost directly from a short rest following their exciting adventures across the Mexican Border, as related in "The Border Boys With the Mexican Rangers." In this book, it will be recalled, they had aided the picturesque mounted police of Mexico in running down a band of desperadoes headed by Black Ramon, a famous Border character.

We first met the boys in the initial book of this series, "The Border Boys on the Trail." This volume set forth how Jack Merrill, the son of an Arizona rancher, and Ralph Stetson, the rather delicate son of an Eastern Railroad magnate and an old school chum, had shared with Walt Phelps, a cattleman's son, some astonishing adventures, including much trouble with the hard characters who formed the nucleus of a band of cattle rustlers. They assisted in putting them to rout, but not before they had encountered many stirring adventures in a ruined mission church in Chihuahua used as a gathering place by the band. The treasure they discovered secreted in the catacombs under the ruined edifice had given each boy a substantial little nest egg of his own.

[10]

In "The Border Boys Across the Frontier" they were found aiding Uncle Sam. They happened to find a strange subterranean river by means of which arms and ammunition were being smuggled to Mexican revolutionists. In trying to put a stop to that work they were captured, and escaped only after a ride on a borrowed locomotive and a fight in the stockade of the Esmeralda mine.

We now find them in San Mercedes awaiting the arrival of the Texas Rangers, a detachment of whom had been ordered to the little settlement on the banks of the Rio Grande Del Norte to put down any disturbances, and to keep the warring Mexicans from committing outrages on Uncle Sam's soil. The boys, always anxious for anything that might offer in the way of adventure, had begged their fathers to allow them to see something of the work of the Rangers. At first this had been absolutely refused. But finally Mr. Stetson gave his permission, and then Mr. Merrill fell in line, as did Walt Phelps' parents. Captain Moseby Atkinson of the Rangers being an old friend of Mr. Merrill's, the rest was easy, and it had been arranged that the boys were to meet Captain Atkinson at San Mercedes. Though they looked only for fun and novel experiences, the Border Boys were destined, while with the Rangers, to pass through adventures more thrilling, and hardships more severe than they dreamed.

[11]

On dashed the Rangers, the hoofs of their mounts thundering like artillery. It was a sight calculated to stir the heart and quicken the pulse of any wholesome, active lad. There were fully twenty of them, riding six abreast. Their sombreros, blue shirts, rough leather chaps and the rifles slung in each man's saddle holster, showed them to be men of action in the acutest sense of that word; men whose bronzed faces and keen, steady eyes bespoke them of the best type of plainsman; worthy descendants of Fremont, Lewis and Clarke.

[12]

"Yip! Yip!" the foremost of the riders shouted as they saw the boys.

Jack's fiery little pony began to show signs of frantic alarm. It bucked and tried to throw itself backward, but each time the young horseman's skill checked it.

"Captain! Captain!" called Jack, as the Rangers swept by.

But above the thunder of hoofs, and in the midst of the yellow dust clouds, Captain Atkinson did not hear nor see the two boys.

But one of his men, a rather squat, dark-skinned, dark-haired little fellow, did.

[13]

"Y—e—ow! Out of the way, you tenderfoot kid!" he exploded.

"I'm trying to get out of the way," responded Jack good humoredly.

"What's that, you long-legged cayuse," bellowed the little chap, whose sleeves were tied round above the elbows with gorgeous pink ribbons, and whose black silk shirt was embroidered with pink rosebuds, "what's that? Can you ride, kid? Can you ride?"

At the same instant Jack's pony swung around, presenting its flank toward the little Ranger. As it did so the Texan brought down his quirt with all its force on the startled little creature's rump.

"Wow! now for fireworks!" he shouted, while his comrades checked their ponies to see the fun.

Jack said nothing. In truth, he had his hands full. Excited before,

his pony was now half mad with frenzy. It bucked as if its insides had been made of steel springs. But Jack stuck to it like a burr to a maverick's tail.

[14]

"Wow! Wow!" shouted the Rangers, as the pony gathered its feet together, sprung into the air, and came down with legs as stiff as hitching posts.

"Stick to him, kid! Don't go to leather!" (meaning, "grab hold of the saddle"), encouraged some of the Rangers struck by Jack's manful riding. But the dark-skinned little chap seemed to wish nothing more than to see the youthful leader of the Border Boys ignominiously toppled into the dust. He spurred his pony alongside Jack's and whacked it again and again with his rawhide quirt.

"That's enough!" shouted Jack. "Stop it!"

"You're scared!" jeered the Ranger. "Mammy's little pet!"

The taunt had hardly left his lips before something very unexpected happened. Jack, for a flash, managed to secure control of his pony. He swung it round on its hind legs and rode it right at the scornful, jeering Ranger. As he did so the other leaned out of his saddle to give Jack's pony another blow with the quirt as it dashed by him. But he miscalculated. Jack drove his pony right in alongside his tormentor's, and the shock of the collision, added to the position the Ranger now occupied in the saddle—leaning far over—proved too much for his equilibrium.

[15]

His animal plunged, as if shot from a catapult, halfway across the street from Jack's pony. As it did so its rider made a vain attempt to save himself by grabbing its withers. But quick as he was he could not regain his balance.

Off he shot, landing in the street and ploughing a furrow with his face in the soft dust. As for the pony, it dashed off, while a dozen Rangers pursued it, yelling and swinging lariats.

Those who remained set up a yell of delight. It tickled the fancy of these free and easy sons of the plains to see their companion unhorsed by a slip of a boy.

[16]

"Good for you, kid!" shouted some.

"Say, Shorty," admonished others, "why don't you pick a fellow your own size?"

In the meantime "Shorty," as he had been addressed, scrambled to his feet. He was a sorry object. His elaborate black silk shirt was torn and dust covered, and one of his carefully tied ribbons was missing. His sombrero lay six feet away, and his black hair fell in a tangle over his dark forehead. As he got to his legs again, crowning humiliation of all, a Chinaman picked up his broad-brimmed hat and tendered it to him. Shorty aimed a blow and a curse at the well-meaning Mongolian, who quickly dodged.

With a roar of rage he rushed at Jack. Then Jack and the others saw what they had not noticed before.

In his fall Shorty's revolver had fallen from its holster into the dust. But he had recovered it, and now, with his lips set viciously, he was rushing at Jack, the weapon poised for a shot.

[17]

"You dern young coyote, I'll do fer you!" he shouted hoarsely, beside himself with fury, intensified by the taunts of his companions over his downfall.

As if in a trance Jack saw the revolver raised above the fellow's head, and then brought down to the firing position.

[18]

CHAPTER II.

THE HUMBLING OF SHORTY.

But at the very instant that the Ranger's finger pressed the trigger something came swishing and snaking through the air, falling in a loop about him and pinioning his arms. The gun cracked as Shorty was yanked from his feet, but the bullet merely ploughed a little furrow in the ground. The next minute he was rolling in the dust for the second time, roped as neatly as ever he had lassoed a yearling, by the rawhide of Captain Atkinson himself.

The captain, who had been in advance, as we know, had not witnessed the first part of the drama which had so nearly ended in a tragedy, but had been apprised of it when Shorty's pinto pony had flashed by him with half a dozen shouting Rangers at its heels. The minute it had been roped he instituted inquiries, and hearing what had occurred, he judged from his acquaintance with Shorty's character that his presence might be needed at the scene of the Ranger's unhorsing. [19]

At top speed he had galloped back, arriving just in time to see Shorty's revolver flash in the air as he brought it down for a shot. Almost as by magic the captain's hand had sought and found his lariat and sent its coil swishing through the air.

"Get up!" he thundered to the disgruntled Shorty, who, thoroughly humiliated, did as he was told.

"Let me alone! Let me git at that cub!" he snarled, under his breath.

"See here, Shorty Swift!" flashed Atkinson, "this isn't the first trouble I've had with you. You're a disgrace to the Rangers."

"He was pickin' on me," began the Ranger; but his commander cut him short with a sharp word.

"Buncombe! Is this the way you obey orders to conduct yourself properly? Do you mean to tell me that you can give me any good reason why a kid like that should annoy a Texas ranger?" [20]

"Well, he did. It was his fault. He—he——"

"See here, Shorty, are you going to tell the truth?"

"I am telling the truth, cap."

"You're not. Some of you other boys tell me what happened."

One of the Rangers who had applauded Jack's horsemanship gave a plain, unvarnished account of the whole scene. Captain Atkinson's brow darkened as he heard.

"So," he snapped, "that's the sort of fellow you are. Well, all I've got to say is that you and your kind are a disgrace to the name of Texas. I've warned you before, Shorty, of what you might expect if you got into disgrace again. That was the last time. Now I find you bullyin' a kid who hadn't done you any harm, and when he gave you what you deserved you tried to shoot him. I've only got one thing to say to you——" [21]

He paused.

There was a vibrant silence, during which the trampling of the restless ponies' hoofs and the hard breathing of Shorty were the only sounds to break the stillness.

"Git!"

The order came like the crack of a rifle.

Shorty seemed to wither and grow smaller and darker as he heard.

"Captain, I——" he stammered out. But Atkinson cut him short abruptly.

"You heard me. Git! This isn't a cow camp, but a regularly organized troop to enforce law and order. You set a fine example of lawlessness right in the town we have been sent to protect from that very thing. There's your pony and here's the pay that's coming to you. Hit the trail, and hit it quick." [22]

"Don't be too hard on him, captain. Give him one more chance. I guess it was only meant as horse play and not viciousness."

Captain Atkinson turned his bronzed countenance on the speaker. It was Jack. Beside him Walt Phelps had reined up and Ralph Stetson, too, the latter having been attracted by the excitement from the side street where he had sought refuge at the

boisterous entrance of the Rangers.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said. "Well, young chap, you've got nerve and sense; but this fellow doesn't deserve any pity."

"I'm sure he won't do it again," Jack assured the captain; "let him off this time. He's been punished enough."

At this Captain Atkinson could not resist a smile. Shorty's weebegone appearance assuredly bore testimony to the truth of Jack's statement.

As for the Rangers, some of them broke into an open guffaw of amusement. [23]

"You're sure right, young chap," agreed Captain Atkinson, "but right now I'd like to ask you who you and your two friends are. You don't look as if you belonged about here."

"We don't. My name is Jack Merrill, this is Walt Phelps and yonder is Ralph Stetson, a school chum and———"

"Waal, by the Lone Star! So you're the kids I'm to take along, eh? Shake, boy, shake! I thought you were a lot of blithering tenderfeet, but you're regular punchers. Put it there, Jack. I'm Captain Atkinson, your father's friend, and———"

"I guessed as much," smiled Jack, shaking hands with the grizzled leader of the Rangers who, in turn, almost wrung the lad's fingers off. "It's for the sake of your friendship, captain, that I ask you to give this man another chance."

"Boy, you're a real sport. Shorty, apologize to this lad here and take your place in the ranks." [24]

"I—I'm sorry," muttered Shorty, hanging his head sullenly and forcing the words from unwilling lips.

"That's all right, Shorty," said Jack heartily, "and I'm as sorry as you are. I didn't mean to give you such a bump."

Shorty took the outstretched hand with limp fingers, barely touched it, and then, remounting his pony, which had been led up, rode off to the rear of his comrades. His face was contorted with humiliation and angry shame.

"I hope you won't judge the Rangers by that fellow," said Captain Atkinson to Jack when Shorty had gone; "we may appear rough but our hearts are in the right place, as I hope we shall prove to you."

"I'm sure of it," rejoined Jack heartily. "Are we going to camp far from the town?" he asked, by way of changing the subject.

"Yes, in the outskirts, on the banks of the river. Alameda and his men are giving the Federal troops a hard tussle, and we want to be on the job if they try to cross." [25]

"Then you won't be in one place?"

Captain Atkinson laughed.

"No; we Rangers are supposed to be like the Irish bird that flew in two places at the same time," he said.

Then, in a more serious tone, he went on:

"We have twenty-five miles of the Rio Grande to patrol and see that the life and property of Americans along the Border are protected. It is also our duty to keep the revolutionists or Federals from getting into American territory or receiving supplies."

"We had some experience in that line when we were in Northern Chihuahua," responded Jack.

"So I have heard. That is one reason I consented to have you along. Raw tenderfoots would be out of place on a job of this kind. But now we must be pushing on. I want to get into camp and map out my plan of campaign before night." [26]

In a few minutes the column was reformed, and the Rangers, at an easy pace, were riding out of the town toward the river. The three boys rode together.

"Well, Jack," remarked Ralph Stetson, as soon as they found themselves alone, "you've made a nice mess of it."

"How's that?" inquired Jack unsuspectingly.

"Getting in a muss with that Ranger. From the look he gave you as he went away I could see he bore you no great affection."

"Well, I'm not going to lose any sleep over it," declared Jack.

"I should think not," chimed in Walt Phelps, "you only did what you were compelled to do. My dad says, 'Don't go looking for trouble and always avoid it if you can; but if you have it forced on you, why then make the other fellow remember it.'" [27]

"Don't worry about that Shorty not remembering it," admonished

Ralph seriously; “he’s not of the forgetting kind.”

And Ralph was right—Shorty wasn’t, as we shall see before long.

CHAPTER III.

AN ATTEMPT AT "GETTING EVEN."

The Rangers, still overshadowed by that pall of yellow dust that seemed inseparable from them, and almost as much a part of themselves as their horses or accouterments, dashed gallantly out of the town and across the rather dreary expanse of mesquite and thorny cactus that lay between San Mercedes and the Rio Grande. On the brink of the stream, which at that point flowed between steep bluffs of a reddish hue, they drew rein.

The boys peered curiously over the bluff on the edge of which they had halted. They saw a shallow, slowly flowing stream obstructed with sand bars and shallows. On its banks grew scanty patches of brush and dull-colored, stunted trees; but the scene was a dreary, almost melancholy one. [29]

"So this is the Rio Grande!" exclaimed Ralph, in a disappointed voice, "I always thought of it as a noble river dashing along between steep banks and——"

"Gracious, you talk like Sir Walter Scott," grinned Jack; "the Rio Grande at this time of the year, so I've been told, is always like this."

"Why, it's not much more than a mud puddle," complained Walt Phelps.

"I'm not so sure about that, young men," put in Captain Atkinson, who had overheard their conversation, "at certain times in the early spring, or winter you'd call it back east, or when there is a cloud burst, the old Rio can be as angry as the best of them."

"What's a cloud burst?" asked Ralph curiously. "I've read of them but I never knew just what they were."

"Well, for a scientific explanation you'll have to ask somebody wiser than me," laughed Captain Atkinson, "but for an everyday explanation, a cloud burst occurs when clouds, full of moisture, come in contact with mountain tops warmer than the clouds themselves. This causes the clouds to melt all at once—precipitation, I believe the weather sharps call it—and then if you are in this part of the country, look out for squalls along the river." [30]

"But I don't quite understand," remarked Walt. "I guess I'm dense or something. I mean there are no mountains here."

"No; but up among the sources of the Rio there are," explained the leader of the Rangers, "and a cloud burst even many hundred miles away means a sudden tidal wave along this part of the Rio."

"Well, it certainly looks as if it could stand quite a lot more water without being particularly dangerous," commented Jack.

At this point of the conversation Captain Atkinson gave a quick look around as the rumble of approaching wheels was heard. [31]

"Here comes the chuck-wagon, I guess," he said; "you boys will have to excuse me while I ride off to tell them where to make a pitch."

"Yes; I suppose a chuck wagon naturally would make a pitch," grinned Ralph, as Captain Atkinson clattered off.

"The kind of pitch he means is a location," rejoined Walt Phelps. "Look, boys! there she comes. Well, that means that we don't starve, anyhow."

The others followed the direction of Walt's gaze and saw a big lumbering vehicle drawn by eight mules approaching across the mesquite plain. It was roofed with canvas, and through this roof stuck a rusty iron stove pipe. From this blue smoke was pouring in a cloud.

"Talk about a prairie schooner. I guess that's a prairie steamer. Look at her smoke-stack," cried Ralph.

"Yes; and look at the captain," laughed Jack, pointing to the yellow face and flying queue of a Chinaman, which were at this moment projected from the back of the wagon. [32]

"That's the cook," said Walt Phelps, "I guess he's been getting supper ready as they came along."

A loud cheer went up from the Rangers as their traveling dining-room came into sight.

"Hello, old Sawed Off, how's chuck?" yelled one Ranger at the grinning Chinaman.

"Hey, there! What's the news from the Chinese Republic?" shouted another.

"Me no Chinese 'public. Me Chinese Democlat!" bawled the yellow man, waving an iron spoon and vanishing into the interior of his wheeled domain.

"They call him Sawed Off because his name is Tuo Long," chuckled Captain Atkinson, when he had directed the driver of the cook wagon where to draw up and unharness his mules, "but he's a mighty good cook—none better, in fact. He's only got one failing, if you can call it such, and that is his dislike of the new Chinese Republic. If you want to get him excited you've only to start him on that."

[33]

"I don't much believe in getting cooks angry," announced Walt Phelps, whose appetite was always a source of merriment with the Border Boys.

"Nor I. But come along and get acquainted with the boys. By-the-way, you brought blankets and slickers as I wrote you?"

"Oh, yes, and canteens, too. In fact, I guess we are all prepared to be regular Rangers," smiled Jack.

By this time the camp was a scene of picturesque bustle. Ponies had been unsaddled and tethered, and presently another wagon, loaded with baled hay in a great yellow stack, came rumbling up. The Rangers, who had by this time selected their sleeping places and bestowed their saddles, at once set about giving their active little mounts their suppers.

[34]

First, each man mounted on his pony barebacked and rode it down to the river to get a drink of water. To do this they had to ride some little distance, as the bluffs at that point were steep and no path offered. At last, however, a trail was found, and in single file down they went to the watering place.

The boys followed the rest along the steep path, Jack coming last of the trio. The trail lay along the edge of the bluff, and at some places was not much wider than a man's hand. Jack had reached the worst part of it, where a drop of some hundred feet lay below him, when he was astonished to hear the sound of hoofs behind him.

He was astonished because, he had judged, almost everybody in the camp had preceded him while he had been busy inspecting the different arrangements. He faced round abruptly in his saddle and saw that the rider behind him was Shorty.

[35]

It must have been at almost the same moment that, for some unknown reason, Shorty's horse began to plunge and kick. Then it dashed forward, bearing down directly on Jack.

"Look out!" shouted Jack, "there's only room for one on the trail. You'll knock me off!"

"I can't pull him in! I can't pull him in!" yelled Shorty, making what appeared to be frantic efforts to pull in his pony. At the same time he kept the cayuse to the inside of the trail.

Jack saw that unless he did something, and quickly, too, his pony was likely to become unmanageable and plunge off the narrow path. But there was small choice of remedies. Already Shorty's horse, which was coming as if maddened by something, was dashing down on him. Jack resolved to take a desperate chance. The others had by this time almost reached the bottom of the trail. As fast as he dared he compelled his pony to gallop down the steep incline. It was a dangerous thing to do, for the trail was too narrow to afford any foothold at more than a slow and careful walk.

[36]

Behind him, yelling like one possessed, came Shorty. Jack urged his mount faster.

"Goodness! I hope we get to the bottom safely!" he gasped out.

The words had hardly left his lips when he felt his pony's hoofs slip from under him.

The next instant, amid a horrified shout from the men below, Jack and the pony went rolling and plunging off the trail down toward the river.

The last sound Jack heard was Shorty's loud:

"Yip! yip! Ye-o-o-ow!"

CHAPTER IV.

WITH THE RANGERS.

From below, where Jack's companions had witnessed his fall with horrified eyes, it appeared almost impossible that he could escape without serious injury. But as his pony struck the ground at the foot of the cliff, amidst a regular landslide of twigs, rocks and earth, Jack succeeded in extricating himself from under the animal, and rolling a few yards he scrambled to his feet, unhurt except for a few slight cuts and bruises.

Ralph and Walt Phelps left their ponies and came running up to where Jack stood brushing the dirt from his garments.

"Hurt, Jack?" cried Ralph.

"No; never touched me," laughed the boy; "and look at that cayuse of mine, I guess he isn't injured, either." [38]

As Jack spoke he nodded his head in the direction of his pony, which had risen and was now galloping off to join its companions at the watering place.

"How did it happen?" demanded Walt. "We saw you coming down the trail quietly enough one moment, and at the next look, behold, you were riding like Tam o' Shanter."

Jack looked about him before replying. But he and his companions were alone, for the Rangers were too busy watering their mounts to bother with the boys once it had been seen that Jack was not hurt.

"I guess you were right when you said that Shorty had it in for me," he remarked, turning to Walt Phelps.

"How do you mean?"

"Just this: Shorty was behind me on that trail. Suddenly his pony began to bolt. It was to avoid being forced from the narrow path that I spurred up my cayuse so as to keep ahead of him." [39]

"What do you think he meant to do?"

The question came from Ralph.

"It's my opinion that he deliberately tried to get between me and the wall of the cliff and force me off the trail."

"Gracious! You might have been killed."

"Not much doubt that I'd have been badly injured, anyway. But Shorty miscalculated, and where I left the trail was further on and not so far to fall."

"Why don't you tell Captain Atkinson?"

"Why, I have nothing to prove that Shorty's pony really didn't get beyond his control."

"Then you suspect that it was not really running away, but that he made it appear that he was unable to manage it?"

"That's it exactly. However, let's join the men. If I get a chance I want to examine Shorty's horse." [40]

"What's the idea in that?" asked Walt.

"You'll see what my plan is if I get an opportunity to put it into execution," was the reply.

The three boys, arm in arm, sauntered up to the group of Rangers. Some of them were now remounted, and two men had charge of the boys' ponies, including Jack's, which had joined its comrades. Shorty was still watering his animal, but when he saw the boys he came up to Jack with an outstretched hand, and every appearance of great affability.

"Say, Pard'ner," he exclaimed, as if genuinely remorseful, "I hope you ain't mad with me on 'count of that accident."

"No; I never harbor a grudge," responded Jack, with emphasis.

"That critter of mine jes' nat'ly ran away from me," pursued Shorty, in the same tone.

"And so that's the reason you had to spur him till he bled," flashed Jack, in a low tone. The boy had seized his opportunity to look over Shorty's pony and saw at once that it had been cruelly rowelled. [41]

Shorty went pale under his tan. His mouth twitched nervously.

"Why—why, you ain't goin' for to say I done it a-purpose?" he demanded.

"I'm not saying anything about it," responded Jack; "all that I know is this, that I shall take care how I ride in front of you again."

So saying the boy turned on his heel and walked toward his pony, followed by Walt and Ralph, who had witnessed the whole scene. Shorty gazed after them. His alarm had gone from his countenance now, and he bore an expression of malignant rage.

"Dern young tenderfoot cubs," he growled to himself, relieving his feelings by giving his pony a kick in the stomach, "blamed interferin' Mammy boys! I'll l'arn 'em a lesson yet. I'll jes' bet I will, and it'll be a hot one, too. One they won't forget in a hurry."

[42]

But of Shorty's fury the boys were ignorant, for they quickly mounted and clattered back up the trail with the rest of the Rangers. On their return to the camp, as soon as each little pony had been given his generous allowance of hay, they found that supper was ready, the Chinaman announcing the fact by beating on a tin dishpan and shouting:

"Come getee! Come getee!"

None of the Rangers needed any second invitation; nor did the boys need any pressing to make hearty meals. Bacon, salted beef, beans, hot biscuits and strong coffee formed the bill of fare. After the meal had been dispatched Captain Atkinson beckoned to Jack and his companions, and they followed him a little apart from the rest of the Rangers who were singing songs and telling stories around a big camp fire, for the night was quite chilly.

"Since you lads have joined us to learn all you can of the life of a Texas Ranger," he said, "I think that you had better start in as soon as possible."

[43]

"Right away if necessary," responded Jack enthusiastically.

"That's my idea," struck in Walt Phelps.

"Can't make it too soon for me, captain," added Ralph, not a whit less eager than the others.

"Very well, then," smiled the captain of the Rangers, "you will go on sentry duty to-night, and to-morrow I shall see that you have some other work assigned to you."

"Do we—do we have to do sentry duty all night?" asked Ralph, in a rather dubious tone.

"No, indeed. That would never do. You must get your sleep. For that reason we divide the hours of darkness into regular watches. There are four of these. I shall assign you to go out with the first guard," said Captain Atkinson to Jack, and then in turn he informed Walt Phelps and Ralph Stetson that their assignments would come with the second and third watches respectively.

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Jack was all eagerness to begin, and when at eight o'clock he and six of the Rangers rode out of the camp toward the river his heart throbbed with anticipation of the duty before him. The men were in charge of one of their number named "Baldy" Sears. This Baldy was quite a character and had determined to give Jack a thorough testing out. As they rode out, the boy questioned "Baldy" eagerly about his duties, but didn't get much satisfaction.

