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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FRANK READE AND HIS STEAM HORSE ***

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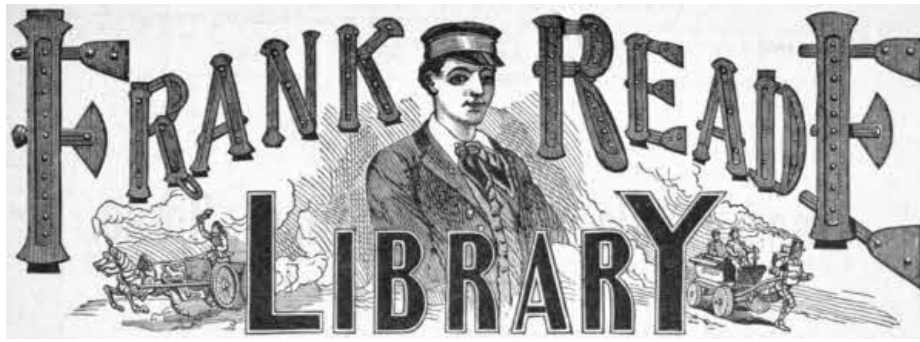
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FRANK READE AND HIS STEAM HORSE. By "NONAME."



Away they flew like rockets over the hard and level ground, the breezes raising their hats as they dashed along. The Steam Man put forth mighty efforts, and made giant strides; but he couldn't match the usual speed.

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FRANK READE AND HIS STEAM HORSE.

By "NONAME."



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Frank Reade and His Steam Horse.

By "NONAME."

Author of "The Steam Man of the Plains," "The Boy Balloonist," etc., etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

PUTTING THE "ANIMILE" TOGETHER.

"Musha, my God, an' what do ye call it?"

Frank Reade looked up with a pleasant smile, as a brick-colored head was thrust into the half-open doorway of the wood-shed, where he was hard at work putting the several parts of his invention together.

"Call it!" said the sixteen-year-old genius, with a proud glance at his wonderful idea; "why, I call it a steam horse."

"A harse, is it?"

"It is," said Frank.

"Wid stale an' iron legs, an' a big copper belly on him?"

"You're right."

"An' can he walk?"

"Yes, and run too."

"Worra, worra, did yez iver hear the loikes o' that?" cried the Irishman, throwing up his hands in astonishment. "Would ye have the nateness to allow me to sthep in for a whist, while I obsarve the construction of the conthrivance? I can philosophize, and so forth, but be the smoke o' Kate Kelly's pipe (be the same token, it was a rale black dudeen), this bates me philosophy, it do."

"Who are you?" asked Frank.

"Patrick McSpalten's my name. Will yez allow me in?"

"I suppose so," said Frank, and into the wood-shed walked the Irishman.

He was a good-natured looking man of about thirty, pleasant-faced, well-dressed, and full of blarney.

"Arrah, it's a jaynus ye are," he said as he looked at Frank's invention. "An' do ye mane to tell me that you constructed that conthrivance all out of yer own head, me gossoon?"

"Oh, no," grinned Frank. "I use quite a quantity of steel, iron and copper."

"Oh, I didn't mane that," hastily said Patrick McSpalten. "I want to know if ye conthrieved the masheen all alone?"

"You bet your bottom dollar I did," said Frank. "I could make a metal casting of any animal and send it traveling with speed. This horse will probably travel at the rate of sixty miles an hour when under high pressure, and could keep going thirty-five or forty miles an hour for ten hours, with occasional ten minute stops to cool a hot joint."

"Is that so?" ejaculated Patrick. "I can philosophize and so forth, but that bates me. Now, I moind that I was jist as much surprised whin I was tould about a Sthame Mon that thraveled over the counthry out west and——"

"What?" cried Frank Reade, surprise ringing in his voice. "The Steam Man was my invention."

"Ye mane it?"

"Of course; I invented the old fellow and traveled over the west with him."

"Honor bright now?" said McSpalten.

"Honor bright," said Frank.

"Thin ye are the broth of a gossoon he was telling me about."

"Who?"

"Me cousin."

"What's his name?"

"Barney Shea."

"What!" cried the much-pleased boy, "is Barney Shea your cousin?"

"Av coorse he is. Me grandfeyther on me mother's side was an O'Reilly, and Barney's grandmother on his feyther's side was a McSpalten, and didn't they mate one foine summer's marning, and all the lossies and lods——"

"Oh, hire a stump," broke in Frank. "Never mind the old folks, but tell me about Barney. How is he?"

"Well and haretly."

"When did you see him last?"

"A month ago, when he said God speed to me on the quay at Dublin. Ah, he's a great mon in the county now, is me cousin, Barney Shea. Frank Rade is yer name, for mony a toime has he tould me of yer diviltrees with the red haythen out in the west."

"Frank Reade is my name," said the young inventor. "Is Barney coming back to this country, do you know?"

"Faith, I heerd him talkin' about the matther, an' saying that he moight take a pleasure trip to this land."

"Do you know his address?"

"Do I, don't I?" cried Pat. "Would yez be afther sinding a lettther to the mon?"

"That's the idea," said Frank.

"For what?"

"To get him to come out here and travel with me."

"And with that thing?"

"Yes," said Frank. "He was the darndest cuss to fight that ever I laid my eyes on. He was always spoiling for a first class shake-up or knock-down, and he was the toughest boy in a rough hand-to-hand scrimmage that ever walloped his way through the West. I could depend on him when there was fighting for us to handle, and he was a mighty stanch friend to me. What's his address?"

"Esquire Barney Shea, Clonakilty, County of Cork, Ireland."

"All right," said Frank, jotting it down in a book, "I've got it."

"Whist now," said Pat, "whin ye direct the lettther, moind that yez don't lave off the esquire."

"I'll moind," said Frank.

"Now, will ye be afther havin' the extrame nateness of showin' me how in the name of the seven wondhers of the worruld ye mane to make that conthrivance thtravel loike a harse?"

"Certainly," said Frank, approaching the invention with a great deal of pardonable pride. "You can see very plainly that the machine is in every respect similar to a horse."

"I moind that same."

"Then I will begin with the information necessary to make you understand how the old thing works," said Frank. "In the first place this copper belly is nothing more nor less than a well-tested, strongly-made boiler, occupying the greater part of the distance between the fore legs and hind ones; this gives room to the steam-chest proper and boiler, and they extend into the haunches. Understand?"

"Oh, yis, I can philosophize an' so forth," said McSpalten, sitting on a wooden bench and looking as wise as an owl.

"Then here, almost on the top of the horse's haunches," said Frank, "are the valves, by means of which I can at any time examine either the water or the steam, and regulate accordingly. Forward of this is the place where my fire burns, the door of the furnace being in the chest, as you can see. Flues running up through the animal's head will allow the smoke to pass out of his ears, while similar pipes will carry the steam out of the horse's nose."

"Musha! musha! did yez iver hear the bate o' that?" murmured Patrick.

"In the head," continued Frank, "I have arranged a clock-work contrivance that will feed coils of magnesium wire as fast as it burns to the flame of a small lamp that is set between a polished reflector and the glass that forms each eye. I shall thus have a powerful light at night time, and on the level plains shall be able to see very clearly one mile ahead, if the night was just as black as a piece of coal."

"Worra! worra!" gasped McSpalten. "Me head is turnin' round. Go on, me gossoon."

"Of course the power is applied by means of iron rods running down the hollow limbs, and having an upward, downward, and forward motion. By reversing steam I can make the horse back. Here, at the knees, I open these slides and rake out the cinders and ashes that fall from the fire in the horse's chest. The animal's hoofs are sharp shod, so there's no danger of him slipping, either uphill or down."

"An' will ye be afther ridin' on the back of that crayture?"

"Oh no," smiled Frank, "I am making a wagon to ride in and carry my supplies for myself and the horse, and the animal will be harnessed to the truck, which will be constructed so as to stand the joltings of rapid travel. There, now, I guess you can understand the idea of the thing pretty well, can't you?"

"Oh, yis, I can philosophize an' so forth, an' I have the ijee very foinely," said Patrick McSpalten. "An' now I'll be afther goin' to me cousin's, the O'Flaherty family, hard by. It's out wist I'm goin' mesilf to-morrow, an' I may mate you there some foine day. I'll grow wid the counthry, an whin I

make a fartune loike me Cousin Shea, then it's back to swate Clonakilty I'll go, an' thin I'll be Esquire McSpalten. Do yez moind that?"

"Success to you," said Frank. "You'll make it out, I guess."

"Faith, I'll thry," said Patrick. "Will yez be afther havin' the nateness to sind me respects to me Cousin Shea, and tell the mon that I hope to mate him in this land?"

"I will," said Frank. "Take care of yourself, look out for sharpers, keep your weather eye skinned, and your hand on your wallet. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, me brave gossoon," said the Irishman, grasping the boy's slender hand in a farewell shake. "Ye can't fail o' making your mark, for ye can philosophize an' so forth as well as mesilf; and I'll wager the last bit o' baccy for me pipe that you'll raise the very divil wid yer Sthame Horse."

CHAPTER II.

BARNEY IN IRELAND.

"Mrs. O'Doolahan."

"Yes, Squire Shea."

"How many more toimes am I to order you to kape that divilish dirty ould sow out o' me schmoking room?"

"Be me sowl, sir, the litter went flying through forninst her, and the poor sow was only follerin' when ye banded the dure agen her."

"Thin moind ye, Mrs. Faylix O'Doolahan, for I'm not to be thrifled wid in this style, I want ye to kape the pigs and childer out o' me schmoking-room, or, be the bright buckles on me shoes, I'll have to ingage some wan ilse to kape the house; to kape the house for me, and not the pigs, mind ye, Mrs. Faylix O'Doolahan."

[3]

"I moind, squire."

"Thin see that I don't have to sphake again about the matter," said Esquire Barney Shea, putting his thumbs under the arm-holes of his red silk vest and puffing out his chest in the most important manner; "and now I'm going to sthroll down to the town for an airin', Mrs. O'Doolahan."

"A pleasant walk to ye this foine summer's marning, sir," said Mrs. O'Doolahan, dropping him a courtesy; and then Barney walked off with a stately step toward the village, looking back at every few steps to glance with pride at the neat cottage, surrounded with many well-cultivated acres, which were all his own.

And this was the same Barney Shea who had roamed over the prairies of Western America, killing Indians and robbers, and reveling in rows and ructions.

He had come to this township of Clonakilty with a few thousands of dollars in shining gold, had purchased a house and land to the surprise of his envious neighbors, had been dubbed "Esquire," in honor of his wealth, and was now living the quiet life of an Irish gentleman.

But he was growing tired of it.

It was very nice to be called "Squire" and receive the respectful homage of all the peasantry and the friendly hand of other squires—men whom he used to look up to in days gone by; but it wasn't equal to a smashing, rip-tearing rumpus with a cut-throat band of murderous redskins and black-hearted white men.

He was growing rusty and out of practice for the want of use; and, as he thought as much of fighting as a woman does of eating, this humdrum life was not well calculated to suit him.

He walked leisurely into the town, and was saluted on all sides with respect.

When he entered the post-office several voices saluted him:

"The top o' the marnin' to ye, Squire Shea."

"Long life to ye, Squire Shea."

"And there's a letther for ye, Esquire Barney Shea," said the postmaster, handing out a yellow envelope. "It's from Ameriky."

"Oh, aye," mumbled Barney, with a wise look on his mug; "wan a' me furrin' correspondents, you moind."

And then he sat down on the chair and broke the seal of the letter, while around him sat the staring and gaping countrymen, anxious to hear something from the far off land, and looking up with great admiration and respect to the man who had a foreign correspondent.

And this is the letter that made Barney Shea's eyes sparkle:

"FRIEND BARNEY:—How are you Squire Shea? How does your lordship feel? I have met with your cousin, Patrick McSpalten, and he has told me all about your being one of the biggest men in your parts, but he also said that you talked about paying a visit to this land some time, and that's why I write to you.

"Barney, my rip-snorter, you remember what I said I'd do, don't you? I said that if it could be done I'd make a horse that should go by steam, and now, old boy, I tell you that I've done it.

"I've built my horse, and every part is perfect, and there's no reason why I can't go whistling over the plains like some rocket on a tear. Oh! what fun I'm going to have with the reds. You bet I'll wake 'em up at the liveliest rate.

"Now Barney, I want you to come out here to my house in New York, and start with me for the West. My horse is all finished, and, by the time that you get here, I shall have the wagon ready to harness on the animal. Charley Gorse and his Steam Man will travel over the plains with us when we reach the West, and you can have full scope for your fighting tendencies among the reds and the rascally whites. Come out, if only to take a ride behind my Steam Horse, and I'll promise to raise more rough and tumble rumpusses in one week on the plains than you'll have in Ireland in a year.

"Tare an' ouns," cried Barney, when he read the letter through, by dint of much study and patient spelling, "did yez iver hear the loikes o' that now?"

And then, observing that they were all looking at him with surprise, he turned to them, and said:

"Whist, me lads; ye moind that powerful young jaynus I was talking about so often to yez?"

"The gossoon wid the mon that wint be sthame?" asked one.

"That same," said Barney.

"We moind the lad," they said.

"Thin moind this," said Barney. "The young jaynus has been afther invintin' a harse that goes be sthame."

"A harse?"

"Do yez mane a rale horse, squire?"

"Musha, my Lord, are ye joking, squire?"

"Be the goat of St. Kevin's cavern that's the bate of all."

And they held up their hands in the greatest wonder.

"I mane it," said Barney. "It's a harse, and av coorse it must be constructed of iron or sthale."

"An' goes be sthame?"

"It will that same," said Barney. "Oh, I must go to Ameriky to take a jaunt at this wondherful Sthame Harse. Look ye, Michael McGarrahan."

"Yis, Squire Shea," said a young man, stepping forward with his hat between his fingers.

"I moind that ye're a loikely soort o' lad, Michael."

"Yis, squire; thank ye, squire."

"And be the same token that nate little colleen—what's her name?"

"Kathleen O'Shaugnessy, yer honor," said Michael; "that's the wan yer honor must mane."

"Aye, Kathleen smiles on ye, but ye're too poor to go together to the praste."

"Yis, squire."

"Thin I give yez both a foine chance to rise in the worruld, for I know that ye're an honest couple and'll not rob me whin I'm away. I'm going to lave Clonakilty."

"Oh, squire."

"Don't go."

"Musha, my God, phat'll we do widout our pratees?"

"And the pigs at Michaelmas?"

"And the grain for me harse whin me feed runs out?"

"And the two chickens for coc's-broth whin me wife's sick?"

"Oh, Squire Shea, don't yez go."

And they all crowded around the good-hearted Barney.

He had stood between them and poverty a great many times since he became a squire, and they were not anxious to have him depart from them.

"Be aisy, boys, be aisy," said Barney. "I'll lave full instruction wid me agent here, Michael McGarrahan, to give aich of ye whatever I've given yez afore, so ye'll not lose by me lavin yez. Michael shall marry his nate colleen, an' take charge of me house and land; and I'll be off to Ameriky with the first ship that laves afther Michael gits married, for I'll sthay to dance at his weddin', and thin I'll be off. Now I must go home and write a letther to the jaynus, tellin' the lad to look for me soon. Good-day."

"Good-day, Squire Shea," cried they all, and away walked Barney, with his head thrown back.

And then he sent the following letter to our hero:

"FRANK, me brave gossoon:—It's delighted wid ye intirely, I am. A Sthame Horse, you wondherful little divil, ye? Oh, ye're a rale jaynus, and ye'll make yer mark, as I tould Mrs. Faylix O'Doolahan (she's me housekeeper, do ye moind), and she allowed ye war a brave gossoon to invent such a contrivance, and she not able to keep the sow and her nine small sows and pigs out o' me schmokin' room half the time; but of coorse I'll come over and ride out west wid ye behind yer Sthame Horse, as I tould Mrs. Faylix O'Doolahan, me housekeeper—bad luck to me, I tould ye that before, but the sow and litter jist hopped across the flure between me legs, and I want ye to moind that I'm ready and spoilin' for a rale knock 'em down an' pick 'em up shindy wid the—there's the sow an' the pigs agen, and they've upset me birdseye terbaccy, and I'll thravel all round wid ye over the land, and I want to see Charley Gorse, and—there goes my pipe

in the little pig's mouth—so look for me on the first ship afther Michael McGarrahan gits married to Kathleen O'Shaugnessy, and I'm going to tell Mrs. Faylix O'Doolahan to kape the pigs away, or I'll stick the troublesome divils between the ribs, and I'm yer sincere friend, that be wid yer soon, to ride wid the Sthame Harse.

"BARNEY SHEA."

CHAPTER III.

THE RACE.

Six weeks after the incidents narrated in the previous chapter had taken place, our young genius was at work in his favorite shed, trying the strength of his wagon in all parts, when the rear door of his father's house was thrown open and our Hibernian friend rushed down the walk yelling out at the top of a sound pair of lungs:

"Frank, me brave gossoon."

"Barney!" gladly cried the boy, and then he deserted his work and sprang forward to meet his old friend.

"You dear old rollicking roarer," he said, seizing Barney's hand with a fervor that attested his liking for the big-hearted Irishman. "How are Mrs. O'Doolah—I beg her pardon, Mrs. Faylix O'Doolahan and the pigs?"

"Well an' hearty," laughed Barney. "And how do I foind ye!"

"In the same condition as Mrs. O'Doolahan and the porkers," smiled Frank.

"And up till your eyes in woruk?"

"Right," said Frank. "I told you I could do it, and I've done it. Just walk into the workshop and look at my nag."

"I will that," said Barney; and into the wood-shed he and Frank tramped.

"Musha my God, but that's nate!" muttered Shea, gazing with admiration and some wonder at the noble looking steed of metal that stood there. "An' ye have the conthrivance all complete?"

"Every bit."

"An' can he travel?"

"Like a flash. I wouldn't hesitate to go fifty miles an hour."

"Howly smoke, fifty moiles in wan hour."

"Yes, sir, on a good road."

"An' ye can manage the masheen?"

"Oh, yes," said Frank, "nothing easier in the world. That strong leather rein that you see running to either side of his mouth will control his movements as quickly as they can be handled. And I can make the old nag turn just as easily. I'll tell you how that's done."

"Go on," said Barney.

"Were you ever lost?" asked Frank.

"In a pace o' woods, is it yer mane, or the loiks o' that?"

"Yes."

"Mony's the toime."

"And could you walk straight ahead?"

"Divil the straight. I wint around in a big circle all the toime, an' jist when I thought I wur coming out all right, what would I do but fetch up slap jist where I started from."

"Exactly," said Frank. "And don't you know the reason?"

"Divil the wan do I knaw."

"Well, sir," said the genius, "it is because one leg is always weaker than the other with everybody, and if you shut your eyes so that you can't see where you're going you'll travel right or left according to which leg is weaker, for the strong one is sure to swing around towards it in consequence of taking a longer and stronger step. Now, I have divided my power so that I can put it on one side, and therefore by pulling a little harder on the left rein than on the other I go to the right, thus having to steer reversedly."

"I see," said Barney; "an' ye got that nate idea from yer own legs?"

"Exactly," said Frank. "Now, just take a peep at my wagon."

The vehicle was a very solidly constructed affair, much heavier than a live horse would have cared to travel before, but the limbs of the Steam Horse were powerful and tireless.

The wagon was all made in small but neatly fitting sections, and all the several joints were made of rubber, so that the very fastest time over a rough road need not subject the occupants of the affair to any very severe jolting, and this forethought on the part of the boy was warmly praised by the Irishman.

"Here at the back of the wagon," said Frank, "I have my vats for holding water, and those long pipes you see here will run along to the shafts, then from a ring they curve up to the haunches, and supply water to my boiler. Here at the sides I intend to carry a supply of sea coal, while I can make it last, and when I run out I'll use wood or anything I can get, for my furnace will consume anything, and all I want from it is heat, and turf will give me that. Then in the center will be placed that wonderful trunk of mine, and I have made clasps to hold it down. I've invented a

whole lot of new infernal contrivances, and I intend to scare the redskins out of their seven senses on this trip."

"Ye can do it," confidently asserted his admiring friend; "ye have the jaynus."

"I will make their hair rise," said Frank.

"An' is Goorse well?" asked Barney.

"First-class," said Frank.

"He's a broth of a boy," said Shea. "Well, and whin do we sthart away for fighting and fiddlin'?"

"Oho," laughed Frank, "and do you mean to say that you've brought your fiddle with you again?"

"Bedad an' I have," grinned Barney. "Where I go, goes me fiddle. I have no wife, nor no childer, and me dear old fiddle's me only darlint." [4]

"Good enough," said Frank. "Well, we'll start just as soon as I can buy all of my supplies, which will take a day or two, and then hurrah for the West."

"Hooroo!" cried Barney Shea.

On a bright, sunshiny morning in midsummer, a little steamboat puffed up to the dock at Clarksville, and was made fast to the pier.

A crowd of interested idlers stood on the wharf, and among them was a young man of medium height, but with broad and well-set shoulders, who stood well forward, looking eagerly at the passengers on the deck of the crowded steamship.

Suddenly he espied two familiar faces on the deck, and, rushing eagerly forward, he shouted:

"Frank! Barney!"

"Charley Goorse! Charley Goorse!" excitedly exclaimed Shea.

"Yes, that's Charley Gorse," said Frank, and, with Barney at his side, he leaped on the pier and dashed up to his stalwart Western cousin.

"Dear old boy," cried Gorse, seizing him in a bearish hug, "you're just as thin and boyish as ever."

"An' jist the same wonderful jaynus that he was afore, only jist the laste bit more so," said Barney, as his hand was grasped by Charley's. "How are ye?"

"Hunky dory," said Charley. "How are Mrs. Faylix O'Doolahan and the pigs?"

"What!" cried Barney, "did you know Mrs. Faylix O'Doolahan an' the pigs?"

Charley roared outright, and Frank laughed heartily.

"I wrote to him," he said.

"Oh, I moind," said Barney.

"Massa Charley," said a voice at the elbow of the Western lad, "I'se here."

Frank turned to look at the speaker, and he was forced to laugh again.

There stood the most comical figure he had ever seen.

A full-blooded negro, black as the blackest of Africans, stood there, with an immense grin on his charcoal mug.

He was not higher than four feet, his chest and shoulders were large and swelling, and from his enormously long body descended bandy legs of a little more than one foot in length, while his feet were the finest specimens in the heavy corn-crushed line that could have been met with.

His head was very large, rounded off as smoothly as a cocoanut, and covered with hair that curled so very tightly that he could not shut his mouth.

The last named feature was probably five inches wide, presenting the appearance, when the darkey was on a broad grin, of his head separating into two equal parts, one above and the other below the awful cavity that he displayed.

His teeth were large and as white as snow; his ears were like two small wind-mills attached to his head, while his nose was as broad and flat as a good old-fashioned Connecticut pancake, squatted right down on his face.

This extraordinary creature returned Frank's glance with an inquiring glance from his little beady eyes, which were as bright and piercing as those of a rattlesnake.

"This," said Charley Gorse, "is my servant and constant companion, Pomp. He is as faithful as a dog, is one of the biggest cards in the way of a rumpus, and can cut up more didoes than any performer you ever saw in a sawdust ring. He's one of the most wonderful riders and whistlers in the West; can ride on his head or his ear, charm snakes and call birds with his whistle, throw knives, hit the bull's eye generally, and always sleeps with one eye open. Pomp, tip these people your hash-grabbers."

"Yes, Massa Charley," groaned Pomp, thrusting forth a horny black paw, fully as large as Frank's foot. "If dey's your frens, dey's my frens, and dis nigger'll fight for 'em till he's chawed clar to

nuffin."

Frank and Barney shook hands with the grinning darkey, and then the quartette walked away to Charley's home, Frank first giving the directions for unloading and conveying his boxes.

An hour later the case containing the different sections of the steam horse and the wagon were brought to the house, and they all gathered around to see Frank unpack his new idea.

In a short time the horse was put together and attached to the wagon, and everything belonging to the cargo designed for the body of the vehicle carefully stowed away.

Then, while Frank was firing up, Charley Gorse went to his barn, and soon came back with the Steam Man, and the old giant glared down from his height upon the steam steed of the plains.

"The old man looks natural," said Frank.

"First-class," said Charley; "and I'll match him to travel against your horse."

"Bully for you," said Frank. "Do you want to try it now?"

"I do," said Charley. "Pomp, go and get our rifles and other things, and stow them in the wagon, for we may get out too far to reach home again to-night."

In a short time everything was ready.

Pomp mounted by the side of Charley Gorse, and Barney Shea took his place alongside Frank Reade; the steam was let on carefully, and away went the horse and man through the village at a moderate pace, the people staring in open-mouthed amazement at the novel sight.

Then out upon the level plains they went and steam was crowded on.

[Away they flew](#) like rockets over the hard and level ground, the breeze raising their hats as they dashed along.

The horse took the load and maintained it, dashing along on a square, rapid trot, his legs fairly twinkling as he spurred the ground with his sharpened hoofs.

The Steam Man put forth mighty efforts, and made giant strides; but he couldn't match the metal steed.

Onward they flew in a straight line over the plains.

Buffaloes dashed across their path and bounded madly away to either hand.

Troops of prairie dogs ran barking and snarling from their homes, and uttering frightened yells, scampered away as fast as their little legs could carry them.

Onward at fifty miles an hour!

The small shrubbery of the plains seemed to fairly fly past.

Although there was not a particle of breeze, they created so much wind by their great speed that Barney came near losing his hat from his head while in the wagon of the Steam Man, and grinning, clung on for dear life.

It was faster than he had ever ridden in his life.

Charley made a big spurt, and slowly closed the gap between him and the Steam Horse.

Frank looked at his gauge.

"Guess I can stand a few pounds more steam," he said, and clapped it on.

As he did so the wheels of his truck hit against a big stone.

Up into the air went the wagon.

Flop went Barney Shea into the bottom of the truck, shouting:

"Oh, why did I lave Mrs. Faylix O'Doolahan an' the pigs!"

As the wagon went up Frank Reade made an involuntary clutch.

He didn't care what he got hold of, so that he could hang on, for it wouldn't have proved just the cheese to have gone flying head first out of that truck just then.

It happened that he clutched one of the driving reins as he felt himself rising in the air.

This big pull on one side caused an instantaneous increase of speed on one side of the horse, and away he wheeled, dashing off like a rocket at right angles from the course.

Down came Frank in a heap on top of Barney, and just then the truck landed on the ground and bumped along once more.

A terrible danger threatened Barney and our hero as they lay floundering in the body of the wagon.

The Steam Man, coming up at a smashing pace, had held steadily to his course, and was now plunging forward with immense strides.

The Steam Horse was darting along on a course that would bring him directly across the Steam Man's track.

A collision seemed inevitable.

For these two steam coursers to collide meant death.

With a pale cheek Frank Reade peered over the seat and beheld the man rushing down upon him. He seized the reins.

Charley Gorse beheld the danger at this moment, and a cry of horror pealed from his lips. The horse and the man were converging toward one point.

There was not time to turn aside.

Only a desperate chance remained for Frank Reade to try.

He pulled hard and sharp on the reins, and threw the entire power of the machine into the iron limbs.

Like an immense bolt, the horse sprang forward, just as the man dashed close up to him, and the two vehicles scraped by with an ominous sound that made them all shudder over their narrow escape.

Then Frank wheeled again, moderated his speed, and ran on a parallel course with the man, and about half a mile from Gorse.

“The Steam Man does well,” muttered Frank, as he slowly increased his speed, “but this hour shall decide whether he can beat my Steam Horse. Now for the grand spurt.”

CHAPTER IV.

THE PRAIRIE LEAGUE.

Where two long spurs of a longer mountain range ran out upon the plains, grew a small patch of woods, springing up between the far-reaching arms of rocks.

Hidden from view in this little cluster of green trees, but approached by a blazed wagon road and well-worn footpath, was a large house, built in the roughest but most substantial style.

The walls were of hewn logs, two and three feet in thickness; the roof was surmounted with a thatching of straw, and the four sides of the two-story building were pierced with rifle apertures.

It looked more like an overgrown log-house or frontier fort than anything else.

In the rear of this dwelling was a substantially-built and commodious stable, looking as if it were capable of accommodating a large number of animals.

An air of perfect peace and quiet was brooding over the place, and it seemed fairly to be sleeping in the warmth of the summer afternoon; but for all that sharp eyes were ever peering from out the numerous holes in the front of the structure, and no one could have approached the place unobserved.

A horseman came riding slowly over the plains from the east.

He guided his jaded animal into the blazed roadway between the trees, and rode until within twenty feet of the house.

Here he stopped and sat motionless on his horse.

A moment later the front door of the house swung slowly open, and a tall, ruffianly-looking fellow came forth.

"What news, Jack?" asked the horseman.

"Nothing 'tickler, capen," answered the fellow with surly respect. "Everything's been movin' at the old gait. How did you get along?"

"Made ten thousand dollars," returned the other, as he dismounted from his horse. "How does that sound?"

"Bully," said Jack, as he took the bridle-rein over his arm. "How much did you manage to shove off?"

"About fifteen thousand."

"And fetched ten?"

"Yes."

"That's rippin' good," said Jack. "The boys'll be proud of you."

"I intend that they shall be," said the man, as he walked away toward the house. "Give him a good rubbing down and plenty of feed, for I may need him."

"All right," said Jack, and led the weary animal to the stables.

As he took the horse into a stall he gave a soft whistle.

A lithe form sprang up from a heap of straw and stood erect.

It was a boy of perhaps fifteen, dwarfed so very much as to appear but a child; his bright eyes were intelligent and full of keen, knowing expression, and his agile movements told very plainly that his deformity did not make a cripple of him.

"What do you want?" he asked.

Jack looked carefully around before making any reply.

"Has no one been here?" he said, speaking in a low tone.

"No one," said the boy. "I have not been to sleep. We're alone."

"Do you know where Harry is now?" asked the man.

"About," said the boy.

"You think you could find him, Pedro?"

"Yes."

"Then go for your pony and ride to him just as lively as possible."

"What shall I say?" asked Pedro.

"Tell him that the captain has come back, and that the rest will probably be here by the morning, or to-morrow afternoon. Say that the wagons will have thousands of dollars in, but that they will all be well guarded, and he had better let them alone; but I think he can rake the ranche if he comes."

"All right."

"Can you remember all?"

"Oh, yes," said Pedro, his bright eyes sparkling with confidence. "Oh, wouldn't I like to lead him [5]

here. He saved my life, and I'd die for Harry."

"Then away," said Jack, and with a hop, skip and a jump the boy was out of the stable, and in a moment was lost to view in the woods.

