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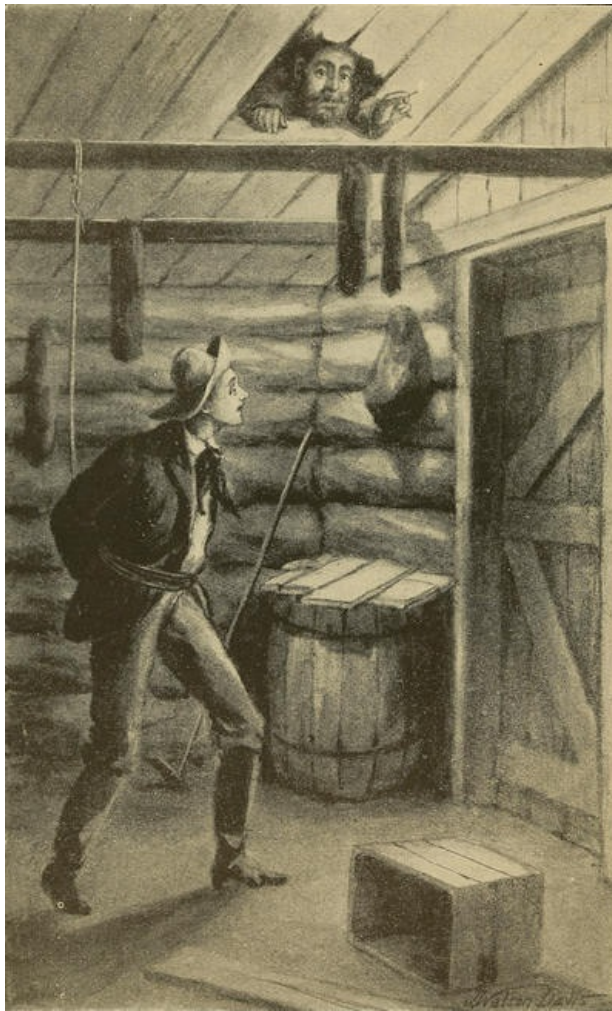
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“Julian!” exclaimed the man, in a low but excited tone of voice. “I am here!” replied the prisoner, so overjoyed that he could scarcely speak. —Page [118](#).

Julian Mortimer.

Julian Mortimer;

A Brave Boy's Struggle for Home and Fortune

BY HARRY CASTLEMON,

Author of

The "Gunboat Series," "The Boy Trapper," "Sportsman's Club Series," etc., etc.

ILLUSTRATED.



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JULIAN MORTIMER.

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JULIAN MORTIMER;

OR,

A Brave Boy's Struggle for Home and Fortune.

CHAPTER I. THE WAGON TRAIN.



THE SUN was just sinking out of sight behind the western mountains, and the shadows of twilight were beginning to creep through the valley, when two horsemen, who had been picking their way along the rocky and almost impassible road that ran through Bridger's Pass, drew rein on the summit of an elevation and looked about them.

One of them was a trapper—he never would have been taken for anything else—a man about forty years of age, and a giant in strength and stature. The very small portion of his face that could be seen over his thick, bushy whiskers was as brown as an Indian's; and from under the tattered fur cap that was slouched over his forehead, peeped forth a pair of eyes as sharp as those of an eagle. He was dressed in a complete suit of buckskin, rode a large cream-colored mustang, and carried a heavy rifle across the horn of his saddle. Around his waist he wore a leather belt, supporting a knife and tomahawk, and under his left arm, suspended by thongs of buckskin, which crossed his breast, hung a bullet-pouch and powder-horn. This man was Silas Roper—one of the best guides that ever led a wagon train across the prairie.