As a matter of fact, Baldy entertained quite a contempt for "Tenderfeet," as he called the boys, and was rather annoyed at having to take Jack out and act as "school marm," as he phrased it.

They reached the river by the same trail that they had descended to water their ponies earlier that evening. As it was still dusk they rode down it without accident. In fact, the Rangers hardly appeared to notice its dangers. Jack, however, wondered how it would be possible to descend it in the dark without mishap. But, then, he recollected the sure-footedness and uncommon intelligence of the average western pony, and realized that if given a loose rein, there probably was not a cayuse in the outfit that could not negotiate it without difficulty.

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"Now, then," said Baldy, when they reached the bottom of the path, "line up and I'll give you your orders. You, Red Saunders, ride east with Sam, and Ed. Ricky, you and Big Foot ride to the west and keep patrolling. I'll take the young maverick here with me. If any of you gets in trouble or wants assistance fire three shots. I reckon that's all."

The men rode off into the night, and then Baldy and Jack were left alone.

"Got a shootin' iron with you, young feller?" inquired Baldy.

"A what?" returned Jack.

[46]

"Waal, if you ain't the tenderfootedest of tenderfeets," scoffed Baldy; "a shootin' iron—a gun!"

"Why, no, I didn't think it necessary to bring one," rejoined Jack. "I don't like carrying firearms unless they are needful. Do you think that anything will happen in which firearms would be useful?"

"Firearms is always useful along the Rio," returned Baldy, "I dunno if the cap told you, but we're here on special duty to-night."

"Dangerous duty?" asked Jack.

"You can't most gen'ally sometimes allers tell," vouchsafed Baldy, examining the magazine of his rifle which he had taken from its saddle holster for the purpose.

CHAPTER V.

JACK'S CHANCE.

"You mean that there is a chance of our being attacked?"

Jack put the question in rather an anxious tone. But for some reason Baldy only grunted in reply.

"I'm going back to camp to git you a gun," he said; "you stay right here till I get back."

"Very well, Mr. Baldy," rejoined the boy, in as conciliatory a tone as possible.

"Don't mister me. I ain't got no handle to my name and don't never expect to have," grunted Baldy, as he swung his pony and rode off.

As Jack listened to the retreating hoof beats he felt strangely lonely. It was very dark down in the cañon, and the steely blue stars seemed very far away. Only the rushing of the water of the river disturbed the boy's thoughts while he awaited Baldy's return.

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"He's not very lively company," he admitted to himself, "but it's better than being all alone. Wish Ralph or Walt had been ordered to share my watch."

But the next moment he was scolding himself.

"For shame, Jack Merrill," he said, "here's the first bit of duty you've been put to, and here you are complaining already. It's got to stop right here and now, and—hello, what was that?"

The boy broke off short, as through the darkness of the cañon he caught an odd sound from the river.

"What can that sound be?" he said to himself. "It seems familiar, too. Where have I heard something like it before?"

Then all of a sudden it dawned upon him what the odd noise was.

It was the splash of oars. But what could a boat be doing on the river at that time of night, and in such a place? Jack was asking himself these questions when he became aware of some words being spoken at a short distance from him. He recognized the language instantly. The men who were conversing were talking in Spanish, of which tongue Jack had a fair working knowledge, as we know.

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He was in the darker shadow of the cañon wall and therefore, of course, quite invisible to whoever was on the river, and who had apparently come to a stop almost opposite to his station. He quickly slipped from his pony, and taking advantage of the brush that grew almost to the water's edge, he crawled along on his stomach in the direction of the unseen men.

At last he gained a position where he could hear them quite distinctly, and could even see their figures bulking up blackly in the general gloom. But what they were doing he could not imagine, and when he finally did find out he received the surprise of his life.

Listening to their talk, Jack heard them speaking of Rosario, the leader of the insurgents in that quarter of the Mexican Republic, and apparently they were discussing some mission on which they had been dispatched.

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He heard the Rangers mentioned, and then came some information that was new to him. The Federal troops of Mexico were hot on the heels of the insurgent army, and the rebels were planning to bring the coming battle on to American soil if possible, in order to force the interference of Uncle Sam.

Evidently the men knew of the presence of the Rangers in the locality, and, by listening, Jack soon learned that they were there acting as spies in order to find out how strongly the Border was guarded at that point. Finally they strode off cautiously into the darkness, apparently with the object of reconnoitering the vicinity.

This was Jack's chance. Without a moment's hesitation he made his way to the river bank and found that a large raft had been moored there. It was evidently on this that the spies had made their way down the stream from some point above. The raft was formed roughly of tree trunks, but appeared to be of stout construction. Some long oars for navigating it lay on the logs; but Jack, in his hasty search, could not see anything on board that might be of interest to Captain Atkinson.

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He had just completed his examination and was preparing to go

back on shore when something happened that changed his plans. As if by magic the figures of the men who had left the raft reappeared at the water's edge.

At the same instant that Jack spied them the men became aware of the intruder on their raft. They did not dare to fire the weapons they carried, owing to the nearness of the Rangers; otherwise they would undoubtedly have done so. Instead, they made a simultaneous leap at Jack, the leader aiming a savage blow at him. [52]

The boy dodged the man's swing, springing backward on the raft. The contrivance had not been securely fastened to the bank. In fact, it had merely been tied carelessly up at the water's edge. Jack's sudden spring gave the raft a violent jolt. The current caught it and whirled it round as the strain came upon one side of it.

Before either Jack or the Mexicans exactly realized what had occurred, the raft was swept out into midstream, the current hurrying it along swiftly.

But Jack was not alone on the swaying, pitching craft. The Mexican who had aimed the blow at him had had one foot on the raft when Jack's backward spring caused it to drift from the bank. By a desperate effort he had managed to maintain a foothold, and now he was crouching back on his haunches like a wild-cat about to spring, while in his hands gleamed a wicked looking knife. [53]

Jack had just time to see this when the fellow, hissing out a torrent of Spanish oaths, sprang at him. Jack dodged the knife blow, and before the Mexican could recover his equilibrium the boy's fist had collided with the lower part of the Mexican's jaw.

The blow was a heavy one, and had landed fair and square. With a grunt of pain and rage the fellow reeled backward, almost pitching off the raft. But in a jiffy he recovered from his shock and rushed at Jack, snarling like a wild beast.

The boy realized that he was in for a fight for life, and in that moment he bitterly regretted the curiosity that had caused him to board the raft, although he had done it with the idea of performing a service for the Rangers. Now, however, he found himself facing a desperate situation.

Unarmed, and alone, he was on a drifting raft with an armed and singularly ferocious foe. [54]

"Yankee pig!" snarled out the Mexican, as he flung himself at the boy.

Jack's blood boiled at the insult. It acted as a brace to his sinking heart. As the man lunged at him the boy's hand struck up the arm that held the knife and the weapon went spinning into the night. But the Mexican, a large man of uncommon strength and activity, did not cease his attack. He rushed at Jack as if to annihilate him.

This was just what Jack wanted. The angrier the Mexican was the worse he would fight, as Jack knew. He met the onrush with coolness, and succeeded in planting two good blows on the man's body. But muscular as Jack was the blows appeared to have little effect on the Mexican. He tore in more savagely than ever.

Without his knife the Mexican was not much of a fighter. He knew nothing of the art of boxing, and Jack's "gym" training stood him in good stead. At last, in one of the Mexican's frantic rushes, Jack's fist met the point of his chin with deadly effect. With a wild swinging of his arms the fellow reeled backward. [55]

He would have fallen from the raft into the current had not Jack leaped forward and saved him. But the Mexican was a formidable foe no longer. Jack's blow had effectually stunned him for a time, and as the boy saved him from pitching overboard he sank in a heap on the floor of the raft.

In the first opportunity he had had for observation of his situation since the raft had got loose, Jack looked about him. Then, for the first time, he realized that the rough craft was proceeding at an extremely swift rate. It was spinning round dizzily, too, as though caught in some sort of whirlpool.

Jack was still wondering how far they had come and what was to be the outcome of this odd adventure, when something happened that effectually put all other thoughts out of his head. [56]

The air became filled with a roaring sound, and spray began to dash upon the floor of the raft. With a sharp thrill of alarm Jack recognized that the roaring sound was the voice of a waterfall, and that the raft was being swept toward it at lightning speed. He seized up one of the oars and attempted to head the raft for the shore. But

the oar might have been a straw for all the effect it had against that rapid current.

All at once it snapped, almost hurling Jack overboard. The next instant raft, boy and unconscious man were swept into a vortex of waters. Jack felt himself falling through space. Simultaneously there came a crashing blow on his head. A million constellations seemed to swim before his eyes, and then, with a blinding flash of fire, his senses left him.



**THE NEXT INSTANT RAFT, BOY AND
UNCONSCIOUS MAN WERE SWEEPED INTO A
VORTEX OF WATERS.**

CHAPTER VI.

THE POOL OF DEATH.

The blow that had been dealt the boy came from one of the timbers of the raft, which had been torn to pieces as it was swept over the falls. How long Jack remained insensible he did not know; but when he recovered his senses he found himself struggling in a seething pool of water at the foot of the falls. Luckily he was able to catch hold of one of the logs of the raft as it was swept by him, and clinging to this he began to strike out with his legs, hoping to make his way to the edge of the pool.

Many times during that desperate struggle for existence Jack felt certain that death would intervene before he could accomplish his purpose. Once another log, that was being swept round like a straw in that boiling vortex of foaming waters, was dashed against the one to which he clung. The shock almost forced the lad to relinquish his hold. But he hung on like grim death.

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Blinded by foam and half choked, the boy, with bull-dog grit, stuck to his purpose, and at last was rewarded by feeling ground under his feet. A moment later, bruised, breathless and drenched to the skin, he flung himself panting on the sandy shore of the pool, too exhausted to move further.

He lay there, actually feeling more dead than alive, for a long time before he felt capable of moving. But at last he found strength to drag himself further up the bank. Fumbling in his pocket, he found that his water-tight match box was in its proper place, and in the darkness he set about making preparations to build a fire. Luckily, on the brink of the pool there was any quantity of dry wood cast up by the maelstrom of waters, and the boy soon had a roaring blaze kindled. Stripping to his underclothing he hung his other garments on sticks in front of the blaze while he basked in its cheery rays.

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By the glow he could see a part of the pool, and as he gazed at its troublous surface and foaming fury he marveled that he had been able to escape with his life. The firelight also showed him that he was in a sort of rock-walled bowl, with steeply sloping sides scantily clad in places with stunted bushes. He was still sitting by this fire, trying to think of some way out of his dilemma, when exhausted nature asserted herself and he sank into a deep slumber beside the warm blaze.

When he awoke the sun was shining down on his face. The daylight showed him that he had blundered into an astonishing place indeed. As he had guessed, by what he could see of the place by firelight, he was at the bottom of a rocky bowl into which the falls over which he had tumbled roared and thundered unceasingly as they had been doing for uncounted centuries.

Jack estimated the height of the falls as being fully sixty feet. The boiling pool appeared to be about an acre or so in extent, and was furiously agitated by the constant pouring of the mighty falls. And now Jack became aware of a curious thing.

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All about the edges of the pool, where the circular motion of the water had evidently cast them up, were myriads of bones. They appeared to be the remains of cattle and various kinds of game; but some of them caused Jack to shudder as he had a distinct notion that they were of human origin.

All at once, while he was still exploring the strange place into which he had fallen, he came across a bleached skull lying amid a pile of bones and débris. The ghastly relic gave him a rude shock as he gazed at it.

"Gracious!" the boy exclaimed, with a shudder, "this place might well be called a Pool of Death. How fortunate I am to be alive; although how I am going to get out of this scrape I don't know. One thing is certain, I cannot remount by the falls. I must see what lies in the other direction."

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Up to that moment, so agitated had the castaway boy been that he had almost entirely forgotten the Mexican with whom he had had the battle on the raft. The thought of the man now suddenly recurred to him. Jack sighed as he realized that the Mexican could hardly have been so fortunate as he had been. In all probability he had forfeited his life to the Pool of Death.

With such melancholy thoughts in his mind Jack set about exploring the rocky basin for some means of exit. Although he was determined not to give way to despair, the boy could not but own that his situation was well-nigh desperate. He was many miles from his friends, and probably in an uninhabited part of the country. He had no food; nor even if there had been any game had he the means of shooting it.

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His hunger was now beginning to make itself painfully manifest. On some bushes that clung to the walls of the Pool of Death were some bright-colored berries, but Jack dreaded to try them. For all he knew they might be deadly poison.

Searching for an exit, Jack was not long in finding one. The pool was drained by a narrow crevice in the rocky walls, forming a passage. On the brink of the water was a strip of beach, not much wider than a man's hand. Beside this pathway the water roared and screamed in its narrow bounds, but Jack knew that if he was to get out of this place at all he must dare the rocky passage.

Stifling his fears as well as he could, the famished, bedraggled lad struck pluckily out. Sometimes the passage grew so narrow that he could have bestridden the stream. At other points it widened out and, looking up, Jack could see the blue sky far overhead. In reality the passage was not more than half a mile in length but, so carefully did Jack have to proceed, it appeared to be four times that length at least.

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The passage ended with almost startling abruptness. Jack could hardly repress an exclamation of amazement as he saw upon what a strange scene it opened. Beyond its mouth lay a broad valley, carpeted with vivid green grass and dotted here and there, like a park, with groups of trees. Viewed in the sparkling sunlight it was indeed a scene of rare beauty and Jack's heart gave a throb of delight as he beheld it.

"Surely," he thought, "some rancher must live hereabouts who will give me food and lend me a horse to ride back to San Mercedes."

For the first few minutes following his discovery of the valley the boy did not doubt but that he should find an easy and speedy means of escaping from his difficulties. But it gradually began to dawn upon him that the place upon which he had so oddly blundered was not inhabited at all. At least, he could see no sign of a human habitation.

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Then, too, somewhat to his dismay, he noticed another feature of the valley which had at first escaped his attention altogether.

The place was completely enclosed by steep, lofty cliffs, and appeared as if, at some early period of the world's growth, it had been dropped below the level of the surrounding country by some mighty convulsion of nature.

For the rest the valley appeared to be about a mile in length and half a mile wide at its broadest part. Through the center of it the stream that issued from the passage beyond the Pool of Death meandered leisurely along.

"Well," exclaimed Jack, to himself, gazing somewhat disconsolately about him, "this is a beautiful spot into which I have wandered; but somehow it doesn't appear to solve my difficulties. In the first place, I don't believe it is frequented by human beings, and in the second, so far as I can see, there is no way out of it. I wonder where on earth I can be? Certainly not on the Rio Grande itself. I begin to suspect that that current hurled the raft off into some side stream which terminated in the falls."

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It may be said here that Jack's theory was correct. The valley in which he found himself had been caused by a convulsion of nature similar to that which effected the wonderful Yosemite Valley in California. It was, in fact, a miniature reproduction of that famous scenic marvel. As the boy likewise suspected, the raft had indeed been hurried by the stream from the main current of the Rio Grande and drawn into a side fork of the river.

Although Jack did not know it at the time, he was on Mexican soil and far removed from his friends, as he paced the strange secret valley.

"I guess my best plan is to follow that stream," mused Jack, after a period of thought; "if I'm not mistaken there must be some way out of the valley at the spot where it emerges. At any rate I'll try it."

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He had walked some distance from the bank of the stream in his

explorations, and he now began to re-thread his footsteps. He directed his course toward a big rock that towered up by the bank of the stream, apparently dislodged at some remote time from the summit of the lofty cliffs that hedged the place all about.

When Jack was within a few feet of the rock he was brought to a sudden halt by a startling occurrence.

From behind the monster boulder a human figure emerged, and the next instant Jack was being hailed by the sudden apparition.

CHAPTER VII.

A STRANGE VALLEY.

Had he beheld the emergence of a supposedly dead man from his tomb, the boy could not have been much more startled. As it was the two cases would have had much in common, for the figure that now advanced toward him was that of a man he had given up for dead—namely, the Mexican who had shared that wild voyage on the raft.

For an instant Jack instinctively threw himself into an attitude of defense. But the next moment he saw that he had nothing to fear from the newcomer. In fact, a more woebegone figure than the Mexican presented it would be hard to imagine. There was a big gash over one of his eyes, his clothing was torn to ribbons and he limped painfully as he advanced toward Jack.

"How did you come here?" asked Jack in Spanish.

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"Ah, señor, surely by a miracle of the saints," was the reply, as the man raised his eyes to heaven. "I recollect your blow and then nothing more till I found myself cast up on the bank of yonder stream. Call it what you will, I believe that it was a true miracle of Providence that my life was saved."

"We must both thank a higher power for our deliverance," said Jack reverently. "I never thought that I should see you alive again."

"But who are you?" demanded the Mexican. "How came you on our raft before it went adrift?"

Jack thought for a moment before replying, and then he decided that it could do no possible harm, under the circumstances, to tell who he was.

"I am the son of an Arizona rancher," he said. "My name is Jack Merrill. With two companions I was accompanying the Texas Rangers on a scouting trip for the sake of the experience. While on guard duty I saw your raft land and thought it my duty to try to find out what you were doing on the American side of the river."

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To Jack's surprise the other showed no trace of anger. Instead he appeared grief stricken.

"Alas, señor," he said, "you may have been the cause of the death of my two companions, for if the Texas Rangers captured them they will assuredly shoot them."

"I'm sure they would do no such thing," rejoined Jack indignantly; "they are not inhuman wretches. If your companions can show that they were doing no harm on our side of the Border they will be released with a warning not to spy upon Americans again."

"Ah, then, you knew that we were spying, señor?"

"Yes, I overheard your conversation at the river's edge. But it is important now that we should get out of this valley as soon as possible. Have you any idea where we are?"

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The Mexican shrugged his shoulders dubiously.

"Alas, señor, I am not certain, but I am inclined to think that we are in what is called the Lost Valley."

"Lost Valley!" echoed Jack, struck by the dismal suggestion of the name. "Is there no way out?"

His companion shook his head.

"The legend says that they who blunder into the valley never escape," he declared.

Jack could not repress a shudder as he thought of the skull by the pool; but the next instant he regained his nerve, for he knew that the stream must emerge from the valley somewhere.

"But surely this river has to find a way out of the valley?" he asked.

"Si, señor," was the reply, "but the stream, so they say, burrows its way through a tunnel by which no human being could hope to pass."

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"Then you mean that we are prisoners here?"

"Unless somebody discovers us—yes."

"Are there many people dwelling in this part of the country?" inquired Jack, with a sinking heart, for, despite his effort to keep up his cheerfulness, his hope was fast ebbing.

"No, it is a wild section devoted to cattle raising, and only a few

wandering vaqueros ever come this way. It is from them that the news of the Lost Valley, which this may be, reached the outer world."

"But we must escape," cried Jack wildly, "we can't remain here. We have no food, no means of getting any, and———"

"I have my revolver," interrupted the Mexican, "also plenty of cartridges. Perhaps we can find some game."

This at least was a spark of cheering news. Both Jack and the Mexican were almost famished and decided to set out at once to see if they could bring down anything to serve as food. A revolver is not much of a weapon to use in hunting; but the Mexican declared that he was highly proficient with it. Jack hadn't much confidence in his own ability as a revolver shot, so it was agreed that his dark-skinned companion should do the shooting.

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They ranged the valley for some time without seeing a sign of life, when suddenly, from a clump of trees, there sprang three deer—two does and a buck.

Bang! went the revolver, and the buck slackened speed and staggered. A crimson stream from his shoulder showed that he had been badly wounded. But it took two more shots to bring him down. He was then dispatched with Jack's knife. No time was lost in cutting off some steaks from the dead buck, a fire was speedily kindled and an appetizing aroma of broiling venison came from it. The meat was cooked by being held over the glowing wood coals on sticks of hard wood. Jack could hardly wait till his was cooked to eat it.

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Fresh deer meat is not the delicacy that some of my readers may suppose. It is coarse, stringy and rather tasteless; but neither Jack nor his companion were in a mood to be particular. They devoured the meat ravenously, although they had no salt, bread or any other relish. But the meat strengthened Jack wonderfully, and as soon as it had been eaten he proposed that they should explore the valley thoroughly in an attempt to find a way out.

The Mexican was nothing loath; but he was dubious about there being any avenue of escape. However, with the stoical fatalism of his race he appeared to accept the situation philosophically.

Before setting out on their expedition the deer meat was hung in one of the trees as a protection in case any wild animals should get scent of it. This done, the Border Boy and his oddly contrasted companion set off, trudging around the valley in a determined effort to effect their escape in some way.

[74]

Several cañons that opened off into the rocky walls were examined, but they all proved to be "blind" and impassable. In exploring one of these Jack had a thrilling adventure.

His foot slipped on a rock and he plunged into a deep hole among some boulders. He was about to scramble out again, when from one of the rock crevices a hideous flat head darted. At the same time a curious dry, rattling sound was heard on every side of him. The boy recognized the noise with a sharp thrill of alarm.

The sound was the vibration of the horny tails of dozens of diamond-backed "rattlers," into a den of which he had fallen. On every side flat heads with evil-looking, leaden eyes were darting in and out of the rocks. The boy was paralyzed with fear. He dared not move a hand or foot lest he precipitate an attack by the loathsome creatures. As soon as he recovered his wits he set up a shout for his Mexican friend, who had told him that his name was Manuel Alvarez.

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Alvarez was quickly on the spot. He took in the situation at a glance, and cautioning Jack not to move, he fired his revolver down into the den of noisome reptiles. The bullet passed so close to Jack's head that he could feel it fan the air. But, as the report of the pistol volleyed and crashed among the rocks, every rattler vanished.

"Now come out quickly!" ordered Alvarez, reaching down a hand to Jack, who took it and scrambled out of the pit of snakes.

As he thanked the Mexican for his promptness in acting, the boy could not help thinking in what an extraordinary situation he was involved.

Lost in a hidden valley with, for companion, a man who, not more than a few hours ago, had been bent on killing him, now it was to that man that he owed his life.

"This is surely one of the strangest adventures in which I have ever taken part," mused the Border Boy, as the two castaways

[76]

resumed their dreary search for a passage to the outer world.

CHAPTER VIII.

NATURE'S PRISONERS.

But despite the most painstaking investigation of the valley, a task which occupied them till almost sundown, the two oddly assorted prisoners were unable to find anything that promised a means of escape. They reached the spot where they had left the deer and flung themselves wearily down upon the ground, too disheartened and tired even to voice their disappointment.

"Gracious! Men imprisoned in a jail could not be more effectually shut in," said Jack, at length; "I feel almost like dashing myself against these rock walls."

His companion was compelled to admit that their situation did indeed seem a hard one. For some time they sat buried in thought. Jack's mind was back in the camp of the Rangers. He wondered how his friends felt over his disappearance, and what steps were being taken to find him. How bitterly his heart ached to see his boy chums again he did not say for fear of breaking down.

"We *must* get out of this horrible place," he cried, at length, "tomorrow as soon as it is light I mean to examine the cliffs and, if possible, to scale them."

"You could not find a place that would afford a foothold," objected his companion.

"I'll try, at any rate. I'd rather almost be dashed to death than drag out a lingering existence in this valley," burst out the boy.

"Well, let us have supper," said Alvarez presently, "there is nothing to be gained by railing at our fate. If the saints do not will that we shall escape, depend upon it we will not."

So saying he rose to his feet, shrugging his shoulders resignedly.

"What a contrast between the indifference of such a race and the rugged determination of an American," thought Jack, as he set to work to rekindle the embers of the fire that had cooked their mid-day meal.

He was blowing them into flame when Alvarez called to him from among the trees. He had found a species of oak which was burdened with acorns. These, the Mexican declared, could be made into a kind of bread if crushed and mixed with water. As this would be a welcome addition to ungarnished deer meat, Jack was proportionately pleased at the discovery. The Mexican set to work and ground the acorns between two flat stones, after which he heated one of the latter till it was almost red-hot. This done, the acorn paste was spread out on it, and before long there was produced a rather "doughy" sort of flap-jack or pan-cake. When one side was done Alvarez turned it till it was nicely browned. By this time Jack had some broiled venison ready, and they sat down to their second meal in the Lost Valley with good appetites.

The acorn flap-jack proved to be not at all unpalatable. It was rather sweet and had a peculiar flavor; at any rate it afforded some variety to the plain deer meat.

"Well, we shan't starve here, at least," commented the Mexican, as they ate; "there seem to be plenty of deer and small game and an unlimited supply of acorns for bread."