"Now there'll be fun," quoth Jack.

When the horseman entered the house, he was met by an old woman, who bowed to him in the most obsequious manner.

"Glad to see you, cap," said this hag, who was as wrinkled, bent, ugly and repulsive as any witch. "Have some dinner?"

"Yes," said the captain. "Dish me up the best you've got, with a bottle of wine and a box of cigars."

This being a good chance to tell the reader who and what this captain was, and what he looked like, the author will avail himself of the opportunity to describe him.

Captain Jerry Prime was probably about five and thirty years of age, light, compact in build, and not bad looking.

He was gentlemanly-looking, and had an air of good breeding about him, which, taken in connection with his attire, would no doubt have been a passport to him almost anywhere, and yet for all that he was one of the worst rascals west of the Hudson.

He was the leader and principal worker in a gang of counterfeiterers that was stocking the country with bogus money; and so well had his operations been conducted, that so far he had eluded all attempts on the part of the government to trace the "queer" to its place of issue.

To cover his business, he set up and run in a fair, square and legitimate style, a prairie express.

Of course the drivers were all men of his gang; but all the express work given into their hands was conducted in such an excellent and satisfactory manner, that the prairie express route had grown into favor very rapidly.

Not even the shrewd detectives of the great secret service seemed to suspect the fact that a well-conducted express business concealed the operations of a gang of counterfeiterers.

Captain Prime regaled himself with a very substantial dinner, drank half a bottle of wine, smoked some very good imported cigars, and was then about to drop off to sleep when the clatter of iron shod hoofs on the plains a few rods away broke into his doze.

He started from his seat and walked to a small barred window that looked out upon the open space into which the blazed roadway led.

A horseman was cantering up the path at an easy gait.

Captain Prime looked at him keenly, and a puzzled expression crossed his face.

"Not one of my boys," he said. "I wonder who he can be? He must have known of this place, for it's almost impossible to discover it from the plains."

The horseman rode up to within a dozen yards of the house.

Then he pulled rein, and placing his hand to his mouth, shouted:

"Halloo!"

No answer was returned to him.

The horseman waited for a moment, and then he shouted again:

"Halloo, Captain Prime."

"The devil," quoth Prime. "He knows me, or my name, whoever he is. I guess I'll order him in."

He touched a bell, and in a moment the tall stableman appeared in the room.

"Jack," said the captain, "take a good look at that fellow."

The stableman peered through the barred window.

"Good," he muttered softly to himself. "He is just the man for the work. I would trust my life to his nerve and bravery."

"Know him?" asked the captain, as the horseman again shouted aloud for some one to come out.

"Never saw him before," said Jack. "What will you do?"

"Let you go and have a confab with the chap; see who and what he is, what he wants with me, and then act according to your own judgment, whether to let him in or send him off about his business. You've got a better head on you than half of the boys, and I can trust you fully."

"Thanky," mumbled Jack, and with a scrape of his foot he backed out of the room.

A moment later he was out of the house and approaching the horseman.

The latter regarded him steadily, but not a sign of recognition passed between the two men.

When they approached close to each other the stableman spoke:

"Glad to see you, old man."

"Mutual," laconically returned the horseman. "Don't think I should have known you. You look like a regular cutthroat. Do you want to know who I am?"

"Yes."

"Tell him my name is Sparrowhawk, and that I'm a New York cracksman. I met Smith, a deserter from his gang; old pal of mine; the police were after me; I cut west; here I am, and want to ring in with him."

"That'll do," said Jack. "Remember, he's not a chicken to deal with. Keep your eyes open for danger, or I may have to peril all by raking you out of a trap. Dismount, throw your bridle over a bush, and follow me into the house. He's watching!"

"I twig," said Sparrowhawk, getting off his horse and disposing of the bridle as Jack had directed. "Fear not for me."

Jack soon conducted him to the presence of the captain.

"Here's a chap named Sparrowhawk, capen, from New York, which he's a cracksman. He met Smith that deserted from you a little time ago; had to get away from the cops, so he come west, and now he wants to join yer. I can vouch for him for all that."

"How?"

"'Cause we're both brother members of a great society, 'The Bloody Hand,'" said Jack. "We'd die for each other."

And it sounded like truth.

"You want to join me?" asked Prime.

"I do," said Sparrowhawk. "I'm called one of the best engravers in the trade, and a very good dye sinker. I'd like to join the 'Prairie League.'"

"I can use you then," said the captain. "In the morning you will be regularly initiated into the band, but until that time your brother of the 'Bloody Hand' will take care of you. Clear, and let me snooze."

The two men left the room and strolled off towards the stables.

"So far so good," said Sparrowhawk. "Harry intends to lay off for the wagons and scoop them in if he can."

"How many men has he?"

"Ten."

"He'll be swallowed up," said Jack, with an expression of alarm. "The boys of the band number more, without counting the redskins, and they're all tough fighters. If Harry gets scooped this enterprise will go up like so much gas."

"Can't be helped," said Sparrowhawk. "Ah, what's that?"

"The distant sound of guns," said Jack, as the dull boom of far-away rifles came rolling across the plains. "Harry has got his head in a trap."

"But what's that?" cried Sparrowhawk, as a loud and long whistle came plainly to their ears. "A locomotive?"

"Can't be," said Jack. "But there's the devil to pay out there."

And Jack was right.

There was the devil to pay.

CHAPTER V.

THE RUNNING FIGHT ON THE PLAINS.

"Charge!"

Three white canvas-covered express wagons were rolling over the plains, drawn by teams of tough mustangs.

In a little grove, close to the track of the wagons, a small body of mounted men sat motionless, headed by one whose flashing eyes and commanding manner stamped him a born leader.

Around the wagons, stretching out for the distance of half a mile, rode fully half a dozen men, not seeming to have any connection with the wagons and still keeping them under guard.

As the command pealed from the lips of the leader, the men in the grove put spurs to their steeds and dashed down upon the wagons.

Not a sound escaped their lips as they rode swiftly on in a compact body.

As soon as they appeared the drivers of the wagons lashed their teams, and the mustangs dashed over the plains at a furious gallop.

"Spread," cried the leader.

At the word his little command spread out in the form of a fan, covering the distance of an eighth of a mile, and stretching across the course of the flying wagons, that were now bumping along at a terrific pace.

"Halt!" was the next command, and the spread-out body pulled up sharp, right in the path of the oncoming teams.

Still the drivers of the wagons lashed the mustangs, evidently with the idea of cutting through at all hazards.

At this moment one of the drivers fired off a pistol, and the outriding guard began to close in towards the wagon at a swift pace.

The leader of the charging party whistled shrilly, and half a dozen of his men at once covered the oncoming teams with their rifles.

"Fire!"

Many reports blended, and the leading team fell.

Shouts of rage arose from the drivers and the closing-in guard, but the first wagon came to a sudden stop, and before the others could cut around it the leader of the little band yelled:

"Down upon them!"

His men spurred forward, and rapidly closed in upon the little train, while at the same time the guards sent up their wild shouts as they rushed madly to the rescue.

"Halt!" cried the leader who had directed the charge. "Rifles up, and cover them so as to keep them at bay. Use the wagons for a barricade, for they outnumber us."

The wagons had all been forced to come to a standstill by the stoppage of the first one, and the drivers had leaped from their seats with weapons clutched in their hands.

The guards were brought to a halt when within rifle-shot by the stern command of the leader of the attacking party.

"Halt!" he shouted. "Stand, or I shoot you down!"

They wisely pulled up, and sat still on their panting horses, covered by the weapons of the others, who were secured somewhat by the wagons.

"What's the meaning of this?" demanded one of the drivers, striding up to the plucky little leader of the attacking band. "Who am I talking to?"

"A man," quietly responded the leader. "I intend to search through your wagons, my good fellow."

"Who are you?"

"Myself, individually."

"And a blessed cutthroat, too!" savagely said the driver.

The leader smiled.

"You're not the man to be so severe on cutthroats," he said. "Now, listen. I don't want to detain you one minute longer than is necessary, if you are really what you seem to be; but if you are humbugs, why I shall have to scoop you in; so be kind enough to tumble out what goods you've got in your truck."

"If I do, I do," blustered the driver, "but if I do I'm darned. We're honest expressmen, driving for the Prairie Express, and, I'd rather die with my weapons in my claws than give up my charge. If you want to see what I've got you must come and ride over my dead body."

He leaped backwards and leaned against the wagon, his pistols held lightly, but firmly, in his hands.

The leader looked admiringly upon the plucky chap.

"You're gritty," he said, "and I can admire you; but if you don't tumble up into that wagon in just half a minute, and tumble out your goods, I'll be cussed if I don't tumble you."

His long rifle leaped to his shoulder as he spoke, and the dark, deadly tube fairly covered the driver's breast.

Pluck was an admirable thing, but it was laughing at death to stand there covered by that deadly rifle.

For a moment the driver stood irresolute, and then he turned and clambered over the body of one of the fallen horses and leaped into the wagon.

He began throwing out his various articles, and the other drivers were ordered to follow his example.

They obeyed orders, and soon the goods from the interior of the tented wagons formed a heap on the plains.

During this time the mounted guard had been forced to sit carelessly on the backs of their horses, kept at bay by the leveled weapons of the attacking party, the latter keeping partly under cover of the wagons.

"Lively," ordered the captain. "Tumble them out as quickly as possible, for I want to search through the wagons after you get through."

"That's all in mine," said the driver, who had attempted to brave him, throwing out a large bundle. "The wagon's clear. I can't imagine what you want. Are you going to rob us of these goods?"

"Oh no."

"Then what do you want?"

"You shall see," said the leader. "Jump out of that."

The driver obeyed, and the leader at once leaped into the wagon.

He searched around the inside, sounded the flooring of the body, and at length found a little crevice running across the boards.

He drew a knife from his bootleg, and with firm hand drove it deep down into the crevice.

Bearing strongly on the hilt he caused the board to fly up, revealing a little trap about a foot square.

In this trap lay a carefully sealed up bag, which he lifted with a little difficulty from its resting- [6] place.

"Gold, by the weight," he said, and going to the front of the wagon he held it up so that his men could see it.

"I have found it," he cried.

The driver uttered a yell of rage, and made a luckless leap forward.

He sprang upwards and caught the brave leader by the throat.

Instinctively the followers turned to the aid of their leader.

The bag fell with a musical jingle from the wagon to the ground.

The driver and the leader clenched tightly, and then followed the bag, rolling from the wagon to the plain.

As soon as the rifles of the attacking men were lowered, the guards made a rapid rush upon them.

A cheer rang out upon one side, a loud shout of defiance from the other, and then the two parties closed in a wild fight.

Rifle and pistol, bullet and blade were crashing and contending, and blood flowed from cruel wounds.

The plunging of the steeds, the hoarse and vindictive shouts of the riders, the screams of the wounded and dying men rang out in a demoniac chorus, and with such music above them the leader and the driver still clung to each other, rolling fairly under the hoofs of the plunging steeds, in their desperate encounter.

There was a wild shriek of mortal agony, as the iron-shod hoof of a madly plunging steed crashed through the brain of the unfortunate driver, and then the leader leaped to his feet, heated and half worn out, but still full of energetic command.

"I'm here!" he shouted, for well did he know that the sound of his ringing blows would encourage his men. "Drive them from the field!"

High above the roar and din of voices and weapons could be heard the crashing sound of many hoofs spurning the pebbles of the stony plain.

As if by magic, hostilities closed, and both parties turned to view this new arrival of enemies or friends of one side.

Around the little grove came sweeping a mixed band of red and white men, outnumbering both sides put together, and with loud yells charged down towards the wagons.

A cheer arose from the guards.

"They come, they come."

The leader of the attacking party gave a shrill call, and his horse came crashing through the ranks, knocking steeds and horses left and right.

Like a flash he was mounted by his brave riders, and the latter shouted:

"Together, wheel, follow."

And before the guards could recover from their surprise, the little band was rattling away behind the executive captain, leaving one man dead, and another one dying on the field, and carrying away more than one wound.

Onward at a swinging gallop, gathering into a compact body as they rode, came the mixed band.

A ringing shout of defiance came back as the little band swept onward, answered by hoarse, threatening cries from the mixed party, now joined by the guards of wagons.

The leader of the small party now turned in his saddle, and glanced swiftly over his right shoulder.

The pursuers were led by a flashily attired man, who held a big rifle in his left hand, guiding the steed he bestrode with the other.

With a quick motion the little captain's rifle was thrown upward, until the steel-bound butt rested against his shoulder; his keen eyes flashed over the clouded tube, and a loud report rang out.

Crack!

Like a sharp snap of a whip, the rifle sent forth its death-note.

The leader of the mixed band tumbled to the ground, while the riderless horse scampered away.

Crack, bang!

Two reports answered the opening fire of the running fight.

One of the brave fellows fell headlong from his horse.

Another one threw up his hands with a low groan of pain, and would have fallen from his horse if his leader had not been prompt in putting out a strong hand, and steadying him in the saddle.

"Wounded?"

"Yes, Harry, I'm afraid it's about all day with me," gasped the man. "And I'm hit in the back. I never wanted to get my last dose there."

"Cheer up," said Harry. "It may not be so bad."

But even as he spoke, the form he was supporting grew limp and nerveless, and fell sideways from the saddle, while the steed dashed steadily onward.

"Poor Bates," said Harry. "Here's to avenge the poor fellow."

Two long range navy revolvers were taken from his holsters, and turning slightly in his saddle he extended his arms in the direction of his foes.

Crack, crack, went the revolvers, and at that instant a little volley was sent in by the pursuers.

The revolver in the right hand of the spirited leader was torn from his hand by a flying bullet.

Another bullet struck his horse in the off hind quarter.

The animal plunged, reared, and then struck off at right angles from the band.

Half a dozen of the Indians and white men instantly separated from the party, and with shouts and yells of wild glee spurred after the cut-off fugitive, whose horse had become crazed with pain.

We must now return to Frank and Charley.

Frank had just decided to put on a full head of steam in order to make a final effort, when his cousin hailed him with a signal whistle.

Frank shut off steam and allowed Charley to drive the man up close to the horse.

"What's the matter?" asked Frank.

"Pomp just took a peep with the telescope," said Charley, "and he saw a band of murderous reds and whites about four miles ahead. They are the worst on the plains, and I move that we try to clean 'em out alone. What do you say?"

"How many are there?"

"Eight or ten."

"I'll do it," said Frank, diving down into the wonderful trunk, "and here's the article that will do the business."

He hauled forth a curious wire work.

When stretched out it was about twelve feet long and four or five wide, made of very strong crossed wires, and looking capable of holding considerable weight.

They watched Frank closely while the genius tied the sides of the wire work to the insides of the wagons as they then stood, and made them fast.

“Now drive up close, pull the slack of the wire into your wagon, and then travel. Put on thirty pounds of steam, and we’ll run steadily together.”

His orders were obeyed, and in two minutes they were rattling across the plains at a smashing pace, close together, and rapidly nearing the mixed band of cutthroats.

These latter suddenly spied them, and tried hard to escape in a compact body, and then Frank cried:

“Forty pounds of steam! Hurrah!”

And like two immense bolts the Steam Horse and the Steam Man shot down upon the flying band, and as they neared them, Frank cried:

“Spread!”

They spread out slightly, rushed on like flashes, and the extended screen of wire pushed the men kiting from the ground and sent them flying, dead, bruised and dying over the plain, while the groans and curses of the band, and their wild screams rang out in one thrilling chorus of terror and pain.

Men went whirling high into the air; and went tumbling over the ground like tops, and all sorts of weapons flew around with the force of the shock, for the solid weight of two immense machines had been sufficient to knock over every living object.

Many were killed instantly; others were left dying on the ground; some few were left to scamper away; but very nearly the entire party of men were stretched out by the one grand rush, and onward dashed the man and horse once more.

And as they rushed onward they caught sight of the running fight, and saw the single fugitive, who had been cut off from his men.

Even as they looked the horse leaped high into the air, twice, and then fell headlong to the ground, catching his rider’s leg under him.

The pursuers spurred fiercely toward him, and then Frank shouted:

“A full head of steam. Scoop ’em in with the net. Do or die. Onward!”

No time was to be lost if they would scoop the little band of pursuers before the helpless captain could be reached, so on went a full head of steam.

The pursuers, yelling like maniacs, spurred toward the captain with drawn weapons in their murderous hands.

“Rescue!” shrieked Frank.

“Hurrah!” shrieked Charley; and together the man and the horse rushed forward at a terrific pace upon the enemy.

CHAPTER VI.

MIDNIGHT DEVILTRY.

In order to properly connect the various parts of our story in proper places, we are forced to turn backward to the night first preceding the day on which occurred the events narrated in the preceding chapter.

We wish to conduct the reader to a large and handsome house situated on the outskirts of Clarkville, the town where Charley Gorse belonged.

This house, the most pretentious in that prosperous town, belonged to a gentleman named Radcliffe, a retired merchant.

Here Mr. Radcliffe resided with his only son Ralph, a boy of fifteen.

Mr. Radcliffe was a perfect invalid, and was not expected to live long.

Many said that he sorrowed for the wife he had buried two years before.

Radcliffe was reputed to be a man of great wealth, and as he lived in first-class style for that locality, there seemed grounds for belief in his riches.

Midnight had descended on the sleeping village, and all were hushed in slumber.

Inside the mansion none heard the clock strike twelve but the invalid owner of the estate.

As the last peals of the silver hammer died away, he arose from his chair in the study, and was about to open the door leading into his bedroom, when a hand was placed on his shoulder.

He stopped short, and with more surprise than alarm turned to see who it was, for the moment believing that it might be his son, who had stolen into the room on tiptoe.

He was mistaken.

He found himself face to face with a man of middle age, powerfully built, heavily bearded, and furnished with a pair of dark, restless eyes, that were ever flashing about him, as if seeking a victim.

He looked like a tough customer, in his rough dress of homespun material, and the host grew somewhat alarmed when he saw a knife half hidden in the left hand of this midnight visitor.

"Who are you?" he faltered, sinking down upon a chair and looking up dubiously at the man before him. "What do you want of me?"

"Much," said the visitor, in the most easy and off-hand style. "That's right; sit down and take it easy. I've been waiting some time to see you."

And so saying, he drew up a chair quite close to the invalid, and seated himself with the utmost composure.

"Suppose you don't know me?" said this cool card. "Very likely, as you've not seen me in many years. Used to know me, however. Very kind of me to resume the acquaintance. Well, I've come to have a talk with you concerning certain matters."

"Who are you?" demanded Radcliffe, with some spirit.

"Call me—let's see—Hardscrabble; yes, that is a good enough name. You can call me Hardscrabble, principally because it's not my name; and when we conclude our little business, I'll tell you who I am."

"Well, sir," said Radcliffe, inquiringly, "is this the way you pay visits?"

"Oh, cut it!" impatiently interrupted the so-called Hardscrabble. "I'm not ceremonious at all. Are you ready to talk?"

"Yes, go on," said Radcliffe, sinking back in his chair.

He did not care about this interview in the least; but then what could he do about it, when it was requested by a powerful, ruffianly-looking fellow, who could have crushed him without need to have recourse to the weapon in his hand?

"Well, sir," said Hardscrabble, fixing his bright eyes upon him, "I wish to know whether you have made a will?"

Radcliffe did not answer, but looked at him doubtfully.

"Oh, you might as well talk out," said this rascally-looking Hardscrabble, "for if you don't you will force me to bind and gag you, and then go through your private desks and drawers. It would only be natural for an invalid to make a will."

"Well, I have made one," slowly returned Radcliffe, who began to feel that he was in the power of an unscrupulous villain, who would not hesitate to stab him if much provoked.

"And how have you left your property?" was the next question.

"What's that to do with——" began the invalid, but a slight motion of Hardscrabble's hand, the one containing the poniard, was enough to recall him to his senses, and remind him that indignation was not a very good article just then.

"Answer," sternly said the visitor.

"I have left the bulk of my property to my son and heir, my Ralph," answered the old man; "and he will inherit everything, with the exception of a few unimportant legacies left to old servants and one or two friends. Tell me what interest you have in the matter."

"A very great one," said the other. "You have no brothers?"

"I have not."

"Nor sisters?"

"Not one."

"Nor any near relatives to step in and get your property if your son should die suddenly?"

"I have no relations living to my knowledge, the last one dying some two or three years ago in California. He was stabbed in some drunken quarrel."

"What was his name?" asked Hardscrabble, an odd smile playing over his lips.

"James Van Dorn," said Radcliffe. "He was my first cousin, and the only relative left me for many years."

Hardscrabble's hand went up to his face with an adroit motion, and he removed the heavy beard.

It made him look ten years younger, but did not take the dare-devil look from his face.

"Don't you know me?" he said.

Radcliffe peered closely at him, and then said slowly:

"Yes, you are Van Dorn."

"Just so, I am James Van Dorn," said the visitor, and then put the poniard in his pocket with a pleasant laugh. "Only did this as a joke, you know. How much are you going to leave me in your will, Cousin Radcliffe, now that you know I'm alive?"

The question was proper enough, but the tone was a threat.

"Will you divide the estate with myself as half heir?" he asked, peering close into the invalid's face with those wicked dark eyes. "Speak."

"I will not," firmly said Radcliffe, trying to rise from his seat. "You can never touch one cent of my money."

"You lie!" savagely said Van Dorn, and with a quick motion he caught poor Radcliffe by the throat with one hand as he drew the poniard with the other. "You lie, for I intend to handle every cent of your money. I'm going to take your life for two reasons; one is because you married the only girl I ever thought a straw about, and the other reason is because you made me as black to her as a man could be made. Die!"

The poniard flashed in the light, the invalid writhed in a vain effort to get away from the ruffian's clutch, and the blade descended and was sheathed in Radcliffe's heart.

The murderer laid the body down, and after spurning it with his foot, picked up the lamp from the table and walked softly out of the room.

He traversed the hallway and reached the door of another room; this he entered with a cat-like tread, and set the lamp down while he turned towards the bed that stood at the side of the room.

There half reclining was a youth of about fifteen, who had been aroused from his slumbers by the light.

Van Dorn strode forward, and the bloody knife flashed before the eyes of the half awakened boy.

"Silence," cautioned Van Dorn, with a look of menace, "for if you make any outcry, utter one sound above a whisper, I'll not hesitate for a moment about driving this poniard into your heart!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE RESCUE.

Like a bolt from the skies the wonderful Steam Horse rushed forward.

The little mixed band of pursuers, yelling and swinging their hatchets and rifles, did not discover the near approach of the rescuing steed until it was too late for them to think of escaping the monster by flight.

In the body of the wagon stood Barney Shea, and in his hands the brave Irishman held a loaded rifle.

The pursuers had reached within two hundred yards of the helpless captain before they discovered the Steam Man, so excited were they by the thought of taking their prey a prisoner.

Then they pulled up short, and tried to wheel their horses so as to escape the impending danger.

The man kept level with the horse, even at this terrible speed.

Charley Gorse held the reins of his high-stepping man, and on the seat beside him, perched up like a frog, sat the darkey.

The latter held two long range revolvers of the Colt's Navy order in his hands, and looked eager to use them.

As the pursuers wheeled their steeds, the sharp tones of the revolving rifle rang out.

Four of the seven men fell from their horses.

Three of them were killed instantly, and never stirred or quivered after falling to the ground.

The fourth one, a big muscular white man, was only wounded, and no sooner was he down than he was up again, pistol held in his hand.

His right hand flew up as the two steam wonders dashed towards him.

The muzzle of his weapon was in a line with Frank Reade's heart.

But quicker than the villain was Barney Shea.

His rifle was still held to his shoulder, and its chambers still contained many death warrants.

The muzzle of his breech-loader moved very swiftly, his finger pressed the trigger, and ere the villain on the ground could fire, Barney Shea had sent a bullet into his heart.

Both Frank and Charley knew that horses were too heavy for them to ride down without running the risk of injuring their machines, so they steered slightly to the right, and as they passed the remainder of the pursuers, the darkey and Barney let drive at them.

Pomp's revolver brought down two out of the three, and Barney's rifle finished the affair.

"Pull up slowly," cried Frank, "and turn back to that poor chap."

As they slowly wheeled and retraced their route back to the helpless man on the ground, the riderless steeds of the fallen men rushed madly over the plains.

Together they went to the vicinity of the man and horse, steam was shut off, and while Pomp was removing the wirework from the trucks, Frank, Charley, and the Irishman went to the captain.

The poor fellow was pinned to the ground under the heavy body of the horse, and was in great pain, and unable to move his imprisoned limb.

As soon as the three rescuers looked at the captain they sprang forward with cries of recognition and surprise.

"It's Harry Hale!" cried Frank.

"The secret service detective," gasped his Cousin Charley. "Why, he's fainted."

"And no wonder," said Barney, "for it's the devil's own throp, so it is."

"Roll that horse over," commanded Frank Reade, who, being clear-headed and quick to conceive ideas, was looked upon as a sort of leader. "Take that off hind leg, Barney."

Barney did so; Frank seized the other leg, and Charley Gorse grabbed the animal's head.

The poor steed was as dead as could be, and he had no trouble in rolling him over.

Frank instantly bent over the captain to examine the leg.

He expected to find the limb broken by the weight, but was overjoyed to find that it was only bruised, and with a little care would soon be as well as ever.

"Whisky, Barney," he called; "of course you have some."

"Arrah now, me gossoon," said blarneying Barney, as he handed forth a heavy pocket-flask, "and it's yerself as knows what kind of a mon I am. Sure, I'd not be a throe Irishman if I didn't love whisky and fiddlin'. Av coorse I never get drunk, ye know, but thin I loike a wee shmall drink, so I do."

While the Irishman was gabbing, Frank was pouring whisky down Harry Hale's throat.

Charley Gorse rubbed the poor fellow's hands, and opened his shirt to give him full chance to

breathe.

In a few moments he came back to life and sensibility.

When he opened his eyes he looked with surprise at the faces around him.

He seemed to think that he was dreaming, and placed his hands to his head in a wondering manner.

"Frank Reade," he slowly said, looking curiously at our hero.

"Right," said Frank. "Here I am, just in time to save you from losing your beautiful curly hair. Give us your hand, old boy."

"And Charley Gorse," cried Hale. "Oh! now I begin to understand it. You have just arrived in time to rescue me. I remember that those devils were spurring down upon me when I was caught under the horse, then everything grew dark around me, and I suppose I must have fainted."

"Exactly," said Frank. "Don't you remember this gentleman?"

With a little effort Harry Hale got upon his feet, and looked steadily at the Irishman.

Barney was quite a bit stouter, and therefore Hale did not know him at once.

"Know me!" cried Barney, standing up to the detective with outstretched hands, "av coorse he knows me, for wasn't we companions in arrums and twin divils for fightin'?"

"I'll be darned if it isn't that blundering Irishman, Barney Shea, the cuss that was always spoiling for any kind of a row. Of course I know him. Jerusalem! how my leg hurts."

"It's lucky it wasn't broke," said the driver of the Steam Horse. "But just see how I travel now."

And then Harry Hale saw the young genius' latest invention, and eyed it with wonder.

He walked painfully towards it, for his leg felt stiff and sore, but his curiosity and admiration would not allow him to rest until he had fully examined the wonderful contrivance from end to end.

"That's really the greatest invention of the age," he said. "And if he can do as well as the Steam Man, you can have good times on these prairies."

"He can do better than the man," said Frank. "We have just had a race, and I should have won it if it had not been for a band on foot that we had to wipe out."

"I don't know about that," put in his Cousin Charley. "I didn't think that I was going to be beaten. I'm ready for another trial at any time."

"I'll accommodate you," said Frank.

"Have you seen anything of my boys?" asked Harry Hale.

"Your boys?"

"Yes, my men who are under my lead. We are out here on a big job. I have two brother detectives with me, and the rest are wild bordermen, all terrible boys for a fight, and as fine riders as any on the plains."

"And what's the big job?" asked Charley.

"I'll tell you," said Hale, seating himself on Frank's wagon. "The country for some time past has been flooded with a large amount of counterfeit money, gold, silver, and the green legal tender. We have looked for the rascals near home, but after a long search we found they were in the West, and I was picked out as the most experienced man to track them down."

"And have you?"

"I think I have," said Hale. "I have got one of my men in their stronghold, and he sent me word to-day, by a boy, that the wagons were coming back with a lot of money in them."

"Wagons?" said Frank.

Harry Hale explained the counterfeiters' mode of operating through a regular express line.

"But we must not stand here wasting time in talk," he said. "My brave boys are being killed, perhaps, while I stand jabbering, for they were riding away from three times their own number. Are you willing to help me?"

"Willing?" said Frank, springing up to his seat. "Just give me a show for adventure, that's all."

"Or me," said Gorse, jumping up to his seat.

"Hooroo!" cried Shea, swinging his old hat. "There's bound to be a row."

"Where away?" cried Frank.

"Sou'west," said Hale.

The reins were pulled, the whistles gave forth a merry yell apiece, and then the Steam Horse and the Steam Man darted swiftly away.

CHAPTER VIII. "WHAT'S THE MATTER?"

But little was said as the two vehicles rolled swiftly over the ground; both the man and the horse planking out at a lively rate.

For ten minutes the high rate of speed was kept up, and then Pomp's voice was heard above the clatter of the iron feet:

"Dar dey is!"

And he pointed in a direction a point or two off their course.

Frank Reade heard him, and glanced ahead over the plain.

He could just make out two flying bands of mounted horsemen, not a quarter of a mile afront, and as he looked one of the leading band tumbled to the ground.

"More speed," said Hale, who was peering over his shoulder.

"More speed it is," said Frank, and pulling his reins sharply, at the same time altering his course slightly.

Charley Gorse did likewise, and at an increased rate they rushed onward to the aid of the little handful of fugitive men.

Pomp had reloaded his revolvers, and was now perched up by Charley once more, the deadly weapons flashing in the afternoon sunlight.

Barney and Harry Hale, standing up in the truck of the Steam Horse, grasped their guns with an eager grip, telling how they longed to use them.

The immense spurt of speed brought them rapidly upon the course passed over by the flying band of white men, and the man and horse out in between the two parties.

Two shrill whistles rang out, and then the white horsemen—Harry Hale's men—pulled up sharp, and dashed back to take a hand in the fight, feeling confident that the mixed band of red and white rascals could not contend successfully with the wonderful inventions of Frank Reade. [8]

The prisoners seemed to have no wish to meet with the man and horse, for they checked their steeds sharply when they discovered the rescuing party, and endeavored to cut away.

"Half circle, and cut them off!" yelled Frank to Charley.

The latter obeyed.