His companion was a youth about sixteen years of age, Julian Mortimer by name, and the hero of our story. He presented a great contrast to the burly trapper. He was slender and graceful, with a fair, almost girlish face, and a mild blue eye, which gazed in wonder at the wild scene spread out before it. It was plain that he had not been long on the prairie, and a stranger would have declared that he was out of his element; but those who were best acquainted with him would have told a different story. He took to the mountains and woods as naturally as though he had been born there, and Silas Roper predicted that he would make his mark as a frontiersman before many years more had passed over his head. There was plenty of strength in his slight figure, and one might have looked the world over without finding a more determined and courageous spirit. He was an excellent shot with the rifle, and managed the fiery little charger on which he was mounted with an ease and grace that showed him to be an accomplished horseman.

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The boy's dress was an odd mixture of the simple style of the prairies and the newest and most elaborate fashions of the Mexicans. He wore a sombrero, a jacket of dark-blue cloth, profusely ornamented with gold lace, buckskin trowsers, brown cloth leggings with green fringe, and light shoes, the heels of which were armed with huge Mexican spurs. His weapons consisted of a rifle, slung over his shoulder by a broad strap, a hunting knife and a brace of revolvers, which he carried in his belt, and a lasso, which was coiled upon the horn of his saddle. From his left shoulder hung a small deerskin haversack, to which was attached an ornamented powder-horn. The haversack contained bullets for his rifle, cartridges for his revolvers, and flint, steel and tinder for lighting a fire. Behind his saddle, neatly rolled up and held in its place by two straps, was a poncho which did duty both as overcoat and bed. He was mounted on a coal-black horse, which was very fleet, and so ill-tempered that no one besides his master cared to approach him.

The trapper and his young companion belonged to an emigrant train which, a few weeks previous to the beginning of our story, had left St. Joseph for Sacramento, and they had ridden in advance of the wagons to select a camping ground for the night. This was a matter of no ordinary importance at that particular time, for during the last two days a band of Indians had been hovering upon the flanks of the train, and the guide knew that they were awaiting a favorable opportunity to swoop down upon it. Hitherto Silas had had an eye only to the comfort of the emigrants, and in picking out his camping grounds had selected places that were convenient to wood and water, and which afforded ample pasturage for the stock belonging to the train; but now he was called upon to provide for the safety of the people under his charge.

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The road, at the point where the horsemen had halted, wound around the base of a rocky cliff, which arose for a hundred feet without a single break or crevice, and was barely wide enough to admit the passage of a single wagon. On the side opposite the cliff was a deep gorge, which seemed to extend down into the very bowels of the earth. It was here that the guide had decided to camp for the night. He carefully examined the ground, and a smile of satisfaction lighted up his face.

"This is the place we've been looking for," said he, dismounting from his horse and tying the animal to a neighboring tree. "Now I will go out an' look around a little bit, an' you can stay here till the wagons come up. You won't be afeared if I leave you alone, will you?"

"Afeared?" repeated Julian. "Of course not. There's nothing to be afeared of."

"You may think differently afore you see the sun rise again," replied the guide. "Now, when

the train comes up tell the fellers to take half the wagons an' block up the road, here at the end of the cliff, an' to put the others at the lower end. Then we'll be protected on all sides. The Injuns can't come down the cliff to get at us, 'cause it's too steep; an' they can't cross the gully nuther. They'll have to come along the road; an' when they try that we'll get behind the wagons an' fight 'em the best we know how. It's risky business, too," added Silas, pulling off his cap and digging his fingers into his head, "'cause if they are too many fur us we won't have no chance on airth to run. We'll have to stay right here an' die, the hul kit an' bilin' of us."

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Julian, who had never seen an Indian in war-paint or heard the whistle of a hostile bullet, was amazed at the trapper's coolness and indifference. The bare thought of a fight with the savages was enough to cause him the most intense alarm, and yet here was Silas, who had more than once been a prisoner in the hands of the Indians, and who knew much better than Julian could imagine it, what the fate of the emigrants would be if their enemies proved too strong for them, apparently as much at his ease as though there had not been a hostile warrior within a thousand miles. The boy wondered at his courage and wished his friend could impart some of it to him, little dreaming how soon he would have need of it.