"No, I suppose if it came down to that, we could live here for a century, like two Robinson Crusoes," agreed Jack, rather bitterly, "but that's not my plan. I mean to escape."

"The young are always hopeful," rejoined Alvarez, with one of his all-expressive shrugs; "I suppose you think you can carry out your plan."

"I mean to make a mighty hard try at it, anyhow," said Jack, setting his lips in a determined line.

That evening as they sat by their camp fire, Alvarez told Jack that he and his two companions on the raft had been leaders of the northern wing of the revolutionary army. They had chosen the raft as a medium to spy from, he explained, because it was possible in that way to ascertain what the border patrol was doing, without so much risk of being discovered as would have been the case had they used horses.

"I guess you wish you'd never seen the raft by this time," commented Jack, throwing some fresh wood on the fire.

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"I do, indeed," agreed the other fervently.

Soon after this they composed themselves to sleep, but it was long before Jack closed his eyes.

He was just dozing off when the sound of a furtive footfall made him sit up, broad awake in an instant. From the darkness two green points were blazing at him.

"The eyes of some wild beast that has decided to pay us a visit," said Jack to himself.

He was just about to arouse Alvarez and get the revolver when the creature that was prowling about the camp gave a sudden leap. Jack saw a lithe body launched at him just in time to roll to one side. [82]

The creature, balked in its spring, came down in the midst of the hot ashes of the smoldering fire. Instantly a piercing howl of anguish split the night. The Mexican leaped up and appeared to be fully awake the instant he opened his eyes. At any rate the great, tawny body was still writhing about in the embers when two shots crackled from his revolver. The big animal gave a spring and another howl of pain and then fell over in a heap, rolling to one side of the fire.

"What—whatever was it?" cried Jack, rather timorously, for the suddenness of the attack had rather unnerved him.

"A mountain lion, and a monster, too," came the reply. "Come up and take a look at him."

"Are you quite sure he is dead?"

"Positive. Wait a minute and I'll make sure, however."

So saying the Mexican stooped and picked a glowing coal out of the fire. He threw it so that it fell on the motionless beast's hide. But the animal did not stir. Unquestionably it was quite dead. Jack approached it, having poked up the fire the better to see the brute. He marveled at its size. It was indeed a giant of its kind and must have weighed six hundred pounds or more, and was lithe and sinewy as a cat. [83]

"What splendid condition it is in! I'd like to skin it and take the hide out of this valley as a souvenir."

"So you are still certain that we can get out?"

"I am not *certain*, but I don't want to give over trying till we have tested every avenue of hope."

"*Caramba!* But you Americans are wonderful people! A Mexican boy would be sitting around crying if he were in the same fix. In the morning we will take the pelt off this brute, and if we ever do get out, the skin will always serve as a memento of a dreadful time." [84]

The mountain lion scare being over, they composed themselves to sleep again. Jack recollected having read or heard that when a mountain lion is killed, its mate will find it out and avenge it. But even though the thought gave him cause for disquietude he was not able to stay awake; and although distant howlings told him that another puma was in the vicinity, nature asserted herself and sealed his eyes in slumber.

The sun had hardly peeped above the rim of the bowl-like valley when Jack and Alvarez were astir. Breakfast was cooked and eaten hurriedly, and then the great lion was skinned. This done, Jack started out to put his plans in execution.

The Mexican did not accompany him. He deemed Jack's mission a useless one. In fact, it did seem very like an attempt at suicide to try to scale the valley's lofty, almost perpendicular walls.

CHAPTER IX.

A CLIMB FOR LIFE.

Jack strolled along at the foot of the cliffs, anxiously scanning every inch of them in the hope of spying some place that afforded an opportunity to climb upward. The cliffs varied in height from two hundred to three, and even four hundred feet. Great beetling crags of gray stone, too steep to afford foothold to more than a few scanty shrubs, filled him with oppression and gloom.

The boy felt this disheartening influence as he made his way along the edges of the valley. From time to time he sighted game—deer, rabbits and a good many quail; but as he had not brought their solitary firearm along he did not pay much attention to the animals.

At last he halted at the foot of a cliff that was less precipitous than the others. It had, in fact, a slight slope to it, and was more closely grown with bushes and small trees which might be grasped by any one attempting to climb it. [86]

Jack had his knife with him, a heavy-bladed, business-like bit of cutlery of finely tempered steel, but strong and thick withal. He drew it out, opened the blade and began hacking at the cliff's face. It was of a soft sort of stone, and he could easily cut depressions in it.

"Good," murmured the boy, "I actually believe that I may be able to scale this cliff, although it may take a long time."

He gauged its height carefully and estimated that from the floor of the valley to the summit of the precipice it must be fully three hundred feet.

"If the situation was not so desperate I would never dream of attempting to climb that awful height," mused the boy, "but necessity often drives where courage would falter."

So thinking, he cast off his coat, laid it on the ground and his hat beside it. Then he clambered over the pile of stones that lay at the foot of the cliff and began his climb. For the first forty feet or so his task was not so difficult. But it was hot, and the perspiration began to run off the laboring lad in streams. [87]

He paused to rest. Jack was now, as has been said, about two score feet from the floor of the valley. Up to this point the cliff had sloped at quite an angle; but now it reared itself upward in a seemingly impassable escarpment, like the wall of a giant's castle.

"Now for the real tug-of-war," thought Jack, when he had rested.

Tightening his belt, he braced himself for what he knew would be a desperately dangerous climb. First he dug out holes to fit his hands and then began working his way up. From time to time he was able to grasp bushes and stunted trees, and these helped him greatly in his task. When he reached even the narrowest ledge he laid down to rest, extending himself at full length and panting like a spent hound. [88]

Owing to the soft nature of the rock, however, he progressed rather better than he had anticipated. But it was slow work. From time to time the face of the cliff was so precipitous that he was compelled to make a detour to find an easier place to cut his steps.

Once he looked down; but he did not repeat the experiment. The sight of the dizzy height, to which he clung like some crawling insect, almost unnerved him. For several minutes, with a palpitating heart and a sickened feeling at the pit of his stomach, he hugged the rock, not daring to look either up or down.

But at last his courage came back and he began his painful progress upward once more. Foot by foot he climbed, and at last, when resting on a ledge, he dared to look about him to see what progress he had made. To his delight he saw that he had come more than halfway up the precipice, although above him its rugged face still towered frowningly as if daring him to surmount it.



**THE SIGHT OF THE DIZZY HEIGHT ALMOST
UNNERVED HIM.**

“Well, I would never have believed that I could have climbed to such a height with so little inconvenience,” mused the boy. “Of course, the climb is a good deal rougher than it looks from below; but still it’s an experience I wouldn’t go through again for hundreds of dollars.”

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Having rested on the ledge and munched some deer meat and acorn flap-jack which he had brought with him, Jack recommenced his climb. It spoke marvels for his cool head, great strength and wonderful endurance that the boy had progressed as far as he had. Few but an American youth of the most steel-like fiber and sterling grit would have dared to undertake such a task. And yet, before Jack there still lay the hardest part of his endeavor.

So steep was the cliff face now that the lad did not dare to pause in his climb. He steadily progressed although his hands were cut and bleeding by this time, and his feet ached as cruelly as did other parts of his anatomy. But just when it seemed to the lad that his body could not stand another fraction of an ounce of strain, he happened on a place where a watercourse from above had cut a sort of shallow cleft in the precipice. In this grew shrubs and several trees, and Jack struggled to gain this oasis in the dangerous desert of his climb for life.

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Gaining it, he flung himself at full length on a bed of sweet smelling yellow flowers under the shade of a broad-leaved bay tree. In the stillness of that lonely and awful height, halfway between earth and sky, his breathing sounded as loud as the exhaust of a steam engine. But by-and-by he recovered his breath, and began to wish with all his soul for some water.

That fearful climb had racked both nerve and muscle; but even more than his fatigue did Jack feel the cruel pangs of a burning thirst. Some grass grew in that lonely little grove on the cliff face, and he chewed some of this for the sake of the moisture that exuded from it. But this was far from satisfying. In fact, it only aggravated his thirst by mocking it.

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He rose on one elbow and looked about him. At a short distance up the steep, dry watercourse he saw a patch of vivid green. To his mind that could betoken nothing but the presence of water near the surface. At any rate he felt that it was worth investigating.

Reaching the patch of verdure, the boy fell on his hands and knees, and with a sharp-edged stone began scraping away at the ground. To his unspeakable delight he had not dug down more than

a few inches before the ground began to grow moist.

Greatly encouraged, he dug away with his improvised tool with renewed vigor. He excavated quite a hole, and then lay down in the shade waiting for it to fill up. Before long a few inches of warm, muddy-colored liquid could be discerned at the bottom of the hole. It did not look inviting, this coffee-colored, tepid mixture, but Jack was not in the mood to be fastidious.

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Casting himself down on his stomach, he plunged his face into the water, sucking it greedily in. Then he bathed his hands and face. He was still engaged in this last occupation when his attention was distracted by a low growl from below him.

The boy looked up quickly, and then almost toppled over backward with astonishment.

Facing him, and lashing its stubby tail angrily, was a large bob-cat. The creature had its wicked-looking teeth bared, and the boy could see its sharp claws. How it came to be in that place he could not imagine. But its emaciated condition seemed to indicate that it must have in some way fallen from the cliff above.

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Evidently it was half mad from deprivation of food and water, for under ordinary conditions a bob-cat—although a really dangerous foe if cornered—will not attack a human being without provocation.

The wild beast's object was, evidently, to get at the water hole which Jack had so painstakingly scooped out. The boy would have been willing enough to allow it to accomplish its purpose. But evidently the half famished creature regarded him as an enemy to be dispatched before it proceeded to slake its thirst.

It crouched down till its fawn-colored belly touched the ground and then, uttering a snarling sort of cry, it launched its body through the air at the boy.

So strong was its leap that tempered steel springs could not have hurled its body forward with more velocity. Jack uttered an involuntary cry of alarm. Above him was the steep cliff, while to move even a short distance in either direction from the dry watercourse would mean a death plunge to the valley below.

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CHAPTER X.

A BATTLE IN MID-AIR.

But Jack Merrill's mind never worked quicker or to better effect than in an emergency. He perceived the instant that the creature crouched that its intention was to spring on him. Swift as a flash he reached down and seized a stone.

As the bob-cat hurled itself into the air Jack's arm shot out. The stone sped from his hand and caught the creature fairly between the eyes. Had a bullet struck it the animal could not have been checked more effectually. It dropped to the ground, rolled up in a furry ball, scratching and spitting furiously, and then, with a yowl of rage and pain, it lost its footing on the edge of the watercourse.

The last Jack saw of it the creature plunged over the brink of the precipice up which the Border Boy had so laboriously toiled. As he heard the body go rolling and bumping down toward the valley, Jack shuddered. Had things turned out differently he might have been in its place, for the boy well knew that if once the maddened animal had fastened its claws in him he would not have stood a chance without a weapon.

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Jack sat down to rest once more, this time keeping a cautious lookout for any other wild creatures; but none appeared, and it was evident that his theory that the animal had accidentally dropped from above was a correct one.

"Well," said Jack to himself, after an interval, "if I'm to get to the top of that cliff I've got to start in right now. Ugh! It doesn't look as if I could possibly make it; but then it's equally certain that I can't climb down again. The thought makes me sick; so I've *got* to tackle it. There's no other way out of it."

Fortifying himself by a cooling drink, to which he added another wash, the boy prepared to take up his task again.

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Above the dry watercourse the cliff shot up more precipitously than the part he had already traversed below it; but Jack steeled himself to the thought of the dizzy climb. Knife in hand he worked his way up, clinging to the face of the cliff desperately at times, and again resting where some vagrant bush offered him a hand or foothold.

In the meantime, below in the valley, Alvarez, returning from a hunt for more food, began to worry about the boy. Not a bad man at heart, Alvarez was a true son of the Mexican revolution. He decided that all Americans, or Gringos, as he contemptuously called them, were the born foes of the Mexicans. It had been with this conviction that he and his companions had set out to spy on the Rangers who, they thought, menaced them, instead of merely patrolling the Border to prevent lawless acts on American soil.

Since his brief acquaintance with Jack, however, Alvarez had found cause to revise his opinion. Himself a courageous man, he admired courage and grit in others, and of these qualities we know Jack possessed full and abundant measure.

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Returning, then, from his hunt with some quail and rabbits, Alvarez began to be seriously alarmed about Jack. Not for one moment did the Mexican deem it possible that the lad could have actually found a way to scale those awful cliffs. He had confidently expected that on his return to camp he would find Jack awaiting him. When, therefore, he could see no trace of the boy his alarm was genuine and deep.

He carefully deposited his game out of harm's way in the trees, and then set out to see if he could find any trace of the boy to whom he had become attached in their short acquaintance.

As he advanced below the cliffs he carefully scanned the foot of the precipitous heights for what he dreaded to find; for Alvarez had begun to fear that Jack had made a daring attempt to escape and summon help and had met death in a fearful fall from the rocky crags.

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"The boy would have been mad to attempt such a climb," he muttered, as he moved along, "why, not even a mountain goat could find a foothold up yonder. It is impossible that he should have tried such a thing. It would have been sheer madness. And yet—and yet when it comes to such things the Gringos are assuredly mad. They will dare anything it seems."

Musing thus the Mexican traversed the greater part of the valley, pondering deeply over the possible fate of his young friend.

"It is a thing without explanation that he could have climbed even a few feet up those cliffs," ran the burden of his thoughts; "yet if he has not, why do I not see a trace of him here below?"

"*Caramba!* Can it be that he has slipped on a lofty crag and is suspended high above the valley, injured, perhaps dying, and beyond reach of human aid?"

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On and on trudged the Mexican, growing more and more alarmed every instant.

Suddenly, as he cast his eye up toward the summit of a lofty precipice, his attention was caught by an object moving slowly up its surface, like a fly on a high wall.

The Mexican gazed steadily at it. He believed that it was an eagle or condor hovering about its nest in the dizzy heights, but still something odd about the moving object arrested and gripped his attention irresistibly.

"No, it is not an eagle," he muttered, "but, then, what is it? No quadruped could climb that cliff. What, then, can it be?"

The sun was sinking low over the western wall of the cañon and the valley itself was beginning to be shrouded in purple shadow. But at that great height the light was still bright. Suddenly the moving object emerged from a patch of shade cast by an overhanging rock.

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Simultaneously the Mexican almost sprang into the air under the shock of his amazement. He crossed himself and then his lips moved.

"By the Saints! It's Jack Merrill!" he cried, in a hollow voice.

For an instant he stood like a thing of wood or stone, every muscle rigid in terrible suspense. And all the time that tiny speck on the cliff face was moving slowly and painfully upward.

Clasping his hands the Mexican stood riveted to the spot. Then his dry lips began to move.

"The saints aid him! The brave boy is working his way to the top of the cliff. He has neared its summit. But can he win it? And, see, there are the steps he has cut in the lower cliff face. It must be that he is working his way upward still by those means. Santa Maria! What courage!

"I dare not call out to him. At that fearful height one backward look might cause him to lose his hold and plunge downward like a stone. Oh, if I could only help, only do something to aid him! But, no, I must stand here helpless, unable to move hand or foot.

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"Never again will I say anything against a Gringo. No boy south of the Border would dare such a feat. See now! *Caramba!* For an instant he slipped. I dare not look."

The Mexican buried his face in his hands and crouched on the ground. Emotional as are all of his race, the sight of that battle between life and death, hundreds of feet above him, had almost unstrung him.

At last he dared to uncover his eyes again and once more fixed them on the toiling atom on the sunlit cliff face.

But now he burst out into tones of joy.

"Sanctissima Maria! See, he is almost at the summit. Oh, brave Gringo! Climb on. May your head be steady and your hands and feet nimble."

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The sweat was pouring down the Mexican's face, his knees smote together and his hands shook as he stood like one paralyzed, stock still, watching the outcome of Jack Merrill's fearful climb. His breath came fast and the veins on his forehead stood out like whip cords. As he watched thus his lips moved in constant, silent prayers for the safety of the young Border Boy.

At last he saw the infinitesimal speck that was Jack Merrill reach the summit of that frowning height. He saw the boy thrust his knife into his belt, and watched him place one hand on the ridge of the precipice and draw himself up.

The next instant the cliff face was bare of life. The fight with death had been won. But Alvarez as he saw Jack attain safety on the summit of the precipice sank back with a groan. The strain under which he had labored had caused the Mexican to swoon.

As he lay there perfectly still three figures appeared at the upper end of the valley in the direction of the Pool of Death. They began advancing down the valley just as Alvarez opened his eyes and

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staggered dizzily to his feet.

CHAPTER XI.

RANGERS ON THE TRAIL.

It was about an hour after he had secured the firearm which he intended for Jack's use that Baldy rode back into the Rangers' camp in, what was for him, a state of great perturbation. The Chinaman was still up scouring dishes, and to him Baldy rode, spurring his pony almost into the remains of the camp fire in his anxiety.

All about lay the recumbent forms of the Rangers, sleeping under the stars on the expanse of plain. Snores and deep breathing showed that every one of them was deeply wrapped in the healthy slumber of the plainsman.

"Wallee maller, Massel Baldy?" cried the Mongolian, as Baldy spurred his pony up to him.

"Nuffin, you yellow-mugged Chinee," shot out Baldy, breathing tensely, despite his effort to appear careless; "have you seen anything of that Tenderfoot that went on watch with me a while ago?"

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"No, me no see him, Massel Baldy. Whafo' you so heap much 'cited?"

The keen-eyed Oriental had pierced Baldy's mask of carelessness, and saw readily enough that the old plainsman was badly worried.

"Me excited, you pig-tailed gopher!" roared out Baldy angrily. "I was never so easy-minded in my life. Where's the cap sleeping?"

"Over yonder, Massel Baldy. Him litee by chuck wagon."

Baldy did not wait to make a reply. He steered his plunging pony skillfully among the sleeping Rangers till he reached a bundled-up heap of blankets which he knew must contain Captain Atkinson. Baldy threw himself from his horse in an instant, at the same time slipping the reins over his pony's head, according to the plainsman's custom.

Reaching down, he shook the captain vigorously.

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"Hello! hello, there, what's up?" came a muffled rejoinder from amidst the blankets.

But the next instant Captain Atkinson, broad awake, was sitting up.

"Oh, you, Baldy? Well, what's the trouble?"

"Dunno jes' erzackly, boss," stammered out Baldy, "but it's about that Tenderfoot kid that you gave me ter mind."

Baldy was plainly embarrassed. He shoved back his sombrero and scratched his head vigorously. At the same time he jingled his spurs as he shifted his feet nervously.

Captain Atkinson's tone was sharp when he next spoke.

"You mean Jack Merrill? I'd have you understand, Baldy, that he is no Tenderfoot. He's only a boy, but he's been through as much as most men of twice his years. But what about him?"

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If the question was sharp and to the point, as was Captain Atkinson's wont, so was Baldy's answer. Rangers are not men who are in the habit of wasting words.

"He's went."

"What?"

"I mean what I say, boss. The kid's vamoosed, gone, skidoosed."

"No nonsense, Baldy. Explain yourself."

"There ain't much to explain, boss."

"If Jack Merrill has gone, I should say that there was a good deal to explain on your part."

Baldy shifted uneasily.

"It warn't no fault of mine, boss," he protested.

"I'll be the judge of that. What's your story?"

"Just this. The kid went on watch with me. As you told me, I kept him close alongside. He didn't hev no shootin' iron, so I rode back to camp to git one. When I got back to the Rio he was gone."

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"Gone?"

"That's what."

"Have you looked for him?"

"Beat the brush frum San Antone to breakfus', but ther ain't no

sign uv hair nor hide uv him."

"You saw the other men?"

"Sure!"

"Did they know nothing?"

"Not a thing. But the kid couldn't hev passed in either direction without goin' up in an air ship."

"None of your jokes. This is serious. Answer my questions. You left him where?"

"Not far from the foot of the trail to the waterin' place."

"You told him to stay there?"

"Sure thing. You see I lef' him ter git him a shootin' iron. I didn't think it was right that he shouldn't be heeled. The greasers———" [110]

"All right, never mind that part of it. Well, you got the gun?"

"Yes; and when I took it back fer him ther kid had gone."

"How long did all this take?"

"Waal, I've bin huntin' fer ther dern little pinto ever since. But I should say that I rode to camp and back in about half an hour. You see, I hurried."

"Humph! You found no sign of trouble when you got back?"

"Nary a bit. All wuz quiet as a Chink's funeral in Tombstone."

"Had the others heard nothing while you were away?"

"Not a sound so fur as they told me."

"It's not possible to ford the river at that point?"

"Boss, a cayuse couldn't swim it, the current's that swift."

"That's so, too, I thought for a moment that the boy might have foolishly tried to cross into Mexican territory." [111]

"Ef he did, it's flowers fer his'n ef we ever find him," declared Baldy piously.

"Let us hope it is not as bad as that. But it is most mysterious."

"Very consterious," agreed Baldy. "You see, there were men to the east and west of where the kid was, and they didn't hear nor see nothing."

"And yet the boy has vanished."

"Waal, he ain't ter be found," admitted Baldy, ignoring the long word.

Captain Atkinson sat up in his blankets lost in thought. At length Baldy ventured to break in on the silence.

"What yer goin' ter do, boss? Ther young maverick may be needin' help right now and needin' it bad, too."

"That's correct, Baldy. We must take some action at once. But the case is so puzzling that I hardly know what to do about it. Jack Merrill didn't impress me as the kind of boy that would run needlessly into danger." [112]

"No; ther young pinto had some hoss sense," admitted Baldy, flicking his chaps with his quirt.

"That being the case, how are we to account for his disappearance? If he had been attacked by greasers there would have been some noise, some disturbance."

"Maybe he jes' fell in ther Rio and was drown-ded," suggested Baldy.

"I don't think that. Jack Merrill is an athletic lad, and among other things, I am told, a first-class swimmer. No, we have to figure on some other line."

"Waal, I'm free to admit that I'm up a tree, boss," grunted Baldy.

By this time Captain Atkinson was out of his blankets and hastily drawing on his chaps and pulling his blue cowboy shirt over his head. When his boots had been drawn on and spurs adjusted he ordered Baldy to saddle his pony and bring it over. As soon as this was done the Captain of the Rangers and Baldy rode out of the camp as silently as possible and made their way to the river. But all Captain Atkinson's questioning failed to elicit any more facts than he had been able to glean from Baldy. There was nothing left to do but to wait for daybreak to make an examination for tracks that might throw some light on the mystery. [113]

In the meantime Ralph and Walt were informed of Jack's mysterious disappearance. To Captain Atkinson's astonishment, they did not appear nearly so much alarmed as he had feared. Instead, they accepted the news with almost stoical faces.

"You think that Jack is safe, then?" asked the captain of the

Rangers. "At any rate, you don't seem much worried about him."

"It's not our way to worry till we know we have good cause to, Captain," rejoined Ralph. "If Jack has vanished, I'm willing to swear that he is off on some sort of duty connected with the Rangers. Possibly he had not time to report back before leaving. Depend upon it, Jack will come out all right."

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"That's my idea, too," declared Walt stoutly.

"Well, I admire the confidence you boys have in your leader," declared Captain Atkinson warmly, "but just the same as soon as it's daylight I mean to start a thorough investigation, and if harm has come to him it will go hard with those that caused it."

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CHAPTER XII.

A BAFFLING PURSUIT.

But a close scrutiny of the river banks by daylight failed to reveal anything more definite than a maze of trampled footmarks and broken brush at the spot where Jack had encountered his combat with the three Mexican spies. Captain Atkinson, one of the most expert of men in the plainsman's art of reading signs from seemingly insignificant features, confessed that he was baffled.

"It is plain enough that Jack was involved in some sort of a fight," he said, "but beyond that I cannot say. The most puzzling thing about his disappearance, in fact, lies in the absence of pony tracks. I can't imagine how whoever it was attacked him reached this vicinity without being heard by the sentries east and west of the trail."

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"Can it not be possible that in some manner he fell into the river and was swept away by the swift current?" inquired Ralph.

The captain shook his head.

"Of course, it is possible, but it hardly lies within the range of probabilities," he declared.

They were still discussing the extraordinary situation when Baldy uttered an exclamation. He had been examining the river bank and now he held up a bit of rope that he had discovered on the verge of the stream.

"Look here, cap," he cried, "I'm a long-horned maverick if this ain't queer."

"A bit of rope, eh, Baldy?" rejoined the captain. "Well, that would seem to indicate that something had been tied there. Clearly it was not a horse or we should see the tracks. It must then have been——"

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"A boat!" burst in Walt, unable to control himself.