The two monsters spread out and made a half moon dash for the flying band of frightened cutthroats.

Hale's men kept on in a straight line for the rascals they had so lately run away from.

In a few minutes the man and the horse had dashed ahead of the band, and then Charley and Frank wheeled in and closed the circle.

Harry Hale's men were thundering up in their rear, and the rascals were forced to pull up.

They were cut off, and unless they were willing to run the gauntlet between the rapidly converging man and horse they would be forced to fight.

For a moment they hesitated, not knowing whether to stand at bay or run the risk of trying to cut through.

That moment's hesitation signed and sealed many death warrants.

The man and horse closed in upon them.

Pomp's long-range Colts rang out with a frightful sound.

Barney and Hale poured in a storm of bullets from their carbines, each one of which held sixteen lives.

Several of the men and horses of the mixed band were wounded, and one red rider was killed outright by the sharp little volley.

Hale's men dashed up like rockets in the rear.

Their wild terrific cheer rang out like a bugle-note of defense, and their ready rifles cracked sharply.

The band thus forced to stand at bay did not deliberate longer.

The voice of the leader arose above the reports of the guns.

"Fire! shoot down the men in the wagons."

And then Harry Hale and Barney wisely dropped down into the bottom of the truck, just as the Steam Horse ceased to move, and Frank tumbled from his seat just in time to escape being perfectly riddled by the hail of whistling bullets that passed over his seat just as he fell.

Charley Gorse had just brought the man to a standstill as the order was shouted forth.

He merely ducked his head with an involuntary dive.

Pomp, sitting at his side, saw several dark tubes turned upon him.

The darkey made up his mind that diving alone might not save him from getting a bullet through his woolly head, as he seemed to have been picked out by the enemy as the most dangerous foe opposed to them.

He didn't hesitate a moment, but made a frog-like jump to the ground, and the bullets clipped over Charley's head with a merry whirr, cutting part of the feather in his cap in their flight.

Pomp bounded from the ground like some huge rubber ball.

He had dropped one of his revolvers into the wagon as he jumped.

The other he now thrust hastily into his belt, and then dashed in among the mixed band in a perfectly fearless manner, and leaped upon the leader.

While the bullets were singing their song of death, the daring darkey grasped the leader by the leg, and tore him from the back of his steed.

Head down to the plain went the leader of the outlaws, and like a monkey, Pomp leaped up and was instantly in the saddle.

As Charley Gorse had told his cousin, the darkey was one of the most expert riders of the day.

He could do more with a horse than an ordinary rider.

He seized the reins, gave them a peculiar twitch, and the horse reared upon his hind legs.

Pomp yelled at him, and the animal began striking viciously with his iron-shod hoofs.

His heavy blows knocked men from their saddle, and caused other horses to leap away in fear.

Pomp kept yelling at him and twitching the reins, and the horse continued striking in a ferocious manner.

Hale and Barney had leaped from the body of the wagon to the ground.

Here they kept dancing about like two uneasy hornets, and banging away right and left.

A bullet raised the skin on Barney Shea's arm, and the Irishman's carbine fell from his hand.

One of the horsemen charged down upon him, a huge bowie flashing in his hand.

Frank Reade had rolled fairly under the bottom of his wagon.

His little revolver, made by himself, and as true as a die, was peeping out from his belt, and as the outlaw dashed down upon the Irishman, the weapon gleamed in Frank's hand.

Crack, went the deadly little pop-gun, and with a shattered wrist the outlaw passed by Barney, the bowie dropping from his nerveless fingers.

Barney snatched the bowie as it reached the ground, and hurled it after the man who had intended it for his breast.

"Take that wid me compliments, and don't feel cut up over the little affair," cried the Patlander.

He was not a remarkable thrower of the knife, but on this occasion he made a good shot.

The keen blade went quivering into the back of the receding outlaw, and the latter fell from his horse.

"Aha!" roared the delighted gentleman from Clonakilty; "I can bate the Aist Ingy jugglers, so I can. Would ye look at that, now?"

Charley Gorse had fallen from his seat in trying to regain his balance, and had landed astride the shafts of his wagon, from which place he toppled to the plain.

All this time Pomp had been raising the deuce with his striking horse, until the animal grew perfectly wild.

He tore and plunged around like some lunatic.

Pomp drew hard and sharp on the rein, and the leather snapped.

Like a bolt the horse leaped forward as soon as he found himself free from the rein.

With immense strides he dashed away over the prairie.

He was the leader's horse, and the other animals had been accustomed to follow in his footsteps, and as he bounded away they all leaped after him, and in all probability their riders did not care about stopping them.

In an instant the battle was over, and the cavalcade of horsemen were going like streaks over the prairie in a line, following in the wake of Pomp and the maddened horse the darkey clung to with accustomed ease.

"After them!" yelled Harry Hale.

Frank tumbled up from under the body of the wagon, and leaped nimbly on to his seat.

Hale and Barney leaped over the rear of the wagon.

Charley Gorse sprang up to his seat and pulled the reins.

The Steam Man started, ran forward for a hundred yards or so, and then pulled up.

Charley leaped to the ground, with an odd expression on his face, and ran to the man.

He flung open the furnace door in the Steam Man's belly.

His fire was almost out, and therefore his steam had become hot water.

"Go on," shouted Hale to his men, as they looked at him for orders. "Follow them, and if you can't reduce their number by picking them off, you must try to finish them in a desperate charge. Away!"

And like a cloud the western riders hurried away, dashing on swiftly after the pursuers of the darkey.

"Now, lively!" he cried to Frank.

The boy was yanking away on the reins even as he spoke.

No move on the part of the Steam Horse answered the pull.

Frank pulled again.

No better effects.

"What's the matter?" asked Hale.

"Has the harse the heaves, or has the haythenish baste foundered?" asked Barney.

"Darned if I know what's the matter," said Frank; and then he saw that Gorse was stuck, too.

"What's the matter, Charley?" he yelled.

"Fire almost out," yelled back Gorse, and ran to his coal box.

"Maybe mine is too," said Frank. "Barney, see to the fire."

"I will that," said Shea, and ran to the breast of the horse.

"A fire hot enough to singe the bristles o' Mrs. Faylix O'Doolahan's pigs," said the rollicking Irishman.

"Jump down lively," requested Hale, "and see what is the matter. Those fellows may eat my boys up, if we don't follow them in a moment."

Frank sprang from his seat, and first looked at his gauge.

It registered thirty pounds of steam.

"That's all right" said Hale, who was at his side. "Look at your boiler and steam chest proper, and see if there's anything blocking up the way."

Frank did so, but found everything all right until he discovered that one of the important pipes, the tube conducting the steam, was bent in such a manner as to render the passage of the vapor power impossible.

In a moment he was back to the wagon, and seized his box of tools, so necessary for keeping the machine in repair.

"It'll be all right in five minutes," he said, and began tinkering at the tube, handling his machinery in the most careful and expert manner.

"Hurry up," shouted Charley Gorse from his wagon. "I'm getting up steam very rapidly."

"I'll be ready as soon as you," shouted back his cousin, sticking steadily to his delicate repairing.

"I'll ride with Charley," said Harry Hale, leaving Frank's side, "and Barney can keep you company."

"All right," said Frank. "Barney, jump into the wagon and load up the guns and pistols."

"I will that," said Barney.

By the time that the weapons were loaded, the repairing was completed, and then the young genius leaped up to his box with a cry of triumph.

"Away!" he cried, and once more pulled on his reins.

At the same instant Charley Gorse got under headway, and sending forth their shrill whistles, the Steam Horse and his human-shaped brother trotted away.

CHAPTER IX.

THE AVENGER'S VOW.

Our story turns to a spot about five or six miles away from the place last mentioned.

Just where the rolling prairie was barred by a patch of woods, long, narrow and dark, a hardy pioneer had erected a rough but substantial dwelling, which, with the waving grass of the plains in front and the dark foliage of the adjacent strip of timber land to form a background, looked as pretty and tasteful as a picture.

Only a very brave man, one who laughed at danger could have been sufficiently heedless of peril to build a dwelling in such an unprotected location.

Jared Dwight knew no such thing as fear.

He had brought his wife and two little children here, had camped in the patch of woods while building the house, and had then taken up his residence in the out-of-the-way dwelling with all the coolness in the world.

His wife was one of those brave, hardy women of the West, who could handle a rifle with skill, and shoot down a stag as well as she could cook the animal after she had slain it.

Here, then, Jared Dwight lived quietly for some time, until the afternoon of the day on which we bring the reader to his dwelling.

Dwight was hoeing a little patch of corn when a bullet came whistling past his ear, and the report of a rifle snapped out near at hand.

Dwight knew that the shot came from the woods.

He did not look around nor stop for a moment.

Where one shot had come from, more might come.

Without a moment's hesitation the tall borderman bounded towards the door of his house, shouting out to his wife as he leaped onward.

A chorus of yells rang out, and a storm of bullets flew around and over the swiftly-running man; but he passed on without a scratch, and dashed safely into the door of the house.

The instant that he was in, his wife closed the portal with a bang, and dropped the heavy bar into its socket.

In one hand she held her rifle, and although her cheek paled somewhat, as she gazed upon the two frightened little ones crouching upon the floor in terror, yet her hands were as steady as those of her fearless husband.

"Jared, they're Injins," she said.

"Injins! and worse than Injins," said Dwight. "They're half white and half red, and the white part is the worst of the two, for a renegade is the worst critter on earth."

He walked to the window, and looked out.

Several forms were dancing in and out among the trees on the edge of the narrow wood patch.

As the borderman had said, some of these were white and others were red, and probably the whites were worse by far to deal with than the savages to whom they had linked themselves.

A big Indian stood exposed for a moment by the side of a tall cottonwood.

That moment was his last one on this side of the happy hunting-grounds.

Jared Dwight's rifle, its muzzle peering out through a little hole, spoke out sharply, and the red-skin, leaping high into the air, with an awful shriek, fell lifeless to the ground. [9]

Some of his comrades dashed forward to lift him from the ground.

Jared spoke out sharp:

"Shoot the foremost man!"

His wife's rifle flew to her shoulder, the end of the barrel resting in the little port-hole; her keen eye flashed over the weapon, and her steady forefinger pressed the trigger.

"Crack!"

A yell of mortal agony followed the shrill report, and the first man of the number which had rushed forward, fell dying in the arms of his comrades.

A chorus of yells rang out as they bore the dying man back into the shelter of the trees.

Then all was still.

"A good shot," said Jared. "They'll begin to understand that we're not going to be gobbled up very easily."

"But they could starve us out if they held out long enough," said his wife; and the brave woman felt a strange heaviness at her heart when she looked upon the two children, who were crying as they huddled together in a corner.

"They won't wait so long," said Jared Dwight. "They're very still, and that is what I don't like. It

means devilry of some kind, and—my God!”

A flaming arrow tore through the air, and fixed itself in the dry logs of the house.

Another and another followed, until the air seemed full of blazing darts.

They fixed themselves in the building very rapidly, until a great part of the log-house was covered with the blazing arrows.

The logs caught fire, and soon the red and white flames roared, and the blue smoke curled up from the blazing side of the settler's cabin.

“Now we're gone,” said Dwight, and his voice was steady with the awful calmness of perfect, hopeless despair. “We have only one chance. Let me see if any of them are at the front.”

He dashed to the front of the little house, and peered out upon the plains.

Several forms, hitherto hidden by the tall prairie grass, were now dancing up and down in savage glee.

“We're hemmed in,” despairingly said the borderer. “To go out by either door would be to get a bullet, or a dozen of them, through your body. We must stay here as long as we can, and trust for something to turn up to aid us, and if nothing does come, then we'll die together in the cabin. You and the children had better die than fall into the hands of those brutes yonder.”

His wife threw her arms around his neck, and pressed her pale lips to his.

“I can die with you,” she said.

The children, crying bitterly, crept up to them, and the little clinging hands took hold of their garments.

“Curse these wretches,” gasped Dwight, as he gazed upon his children.

The flames were hissing and crackling, the blue smoke rolled in clouds around the burning cabin, and the loud yells close at hand told that the demons had closed up around the doomed dwelling.

A dozen bullets came crashing through the little window, and with an awful cry of agony, the brave wife sank down upon the floor, the blood welling slowly upward from a wound in her breast.

“My God! she's killed,” gasped Dwight, and not daring to look at her, he slung his rifle over his back, picked up the two children, and dashed up the stairs, for the room was becoming choked with smoke, and the heat was intolerable.

His wife, wounded, but not dead, heard him leaping up the stairs with the two children, and with great difficulty she arose and staggered after him, and when she reached the room above, she gasped for breath and staggered feebly to the window, where, with her arms held forth in a supplicating attitude, she stood until another bullet put an end to her life.

Outside, the red fiends and their white brothers in crime were dancing up and down with devilish joy.

Dwight had clambered out upon the roof of the little log hut, and there he stood with a child on each side of him, until the whistling bullets from the fiends below struck down the poor children, laying them both dead at his feet.

He seemed to bear a charmed life, for, although some of the leaden missiles rent his clothing, he still stood there unwounded.

A loud whistle, shrill and piercing, rang in his ears, and looking over the plains he beheld the Steam Horse, making splendid time over the plains towards him.

The Indians scattered like chaff as the monster bounded towards them, very gradually reducing its speed; and as the prairie steed drew near, Jared Dwight made a leap from the roof of the house, landed safely upon the hard ground, and then bounded nimbly into the wagon as it passed by.

“Onward,” he cried, and Frank Reade increased his speed. “The rest are all gone.”

“Who are killed?” asked Frank, as Barney handed his consoling flask to Dwight.

“My wife and my children,” said Jared, and his face grew dark and stern with a terrible thought; “all I had to love and care for in this world. They were all shot down by those red and white devils, and their bodies will burn in that fire.”

“Do you know your foes?”

“Know them?” said Dwight. “Aye, I do, and they shall know me. I have now nothing to live for but revenge, and they shall know what it is to be harassed by the untiring hate of an avenger, for here I swear to devote my whole life to the work of ridding the plains of these human fiends. Neither by night nor by day shall my hatred sleep, and to the last man will track them down to death. Hear me, just God, and give ear, oh, earth, that from this time forward, until my arms are still in death, I am an avenger!”

CHAPTER X.

POMP'S RIDE.

We left Pomp dashing away over the vast plains on the horse belonging to the leader of the outlaws.

The racket just suited the darkey, for above all things he liked racing and excitement, and certainly this sort of race was exciting enough, for the stake at issue was his own life.

Like a rocket he dashed on, for the horse he bestrode was one of the fleetest mustangs of the plains; barrel bodied, full chested, thin nosed, clean limbed, bright eyed, and full of bottom and speed.

After him in a perfect cloud came the outlaws.

As the reader knows, the mounted men of Hale's command did not leave their captain until it was ascertained that something was the matter with the machines, therefore Pomp and his pursuers had a big start and a clear course.

With the most practiced ease the little darkey stood on his head in the saddle, and kicked up his legs.

"Come on," he yelled. "Don't yer go for to be getting bashful, kase I'se out for fun, I is, and I likes company. Come right 'long dar, and don't be hanging back. What fo' you think dis nigga want to go trablin' lone for, hey?"

A chorus of shouts, shots, shrieks, yells and curses rang out.

Several bullets whistled around the little darkey, but none hit either him or the horse.

His enemies were wild over his cool mode of treatment.

It was decidedly contemptuous, and they did not like it.

So they banged away at him, but it is not every marksman who can hit even a very large sized mark when he has to fire from the back of a bounding steed, and Pomp knew that as long as they aimed at him he was pretty safe, whereas if they had only banged away in a promiscuous manner, he would have felt insecure.

He knew that they were not likely to hit what they aimed at.

He stood their firing for a few minutes, and then he stood up in his saddle and took a view of them.

They were just about a quarter of a mile behind, well together, and coming on at a swinging gallop.

They set up a loud shout as Pomp stood up so carelessly, and the little darkey sent back a cry of defiance.

"Tain't all you fellers what kin hit on de fly," he said. "Dis chile'll show you what a darkey kin do."

His remaining Colt's long range revolver was in his belt.

He drew it, cocked it, and stood for a moment selecting his mark from out of the many.

In the front of the band of pursuers rode a tall Indian, mounted upon a beautiful cream stallion.

Both man and horse were decorated in fancy style, and Pomp knew that the Indian must be a person of consequence.

The cream stallion could have left the rest behind if his rider had let him have his head, but it is likely that the gayly-tricked-out red-skin did not care about getting too close to Pomp.

"Dat are stallion am jest a little bit too good a hoss for to be chasin' me," said the nig. "He's de only one what could catch dis chile, so I guess I'll send him free over the plain, wi'out a rider."

His long right arm went up, and the gleaming weapon in his hand was extended toward the pursuers.

His keen black eyes flashed for a mere instant over the barrel, and then he pulled the trigger.

Bang!

With a terrible yell the Indian leaped fairly from the back of his horse, and went down to the ground under the hoofs of the flying steeds, while the noble cream stallion, freed from its load, dashed away from the band in frightened style, making wonderful bounds that soon carried it out of sight.

Again the revolver in Pomp's hand sent forth its death-note, and another riderless steed bounded away after the cream stallion.

An answering volley rang out from the pursuers.

A well-aimed bullet struck against the lock of the revolver, and the heavy weapon was torn from the hands of the surprised darkey.

Away it flew through the air, whirling over and over.

It struck some few hundred yards ahead of the horse, and directly in the course the darkey was

traveling.

A cheer went up from the pursuers when they saw their plucky enemy thus suddenly disarmed, for in the hands of such a marksman that very revolver was not a proper thing to ride behind.

But Pomp performed a marvelous feat from the back of the horse that caused them to give another shout, this time in admiration of the plucky darkey.

The revolver landed and stopped, and then Pomp put one foot over the pommel of the saddle, the other one curved dexterously over the horse's neck, and then Pomp went head down and made a quick grab at the butt of the weapon as it lay on the ground.

He got it, and holding it firmly in his right hand, he caught the mane with the strong fingers of his left paw, and rapidly swung himself up again.

He looked over the weapon.

It was uninjured, and two charges were still in the chambers.

In an instant the darkey was standing erect again in the saddle, and his two remaining bullets were sent shrieking into the closely-packed crowd of howling pursuers, tumbling two more of them from their horses, and creating a little panic among the band.

Then the darkey plunged down into the saddle and caught his reins up.

His horse was making splendid time running, and the gait, a long, swinging gallop, was not tiresome.

The darkey possessed very powerful eyes, but he looked in vain for anything in the shape of rescuing friends.

Nothing was to be seen but the howling enemies in his rear.

"Den dis yere am a ride for life," said the darkey to himself, as he sat cross-legged on the saddle and proceeded to reload his weapon. "Well, I kinder guess dis chile kin do de ridin'."

And the shooting, too, he might have added, for he had already sent several of his enemies to their last account, and he was as yet totally uninjured.

He glanced ahead, and a cry of surprise, if not of fear, burst from his lips.

The plain was here intersected by a rapidly-flowing stream, hemmed in by long spurs of rock.

On the bank which the darkey was rapidly approaching, a strange and thrilling scene was being enacted.

A dozen buffaloes, wounded, covered with blood, and evidently maddened to a desperate degree, were fighting a terrific running fight, continually dashing around and around in a big circle, describing the distance of a hundred yards.

Their sides and horns were reeking with gore and their bellowing sounded like the moans of a dying army.

In the center of this immense circle, and fairly hemmed in by the beasts as they tore around, were two trembling horses, and upon their backs were seated a man and a boy.

These latter were none others than James Van Dorn and Ralph Radcliffe, the son of the man Van Dorn had so brutally murdered in his house at Clarkville.

"For de land's sake!" cried Pomp, fully surprised by the wonderful sight. "Dey is hemmed in by dem bufflers, an' dey is not able to get out. Why de debbil don't de man pop some of de bufflers ober?"

But when he looked again he saw that the man had no rifle; and a revolver, in the hands of an ordinary marksman, and used upon the tough hide of a bison, doesn't amount to much.

Pomp stood upon the saddle so as to get a clear view, and held his reloaded weapon in his right hand.

The maddened buffaloes were leaping and prancing in that immense circle, their deep-toned lowing sounding like distant thunder. [10]

There appeared to be two sides to the fight, for there were about half a dozen on one side and half a dozen on the other, but instead of rushing forward and locking horns, as a domesticated bull would have done, they continued their fierce battle in that big ring, and a desperate battle it was, too.

Even as the darkey stood up one of the big beasts made a desperate leap upon one of his foes, the other in turn attacking a foe ahead of him; but the fierce charge of the first-named brute was well directed, and the second buffalo sank dying to the plain, a gash fully a yard long in his side, showing where he had been disemboweled as quickly and as neatly by a cruel horn as the sharpest sword could have done.

Pomp's horse was heading direct for the fighting beasts.

The pursuers, thundering rapidly up in the rear, thought that Pomp's ride was over now, and they set up a loud shout of expectant triumph.

But Pomp didn't have any idea of giving up just then.

His powerful eyes recognized the features of the pallid boy at James Van Dorn's side, and he made up his mind to rescue the lad if the thing could be done.

He turned lightly in the saddle, and his keen eyes ranged over his foes.

They were gaining on him, but his horse was still in good wind, and Pomp was sure that he could keep them back.

His arm went up, and again that long muzzled Colt covered one of the advancing band of outlaws. It spoke out sharply.

"Dar goes one," said Pomp, as he re-cocked his weapon. "Here we are again."

Again that long-range weapon sent forth its unerring bullet.

"Down goes anudder," roared the delighted darkey, as his enemies wavered and broke up in some confusion. "Now for dat ar' poor little boy."

He thrust his pistol in his belt, and with a firm grip seized the reins, pulled up on them taut, almost lifting the horse from his feet, and with a loud yell urged him on.

Forward bounded the steed at a fearful pace, dashing down directly upon the swiftly-moving circle of buffaloes, and the darkey's steady hand and quick eyes guided him through a slight gap in the living ring.

As he gained the inside of the ring, his enemies came thundering down upon his track, their rifles ready for either the buffaloes or himself.

Pomp leaned far out from the saddle and clutched Ralph Radcliffe by the arm, swinging him before him with but small effort of his cable-like muscles, and then he yelled at the horse again, and pulled him up with one hand, short and sharp, and as the animal was going at full speed it caused him to leap.

Straight over the fighting circle arose the horse and his double burden.

CHAPTER XI.

THE TRAPPED TRAIN!

The reader has of course guessed that the Steam Horse and the Steam Man became separated in some manner.

After starting away on the tracks of Pomp's pursuers, all went smooth for some time, and then Charley's man got out of order in some part, and he was forced to pull up and investigate the matter.

"I'll keep right on," yelled Frank.

"That's right!" shouted back Harry Hale from Charley's wagon. "We'll soon be on the road again."

And then Frank shot away over the plains with his gallant Steam Horse, the animal of mettle and metal spurning the hard course with rapid hoofs.

But Frank lost his bearings, and, in some unaccountable manner, got off his course, and instead of following in the trail of the darkey, and the outlaws, he took a course some points off the line, and, as the reader knows, was enabled to rescue Jared Dwight from the roof of his burning home.

After Dwight had registered that solemn vow that made him an avenger for life, he sank down into the bottom of the wagon and covered his face with his hands, and for some time did not utter a single word.

Barney then looked at him with a rather awestruck expression, and then clambered up beside Frank.

"Frank, dear?"

"Yes, Barney."

"It's a bad lot he is, so he is, and he'll make them rue the day, so he will."

"Shouldn't wonder," said Frank.

"I'd not like to mate him alone on a dark night, so I wouldn't, if I knew that the man had a grudge agin me."

"He is a tough customer," said Frank, "and I'll back him to avenge his wife and little ones if he gets a square show."

The Steam Horse was now running, or rather trotting away at the rate of about fifteen miles an hour, for Frank knew that he was off his course, and therefore there was no use hurrying.

For some time he trotted along in a leisurely manner, but no signs could he see of either Pomp, his pursuers, or Charley Gorse and the man.

Barney Shea turned to him with a most comical expression.

"Masther Frank."

"Go ahead, Barney."

"Av coorse it sames out o' place to talk of such thrifling matthers, whin we're enjoying such illegant rows an' ructions, but thin I'm only a man afther all, and be me sowl I have a stummick."

"And that 'stummick' is hungry?"

"It is that."

"Well, I don't mind confessing that I am in the same condition," said Frank. "I could eat a horse, shoes and all."

"Unless the animal was a sthame horse," said Barney, with a grin.

"Exactly," said Frank. "See yonder, there's a little grove. We'll stop there, cool off all my wheels, attend to everything, so as to have the concern in the best traveling order, and get away with a square meal. I guess by the look of the place that we shall find a little spring of beautiful fresh water bubbling up there."

"Arrah, and it's meself that loikes beautiful fresh wather," said Barney; "that is, wid the whisky in, av coorse. Faith, it's only haythens that would think o' drinkin' beautiful fresh wather widout a wee shmall dhrop o' poteen to flavor wid."

In a few moments they were at the grove, a beautiful shady little spot of about a half acre in extent, furnished with several tall trees, a lot of bushes, and a bubbling clear spring.

Here the Steam Horse came to a halt, and the avenger started abruptly from the dark train of thought that had absorbed his mind.

Frank walked up to him.

"Come, sir," he said, kindly, "I sympathize deeply with you, but it will do you no good to brood over your troubles. You cannot forget them, nor your vow of vengeance, so nursing your hatred in this dark and gloomy manner can do no good. What is your name?"

"Jared Dwight."

"And mine is Frank Reade, of the city of New York, and my companion here is Barney Shea, of

Clonakilty, Ireland.”

“I know you both,” said Dwight, as with an effort of will he shook off the dark cloud hanging over his spirits. “I was with Snap Carter, the prairie guide, when we were all penned up in that blind pass, and you rescued us by cutting through with your Steam Man, dashing away to the fort, and bringing the soldiers down upon the outlaws. I knew that it must be you when I saw this Steam Horse coming over the plains when my house was burning under me, for it is just what I expected of you.”

“Oh, it’s a wonderful gossoon he is, so he is,” said Barney, casting a look of pride upon Frank, “and it’s rare foine ideas he has, so he has: but divil a wan would amount to anything if I didn’t come wid the braw jaynus to kape him straight.”

With a faint smile the avenger turned from him, and walked to the bubbling crystal spring.

Frank had made a dive into the body of the wagon.

Here he had constructed a locker or larder, and kept in it a sufficient quantity of food to last several days if need be; for his food was nearly all dried or else condensed, and could be kept in a pure state for several months.

In a few moments Barney had a cracking fire started. Frank produced a little silver tea-pot and hung it upon a wire frame which sat airily above the flames of the little fire, and in less than five minutes a good cup of tea was produced by the young genius.

“I merely do this to try how my frame works,” said Frank to Dwight, who was watching him with interest. “My furnace would serve me for all cooking purposes, but this seems the nicer way, and it don’t seem natural to do your cooking in the breast of a horse, even if the animal be made of metal.”

“Science is a wonderful thing,” said Jared, looking attentively at the horse.

“You bet it is,” said Frank, warmly. “Just by scientific trickery, nothing else, I was able to get the best of one of the smartest Indian jugglers in the West, and now I’m equal to a dozen of them.”

While talking they kept their jaws very busy as well as their tongues, and in the course of half an hour Frank and Barney declared themselves as feeling better.

Frank replaced his articles in the wagon, had a look at the axles of his wheels, and found that all the parts were as cold as could be, and then, after a peep at his furnace, and a squirt of steam through the nostrils of the horse, declared everything in proper traveling order.

“Of course, you’ll go with us,” he said to the avenger.

“If you will take me I should be pleased to go,” said Dwight. “I know that you are in the midst of wild adventures day after day, and that will afford me chance for the revenge I seek. I am a homeless wanderer now, and all spots are alike to me, so that they do not take me too far away from the wretches I have sworn to track down to the bitter end; but—hark!”

He ceased speaking, and held up his hand in a listening attitude.

Frank and Barney bent forward in eager attention.

The distant thundering of many rifles, clear, though far away, came with a rumbling echo to their ears.

“Where is that same firing?” demanded the impatient Irishman. “Oh, there’s an illegant row going on somewheres around here, and I’m not there to take a hand. Och, where the divil is the foight?”

Frank leaped up to his seat and seized the telescope that lay in brackets alongside his driving-place.

In a moment he adjusted it, placed it to his eye, and slowly swept the plain with the powerful glass.

He saw, some four or five miles away to the right hand, the very trap Dwight had spoken of a few moments before.

Two narrow but high spurs of rock, closing in at one end and forming a blind pass; into this rocky trap a band of mounted men wore forcing an emigrant train, and from both sides came the thunder of the guns that they had heard.

He handed the glass to his companions, and they took in the scene at a glance through the lens.

“That damnable blind pass again,” said the avenger. “What will you do?”

“Not go to the fort again, anyhow,” said the inventor of the Steam Horse, as he took his seat. “I hold myself good for a tribe of red-skins, and, I reckon, to be able to scare a few white men, also, with my odd contrivance. Let me look again through the glass.”

When he looked again he found that the train was fairly into the trap, and that the outlaws of the plains—red or white—were forced to draw out of gunshot, for the emigrants were at bay.

“What will you do?” asked Dwight. “I’d like to pile right down there.”

“So would I,” said Barney. “Hooroo! give me a whack at ’em, Frank, dear.”

“You’d both lose your hair and mine, too,” said Frank. “It is growing dark rapidly now, and when night comes on I shall be able to astonish you with some of my little inventions. I shall stay here until it is perfectly dark, and then if I don’t trot down to that pass and yank those poor people out

of that trap lively, then you can call Frank Reade a fool. But just you wait.”

CHAPTER XII.

BARRY BROWN'S SEARCH.

The reader will remember the individual who was admitted by the captain of the gang of counterfeiters in the second number of this story.

This person was Barry Brown, one of the men under Harry Hale, and a most cool and skillful secret service detective; as the reader has doubtless surmised, Jack, the tall stableman, was also a spy upon the counterfeiters who had been worked into the service of the leader by the cunning of Harry Hale.

Barry Brown had been selected by Hale to enter the counterfeiting gang, and by his skill in die-sinking and engraving, to work himself thoroughly into their confidence, for this gang conducted its secret operations on a larger scale than any other in the country, and it was worth time and patience, and all possible risk, to have the glory of bringing the rascals to justice.

This Brown was as cool as a piece of steel, and his nerves were like the same chilly metal in texture.

He was brave to a fault, but was never rash, and the greatest danger had never proved sufficiently exciting to cause him to lose his head, as the saying is.