"How could a boat ever get along in this shallow, swirling stream?" cried Ralph.

"No; but some contrivance of logs that would float, such as a raft, might have navigated the river," suggested Captain Atkinson, little guessing how close he was to the truth.

The captain now had the rope in his hands and was examining the frayed end.

"This rope has been recently severed," he decided.

"Cut?" questioned Ralph.

"No, broken," was the rejoinder.

"Then ther kid must have gone down the river," said Baldy.

"Undoubtedly," rejoined the captain.

"In that case we must follow the stream in search of him," cried Walt.

"Yes. We will start as soon as possible, too. Baldy, see that everything is made ready for us at once."

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"Ain't I going along, cap?" pleaded Baldy.

"No; I shall leave you in command of the camp till I return. In the meantime the boys and I will ride back with you to camp and prepare for our expedition."

The boys' faces were flushed with excitement as the return ride was begun. Eagerly they discussed between themselves the probabilities of recovering Jack, while the captain rode with bowed head as if buried in thought. The mystery of Jack's fate worried him deeply, and he was beginning to think that there were more complications to it than he had at first imagined.

It was an hour after that the search party set forth. They carried blankets, emergency kits, food, firearms and hatchets. Also each had a stout rawhide lariat, each "rope" being about forty feet in length. Thus equipped they started out on what was to prove a most eventful journey, and one in which they were destined to encounter more surprises than they dreamed.

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By sunset the first day of their search they found themselves in a wild canyon through which the river flowed swiftly. Camp was made at a spot near which a clear spring of water gushed from a wall of the place. It was slightly alkaline, but they did not mind that, as it was preferable even as it was to the muddy, discolored waters of the Rio Grande. The ponies were picketed, a fire was lighted, supper

cooked and things put in order for the night.

It was not a cheerful party that gathered about the camp fire. All of them were pretty well exhausted and disheartened by their absolute failure to find any trace of Jack. Captain Atkinson alone would not admit discouragement. He did all he could to keep up the flagging spirits of the two lads, and after supper had been despatched he inquired if they would care to hear some of his experiences on the Border.

"Gladly," declared Ralph, relieved to hear something that might, for a time at least, take his mind off the possible predicament of his chum.

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Captain Atkinson paused to cram his old black pipe with strong tobacco, light it with a glowing coal, and then plunged into his story. As he talked the murmuring voice of the river and the sighing of the night wind in the scanty trees of the canyon formed a fitting accompaniment to his narrative.

"Some years ago," he began, "I was foreman of a small ranch in the neighborhood of Las Animas, in the eastern part of the state. It was at a time when cattle and horse thieves, 'rustlers' as we call them, had been particularly active. Hardly a rancher in the vicinity but had suffered from their depredations, and feeling ran pretty high against them, I can tell you.

"Well, our ranch, which was known as the Flying U, had managed somehow to escape unscathed, although all round us the rustlers had been operating boldly and openly. Their method was to raid a ranch, drive the cattle or horses across the Border and then sell them to Mexican dealers, who drove them to the coast and there disposed of them as best they could. Many were shipped to European ports, so I heard.

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But it was impossible that our ranch should long remain untouched in the midst of the general robberies and rascality going on. Although we guarded against it in every possible way, one night our 'Far Pasture' as it was called, was raided and a fine bunch of young steers carried off. It was known that the leader of the band was a man named Alvarez; but beyond this fact and the further one that he had been a leader in several of the frequent revolutions in his country, we knew little about him. He was, however, without doubt the most successful and daring rustler that the Border was ever harassed with.

"In fact, so bold was he, and so impossible of capture did he appear, that some of the more superstitious men in the district began to hint that he was of supernatural origin. Those were wild, uncultured days, and the belief began to spread. Every fresh raid added strength to the rumor, until at the time of the robbery of the Flying U I was unable to persuade anyone to accompany me in pursuit of Alvarez; for I was determined to take after the rascal even if the chase led me across the Border.

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"It may have been a foolish resolve, but I was younger then and hot-blooded. Well, when I found that I would have to go alone or lose valuable time getting some men to accompany me, I delayed no longer. I oiled up my revolver and rifle and loaded some provisions on my saddle, together with a roll of blankets. Then, with a tough little pinto pony that was good for his fifty miles a day, I took the trail.

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CHAPTER XIII.

THE CAPTAIN'S STORY.

"I soon found that I had entered on a chase that was to prove more than I had bargained for. Not that I had any difficulty in picking up the trail of the stolen cattle—that part was easy enough. I followed it all day, and at night found myself not far from the river, in a country creased and criss-crossed by dry gulches and arroyos. It was a gloomy, desolate-looking place enough, but, as it was growing dark, I had no choice but to camp there.

"At the bottom of one of the arroyos I found a muddy, ill-smelling pool of seepage water. It did not taste good, so I fell back on what I had in my canteen and let the pinto drink it. The sun sank in a red ball of fire and there was a peculiar sulphury sort of smell in the air. But I was thinking of other things than the weather and sat up late under the stars figuring out the situation. [124]

"The result of my mental activities was that I decided to rest till midnight, when the moon was high, and then plug on again. I knew the moon would be full, and figured that I could follow the trail all right by its light. I've always been pretty well broken in to the habit of waking up at the time I want to, and so it was within a few minutes of twelve o'clock when I was ready to start off once more.

"With my pony saddled, I mounted and was off on the path of adventure again. All that night I followed the trail, and by morning found myself over the Border and in Mexico. It was here that I decided to execute a bit of strategy. In my kit I had, in accordance with a half-formed scheme which had come into my mind before I set out, placed some Mexican-looking garments. As I spoke the language well and was dark enough to be taken for a Mexican anyhow, I didn't think I'd have much difficulty in making myself out a native of the country in which I then was. [125]

"You can readily see why I adopted this precaution. Mexicans always have, and always will, hate the Gringos. They can't help it any more than they can help their skins being dark. It's bred in them, I suppose. So 'into the enemy's country' as it were, I proceeded, feeling much more secure in my disguise.

"I soon had a chance to learn how nearly I approached to the character I had assumed. About noon that same day, after crossing a rather barren stretch of country covered with giant yuccas and stunted trees, I came in sight of a clump of willows, amidst which smoke was rising. At first my heart gave a bound. I knew I was still on Alvarez's trail and for an instant I thought that he and his band were right ahead of me.

"But I was speedily undeceived. As I drew closer I saw that there was an adobe hut amidst the willows, and leaning on a gate in a tumble-down barb wire fence was a wild, unkempt figure, evidently that of the proprietor of the small, lonely ranch. Beards are rare among Mexicans, therefore I was somewhat surprised to see that the man I was approaching had one that almost reached his waist. [126]

"On his face it reached his eyes, forming a little mask of hair, from amid which a pair of cunning, deep-set eyes scrutinized me closely. I bid the fellow good-day in Mexican and asked if I could rest and eat there, as well as obtain hay and water for my pony. He appeared to hesitate an instant, but then came to a sudden resolution. He swung the gate open with surly hospitality, and with a wave of his hand invited me to come in.

"I was not slow to accept the invitation. While he led the pony to an adobe barn in the rear of the place I entered the house. It was just like any other Mexican residence. Dark, cool and bare, except for chairs and a rough table. On the porch, roofed with willow boughs, was the inevitable water-cooler, or 'olla,' of porous earthenware. My host soon returned from his task of stabling the horse and informed me that he was keeping bachelor's hall. His wife, he said, was away visiting friends in another part of the province. [127]

"It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him if he had seen anything of Alvarez, but I refrained, urged to that decision by some mysterious instinct. While the man prepared a meal of corn paste, dried beef and frijoles, I caught him eying me curiously once or twice. I had told him I was a native of another province, on my way

to Santa Rosalia, a town about twenty miles distant. I flattered myself that my disguise was so good that the fellow had not penetrated it. But in this, as you will hear, I was grievously wrong.

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"The rough meal being cooked, we sat down and ate together. The man seemed a taciturn, ugly sort of chap, and replied to my questions in a sullen manner. Moreover, I didn't half like the way he kept sizing me up, as it were. But I determined not to meet trouble half way, and made a good meal with as stout a heart as I could.

"The food despatched, I decided to push on, and informed the man of my intention. He said he would get my pony for me and left the place. I was helping myself to a drink from the olla in a gourd cup when my host reappeared. He looked much distressed, and, on my inquiring what was the matter, he informed me that my pony was 'mucho malo' meaning that the animal was sick.

"I wasted no words, but hastened to the stable. There, sure enough, was my poor pinto in a sad state of distress. His eyes were glassy, his coat wet with sweat, and he was shaking in every limb. One look at the animal was enough. I saw in a flash that he had been poisoned.

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"With what motive it was easy enough to guess. The fellow had only too clearly seen through my disguise, and, being in sympathy with Alvarez, had determined to prevent me from following him further.

"My position was about as bad as it could well be. I was several miles from the Border and in a part of the country entirely strange to me. My first impulse was to attack the bearded man and seize one of his ponies in exchange for the one he had poisoned. But on second thoughts I decided to move more slowly in the matter. I guess I was aided in this determination by the fact that while I was examining the pony the bearded man had come stealthily into the stable, and, looking round suddenly, I caught him eying me intently.

"'What's the matter with the pony?' I asked in as easy a tone as I could assume.

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"'Quien sabe?' rejoined the man with a shrug of his shoulders. He went on to say that he thought the beast was locoed, meaning that he had eaten 'loco' weed, which possesses the peculiarity of driving horses crazy if it doesn't kill them.

"It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him that I knew a great deal better, but I held myself in check and appeared to agree with him.

"'Well,' said I, 'since the pony is not fit to use, perhaps I can borrow one from you to continue my journey?'

"But, not much to my surprise, he shook his head. All his ponies, he said, were in a distant pasture, and till his wife returned he would not have one. He had hardly said this when there came a shrill whinny from some nearby point. Had the animal that uttered it meant to give the lie to his words, it could not have done so more effectually.

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"As it was useless to affect not to have heard the whinny, I asked him how it was that the noise could have been heard so plainly from a distant pasture. He eyed me narrowly as he rejoined that the wind must have carried the sound.

"I kept my composure and merely nodded.

"'How far is it to the pasture?' I asked.

"'Oh, quite some distance; too far to walk,' he said.

"'Nevertheless, I'll try to walk it,' rejoined I, 'for I must have a pony to continue my journey with.'

"At this he seemed to have arrived at a bold determination to cast all disguise aside.

"'Your journey stops here, beast of a Gringo!' he shouted, and sprang at me like a tiger.

"Now I am of a pretty husky build, but what with the suddenness of the attack and the really remarkable strength of the man, I was completely taken off my guard. The fellow had me by the throat and was shaking the life out of me before I knew what had happened. What defense I could make I did. Whether I could have bested him or not I do not know, for in the height of our struggling I was thrown against the heels of my pony and the little brute lashed out viciously. One of its hoofs struck me, and I felt my senses go out under the blow.

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"When I came to, I was lying in pitch darkness. As you can

imagine, it was some little time before I could recollect just what had happened. When remembrance rushed back I pulled myself together and took stock. I found that I had received a blow on the side of the head, which, although painful, did not appear to be so bad as might have been expected.

“My next step was naturally to ascertain where I was. Groping about, I found that I was in a room, and there was little doubt in my mind that the room was in the house of the Mexican. As I had not been bound, the inference was plain that he had not thought it worth while to do so because there was no way of escape from the room.

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“Fumbling in my pockets, I was rather surprised to find their contents intact. My knife, matches and money all were there. Perhaps the bearded man had intended to rifle me at his leisure, or perhaps he had not thought it worth while. However that may be, I was rejoiced beyond measure to find that at least I had the means of making a light.

“I struck a match and as its yellow light flickered up I saw that my prison place was a bare room with whitewashed walls, one small window high up, and a heavy door with formidable-looking iron hinges and lock. I was approaching the door with the intention of trying if it was possible to effect an escape that way when a key grated in the keyhole.

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“At the same instant the match burned my fingers and went out.”

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CHAPTER XIV.

RALPH'S HOUR OF DANGER.

"The next moment the door was flung open and a flood of light rushed into the room. The latter came from a lantern carried by the bearded man, who was the individual that had unlocked the door. In a flash it came to me to employ the fellow's own tactics on himself. Before he had recovered from his evident astonishment at seeing me on my feet, I flung myself at him like a thunderbolt.

"With the lantern he could not raise his hands in time to defend himself, and he went down under my onslaught like a log. And then a startling and astonishing thing occurred. My fingers had become entangled in that monstrous beard, and in pulling them away the mass of black hair came with them. It was as if a mask had been pulled off and revealed the face underneath. [136]

"The countenance I then beheld was the last on earth I expected to see just then.

"It was that of Alvarez himself. He snarled like a vicious dog when he saw what I had done. But I had him down and he could do nothing. I forgot to mention that when he entered the room he had with him a coil of hair rope, no doubt intending to bind me before I should recover consciousness. I now used this on Alvarez while he bit and literally foamed at the mouth. It was turning the tables with a vengeance.

"'Now then, you hound,' I said, when I had finished, 'tell me where those cattle are and where your ponies are, or I'll kill you here and now instead of taking you back across the Border.'

"Of course, I had no intention of carrying out such a threat; but I put on such a ferocious look as I spoke that the fellow changed from a defiant, snapping wolf to a timid, cowering cur in an instant. He begged me to save his life and he would tell me the whole truth. [137]

"'See that you do,' I said sternly.

"He told me that the lonely house was used as headquarters for his gang, all of whom were now absent on a drive in another part of the province.

"I was glad enough to hear this, for I by no means fancied having a big fight on my hands, which would have been the case had the rascal's companions reappeared. My next questions, of course, dealt with the whereabouts of the stolen cattle. He told me they were all rounded up in a gulch not far from the house. I told him that at daybreak we would go and get them and that he should help me drive them back across the Border.

"To this he readily consented and side by side we waited for daylight. As soon as it broke we made a hasty meal, I having to feed my prisoner, for I dared not release his hands. This done, I ordered him to set out ahead of me and show me the way to the secret cañon where the cattle were cached. First, however, I made him take me to where the ponies were picketed in a corral at the bottom of an arroyo. It was not more than a few hundred yards from the house, but so well concealed that if I had not heard one of the animals whinny, as I told you, I should never have guessed at its existence. Before setting out, too, I looked my pinto over and was glad to see that he appeared to be getting over the effects of the poisonous dose. [138]

"I tied Alvarez's feet together under his pony's body and made him ride in front of me all the way to a range of low hills, in which he said lay the place where the stolen cattle were 'cached' before being driven to the coast. It was a wild and desolate-looking spot, but after traversing the foothills of the dreary range we came to a valley in which there was a stream and a plentiful crop of wild oats and bunch grass. Feeding placidly amongst these was a bunch of cattle which I instantly recognized as those I was in search of. [139]

"I made Alvarez help me round them up and then began a drive the like of which I never participated in before. We stopped at the ranch house on the return journey for the pinto, who was, by this time, strong enough to be led behind one of the other ponies. What a drive that was! Besides watching the cattle, I had to keep a constant eye on Alvarez, whom I had determined to bring back a captive to the States.

"But in spite of all my vigilance the tricky fellow escaped me.

Rightly judging that I valued the cattle more than his worthless hide, he waited till we reached the vicinity of the Border. Then, taking his opportunity when the cattle were restless, he struck spurs to his horse and, tied as he was, dashed off. I fired after him, but that did not stop him. The last I saw of him was a cloud of dust. It would have been useless to pursue him, so I devoted myself to the cattle, and the next night brought them home again safe and sound.

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"Soon after that I became a Ranger, and have remained one ever since. I'd like to tell you lads other tales of the Border, but it is late and we must make an early start, so now—good-night."

"Good-night," echoed the boys, who had listened with the deepest interest to the grizzled Ranger's story, "we shall dream of that lone ranch house."

"I often do, I can assure you," rejoined Captain Atkinson, with a laugh. "I wonder if Alvarez does. I've never heard of him from that day to this, except that I did hear some place that he had become a revolutionary leader in Mexico."

At the moment Captain Atkinson little imagined how close he was to a second meeting with the notorious Alvarez, revolutionist and cattle rustler.

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* * * * *

Jack flung himself face downward on the turf at the crest of the precipice he had so miraculously conquered. His senses were swimming, his lungs felt as if they would burst, his heart beat wildly, shaking his frame. In truth the boy had come perilously close to the limit of endurance. The feat he had accomplished would have been a test to a hardened Border man, let alone a youth.

For the first few minutes Jack felt a deep conviction that he was going to die—and he didn't much care. But as life came back he struggled to his feet and began to look about him. First he peered down into the valley he had left to see if he could signal Alvarez and give him to understand that he was bringing help if possible. But deep purple shadows now obscured the valley floor, and he could see nothing of the drama that was taking place below him.

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It will be recalled, of course, that we left Alvarez thunderstruck at the approach of three figures along the valley from the direction of the Pool of Death. This was just after he had watched Jack's speck-like form vanish over the cliff top. For the sake of clearness we will now relate what took place in the valley following Alvarez's discovery of the approach of the newcomers, and then go on to tell what befell Jack after his recovery from exhaustion.

Alvarez kept his eyes fixed in wonderment on the trio as they came down the valley. All at once he recognized one, slightly in advance, with a cry of astonishment. At the same instant Captain Atkinson, for it was he, recognized Alvarez. For an instant neither spoke, and the two lads accompanying the captain, who, as the reader will have guessed, were Ralph Stetson and Walt Phelps, also came to a halt.

"What's the matter, captain?" inquired Ralph, regarding the Mexican with some astonishment, for his perturbation was only too evident.

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"Why, boys, of all the adventures that have befallen us since we set out to look for Jack this is the most surprising."

"How is that?" inquired Ralph.

"Simply that this man before us is the very Alvarez about whom I told you the other night."

But the reader must be wondering how the captain of the Rangers and the two lads came to be in the inaccessible valley. To explain this we must, at the risk of being tedious, go back a few hours.

The morning following Captain Atkinson's narration of his experience with Alvarez the trail had once more been taken up. Before many hours had passed the searchers came to the fork in the Rio, and stopped almost nonplussed. They had no means of judging whether the boat or raft which they believed had carried off Jack had gone down the Rio or had been swept down the branch stream.

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The question was decided in an ingenious manner by Captain Atkinson. Some distance above the fork in the stream lay a big log near the water's edge. Doubtless it had been carried down in some freshet. At any rate, to the Ranger's shrewd mind it suggested a way of solving the problem. Under his direction the boys rolled it into

the stream, wading out with it as far as they dared.

Then they watched it as the river swept it along. At the fork a current caught the log and whirled it off down the branch stream.

"That decides it," declared Captain Atkinson, "we will follow the fork of the Rio. If Jack was on anything that floated it would have been swept from the main stream in the same way as that log."

They then proceeded to find a way to cross the main stream so as to get on the bank of the branch current. They soon found a ford about a mile up the river. After some cautious reconnoitering Captain Atkinson decided to cross the stream at that point. But he warned the boys that they might have to swim with their horses before they reached the other side.

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"It is impossible to tell if there aren't deep holes in the middle of the stream," he said. "In case we do flounder into any of them just fling yourself from the saddle, keeping hold of the pommel. Then let the ponies do the rest and they will land you safe and sound."

For the first few yards all went well. The water came up to the ponies' withers, but it did not appear to get deeper. Ralph was just congratulating himself that they would get across with ease and safety if things continued that way when his pony suddenly floundered into a deep hole. Instantly it lost its footing and went clear under.

Ralph had not time to extricate his feet from the stirrups, and was carried with it. As he vanished from view under the turbid current an alarmed cry broke from both Captain Atkinson and Walt Phelps.

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CHAPTER XV.

A "BLANK WALL."

"He's drowning!" cried Walt in alarmed tones.

"It is just as I feared," cried Captain Atkinson, "the pony struck a water hole and——"

"Look, there's the pony now!" cried Walt as the little animal reappeared and began swimming for the bank.

"But where is Ralph?"

Without waiting to make any reply to Captain Atkinson, Walt suddenly wheeled his pony. Down the stream he had seen an arm extended above the muddy current. He knew that it was Ralph's.

There was no hesitation in the boy's manner as he turned his pony, and, plunging the spurs in deep, drove him through the water. All at once Walt and his pony floundered into the same hole that had been Ralph's undoing. At the same instant a sudden swirl of the current caught Ralph, who, though half drowned, was making a brave struggle. The momentary halt was the chance that Captain Atkinson had been looking for.

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He had followed close on Walt's heels and now, while the latter was struggling to maintain a hold on his swimming pony, the captain of the Rangers uncoiled his lariat.

Swish! It shot out in a long rolling coil and fell fairly about the shoulders of the struggling Ralph Stetson. Although half choked into insensibility with the water he had swallowed, Ralph still maintained enough sense to grasp the rawhide while Captain Atkinson drew it tight.

When the coil was fast the captain backed his pony upstream until Ralph had been dragged to shallow water. Then he pulled him out and laid him on the bank, gasping and almost drowned. In the meantime Walt Phelps had succeeded in extricating himself from his perilous position, and he and his pony, drenched through and dripping, arrived on the bank almost at the same time as Ralph was dragged ashore.

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Captain Atkinson had some simple remedies in his kit and he applied these to Ralph, who was soon able, as he put it, "to sit up and take notice." As he did so the stumbling pony, which had been the cause of all the trouble, came up and sniffed at his master curiously.

"Well, Spot-nose," said Ralph, using the name he had given the little beast, "you almost caused me to find a watery grave."

The pony whinnied as if to show that he was sorry and was willing to apologize. This view of the circumstance made them all laugh. By this time Captain Atkinson had a roaring fire going, by the side of which they dried themselves, and there was soon a decidedly more cheerful tone to the party.

"It makes me shiver, though, when I think of that narrow escape," said Ralph as they prepared to continue their journey.

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"That is just an incident of life here on the Border," declared Captain Atkinson. "It's such things as those that make a man or a boy know that there is a divine Providence watching over us. No man who has lived on the desert or at sea doubts that there is a watchful eye upon us, saving by seeming miracles from disaster and death."

"That is so," agreed Walt soberly, "I've often heard my father say that the best cure for religious doubts is to have a man come out here on the Borderland. He says that heaven and earth are closer here than in the cities or in the more civilized portions of the country."

They rode on, following the branch of the Rio, tracing, although they did not at the time know it, the course of the runaway raft on which Jack had made his wild trip.

It was late that afternoon that they came to the falls that thundered down into the Pool of Death.

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Awe-struck by the wild and gloomy majesty of the scene, not one of the party spoke for a time. It was Walt who broke the silence, shouting above the mighty roaring of the falls.

"Can Jack have gone over this cataract and lived?" he said.

Captain Atkinson shook his head gloomily.

"It looks bad," he said. "If the boy was plunged over such a place only one of those miracles of which we spoke awhile back can have saved his life."

"How can we reach the foot of the falls?" asked Ralph in a quavery tone.

The sublimity of the scene and its suggestion of ruthless power and pitiless force had overawed him.

"We must look about for a way," declared Captain Atkinson, "at any rate we won't turn back till we know, or at least are reasonably certain, of Jack's fate."

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For some time they searched about the summit of the steep cliffs surrounding the Pool of Death without coming on any path or series of ledges by which they could hope to gain the foot of the falls. But at last Captain Atkinson halted by a rock that towered up like a pinnacle or obelisk. It stood at the edge of the cliffs, at a spot where they did not appear more than a hundred feet or so high.

"We might be able to get down from here," he decided.

The boys peered over the edge of the cliff. It was perpendicular and steep as a wall. It was hard to imagine even a fly maintaining a hold on it.

But they knew that Captain Atkinson was not the man to speak without reason, and so they respectfully waited for him to continue.

"I estimate the height of this cliff at a trifle under one hundred feet," he said, "therefore we have a means of getting to the bottom."

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"I don't see how," rejoined Ralph.

"My boy, you will never make a Ranger if you can't make the best of a situation," said Captain Atkinson in a tone of mild reproof. "We have the three lariats. Their united length is one hundred and twenty feet. That will allow us a chance to knot some sticks into the united ropes and thus make a sort of rope ladder. We can secure it 'round this spindle-shaped rock and so reach the foot of the falls without much difficulty."

The boys hailed the idea with enthusiasm, Ralph saying:

"Well, I am a chucklehead. Why on earth didn't I think of that?"

"Because you're not a full-fledged Texas Ranger," laughed Walt. "I guess there's more to being a Ranger than we thought."

"I guess there is," agreed Ralph contritely.

The three ropes were fetched from the saddles and one long one made out of them. Then stout sticks were knotted in at long intervals so as to form a rough kind of ladder.

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"Now, then," said Captain Atkinson, when he had fastened the rope about the obelisk-shaped rock, "I will go first and test it."

"Would it not be better if one of us, who are lighter, took your place?" asked Ralph, unwilling to see the daring Texas Ranger risk his life.

"No. It is my duty to go first. If it will bear me, it will bear you."

So saying, Captain Atkinson began that thrilling descent. The boys, lying flat, with their heads extended over the rim of the Pool of Death, watched him till he reached the ground. They could not restrain a cheer when they saw that the feat had been accomplished in safety. In response Captain Atkinson waved his hand up to them.

"Now, boys, it is your turn," he cried encouragingly.

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After a moment's argument, for each wished the other to have the honor of going first, Ralph was persuaded to make the descent. He reached the ground safely, and was soon standing beside Captain Atkinson. Then came Walt's turn, after which the three adventurers were united.

"What an awful place!" shuddered Ralph, glancing about him nervously.

"Yes, let us be pushing on. It is high time we—Great heavens, look here!"

The captain had stopped abruptly at the rock on which Jack had dried out his dripping garments. What he had seen had been the ashes of the fire the lad had kindled.

"Some one has lit a fire here," cried Ralph as he, too, saw the embers.

"Yes, and not long ago, either."

Captain Atkinson bent over and picked up a handful of the blackened embers, examining them carefully.

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"This fire is not over forty-eight hours old," he exclaimed in a

voice that fairly shook with suppressed excitement.

"And that means that Jack has———"

"In some miraculous way been swept over those falls and survived. Let us press on at once. Before dark we may have him with us again."

At these words new life seemed to course through the veins of the two exhausted young Rangers. They plucked up energy and courage from the captain's manner.

"Forward," cried their leader, plunging into the narrow passage which we have seen Jack traverse.

Entering the valley, they had hardly gotten over the first shock of their surprise at its extent and formation when the keen eyes of Captain Atkinson discovered the figure of the Mexican.

"What can this mean?" he exclaimed. "Yonder is a man watching us. Let us go up to him at once and find out what this means; perhaps Jack has found friends; perhaps the valley is inhabited."

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It was a moment later that the scene of recognition which we have described took place.

"How came you here, señors?" demanded the Mexican, who, seemingly, was the first to recover his self-possession.

For reply Captain Atkinson whipped out his revolver with incredible swiftness and leveled it at the fellow's head.

"Speak the truth, Alvarez," he snapped, "or it will be the worse for you. Where is Jack Merrill?"

"If you mean the boy who was dashed over the falls with me," was the reply, "he has gone."

"Gone?"

"Si, señor."

"Where?"

"Quien sabe."

"Answer me quick, Alvarez."

The brow of Captain Atkinson puckered angrily, his countenance grew dark.

"It is as I say, señor. What object would I have in lying to you? The boy climbed yonder cliff but this minute and has vanished."

Although they would have liked to disbelieve the fellow's story, and incredible as it seemed that a human being could have climbed that cliff, there was an unmistakable ring of sincerity in the man's tone; it was impossible to make light of his tale.

"Boys, we have run against a blank wall," spoke Captain Atkinson at length, with heavy anxiety in his tone.

"Do you think Jack is safe?" breathed Ralph.

"Heaven, in whose power he is, alone knows," was the earnest rejoinder.

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CHAPTER XVI.

LOST IN THE BURNING DESERT.

Jack's first thought when he rose to his feet had been, as we know, to signal the Mexican whom he had left behind him, and try to assure him by sign language that he would do all in his power to bring rescuers to the valley. Not that the boy had any particular affection for the swarthy Alvarez; but naturally, with his warm, forgiving temperament, he hated the idea of leaving a fellow being behind without hope of succor.

But the dark shadows of evening hid the valley from him, and the boy was forced to set forward without having had a chance to signal the Mexican, or to witness a scene that would have interested him in an extraordinary degree, namely, the arrival of his chums and Captain Atkinson. [160]

Naturally enough, the first thing that Jack did when he found himself at the top of the dread precipice was to look about him and see what kind of country it was into which he had fallen, or rather, climbed. While it was rapidly growing dark in the valley below, the sun still shone brightly on the heights above, although the luminary of day was not far from the horizon.

So far as Jack could see, the country round about was not dissimilar in the main from that across the Border. It was a rolling country, grown with bunch grass and here and there a ghostly-looking yucca stretching its gaunt arms out against the sky. As far as the eye could reach this sort of country extended, except that in the distance was a purplish mass of what might have been either mountains or low-lying clouds.

But to the boy's dismay there was not a sign of a human dwelling, nor of anything to indicate that life existed in that dreary plain. [161]

"Gracious," thought Jack, "this is really serious. I feel weak for want of food and I'm thirsty enough to drink a well dry. Surely, there must be some human beings in the vicinity. At least I'll not give up hope."

With a great sigh the boy struck out toward the east. He chose this direction because he thought it was as good as any other, and not for any particular reason. He trudged pluckily on across arid, rocky plains till the sun sank in a blaze of copper and gold behind his back.

It was then, and not till then, that Jack gave way. He flung himself down despairingly on the hot ground under the cheerless arms of a huge yucca.

"What is to become of me?" he cried in a dismayed tone. "What shall I do? Evidently this part of the country is good for neither ranching or mining, and is uninhabited. I might tramp on for days without finding a soul to help me. Am I doomed to end my life in this dreary place?" [162]

These and a hundred other gloomy thoughts flitted through the boy's mind as, utterly exhausted and unnerved, he lay on the ground beneath the yucca. What were his chums doing? he wondered. No doubt by this time a search party had been organized to seek for him, but Jack owned, with a sinking of the heart, that it was beyond the range of possibilities, almost, that they should ever find the Pool of Death and the secret valley.

"No," he owned with bitter resignation, "my bones will bleach in this God-forgotten place, and none will ever know my fate."

Then he thought of his home and his father, the stalwart ranchman, and tears welled up in his eyes and a great lump rose in his throat.

"Oh, it's hard to have to die like this," he moaned, "and yet there is nothing to be done. True, I may live for a day or two yet. I can start out again to-morrow morning and go on stumbling along till I drop exhausted." [163]

It was at this bitter moment that a sudden recollection of a favorite saying of his father's came into the boy's mind: "Never give up while you've a kick left in you."

Jack thought of the bluff ranchman as the saying came back to him with poignant force.

"Never give up while you've a kick left in you."

"For shame, Jack Merrill," he said half aloud, "for shame, to be giving up this way. You've a kick left in you, many of them perhaps. What would your dad say if he saw you sitting down like a girl or a baby and giving in before you had to? Don't you dare to do it again."

Having thus scolded himself, Jack felt somewhat better, though there was still the great dread of a death in the desert upon him. But at least some of his spirit had returned. He resolved to struggle on as soon as he was sufficiently rested.

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With this determination in his mind, the boy tried to compose himself for sleep. He knew that a good spell of slumber would refresh him almost as much as food or drink. Thus he unconsciously echoed the sentiments of the philosopher who declared that "He who sleeps, dines."

At any rate, the practical Jack Merrill wished to be at his best when he started off once more on his wanderings, so he laid down and composed himself as comfortably as he could. Strange as it may seem that he could sleep under such conditions, slumber he did, although all sorts of wild dreams beset his rest. At one moment he was toiling over a burning desert under a pitiless sun, calling aloud for water. Then again he was in the shade of a delightful group of trees while bright crystal springs flashed and rippled. He was dreaming that he felt the delightful cooling sensation of a cold plunge into one of these rivulets when he awoke with a start.

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Above him the stars glittered coldly. The yuccas, like grim sentinels, outstretched their gaunt, semaphore-like arms against the night sky. A breeze that seemed chilly after the heat of the day swept the dismal plain. The sensation of coming from that dream of cool green places to that dry, desolate, stony waste gave Jack a fresh shock; but, true to his determination to act as he knew his father would wish him to do, he shook off his gloomy depression and struck out once more toward the east, taking his direction from the North Star, which he sighted by means of the "pointers" in the Dipper.

As he strode forward the poor boy whistled "Marching Thro' Georgia" to keep up his spirits. But the tune soon wavered and died out. His lips were too dry and cracked to make whistling anything but a painful process. Thereafter he trudged along in silence. Soon a rosy flush appeared in the east, and before long the sun rushed up and it was a new day.

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But to Jack the coming of the sun meant fresh disappointment. He had hoped that with daylight he might perceive some house, however rough, or at least a road he could follow. But none appeared. He mounted to the highest bit of rocky land he could find in the vicinity in the hope that the elevation might aid him in surveying the country.

It did give him a wider outlook, it is true, but the extended range of vision brought no glad tidings of civilization to the boy. Nothing but that same dreary expanse of brush, yuccas, sand and rocks met his eye.

Jack set his teeth grimly. He faced the truth now squarely and without flinching. Unless by some miracle a human being came that way he was doomed. There was no evading the fact. Already his thirst had passed the uncomfortable stage and had become a mad craving for water.

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He tried cutting the yucca stalks and extracting some moisture from them. But though they yielded some acrid juice, it did little to assuage his pangs. It was about a mile from the spot where he had mounted the little hill that Jack's collapse came. For some time before he had been certain that his mind was acting strangely. He was distinctly conscious of another self, a second Jack Merrill walking by his side. He talked wildly to this visionary being. His talk was like the ravings of a boy in a high fever.

So weak had he become that the last mile had taken more than an hour to traverse. Hardly conscious of what he was doing, the boy had toiled doggedly on. But as the sun grew higher his strength grew less. At last his knees fairly buckled under him and he sank down in that stony, sun-bitten place, utterly incapable of further locomotion.

"It is the end," he muttered, through scorched and blackened lips, as he sank, "oh, great heavens, it is the end!"

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The sun beat pitilessly down on his form as it lay there in that shadeless expanse. Tiny lizards darted in and out among the scanty, dusty brush and glanced speculatively at him with their tiny bright

eyes.

High in the burning blue vault of the sky a buzzard paused in its ceaseless wheelings, and, gazing down, saw that motionless form. By the magic that summons these birds of prey the sky above Jack's still form was soon filled with them.

For a time they swung round and round; but gradually the boldest, from mere dots high in the air, became great black-winged birds with foul looking heads of bare red flesh and hideous curved beaks. First one and then another dropped to the ground a short distance from the boy's form.

They hopped in a curious flopping fashion about him.

"Was the boy dead?" That was the question that they asked themselves as they eyed his still form with greedy, deep-set eyes.

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CHAPTER XVII.

TWO MEN OF THE AIR.

The news that all their trouble had gone for naught, and that Jack had himself placed his rescue beyond their hands, struck the three newcomers to the valley dumb for an instant. But at last Captain Atkinson spoke:

"Of course, you have not forgotten me, Alvarez?"

"That is hardly likely, señor capitán," rejoined Alvarez, a slight smile playing across his swarthy features; "one does not forget such encounters as our last one."

"So I perceive. But this time you will not escape so easily. You are to consider yourself my prisoner."

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders.

"I am not in a position to attempt to escape," he said resignedly.

"How did you come to be in this valley with Jack Merrill?" was the next question.

Alvarez, who doubtless saw that his best course was to tell the truth, launched into a fairly accurate account of the adventures on the raft, and the thrilling descent into the Pool of Death. Ralph Stetson shuddered as he listened. Walt looked almost incredulous. It seemed hard to believe that any human being could have "shot" that awful cataract and lived.

By this time it was dark, and, as it would have been too dangerous to attempt using the improvised rope ladder at night, Captain Atkinson decided to camp where they were. Alvarez was not bound, as his captors deemed it impossible for him to escape. Instead, he sat around the fire with them, and to anyone not knowing the circumstances he appeared more like a friend or a member of the party than an alien prisoner.

But they had not counted on the wily ways of the ex-cattle rustler. Even Captain Atkinson, old plainsman as he was, was completely taken in by the seeming resignation of Alvarez to his fate. For this reason no guard was placed on the man that night. This Captain Atkinson was to regret bitterly some hours later, for, when day dawned, there was no sign of Alvarez.

The Ranger guessed the truth at once. Alvarez had overheard their talk about the rope ladder and the ponies which had been left tethered in the grass at the falls. There was not the slightest doubt that he had made use of the ladder in the night, and helped himself to one of the ponies. If he had not taken all three they would be lucky, thought the captain.

The boys were anxious to set off in pursuit of the escaped prisoner at once, but Captain Atkinson made them prepare and eat a scanty breakfast first.

"Alvarez must be miles away by this time," he said, "that is, provided he made the climb in safety."

After breakfast no time was lost in striking out for the falls. The ladder was just as they had left it, except that one of the cross sticks had snapped, showing that someone must have climbed it in the darkness and missed his footing.

"We are at least fortunate that he left the ladder," said Captain Atkinson. "I had a half-formed fear that he would have destroyed it."

"Surely he would not have done such a dastardly thing as that!" exclaimed Walt.

"All is fair in love and war, you know," rejoined the Captain with a smile, "and Alvarez is at war with us."

"I'm not bothering so much about him," said Ralph with a sigh, "in fact, I think it was good riddance of bad rubbish to lose him. It's poor Jack I'm worrying about."

"Let us hope that he has found his way to a settlement and that by this time he is on his way back to camp," said Captain Atkinson cheerfully. "Why, it's even possible that he may get there ahead of us."

The cheery tones of their leader greatly heartened both the lads and the climb up the ladder was made in good spirits. As soon as they reached the surface they hurried to where the ponies had been tethered. Walt and Jack's animals were both there, but the captain's

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had gone. Pinned to one of the saddles was a hastily scribbled note on a bit of paper seemingly torn from an old account book.

Captain Atkinson unfolded this missive and read it aloud. It was in Spanish, but he translated as he went along.

"Dear Señor Capitan:

"Thank you very much for your consideration in leaving me a pony and allowing me a chance to get out of that odious valley. Adios; possibly we may meet again; till which time I am your devoted servant and humble admirer.

"ALVAREZ."

"Well," laughed the captain, "that's a characteristic bit of Mexican writing. A man steals your horse and breaks his parole and then signs himself 'your devoted servant.'"

"What's to be done now?" asked Walt.

"We shall have to take turns riding the remaining ponies double. It will make our progress slow, but it is the only thing to be done. Let us lose no more time but saddle up and get started at once."

This was done; and half an hour later the three travelers had left beyond ear-shot the sound of the falls that thundered unceasingly into the Pool of Death.

* * * * *

The boldest of the unclean birds that surrounded Jack's unconscious form were quite close to him when in the air above, where some others were still wheeling about before descending, there came a sudden disturbance and flapping of wings. High above the highest of the circling buzzards was what at first appeared to be merely a larger bird of prey. But a second glance would have shown that besides size, this new winged creature possessed many other points of difference from the bird creation. Behind it streaked out a long trail of blue smoke, and it could be seen that seated in it, between the wings, were the figures of two men. It was, in fact, an aeroplane of the biplane type, powerfully engined and commissioned by the Mexican government for use as a scout ship to spy out the haunts of the rebels.

Its two occupants were Lieut. José Sancho and Lieut. Manuel Diaz of the Mexican army. They had been flying since daybreak, scouting the country thoroughly in search of information of the rebels' whereabouts. The great flock of buzzards had attracted their attention, and Lieut. Sancho, who was at the wheel, while his comrade scanned the country through field glasses, had steered the airship in the direction of the great birds.

"Can you see anything?" he asked Lieut. Diaz as the airship drove in among the birds, scaring them off with hoarse cries.

"Yes. There is something on the ground."

"It must be some dead animal. No human being could have found his way into this miserable desert."

Lieut. Sancho was about to put the airship on its course once more when his brother officer gave a startled exclamation.

"By the saints!" he exclaimed, "this is strange."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, what attracted those buzzards was no dead steer or horse."

"What then was it?"

"The figure of a boy or a man lying face downward."

"Is he dead, do you think?"

"It is impossible to tell."

"Shall we descend and see?"

"We might as well, although, to speak the truth, I can't conceive that anyone could have wandered into this desert and lived."

"Nor I. Still it is our duty to find out."

"Undoubtedly. Let us land on that little hillock yonder and then we can make an examination."

Down swooped the great airship, landing without a jar on the bare little hill Lieut. Diaz had mentioned.

As soon as the craft touched the ground the two Mexican officers were out of it, and, after attending to the motor, hastened over the sandy soil to Jack's side.

"*Santa Maria!* It is but a boy," exclaimed Lieut. Sancho as he

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turned the inanimate form over.

"Todos los Santos, so it is. A fine-looking fellow, too. But is there any trace of life in him?"

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For answer Lieut. Sancho shook his head mournfully.

"I fear we have come too late," he said, bending over Jack to try to catch the least flicker of life.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SANDSTORM.

His companion produced a tiny mirror, part of a pocket toilet set he carried. Lieut. Sancho took it and held it over Jack's lips.

"Praise the saints, there is still life in him. See!"

He held up the mirror for his companion's inspection. It was blurred faintly, showing that the boy was still breathing.

"Get the emergency outfit," was the next order of the young Mexican officer, and his companion soon produced the required kit from a box under the seat of the military biplane.

The kit was the same as used by the armies of most civilized nations. It contained, besides bandages and antiseptics for wounds, stimulants and other drugs. Forcing Jack's lips open, the lieutenant gave him some stimulant, and was rewarded before long by a faint stirring on the part of the boy. [181]

He redoubled his efforts to revive him, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing the boy's eyes open and stare wildly about him. Not more than ten minutes later Jack was sipping a cup of water and explaining, between gulps, how he came to be in such a predicament. The officers listened with interest and nodded appreciatively as the boy told his story.

"This Alvarez is one of the most dangerous of the revolutionaries," declared Lieut. Sancho. "Since President Madero's accession he has kept things in the province stirred up in constant turmoil."

"His presence in this part of the country shows that the rebel troops cannot be far off," struck in Lieut. Diaz, "so that we have to thank our young friend here for some valuable information." [182]

"And I have to thank you for my life," exclaimed Jack warmly. "I don't know how to thank you."

"By consenting, if you feel strong enough, to take a ride with us in our aeroplane. What you told us about Alvarez makes me anxious to be off as soon as possible. If he is still in that valley we can capture him, and that will be a crushing blow to the revolutionaries."

Jack had seen aeroplanes before, but never at as close range as this military one. It was painted a dark olive, with wings of a dull gray color, the object being to make it as inconspicuous as possible. It had a powerful six-cylinder motor and was driven by twin propellers. It was built to carry two, but there was room on a folding seat for a third passenger. Jack was told to occupy this extra seat and then Lieut. Sancho and his comrade climbed on board.

"Hold tight!" cried Lieut. Sancho as he started his engine.

Steady as Jack's nerves usually were, he felt rather alarmed at the uproar that ensued. From the exhaust pipes of the motor smoke and flame shot viciously. The slender fabric of the aeroplane shook tremulously as the pulsations of the mighty engine racked its frame. [183]

But suddenly another sound broke in—a sound that Jack had heard too often before not to recognize it instantly.

It was the song of a bullet—the long drawn ze-e-e-ee of a rifle projectile.

The two officers were as swift to hear the sound as Jack. Glancing up, the three beheld simultaneously a body of horsemen sweeping down on them from a range of barren-looking hills in the distance. As they rode they fired till a perfect fusillade of bullets was whistling around the aeroplane.

They were a wild-looking body of men. Most of them wore the sugar loaf or cone-peaked hat of the Mestizo, and their serapes streamed out in the breeze behind them. Dust and sweat covered their ponies, and a great cloud of gray dust enveloped them. [184]

"*Viva Alvarez!*" they cried as they swept on.

Lieut. Sancho saw that to resist them would be hopeless. Instead he devoted all his efforts to starting his motor. At last, just as the foremost of the horsemen were upon them, the aeroplane gave a jump forward and scudded off like a live thing over the crowd.

This sudden motion of the great winged man-made bird so terrified the ponies of the rebels, for a detachment of the revolutionists they were, that the little creatures became

uncontrollable and dashed off in every direction. All the shouts and curses of their owners failed to rally them, and after running a few hundred feet the aeroplane soared aloft, unharmed except for a few bullet holes in her planes.

The sensation was a delightful one. As the bumping motion caused by the run over the ground ceased, it felt to Jack as if he was riding on billows of the softest cloud fabric. He had not the slightest fear and watched Lieut. Sancho with interest while he manipulated the various levers and wheels. As they flew the officer showed Jack just how the air craft worked. He even let him take the wheel for an instant, and declared that the boy acquitted himself like a born airman. The aeroplane being fitted with stability devices of automatic construction, it was, of course, possible to do this, where in another sort of air machine it might have been dangerous to allow a novice to handle the control wheel.

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As they rose higher Jack cast a look back. The country was stretched out like a panorama beneath him. On the plain he could see the detachment of revolutionaries galloping about trying in vain to reform their disorganized ranks.

"See if you can point out this wonderful valley of yours," said Lieut. Diaz presently.

Before long Jack sighted the hidden valley which had been the scene of his thrilling climb. He recognized it by the tumbling cascade of water that thundered whitely into the Pool of Death.

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"There! There it is yonder!" he cried.

"It is indeed a wonderful place," commented Lieut. Sancho as they hovered like a huge eagle above the cliff-walled valley. "If one did not know of it, it would be impossible to discover it."

"Except by airship or by the Pool of Death," said Jack.

Lieut. Sancho finally spied a good place to land and the aeroplane was dropped rapidly into the valley. It settled with hardly a jar or a quiver, much to Jack's astonishment, who had feared it would collide with the ground with considerable force.

"Well, I don't see anything of your friend Alvarez," commented Lieut. Sancho, looking about him after they had left the aeroplane.

"Nor do I," commented Jack in a rather astonished tone, "what can have become of him?"

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"Possibly he has escaped in some way. He is as cunning a fox as there is in the country," declared Lieut. Diaz.

Jack shook his head, however.

"There is no chance that he could have gotten out unless he followed my path and I think he was not active enough for that."

"Which way did you get out?" inquired Lieut. Diaz. "Where is that cliff you told us about?"

Jack pointed to the frowning precipice he had scaled. The officers, who could hardly be blamed for doubting him, gazed at the boy sharply. But his frank, honest countenance and modest manner of telling his story soon put their suspicions to rout, although Lieut. Diaz frankly confessed:

"Señor, you are an American boy, and therefore tell the truth; but from anyone else we should have laughed at the story."

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"It was nothing to laugh at, I assure you," said Jack.

"I should imagine not," agreed Lieut. Sancho, "one would hardly think a fly could find footing on that place."

"Looking up at it now," said Jack with a laugh, "I myself begin to doubt that I did it."

A systematic search of the valley was begun, and of course ended without result. One thing only was certain, Alvarez had gone. It was a good thing possibly that Jack did not know then the manner of his going, or what part the boy's own friends had played in it. Had he done so, he would have felt very downcast over the thought of by how narrow a margin he had missed being reunited to them.

"Well," declared Lieut. Diaz as they came to a halt near the Pool of Death, "one thing is as certain as daylight, and that is that in some manner Alvarez has escaped."

"Not a doubt of it. But how?" rejoined his companion. "I confess I am at a complete loss to understand how he effected his release."

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"Maybe another aeroplane came along and took him," suggested Jack. "That is the only thing I can think of."

Entirely mystified, the two officers made arrangements for flight once more. It had been agreed that Jack was to be landed in the

Rangers' camp, or, at any rate, close to it. The prospect of rejoining his friends safe and sound rejoiced the boy, and he was in high spirits when they sat down to partake of lunch before resuming flight.

They had concluded their meal when Jack noticed that there was a peculiar look about the sky. From blue it had turned to a yellowish tinge, and the sun glowed through it like a fiery copper ball. He drew the attention of Lieut. Sancho to this, and the young officer and his comrade in arms held a long consultation about the state of the weather.

At its conclusion Lieut. Sancho announced that, although the weather appeared threatening, yet they would go up. He explained that he and his companion had to be back at their headquarters in time to report the rebel attack and the near approach of the reactionary forces. If they were to drop Jack on the way, there was no time to be lost.

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The aeroplane was swiftly tuned up, and when all were on board Lieut. Diaz, who had relieved Lieut. Sancho at the wheel, sent the big craft up with a velocity that made Jack lose his breath. At a height of about two hundred feet a sudden gust struck the air craft, causing it to careen in a most alarming manner. For one dread instant it appeared to Jack that the whole affair was doomed to turn turtle in mid-air; but the stability devices worked just in time.

With a clicking and sliding sound the parts that composed the balancing power of the machine slipped into their places and it resumed an even keel.