Therefore it will be seen that he was a man eminently fitted to carry out the dangerous task intrusted to him by his leader, that of probing into the secrets of the gang, becoming one of their trusted workers, and thus eventually of being able to spring a trap and bag the lot of them. [11]

When the first firing took place between the Prairie Express and the men under Harry Hale, Barry Brown and Jack the stableman were standing in the opening fronting the house.

Some of the horses in the stable became a little frightened, and Jack was forced to attend to them.

"I guess it's the captain stopping those wagons," muttered Brown. "Well, whether he carries out his plans or not, I must attend to my work. There being very few in the house now, I guess it will be the best chance I shall have of going on an exploring expedition."

He went back to the house, and entering the hallway, closed the door.

Nobody was to be seen.

Barry Brown walked slowly along the hallway.

There was a stairway leading down to some unknown part; and down the steps with cautious tread went the secret service spy.

They conducted him to a lower hallway, and this was constructed of huge blocks made of solid stone.

He paused in this hallway, and bent his head to a listening attitude.

A form glided out from the gloom of a dark corner, and with a swift, noiseless leap, bounded upon him.

The secret service man probably owed his life to one fact. He had been a telegraph operator in his time, and the wonderful business had sharpened his ears so much, that, even the very slightest sound became audible to him.

What he heard on this occasion was the sound of the flying foe.

The latter rushing swiftly through the air made but little noise, but that noise was sufficient to attract the attention of Barry Brown's quick ears.

Merely from the force of a long-practiced habit the detective dropped to the ground, and the flying form shot over him.

It was a huge hound, one of that silent, deadly race that destroy without uttering a single sound.

In a moment the dog turned and made for him again, but Barry Brown did not dodge this time.

He'd met with four-footed enemies before this, and he knew how to battle with them.

In his right hand he grasped a cruel-looking bowie.

His left arm was wrapped in the folds formed by the tail of his coat.

Without a single cry, the immense hound leaped forward.

Barry Brown's steady eyes flashed like two stars.

His left arm was struck forward, fairly into the immense jaws of the hound as the brute dropped upon him.

The white teeth sank into the thin cloth, and the force of the charge sent Barry over on his back.

The brute came fairly on top of him with its crushing weight.

That armed right hand went up like some mechanical contrivance four or five times with the regularity of clock work, and the keen blade sank again and again into the quivering body of the hound.

The powerful jaws relaxed their hold, the beast rolled off sidewise from the man, and after a few

convulsive struggles, gave its last kick and died.

Barry arose to his feet, kicked the dog aside, and then looked to see from what place the creature had come when he made his first leap.

He saw a sort of a kennel in one corner, and thither he dragged the dead hound by his tail and left it.

"A very good dog," soliloquized he, "a very good dog indeed, but he wasn't fairly up to the mark, or he never would have given me a chance to draw a weapon. I wonder how long it will take them to find out that he's dead? It's rather odd that Jack shouldn't know anything about the hound being there. Perhaps he forgot to tell me. Well, that's one guard gone, and the fact that he was a guard tells me that I'm approaching some place worth guarding, and that is what I'm after. I'm blessed if I can see any door in the wall."

He could not see anything that looked like a door until he came to the end of the hall, and there a small knob informed him that something like a countersunk door might be found.

He unsheathed his knife and held it in his hand.

A strange, buzzing sound came from the other side of the heavy stone wall, but Barry could not distinguish anything more than the fact that human voices formed part of the sound.

"Without doubt, this is one of their down-stairs work-rooms," said Barry, as he held one ear close to the wall in a vain effort to catch some clear sound from the other side of the massive masonry. "I must lay off there until some one comes out. I'll wait hours before I'll budge, unless some new danger drives me away."

This man's patience in carrying out such an idea was remarkable.

He crouched down upon the floor, seeking the shady side of the wall, and lay at ease, calmly waiting for some one to appear.

One, two, three, four long hours dragged wearily by, and no one came forth to reward his watching; but beyond a slight change of position, the secret service man stirred not from his post.

Then the portion of the wall intersected by the knob spoken of before swung slowly open, and as Barry Brown looked up, he beheld a man standing before him with a gleaming sword uplifted, as if to cut the daring spy.

When Frank and Charley parted company on the plains, in consequence of something being the matter with the Steam Man, Harry Hale fumed and fretted greatly over the delay.

"It's no use fussing about it," cheerily said Gorse, as the man came to a dead stop, and he leaped to the ground. "Both of these machines are very good for speed and effect, but it's impossible to prevent them from getting out of order if we persist in using them in this slap-dash style. Be good enough to jump down and help me to find what's up with the old fellow."

"My boys will be cut to pieces," said Harry Hale. "They'll rush into any sort of wild danger if I'm not with them to hold them in check."

"Don't fret," said Charley. "It's my private opinion that they lost so much time, that they have not been able to come up with Pomp or his pursuers. As for the darkey, I have no fears, for he's a devil of a fighter, and the best rider in the West, bar none."

By this time Hale was upon the ground by Charley's side, and together they went over the machine.

"Running posts all right?" asked Hale.

"Yes," said Charley.

"Your axles cool?"

"Yes, as ice; not a bit swelled."

"Water all right?"

"Yes, and steam gauge indicating a high pressure—forty pounds. I must blow off steam."

He turned on the cocks and allowed two immense jets of steam to rush from the man's nose for a few moments, while he kept walking around the man looking for the cause of the stoppage.

He found it at length.

It was caused by a "catch" in one of the iron rods running down the legs of the monster which gave him his motive force, and as this could move but very slightly, of course the man could only go along in a one-legged style, that was rather apt to render traveling with him fully as dangerous as it was one-sided.

"The right leg shaft has got twisted at the top of the knee-joint," said Charley, shutting off steam, so as to make himself heard. "It will be a long job to fix it here with the small tools I carry, but if you'll lend me a hand, we may get through in about an hour."

"An hour," groaned Hale; "if my brave boys tackle that band of outlaws, they'll be eaten up alive in less than an hour, and they don't know enough to claw off until they're almost dead."

"What can't be cured must be endured, my dear sir," said Charley. "Hand me that box of tools, and that monkey-wrench."

The machinery of the Steam Man, like his horsey brother, was constructed in such a delicate and nicely adjusted manner, that repairing had to be done with exceeding care and studious labor; an extra hard blow or too powerful a wrench with the hand-screw would, perhaps, be sufficient to render the machine totally useless until some experienced mechanic could take it apart and amend the work caused only by both.

So Charley was wise enough to work as slowly as possible, and in the course of an hour he had neatly repaired the twisted part, and the man was again declared to be in running order.

"But it's getting dark," said Hale. "Can't you light up?"

"I can," said Charley; and soon the giant flaming eyes were glaring out upon the gathering gloom.

But when they started, Charley found that he did not know exactly where he was traveling to, for, like his Cousin Frank, he had lost his bearings.

Onward they sped through the gloom; mile after mile gliding under the feet of the Steam Man, until Charley guided him into the blazed path leading into the patch of woods in which was situated the rendezvous of the counterfeiting gang.

As he traveled along the pathway at very low speed, he bumped over some obstacle, and with a reddened flash, his headlight in the man's head went out, just as he got into the open space in front of the house.

On jumped the man, and before Charley could pull the rein to stop him, the giant bounded up a stone step and crashed against the massive door.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TOTEM BELT.

When Pomp and Ralph Radcliffe, on the back of the flying steed, rose over the wild buffaloes, the pursuers were rushing at the fighting beasts in a swift charge, their rifles leveled for a deadly volley.

With loud yells they dashed down upon the infuriated beasts.

In the center of the ring James Van Dorn still sat on the back of his horse, Ralph's riderless animal close beside him, and he had made up his mind that his time had come.

Ah, it was a grandly, sublimely beautiful sight.

The roaring, fighting circle of infuriated buffaloes, rushing upon each other with lowered heads, lolling tongues, distended, blazing eyes, and cruel, pointed horns; in the center of the immense ring the man and the two horses; at the side the wild mustang and his double load rising in the air; and the mixed band of half-crazy pursuers charging down upon the whole, weapons flashing bright in the afternoon sunlight.

A yell of triumph rang out from the lips of the wonderful colored rider as his gallant horse cleared the ring, and in a moment he was dashing swiftly away through the shallow water of the stream.

The current touched the breast of the brave horse and then he struck out with powerful strokes for the opposite shore.

Pomp slipped from his back, leaving Ralph in the saddle.

The darkey swam closely by the side of the horse, keeping an easy hold of the reins.

The horse swam steadily onward, and in a few moments the opposite shore was reached.

Then the darkey hopped again into the saddle, and with a shout cantered away.

Meanwhile the red and white band of pursuers rushed down upon the crazed beasts, and their rifles told the death of more than one.

With exultant yells and cries they dashed among the beasts, firing right and left in the full glory of slaughter, and at last the animals began to recognize the fact that a common enemy was destroying them.

Then they ceased to fight among themselves, and turned to meet the band.

With vindictive growls they battled with them, but the well-trained and naturally smart prairie horses were much too quick and wide awake to be caught on their cruel horns.

As soon as the ring was broken up, the man in the middle drove his spurs deep into the sides of his horse, and tried his best to escape.

The maddened animal made a swift bound, and tried to reach the stream in a succession of magnificent leaps, but the band had no intention of allowing Mr. Van Dorn to escape.

A long lasso came whistling through the air, and settled around the neck of the horse; the strands became taut, and, with a scream of pain, horse and man rolled to the ground.

In a moment several men, red ones and white ones, too, were standing over him, and Van Dorn was lifted from the ground, much bruised and covered with dust, and very thoroughly shaken up.

The buffaloes—those left alive—had made up their minds to migrate, and they were now plashing through the waters, making excellent time for the opposite shore.

Many of them lay upon the blood-stained plain by the water's edge, either dead or dying.

Black Arrow, a tall, powerfully-built Indian, and a white man called Billy Blossom, a low-browed, swarthy villain of middle age, were looked up to as the leaders of the party, and they now came forward and took a look at the sullen prisoner.

"Well, you've got me," said Van Dorn, as he looked up into the face of the white leader.

"Rayther guess you're right, old hoss," said Billy Blossom.

"And what are you going to do with me?"

"Don't know yet," said Blossom. "What's your name?"

"Hardscrabble."

"What are you?"

"A roving blade, like yourself."

"What are you doing here?"

"None of your business," said Van Dorn, in the coolest manner.

"Well, you're cheeky, anyhow," said Billy Blossom. "And, above all things, I do admire grit. If I can do anything for you I will." [12]

"Thank you," said Van Dorn. "If it would not be asking too much, I'd like you to set me free."

Blossom grinned.

"Like to oblige you, friend," he said, "for you seem one after my own style; but then you see

you're not my prisoner. White is white, and you're the right kind. I can see that at a glance, but when the reds capture, the prisoner belongs to them. But I'll do all I can for you."

"Who captured me?"

"Black Arrow; there he is."

"Talk to him for me."

"All right," said Blossom. "I've took a liking to you, and I'll stand by you."

Then he walked away, while two of the Indians securely bound the captured villain, and placed him again on his horse, the animal having sustained but very slight injuries from his sudden fall.

Then the band mounted again, and in a body swam the stream.

For half an hour they rode onward at a moderate pace, for their horses were much fatigued, and then they came to a halt in a pretty grove.

The horses were picketed, Van Dorn was carelessly thrown upon the ground, and then the redskins held a council, the purpose of which was to decide what should be done with the prisoner.

Many of the band had been popped over, and the majority of the dead ones were redskins.

This made the savages more bloodthirsty than was usual even with them, and the common sentiment towards the prisoner was a deadly one.

Billy Blossom put in his ear, and made an appeal for the life of the prisoner, but the savages would not hear him.

They wanted a life, and a life they would have.

The prisoner was a white man, was not a renegade, and that was enough for them.

They unbound him, and warriors ran to collect brushwood, for their intention was to burn him.

Blossom approached him with a very sorrowful shake of his head.

"Can't help it, pard," he said. "I really did cotton to you, but I'm afraid you'll have to pass in your checks. You see the reds jest cotched you at a pretty bad time, for they're mad about so many of the band being killed, and they want to do some killin' to make them feel jist a little more square. Of course it's not your fault, but then you're a white man, and they ain't partickler about the thing, so long as they can dance and yell and cut up their wild didoes while a white skin is blisterin'. Stand it like a man and don't squeal."

"I'll not," said Van Dorn, who was pale but calm. "I can die, but I'd much rather live, for I've been knocked around all my life, and jist now a glorious time was opening for me. But it's no use, as you say, so I'll shut my teeth hard and show them that I can die game."

The prisoner was now taken in hand by two of Black Arrow's braves, who very quickly removed the coat, vest, and shirt from the upper portion of his body.

When this much was taken the white skin was revealed.

Then strange cries broke from the lips of the Indians, and they pointed excitedly at Van Dorn.

Around Van Dorn's waist, pricked into the white flesh with needle and Indian ink, or some similar substance, ran a perfectly-made belt, formed of many curiously-wrought designs.

These marks or tokens, as they are called, express much in little, and often tell a long yarn to the beholders with the aid of a few cabalistic characters.

Black Arrow gave one glance at the token belt, and then his deep voice rang out in command:

"Kan, Kan gee whock."

Instantly the Indians formed two lines straight up and down from the white prisoner to their chief, and then Black Arrow walked slowly forward and gazed intently at the curious signs encircling the white man's waist.

He walked around him in the most sober and profound style, and being somewhat learned in the curious lore of his nation, soon deciphered the whole story presented by the token belt.

Then, with his own hands, he severed Van Dorn's bonds, and led him beneath a tree.

He seated the gratified villain on the grass, and then turned importantly to the waiting warriors.

They knew that there was a story hidden beneath the curious designs of the belt, and they were burning with impatience to hear it.

Black Arrow waved his hand, and the whole crowd squatted around him in the most undignified fashion.

The white members of the party also drew near, for they were greatly interested in this odd affair.

Black Arrow spoke in the Indian tongue:

"Many moons ago this white brave found a beautiful Indian princess and her aged father in the great forest in mid-winter, held prisoners in the hands of our most deadly enemies, the Snake Indians, for the chief of the Snakes sought to make the princess his squaw, and therefore had stolen her and her father in the dead of night, with the aid of two comrades.

"This noble brave, with a white skin, but with the heart of a true Indian, roamed the forest and came upon them. He was seen by the beautiful princess, and implored his protection.

"He was as brave as the tiger, as cunning as the fox, as strong as the buffalo, and as keen as the lynx. With the spring of a wild panther he bounded upon them and struck them to the ground. His knife drank their blood, his bullets found their heart. He killed them all with his own hands, and then he conducted the old chieftain and the beautiful young princess back to their village, where he was marked with this totem belt that tells the story. The beautiful princess was the light of the wigwam, Neoskaleeta, and her father the great chieftain to whom we all pay allegiance, Black Hawk. You know what to do, my braves."

A great cry went up from the interested braves, and they stood erect.

Their weapons flashed in the slanting rays of the dying sunlight, and they pressed forward eagerly, placing their weapons at Van Dorn's feet as they knelt before him, while a united cry assailed his ears:

"Ne ka qua bah!" ("You may command us.")

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SUIT OF MAIL.

While waiting for the darkness to come on, Frank Reade took the precaution to see that everything about the machine was kept in trim.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, as the shadows of night began to gather around the Steam Horse, "I'm going to show you the way in which I propose to dress when I go driving into that bad crowd. I had just a few tough experiences to go through when I traveled over this ground with the Steam Man, and on more than one occasion came near losing my hair because I was a prominent mark for bullets and knives. I'm not anything the less prominent now when driving my horse, but I'm well guarded. Look."

He lifted a beautiful suit of mail from that wonderful, all-containing trunk of his, and held it up to view.

It was a splendidly-made piece of work, every link and part being finished with the greatest care, and they could see at a glance that it was bullet-proof from top to bottom.

"In this," said Frank, throwing off part of his clothes and beginning to put on his steel attire, "I can defy ordinary weapons, but I must confess to you that some of the lately made rifles on the improved plan send a bullet with such force that I should rather prefer being absent to being brave enough for a test. Tomahawks, knives, and ordinary bullets I laugh at, and a sword would break against my body. This, gentlemen, is my driving suit."

By this time he had fully covered his body and head with the neat-fitting suit of steel.

A very flexible and finely-polished head-piece protected that portion from any stray bullets, and his blue eyes flashed through the cross-laced bars of his metal visor.

He seemed invincible in this suit of mail, and Barney looked proudly at his boy friend.

"It's a raw gossoon he may be," said the Irishman, "but this foine counthry will niver see the fate of him."

"All aboard," cried Frank. "The procession is going to start."

Dwight and Barney hastily tumbled into the wagon.

Frank planted himself firmly on the seat and seized his reins.

The eyes of the horse, lit up by the fierce glare of the magnesium coils, threw a brilliant glow far out upon the level plain.

Frank pulled his whistle-cord, and the Steam Horse sent forth his shrill note of defiance.

Then the rods were pulled, and at the rate of about fifteen miles an hour, just an easy jog for the horse, away they went.

The prairie stretched out before them as bright and green as at noonday, for the magnesium light dispelled the gloom of night for fully half a mile ahead of their course.

The night was clear and starlit, and a low breeze just made it pleasant to dash over the level roadway.

Everything was working finely.

"Barney?" called Frank.

"Here I am."

"Jump up here and take hold of these ribbons, while I arrange everything for my surprise party. Just keep him as he is, and look sharp enough to steer clear of everything in the road."

"I moind," said Barney, taking the reins from Frank's hand.

The genius slowly got down from his perch, for the suit of mail prevented him from making any very lively motions; and when he reached the bottom of the wagon he picked up a small china knob having a piece of wire attached to it.

This he handed to Jared Dwight.

"Take this," he said, "and when I give you the word, I want you to pull hard on the knob. You can drop it just as soon as you pull."

"All right," said the avenger, and took the knob in his hand.

Frank then passed his hand over the upper portion of the frame of the body, as if reaching for some particular parts, for his fingers rested awhile at regular intervals, during which time Dwight vainly endeavored to see what he was doing.

"All right," said Frank. "Don't forget your pull when you hear the word."

"You can trust me," said Dwight.

"Now, tumble down, old boy," said the young leader to Barney, as he climbed up into the seat once more, "we will soon be in a dangerous locality."

Barney handed him the reins, and then dropped over the seat to the bottom, by the side of the gloomy Dwight.

Frank looked out ahead.

In the far-reaching light of the brilliant magnesium coils he could see the mixed band of prairie banditti lying in a big half moon around the mouth of the awful trap, into which they had driven their prey.

Even as he had looked they began moving, for the bright light startled them greatly.

Then Frank pulled his reins, and at a swift rate closed in upon them as they tumbled up from the ground in sudden alarm.

A great united chorus of shouts, shrieks, and yells went up to the sky as the steed, with blazing eyes, rushed over the plains with rapid strides.

"Pull!" cried Frank.

Jared Dwight heard the order, and he drew the china knob with a hard jerk.

From a dozen different points of the huge iron railing, running around the top of the body, sprang up bright jets of chemical fire—red, blue, green, orange and other colors—seeming to issue from little tubes set at regular distances all around the rail.

This variously-colored fire streamed up in a brilliant series of columns, casting a wonderful and beautiful light upon the steel-clad form of the boy-driver who guided the rapid motions of the Steam Horse.

Yells of terror from the red men, and shouts of wonder from the white ones, now filled the air, and then something took place that Frank Reade had not reckoned upon.

The bandits, terrified and demoralized by the flaming advent of Frank Reade and his Steam Horse, turned from the brightly flaming wagon and dashed towards the mouth of the pass.

The emigrants lay there on guard, for they were ready to battle their lives away in defense of their dear ones, and when the frightened mass of men mounted and on foot rushed madly towards them their ready weapons flashed brightly in the light of Frank's chemical fires.

A deep-toned voice, the voice of a man born to be a leader, rang out clear and thrilling above the din:

"Fire!"

Crash!

The thundering voices of a score of rifles spoke out sharply and the answering yells of pain told that many a bullet had found a living mark.

Frank chased them up when he saw the turn affairs had taken, and thus they were forced to continue on in their desperate charge up the pass.

The emigrants stood firm, and in less than a moment the two parties came together with an obstinate crash.

Immediately the affair resolved itself into a hand-to-hand fight of the most fierce and desperate character, for the bandits were running away from some hobgoblin of terror, and the travelers of the plains were defending their dear ones with noble hearts.

Frank shut off steam.

The horse went a few rods further and then stopped and there stood like some prairie-monster, looking upon the battle with his brilliant eyes.

A dark form leaped over the blazing line of lights that streamed up in parti-colored splendor from the rail.

It was the avenger.

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With a yell of furious joy, he sprang into the thickest of the fray, seeming to court death in his reckless manner of fighting.

"Hooroo!" shrieked Barney Shea, and with a bound the brave fellow went over after Dwight.

"Worra-worra!" he shouted, smashing a big Indian over the head with his heavy shillaleh, and laying the red-skin out in the neatest possible style, "I'm here, and I mane that yez shall know the same, ma bouchals. Aha, friend top-knot, be me sowl, I've not seen ye since last summer; bedad, so take this schmall wee favor, with me compliments."

And then another red-skin got the headache in no time, for, while talking and shouting and hopping around like a merry grasshopper, he was putting in big clips, and getting some neat ones in return too.

Frank kept his seat on the box, and with the most lively delight watched the battle before his eyes.

Ah, it was a grand sight to watch those contending blades and weapons rising and falling, flashing and clashing in the lurid glare, and the blood went like some mountain torrent through every vein as he gazed upon the swaying and writhing forms of the deadly foes thus engaged in mortal strife.

The light glancing over the bright parts of his mailed suit made him a prominent mark, as Frank well knew.

Ping, ping!

Two bullets spatted up against his breast, and then fell flattened, from the armor to the ground.

Frank shuddered.

"Without my suit I'd have been a goner that time," he muttered. "I wonder if I was aimed at?"

He looked at the wildly struggling horde of men before him.

He caught a glimpse of several wicked eyes.

They gleamed out of white faces, and the boy knew that they were more to be feared than his Indian foes.

He pulled a pair of revolvers from his belt.

Back went the hammers.

His long arms shot out; the polished barrels of the weapons flashed crimson bright in the chemical light; his steady fingers pulled the triggers.

Crack, crack! two whip-like reports rang out.

Shrieks of mortal agony went up, and Frank cried:

"A hit, a double hit."

And then three gleaming rifle barrels were pointed at him from the midst of the combatants, the muzzles frowning darkly upon him.

Frank saw them.

He smiled to himself.

"Fire!" he cried, scornfully.

Together the reports rang out.

With a loud cry Frank Reade leaped from his seat.

For a moment he tottered on the steps, and then fell heavily from the box to the floor of the wagon.

CHAPTER XV.

THE STEAM MAN.

When the Steam Man went smashing up against the door of the counterfeiter's head-quarters, the shock caused by the sudden recoil was so great that Charley Gorse flew one way and Harry Hale went another.

The man shivered and stood still, for the power of action ceased immediately after the collision.

If Charley had only been a second sooner in shutting off steam, they would have stopped before reaching the door.

The man's feet were fairly on the stone steps of the door.

When he recoiled from the stout panel that had withstood even this great shock, the Steam Man actually staggered.

From side to side he swayed on the uneven footing, and had it not been for the far-reaching foresight that had built his legs wide apart, he must have inevitably fallen.

But he was well balanced, and, after a moment's rocking, he settled down on the steps.

The shock had one totally unlooked-for effect.

There must have been some very slight cause of interference in the machinery connected with the headlight; most likely a piece of dirt lodged in a delicate part of the intricate coils, and this obstruction had been jolted out by the shock.

As the coils came into action again they were fired by a steam of electricity that ran from the wagon, and the man's eyes again blazed with powerful light.

Charley Gorse had been hurled with great force from his seat.

His head came in contact with some very hard substance, and then Charley forgot where he was for some time, for his five senses were knocked out of proper working order, and he lay on the hard ground, totally bewildered, and too much dazed to think.

Harry Hale was like a cat.

If you had tossed him into the air for a dozen feet, it is more than probable that he would come down upon his feet, merely from habit.

He came upon his feet this time, but nearly six yards from the Steam Man, and for all that he had accomplished a neat involuntary back-somersault, and he did not feel very glorious over it for every bone in his body seemed started from head to foot.

"By George, that was rough!" he cried, as he picked himself up. "I wonder where the boy is?"

Charley was lying about twenty feet from him, too much stunned to wonder back in return.

At this moment the light blazed forth with great brilliancy from the eyes of the giant.

Cries were heard from within the house, and the sound of hurrying footsteps came to Hale's ears.

The door was flung open.

Half a dozen men stood in the wide hallway.

They were all armed in a rough and ready fashion, having apparently taken what weapons that chanced to come first to their hands.

Well, that huge old prairie traveler came very near scaring the life out of them.

As they flung open the door his powerful bright eyes flooded them with light, and if they had been childishly superstitious to any degree they might have thought that some of the giants of their nursery rhymes, the ones with eyes of flame and breath of smoke, had come to pay them a visit, and that the thundering noise with which he announced his advent was merely his style of tapping for admittance.

They yelled one excited yell of wholesale terror.

Only one man out of all that party stood his ground, and that man was Captain Jerry Prime.

The fact of the case was that he would just as soon have shaken hands with the devil as with any one else, and therefore, even this alarming specter was not calculated to make him turn tail in affright.

The rest were badly scared, and they all dropped their arms.

Two of them, religiously superstitious, fell down upon their knees on the floor, and began to hurriedly jabber over some prayers.

Others turned to fly, and in the hurry and bustle of that demoralized moment they were not careful about putting their feet down properly, and one of the men kneeling on the floor got a number nine boot in his mouth with such hearty good force that he flew off to a distant corner, minus several teeth.

Others tumbled over the kneeling form of his comrade, and then the cursing and kicking began.

They fought, bit, cursed, kicked, gouged, and, in fact, did anything to get away from the terrifying spectacle.

Captain Jerry Prime seized some of the fools by the collar of their coats, and with no gentle hand lifted them erect.

"Silence!" he roared. "What the devil do you mean by this? Can't you see that it's the Steam Man standing up against the door? What the devil is the matter with you, Browning?"

"Yes, sir."

One of the men answered him.

"Grab a torch and jump out there as lively as you can."

"Yes, sir," said Browning; and seizing a torch from a socket in the wall, he made a desperate leap past the Steam Man into the darkness.

He didn't care to go, not a bit of it, but then Captain Jerry Prime had a peculiar style about giving orders.

He gave out his command, and then fixed his eyes upon the man he had given the order to; one hand rested upon the butt of a revolver in his belt, and the poor chap knew that it meant obedience or death, every time.

The first thing Browning met when he reached the open air was a hand—a human hand.

This hand was formed with the usual amount of fingers and the adjunctive thumb, and they were all doubled up into a compact ball.

Browning must have met this with his face, somewhere about the region of the center of his face.

It would have appeared to an outsider that he was puzzled.

He evidently thought that it was some sort of a problem, for he lay down on the ground at full length to solve it.

By this time Charley Gorse had got upon his feet, and began looking about him in surprise.

He saw Harry Hale's fist shoot out, and he saw Browning go down, and then the clear voice of his comrade rang out:

"Charley!"

"Here."

"Follow me," said Hale.

"Lead on," cried Charley Gorse.

Hale leaped forward, a pistol clutched in his hand.

After him came Charley Gorse, but not similarly armed.

In a hand-to-hand affair Charley Gorse liked the bowie-knife.

It was heavy, deadly, and he was skilled in its use, and at close quarters, such as threatened them now, he preferred it to the best of revolvers.

Like a tiger Hale leaped through the gap left between the huge body of the man and the side of the door, and his flying form struck squarely against the rather light-weighted Jerry Prime.

The captain went down, and Harry Hale flew over him.

Close upon his heels came the heavy form of the border boy, who landed safely upon his feet.

Hale sprang to his feet with a swift, nimble bound, and as he did so the voice of his trusty follower, Barry Brown, came up from below:

"Hale to the rescue!"

"Follow!" shrieked Hale to Charley. "Barry, we come!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PROSPECTORS.

On, swiftly on over the rolling prairie dashed the horse bearing the darkey rider and Ralph Radcliffe, for the plunge into the cold waters of the stream had greatly refreshed the animal, and the ground seemed to fairly fly under his hoofs.

But when a goodly distance had been placed between them and their pursuers, the darkey pulled rein and brought the horse to a walk.

"Mussen tiah de hoss clean out," said the nig. "Well, Massa Ralph, how you come for to be in sich company?"

"I couldn't help it," said Ralph, who from living in the town with the darkey was perfectly familiar with him. "I was taken from my bed at the dead of night by that big rascal you rescued me from, made to dress myself, follow him to the stable, get upon a horse and ride swiftly out of town. I don't know anything of him, not even his name, and what his idea could have been in carrying me away in that style is more than I can imagine."

"Fo' de lan's sake" exclaimed Pomp. "Wha' fo' he bin gone done datar', I wonner. Massy on us for de Lord! Yerm suah yo' fodder is well?"

"The last I saw of him he was as well as he had been in months," returned the boy, who did not know that James Van Dorn had stabbed his father to the heart the same hour that he abducted him from the mansion.

Had he known the truth, Ralph would have been overwhelmed with the deepest sorrow for his father's fate.

"Him bad man," said Pomp. "Better look out for dis coon when I gits my paws on him. He's too bad to live. By golly, but won't I jist knock him if I cotch de rascal agin."

"Look!" cried Ralph.

"Where?"

"East," said the boy, pointing with his right hand; "a race for life!"

Pomp pulled in short and followed the direction of the outstretched hand.

A mounted party of Indians were in hot pursuit of a number of white men on foot.

The Indians, numbered very nearly to a score, seemed well mounted and armed, and full of a devilish desire to kill and destroy.

The white party consisted of about a dozen stalwart, hardy-looking fellows, carrying quite a number of odd traps in addition to their arms, and they seemed pretty well tired out.

They, the whites, were making for a pretty little grove some little distance away, and the reds were making for them.

Every moment one of the men on foot would pause, wheel, take a rapid aim and fire, and then, without stopping for an instant to note the effect of his shot, he would dash on with his comrades.

The grove was still pretty nearly a quarter of a mile away, and a quarter of a mile to a man on foot represents a few moments of time, and on such occasions as these the time seems fearfully precious.

Onward, straining every nerve, they all dashed for their haven of rest, while the red fiends in their rear plied whip and spur to their steeds.

Pursuers and pursued were separated by fully half a mile, but the flying hoofs could soon close that gap if the white men failed to gain the grove, in which they were capable of keeping the Indians at bay.