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As if to show his perfect mastery of the military dirigible, Lieut. Diaz drove it straight up toward the overcast sky. A fairly stiff wind was now beginning to blow, and to Jack the maneuver appeared risky in the extreme. But, of course, he said nothing, although, looking downward, earth looked fearfully remote. But to the two Mexican officers all this was evidently part of the day's work. At all events, neither of them displayed the least anxiety; on the contrary, Lieut. Sancho was busy noting the action of the barograph and barometer, and jotting down the results of his observations in a small notebook.

All at once Jack, on glancing down, discovered that the earth had been obliterated. A yellow fog, or it seemed to be fog, hid the surface of the country from them. All at once something stinging struck the boy's face. It was sand.

With a gasp of alarm Jack realized that a sandstorm was raging below them. He recalled the one near La Hacheta, in which the lads had seen the flight of the ghostly camels. Seriously alarmed, he drew the attention of his companions to what was going on. By this time, so rapidly had the velocity of the wind increased that it was blowing half a gale, great clouds of sand swept bewilderingly round them. The aeroplane pitched and swayed like a ship in an angry sea. Jack held on tight, thinking that every moment would be likely to be his last.

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"We did wrong to come up so high," admitted Lieut. Diaz.

"But you are going higher?" objected Jack.

"Yes. We must avoid that sand at all hazards. It won't be so bad higher up, I hope."

"Why not drop to earth right now? It's all flat country hereabouts," said Jack.

"In the first place, the sand would blind us and we would crash to earth and be wrecked, in all probability. In the second place, if even a little sand got into our engine it would ruin it," rejoined the officer.

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Jack said no more. He felt rather ashamed, in fact, of having showed his agitation so plainly. After all, the officers knew far more about aeroplanes than he did, and perhaps there was a chance that they would get through safely yet. He fervently prayed that they might.

Lieut. Diaz sat grimly at the wheel, driving the aeroplane ever upward. Jack watched him admiringly. Not a trace of fear or of any other emotion had flickered across his steadfast countenance since the battle with the storm had begun.

They had driven their way far above the yellow sand fog and were battling with the wind at an altitude of almost seven thousand feet, when Lieut. Diaz gave a sudden gasp. He turned deadly pale and lurched forward in his seat. Had not Lieut. Sancho caught him,

he would have toppled off into space. The aeroplane, released from a controlling hand, gave a sickening dash downward.

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“Wha-what has happened?” gasped Jack, genuinely alarmed now.

“It’s air sickness! Seize that controlling handle and do just as I tell you. All our lives may depend on it!”

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CHAPTER XIX.

THE BATTLE AT THE SCHOOLHOUSE.

Air sickness! With the words there flashed through Jack's mind a recollection of having read somewhere about that strange malady of the upper regions which sometimes seizes airmen, paralyzing temporarily their every faculty.

While the thought was still in his mind he had seized the wheel and awaited the next orders from Lieut. Sancho, who was holding the unconscious form of Lieut. Diaz in the machine.

"Push that lever forward—so! Now a twist of your wheel to the left. *Bueno!* You are a born airman."

Jack wished he could think so, too. From sheer nervousness the sweat stood out upon him, his hands shook and his pulses throbbed.

But the consciousness that all their lives depended upon his keeping cool and obeying orders steadied him. By a supreme effort he mastered his jumping nerves and obeyed the lieutenant's orders implicitly.

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To his actual surprise, for he did not think it would have been so easy to handle an air craft, the winged machine righted itself as he manipulated the lever and wheel. Before many seconds it was driving along on an even keel once more. But in its fall it had entered the region of driving sand again. Pitilessly, like needle-pointed hailstones, the sharp grains drove about them, pricking their flesh.

"Up! We must go up higher!" cried Lieut. Sancho. "Pull back that lever. Now your wheel to the right—that sets the rising warping appliances! There! That's it! Now your foot on the engine accelerator! Good! You are an aviator already."

As Jack put the lieutenant's commands into execution one after another the desired effect was procured. The aeroplane began to rise, fighting its way up through that inferno of yellow sand. Jack feared that at any moment his eyes would be rendered useless, but he stuck to his task without flinching.

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At last in the upper regions, they winged along free from the ordeal of the whirling sand spouts, but still in the grasp of the furious wind.

"Can we not land?" asked Jack after a time. "Surely it would be safer."

"Safer, doubtless, once we could get to earth; but it would be madness to attempt a landing in this wind."

"Then we must stay up here till the wind subsides?"

"Yes, or at least until the sand thins out. We should be blinded if we got into the thick of it, let alone the danger to our engine."

"What speed are we making?" was Jack's next question.

"About fifty miles an hour, possibly more."

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"Then we may be driven miles out of our way?"

"I fear that is possible. But see, Lieut. Diaz appears to be reviving. Can you reach me that medical kit?"

Jack, not without being fearful of the consequences of his taking one hand from the controlling devices, did so. Luckily, as we know, the aeroplane was equipped with the latest stability devices, making her comparatively steady compared to the older fashioned craft of the air. Jack's maneuver, therefore, was not so risky as might have been thought.

While the aeroplane bucked and plunged its way through the storm Lieut. Sancho administered stimulants to Lieut. Diaz, who presently began to recover from his spell of air sickness almost as rapidly as he had been "taken down" with it. It is a peculiarity of such seizures, in fact, that they are not of long duration. Some authorities have held that there are poisoned strata in the air which cause the sickness and on emerging from them the victim becomes well again. However that may be, Lieut. Diaz was soon himself, and Jack was relieved at the wheel by Lieut. Sancho.

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"How far do you imagine we have been driven?" he asked as the officer took the wheel.

"That is impossible to say, *amigo* Jack. I directed you while you were in control of the ship so that as far as possible we should maneuver in circles. Judging by that, we ought not to be much more

than fifty miles or so out of our way."

This was cheering news to Jack, who had begun to imagine that they had been driven half way to the Gulf of Mexico at least. As this would have meant a lot of delay in rejoining his comrades, he was naturally worried. For an hour or so more they swung in circles above the storm, and then the furious gale began to lessen.

As the wind fell the sand "fog" below began to melt away just as if it had actually been mist. Its dissolving brought a view of a stretch of country not unlike that in which the Rangers had been camped when Jack had last seen them. [200]

Below them shone the river between its precipitous banks, and on one side of it Jack could see a small, rough-looking settlement. On the outskirts was a low red building, the shape and form of which at once showed it to be a schoolhouse, even if the Stars and Stripes had not been floating on a pole before the door. The aeroplane was still hovering in the air above the little settlement when the schoolhouse door opened and out rushed teacher and pupils in evident excitement. They gazed upward at the winged man-bird in a state of the greatest wonderment.

Suddenly from across the river came a perfect tempest of shots and yells. Looking down, Jack saw that a body of horsemen was galloping for dear life toward the ford at the river. Close behind them came some more mounted men, although the latter were dressed in uniforms, suggesting that they were regulars. Evidently they were in pursuit of the ragged-looking Mestizos who were making for the ford. [201]

On they came at a furious gallop. Gazing from above, Lieut. Sancho announced that the band being pursued was a band of rebels, while the men in pursuit were part of the regular cavalry of the Mexican government.

"But they are fleeing on to American soil!" exclaimed Jack.

"Si, señor Jack. Evidently the rascally rebels think that if they can gain the protection of the Stars and Stripes they will be safe."

Jack could not help feeling sympathy for the ragged band that was being so remorselessly pursued, even though he knew that the rebels had wrought all sorts of outrages, both on American soil and in their own country. For instance, only a short time before a band of cattle had been driven from an American ranch to feed the starving revolutionary troops. [202]

But such thoughts as these were soon interrupted by the boy's absorbed interest in the drama taking place far below them. From the town a few men had come running at the sound of the shooting, but as they saw the armed men come sweeping through the ford they beat a hasty retreat. Only the school teacher, a pretty young girl, so far as Jack could see, and her little flock stood their ground.

Having crossed the ford the pursued Mestizos did not draw rein. Instead, they urged their ponies on still more furiously. The clatter of their hoofs even reached to the aeroplane, which was swinging about in the blue ether some thousands of feet above.

All at once Jack, with a quick intake of his breath, divined their purpose. The hounded band of revolutionaries was spurring and lashing for the schoolhouse. Their evident purpose was to seek refuge within it, under the protection of Old Glory. [203]

But what of the children and their young teacher? In case there should be firing, their position would be a terrible one. As the first of the rebel band dashed into the schoolhouse enclosure and the teacher and her pupils fled within in terror, Jack begged Lieut. Sancho to descend.

"In case the Federals open fire on the schoolhouse many of those children will be killed," he cried anxiously.

Lieut. Sancho nodded.

"I doubt if we can be of much use," he said, "but at any rate we will drop down and see what can be done."

The aeroplane instantly began to descend, but before it was half way down the last of the refugees had dashed into the schoolhouse, and the door was slammed to and bolted. The Federals, close on the fugitives' heels, withdrew to a short distance for a parley when they perceived this. From the schoolhouse windows a few scattering shots followed them, but none of them took effect. [204]

But the men who had done the shooting had perceived the approach of the aeroplane, which was now quite close to the ground. It was probably the first they had ever seen and they gazed

at it with awe and some superstitious terror.

"What do you want?" called one of them.

"What shall we tell them?" Lieut. Sancho whispered to Jack.

"Tell them to let the teacher and her scholars out of there at once or we will dynamite the place," replied Jack without hesitation.

"I'll tell them that if they don't, we shall drop a bomb from the aeroplane," whispered the lieutenant.

"That's a good idea. Let's hope it will scare them into releasing the children and their teacher."

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Lieut. Sancho shouted his ultimatum at the men at the schoolhouse windows, at the same time leaning down as if to pick up some sort of weapon. Doubtless the unfamiliarity of such a war machine as an aeroplane had something to do with it; but at any rate, after some anxious deliberation, during which the aeroplane hovered at closer range, the door was opened and the teacher and her little flock emerged.

"Now run to the town. Run for your lives," cried Jack as they came out, and the pretty girl and her pupils were not slow to obey the injunction.

In the meantime the Federals, withdrawn to a little distance, had viewed the operations with amazement. They had been too much excited by the chase to notice the aeroplane till it was at close range. Now they gazed at it with wonder and then broke into a cheer. At first Jack was astonished at this enthusiasm, but then he suddenly recollected that inscribed on the machine's upper and lower planes were the arms of the Mexican Republic.

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"Viva! Viva, Madero!" yelled the regulars, as the aeroplane swung above them.

"What are you going to do with those rascals in the schoolhouse?" yelled down Lieut. Sancho to the officer in charge of the Federals as the great winged machine sailed majestically by over their heads.

"Assault the place and capture it," was the reply.

"You forget that it is on American territory and that our government will be liable for any outrages inflicted on this side of the Border," was the rejoinder. "I will guarantee to get them out of there in far more peaceable fashion."

"Very well, señor lieutenant, as you will," was the reply of the officer, given with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Well, I wonder what's going to happen now?" thought Jack as the aeroplane was headed back at top speed for the schoolhouse.

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"Diaz, will you do me the favor to get that round black bottle out of the medicine kit?" said Lieut. Sancho in calm tones as he guided the air craft toward the stronghold and retreat of the rebel force.

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CHAPTER XX.

WHERE STRATEGY WON OUT.

Their coming was viewed by a dozen swarthy faces thrust out of the schoolhouse windows. As the aeroplane drew near the building Lieut. Sancho raised his voice above the humming of the engine.

In a loud authoritative tone he called for attention.

"If that schoolhouse is not vacated inside of five minutes," he snapped out, "I shall dynamite it."

A derisive chorus of yells greeted this, although a few voices could be heard begging the officer to have mercy.

"Hand me that 'bomb,' Diaz," ordered the officer as the aeroplane came in full view of the schoolhouse.

Seizing this opportunity, Lieut. Sancho manipulated the air craft with one hand while he apparently examined the "bomb" with deep attention. He took good care while doing this to handle it so that it might be plainly seen by the Mestizos.

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The aeroplane continued its flight above the schoolhouse roof, and then, swinging round, was driven back again. As they came over for the second time Lieut. Sancho hailed the recalcitrants once more.

"Throw your rifles and weapons out of the windows or I'll drop the bomb. The five minutes is almost up."

This time there was no answer but a sullen roar. Apparently the occupants of the schoolhouse were quarreling among each other. The aeroplane was flown a short distance and then turned for another flight toward the schoolhouse.

"Here, take the wheel, Diaz," ordered Lieut. Sancho. "I'm going to let them see that we mean business."

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With Lieut. Diaz at the wheel, his brother officer manipulated the "bomb" in truly alarming manner. Bending low over it and striking a match, he appeared to light its fuse. Then, holding on to a brace, he half rose out of his seat, and as they neared the schoolhouse he raised his arm as if poisoning the "bomb" before hurling it.

It was too much for the nerves of the besieged. With wild cries to Lieut. Sancho not to kill them, they began casting their rifles and revolvers out of the windows in a perfect hail. Lieut. Sancho appeared to stay his hand, but was still menacing.

"Todos! Todos!" ("All! All!")

He shouted this as they thundered close above the schoolhouse roof. As he did so the schoolhouse door was opened and out rushed the terrified, demoralized Mestizos, who were swiftly made prisoners by the Federals without their offering more than a nominal resistance.

By the time the last had been captured, while the aeroplane drew close to the scene, from the town, whence the proceedings had been watched with interest, several citizens came running, now that all the danger of bullets seemed to be past.

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"Well, after what I've seen," declared Jack, "never tell me that the aeroplane isn't any good in warfare. To-day it averted what might have been a bloody fight, and, as it was, not a man was even scratched, except in his feelings. By the way, Lieutenant, what was in that 'bomb'?"

"A very deadly mixture," laughed the officer in return, "a solution of Epsom salts!"

"Here I be, the mayor of that thar berg back thar," said an individual with a bristly straw-colored mustache, hastening up. "What be all these here connipations a-goin' on out hyar?"

"Why, Mr. Mayor," rejoined Jack, "these two gentlemen are officers of the Mexican Federal troops detailed to aerial duty."

"Waal, what be they doin' this side of ther Border? I've a good mind ter put 'em in ther calaboose, the dern long-horns," declared the mayor angrily.

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"Inasmuch as they saved a lot of children and their teacher from rough treatment by a band of rebels, I don't think that would be very fair," said Jack.

"Humph!" grunted the mayor, "I was comin' out hyar to git ther mavericks on ther run myself, but I had an attack of indigestion."

"I guess that was when you heard the shooting," thought Jack to himself.

Aloud, though, he continued:

"The Mestizos were captured by as clever a ruse as can be imagined, Mr. Mayor."

"Eh, how's that, young feller?"

"By a bottle of Epsom salts."

"Say, see here, kid, it ain't healthy ter git funny with yer elders in these hyar parts."

"It's the exact truth, I assure you," declared Jack smilingly, quite ignoring the mayor's frown. He went on to tell the full details of the fight, or rather the argument, and when he had finished not one of the assembled crowd was there that did not join in the laugh. [213]

"An' how did you come to be hyar, young feller?" asked the mayor at the conclusion of Jack's story. "You beant a greaser."

"No, but I have found that there are a few brave and clever men on the other side of the line, too," declared Jack.

"Ther kid's right," assented one or two in the crowd.

Jack then told as much of his adventures as he thought necessary, and at the conclusion the delighted mayor clapped him on the back so heartily that the breath was almost driven out of his body.

"I'll give yer all ther liberty of Go 'long," he said, sweeping his hand back toward his little principality.

But the two Mexican officers were obliged to refuse the mayor's hospitality. A short time after the Federal troops had departed with their prisoners of war the two airmen winged their way southward to their headquarters. [214]

As for Jack, he had ascertained that San Mercedes was only twenty miles or so off, so he determined to hire a horse and ride over there early in the morning. That night he slept in a bed for the first time in many long hours, and with his anxieties cleared away and his heart light, his slumbers were deep and dreamless. He was awakened by the ubiquitous mayor, who was also the hotel-keeper. Incidentally, the pretty school teacher turned out to be his daughter. Her enthusiastic praises of Jack the night before had made the boy blush hotly, but that was nothing to his embarrassment a few moments later when the town band, consisting of a cornet and a drum, headed a procession to the hotel and he had been compelled to give a speech.

Jack felt glad on waking that all that was over, and that in a short time he would be on his way back to his friends in the camp of the Rangers. The town of Go 'long did not offer much in the way of a menu beyond blackstrap and hot cakes, beans, bacon and black coffee, but Jack made a hearty meal on these frontier delicacies, after which he was informed that his pony was at the door. [215]

His landlord, whose name, by the way, was Jerry Dolittle, refused to take a cent from the boy, and told him that when the Rangers came that way next his old friend, Captain Atkinson, could return him the pony.

The greater part of the population of Go 'long had accompanied Jack about a mile on his way, but soon he was ambling along alone with a straight road in front of him. Naturally his mind was busy with speculations as to what had occurred in the camp during his long absence from it.

"Good old Walt! Dear old Ralph! Won't they be glad to see me!" he mused as he rode along across the plains; "won't I be glad to see them, too! Gracious, what a lot we shall have to talk about! I won't blame them if they don't believe half of it. I can hardly believe it myself sometimes, and that's a fact." [216]

Between San Mercedes and Go 'long the rough road led through one of those peculiarly desolate ranges of hills common in that part of our country. As Jack's pony began to mount into the recesses of these gloomy, barren hills, the lad knew that he had come a dozen miles or so from the Go 'long hotel.

The road wound along the bottom of the steep, sandy gullies, which were in some places streaked gorgeously with strata of various colors, red, blue and bright orange. Above burned a sky of brilliant blue. It would have made a splendid subject for the canvas of an impressionistic painter.

Jack knew that somewhere within these hills he ought to meet [217]

the daily stage that ran between San Mercedes and Go 'long. At least, such had been the information given him before he set out from the latter place. He was quite anxious to see it, as on his lonely ride he had not encountered a human face. The solitary nature of the barren hills through which he was now riding depressed him, too, with a sense of remoteness and lonesomeness.

As Jack rode he commented to himself on the rugged character of the scenery. The road, which would have hardly been dignified with the name of a trail in the east, crawled along the side of the bare hills, in some places overhanging gloomy canyons.

"This must be a dangerous place to drive a stage," thought Jack as he passed by a big rock and found himself traversing a bit of road which bordered the edge of a mountain spur, with a precipice on one side and a deep canyon on the other.

In fact, had the lad known it, that particular bit of road was reputed to be about the worst even in that wild land. Should the horses make a misstep on the trail, instant death to every occupant of the coach must result. [218]

There were few drivers, even the most reckless, that cared to go at more than a snail's pace over that stretch of road even with the quietest team. True, the passage had been made on one occasion at night, but that was for a wild and foolish bet and the authorities had put a stop to any more such practices. So that Jack was not far out when he mentally appraised that bit of road as being as dangerous and nasty a track to negotiate as he had ever seen; and Jack had seen a good deal of the wild southwest.

The boy had passed the dangerous bit of road and was jogging along in a deep divide between two ranges, when he was startled by a sudden sound right ahead of him.

It was unmistakably a shot.

A rifle shot, too, the boy judged. He spurred forward rapidly, not knowing well just what to expect when he should round a curve in the road just ahead. [219]

It did flash into his mind that his landlord at Go 'long had spoken of the coach being held up occasionally, but Jack had placed little stock in the stories. In fact, he rather inclined to think that old Jerry was telling them with the idea of getting a rise out of a Tenderfoot.

Still, there were a few mines in that part of the country and occasionally gold was shipped through to Go 'long, which was not far from the main line of the Southern Pacific Railroad.

But Jack had only made a few paces forward on his quickened mount when three other shots rang out in rapid succession.

"Now I am perfectly sure there is trouble on the trail ahead!" exclaimed Jack to himself, urging his pony forward at a yet faster gait.

The idea of personal danger did not enter Jack's head, although the scene that he beheld as he swept round the curve on his galloping pony might well have alarmed an older hand than he. [220]

Coming toward him at a hard gallop was the Go 'long coach. Its six horses were in a lather of perspiration, and the coach was swaying wildly from side to side.

From the top of the coach a fusilade was being fired at three men in pursuit of the vehicle. These latter appeared to be returning the fire with good will.

At almost the same moment that his eye took in these details Jack became aware that, besides the driver of the stage, there were three other occupants on the roof.

These were Captain Atkinson of the Rangers, Ralph Stetson and Walt Phelps.

As he perceived all this Jack drew his pony back on his haunches and waited whatever might turn up, for it was his determination to aid his friends.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE STAGE HOLD-UP.

Suddenly Jack saw the driver lurch forward in his seat. Perhaps he had been killed, perhaps he was only badly injured.

Instantly Jack's mind was made up. Snatching off his hat, he waved it about his head.

At the same time he turned in his saddle and yelled back down the trail, as if a numerous band was coming round the turn:

"Come on, boys! Hurry up and we'll get them!"

The pursuers of the coach stopped suddenly. Then they wheeled their ponies about and dashed off at top speed. Jack's ruse had succeeded. Evidently the highwaymen thought that a large body of horsemen was behind Jack. At any rate, they deemed it more prudent not to wait to find out. [222]

But only one serious aspect of the situation was relieved by the abrupt departure of the highwaymen. The limp form of the coachman hung on the box, almost toppling off the seat. The lines had dropped from his hands and lay on the backs of the terrified wheelers. On they came, thundering at runaway speed, while Jack hesitated, his mind full of the thought of that dangerous bit of road that lay ahead.

He shouted up to his companions on the roof:

"Hullo, boys! I'm with you again!"

There was a yell of joy. An answer to his hail came quickly.

"Jack Merrill, by all that's wonderful!"

"Jack! How under the sun did he get here!"

"It's Jack on deck again as usual!"

But Jack heard none of these joyous exclamations. He had turned his horse almost on its haunches, owing to the narrowness of the trail. In one swift flash of inspiration he had made up his mind as to the course he would pursue in checking the runaways. [223]

He spurred his pony alongside the wheelers, crying out in as soothing a tone as he could:

"Whoa, boys! Whoa, there!"

But the terrified animals paid no attention to him, nor had he much expected that they would. He only spoke to them in order that he might not frighten them worse when he spurred his pony alongside them.

He might have ridden in front of them, but the risk of causing them to swerve and precipitate the whole coach from the trail was too great. The most dangerous part of the road lay about a mile ahead. If only he could check the team before they reached it, all might be well; if not—well, Jack did not dare to think of what would be the consequences in such a case. Thus began a mad, dangerous ride, a ride of grave risk to the daring young Border Boy.

Of one thing he was thankful—the pony under him was a sure-footed, fast little beast, and perfectly broken, a rare thing in that part of our country. This made it possible for Jack to loop his own reins about the saddle horn and then, leaning out of the saddle, to seize the lines which the wounded driver had dropped. [224]

This done, he began to pull gently on them, taking care not to terrify the runaways further by jerking on their bits. Bracing himself in his stirrups, Jack exerted a steady pressure on the reins, at the same time using every means he knew of to soothe the maddened beasts.

"Good boy, Jack! Good boy!" breathed Captain Atkinson from the roof of the coach, while he lifted the stricken stage driver to a place of safety. "Boys, Jack will save us yet," he added, turning to his young companions.

"You can bet on him every time," came admiringly from Ralph. "He'll conquer them yet."

But had Ralph known of the danger place that lay not so far ahead now, he might not have been so confident. [225]

"Put on the brake!" Jack shouted back over his shoulder as they tore along that dangerous trail.

"Bless my soul! Why didn't I think of that?" exclaimed Captain Atkinson.

Handing the driver over to the care of the boys, he clambered into the former's seat, and, placing his foot on the heavy California-style brake, he jammed it down with all his force.

"Good!" cried Jack as the wheels screeched and groaned.

The horses appeared more terrified than ever at the racket made by the brake, but it was strong enough to check their speed perceptibly, struggle as they would.

A short distance further came a little rise, beyond which lay the dangerous spot that Jack dreaded. The rise completed what the brake had begun.

"They're slackening speed, Jack!" cried Captain Atkinson. [226]

"They are, indeed!" hurled back Jack. "I think I'll have them under control in a jiffy."

Jack's words came true, but none too soon. A few seconds more and they would have reached the curve, beyond which lay the bit of narrow road. A thrill ran through Jack's frame as he drew tight on the reins and felt the tired animals slow up to a trot and then, obedient to his voice, come to a halt, sweating and trembling, with distended nostrils.

Jack lost no time in riding round to the heads of the leaders and holding tightly on to them. But there was little fight left in the horses. Dragging the coach with its locked brake up that hill had thoroughly exhausted them; they seemed glad to rest.

"Get out, boys!" shouted Jack. "Come and give me a hand to uncouple the traces. I don't think they'll run again, but we won't take chances." [227]

In an instant Ralph Stetson and Walt Phelps had sprung to the ground and one on either side of the coach were running forward to help Jack complete one of the bravest tasks a boy ever set himself to perform.

Naturally, it was not till the horses were calmed down that they had a chance to talk. In the meantime the stage driver, whose name was Jed Hoster, had been revived and was found to be painfully but not seriously injured. He had been shot through the shoulder.

We are not going to relate all that took place at that odd reunion in the heart of the Ragged Range, as the barren hills were called. Every one of my readers can picture for himself what a confusion of tongues reigned as the boys all tried to talk at once, and relate their many adventures since last they had met.

After awhile the coach, with Captain Atkinson at the "ribbons" and Jack riding close alongside, was driven to a broad part of the road and then turned around, as San Mercedes was closer to the spot where the attack had occurred than was Go 'long. [228]

Captain Atkinson told the boys that he had not the least idea who the men that made the attack could have been, but surmised that they must have possessed information that the coach was carrying a consignment of gold dust from a desert mine for shipment at Go 'long.

"Had it not been for your smart trick, Jack," he declared, "we should never have got off as easily as we did."

A sharp lookout was kept all the way back to San Mercedes for another sight of the would-be robbers. But nothing more was seen of them, and the return journey was made without incident. There was much rejoicing in the camp of the Rangers over the safe return of Jack, and even Shorty appeared to be glad that the boy had come unscathed through so many perils. [229]

That was a gala night in camp. Songs and stories filled the time till far into the night. The three boys, who possessed remarkably good voices, sang several popular songs and were much applauded. At last they had to stop from sheer weariness.

Each lad was anxious to go out on duty along the Rio Grande that same evening, but Captain Atkinson sternly forbade them doing so.

"You turn into your blankets and get a good sleep," he ordered. "I've got another job on hand for you to-morrow and I want you to be fresh when you tackle it."

Much mystified and not a little excited at these words, the boys obediently turned in and were soon sound asleep. They were astir bright and early the next morning—just as the last patrol of the night was coming in, in fact. The night had been an eventless one, they learned, the rebels having given no sign of their presence. [230]

Soon after breakfast Captain Atkinson approached the boys, who

were polishing up their saddles and bits, accompanied by a tall, bronze-bearded man, whose tanned skin and keen gray eyes bespoke him a dweller in the open places.

"This is Mr. Lionel Reeves, the rancher, of whom you may have heard," he said. "Mr. Reeves, these are the lads of whom I spoke to you."

"I am sure you could not have picked better young fellows for the task you wish accomplished," spoke Mr. Reeves, shaking hands warmly with each of the boys in turn. "By the way, do they know about it?"

"Not yet," rejoined Captain Atkinson, with a smile at the eager looks that three pairs of eyes turned on him.

CHAPTER XXII.

OFF ON A MISSION.

"Mr. Reeves lives on the Rio Grande about fifty miles from here," went on Captain Atkinson, while the boys listened eagerly, feeling that they were on the verge of some fresh adventure. "He has, as you may know, one of the biggest cattle ranches in this part of Texas. Word has been brought to him that the rebel army of Mexico, which is hard up for food, has planned a raid on his ranch to drive off a band of cattle."

The boys nodded attentively, but as there was no necessity for speech they said nothing.

"Now, then," continued the captain of the Rangers, "most of his punchers are off on another of his ranges rounding up stock for shipment on a rush order. That leaves the Border ranch practically unprotected. Mr. Reeves is an old friend of mine, and has come to ask me for aid. I cannot spare any of my men, as I need them all to patrol this part of the river. I have offered, subject to your consent, of course, your services to Mr. Reeves. You will rank as Rangers yourselves while performing patrol duty at Lagunitas Rancho. Will you go?"

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Would they? The cheer that went up was more than ample evidence that the Border Boys fairly leaped at the chance. Captain Atkinson went on to explain that their duties would be to watch the cattle at night and instantly give the alarm if anything out of the way occurred.

"But mind," he warned, with a half humorous look playing about his mouth, "mind, you are not to get into any danger."

"Oh, no, captain," chorused three voices in unison.

"I am not so sure about that," rejoined Captain Atkinson. "You Border Boys appear to have a remarkable faculty for getting into scrapes of all kinds."

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"But, then, we always get out of them again," struck in Walt Phelps quite seriously, at which both Captain Atkinson and Mr. Reeves and the boys themselves had to laugh.

"Do we start right away?" asked Walt anxiously.

"No; not until to-morrow morning. Mr. Reeves, however, will go on ahead. I will give full instructions as to the road to take and there will be no chance of your being lost."

"As if we couldn't find the road," whispered Ralph indignantly to Walt. "That would be a fine thing for full-fledged Rangers to do, wouldn't it?"

Soon after, Mr. Reeves said good-bye, as he had a long ride ahead of him and could not expect to arrive home much before midnight. The rest of that day the boys spent in getting their outfits ready. Baldy showed them how to do up their kits in real Ranger fashion. In the town the boys also procured for themselves Ranger hats and gauntlets, so that when the time came for their departure the next morning they were three as doughty looking Rangers as could have been found along the Rio Grande.

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"Good-bye, boys," were Captain Atkinson's parting words. "Keep out of danger and remember that you are going on Rangers' work as Texas Rangers."

"We won't forget," called back Jack, with a hearty ring in his voice.

"So-long! Yip-ye-e-e-ee!" yelled the Rangers.

"Yip! Yip!" shouted the boys.

Their three ponies bounded forward, and in a cloud of dust they clattered through the town and out upon the plains upon the trail for Lagunitas Rancho.

As they had a long trip before them, they did not ride fast after they had passed the town limits, but allowed their ponies to adopt that easy, single-footed gait known all over the west as the "cow trot." At noon they halted by some giant cottonwood trees to eat the lunch they had brought with them. Large clumps of bright green grass grew in great profusion all about, and the boys decided to let the ponies graze while they ate. They made a hearty meal, washing it down with water from their canteens. These canteens were covered with felt, which had been well soaked with water before

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leaving camp.

The evaporation from the wet felt as the hot sun struck it kept the fluid within the canteens fairly cool.

"Gee whiz! I just hate to go out into the hot sun again," declared Walt Phelps, throwing himself down on the ground and luxuriating in the shade.

"Same here, but we've got to be pressing forward if we are to go on duty to-night," declared Jack.

"Thunderation!" fairly shouted Ralph, "do we have to go on duty to-night?" [236]

"Why, yes. You didn't think we were going to Lagunitas for a vacation, did you?" inquired Jack with a smile.

"N-n-no," stammered Ralph, looking rather shamefaced, "but I thought we'd have a rest before we started in."

"I reckon Rangers do their work first and rest afterward. Isn't that the way, Jack?" asked Walt.

"I guess that's it," was the reply. "But let's go and get the cayuses and saddle up."

"Well, I suppose what must be, must be," muttered Ralph, with a groan at the idea of leaving the friendly cottonwoods.

The three lads rose to their feet and looked about them. To their dumbfounded amazement no ponies were to be seen.

"Great Scott, what can have become of them?" cried Jack.

"Stolen, maybe," suggested Ralph. [237]

"How on earth could that be? No one came near while we were resting."

"But they are not to be seen," objected Walt.

"Why, yes, they are," cried Jack suddenly. "Look, they are all lying down out yonder."

"Gracious, they lie as if they were———" began Walt, when Ralph interrupted him with a sharp cry of:

"Dead!"

In a moment the boys were at the side of their little mounts. The animals lay stretched out as if they had not an ounce of life in their bodies. But their hearts could be seen beating, and their nostrils moved as the breath passed in and out; so it was quite evident that they were alive.

"What on earth can have happened to them?" asked Jack.

"You've got me," confessed Walt. "I can't imagine." [238]

"It's certain that they were all right and lively a few minutes ago," said Ralph.

"Not a doubt of it," agreed Jack. "Well, then, it must be something that they've eaten right here."

"Yes, but what?" objected Ralph Stetson. "There's nothing here for them to eat but this grass."

"Maybe it's the grass, then. It *is peculiar* looking grass, now you come to look at it. Look at these funny tufts on it."

"I guess you're right, Walt," agreed Jack, "but let's try if we can't get the ponies on their feet. Maybe it will work off."

Not without a lot of exertion were the ponies induced to stand up, and then they appeared to be so sleepy that they could hardly keep their feet.

"Let's mount them and ride them up and down," said Jack; "that may help to work off whatever it is that ails them." [239]

The three lads mounted as Jack suggested and began riding their ponies vigorously up and down under the cottonwoods. After a short time the treatment did appear to be effective. The ponies' eyes, which had been dull and lifeless, brightened up and they shook their heads and tossed their manes vigorously.

"Well, they seem to be all right again. I guess we'd better be pushing on," said Jack.

"Hold on a minute. Let's take some of that grass along," suggested Walt. "Mr. Reeves may be able to tell us what it is."

"That's a good idea," assented Jack.

Each of the boys picked a big bunch of the queer-looking grass and stuffed it in his pocket. Then they rode on once more, the ponies seeming to be as well as ever after their odd sleeping fit. It may be said here that Mr. Reeves told them later on that the grass the ponies had eaten was of a rare sort known as "lazy grass." It grows

in parts of the southwest and is readily recognizable by its peculiar tufts. It has the effect of a narcotic, and if taken in large quantities may prove fatal. But the ponies had only eaten enough to make them sleepy, fortunately for the boys.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

THE HERMIT OF THE YUCCA.

Late that same afternoon the three boy travelers found themselves riding amidst a perfect forest of stiff-armed yucca plants. Here they came upon a small shack where lived a strange character of the Texan wilds. This old man was known to the cowboys and ranchers who passed that way as Mad Mat. He was supposed to have been driven to the solitudes of the yucca desert by some unfortunate love affair, but of this he never talked, and all concerning his former life was merely rumor.

Hot and dusty as the boys were, they decided that it would be pleasant to stop in at the shack and see if they could obtain some fresh water and a cooked meal, for, although they had plenty of cold grub, they had neglected to bring any cooking appliances. Jack knocked at the door of the dilapidated shack and the boys, who had not been prepared for the strange appearance of Mad Mat, almost shrank back as he appeared. [242]

The old hermit was dressed in a collection of filthy rags, apparently secured from all sources, for no two pieces matched. A long gray beard hung almost to his waist, and out of the hairy growth which half covered his face his eyes glowed like two coals of fire. However, he did not appear half so formidable as he looked, and the boys concluded that the old hermit of the yucca waste would be an interesting character to study.

Mad Mat invited them cordially enough into his shack, and opened the door to them with as consequential a flourish of his hand as if this had been the dwelling place of an emperor. He lived, so he told them, by tending his little flock of sheep, most of which, so rumor in that part of the country had it, had been stolen from passing herds. [243]

However that might be, Mad Mat was able to set forth some excellent mutton before his hungry guests, and, although the surroundings were not suited to the fastidious, the boys had roughed it too much in the southwest to be over-particular.

They found Mad Mat talkative on every subject but himself. In fact, when Ralph asked him where he came from the old man became quite angry and glared at them out of his beard like an "owl in an ivy bush," as Ralph put it afterward.

Jack found an opportunity to draw Ralph aside and warned him that it was not good policy in that country to ask personal questions of strangers.

"Most of these odd characters of the plains have a reason for being out here which they don't like to talk about," he said.

By way of changing the subject, Walt turned to that safe topic, the weather. [244]

"You evidently haven't had much rain here lately?" he said.

"Nope," rejoined Mad Mat in his odd, jerky way of talking; "no rain. No rain for a year."

"No rain for a year!" echoed the boys.

"That's right. Maybe a drop now and then, but not to amount to anything."

"How do you get water then?" asked Ralph, for the ponies had been watered from a big tub filled from a wooden pipe.

"Pipe it from a dry spring."

"That's a funny sort of spring—a dry one," exclaimed Walt.

"It's so, just the same," replied the hermit, rather angrily. "We call a dry spring one that you have to dig out, one that doesn't come to the surface. We find 'em with divining rods."

"Well, it looks to me as if you might get some rain to-night," said Jack, who had risen and looked out of the door. [245]

"I guess not," said the hermit confidently. "The sheep ain't baaing, and they mos' gen'ally always do afore rain."

"Well, there's something coming up then, or I'm no judge of weather."

At the same time a low, distant rumbling was heard.

"Thunder!" cried Walt, springing to his feet.

"That's what," agreed Ralph. "I guess we are in for a wetting."

"Oh, I don't know," said the hermit, shrugging his thin shoulders.

He rose and accompanied by Walt and Ralph came to the door, where Jack was already standing.

"Goshen!" he exclaimed, "it is makin' up its mind to suthin', fer sure."

Far off to the southwest lightning was ripping and tearing in livid streaks across the sky. It had grown almost as black as night, and there was a distinctly sulphurous smell in the air. [246]

It was a magnificent sight as the storm swept down on them, although it was also awe-inspiring. The sky grew like a black curtain spread above the earth. Across it riven fragments of white cloud were driven, like flying steam. Through this sable canopy the lightning tore and crackled with vicious emphasis.

But, strangely enough, there was no rain. Instead, great clouds of dust heralded the coming of the storm. The air was stifling and heavy, too, like the breath from an open oven door.

"There ain't much rain up yonder," said the old hermit, his long white hair and beard blown about wildly by the wind.

"No rain?" questioned Jack. "What is there, then?"

"Lightning," exclaimed the old man, his eyes glowing strangely as he spoke. It seemed that he rejoiced and triumphed in the advance of the storm. He held his arms extended to the heavens like a prophet of olden days. [247]

Suddenly with an ear-splitting crash a bolt tore its way across the sky and fell with a sizzling crash almost in front of the shanty. It bored into the earth, throwing up a cloud of stones and dust on every side. So great was the force of the explosion when it struck that Jack was sent reeling back against the door post.

"No more of that for me," said the boy. "I'm going inside."

"A lot of good that will do you," scoffed Walt Phelps. "It wouldn't much surprise me if this house was hit next."

Ralph's face turned pale as he heard. In truth the constant display of heavenly artillery was discomposing. A green glare lit up the surroundings, the yuccas standing out blackly against the constant flashes.

The thunder, too, was terrific and incessant, shaking the earth as it reverberated. All at once came a crash that seemed as if it must have split the earth wide open. Balls of green and white fire spattered in every direction. The boys were hurled helter-skelter all over the hut. It was almost pitch dark, and they called to each other nervously. Not one knew but that the other might have been killed or seriously injured. [248]

But although bruised and badly scared, they were all right, it was found. Yet as they scrambled to their feet the lightning outside showed them a still form lying across the door of the hut.

"It's the hermit!" cried Jack.

"He's dead!" shouted Ralph.

"Hold on a minute," warned Jack.

He went outside and Walt helped him drag the old man into the hut. The lightning, by one of those freaks for which it is noted, had stripped his miserable collection of rags right off him and there did not appear to be much life in him.

The boys laid him on a table and then lighted a lantern, for it was too dark to see but by artificial light. All this time the storm raged and crashed alarmingly about them, but they were too intent on discovering a spark of life in the old hermit to pay any attention to it. [249]

"Get some water, quick!" ordered Jack.

There was a tub in one corner of the hut and the boys dipped cloths into it, which Jack applied to the base of the old man's skull. After a time, to Jack's great delight, the old hermit began to give signs of recovery. He opened his queer, bloodshot eyes and looked up at the boys.

"How do you feel?" asked Jack.

"As if I'd bin kicked by a blamed mule," answered Mad Mat.

The boys could not help laughing at his whimsical description of the effects of the lightning.

"It took all the—the———"—Jack hesitated as to what to call the hermit's rags—"the clothes off you."

"Consarn it, so it did," grunted the old man, sitting up. "The last [250]

time it hit me it did the same thing."

"What! Have you been hit before?" demanded the boys in astonishment.

"Sure. This makes the third time, an' I guess as I've got through this safely, I'm all right now."

"Well, that's one way of looking at it," declared Walt with a grin, "but once would be quite enough for me."

"Anyhow, it didn't rain," said the hermit triumphantly. "I told yer it wouldn't."

It was all the boys could do to keep from breaking out into hearty laughter at the strange old man who seemed to mind being hit by lightning no more than any ordinary occurrence.

"Waal, now I've got to stitch all them rags together agin," he said presently in a complaining tone, regarding the scattered collection of stuff that had been torn off him by the lightning.

"Gracious! I should think you'd get a new outfit," declared Jack. [251]

The hermit glowered at him.

"Git a new outfit? What'd I git a new outfit fer? Ain't them clothes as good as ever? All they want is stitching together agin and they'll be as good as new."

So saying, he went outside, for the storm had passed over by this time, and began gathering his scattered raiment.

"Hadn't you better put on some clothes?" suggested Jack, trying to stifle his laughter.

"Oh, that's right!" exclaimed the hermit, who had apparently quite forgotten that he was bereft of all garments. He returned to the shack, put on an old blanket, and with this wrapped about him he set about collecting his rags once more, grumbling to himself all the time.

"I s'pose that blame lightnin' will hit one of my sheep next trip," he grunted, as if the fact that he had been struck was nothing compared with the loss of one of his sheep. [252]

"Speaking of sheep, we'd better go and see how the ponies are getting along," said Jack presently.

They ran to the rough shed where the ponies had been tied. Two of them, they found, had been knocked down by a bolt, while the other was half wild from fright. The two that had been struck were just struggling to their feet.

The boys quieted their distressed animals and saddled them up ready to depart from the strange old hermit and his abode.

"You can't blame the ponies for being scared," declared Jack with a laugh; "being knocked out twice in one day is pretty tough."

"Unless you're a hermit," laughed Walt, at which they all roared.

Jack handed the hermit some money to pay for their entertainment as they were leaving. The old man took it without a word, except to say that he would have to hurry and stitch a pocket on his rags so as to have some place to put it. [253]

Then, without a word of farewell, he continued picking up his scattered raiment, and the last the boys saw of him he was still intent on his odd task.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BY SHEER GRIT.

Owing to the delay caused by the storm, it was late when they reached the Lagunitas Rancho. It was too dark for them to form any idea of the place, but Mr. Reeves, who greeted them warmly, ushered them into a long, low room hung with skins and trophies of the hunt, and ornamented at one end by a huge stone fireplace. The boys were surprised to find the ranch very comfortably furnished, almost luxurious, in fact. Every comfort of civilization was to be found there, even down to a grand piano and a phonograph. After a plentiful supper Mr. Reeves entertained the boys with selections on both of these instruments.

The rancher was married and had three children, but his family was at the time away on a visit to the East. Mr. Reeves said that while he was sorry that the boys had not had an opportunity to meet them, he was glad of their absence in another sense, for times were very troublous along the Border. [255]

It was decided that the boys were not to go on duty that night, but would turn in early and spend the next day getting acquainted with the ranch so that they could ride over it "blindfold," as Mr. Reeves put it. He informed them that he had six cowboys on duty, but that two of them were not very reliable and could not be depended upon in an emergency.

"I feel much easier in my mind now that I have three of the famous Texas Rangers to help me out," he said with a kindly smile.

"I hope we shall be able to live up to what the name stands for," said Jack gravely.

"Bravo, my lad; that's the proper spirit," declared the rancher warmly.

The boys slept that night in a comfortably furnished bedroom containing three cots. Before daybreak they were awake and discussing the coming day. Sunrise found them outside the ranch house, eagerly inspecting their new surroundings. But, early as they were, Mr. Reeves had been up before them and was ready to show them around. [256]

"Now, you boys must each pick yourself out a pony," he said, leading them toward a big corral in which several ponies were running loose.

"But we have our own," objected Ralph, who knew what western bronchos are when they are first taken out of a corral.

"I know that," responded Mr. Reeves, "but your ponies are pretty well tuckered out after all they went through yesterday. Fresh mounts will be very much better."

"You have some fine ones here, too," said Jack, who had been inspecting the twenty or more cayuses in the corral.

"Yes, Lagunitas is famous for its stock," was the response. "Will you rope the ones you want for yourselves, or shall I tell a puncher to do it for you?" [257]

"We'd be fine Rangers if we couldn't rope our own ponies," laughed Jack.

So saying, he selected a rope from several which were hanging on the corral posts. He tried it out and found it a good, pliant bit of rawhide. In the meantime Walt and Ralph had each taken another "riata" and were testing them.

So far as Ralph was concerned, his knowledge of lariat throwing was strictly limited. He had practiced a bit on the Merrill ranch, but he did not know much about the art—for an art it is to throw a rope with precision and accuracy.

By this time several of the cow-punchers attached to the ranch had assembled and watched the boys critically.

"Watch the Tenderfeet throw a rope, Bud," said one of them, a short, freckle-faced fellow. [258]

"Waal, I don't know but that tall one knows how to handle a lariat," rejoined Bud, fixing his eyes on Jack as he entered the corral with his rope trailing behind him, the loop ready for a swing. As soon as the boys were within the corral they started "milling" the ponies, as it is called, that is, causing them to run round and round in circles. In this work they were aided by the shrill whoops and

yells of the cow-punchers, who perched on the fence like a row of buzzards.

A buckskin pony with a white face and pink-rimmed eyes caught Jack's fancy, and in a jiffy his rope was swishing through the air. It fell neatly about the buckskin's neck, and Jack quickly brought the little animal up with a round turn on the "snubbing post" in the center of the corral. Then came Walt's turn and after some difficulty he succeeded in lassoing a small but wiry chestnut animal that looked capable of carrying his weight finely.

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Last of all came Ralph. He set his lips firmly and made the best cast he knew how at a sorrel colt that was galloping past him. The cowboys set up a jeering yell as they saw the way he handled his rope, and Ralph flushed crimson with mortification. Again and again he cast his rope, each time failing to land his animal. At last Mr. Reeves ordered one of the punchers to catch the pony for him. Ralph, feeling much humiliated, saw the sorrel caught with neatness and despatch.

"Must have bin practicing ropin' with yer maw's clothes line," grinned the cowboy who had effected the capture as he handed the pony over to Ralph.

While this was going on Jack had secured his heavy stock saddle and approached the buckskin to put it on its back. But the instant the little brute saw the saddle it began a series of wild buckings, lashing the air frantically with its hind feet.

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"Now look out for fun!" yelled a cow-puncher.

"The kid's got hold of old Dynamite," laughed another.

Jack heard this last remark and realized from it that the pony he had selected was a "bad one." But he determined to stick it out.

Mr. Reeves came over to his side.

"I wouldn't try to ride Dynamite, my boy," he said. "He's the most unruly broncho on the ranch. Take a quieter one like your chums have."

"I like this buckskin, sir, and, if you have no objection, I mean to ride him," spoke Jack quietly.

Something in the boy's eye and the determined set of his mouth and chin told the ranch owner that it would be useless to argue with Jack.

"At any rate, I'll send Bud in to help you cinch up," he volunteered.

"Thank you," said Jack, keeping his eyes on the buckskin, which had his ears laid back, and was the very picture of defiance.

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Bud, grinning all over, came into the corral swinging a rope. He skillfully caught the broncho's legs and threw the refractory animal to the ground. The instant the pony was down Jack ran forward and put a blindfold over his eyes.

"Waal, I see you do know something," admitted Bud grudgingly, "but you ain't never goin' ter ride Dynamite."

"Why not?"

"Cos there ain't a puncher on this ranch kin tackle him and I 'low no bloomin' Tenderfoot is going ter do what an old vaquero kain't."

"Well, we'll see," said Jack, with a quiet smile.

Having blindfolded the pony, a "hackamore" bridle was slipped over his head. To this Dynamite offered no resistance. The blindfold made him quiet and submissive for the time being. When the bridle was in place he was allowed to rise, and before the pony knew it, almost, Jack had the saddle on his back and "cinched" up tightly. This done, the boy threw off his hat, drew on a pair of gloves and adjusted his heavy plainsman's spurs with their big, blunt rowels.

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"All right?" grinned Bud.

"All right," rejoined Jack in the same quiet tone he had used hitherto. To judge from outward appearances, he was as cool as ice; but inwardly the Border Boy knew that he was in for a big battle.

"Waal, good-bye, kid, we'll hev yer remains shipped back home," shouted a facetious puncher from the group perched on the fence.

"Dynamite 'ull send you so high you'll get old coming down," yelled another.

"Better let the job out, kid," said Bud. "We don't want to commit murder round here."

"I guess I'm the best judge of that," spoke Jack quickly. "Get ready to cut loose that rope when I give the word, and take the lasso

off the snubbing post."



THEN BEGAN A SERIES OF AMAZING BUCKS.

This was quickly done and Dynamite stood free, but still blindfolded. Jack poised on his tip toes and gave a light run forward. His hands were seen to touch the saddle and the next instant he was in it. He leaned forward and lifted the blindfold.