Pomp's revolver flashed in his hand as he took in the scene.

His little, beady eyes glowed and flashed like black diamonds.

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There was fun and fighting ahead, and that was enough to set the black dead-shot wild with joy.

He ran his eyes hastily over the chambers of his Colt, and saw that everything was in working order.

"What can you do with me on?" cried his boy friend. "I'll slip off and let you go to their aid."

"No, no!" cried Pomp.

"I will."

"You get killed suah!"

"Then you can bury me," said Ralph, who was a plucky little fellow. "Here goes for the grove on foot."

And in spite of Pomp's earnest appeal for him to stay, Ralph leaped from the saddle, hit the horse a deuce of a crack across the hind quarters, and sent him flying to the rescue.

With immense leaps the horse, relieved of half his burden, rushed across the plains, the darkey standing erect in the saddle, the gleaming revolver in his hand.

His strange, defiant cry rang out like a shrill bugle note as he dashed madly onward; and the surprised Indians turned in their saddles to see what was the matter.

Crack!

A bullet told them that they were pursued in turn, although by one man only.

Pomp's opening shot knocked a red-skin from his saddle.

"Out on de fly!" roared the much-tickled darkey, and again that deadly revolver flew up.

Bang! and this time he effected a neat double play by killing an Indian and wounding a horse.

The Indians didn't like it.

Ordinary riders and ordinary marksmen they were in no great fear of; but when a man could stand erect on the back of a madly-leaping steed, and, with an unerring aim, send destruction into their midst, then they felt appalled.

"De high golly!" cried the delighted nig. "Dar's no use talkin', dis yere am de spot to hab a libely time. Yes, sah! Golly, why for I can't plum dat ar' chap in de head what am got de black fidders stuck in his top-knot? Heah she goes!"

The chap he referred to was a tall young sub-chief, mounted upon a beautiful bay horse.

The chap had half a dozen black feathers stuck around his head in an attempt at ornamentation.

Those feathers made him an extra prominent mark, and really were the cause of his death.

Pomp pulled up on him, and—well, the boys can guess what happened, as long as the pistol went off all right.

"Yah, yah—h—h!" roared Pomp. "Guess he won't play dandy no moah in dis world. De idea of him sportin' eagle fidders! G'way, chile!"

The Indians halted, and formed to meet this terrible single foe.

This gave the fugitives on foot the extra time of which they stood so greatly in need, and in a moment they were safely sheltered in the grove; for Pomp pulled up, even as the Indians had done, and purposely sat motionless on his horse, in order that the little band might gain the grove.

He cast a rapid glance over the green plain.

Ralph Radcliffe was not visible at any point.

The darkey looked again.

No signs whatever of the boy, and he knew full well that Ralph could not have reached the grove.

What could have become of him?

While looking for him, Pomp and his horse had not moved; neither had the Indians, who seemed waiting for the darkey to do something.

So Pomp struck off at right angles, to gain the grove by describing a half-circle, for he could not help clinging to the wishful idea that the boy had managed to reach the trees by some means, and whether he had got to the place or not, it was the best spot for the darkey just now.

The Indians raided down after him at a lively rate; but the darkey had a good start, and kept it, too.

Again he stood up in the saddle, and with terrible certainty discharged the remaining chambers of his revolver at the foe, and his fatal marksmanship told fearfully.

Every bullet found a mark.

With a wild cheer the darkey pricked the horse with his bowie, and yelled in shrill tones to him.

The spirited creature uttered a scream and sprang forward like a rocket, and in less than two minutes Pomp was safely in the grove.

The horse fell, half exhausted, to the green sward, and half a dozen hands were stretched forth to pluck the little darkey from the saddle.

But with a hearty "Yah, yah—h—h," the active nig turned a somersault over their hands, landed lightly on the turf, and then curving his enormous feet over, walked on his black paws up to the man who appeared to be the leader, and then turned a hand-spring and stood erect.

"Hope I sees yer well, sah," said this ebony-hued wonder.

"Oh, very well indeed," laughed the man, eyeing him with amusement, while the rest of the men grinned pleasantly at the odd-appearing coon. "I need not ask you how you are, because I can see for myself."

"Whoop!"

The Indians were pouring down upon the grove in the wake of the darkey.

The men sprang to their feet and held their rifles in readiness, using the trees for forts.

But the red-skins were far too wise and too well skilled in the business of war on the plains to rush recklessly down upon a dozen level rifles, peeping out from behind sheltering trees.

They pulled rein and came to a standstill just out of gunshot.

Here they caused their horses to lie down, and in less than five minutes they had erected eight or ten little tents before the eyes of the surprised men in the grove.

"Dat means biz," said Pomp.

"It means a siege," said the leader of the party; "and we are but poorly prepared for one."

"What am yer?"

"Prospectors. We're marching on foot over the country to find gold and silver, for we're satisfied that there's plenty of it to be found, and we've had some pretty tough times getting away from the red devils."

"Guess you'll lose yer har afore yer finds de pay dirt," said Pomp. "But whar am dat boy?"

"What boy?"

Before the nig could make answer a shrill scream arose.

Then a chorus of yells followed, and Pomp rushed to the edge of the grove to see what was up.

Ralph Radcliffe was running through the grass towards the trees, and three tall red braves were bounding down upon the boy.

The boy ran fleetly, but he was no match for the tall red-skins, and they were rapidly overhauling him.

Like a flash Pomp turned back, leaped on the back of one of the men in his eagerness, tore the weapons from his belt, and made grand flying leaps out upon the grassy plain.

The Indians were closing in upon the poor boy, when, with a mighty bound, the black athlete leaped upon them.

CHAPTER XVII.

SLAP BANG AND AWAY AGAIN.

When Barry Brown saw that form before him with upraised sword in hand, he felt very much like selling out rather cheaply, although merely from force of defensive habit he pointed his pistol at the foe.

And then a laugh came to his ears, a low, chilling, sneering laugh, and from the brilliant glow proceeding from the inner room stepped the captain of the counterfeiters, Jerry Prime.

He was speaking to somebody behind him, or rather laughing scornfully at the party, and Barry Brown understood at once that he had not been seen by the leader of the outlaws.

But the man with the sword standing almost over him, the weapon gleaming in the brilliant light? Barry stole a glance of amused interest at the figure now, and then lowered his revolver.

"The devil!" quoth he, "that's a thundering neat sell."

He had been frightened by a well-made dummy, fixed up against the inside panel of the door, being made to hold that awful threatening sword in a most awe-inspiring manner.

Barry Brown sank back into the shadow just as Jerry Prime gave a final sneering laugh, and closed the door, striding past the detective in the darkness.

"By Jove, I thought the house was coming down," gasped Brown; "that was a big whack a moment ago. Ha, they're fighting above there, and I can't take a hand in."

But he had a hand in very soon, right where he was, for the door was flung open again, and three men bounded upon him in a manner that told very plainly that they had known of his being where he was before they made their united assault.

It appeared to be their object to take him alive, and therefore they did not draw weapons, but leaped upon him and seized him with their hands.

Oh, Jupiter! what a ripper that tall chap was.

He just stretched himself out in an energetic sort of manner, and he sent one flying right and the other left, while he put in a neat kick at the third.

The latter was wise.

He dodged the compliment, and then turned to grab the foot.

Brown was too quick for him, however, and he failed to get the number seven as he desired.

Then all saw in a moment that this was too tough a customer for them to play easy with at all, and they all sailed down upon him with drawn knives at the second charge.

And then it was that Barry Brown, his ears recognizing the voice of his beloved captain in the hallway above, sent forth that cry for aid.

When he heard Harry Hale's answering shout he seemed inspired with new confidence and strength.

His coat was folded over his left arm, his right hand was armed with a long, deadly bowie, needle-like on the point and razor-like on either side.

With this terrible two-edged weapon he met their onslaught, and the first man went down with an ugly gash across his left breast.

"Curse you, you'll die for that," gritted one of the comrades of the fallen man, and he made a heavy blow with his blade at the brave fellow's throat.

Barry Brown caught it on the coat that served him for a shield, and before the outlaw could strike again, a bullet, sent by Harry Hale, crashed through his brain, and stretched him lifeless by the side of his wounded comrade, whose fall he had sought to avenge.

Down the hallway dashed Hale and Gorse.

After them, pell-mell, rushed the men from the hallway above.

"Brown?"

"Here."

"We must fight our way out."

"We can do it."

"Shoulder to shoulder then," cried Harry Hale. "Strike down everything in your road."

"And get to the man?" cried Gorse.

"Yes."

"Strike it is then," roared Charley, and his blade flashed in the radiant glow that streamed from the doorway. "Take that, you snoozer."

And down went a wounded man as he spoke.

Headed by Jerry Prime, the outlaws poured into the hallway.

There were fully a dozen of them, but our three friends were desperate men and bold fighters,

and they did not reckon the odds.

They were resolved to cut their way out to the Steam Man, and they meant to carry out the resolve.

Many of the counterfeiterers were lying in the hallway above, and this fortunately reduced the number of those arrayed against our three friends.

Four to one!

At it they went.

Barry Brown was a terrible man in just such a rumpus.

He was possessed of magnificent muscle, was active, wiry, quick as a cat upon his feet, and seemingly as sharp-eyed, and moreover, he appeared to really love to strike his awful blows.

Captain Jerry Prime was not exactly a slouch when it came to a hand-to-hand conflict.

In fact, he was pretty much the same sort of screamer as Barry Brown, on a very much reduced scale, and these two screamers recognized the fact that they were well-matched antagonists.

With mutual howls of delight, they made for each other.

Prime made a quick clip at the head of his opponent with his pistol, but the detective caught it squarely on his arm, and made a counter blow with his bowie.

Crack went a pistol, and the bullet grazed the forehead of the captain, knocking him down just in time to escape the deadly thrust of Barry Brown's knife.

All this time Harry Hale and Gorse had been contending fiercely with their many foes, sticking closely together, and trying to reach the stairway.

They were both wounded; although their injuries were but slight, they could not ward off every blow aimed at them by their furious enemies, and their chance of escape seemed small.

A tall, lank form leaped from the stairs into the midst of the combatants.

Jack, the stableman, had come to the rescue.

Armed with a heavy club, he laid around him with terrible effect.

"Strike hard, cap," he called out to Harry Hale; "strike hard, and we'll go out of this flying."

"Hurrah!" cried Hale, and seemed to be crazed by the presence of his faithful spy. "Give me room."

With such a desperate fighter as Barry Brown, and with such a weapon in their midst as the club, wielded by the tall stableman, the counterfeiterers did not care to contend, and they slowly gave way after a third of their party had gone down wounded, dead, or dying under the lightning blows.

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"Now," rang out Harry Hale's clear voice, "charge for the stairs."

"Hurrah!" shouted his few followers, and away they went.

The outlaws had had quite enough of them, and they allowed them to leave without further opposition.

Up-stairs they rushed, and through the hallway to the door.

"Tumble in," cried Gorse, jumping to the seat, and into the body tumbled the three men.

The man was wheeled, a good head of steam let on, and away they went over the plains.

The headlight was burning up brightly now, and the driver of the Steam Man could see quite a distance ahead as he dashed along.

Not a word was spoken until a mile or two had been fleetly passed over, and then Charley pulled in and allowed the man to come to a standstill on the open plain.

"There!" he ejaculated.

"What's up?" anxiously inquired Hale.

"Stopping for repairs," said Charley.

"The man out of order?"

"No, the boy," said Gorse. "I am the one that wants repairing. I've got a neat little gash across my right arm, a tickler in my ribs, a bruise on the top of my head, a big bump on my forehead, and there's some blood got inside my boots from some place or other, and so I say I guess I want repairing."

"Count me in, too," said Barry Brown, who was awfully gnashed.

"A little court-plaster and a box of salve might be of some service to me," said Hale. "In fact, I guess we all need repairing but Jack."

"I'm right side up and round as a Mexican dollar," said the lanky stableman. "Trot out your medicine chest, and I'll doctor the party."

Charley procured the medicine-chest for him, and Jack immediately set to work upon his friends.

"By George, that was just about as lively a little affair as I can remember having been in," said Hale. "The air seemed full of knives."

"And cuss-words," said Charley, as Jack put some salve on a wound in the boy's leg.

"Well, this winds up your services in the capacity of stableman," said Hale to his follower. "Jack, I must congratulate you on the success with which you've carried out your ideas. We now know, or rather you know and can soon tell us, every portion of the enemy's camp, and are also fully satisfied that the counterfeiting is carried on down-stairs. Just as soon as I can collect my boys together we'll raid on the gang, and either capture them or burn the building over their heads. Here, put some ointment in this cut on my shoulder."

"Look," said Barry Brown, pointing up towards the sky.

A few miles away, so it appeared to their eyes, a brilliant rocket, composed of some material far exceeding powder in intensity of light, was winding up gracefully in the air, making snake like motions as it shot towards the sky.

"Hurrah! eureka! bully!" roared Charley Gorse.

"What's the matter?" cried Hale.

"That's my Pomp," said the delighted boy, who feared that his faithful servant was gone forever from him. "I make those little rockets myself, and you can carry them in your pocket. He sent that up as a signal to me. Will you go with me?"

"Willingly," cried Hale.

"Then tumble in once more, and away we go," cried Gorse, and with the well-patched men in the body of the wagon, he once more seized the reins, and with a smashing gait the Steam Man tore away on his course.

CHAPTER XVIII.

VAN DORN'S POWER.

Van Dorn was not a little gratified to find that one of the few unselfish and good acts of his ill-spent life had resulted in saving him from a horrible fate, and placing a body of men under his control.

They, the braves under the lead of Black Arrow, had said:

"You may command us."

Van Dorn was well versed in Indian characters, and he knew that this was no empty offer.

There was no loud-mouthed, gas-bag business about it, but a real and sincere laying of their weapons at his feet, to be taken up when he gave the word, and to be used as he should see fit to direct.

The Indian may be treacherous in many respects, but he will die in support of his peculiar institution, and the pleased villain knew that their superstitious faith secured them to him much more strongly than money could have done if their services had been hired.

He could speak their tongue quite well, and he now advanced to the chieftain and took him by the hand.

"Brother," he said, "I have no desire to take away any of your power, but as I am now situated, I ask that you will aid me if you can."

"Brother," returned Black Arrow, "I can but repeat what my braves have said to you from their hearts."

"Thanks," returned Van Dorn, and then he turned and waved his hand over the kneeling braves.

"Arise," he said, solemnly; "I accept your noble offer as it is given. The great chief paid for the service I rendered him when he marked me with the totem belt, for now in my hour of need, I can call on faithful hearts for aid. I had a white prisoner, a mere boy, and he was taken from me as you know by that wonderful black rider when the buffaloes were fighting around me. I must have that prisoner again, and without your help I might not be able to recover him. I want to lead you on the trail of that black rider."

"We will follow," was the response, as the braves arose to their feet.

Billy Blossom came walking up to the fortunate Van Dorn.

"Well, Mr. Hardscrabble," he began, holding out his hand, "I must say as how you hev completely knocked me silly with what you've did. By the way, what in thunder is your name? Hardscrabble is not exactly the cheese now."

"My name is Van Dorn."

"I shall call you Van."

"And I'll call you Bloss."

"All right," said the good-natured outlaw, as they shook hands. "So be it. Well, what are you going to do now that you've got command o' the reds?"

"Start on the trail of that cussed black imp," said Van Dorn. "His track must run within half a mile of here, and I can tell it from a hundred."

"How?"

"By the depth of the hoof-marks," said the cunning rascal. "The horse carried double weight after he cut away from the buffaloes."

"Right," said Blossom. "When do you make a start?"

"In half an hour or so; just as soon as we can grub up, for I want daylight to follow the trail."

"Well, success to you," said Blossom.

"Ain't you going with us?"

"Oh, no," said the outlaw; "me and my boys must get back to where the wagons was left and stand guard. These reds ought to be along, too, for they get paid to do the work; but I know enough about the cusses not to lose any time talkin' the matter over. They'll stand by you and that belt while they've got a drop of blood in their veins. Ready, boys?"

"Ready, ready," was shouted by all, and the horses were taken rapidly from their pickets.

"Good-bye, old Van," said Blossom. "I'll see you agin afore long. Look out for yerself and don't get within range of a weapon in the hands o' that black cuss."

"I'll mind my eyes," laughed the lucky villain. "Good-bye, and remember that I feel grateful for what you tried to do for me just as much as though you had succeeded, and if ever I can do anything for you, just name it. I shall handle a pile of rocks in about three or four weeks, and intend to hang out in bang-up style in Clarkville, and then I want you to come and have a smashing good time with me."

"I'll be there," cried Blossom. "So long, old boy. Three abreast; wounded in the middle; keep close and lope nose to flank. Ready, forward!"

And in good style he led his troop away from the grove.

Van Dorn turned to the waiting chieftain at his side.

"Well, Black Arrow?"

"Shall my braves eat before they shall seek for the trail of the black rider?" asked the Indian chieftain; and had Van Dorn so commanded, the reds would have gone hungry in implicit obedience to his will.

"Yes; let them eat and be quick," answered the white rascal. "As soon as they are done we will start. I do not want to take away the command of the braves from such an able chief as Black Arrow. I shall ride with you, and tell you what to do for me, and you can give your orders."

The redskin looked pleased.

"It is well," he said, turning away.

Less than half an hour sufficed for the Indians to prepare and eat a meal, and then the thoroughly-refreshed mustangs were remounted, and the party trotted away from the grove, Van Dorn and his red friend leading.

"Which way do you think the trail of the black rider lies?" asked the chief.

"To the east," said Van Dorn. "That's the course he took, and as he was making time, and trying to get away from a party of pursuers, it is more than likely that he kept on straight ahead. I shall know the trail when we come to it."

They pushed on in silence for some few minutes, and then Van Dorn said:

"There are the tracks."

Sure enough, there were the deep imprints of the horse's hoofs, for his double load had caused him to mark deeply.

The chieftain pointed them out to his braves.

"Follow," he said.

And away they dashed on the trail of the darkey's stolen horse.

As the reader knows, the riders of the stallion had not gone very far, and when two or three miles had been passed over, the ears of Black Arrow and some of his men were assailed with the sound of firearms.

"Halt!" said the chieftain.

The band pulled up.

In a moment came the steady crack of the darkey's revolver, for at that very moment he was about a mile away, standing up on the saddle and sending destruction into the midst of the Indians who were pursuing the prospecting party.

"That is the black rider," said the chief. "On."

"How do you know?" asked Van Dorn.

"I know by the sharp crack of that big revolver he carries," said Black Arrow, in confident tones. "Ah," as they passed over a little swell in the prairie, "there he is, fighting against a party. But the boy is not with him. We will halt and watch him, for he cannot escape us now."

They sat motionless on their horses and saw the fight and its result, and also saw Pomp's safe flight to the cluster of trees where the white party lay.

"Are they friends or foes?" asked Van Dorn, pointing to the redskins who were putting up their tents.

"Friends," said Black Arrow.

At that instant the cry rang out from Ralph Radcliffe, and they beheld the boy running over the grass pursued by three redskins, and also saw Pomp dash to the rescue.

"Forward!" shouted Van Dorn.

CHAPTER XIX.

KILLED BY THE STEAM HORSE.

When Frank Reade fell from his seat to the ground, stricken by the bullets fired at him by the enemy, he lay perfectly motionless upon the hard plain, and any one would have supposed him dead.

Such, however, was not the case, for he had only been knocked off his balance in consequence of the leaden bullets striking with their terrific force against his head-piece.

The well-made metal covering saved his life, but it could not help to preserve his balance.

Down he went, and when he got down he stopped there, for his wind went as soon as he struck the ground, and he lay there insensible.

Barney was fighting like a tiger just let loose.

"Hooroo!" he would shriek, meeting an Indian warwhoop with a stentorian Irish cry not a whit less shrill or powerful than the redskins'. "What an illigant country, where they kape foighting for the fun o' the thing, do ye moind. Och, sure, there's not the hate of it in the wide, wide worruld, so there ain't. Look at this, now; that's a Donegal clip I picked up from Patsy Gagen; he was the son-in-law of me eldest sister's father's cousin, and that made him a distant relation to myself, do ye moind; and, be the powers, he taught me this same bit of a twist that they call the Donegal smasher. There, ye have it agin; shure."

Jared Dwight had gone to work in the savage style.

Stabbing with the knife seemed more suited to his taste just then than did shooting with the pistol, and so he allowed his revolver to remain in his belt while he kept thrusting at his foes in the most cold-blooded and vindictive style.

He seldom drew his revolver, except to shoot down one of the enemy who was getting the best of a friend, and then only when the pair were altogether out of his reach.

It seemed to be no small gratification for him to scour his knife on the ribs of his enemies, and certainly he had plenty of such fun.

The besieged party had fought bravely for their wives and little ones, and their strong blows had told fearfully even against the superior numbers brought to bear against them.

They were led on by a young man of not more than thirty, a tall, nobly-formed Hercules, who walked straight among his foes with an awful battle smile on his lips, and who cut down strong men with magnificent sweeping blows of his heavy rifle.

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This was Mustang Max, one of the most skillful guides and worst redskin haters on the plains.

He fought so coolly and easily that it appeared like a pastime to him, and wherever he went with that long swinging rifle and deadly smile the Indians seemed struck with a panic, and would lose no time in gaining another part of the field.

They seemed to fear him far more than even Jared Dwight, although the latter was the more destructive foe.

Pistols cracked, bullets went whistling in the air, knives spun over and over in the various lights streaming up in columns from the wagon attached to the Steam Horse, tomahawks clashed against rifle butts, savage oaths were met by savage yells, and the life-blood of the contending factions rapidly stained the field.

And through it all Frank Reade lay under the wagon senseless, his head just a few inches back of the hind hoofs of the Steam Horse.

Some of the men who had shot at him, supposing him to be dead, wished to secure the wonderful suit in which he was habited.

Three of them had shot at him, three white men, and one of them now called to the others:

"Go for the boy. If he's dead we want his suit, and if he's only wounded, we want his body. We can wipe this crowd out easy enough."

"Lead on," cried the other two, and the trio fairly fought their way out from the thickest of the battle, and made a dash for the wagon.

Barney Shea did good service.

Once in his life he had thrown a knife, and had plugged his enemy fairly in the back.

This gave him the idea that he was a straight shot, so when he saw those three chaps making for the wagon, he picked up a heavy tomahawk and hurled it at them.

He didn't make a remarkably accurate throw this time, but it resulted better by far than he had expected.

It, the tomahawk, struck heavily upon one of the reins running to the nostrils of the Steam Horse, and like lightning up came one fore foot, and also one of the hind feet.

As has already been explained, the power was equally divided in the Steam Horse's nose to allow of his being steered by the application of a well-known principle discovered in human limbs, and when the tomahawk struck with immense force against one rein it let on great power in one side

only of the iron monster, and away he went in a big circle, tearing round and constantly narrowing the immense ring from the fact that the ground he ran on was slightly uneven.

His flying fore foot struck down one of the men as the rascal was about to creep upon the unconscious young inventor.

The iron spikes crashed through the villain's brain, stretching him dead upon the plain, killed by the wonderful Steam Horse.

Away tore the iron fiend through the crowded ranks, and both sides were threatened with death.

"Back to the rocks!" roared Jared Dwight, just as Frank Reade picked himself up from the ground and gazed wonderingly around him. "Keep inside the pass."

The emigrants obeyed, but three of their number were knocked down before they could elude the horse.

The Indians ran, yelling and shrieking, from the spot, scared to death by the odd affair; for without a driver on the seat, it appeared as though the iron steed knew what he was doing when he struck them down with his spiked hoofs.

The white outlaws were no more inclined to stop than their red allies, for their heads were threatened, and they could not strike back with effect at this odd enemy.

They hastily caught what horses they could in a pell-mell sort of manner, and, partly mounted and partly on foot, they dashed away.

Frank Reade stood for a moment in amazement, contemplating the destructive circular course of his invention, and then he made a jump for the madly tearing animal.

He knew that if the thing was to be stopped, he would have to do it.

He leaped up into the wagon, although it was an effort for him to do so, clad as he was in steel, and climbing over the seat, he seized the reins.

In a moment he had the horse fully under control, and then he drove him up to the mouth of the pass.

The fight was over.

The victory had not been for either side, but the emigrants could now leave the terrible pass which had caught them as a trap catches a mouse.

Frank and Jared Dwight marched in silence over the field, with the same idea in their heads, and after looking at the wounded and dead, they both cried:

"Where's Barney Shea?"

CHAPTER XX.

WHERE BARNEY SHEA WAS.

Yes, there was no mistake about the little affair; Barney Shea was missing.

Dwight and Frank Reade were much surprised; but their wondering did not throw any light upon the whereabouts of the rollicking Irishman.

Frank searched through his wagon, in the vain hope that Barney might be playing a trick upon them, but the jolly fellow was not hiding.

As Frank made his hasty examination, he uttered a cry of surprise.

"This is funny," he said.

"What?" asked Jared.

"Barney's fiddle is gone!"

"That is strange," said Dwight. "Really, it does seem as though he walked off on his own hook."

"But that he would not do," said Frank. "He isn't that sort of a sardine. It is impossible to find out anything now, so we must be content to wait for daylight to tell us something."

And all this time the Irishman was riding away over the plains on the back of a galloping horse, his legs tied under his back, and his darling fiddle in his hands.

He had been pounced upon by three white men in the heat of the battle, and was unable to contend against such odds.

He was knocked down, kicked once or twice for falling, and then rushed up to the wagon and told to grab his fiddle.

Barney was much bewildered.

Half stunned and totally incapable of anything like connected thought, he grasped his dear old musical companion, and was marched away.

Then he was placed on the back of the horse, his legs tied under the animal's belly, and trotted off from the scene of his capture at a lively pace.

His three captors kept sharp watch over him.

They were sharp, wide-awake white chaps, and any of them seemed quite a match for Barney, so the Irishman, when he got a little sensible, thought it would only be policy on his part to take the matter lightly, and not appear to be huffy, or to kick up any rumpus.

His brain cleared, and he didn't very clearly understand how it was that he was riding along in the company of these cut-throats, although a confused notion of his capture kept running in his head.

"It sames that I'm united to this party be very strong toies," he said to the man who was riding at his right hand.

"I guess yes," was the laconic reply.

"And be the same token the toies extend to the very bottom o' me feet," said Barney.

The men laughed.

"Av coorse I don't loike to be thought ongintlemonly and inquisitive, ye moind, but thin I'd loike to know be what manes I am here, so I would."

"Ha, ha!" laughed the man on his left hand. "Puzzles you, does it? Well, my jolly screamer from the Emerald Isle, we just knocked you down, picked you up, and trotted you away."

"An' the fiddle?"

"You picked that up yourself when we marched you up to the wagon," said the man, who appeared inclined to be communicative with the good-natured Irishman.

"Well, now," said Barney, "it's meself that's under great obligations to ye for yer kindness, so I am, but, av coorse, now that ye've tould me so much, maybe ye may tell phat in the name of all that's wondherful caused ye to carry me off whin yez could have whacked me a belt on the sponce that would have put an ind to me ructions?"

"You want to know why we took you prisoner instead o' wipin' you out?"

"Faith I do."

"Because we want you."

"And me fiddle, too?"

"You're right."

"What for, av I may be enlightened?" asked the puzzled Irishman.

"Ah, now yer comin' to it," said the man, with a short, chuckling laugh. "You see that sardine there?"

He pointed to one of his comrades, a very good-looking young fellow of perhaps five-and-twenty.

"Faith I have the use of me two eyes," said Shea.

"Well, then, you see a 'tarnal galoot what's picked up a woman and is going to get spliced," chuckled the man.

"Draw it mild, Snorter," said the party indicated.

"I'm drawing a straight bow," said Snorter.

"Honestly, Irisher, he's picked up a woman what ran away from some wagon train."

"I moind."

"And they've struck up a bargain to go into partnership yer see, and to-morrow they want to be hitched."

"Before the praste you mane," said Barney, a little doubtfully.

"Well, thar won't be much priest business about it," said Snorter. "But you've got the hang of it. They'll strike hands and let folks see as how they've mutually 'greed to hitch hosses."

"I moind," said Barney.

"Well, then you see," continued Snorter, "the young bridegroom thar he wanted to have a little blow out, acos he was never hitched afore in his life, so the cap'en has made over two barrels o' whisky and a big lot o' tobacker to him, sort o' weddin' present you know, and the young sardine has invited all his red and white friends to come to the blow-out, which will take place to-morrow at the little shanty he's going to live in."

"But what has all this to do with this gentleman from Clonakilty?" demanded Barney.

"Oh!" cried Snorter, "I thought as how you'd guessed it. Yer see he's going to have company, lots of it, and plenty to eat an' drink, but whar's the band to come from, whar's the band?"

"Eh, the band?"

"Certainly," said Snorter; "what kind of a ceremony would it be if you didn't dance, and how are you going to do it without music?"

"Howly Moses," cried Barney. "And have I to furnish the music for this mane weddin' party?"

"That's the size of it," said Snorter.

"I reckon," said the bridegroom.

"And what's the pay?" humorously asked the fearless Irishman.

The bridegroom turned to him with a jolly laugh.

"You're a happy-minded sort o' Irish galoot," he said, "and I don't mind a little favor if you try to make my little blow-out as bang-up as possible. You jest do your level best for me and the woman; grind out yer best music, and don't cut out any of the figures to cut down on the ball, and when the thing is all over I'll mount yer on a good hoss, gin yer two days' provisions and a gun, and set yer free."

"What's yer name?" cried Barney.

"Cheeky Charley."

"Thin by me soul, Cheeky Charley, it's meself that will play ye chunes to make yer blood lape through the cockles of yer heart. Ye're a dacint man, and ye know how to dale wid a distinguished prisoner of war, and I'll do the square thing by ye."

"You do and you'll ride away a happy man," said Cheeky Charley.

Then the conversation was interrupted by the flying members of the mixed band dashing up behind them, escaping from the death-dealing hoofs of the Steam-Horse.

They rode rapidly onward for a half a dozen miles, and then halted in a small clearing, and Barney and his fiddle were conducted to a bed of leaves in the darkness and left alone.

"It's a quare counthry," said Barney. "The idea of an Irish squire playing fiddle for a blackguard's weddin'. Howly Moses!"

CHAPTER XXI.

POMP SLINGS HIMSELF.

Like some colored edition of a ground-hog or rolling porcupine the darkey traveled towards the three redskins who were about pouncing upon Ralph Radcliffe.

He bore down upon them like a small black whirlwind.

As he flew through the air he hurled his knife.

He was a regular Spaniard when it came to throwing a knife, and this time, although the cast was made while he was going at full speed, his aim was as true as the pliant steel of the blade he hurled.

It struck fairly upon the broad brow of the foremost savage, and seemed to sink to the hilt.

The savage uttered a piercing cry, threw up his hands with a despairing gesture, and then fell heavily backwards to the grassy plain.

Then Pomp's pistol went up, and as his finger pressed the trigger the second one went down to rise no more, and the last of the three leaped upon him while the echo of the report still lingered upon the air.

They rolled to the ground, carried off of their feet by the terrific force of the shock with which they met.

Like two tigers they rolled over the soft grass.

Ralph Radcliffe got a clip alongside the head.

Pomp's pistol had been forced from his hand, and by accident had hit the boy.

Ralph promptly picked it up, waited for the rolling pair to perform one more revolution, and then, as the Indian came upon top, the boy coolly put a leaden ball through his copper-colored body, and thus put a sudden end to this lively little unpleasantness. [17]

And just as Pomp untangled himself from the entwining limbs of his tough Indian foe, his ears caught the sound of many hoofs beating the plains.

He looked away to the west and beheld James Van Dorn and his newly acquired command bearing down rapidly upon him.

He snatched the pistol from the hands of the excited boy.

Fierce yells rang out, and from the other side the Indians began pouring out from their little tents, and to the number of a dozen dashed fleetly towards him and the boy.

Pomp was in his glory, for the plucky little darkey really loved the excitement of danger, and was always delighted with a big rumpus that afforded him full scope to use his wonderful skill in shooting.

He had four shots left.

The knife he plucked from the breast of the Indian he had struck down so cleverly, and placed the reeking blade in his belt.

"Run for the grove," he said to Ralph in a commanding tone that started the boy off at a steady trot for the trees, and then the darkey turned to the mounted reds.

Crack!

Down went the warrior who was riding beside Black Arrow, falling headlong to the earth.

But, before he had fallen, Pomp had turned on his heel and swiftly fired at the foremost man of the party on foot as they dashed out of their tents.

Without a cry the doomed redskin fell stone dead.

Pomp didn't wait to see the effect of his shot, for he never doubted the accuracy of his aim, and when the savage fell into the arms of one of his comrades the little darkey dead-shot wheeled again and let drive at the mounted gang.

Down dropped Black Arrow with a ball between his shoulders, and had not James Van Dorn caught him by the arm and hauled him up on the saddle he would surely have toppled headlong to the ground.

And then, like lightning, Pomp turned on his heel once more and banged away with his remaining charge, bringing down his game as usual.

This bang-bang and kill-kill sort of thing did not please the reds.

They grew somewhat shy of this wonderful marksman, whose aim always meant danger if not death.

"Halt!" cried Van Dorn. "That black cuss must be the devil."

His party pulled up, and Black Arrow, bleeding profusely and dying fast, was placed upon the grass.

The leader of the Indians who had so valiantly rushed down upon Pomp from their tents with the charitable intention of gobbling him up alive, were convinced that it was rather dangerous for

them to advance against this terrible marksman, and therefore they pulled up with great dispatch, and vented their chagrin in loud yells.

"Hope you'll yell yer darned heads off!" cried Pomp. "Don't yer fool wid the court-house no more, honeys. I'm dar every time. Yes, I is, and don't yer go fo' to forget dat ax nudder. When dis chile o' darkness sot out to sling hisself, den yer must look out for de har to fly, by gum."

And then, with a loud yell of derision and scorn, the ebony wonder bounded away to the grove.

Ralph Radcliffe had been so frightened by the yells of redskins that he made very rapid time for that grove, and was soon safe among the members of the much excited prospecting party, who regarded the fighting darkey's wonderful exploits with wide-open eyes.

Pomp made for the grove at a rate of speed that would have bothered anything but a race-horse to compete with, and with one of his victorious yells bounded fairly into the shelter of the trees.

"Ker flew dar!" cried Pomp. "Didn't dis yar colored gemmen jes' sling hisself fo' 'bout free minutes? I guess. Gorra mighty, but dem dar Injuns mus' had awful pain in dere heads when dey took dem ar pills. G'way, chile; don't yer git courtin' wid der fool-house."

"You're a tearer," said one of the men. "I'll bet that there isn't your match anywhere around the country for shooting with a revolver."

"Yes, dar am," said Pomp. "Dar's one man in dis yar benighted lan' what kin take de shine out ob dis yar colored pusson, but I guess he's de only chile what'll car to swap shots with little Pomp."

"Who is he?"

"Tell us his name?" they cried.

"Yer knows him well 'nough," returned the little nig. "He's de toughest little cuss in dis yar western lan', an' he taught Pomp how to handle a 'volver. De little screamer what I refers to am called Little Gilmore. 'Spose yourn heard o' de cuss?"

"Heard of him!" Rather. Who had not heard of Little Gilmore, the most expert hand at the revolver in the West—the man who had freed a Navajoe city from four immense bears that had proved a terror to the superstitious inhabitants for years. Of course they had heard of him, and when they knew that Pomp was his pupil, they did not marvel so much at his remarkable skill.

Black Arrow died, and then Van Dorn and his party encamped alongside of the other reds, only waiting for night to fall to crawl down upon the few inmates of the grove.

"For I must have that boy," grimly said the villain to himself, as he stowed away his portion of antelope steak; "and when he's in my hands again, I'll take care not to let him get away again. Guess I'll pay one of these reds to slit his little throat for him."

Meantime, in the grove, they had eaten their supper and drank their whisky and water, and then they posted themselves in positions to guard against surprise.

Pomp searched through his clothes, found the rocket he had placed there, attached it to a stick, and sent it up, and, as the reader knows, it was seen by the driver of the Steam Man and those with him, and a moment later a distant whistle told the darkey that his signal had been seen, and that the man was coming to his rescue.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE BATTLE AT THE GROVE.

As the answering whistle came faintly to the ears of the little darkey, he thought he saw a shadowy form moving in the grass some few feet away.

He grasped his knife and dropped silently to the ground.

He was now on a line with the object, and could see it better.

It was a top-knotted Indian, a scout in all probability, who was crawling upon the grove.

"High golly!" muttered the darkey, "if dat ar chap am comin' fo' information, dis chile guess he won't carry de news to Mary. Not much. Guess I kin a'most jump down his froat."

He waited until the Indian crawled a few feet further in towards him, and then he coiled himself up like some queer snake.

He undoubled himself with a sudden jerk, and flew swiftly through the thin air, alighting directly on top of the redskin's shoulders.

"Whoop!" yelled the red, giving utterance to a call for aid.

"Dat am yer last yawp," cried Pomp; and with a quick blow he drove the heavy knife nearly through the poor scout's heart.

Without another sound the redskin fell backwards.

A chorus of yells rang out not more than a hundred yards away, telling very plainly that the enemy hovered close upon the trail of the scout he had killed.

That darkey didn't lose any time in getting back to the trees, and it was well that he did so, for the next moment the enemy came down in a grand rush, evidently with the idea of carrying all before them by the force of their assault.

However, the prospecting party were well secured, were in the deep shadows and could see a little distance out on the level plain, and, likewise, were well prepared to receive them.

"Fire!" yelled Pomp, and his own favorite weapon, the long-range Colt, spoke out as he gave the command.

A series of shots rang out, and almost at the same instant a succession of very painful yells told that the bullets found many a living mark.

But the rush was too impetuous even for a volley to check, and the next moment the Indians piled into the grove.

The prospectors met them bravely, and it was lucky for them that the darkness of the night was in their favor, for, greatly outnumbered as they were, they must have inevitably been gobbled up by their savage foes.

A hand-to-hand fight in the dark is always a terrible thing.

One is as apt to strike a deadly blow at a friend as at a foe.

It is difficult to fight, even at arm's length, in the gloom, and this causes foes to grapple, making the contest a deadly one.

Ralph Radcliffe was not old enough nor large enough to contend with any of the enemy, and therefore got out of the way of danger by burying himself in a cluster of bushes.

The thundering sound of mighty feet were heard on the hard roadway of the plains, a bright light, steady and brilliant, suddenly shot up, a ringing cheer from four throats, mingled with a clear whistle, and then the Steam Man and the four brave fellows it brought to the rescue, dashed swiftly up to the grove.

The man came to a sudden halt about ten feet from the trees, and, with Harry Hale at their head, the four rough customers leaped from the wagon to the ground.

"Hurrah!" they yelled, and leaped like tigers into the thickest of the fight, the spot where Pomp was slashing left and right, dealing telling blows with his long, heavy knife.

The detective came upon the redskins like a miniature tornado, and his path was marked with the bodies of the fallen slain.

An immense redskin, a giant in size and strength, and armed with a heavy war-club, a terrible weapon in the hands of a powerful man, leaned swiftly upon Hale.

The detective turned savagely upon his gigantic foe, and swung his heavy bowie-knife full at the Indian's broad bosom, and with such good aim that it went in like a bolt.

But the Indian was not checked by the blow.

Onward, with upraised club, he came.

Hale dodged swiftly, but the blow was made too quickly for him, and he got a terrible clip on the top of the head that stretched him out.

As he fell to the ground his big enemy also dropped.

The red giant fell forward, and as he reached the ground the hilt of the knife was fairly forced

through his body.

With a deep groan and a gasping cry he expired.

The bright chemical blaze streaming up from the wagon of the Steam Man shed its brilliant glow far around, and the grove and its surroundings were well lit up.

A villainous-looking half-breed, a tall, well-built fellow, crawled up to the wagon while the fight was going on, and after a moment's search succeeded in finding Pomp's banjo.

He dashed swiftly away to the cluster of tents with this, and after placing it in a safe spot, grabbed up a long war-club and rushed back to the scene of the battle.

He made straight for Pomp.

He was wise, this half-breed, for he knew better than to hit a darkey on the head, even with such a ponderous club as he grasped.

He dashed upon the little nig, and made a clip at him.

Pomp saw the blow coming, and very naturally supposed that it was intended for his head.

That's just where he was mistaken, and where the half-breed exhibited a great amount of knowledge.

The heavy club hummed through the air and descended fairly across the darkey's shins.

Down dropped Pomp, as though he had come slap up against a big locomotive.

That's a mighty sure thing on almost any colored individual.

As soon as he fell, the half-breed made a few rapid blows with the club, and rapidly cleared a space.

Then he bent down, picked up the little nig, and ran off with him, before anything could be done to prevent his departure.

The battle was still raging fiercely, but the addition of the four slap-dash Indian fighters had made so much difference that the redskins did not care to continue the affair in the widespreading light from the wagon.

Several signal yells rang out, and a shout from the lips of James Van Dorn was also heard, and than the enemy beat a rapid retreat to their tents, leaving the dead and dying of their combined parties on the field.

In common with the fracas at the Pass, the battle was over; but the victory was not with either side.

When search was made for friends on the field, Harry Hale was picked up and, after a time, brought back to life; but he had an awful headache.

Charley Gorse was unharmed, but his other two comrades were slightly cut up, and many of the prospectors were either dead or wounded.

After searching carefully among the bodies for ten minutes, and shouting vainly, it was determined that the little nig was not to be found in that vicinity, and then they cried out, as Frank and Dwight had called out, for the jolly Irishman:

"Where is Pomp?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

A HIGH OLD TIME.

The night has passed away, and the bright morrow has come.

Under a spreading old oak tree in the little valley where the matrimonially inclined outlaw had built his little shanty, could be seen a motley gathering, drawn together for the purpose of taking part in the wedding festivities of Cheeky Charley and his buxom bride. [18]

Full blooded Indians, yellowish half-breeds, full blooded whites, a sprinkling of squaws and papooses, and one white woman, made up the crowd that gathered to witness the nuptials.

With their backs against the aforesaid widespreading old oak tree, well shaded by the far-reaching branches, sat two gentlemen of widely different color and nationality, united together most strongly by common bonds.

The bonds we speak of were figurative in point of fact, for the parties were Barney Shea and Pomp.

They were both prisoners in the hands of a common foe, and, additionally, they were both musicians.

Barney held his "darlint" fiddle against his breast, and sawed away with might and main, while Pomp, with his banjo on his knee, managed to pick a good tum to tum accompaniment to Barney's fiddling.

In the clearing around them, many of the white men were having what is called a stag-dance—that is, a square dance without females.

"Music hath charms," etc.

They could not help moving their feet in accord to the tune of the fiddle and the tinkling banjo.

They were having a high old time, for whisky was flowing freely, and spirits were rising proportionately as spirits went down.

Not a man or woman in the party but what drank like fishes, danced and cut up like Eastern dervishes, and raised the devil generally.

It was an extra occasion you see, and they had to let themselves out a kink or two.

Cheeky Charley and his two friends, who acted in the time-honored capacity of groomsmen, walked out into the clearing and held up his hand.

The music instantly stopped.

"Now you want to hold just awhile," said the bridegroom, who had fished a flaming scarlet tie from somewhere, and was in extra good trim, "cos yer see this here fandango has got to stop and let the nuptials go on. The female what's going to get hitched says she don't want to be all day about it, cos she kinder thinks as how she can have more freedom as a married woman than she can when she's a modest young gal."

"Yes, by thunder, yer right, old man," said the blooming bride, bouncing out of the cabin door and stalking into the middle of the clearing, "and, by jinks, yer'd better be lively in getting hitched or, so help me Bob, I'll tackle some likely cuss and elope. By thunder an' lightnin' I jest will now."

Barney and Pomp took a look at her.

She was worth looking at.

She was about five feet ten inches and a half in height, broad-shouldered and big-armed, and was as coarse, freckled, bloated with gin and foul-mouthed as any woman could have possibly been.

"Now see here, Sal," put in Cheeky Charley, in coaxing tones, "yer hain't got no sort o' cause to git talkin' in that shape, for I want to git spliced real bad. Give us yer paw, old gal."

"I'm here, my jolly young galoot," said the blushing bride, and covered his ordinary sort of hand with her immense paw; "see here, you red and white cusses, I want yer all to know as how this hitches me to this galoot, for as long as we 'gree to hang together in this here vale o' tears."

"Hear ye, hear ye," roared Cheeky Charley, in imitation of an Inspector of Election, "this is to let you know as how this here female is my wife, and the cuss what tramples on her has got to trample on me, he has by glory, and when any son of a gun spits in her face, he's got to lam one of the very worst galoots in America. Friends, let's take a drink."

Well, perhaps the red-skin portion of the wedding guests didn't understand all about it, but they certainly knew when they were asked to take a drink.

They were marched up to the barrels that stood on the side of the clearing, and drank to the health of bridegroom and bride.

"Here you are," cried Cheeky Charley, marching up to the musicians with a tin pan half-filled with brandy; "drink hearty, for you know yer welcome, by thunder!"

"Guess so, mas'r," said Pomp, and he put his banjo down, and then did likewise with a pint of the liquor.

"For the love o' pace howld on, ye little black divil," roared Barney, as the tin pan went higher

and higher. "Musha, my gad, an' do ye think I have no mouth at all? Have the extrame nateness to hand over that sauce-pan, av ye please."

"Only had a toofull," said Pomp. "Dat's good stuff."

"I belave ye," said Barney, "ye can safely be relied on for judgment in the matter of whisky and pistols. Ah-h-h, be me sowl that's foine."

"Give us a song," cried Cheeky Charley to Pomp. "Give us one of the reg'ler old down South songs."

"All right," said Pomp, and after tuning up he launched forth in a melodious voice, with:

"DAT COON HUNT.

"Massa went out for to hunt the coon,
He went for to hunt by de light of the moon,
He find the critter mighty soon;
Ker-flew dar, ker-flew.

"De coon was up in a great big tree,
De highest tree yer eber did see,
An' he got stung by a bumble bee,
Ker-flew dar, ker-flew.

"De coon he begin to bite and bite,
An' we pepper way wi' all our might,
An' down came he, dead to right,
Ker-flew dar, ker-flew."

This piece of nonsense received a great deal of applause from all parties, and then the next thing in order was a drink.

After that the bridegroom, being master of ceremonies, called upon Barney to favor the company with a real genuine, rattling old Irish jig.

"An I'll thry," said Barney. "Master Pomp."

"Yes, sar," returned the grinning darkey.

"Will ye have the extrame nateness to rattle me off a breakdown, loively, ye moind?"

"I bet yer," cried Pomp, and struck up that rattling old timer: "Did you ever see the devil?"

Away went Barney, rattling away in good time, and putting in some excellent steps, such as the beats and the rattlers, the straight fives and others.

The company went wild over him.

"Excellent," cried Cheeky Charley.

"Bully," said his more emphatic bride. "That Irish son of a sea cook can just everlastin'ly shake his foot. He can now, by thunder."

Pomp got wound up and kept on going faster and faster, and then the half-tipsy Irishman put in all sorts of extra heel and toe flourishes.

The spectators grew excited, and their feet began to hitch uneasily.

In less than a minute Cheeky Charley and his bride were dancing a Western edition of the can-can, the white men were either clogging or jigging, and the redskins, male, female and papooses, went into a wild corn-feast dance, and such yells and cries, leaps and quirks, twists and bends, mixed up with half-drunken singing was never before seen and heard in the wide West, and still Pomp kept up his exhilarating tum-te-tum-tum.

They went perfectly wild, and cut up most comical figures as they danced around the drunken Irishman, who kept slinging his brogans in alarming style, but they were scattered like chaff when a succession of shrill whistles rang out close at hand, and with giant strides the Steam Horse and the Steam Man rushed pell-mell through the dancing crowd.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"THE HAND OF THE GREAT SPIRIT."

The reader will remember the mysterious delay on the part of Ralph Radcliffe in reaching the grove, after he leaped from the back of the horse, so as to give the darkey full chance to operate against the redskins who were chasing the little party of prospectors.

Of course there was a cause for all this, and the cause was destined to prove the means of saving Ralph's life.

The boy was subject to a sort of vertigo, and would sometimes pass into a succession of fainting fits that ultimately rendered him insane for days, and then he would wander around with the vacant stare, meaningless smile and senseless chatter of an idiot.

The fright, excitement, rough riding, and much rougher treatment he had experienced in the past few days had upset the boy's not over strong nervous system, and when he started for the grove he was taken with one of his fits and fell from view among the grass.

His recovery, second attempt to reach the grove, the pursuit of the three Indians, and his rescue by the plucky Pomp are known to the reader.

In the fight that took place at night Ralph concealed himself in the thick bushes, but this mode of seeking safety really made him a prisoner; for, when the brilliant light from the Steam Man was added to the scene, some of the redskins could see the boy's shining eyes reflecting back the crimson glow, and they made up their minds to very quietly scoop him in for their leader.

They crept around to the rear of the big cluster of bushes while the fight was at its hottest, and very easily walked away with the boy, holding a hand over his mouth to hush any cry he might make.

They ran him into the camp of tents, handed him over to the tender mercies of an aged warrior, bound and gagged, and then they skedaddled back to the rumpus.

After the fracas was over, and Van Dorn went to the camp, he was delighted to find Ralph there a prisoner.

"Aha!" he cried, gazing malignantly upon the helpless boy, "you are back again, are you? You see you can't keep away from me if you try. How do you think you feel?"

And the brutal villain, elated over the recovery of his prize, gave the boy a kick.

Ralph could not cry out on account of the gag in his mouth, but he moaned with pain.

"Ha, ha!" laughed the wretch, in devilish glee, "it tickles you, don't it? I must try to tickle you a little more before I lose sight of you again."

Then he turned to one of the redskins at hand.

"Who brought him in?"

"Little Deer and others."

"Send Little Deer to me," commanded the white leader.

Little Deer, a small, well-made Indian, noted for his fleetness of foot, as well as his skill in hunting the animal after which he was named, was called in according to orders.

The leader looked him over.

The chap had a sharp, snaky eye, and a general sneaking expression.

He looked the spy and sneak from head to foot, and Van Dorn smiled approvingly upon him.

He took him aside.

"I want to speak with you," he said. "I want you to do me a service."

"The white chieftain has but to give his orders," said Little Deer. "You know we have said you may command us."

"Yes, that is true," said Van Dorn. "But this, is out of the regular line; and if you can do the service properly I shall say that you are faithful to your word, and, in addition, I will make you a present of this."

He took from an inner pocket of his coat a small and beautifully made revolver, silver mounted and highly polished.

Little Deer's eyes fairly snapped as they rested upon the weapon.

He took it in his hands and fairly caressed it.

"For that I would do anything you can ask," he said.

"Very good," said Van Dorn, and put the pistol back in his pocket.

"Name the service," said the redskin.

"I want you to take the captive out a little distance from the camp as soon as it is light enough for you to see, and run your knife across his throat," said James Van Dorn.

"Is that all," cried the Indian villain, in great surprise. "White chief, the boy is doomed. When I can see friend and foe I will take him away."

By which the red rascal meant that he could perform the service when it was light enough for him to distinguish a friend from a foe.

"Do so," said Van Horn, "and the little gun is yours."

The hours rolled painfully by to the poor boy, and when morning dawned he was glad to have his bonds released by Little Deer, who lifted him to his feet.

For a moment the boy was unable to stand alone, but when the blood began to move through his veins he was all right once more.

A strange buzzing began to rack through his head and the boy feared that he was about to have another attack of the fits he was subject to.

Before he had time to think much about it Little Deer hurried him away from the tents with the charitable design of putting him out of misery.

When he walked out upon the prairie he unsheathed his knife and prepared to carry out his cold blooded intentions.

As he did so the boy's whole form became convulsed.

He fell to the ground, and writhed and twisted in agony.

His eyes rolled backward in his head, his lips were covered with a slight foam, the teeth were clenched and bare, and the boy's entire appearance was horrifying to the last degree.

He passed from one fit into another with alarming rapidity.

Little Deer seized him and attempted to hold him.

Ralph thrust him forcibly aside, and sent him flying.

The Indian was puzzled, and quite a bit frightened.

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In a few moments the fits ceased, and then Ralph got up and looked at Little Deer and laughed.

The look was vacant, the laugh was without mirth. The boy, for the time being, was insane.

A little snake, fortunately of a harmless species, crossed their path at this moment, and with a childish laugh the boy pounced upon it, and began to play with it, passing it through his hands and around his neck.

Little Deer shook his head slowly with a strange reverential expression on his face, and taking the boy by the hand he led him back to the camp, for an insane person is as sacred as a god to the red men.

The camp was astir when he entered it, and the Indians all looked upwards toward the sky when they glanced at the boy, but Van Dorn, furious with rage, cried out:

"Why did you not kill him?"

"I could not," said Little Deer.

"Then I will," cried Van Dorn, and drew a knife from his belt as he turned upon the boy, but with a united cry of the deepest horror every red man clustered around the boy with drawn weapons.

"He is touched," they said. "You must not harm him or the happy hunting grounds would never open to us."

"Touched!" shrieked the ferocious villain. "By what?"

And the answer came in tones low and awestruck from the protecting group of superstitious redmen.

"The hand of the Great Spirit!"

CHAPTER XXV. THE ELECTRICAL GUARD.

After the battle at the grove, when it was discovered that Pomp was among the missing, in fact the sole party then missed, great was the surprise, and many were the conjectures on the part of his friends.

"He's not killed," said Charley.

"No," said Barry Brown, who had been around the field again, "he's not among the killed, and I'm of the opinion that he's been scooped in by some of the reds."

"Perhaps so," said Charley, "although I did not credit them with being smart enough to scoop Pomp."

Harry Hale was sitting on the ground with his back against a tree.

He had about as big a headache as any small man would care to carry around with him, for that blow with the club was a terrible one.

He had been picked up for dead by one of the men, and handed over to Barry Brown, who soon brought him back to life by applying a little whisky outside, and then using the very same universal remedy for the inside of the patient.

Hale did not feel very good, but he was slowly coming around, for his head was hard, and his constitution was like iron.

"See here," said the leader of the prospecting party, "we haven't thought anything about that boy. Where is he?"

"He hid in that cluster of bushes," replied one of the men, pointing to the spot where Ralph had secreted himself. "He's probably fainted with fright. I'll rake him out."

But, of course, he failed to rake the boy out, although he searched all through the grove with the others to aid him.

"He's gone," was announced.

"This is mighty funny," said Harry Hale. "Both carried away without anybody seeing the thing done. Charley?"

"Yes," said Gorse.

"Have you looked in the wagon? Pomp may be hiding there for a lark."

"That's so," said Charley, and made a search that resulted in the discovery of the absence of the darkey's banjo, which fact he made known to the others.

"That settles it," said the lanky stableman who had so long hoodwinked Captain Jerry Prime. "I understand the whole thing now. He has been taken away with his banjo to make fun at Cheeky Charley's wedding, which takes place to-morrow morning a few miles distant from here. Captain Prime has given him a little layout, and they've captured Pomp to play the banjo for them. Rest easy, and in the morning we'll pile down upon them while the fun is running high and carry off the darkey before their eyes."

"That's all we can do," said Charley. "Hark! there's Frank."

Three shrill whistles rang out on the still night air.

Gorse seized the whistle-cord of his Steam Man and answered.

For a few moments, at intervals, this sort of signaling was kept up, and then the blazing eyes of the Steam Horse appeared in view as the metal steed trotted rapidly up to them over the prairie.

"All over?" cried Frank, as he came to a halt at the grove.

"Yes, all done," said Barry Brown; "and for a small, private affair it was a real nice selected party, although the side dishes of chopped noses were not to my taste."

"Where's Barney?" anxiously inquired the Western boy of his cousin.

"Don't know," said Frank, with a shake of his head; "he's been carried off along with his fiddle."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the men, for now it was apparent that Jack's conjecture was correct, and that both men had been carried away on account of their ability to furnish music for the outlaw's wedding.

"What's the racket?" asked Frank.

"Why, Pomp and his banjo are gone, too," said Charley, with a smile, and then he told his cousin the stableman's idea.

"I'm glad," said Frank. "We can rescue them both in the morning. What camp is that out there?"

"The combined enemy."

"In numbers?"

"Two to one or more against this party," said Charley. "If they don't trouble us we will not trouble them. Come, drive your horse in under the trees."

The machines were both safely brought into the grove, where by the light of the little camp-fire

the drivers of the respective contrivances thoroughly cleaned all parts, and had things in readiness for a rapid run at any moment.

Then guards were selected to watch over the slumbers of the rest, but Frank put in his oar.

"It is quite unnecessary, gentlemen," said the young genius; "there is no need that any of you should lose one hour's sleep in order to guard the slumbers of this party. If you will give me your aid for one minute I'll undertake to guard the camp and go to sleep myself."

They looked at him in surprise.

"If he says he can do, he can," said Charley Gorse.

"You bet he can," said Harry Hale.

Frank stepped to his wagon, went down into that wonderful trunk, produced his coils of wire, batteries and binding posts, and spread out the apparatus on the ground.

"You take this wire and go around that way, and you take this one, and strike off in an opposite direction;" and, as he spoke, he handed the ringed ends of the wire to different ones, and in less than three minutes he had half a dozen thin wires connected from point to point, encircling the little grove with copper.

Then he attached his ends to both batteries, screwed down all his posts, and announced:

"Gentlemen, you can retire. The camp is guarded; but I advise you all not to walk in your sleep or you'll certainly experience something shocking."

And then the young inventor tumbled into his wagon and passed into the land of dreams, feeling the utmost security in his electrical guard.

The rest looked rather doubtfully at the odd contrivance.

"I don't much like to go off snoozing with a pack of bloodthirsty redskins just out of gunshot, and nothing to warn me of their approach but that," said one of the prospectors.

"Fear not," said Harry Hale. "The reds can't beat this wonderful little rascal if they try. You can depend on him as I do."

And to prove his confidence in Frank Reade's genius he threw himself on the ground and was soon asleep.

The men felt skeptical, many of them, but they were tired out and sleepy, and all were soon in the land of Nod.

A few hours passed by in quietness, and then a startling cry rang out.

Every man in the camp leaped to his feet, and the grove resounded with cries of

"What is it?"

"Who is hurt?"

"Who shrieked?"

And Frank Reade coolly hopped down from the wagon, ran to his batteries, and increased the power, and immediately a second cry rang out.

"That's the ticket" he said. "Follow the course of the wires, my friends, and you'll find a redskin hanging on to one of them, simply because he can't let it go."

And with a movement of his hand he produced another scream.

Away darted half a dozen of the men around the circle.

"Found!" came to Frank's ears, as they came upon a tall redskin who was standing erect by a big bush, his teeth tightly clenched, his copper-colored face half bleached, and an expression of agony on his features.

His fingers were closed around one of the wires, and his most strenuous efforts failed to disconnect the electrical attachment.

The guard had done its duty, and the young inventor was triumphant and full of glee.

"Grab him, and take away his weapon," he commanded.

Half a dozen hands seized the redskin and disarmed him.

He belonged to the party that had chased the prospectors.

As soon as the rascal was secured, Frank disconnected the wire by means of a switch, or cut-out, and with a deep groan the red man's hands unclasped and fell heavily to his side, and he was carried to the camp-fire.

"What do you think of the electrical guard, now?" demanded Frank Reade.

"That it is a credit to the inventor of the Steam Horse," said the man who had doubted its efficiency. "The prisoner is your property. What will you do with the rascal?"

For answer Frank picked up a long knife, severed the captive's bonds, and taking him by the hand, led him to the edge of the grove, and, pointing to the distant cluster of tents, dimly visible in the faint starlight:

"Go," he said.

The Indian knelt at his feet, placed his hands above his head, and then was up and away like a flash.

“He’s my friend for life,” said Frank, and went back to his bunk.

In the morning he and Charley started away with Barry Brown, Hale, Jack and Jared Dwight; the stableman directing the course to the spot where Cheeky Charley was holding high carnival.

As they expected, they found everything in full blast, and while everybody was dancing mad, they rushed pell-mell into the squirming pack.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PEDRO'S MUSTANG RIDE.

The reader will remember Pedro, the stable-boy, who was sent by Jack to carry the information to Harry Hale that resulted in the fight with the teamsters and their red and white guards.

After performing his errand, Pedro mounted his hardy little mustang and set off for the southwest to visit his parents, whom he had not seen for a year.

They lived on the outskirts of a small village, just about fifty miles from the spot he started from, and as his tough little pony was fresh, Pedro expected to do the distance in seven or eight hours, with short rests.

He longed to see his parents, and looked forward to the meeting with joy.

He rode all day at a steady pace that covered a great deal of ground, and at night fetched up before the little door-yard fronting his home.

The peaceful-looking cottage was there, but no one came eagerly forth in answer to his blithe hail, and a strange misgiving made the blood grow cold and chill around the boy's heart as he leaped from the back of his jaded steed.

He rushed up to the door.

Locked!