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For an instant Dynamite stood shivering, his ears laid back, his eyes rolling viciously. Then, before the broncho knew what had happened, Jack's quirt came down on his flank heavily.

"Yip!" yelled the cow-punchers.

"Yip! Yip!" called Jack, and hardly had the words left his mouth before he was flying through the air over the pony's head. Dynamite's first buck had unseated him. Mr. Reeves ran forward anxiously as Jack plowed the ground. But his anxiety was needless. By the time he reached the boy's side Jack was up again, brushing the dirt of the corral from his clothing. He was pale but determined.

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"You see, I told you it was impossible," said the ranch owner. "Give it up."

"Give it up!" exclaimed Jack. "Why, I've only just begun."

"The kid's got grit," exclaimed a cowboy who had heard this last.

"Yep, more grit than sense, I reckon," chimed another.

Jack picked up his rope once more and recaptured the buckskin, which was trotting about the corral, apparently feeling that the fight was over and he had won. Once more Bud held the rope while Jack vaulted into the saddle.

This time, however, there was no preliminary pause. Dynamite plunged straight into his program of unseating tactics.

With a vicious squeal the pony's hind feet shot out and the next instant as Jack jerked the little animal's head up it caroomed into the air, coming down with a stiff-legged jolt that jarred every nerve in Jack's body. Then began a series of amazing bucks. It seemed impossible that anybody, much less a mere boy, could have stuck to the pony's back through such an ordeal.

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"Wow! Dynamite's sure steamboatin' some!" yelled the cow-punchers.

Suddenly Dynamite ceased bucking.

"Look out for a side-jump!" shouted Mr. Reeves; but, even as he spoke, it came.

The broncho gave a brain-twisting leap to the left, causing Jack to sway out of his saddle to the right. Luckily he caught the pommel and cantle just in time to save himself from being thrown. Dynamite seemed surprised that he had not unseated his rider by his favorite and oft-tried method. He repeated his famous side-jump. But Jack stuck like a cockle-burr to a colt's tail.

All at once the buckskin gave a semi-turn while in the air. It was a variation of the regular "buck" that would have unseated half the veteran cowboys perched on the corral fence watching the fight between boy and broncho.

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"Good fer you, kid!" they shouted enthusiastically, as Jack maintained his seat.

"Stick to it, Jack!" chimed in the voices of Ralph and Walt.

But it is doubtful if Jack heard any of the applause. He was too busy watching Dynamite's antics. Suddenly the pony rushed straight at the corral fence and tore along it as closely as he could without cutting his hide. His object was to scrape off the hateful human who stuck so persistently to his back. But Jack was as quick as the buckskin and as the pony dashed along the fence he had one leg up over the saddle and out of harm's way.

All at once Dynamite paused. Then up went his head, his fore feet beat the air furiously. Straight up he reared till he was standing almost erect. Then without the slightest warning he toppled over backward.

A shout of alarm went up from the punchers, but Jack did not need it. As the pony crashed to earth Jack was not there. He had nimbly leaped from the saddle and to one side.

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Before the buckskin could rise again Jack was straddling the saddle. As the animal sprang up Jack was back in his seat once more with a sadly perplexed broncho under him. Dynamite had tried everything, and more too, that he had used on the ranch riders and all had failed to remove the incubus on his back.

"Good for you, Jack. You've finished him!" yelled Walt Phelps.

"Don't be too sure," warned Mr. Reeves, who was standing by the boys. "See the way those ears are set? That means more trouble coming."

The words had hardly left the ranch owner's mouth before the "trouble" came. Dynamite darted off as if he had been impelled from a cannon's mouth. Then all at once he set his legs stiff and slid along the ground, ploughing up dusty furrows with his hoofs in the soft earth of the corral. Had Jack not been prepared for some such maneuver, he might have been unseated. But he had guessed that something more was coming off and so he was prepared. Hardly had Dynamite come to his abrupt stop before he threw himself on his side and rolled over. If Jack had been there, he would have been crushed by the pony's weight—but he wasn't.

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As the pony rolled Jack stepped out of the saddle on the opposite side. The moment he slipped off he picked up the loose end of the lariat which was still around the pony's neck.

"Yip! Get up!" he cried.

Dynamite, not thinking of anything but that he was free at last, was off like a shot. But, alas! he reckoned without his host. As the little animal darted off Jack took a swift turn of the rope around the snubbing post. When Dynamite reached the end of the rope he got the surprise of his life. His feet were jerked from under him and over he went in a heap.

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Before he could rise Jack was over him. As Dynamite struggled up Jack resumed his seat in the saddle; but now he rode a different Dynamite from the unsubdued buckskin he had roped a short time before. Trembling in every limb, covered with sweat and dirt, and his head hanging down, Dynamite owned himself defeated.

A great shout of applause went up from the cow-punchers and from Jack's chums.

"His name ain't Dynamite no longer; it's 'Sugar Candy'!" shouted an enthusiastic cow-puncher.

"Wow! but the kiddy is some rider," yelled another.

"You bet!" came an assenting chorus of approval.

"Splendid work, my boy," approved Mr. Reeves warmly, coming forward and shaking Jack's hand. "It was as fine an exhibition of horsemanship and courage as ever I saw."

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"Thanks," laughed Jack lightly. "I've got an idea that Dynamite and I are going to be great chums. Aren't we, little horse?"

Jack patted the buckskin's sweating neck and the pony shook his head as if he agreed with the boy who had conquered his fighting spirit by sheer grit.

THE GREAT STAMPEDE.

"How is it going, Jack? All quiet?"

Walt Phelps paused in his ride around the herd to address his chum.

"Yes, everything is going splendidly, Walt. Dynamite's a real cow-pony."

"No doubt about that. Well, I'll ride on; we must keep circling the herd."

"You're right. They seem a bit restless."

Walt rode off with a word of farewell, while Jack flicked Dynamite with the quirt and proceeded in the opposite direction.

The time was about midnight the night following Jack's little argument with Dynamite. Since nine o'clock the Border Boys had been on duty with the Reeves herd. Under the bright stars the cattle were visible only as a black, evershifting mass, round and round which the boys, Bud and two cow-punchers circled unceasingly. Some of the animals were feeding, others standing up or moving about. The air reeked of cattle. Their warm breaths ascended into the cool night in a nebulous cloud of steam.

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From far off came the sound of a voice singing, not unmusically, that classic old ballad of the Texas cowman:

*"Lie quietly now, cattle,
And please do not rattle,
Or else we will 'mill' you,
As sure as you're born.*

*A long time ago,
At Ranch Silver Bow,
I'd a sweetheart and friends,
On the River Big Horn"*

Jack pulled up his pony for a minute and listened to the long drawn, melancholy cadence. It was the cow-puncher's way of keeping the cattle quiet and easy-minded. Steers at night are about as panicky creatures as can be imagined. The rustle of the night wind in the sagebrush, the sudden upspringing of a jackrabbit, the whinnying of a pony, all these slight causes have been known to start uncontrollable "stampedes" that have been costly both to life and property.

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The night was intensely still. Hardly a breath of wind stirred. Except for the occasional bellow of a restless steer or the never-ending refrain of Bud's song, the plains on the border of the Rio Grande were as silent as a country churchyard.

Jack resumed his ride. He began whistling. It was not a cheerful tune he chose. "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground," was his selection. Somehow it seemed to the lad that such a tune was suited to the night and to his task.

Jack's course led him to the south of the herd, between the main body of cattle and the Rio Grande. He kept a bright lookout as he passed along the river banks. He knew that if trouble was coming, it was going to come from that direction. Almost unconsciously he felt his holsters to see if his weapons were all right.

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Once he paused to listen. It was at a spot right on the river bank that he made his halt. He was just about to ride on again, whistling his lugubrious tune, when something odd caught his eye and set his heart to thumping violently.

A head covered with a white hood containing two eyeholes had suddenly appeared above the river bank. The next instant a score more appeared. All wore the white hoods with the same ghastly eyeholes, giving them the appearance of so many skulls.

Greatly startled and alarmed, Jack yet realized that the figures that had appeared so suddenly must be those of cattle-stealing Mexican rebels and that they had adopted the hoods with the idea of scaring the superstitious cowboys. Hardly had he arrived at this conclusion before the hooded horsemen rushed up the bank. They aimed straight for the boy.

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Instantly Jack's hand sought his holster.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

It was the three shots agreed upon as a signal of trouble. From far back on the eastern side of the herd came an answer. Jack had just time to hear it when the hooded band swept down upon him. He felt bullets whiz past his ear and then, without exactly knowing how it happened, he was riding for his life, crouched low on Dynamite's withers.

Off to the north, east and west other six-shooters cracked and flashed. The signal of alarm was being passed around rapidly. Jack was riding for his life toward the west side of the herd. Behind him pressed one of the hooded horsemen. All the others had been distanced by the fleet-footed Dynamite. But this man behind him clung on like grim death.

From time to time he fired, but at the pace they were going his aim was naturally poor and none of the bullets went near the fleeing boy on the buckskin pony. [276]

The air roared in Jack's ears as he dashed along. All at once he became conscious of another roar, the roar of hundreds of terrified steers. Horns crashed and rattled. Startled bellows arose. Then off to the east came more firing. Jack judged by this that most of the hooded band had gone off in that direction and were now engaged in fighting with Bud and the rest of the cattle watchers.

The next instant the lad became conscious of a thunderous sound that seemed to shake the earth. It was the roar and rush of thousands of hoofs.

"The cattle have stampeded!" gasped Jack to himself, and the next instant:

"The firing to the east has started them off; and I am right in their path." [277]

He swung his pony in an effort to cut off part of the herd. But through the darkness they thundered down on him like a huge overpowering wave of hoofs and horns. Jack fired with both his six-shooters, hoping to turn the stampede; but he might as well have saved his cartridges. No power on earth can stop stampeding cattle till they get ready to quit.

Jack was in the direst peril. But he did not lose his head. He swung Dynamite around once more and urged him forward. It was a race for life with the maddened cattle. He had lost all thought of the hooded rider who had pursued him so closely. His sole idea now was to escape alive from the stampede behind him. Had he dared, he would have tried to cut across the face of it. But he knew that he stood every chance of being trapped should he do so. He therefore decided to trust to Dynamite's fleetness and sure-footedness. It made him shudder to think what would befall him if the pony happened to get his foot in a gopher hole and stumble. [278]

A Texas steer in a stampede can travel every bit as fast as a pony, and it was not long before the steers were in a crescent-shaped formation, with Jack riding for his life in about the center of the half moon. On and on they thundered in the mad race. To Jack it felt as if they were beginning to go down hill, but he was not certain. Nor had he the least idea of the direction in which he was going. He bent all his faculties on keeping ahead of that hooped and horned wave behind him.

Dynamite went like the wind. But even his muscles began to flag under the merciless strain after a time. He felt the effects of his strenuous lesson of the morning. Jack was forced to ply quirt and spur to keep him on his gait. But the signs that the pony was playing out dismayed the boy. His life depended on Dynamite's staying powers, and they were only too plainly diminishing. [279]

The slope down which they were dashing was a fairly steep one, which accounted for Jack's feeling the grade. It led into a broad, sandy-bottomed, dry water course, or "arroyo" as they are called in the west. But of this, of course, Jack was unaware.

All at once Jack felt Dynamite plunge into a thick patch of grease-wood. The pony slowed up as he encountered the obstruction, but Jack's quirt and spur urged him into it. But that momentary pause had been nearly fatal. Jack could now almost feel the hot breath of the leading cattle. Despite his grit and courage, both of sterling quality, Jack's heart gave an uncomfortable bound. He felt his scalp tighten at the narrowness of his escape. But still he urged Dynamite on. Luckily he wore stout leather "chaps," or the brush would have torn his limbs fearfully.

Dynamite tore on, with seemingly undiminished valor, but Jack knew that the end was near.

"Only a few yards more, and then———" he thought, when he felt a different sensation.

It filled him with alarm. He was dropping downward through the air. Down he plunged, while behind him came the thunder of the maddened steers.

"Good heavens! Is this the end?" was the thought that flashed through the boy's mind in that terrible fraction of time when he felt himself and his pony dropping through space.

The next instant he felt the pony hit the ground under him. Like a stone from a slingshot, Jack was catapulted out of the saddle. He landed on the ground some distance from the pony. He was shaken and bruised, but he was up in a flash. In another instant the steers would be upon him. He would be crushed to a pulp under their hoofs unless he found some means of escape.

"If I don't do something quick, it's good-bye for me," he told himself. [281]

In frantic haste he looked about for some means of saving himself. All at once he spied through the darkness the black outlines of a cottonwood tree. In a flash his plan was formed. He slipped behind the trunk of the cottonwood, using it as a shield between himself and the oncoming cattle.

Hardly had he slipped behind his refuge when an agonized cry came to his ears, the cry of a human being in mortal terror. Jack peered from behind his tree trunk. As he did so the form of a man rolled almost to his feet and lay still.

With a thrill Jack recognized the white hood the figure wore and knew it must be the hooded horseman who had pursued him. Like himself, the man had been caught in the stampede and been thrown from his horse almost at the foot of the tree. Exerting all his strength, Jack pulled the man into shelter behind the tree scarcely a second before the crazed steers were upon them. In their blind frenzy of terror many of them dashed headlong into the tree, stunning and killing themselves. But the main herd swept by on both sides, leaving Jack and the unconscious man in a little haven of safety behind the tree trunk. [282]

Jack found himself wedged in between two barricades of bellowing, galloping steers, and for his deliverance from what had seemed certain death a few minutes before he offered up a fervent prayer of thanks.

For some time the rush continued and then thinned out to a few stragglers. At last Jack thought it safe to emerge from behind his tree. In front of it lay several dead cattle, their brains knocked out by the force with which they had collided with the cottonwood. A few injured animals limped about moaning piteously. Some of them were so badly injured that Jack, who could not bear to see an animal suffer, put them out of their misery with his six-shooter. [283]

It was now time to turn his attention to the hooded man. The fellow had been stunned when he was thrown from his horse; but he was now stirring and groaning. Jack bent over him and pulled off his hood. As he did so he staggered back with an amazed exclamation.

The face the starlight revealed was that of Alvarez, the man whose destiny had been so oddly linked with Jack's!

"Where am I? What has happened?" exclaimed the man in Spanish as he opened his eyes.

"You have been engaged in the despicable work of cattle stealing, Alvarez," spoke Jack sternly. "If you had not been thrown at my very feet, you would have perished miserably under the hoofs of the herd you planned to steal." [284]

At the first sound of Jack's voice Alvarez had staggered painfully to his feet. Now he uttered a cry.

"It is you, Señor Merrill! I thought you were miles from here."

"Well, I am not, as you see. Are you badly hurt?"

"I do not know. I think my arm is broken. It pains fearfully."

"I will examine it by daylight. Are you armed?"

"I was, señor, but I lost my pistol in that fearful ride before the stampede."

The man's tone was cringing, whining almost. Jack felt nothing but contempt for him. He held that the Mexican revolutionists were about as much in the right as the government troops; but cattle

stealing on the Border is a serious offense and Jack Merrill was a rancher's son. He made no reply to Alvarez, but, telling him to remain where he was, he went off to see if he could find some water to bathe the man's injuries, for, besides his injured arm, he had a nasty cut on the head.

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He did not find water and was returning to the tree rather downcast, when through the darkness ahead of him he saw something moving. The object was not a steer, he was sure of that. He moved cautiously toward it, his heart beating with a hope he hardly dared to entertain.

But at last suspicion grew to certainty.

"It's my pony! It's Dynamite!" he breathed, not daring to make a noise lest the pony take fright and dash off.

Cautiously he crept up on the little animal. He now saw as he drew closer that another horse was beside it. He had no doubt that this latter beast was the one Alvarez had ridden. How the horses had escaped death or serious injury Jack could not imagine; but escape it they had, although they both stood dejectedly with heads hung down and heaving flanks.

"Whoa, Dynamite! Whoa, boy!" whispered Jack, moving up to the broncho with outstretched hand.

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Dynamite stirred nervously. He pricked up his ears. Jack crept forward once more. In this way he got within a few feet of the pony. Then he decided to make a dash for it. He flung himself forward, grabbed the pommel of the saddle and swung himself on to Dynamite's back. With a squeal of fear the pony started bucking furiously.

"Buck all you want," laughed Jack. "I've got you now and, by ginger, if I can do it, I mean to get back those cattle, too."

Dynamite soon quieted down and then Jack set himself to catching the horse Alvarez had ridden. This was not an easy task, but the brute was not so fiery as Dynamite, and at last Jack got him. The dawn was just flushing up in the east when Jack, leading the Mexican's horse, rode back toward the cottonwood tree. Alvarez, looking pale and old, sat where Jack had left him.

He glanced up as the boy approached, but said nothing. Jack hitched the horses and then examined the Mexican's arm. He decided that it was not broken, only badly sprained. He concluded, therefore, that the Mexican was quite able to perform the task he had laid out for him.

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"Get on your horse, Alvarez," he ordered.

"Si, señor," rejoined the swarthy Alvarez without comment.

Only when he was mounted and Jack told him to ride in front of him, did he inquire what was to be done with him.

"You are going to help me drive those cattle back first," said Jack grimly. "Then we'll decide on what comes next."

In silence they rode up the far bank of the arroyo and the plain lay spread out before them. Jack could not restrain a cry of joy as in the distance he saw a dark mass closely huddled. It was the missing band of steers.

"Now, Alvarez," he warned sternly, "what will happen to you may depend on just how we restore his property to Mr. Reeves. Do you understand?"

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"Si, señor," nodded the man, whose spirit appeared completely broken.

They rode up cautiously. But the steers appeared to be as quiet as so many sheep and merely eyed them as they approached. The animals were in pitiful shape after their frantic gallop and one look at them showed Jack that he would have no trouble in driving them back to the home ranch once they were got moving.

Keeping a sharp eye on Alvarez, he ordered the Mexican to begin "milling" the steers, that is, riding them around and around till they were bunched in a compact mass. This done, the drive began. At times Jack hardly knew how he kept in his saddle. He was sick, faint, and thirsty, with a burning thirst. The dust from the trampling steers enveloped him, stinging nostrils and eyes, and, besides all this, he dared not take his eyes off Alvarez for an instant.

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The boy surveyed himself. He was a mass of scratches and bruises, his shirt was ripped and hung in shreds, his chaperajos alone remained intact. Even his saddle was badly torn, and, as for the poor buckskin, he was in as bad shape as his master.

"Well, I am a disreputable looking object," thought the boy. "The Rangers wouldn't own me if they could see me now."

* * * * *

It was late afternoon at the Reeves ranch when Bud and the two boys rode in with the news that they could find no trace of the missing cattle. Nor, of course, had they any news of Jack. Mr. Reeves was much downcast at this, almost as much so as Walt and Ralph. Yet somehow the two latter felt sure that Jack would come out all right.

They had not had an easy night of it, either. The battle to the eastward of the herd that had started the stampede had resulted in a flesh wound for Walt and a bad cut on the hand for Ralph. But the boys and the cow-punchers had managed to make prisoners of ten of the hooded Mexicans, so that they felt they had not done a bad night's work. If only they had possessed a clew to Jack's fate, they would, in fact, have been jubilant. Ralph's behavior during the fight had quite won him back the respect he had lost by his poor exhibition with the rope. The Border Boys were declared "the grittiest ever" by every puncher on the range.

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The ten prisoners were confined in the barn, but they all denied vigorously having seen anything of Jack. They confessed that their raid had been made for the purpose of getting beef for the rebel army, which had been practically starved out by the government troops.

Bud had just dismounted by the corral and Walt and Ralph were dispiritedly doing the same when Mr. Reeves uttered a shout and pointed to the far southwest.

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"Wonder what that is off there, that cloud of dust!" he exclaimed.

"I'll get the glasses, boss," declared Bud.

He dived into the house and speedily reappeared with a pair of powerful binoculars such as most stockmen use.

Mr. Reeves applied them to his eyes and gazed long and carefully at the distant object that had attracted his attention.

"What is it?" demanded Bud.

"I don't know yet. I can't see for dust. But I'm pretty sure it's a band of cattle."

Walt and Ralph held their breaths.

"*Our* cattle?" almost whispered Bud, in a tense voice.

"I can't be sure. It might be any band of steers crossing the state. Tell you what, Bud, saddle the big sorrel for me and we'll go and find out."

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Ten minutes later the band of horsemen was riding at top speed toward the distant moving objects. As they drew closer it was seen that they were unmistakably cattle. All at once Bud gave a sharp cry.

"Boss, they're our cows. See the big muley steer in front? That's old Abe. I'd know him among a thousand."

"By George, Bud, you're right! But who can be driving them?"

He was interrupted by a mighty shout from Ralph Stetson.

"It's Jack!" he cried.

"It *is* the broncho bustin' Tenderfoot as sure as you're a foot high!" bawled out Bud.

"But who's that with him?" demanded Walt.

"Dunno; looks like a greaser," growled Bud, who had no liking for the "brown brothers" across the Border.

And then, at the risk of starting another stampede, the cavalcade dashed forward, waving their hats and yelling like wild Indians.

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Mr. Reeves rode right down on Jack.

"Boy, you're a wonder. How did you do it? No; stop; don't tell me now. I can see you're about tuckered out. How are you?"

"Roasted out," rejoined Jack with an attempt at a smile. But his voice was hoarse as a crow's and his lips were too baked and cracked to smile naturally.

"Great heavens, boy, you've been through an awfully tough ordeal, I can see that. But who is this personage here?"

Mr. Reeves indicated Alvarez, who shrank under his gaze.

Jack forced his voice out of his parched throat.

"That is my assistant driver, Mr. Reeves," he said. "We have had a good deal of talk as we came along and he tells me that he has a

great longing to go back to his own country and *stay there*. He knows what it means if he comes back across the Border again, don't you, Alvarez?"

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"Si, Señor Merrill," stammered the Mexican while Bud glowered at him.

"There's something behind all this, Jack, that I can partly guess at," declared Mr. Reeves, "but if you really want him to go, let him go."

"You hear?" croaked Jack in Spanish.

"Si, señor."

"Then go."

The Mexican wheeled his horse, doffed his peaked hat in a graceful wave and in a loud, clear voice shouted:

"Adios, señors!"

He struck his spurs home and brought down his quirt. His horse sprang forward. Straight for the Rio Grande he rode and vanished over its northern bank. Five minutes later he was off American soil. On the opposite bank he paused once more, wheeled his horse and waved his sombrero in token of farewell. Then he vanished, so far as the boys were concerned, forever.

"Now, forward," cried Mr. Reeves. "Bud, you hold the cattle here till I send out some boys to help you bring them in. Jack, you come with us at once. You need doctoring up."

[295]

"Can't I stay and bring the cattle in?" pleaded Jack.

"Son," said the rancher in a deep voice, "you've *done* your duty; mine begins now. I haven't heard your story yet, but I'll bet my last dollar that you've done a big thing out there, and that the Rangers will be mighty proud of their boy recruits."

And then they rode forward to the ranch house and food and drink, and later to the unfolding of Jack's story.

As Mr. Reeves had prophesied, the Rangers were proud of their young comrades. And not only the circle of Rangers, but the whole state of Texas rang with their praises until the boys were afraid to look at a newspaper. As for Jack's generous action in letting Alvarez go free, none but Captain Atkinson, Mr. Reeves and the Border Boys themselves knew of it, though Bud suspected, or "suspicioned" as he called it.

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A few days later the revolution was crushed, and they heard afterward that Alvarez had died fighting bravely for what he deemed the right cause. A few days later, too, the boys had to leave their kind Texan friends and wend their way homeward.

And now we, too, have reached the parting of the ways so far as this part of the Border Boys' adventures is concerned. Here, for a time, we will take leave of our young friends, wishing them well till we meet them again in further stirring adventures. What befell them after leaving Texas and how they acquitted themselves in scenes and situations as exciting and thrilling as any through which they have yet passed, will all be related in the next volume of this series, which will be called: "THE BORDER BOYS IN THE CANADIAN ROCKIES."

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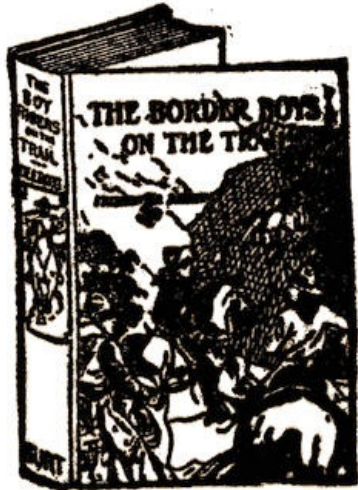
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