He shouted.

No sound came back for some time, and then a neighbor heard his voice and in a moment several forms came toward him in the darkness.

"It is Pedro!" they cried.

"Poor Pedro!" said one.

"Unhappy boy!" said another.

"What do you mean?" cried the perplexed Pedro. "Where is my mother?—my father?"

"Gone," they sorrowfully said.

"Gone!" cried Pedro. "Dead?"

"No," said an old man, "but they might better be dead. They have been taken off by the outlaw and his band."

"Sinyaro?"

"Yes, the terrible Sinyaro, who swears that your father has money concealed. 'Twas but yesterday that he sent us your poor father's right ear, demanding that we send him a hundred dollars for each of the prisoners, or else he will slay them by sunset to-morrow. Alas! we are all too poor to raise that amount."

"To-morrow night?" gasped Pedro. "The time is short."

"Aye! and the bandit swears that he will bring them both to the edge of the village and slay them before our very eyes," said the old man.

"Hush," cried Pedro; "let me think a moment. Ha! I have it; Harry Hale—the Steam Man—the Steam Horse—all or any can save them if I can get them there in time."

"The Steam Horse!" said one. "The boy's brain is turned."

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"He talks of Steam Men," said another, in pitying tones. "The shock has been too much for him."

And they regarded him with glances of commiseration, while he leaned his head on his hand and tried to collect his thoughts.

The time was too short to ride the distance, find the parties he wanted, and get them back on time, and Pedro could not help shuddering.

It was a slim chance, but he had no other choice.

But how was he to ride back that long fifty miles?

One horse, nor two ordinary, would be able to do the distance in the time that he wished to span the weary track, and yet he must do the distance within five hours to allow of sufficient time to get the rescuers to the village.

He turned to a tall, slim youth who stood at his side.

"Carlos?"

"Speak."

"You have a pair of fleet mustangs?"

"Yes, and they are at your service," said the youth.

"And yourself also?" asked Pedro.

"Command me," said Carlos.

"Ride with one mustang to the next town, ten miles away," said Pedro. "Leave the other mustang

for me. I am faint with hunger, and when I have eaten I will mount your mustang and ride to where you are with all speed, and you must have a fleet mustang ready for me to leap upon when I dash in."

"What would you do?"

"Save my parents' life," said the brave boy. "Before sunset to-morrow rescuers shall be here. Away!"

Carlos vanished, carrying with him a small sum of money to pay for the mustang he was to have ready at the next village.

"Who will give me food?" asked the hungry boy, and half a dozen eagerly tried to lead him away to their humble cots, while others led forth the fleet young mustang he was to ride.

He partook of a hearty meal, and then, with the good wishes of the villagers, leaped upon the mustang and yelled:

"Away! for life or death!"

Like a rocket the fleet mustang went on the track.

Onward, with fearful bounds, the ground fairly gliding beneath the flying hoofs of the fleet steed; through valleys, through groves, over marshlands and meadows, past tall trees flitting like ghosts in the starlight, and in an incredibly short space of time the gallant little animal dashed into the village, where Carlos stood holding the bridle of a fresh courier.

"Thanks," cried Pedro, and with one flying leap he was upon the back of the other mustang.

"Away," he cried, and drove his spurs deep into the side of the steed.

With an angry snort the mustang dashed madly away, the strong hand of the reckless rider guiding him with ease and skill.

With frightful bounds the incensed steed leaped over the irregular ground, and in a few minutes his magnificent burst of speed brought him out upon the level plain, where the mustang was pulled down to a long, swinging gallop, that covered the ground very rapidly.

On, on, steadily onward; and when the noble little steed began to flag the cruel spurs urged it on, and just as the mustang was failing, Pedro dashed into a little town and pulled up at the door of the sole inn of the village.

He leaped from the back of his foaming horse.

It was two hours past midnight, as he knew by the stars.

All was still, and the only sound he could hear was the heavy panting of the exhausted mustang.

He pulled a pistol from his pocket, and with the iron-bound butt rapped loudly on the door of the tavern.

"Awake!" he cried. "Haste! for life or death hangs on speed. Awake!"

And he rapped loudly.

Down came the landlord and one or two servants, lights flashed about the place, and the door was flung open with a bang.

"What's the matter?" demanded a man who stood there half-dressed.

"A case of life or death," excitedly replied the boy; "on my speed depends the fate of a man and woman. Give me the fleetest mustang in your stable, take my tired one, and I will pay you what you please. But, for God's sake lose no time."

The man had a heart.

He caught up a lantern, rushed to his stable, and ran back with a wiry-looking mustang.

In a moment the saddle and bridle were transferred, and Pedro leaped upon the back of a fresh horse.

"How much money?" he cried.

"Away!" cried the man with a heart, as he struck the mustang across the rump with a whip.

Like an arrow from a bow the little tough-knot leaped away, swiftly as the wind.

He was a fleet courser, and struck at once into that long easy stride that tells wonderfully in an hour.

Onward, steadily onward under the silent stars, the fleet hoofs springing from the soft grass of the plain with tireless tread.

Then, as the stars began to pale in the sky, two horsemen appeared in the course of the flying mustang.

"Away!" shrieked Pedro. "This is for life or death!"

They stood firm in his course, and, with a determined cry, the boy drew his revolvers.

"Crack!"

Down went one of the horsemen like a bolt.

"Crack!"

The steed of the other horseman was wounded, and as the rider fell to the ground, he fired upon the boy.

A scream of pain from the gallant mustang told that he was hit; but still he bounded onward and dashed fleetly away for a mile.

Then his strength began to fail, for his life blood was oozing forth from a cruel wound in his shoulder.

With his eyes blazing, he essayed to leap onward; but he stumbled and fell, and, like a rocket, Pedro shot over him, and landed stunned and bruised on the level plain.

Was his terrible ride to be in vain? Was the bandit going to kill his mother and father on the coming nightfall? Were his noble efforts to save them to go for nought? We shall see.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BARNEY SHEA IN HIS ELEMENT.

Slap-dash into the midst of the excited and half-crazed dancers rushed the Steam Man and his four-footed friend, the Steam Horse.

Frank and Charley, perched on their seats, guided the iron monsters, and took care to circumnavigate the dancing Irishman and the playing darkey.

In an instant the scene was changed; the dancing ceased; people scattered right and left; shouts shrieks and yells were heard from red and white, and the high old wedding festivities came to a sudden end.

The iron hoofs of the Steam Horse struck down a number of half-drunken fools who were too slow in getting out of the way, and the man fairly climbed over some stick-in-the-mud parties who stopped too long in his way.

It was the design of the parties supposed to be in command of the occupants of the wagons, namely Charley and Frank, to merely rescue the prisoners from their captors, and then dig away from the spot as lively as possible, it not being sensible to get up a rumpus when outnumbered ten to one.

This plan would have been adhered to but for the savage vindictiveness of Jared Dwight.

The avenger could not look upon his red foes without feeling all the vengeful blood in his body coursing hotly through his every vein, and then the one idea was sure to take possession of him, and that was to stab, shoot and kill.

He stood up with a brace of revolvers in his hands, and began to pop over the redskins like rabbits.

This brought an immediate change in the attitude of the somewhat startled reds.

When they heard the pistols popping, and saw many of their number dropping down lifeless, then they began to realize that this thing meant fight, and as they were drunk enough to run, so were they also drunk enough to fight.

Accordingly they turned, faced the foe, and popped back in return, and Frank's hat flew off his head, carried away by a bullet.

"Whoa!" cried Frank, and pulled up very short. "What's all this about?"

And at the same instant Dwight made a flying leap from the wagon, and fell on top of half a dozen much-amazed redskins.

He had discarded one pistol for a knife, and now went to work at them with lead and cold steel.

This resulted as might have been foretold, very easily.

In less than a minute every one of the whites were up to their eyes in business, for they couldn't sit idly by and see Jared get "chawed" up.

Accordingly they sailed in, and struck with a will.

One thing was in their favor; the reds were a little too drunk to see straight, and therefore failed to strike very accurate blows, or to make plumb-center bulls-eye shots.

Barney Shea was astonished, but he was also delighted.

So was Pomp.

They both hailed a fight of any kind with delight, not because they had any particular grudges to pay off, but merely because fighting was a very delightful pastime in their estimation.

Barney grabbed his fiddle and half threw it into the wagon of the Steam Horse, and grasped his favorite old blackthorn stick, which Frank had found at the pass after the battle and had faithfully preserved.

Armed with a weapon in the use of which he was skilled, the Irishman uttered his wild native yell and went boldly into the rumpus.

"Me feyther was an O'Doolahan by me great-gran'mother's side, do yez moind, and the O'Doolahans was allus in the most haythenish racketts that ye iver saw, and that's where I got me fighting qualities from, ye moind. Thin all the Sheas was allus noted for love o' good whisky an' purty girruls, and that's in my blood too, do ya moind, and so how I can sthoph wid me mussin' is more than I know, so it is."

And while he kept rattling away in his slap-dash reckless style he was distributing headaches and fractures, and small editions of nervousness with lavish hand, for that blackthorn shillaleh never ceased playing upon the heads of his foes all the while he was jabbering.

Pomp jumped from the wagon of the Steam Man.

In went his banjo, and out came an iron bar that lay upon the floor of the body.

Twirling this as lightly as any dandy in the land would twirl his gold-headed cane, the darkey leaped in among the half-intoxicated reds.

The white men and the outlaws had been more profuse in their use of liquor than their more

temperate red friends, and were lying around in the most helpless position, dead drunk and perfectly useless.

Frank knew that his followers must strike quick and sharp, and then get away, or, despite the condition of the Indians, they must be crushed down and murdered by the mere brute force of numbers.

"Strike quick, heavy, and sharp," he shouted, as he drove his blade into the tufted skull of an Indian who made an unsteady clip at him with a murderous-looking tomahawk, "and then jump for the wagons; we must not stop."

"Arrah now, be aisy," said Barney Shea, who was in his glory; "sure ye'd not be afther lavin' such an illigant bit of a ruction as this same widout gittin' yer bellyful. Ooh, would yez moind that, Masther Frank?"

And with a triple-twisted blow he smashed an Indian's nose all over his face, thumped him in the pit of the stomach with the end of the stick, and as the poor red doubled up he gave him a rousing one over the top-knot that stretched him out quivering.

And Pomp was knocking them down right and left, for the iron bar proved a terrible weapon in his hands.

But they had accomplished all that they had come for, and Frank gave the order in a peremptory tone:

"To the wagons."

They all obeyed, springing to the wagons at the word of command, and the last one being Jared Dwight, who delayed a moment to finish up accounts with a tall redskin.

"Ready," shouted Frank.

"Ready," shouted back his cousin Charley.

"Go."

And then the reins were pulled.

Away they shot over an irregular and somewhat dangerous course.

Swiftly sped the iron feet, and in the course of five minutes the level land of the prairie was reached.

Then swiftly away over the level plain, until a shrill call from Pomp caused both drivers to pull up, and in two minutes' time they were bending over the bruised and half-senseless form of Pedro, the mustang rider.

"Haste," he said. "Haste to my village for life or death."

They took him into the wagon of the Steam Horse, and when they had given him some whisky he told them what was the matter.

"Hurrah!" cried Frank.

"Glory!" yelled Charley.

"You will go?" cried Pedro.

"Go!" shrieked Frank, as he seized the reins. "We'll be there in time just to chaw 'em up.

"Hooroo!" shouted Barney Shea as the man shot on after the Steam Horse. "What an illigant land for weddin's an' wakes."

MUSTANG MAX.

The villain, Van Dorn, was surprised at the hostile attitude of the Indians who had said to him the previous day:

"You may command us."

Now their weapons were raised in defense of the boy, and Ralph Radcliffe could not be reached except by passing through the glittering array of steel.

Van Dorn found out that gratitude in the Indian character was very strong, but he also learned that superstition in the same animal was greater than every other feeling.

He felt that his hold on the reds was growing shaky, and he did not care about losing his new-found command.

He thrust his weapon back into his belt, and spoke:

"I was wrong," he said, "I did not know that the hand of the Great Spirit had been laid upon him. I would not now harm a hair of his head. You have done well, my braves."

And then the well-pleaded redskins got upon their feet, and Ralph was led away to a tent.

"Ten thousand furies!" grunted the baffled villain as he strode away. "What can be the matter with the boy? Is he really a bit cracked, or is he only shamming so as to arouse the sympathy and gain the reds' protection? Great Spirit be hanged. If I can get a good square show to run my knife across his windpipe, I'll not take time to think before doing it. He is in my way, and anything that bars me now must be removed."

And the determined compression of his thin lips told that his savage nature would not hesitate to carry out his evil purpose.

After the morning meal had been put out of sight, the reds prepared for a start.

As they were strong together, and not over strong when apart, the leader of the other party, a cunning half-breed, conferred with Van Dorn, and made an agreement to travel along with him.

Van Dorn had no special place to go to, and all he wanted to do was to hang on to the party until Ralph Radcliffe was put out of the way.

"Then I can cut away to Clarkville," said the scheming rascal; "and then hurrah for a slappin' old time."

They moved away in good style together, and traveled east, it being the design of the half-breed leader to strike the common route of the emigrant trains.

Mustang Max, the young guide, was walking along in advance of the long train, when he discovered the approach of the combined.

"Halt!"

Clear as a bell the command rang from his lips.

It rolled down the long line of heavy wagons.

It passed from mouth to mouth, and the train came to a standstill on the plain.

Everybody was on tiptoe.

The guide pointed to the west.

"Look," he said, and then they saw the mounted Indians sweeping down upon them.

A few women screamed.

"Stop that!" said Mustang Max. "I want no noise except what I feel inclined to make. Don't let me hear another of those yawps, now I tell you."

"But they are sweeping down upon us at full speed," anxiously said one of the men.

"Don't flurry yourself," smiled the tall guide; "they ain't foolish enough to rush upon loaded rifles in broad daylight. They'll stop before they get within gunshot—you can bet your dear life they will. They can see who's the boss of this train when they happen to clap their peepers on me, and they won't hurt my feelings by rushing at me in that style."

He looked around him.

No grove, not so much as a bush or a tree, only the hard, level plain and the prairie grass.

"This is a bad place," he said; "but I must make my stand here for all that."

He turned to the waiting emigrants.

"The three head teams face around in a half circle, and the hind teams turn from the other way. Every one of the animals, and all the women and young uns inside the ring. Every man see that his weapons are well loaded and primed, and have his knife ready to clap his hand on. Use the wheels of the wagons for posts and lookout ports."

His orders were rapidly obeyed.

The wagons swung around: all the women, children and teams on the inside, and thus a strong

corral was formed.

Behind the wagons, forming the circle, crouched the stout-hearted defenders, looking out upon the plain in the direction from which the foe was seen advancing.

Onward at a swift, swinging gallop came the enemy, their horses taking in the excitement of the affair and literally leaping over the level course.

On, steadily on, until but a quarter of a mile intervened between them and the wagons.

The women who dared to peer out through the wagon wheels grew pale as death at their near approach.

The men feared that this meant a determined assault, and they grasped their weapons firmly.

But the guide knew the tactics of the people he had contended with all his life.

When they had approached to within the distance named, they spread out in equal numbers to the right and to the left, and coursed away on either hand of the wagons.

"That is to see the entire strength of our fort," said Mustang Max. "They won't care much about tackling the concern, that's my private opinion, but I may be mistaken."

"They greatly outnumber us," said one of the men.

"But we are inside of a barricade," said the guide. "We have the advantage of being able to shoot from cover, while they must ride upon us in the very face of a bullet, as one might say, and they are not likely to do that unless the night covers them."

"And do you think they will hang on until night if they don't dare tackle us in broad daylight?"

"I certainly do," said Mustang Max. "In fact that's their regular way of doing the business. Look at them now."

The Indians had formed into four different parties, and had come to a halt on the plain.

"That is to bother us," said the young guide. "We must watch all points of the compass now. Attention."

They all looked at him.

Mustang Max selected the proper number of men, and posted them in four different squads in order to fully cover the four parties of red rascals now standing motionless on the plain.

Suddenly a shot rang out to the far right hand.

A moment later a similar sound came from the left.

Then followed a report from the foe in the rear.

The guide knew now what the pistol shots meant.

They were signal shots to start a combined assault from the four different points.

Even as the idea flashed through his mind the fourth report came from the party in front.

Then a simultaneous cheering yell rang fiercely out, and with horrible shrieks and cries, and wildly brandished weapons, on came the foe.

"Steady!" gritted Mustang Max. "Don't fire until I give the word, and then make sure of your mark."

CHAPTER XXIX.

SINYARO.

How anxiously did the good people of the little village watch for the return of Pedro, when the sun's declining rays heralded the approach of evening.

If he should fail to bring rescuers within the hour they would be forced to behold the melancholy spectacle of seeing his aged parents slaughtered before their eyes.

They knew that Sinyaro would carry out his horrible threat, for since his first appearance in the neighborhood, some three years previously, he had committed over a hundred bold and cold-blooded outrages.

No wonder they looked anxiously for the coming of the son who was to bring rescue and hope in his wake.

Longer and longer grew the slanting red beams, and the afternoon was wearing slowly away.

In two directions were the eyes of the many watchers turned.

They looked hopefully for Pedro from one way, and fearfully for Sinyaro from the other.

At length distant whistles were heard far away to the right, and soon after came the sound of mighty feet spurning the hard ground.

The people looked aghast at one another, for they had never heard sounds like these in the vicinity of their peaceful village before.

Shrill and clear sounded the shrieks on the air once more, and the tread of the mighty feet grew louder.

Some of the women rushed screaming into their houses and covered their heads with their gowns.

Others ran to the extreme end of the little town, opposite the part from which the terrifying sounds came.

A few of the men were brave enough to go to the right end of the village and try to find out what the racket meant.

Very soon the Steam Horse hove into view, Frank on the seat and Pedro at his side, while behind him, in the wagon, clustered Harry Hale, Barney Shea, the latter fiddling away with might and main, and the gloomy avenger.

A few hundred yards behind them came the Steam Man, Charley and Pomp on the seat, the darkey singing and playing on his banjo, while in the body of the wagon could be seen Barry Brown and Jack.

They had to move slowly, for here the ground was not as level as upon the plains, beyond, and the drivers knew that they must exercise great care in traveling over uneven surface, if they would not injure the delicate machinery of the wonderful inventions.

They went into the village in style, and it was humorous to watch the effect of their entrance upon different sorts of natures.

Some gave one glance at the odd-looking metal horse, and then roared with laughter.

Others, as soon as they caught a mere glimpse of the contrivance, set up some most awful howls, and started for home on a racket.

Probably they might all have been very much terrified if they had not seen Pedro sitting by Frank's side.

As it was, it took a good ten minutes to collect them all around the strange monsters, and convince them that they were not infernal machines.

"Tell them what they are, Pedro," said the inventor to the boy at his side. "They would not listen to me."

Thereupon the Mexican boy stood up and told them all about it, explained, as well as he knew how to do, the construction and workings of the two prairie travelers, and then introduced Frank Reade as the talented inventor.

Of course our hero was hailed with the greatest delight and admiration by the simple village folk.

"The bandit, as you call him, has not come yet?" inquiringly said Frank, as he hopped down to the ground.

"No," said Pedro, springing down to his side, "but he will be here when the sun is dipping."

"And we'll dip him," said Harry Hale, with an expectant grin. "I like to come across these tough customers."

"It's fun to handle them and clip their wings," said Barry Brown.

"You bet," said his captain, "and we are the boys that can do it."

"I feel just like having a nice little knock down and pick 'em up sort of little tea party," said the tall, lanky stableman; "I've only had enough so far to make me hungry for a good square shindy, and I feel as though I could fairly walk through a good-sized crowd of hard nuts."

"You'll have enough to do, Jack," said the young Mexican. "Sinyaro is a rascal—a big rascal, but he will fight like a tiger. While he lives his men will never give in, so I advise you to try and kill him off the first thing."

"And spile all the illegant little ruction entirely?" roared Barney Shea, before Jack could say a word. "Be off wid ye, ye little haythen! Bedad, now that it is meself that knows what's what, be my sowl, I'll let the divilish thafe go out of me grasp if I should happen to put me purty paws upon him, so I would. Musha, my gad! would ye put a sudden ind to an illegant row?"

Pedro was silenced.

"Course not—course not," glibly said Pomp, examining those deadly long-range revolvers. "Nebber do, sar, nebber do in the world. What fo' you tink we come all dis yar way if you is gwine to cut off de rumpus in de middle, eh, Massa Pedro? Dis yar fire-top gemmen and me we'se de rattlin' gamecocks or dis yar party, we is; yes, sar, an' don't yer forget dat, nudder."

"You shall have all the fun you want, my colored friend," said Barry Brown; "but just now I want something solid to eat if I'm booked to do any work."

Pedro spoke to several of his neighbors, and they speedily prepared meals for the hungry party.

Pomp, being blessed with remarkably powerful eyesight, was stationed upon one of the housetops to note the advent of the robber band, and there he sat eating and watching for over twenty minutes.

Then he caught sight of the gleam of arms, the bright hues of crimson and blue sashes and wraps, and soon made out a large mounted party coming through a small valley that lay a mile away.

"Dey's comin'," he shouted, and came down from his perch. "Dey's trotting through the valley 'bout one mile away ober dar."

"How many of them do you think in the party?" asked Frank, as he examined all parts of his machinery.

"Guess dar's fully half hundred men on dem horses," said Pomp. "Dey looks flashy too, I tell yer." [22]

"Where are the prisoners?"

"In de front ranks," said Pomp.

"All right," said Frank. "I've fixed the mode of attack. All I want you to do is to see that those old people are not murdered by the robbers when we make our charge. I give you the job because you are the best and quickest shot, and can use your eyes to effect."

"Consider dem under dis chile's special pertection," said Pomp.

They now piled into the wagons, and stood ready for a start.

Soon the tramp of the on-coming troop of horsemen came to their ears, approaching at a rapid trot.

"Ready!" cried Frank.

"Ready!" yelled Charley.

"Go!" cried Harry Hale, and the reins were pulled.

Just as the robber band flashed into view the Steam Horse and the Steam Man rushed like living bolts to the rescue.

CHAPTER XXX.

"WE SHALL STARVE ALIVE."

With their menacing yells ringing out in a loud chorus, the Indians under Van Dorn and the half-breed and the two sub-leaders they had appointed, swept down upon the devoted band.

They had determined upon a desperate charge, hoping by their fierce onset and irresistible force to terrify the emigrants and fairly cut into them at the first charge.

They made a mistake.

Mustang Max was not exceedingly terrified, and his men borrowed their deportment from him.

Cool and steady as old Indian fighters they knelt behind the wagons, rifles cocked and fingers on triggers, ready at the word of command to hurl death among the on-coming foe.

Mustang Max waited long.

He knew the abilities of the men under him, and he would risk no such things as long shots, for he wanted every bullet to tell.

Therefore the yelling horde galloped up to within two hundred yards of the wagons before the command rang out:

"Fire!"

Crash!

With a combined roar the rifles of the kneeling defenders rang out.

A chorus of shrieks, ringing high and clear above the savage yells in intense agony, followed closely upon the heels of the discharge.

Horses leaped fairly into the air, and then dropped dead.

Men were crushed under their falling forms and ridden over in a second.

Many warriors threw up their hands in a wild gesture of despair as they reeled in their saddles, and then fell to the plain dead, wounded or dying.

It had been a deadly, destructive fire, well aimed and hurled in exactly at the right moment, and fully a dozen out of the four different parties were down upon the ground.

But still a volley had been looked for by the desperate leaders, and they had given a desperate order that admitted of no pause:

"If half are killed let the rest dash on to the wagons."

Thus it was that the terrible charge was not stayed by the volley.

It threw all four divisions into a little confusion for a second, and then they dashed on again.

This was not what Mustang Max had looked for.

He certainly expected that his first fire would break up the enemy's ranks so badly that the charge would have to be deferred until the parties could be re-organized as well as possible by the living leaders, but he saw instantly that he had made a mistake.

He had underrated the courage of the foe, and that is always a very bad thing to do.

"Fire again," he shouted, and those who held double-barreled guns poured in a scattering volley, while those who had discharged their single barrels had to make use of their revolvers, a much inferior weapon for such service.

"Shoot, stab or use your butts," yelled the guide. "Don't let the red devils mount over the wagons. Keep them outside if we have to go out to them. Here they are."

And he sent a revolver bullet fairly between the eyes of the foremost redskin on his side.

It was a shrewd trick to divide up the large party, for it fairly weakened the strength of the emigrants greatly to spread them around the inner circle formed by the wagons, and gave them less chance of repulsing a charge close at hand.

Onward with irresistible force the redskins came, and some of them fairly leaped their steeds over the shafts, as the wagons lay together, passing through the narrow gap thus left, and landing fairly among the brave defenders.

They did not last long after they got inside, for Mustang Max gave them his special attention and services, and sent them out of the world flying.

With loud, horrible cries, calculated by the Indians to throw the frightened women into confusion, and thus work a diversion in their favor, the redskins dashed upon the wagons and sought to force a way into the barricade.

They leaped from their horses and clambered over the tops of the seats and over the interlacing shafts and poles.

Like a swarm they came, keeping up their horrid chorus of chilling yells; but Mustang Max had taken good care that the women should have no chance to interfere with the defense.

"Strike hard," he cried, as he sprang to the breach. "Force them outside and then keep them out."

Nobly they leaped forward at the word, but the foe was a desperate one, and were not to be easily driven off.

Many a redskin went down clutching a white man in his arms, and their lives would flow out with their mingling blood as they lay upon the ground in that deadly embrace.

Mustang Max fought like a demon, and did more than any three other men in the party.

With that terrible battle-smile playing over his noble face, he stalked among his foes.

He seemed to bear a charmed life: to covet danger; to laugh at death; the Indians felt a holy horror of coming in his way when they looked upon him, and therefore he was not as strongly opposed as a less terrible foe would have been.

A scream rang out from one of the wagons, as the guide sprang upon an Indian who stood near it.

Mustang Max guessed instantly what the cry meant.

An Indian had cut his way through one of the canvas sides, and was now among the women.

With a swift blow he struck down the redskin in his path, and drawing his keen knife, he slashed the side of the cover with a strong blow.

Out tumbled an Indian and a white woman for the red rascal had clasped her in his arms.

They must have been struggling on that side, and pressing against the canvas, for the same blow that let them drop out left a long bleeding gape on the Indian's bare leg.

Mustang Max promptly picked up the woman, slung her back into the body of the wagon without much ceremony, and promptly put his knife into the Indian's breast.

Then he leaped back into the thickest of the fight.

With words and blows he encouraged his men, and drove the enemy back over the wagons.

Inch by inch the ground was contested in a bloody manner, but the emigrants were defenders, and brave ones, too, and they struck hard blows for their wives and little ones.

At length the last of the enemy were fairly forced outside the barricade, and then Van Dorn, who found that this thing was not healthy, recalled his men, and gave orders for a retreat.

In a moment they were all mounted upon their horses, and dashed away for a quarter of a mile, less in number by fully a score.

They halted upon the plain, and those who had them, hastened to erect their tents.

Mustang Max, giving orders to clear up the sanguinary marks of the conflict, saw this, and his heart grew heavy.

"Devil take them," he said.

"What does it mean?" said one.

"It means that they've settled down there with the determination to starve us out, unless driven away by some other force, and I don't know where our rescuers are to come from. We have food in plenty, but no water, and without drink we cannot eat. If those chaps hang on, and no one comes to help us, we must charge on them, or we shall starve alive."

CHAPTER XXXI.

WIPED OUT.

"Hurrah!"

With a wild cheer the two monsters of the plains were directed upon the startled robbers as they came into view.

The outlaws were taken by surprise, and were thrown into confusion by the very unlooked-for charge.

Sinyaro, the outlaw leader, was the only man of his party who seemed to retain possession of his coolness.

Drawing his revolvers from his belt, the leader of the robber band shot down one of his own men who had turned his horse with the intention of running from the terrifying monsters.

As the man fell dead from the back of his horse the chieftain reined in, and his voice rang out in command:

"Stand, firm! The man who flies from the enemy dies by my hand."

His voice reassured his men, but they shook, nevertheless, when Pomp gave them the benefit of his deadly long-range Colts.

The darkey opened the ball.

He led off with a neat double shot, picking the men off who sat on either side of the prisoners.

As the men fell, Sinyaro shrieked out in angry tones:

"Stab the prisoners to the heart!"

Two of his followers sprang from their horses and leaped upon the poor old people.

The aged couple were pulled from the backs of the horses they rode and hurled to the ground.

Then the assassins bent over them with knives upraised.

Frank Reade had done wisely in selecting the darkey to protect the old couple from assassination.

As the knives went up in the air, so did Pomp's hands.

Each one grasped a revolver.

Crack! Crack!

Almost together the reports rang out on the breeze, and the assassins went down to rise no more.

Then the man and the horse plunged swiftly into the ranks of the determined robbers, and steam was shut off.

Pomp, Pedro and Harry Hale leaped to the old folks' rescue.

They pulled them erect, and then Pedro seized their hands and ran off with them to the village.

Then the rest of our friends piled into the fight in their usual spatter-and-dash style, knocking everything in a reckless manner that was enough to terrify an ordinary foe.

Sinyaro's sneering laugh rang out loudly when he saw the handful of men opposed to his band.

Indeed, two out of the few were mere boys—Charley Gorse and Frank Reade; but Charley was a regular rough-and-tumble Indian fighter, and our hero was arrayed in his invincible suit of mail.

He did not descend from his wagon-seat, but with cool nerve sat up high and picked off his foes at pleasure.

Spat, spat, ping! the bullets struck against his breast, but he laughed in derision.

Only his eyes were visible through the close-laced bars of his visor.

With a pistol in either hand he coolly sat there, keeping an eye upon his friends, and sending in a helping shot whenever he thought any of them were in need of it.

Barney Shea sprang into the midst of his enemies with a wild Irish yell, grasping his heavy black-thorn stick, and twirling it with a practiced hand.

"Hooray, boys," he shouted; "gintlemin, it's plased I am to mate yez all this foine summer's avening. There's me compliments on top o' yez head, ye spalpeen, an' don't yez be after saying Barney Shea ever forgot his manners whin he thraveled through a strange counthry. It's a rale dacint lookin' mon ye are, and sure it's not meself that would think o' passin' ye by so aisely, so take another wan in token o' my estame."

And then the robber to whom he paid particular attention tumbled from his saddle with a broken head, very much knocked out of tune by Barney's token of esteem.

Jared Dwight was not fighting reds now, but he went to work in a very systematic manner with his heavy rifle.

He took the end of the barrel firmly in his hands, and with the iron-bound butt revolving rapidly around his head, he sailed in.

Men who came within the sweep of the reversed arm, were knocked over like tenpins, and by

their prancing and shying it seemed that the horses didn't like it very well.

Our friends fought on this plain.

They were outnumbered ten to one.

They could not reasonably hope to get the best of such numbers; therefore, they had determined to strike a few sharp, quick blows, fight like furies for about two or three minutes and throw their foe into confusion or terrify them if possible, and then make tracks while they had a chance to save their lives.

Pomp was a perfect battery.

With a revolver in either hand he kept up a constant fire.

Harry Hale, a splendid shot, followed suit.

As we have said, Dwight proved to be a host with his clubbed gun, for he was a man of immense muscular strength, and could handle such a weapon as he wielded. [23]

Our boys rapidly emptied their loaded weapons, and then they thought of making a retreat.

Frank gave the signal for the homeward march by jerking on the whistle-cord of his machine.

The loud shriek that came from the horse frightened the steeds of the robbers, and they began cavorting around the place like mad.

Charley Gorse leaped back to his seat, and the others made for the wagons with all speed.

Just then a loud shout rang out at hand, and when Frank Reade turned his head to see what it meant he dropped the reins and did not put on steam.

The battle was not yet over.

In a well-formed body, and around in every conceivable style, the villagers were pouring down upon the robbers.

With exultant shouts they precipitated themselves upon the outlaws, led by young Pedro, the Mexican boy, who sought to avenge a parent's wrongs.

They greatly outnumbered the bandits, as they termed them, but these latter were armed in a superior manner, and the villagers would never have dared to tackle them had not our friends opened the way to victory for them by half demoralizing the foe.

Pedro leaped upon the horse bestrode by Sinyaro.

He caught the bold outlaw by the throat and yelled in his ear:

"Revenge!"

And then he sheathed his knife in the chieftain's heart.

Their leader dead, the rest sought to fly from the overwhelming force, but the villagers were determined to exterminate them, and with rude but effective weapons they hemmed them in and cut them down.

The terrible battle was short and sharp, but it was a decisive victory for the long-suffering villagers.

Many of their number lay dead upon the ground, but of all that gayly-dressed band that came riding in not one was left to ride out again, for the band was completely wiped out.

"Worra, worra!" cried Barney Shea, as he put some balsam on a wound in his left arm. "Did anybody iver see the loikes of this counthry for ructions? I'd loike to attind a wake in this land."

CHAPTER XXXII.

AT LAST.

The long day wore wearily away to the penned-up emigrants inclosed in their cluster of wagons, and the night drew on apace, but brought them no relief.

Suddenly Mustang Max bethought himself of a forgotten circumstance.

When Frank Reade left him he gave him one of his prepared rockets, with instructions how to use it, and told the tall guide that he might chance to see it and come to his aid if sent up at night when he was in peril.

"Dang me if I don't try the new-fangled thing," said Max, and hunting up the chemical preparation he hastened to attach it to a stick.

He applied a light to it, and with a loud whizz away went the brilliant signal-light in the air.

High up towards the heavens sped the lurid dart of flame, and many eyes beheld its flight with wonder.

Anxiously Mustang Max scanned the heavens.

"If that boy sees my light he'll know enough to answer it," muttered the tall chap. "He's a terror when he drives that Steam Horse of his, and I wouldn't be a bit afraid to charge them cusses out yonder if I had him to back me up with that consarn."

He was looking all around the dark sky as he spoke.

The light of his very brilliant rocket had died away.

Suddenly, from the far southwest, there appeared an answering rocket.

"There it is," cried Mustang Max.

Grandly it sailed up into the air, its course marked by dropping points of parti-colored flame; and, then, with a graceful curve, it slowly descended and died away.

"Eureka!" cried Max.

"What it is?"

"What does it mean?"

"Who are you signaling?"

"What does it mean?"

"Is that cavalry?"

These, and a dozen questions of like nature were shot at Mustang Max, but the guide laughed gleefully.

"Cavalry be blessed," he said. "No, boys, I was signaling Frank Reade and his Steam Horse, and I've got my answer. I'd rather have him than any company of cavalry."

"So would we."

"He's a terror."

"If he comes we are saved."

These remarks from the emigrants were of a character to indicate the estimation in which they held our hero and his wonderful invention.

"How far away is he?" asked one of the men.

"I can't tell," said the guide. "He may be one mile, and he may be fifteen or twenty. You can't tell anything by a light in the sky at night, for it's a mighty deceptive thing. But you can bet your sweet life that he won't be very long in getting here now after he's been signaled."

"I hope the reds will keep off until he arrives," said one.

"I am afraid of them when they come in the dark," said another.

"Afraid?" cried Max.

"Not for myself," said the man, a resolute-looking young pioneer. "But afraid of my beautiful young bride. If they had her in their hands and I lay on the ground wounded, what do you suppose I'd do?"

"What?" asked several.

"I'd try to put a bullet through her dear heart and let her die a painless death before she should suffer at their hands, the red fiends!" said the young man, with earnestness and warmth. "Oh, my God! how I blush for the weak, miserable policy of our great men in public office. Here are we near the year eighteen hundred and sixty. I can look back, close my eyes, and in my mind see the terrible defeat of General Braddock a century ago, and when I open my eyes what do I then see? Indians! red devils, scalping the living and the dead at the present hour as they did in the last century, when Braddock sustained that awful defeat; and then I blush to think that the men in office, the leaders in politics of my well loved native land, are still at their weak, humdrum policy. They are still fighting the Indians."

And with an expression of contempt on his eloquent face the young man turned away, while the men around him sent up a murmur of approval for his words of censure.

"Dang me if he ain't right now," said Mustang Max. "This government ought to be ashamed to fight a few thousand miserably armed men for nigh onto a hundred years, and get licked half of the time at that. It's a shame."

Just as the guide was giving utterance to his sentiments a low whistle came from the prairie.

He had posted men on duty, and knew that this was a signal to the wagons.

He answered the whistle in a manner agreed upon, and then crawled out of the inclosure and slowly worked his way through the grass toward his keen-eared sentry.

He whistled softly, was answered, and in a moment was beside the outpost, who lay length-wise on the ground, his eyes turned toward the camp of the redskins under Van Dorn and the half-breed.

"Danger?" said Max.

"Yes, they're on the move."

"What did you see?"

"The light of a pipe as it moved around in a circle."

"Shew!" whistled Mustang Max. "That is a council."

"What for?" asked the outpost.

"To decide whether they had better tackle us again or not," said the guide. "They got a decent dose this morning, you see, and they don't feel over and above sure of being able to scalp us."

"I see."

They lay perfectly still, and watched the camp of the enemy.

It was nearly a quarter of a mile from them, and in the pale light of the stars but very little could be made out with any degree of surety.

But Max could see the council pipe as it circulated, and he knew that the crisis would soon be reached.

"Only I hope they'll keep off until Frank Reade gets here," said the guide.

While he watched the pipe it suddenly went out of sight.

"Council's over," said Max. "Now we'll see what the verdict is."

The starlight was bright enough to show him what followed.

The tents were taken down with incredible celerity, and put somewhere out of sight, and the neighing of the horses could be heard as the Indians moved among them.

"What does it mean?"

The question came from the outpost.

"Cuss me if I don't think they are folding their tents like those eastern cusses, what do ye call 'em, Arabs I think, for to silently steal away."

"I hope so," said the other.

"So do I," said Max. "And I really think they will move off without leaving us a lock of their hair."

But the tall guide was mistaken about the intentions of the redskins.

Their council had decided to strike the tents, pile them upon the backs of the horses, ready to mount and fly in case of defeat, and then to crawl over the prairie and attack the emigrants on foot, hoping to surprise them.

But Mustang Max was on the watch and noted their approach.

His lynx eyes detected stealthy forms moving through the grass, and he readily conjectured that the enemy must be coming upon him after all.

They came very near stealing a march on him by sending some of their men around to the other side of the wagons, and had it not been for the quick ears of a sentry posted at that part much damage might have been done.

But the alarm was given, the sentries all came in, and everything was prepared for defense.

At this moment, just when a perfect stillness hung over everything, the sound of a shrill whistle came distinctly over the plains.

"That's the Steam Horse," said Max. "They'll soon be here."

"Whoop!"

A shrill yell rang out.

Then came a chorus of horrid yells, and the redskins rushed forward.

Crash!

A random volley was poured in over the shafts of the wagons.

One or two of the emigrants fell, badly wounded, but none were killed by the random fire.

“Ready!” yelled Mustang Max.

Every muzzle was directed outwards as the foe came rushing up with a reckless burst of speed.

“Fire!”

The thundering rattle of the guns followed closely on the order.

A chorus of cries, a concert of yells and groans rang out.

Near at hand pealed forth shrill whistles in quick succession, and two streams of tapering light flashed with far-reaching radiance over the prairie.

The Steam Man and the Steam Horse were at hand.

Like meteors they sped over the course, level as a trotting road, and bore down upon the wagons.

The Indians were trying to carry Mustang Max’s barricade by storm when the loud whistles sounded.

As the headlights of the two wonderful prairie travelers flashed upon them, they tried to turn tail and run away to the spot where their horses stood.

Then the voice of the tall guide rang out in thunder tones:

“After them! Cut them down without a bit of mercy! Wipe the scoundrels from the face of the earth!”

“Hurrah!” yelled the emigrants; and over the wagons they clambered and dashed after the flying foe.

With a mighty rush the two monsters, the man and the horse charged down upon the demoralized horde, trampling them under foot.

The iron hoofs, sharp spiked, of the Steam Horse created terrible havoc, and the man fairly walked over the redskins with his gigantic strides.

Right and left the avenging emigrants struck.

Crack! crack! went the weapons of the men in the wagons, and Indian after Indian fell lifeless to the plain.

The half-breed turned to fight, nerved to desperation; but Pomp shot him fairly through the heart, and without a sound he fell dead.

Steadily onward went the slaughter, man after man being cut down without any mercy, until but one was left, the arch-villain, James Van Dorn.

With wonderful speed he dashed towards the grove.

The man and the horse were speeding in different directions, chasing around in a sort of harum-scarum style, and only the emigrants were in pursuit of the wretch.

His wonderful burst of speed made his escape possible, and with a heart beating high with hope, he dashed onward for the horses, feeling that if he could leap upon the back of a fleet steed that he was safe.

A slender form sprang up as he neared the horses, an arm and hand were extended with a quick motion, and a flash of fire and a loud report told the villain’s doom.

With a loud cry James Van Dorn fell to the ground, shot down by the hands of Ralph Radcliffe. [24]

The son had avenged the father.

The outlaw was dying when the emigrants gathered around him, his life-blood slowly ebbing from a wound very near to his heart.

They saw that he wanted to speak, so they raised him up and put some brandy down his throat.

“I killed his father,” he said, pointing to Ralph, as the boy stood before him with the smoking pistol in his hand. “It’s a square deal, for he only avenged the old man’s murder and I’m satisfied. If I’d lived, I’d had a rollicking time with all the money, but he’s fetched me up standing at last.”

Here the villain grew weak, and his voice husky.

They gave him more brandy, but he failed to rally, and without another word he went to the bar of God.

He had been overtaken and punished at last.

They left his body to the vultures with the rest of the wretches he had herded with, and went back with Ralph to shake hands with Frank Reade.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CLEANING OUT THE COUNTERFEITERS.

Another day has dawned.

Along the blazed roadway conducting the traveler to the sequestered den occupied by Captain Jerry Prime and his gang of counterfeiters, a large number of men are riding.

Captain Harry Hale rides at the head of his picked band.

They had come into the emigrant camp one hour after the fight that had resulted in the extermination of James Van Dorn and his savage band.

Mustang Max is leading a selected body of the hardy emigrants, men picked out for their fighting qualities, and the half smile on the face of the tall guide tells very plainly that a battle must be very near at hand.

Preceding the two bands, and traveling at an easy pace to accommodate the horses, are the Steam Horse and his regular chum, the Steam Man.

Pomp is playing on his banjo and singing at the top of his voice.

Barney is scraping away with might and main on his "darlint" fiddle, and putting in an accompaniment to Pomp's melodious singing.

Altogether it looks like a triumphant entry into an enemy's domains, although of a character somewhat novel.

With music, mirth, song, laughter and jest, they march along over the sunlit road towards Captain Prime's house, with the very charitable intention of cleaning him out if he refuses to come to their terms of surrender.

"Barney," sings out Barry Brown.

"I moind," said Shea, never ceasing in his see-saw.

"Do you play by note?"

"Divil the note."

"Oh," said Brown, with an air of relief. "I thought you did and felt bad for your favorite composers. Then, my friend, you play by ear?"

"Divil the ear," returned Barney, still scraping away.

The listeners laughed.

"What," cried Brown. "Neither by note nor by ear? What then do you play by?"

"By main strength, be jabers," said the Irishman, and went on with his steady scrape amid the loud laughter of his hearers.

The road began to wind in among the trees.

"Form in solid," said Captain Hale. "Keep up the playing. We must make our entry in good style."

And in close form they went along the winding roadway until the opening in front of the house was reached, and then the word was given:

"Halt!"

The odd cavalcade pulled up, the two steam monsters halting also and retaining their position at the van.

"We will hail the enemy," said Hale, and stepping forward, he placed his hand to his mouth, and shouted:

"Halloa! Captain Prime."

No answer came back for a moment, and then the wicket in the upper floor was flung open.

"What's wanted?" demanded a gruff voice from the opening.

"Captain Prime."

"What for?"

"None of your business," said Hale. "Trot out Captain Prime."

"Go to the devil."

"Sorry, but I can't oblige you."

"Captain Prime is not here."

"Then we'll walk in and see you."

"You won't."

"But I say we will, my friend, and I mean what I say."

"You can't come in here."

"We'll see about it."

"I shall shoot," said the voice.

"Shoot and be blanked," said Captain Harry Hale, only he said something else instead of "blanked."

"This is an outrage," cried the voice from the wicket.

"How so?"

"This is an express office."

"Well!"

"And contains goods belonging to many different parties. We carry on an honest and straightforward business, and we will not allow ourselves to be plundered by any lawless band."

"You say that well," said Hale.

"Do I?"

"Yes; you ought to leave the expressing and go on the stage."

"Oh!"

"Just so," said Hale. "Now, Mr. Fraud, let me tell you that I know you. You are Captain Prime in person, and I tell you plainly, that I am Captain Hale of the United States Secret Service, and that I'm here with these armed men at my back to arrest you on charge of uttering counterfeit money."

"All right, my dear," was the reply of the counterfeiter chief. "All you've got to do is to come out and take me."

"You refuse to surrender?"

"I do."

"Absolutely?"

"Even so, my lord," said the sarcastic Prime. "Pile ahead with your show, and let the band resume its melodious strains."

"Plucky, by Jove," said Hale, turning to his friend Brown. "It's a shame that such a man is not in the Secret Service. He would make a valuable member of the body. However, we must try to clean the rascal out, Charley."

"What?" said Gorse.

"Be kind enough to hew down that young tree for me."

"Certainly," said Gorse, and seizing his ax he hastened to chop away at the tree indicated by Hale, which was nearly one foot thick, and about twenty feet or so in length.

Charley, an expert wood-chopper, hewed it down in a few minutes, and then Harry Hale turned to Frank.

"Do you think you could fix that battering ram between your horse and Gorse's man, and smash that door in?"

"You bet," cried Frank.

"Sartin," said Charley, and the two young fellows seized upon it and swung the heavy beam between the two wagons, by means of strong, elastic bands.

Then they mounted their wagons, let on a requisite amount of steam, and let drive, a score of men standing ready with cocked rifles to guard them from assault or shot.

Whiz, crash, and with a thundering bunk the heavy end of the young tree smashed up against the strongly-made door, fairly starting it from its hinges, and with great skill Charley and Frank shut off steam at the right moment.

The beam recoiled.

Back it went to the full stretch of the elastic bands that held it, and then flew forward again.

With a reluctant crash the door gave way, and with the same idea uppermost in their minds, Frank and Charley tumbled over backwards, and landed in their wagons.

Well it was for them that they did so, for at that moment half a dozen rifles were thrown forward from the doorway, and as many bullets out the air above the vacant driving-seats.

Had not the drivers been prompt in their action, they must inevitably have been riddled with balls.

"Charge!"

It was Harry Hale's voice, giving the word of command.

"Hurrah!"

And like a resistless torrent the band rushed forward.

Mustang Max, Barry Brown, Hale, Jared Dwight, Pomp, Barney, and a lot more of the toughest knots, led the wild and irresistible assault.

Like a fierce mountain torrent they swept across the open space, keeping the wagons between them and the open doorway, and thus really advancing from behind a barricade.

Onward, with a wild, exultant, Western cheer.

Around the wagons they dashed, and fairly into the arms of the counterfeiter.

These latter were clustered in the hallway to the number of thirty odd, and they all looked desperate.

"Surrender or be chewed up," yelled Barry Brown.

"Don't give up, ye devils ye," shouted Barney Shea, creating headaches without number with his blackthorn stick; "foight on like blazes, me beauties, and ye may bate the very insides out of us. Don't yez give up."

Which advice was given so freely because he didn't want such an "illegant row" to end in a hurry.

Pomp had a picnic all to himself, for he sat down in a big chair that stood in the hallway, and contented himself with picking off those of the enemy who were getting the best of any of his friends, and in this particular line the black dead-shot was not to be excelled.

Jared Dwight fought like a machine, and created a panic by his deadly mechanical style of fighting.

Barry Brown stormed around like some human threshing-machine.

Mustang Max walked through everything with that terrible battle smile on his lips, and all these rough-and-tumble chaps soon knocked the counterfeiter quite out of time.

Captain Prime leaped towards Captain Hale.

A flashing knife went up in the air as the outlaw seized the detective by the throat.

Crack! crack!

The knife flew far away, and Captain Prime fell dead.

Pomp had fired two shots in rapid succession, one for the knife that was descending, and the other for Captain Prime's heart, and Harry Hale's life was saved.

The loss of their leaders seemed to take the courage out of the counterfeiter, and they began to waver.

"Surrender!" cried Hale.

"Don't do it," cried Barney Shea, cracking one of them over the head, and laying him out stiff. "Don't yez give up yet, me lads."

"Oh, dry up," laughed Hale, amused over the Irishman's odd advice. "Surrender and we'll spare your lives."

The outlaws sprang back and lowered their weapons.

"Will you give us a fair show and a real square trial?" asked one.

"We will," said Hale. "I promise you a safe conduct to the nearest city, if you don't escape on the road."

"And no stringing up?"

"On my honor, no."

"Then we give in."

"Take 'em, boys," said Hale to his men, and as if by magic any number of steel handcuffs appeared and were snapped on the wrists of the prisoners.

"For the devil's sake," cried Barney, "an' is the foight over?"

"You bet," said Hale.

"What a man," cried Barney, "to sthop an illegant ruction loike that."

"Search through the house," commanded Hale. "Break open every door, drawer, cabinet and panel. Bring all you find up here and lay it upon the grass, and then we'll set fire to the crib and have a grand flare up."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CONCLUSION.

Away went the willing men in search of the money, genuine and false, the plates, dies and other things required by the victorious captain.

They found counterfeit money to the great amount of five hundred thousand dollars in bills and coins of various large and small denominations! but what rejoiced the hearts of the seekers was a big pile of genuine bank bills.

These were brought out and laid upon the grass.

"Eureka, spoils," cried Harry Hale. "I took this job on condition that I was to pay myself with what I could find, and it begins to look as though I am not going money out on the operation. I can give you all liberal pay for your services, my friends, and then have enough for my immediate followers and myself."

"Well, if you're through with us we'll each take a ten spot and bid you good-bye," said Mustang Max.

"Certainly," said Hale. "I am through with you, much obliged to you, and am pleased to hand you each a ten spot."

And the ceremony was performed to the satisfaction of all.

"Good-bye, and take good care of that great boy," said Max, smiling upon Frank as he leaped into the saddle. "I expect to hear great things of him yet."

"I'll look out for him," said Hale, and then the tall guide waved his hand and rode off at the head of his men, looking like some great proud king of the plains in his strong beauty.

"I think you boy what let poor Indian go when you catch him," said a voice at Frank Reade's side. [25]

He turned and looked keenly at the sole Indian, taken with the gang of white counterfeiters.

He recognized him as the red-skin that had been caught and held by his wonderful electric guard when camping two nights before in the grove with the prospecting party.

"Yes," he said. "I am the boy."

"Then Indian pay you," said the copper-colored confederate of the counterfeiters. "You give red man his life."

"I did," said Frank.

"Do it with free heart?" asked the red.

"Yes, and I'd do it again," said Frank. "If I could put a knife in your hand then I'd fight with you, but when you cannot defend yourself I will not strike."

"Good," said the red, "you hab heart of Indian. Me like you. Listen."

Frank bent close.

"Go down to bottom of stairs, smash in de last step with ax, and you find some gold. Dat for you."

Frank needed no second bidding.

He tore his ax from its rest at the side of the wagon.

"Harry," he said to Hale, "will you give me what spoils I can find, if they are not plates or dies or anything you need for evidence?"

"Anything," said Hale. "This victory is all your work."

"Good-bye," said Frank. "Here goes for the spoils."

And away he dashed down the stairs of the den, ax in hand.

He reached the bottom and smashed into the wood.

Crash!

With a reluctant, scraping sound the stairs gave way.

Another blow knocked the wood aside, and then three small bags lay exposed to the boy's eager gaze.

He threw away his ax and gathered up the bags in his arms, and fairly staggering under the load of gold he managed to walk up the stairs.

"Hurrah!" he yelled, as he staggered across the doorstep and half fell to the ground along with his gold.

"What is it?" cried Charley.

"See," said Frank.

Charley did so.

He opened the bags and found that they all contained two thousand dollars in shining gold pieces.

Frank was ready to faint with excitement and joy.

"Hold on," cried Hale. "They may not be good after all."

He took one in his hand, flipped it from his thumb-nail, and then smilingly gave it back to the anxious boy.

"Good as they make them," he said. "Frank has got a little fortune."

"And he'll know what to do with it," said the young inventor. "The first thing you know you'll see me coming out here with a pair of steam mules."

"Or a jackass, and go braying over the universe," grinned Hale.

"Or come on top of an elephant, and scare the wits out of the reds," said Charley Gorse, with a smile. "What do you really think you will do, Frank?"

"Invent?"

"Yes."

"I think when I do return home that I'll try to use my wits and my money in trying to get up a flying machine, or else a vessel that can travel under the water. But just now I'm going further West in search of the very wildest adventures."

"And I'm wid ye," said Barney Shea, "for fun, foightin', fiddlin', frolickin', and what may turn up."

"I go with you," said Charley; "and with the man and the horse we'll manage to raise Cain."

"Dis chile goes wid de party," said Pomp, his little eyes twinkling. "Yer am all under dis chicken's pertection, and don't yer forget dat nudder."

"Fire the den!" said Harry Hale, and then the torch was applied and the haunt of the counterfeiting gang was given up to the grasp of the fire king.

Then, with many hand-shakings and good wishes on all sides, these three old and tried companions in danger parted, Hale's party and the prisoners going East, and the Steam Horse and the Steam Man dashing off with iron feet to the far West, ready for fun, fighting or rescue; the darkey, with fine voice and tinkling banjo, keeping time to Barney Shea as he scraped away on the old violin.

We pause here in our story, leaving our young hero and his friends to pursue their further adventures in the plains of the far West, assured that the bravery and heroism, which has marked their career up till now, will continue to urge them on in the fulfillment of their vow to right the wrong and aid in the triumph of virtue over vice.

[THE END.]

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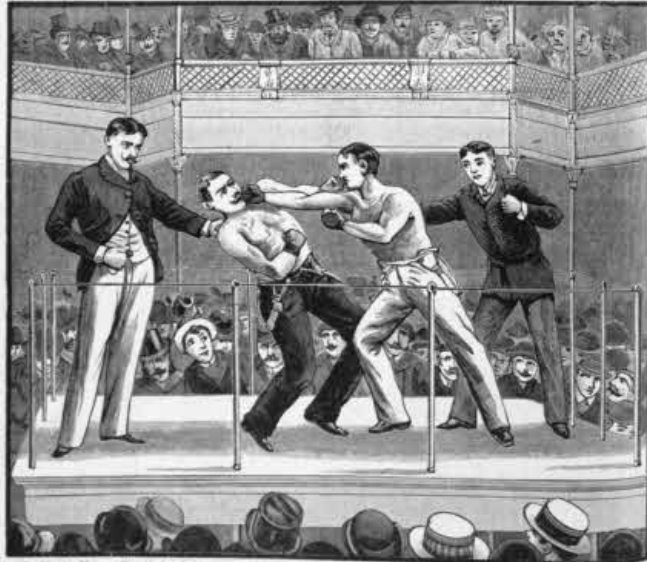
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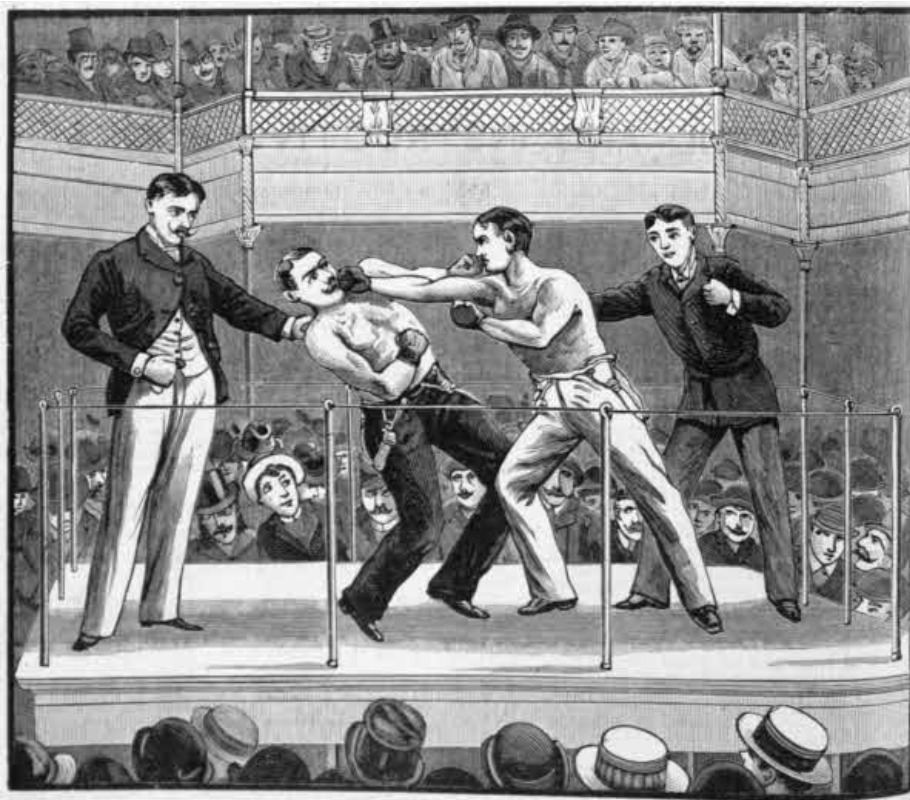
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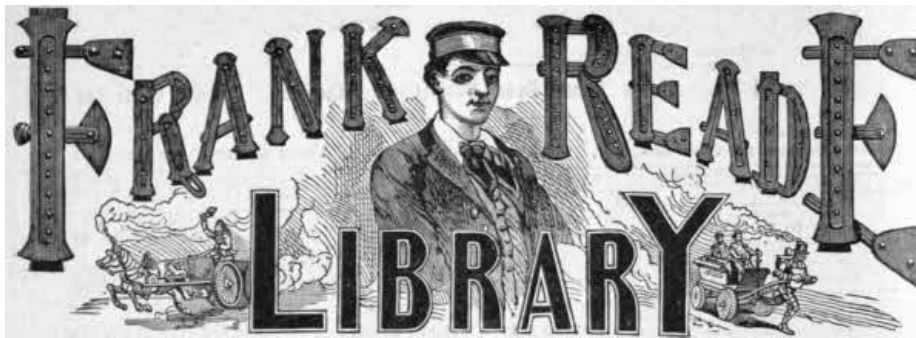
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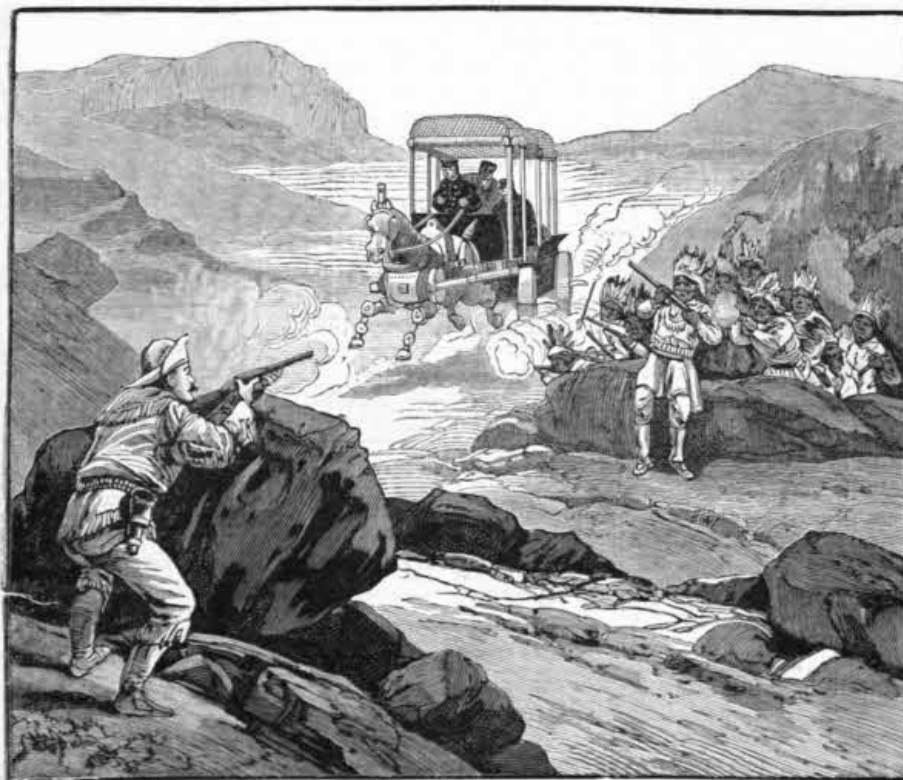
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"Noname" was used by the publisher for several different authors, and the author of this work is Harry Enton.

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