"Do you really think there is danger of an attack?" asked Julian, as soon as he could speak.

The trapper, who was in the act of untying a haunch of venison that was fastened behind his saddle, turned and looked curiously at his companion.

"Youngster," said he, "if you should diskiver a cloud as black as midnight comin' up over these mountains, an' should see the lightnin' a playin' around the edges, an' hear the thunder a grumblin', what would you say?"

"That we were going to have a storm," replied Julian.

"In course you would. An' when I know that thar are Injins all around us, an' that they are takin' mighty good care to keep themselves out of sight, I tell myself that they'll bar watchin'. When I see their trail, an' find out that thar are nigh onto three hundred braves in the party, an' that they haint got no women or plunder with 'em, I know that they are on the war-path. An' when they foller us fur two hul days, an' their spies watch us every night while we are makin' our camp—like that varlet over thar is watchin' us now—I know that they are arter us an' nobody else. The signs are jest as plain to me as the signs of a thunder storm are to you."

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"Is there some one watching us now?" asked Julian, in great excitement.

"Sartin thar is. I've seed that copper-colored face of his'n peepin' over that rock ever since we've been here. If he was within good pluggin' distance all the news he would carry back to his friends wouldn't do 'em much good, I reckon."

As the trapper spoke he pointed toward the opposite side of the gorge. Julian looked in the direction indicated, closely scrutinizing every rock and tree within the range of his vision, but nothing in the shape of an Indian's head could he see. His eyes were not as sharp as those of the guide.

"Never mind," said Silas, "you'll see plenty of 'em afore mornin', an' they'll be closer to you than you'll care to have 'em. But you needn't be any ways oneasy. *They* won't hurt you. It's white men that you've got to look out fur."

"White men?" echoed Julian.

"Sartin. Thar's two persons in the world—an' I can lay my hand on one of 'em in less'n five minutes—who would be willin' to give something nice if they could get hold of you. I know a heap more about you than you think I do."

"You have hinted something like this before, Silas, and I don't know what you mean. I wish you would explain yourself."

"I hain't got no time now," replied the guide, shouldering his rifle and walking briskly up the road. "Keep your eyes open, an' don't go out of the camp till I get back. Don't forget what I told you about them wagons nuther."

The trapper quickly disappeared around a bend in the road, and Julian once more directed his gaze across the gully and tried in vain to discover the hiding-place of the spy. He began to feel timid now that he was alone. The thought that there were hostile Indians all around him, and that one of their number was concealed almost within rifle-shot of him, watching every move he made, was by no means an agreeable one. His first impulse was to put spurs to his horse and make the best of his way back to the train; and he probably would have done so had he not at that moment become aware that the train was coming to him. He heard the rumbling of the wheels and the voices of teamsters below him, and the familiar sounds brought his courage back to him again. He remained at his post until the foremost wagons came in sight, and then proceeded to carry out the instructions Silas had given him.

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CHAPTER II.

JULIAN HEARS SOMETHING.



IN HALF an hour the preparations for the night were all completed, and Julian surveyed the camp with a smile of satisfaction. There were twenty wagons in the train, and of these two barricades had been made, one at the upper and the other at the lower end of the cliffs, as the guide had directed. The vehicles had been drawn close together, and were fastened to one another by chains so that they could not be easily moved from their places. The space between the wheels was blocked up with plows, harrows, stoves, bedsteads and chairs, thus rendering it a matter of some difficulty for any one to effect an entrance into the camp.

While this work was being performed the shadows of twilight had deepened into the gloom of night, and now all objects outside the circle of light made by the camp-fires were concealed by Egyptian darkness. Inside the barricades a scene was presented that was a cheering one to men wearied with their day's journey. A dozen fires blazed along the base of the cliff, and beside them stalwart pioneers reposed on their blankets, smoking their pipes and watching with hungry eyes the preparations for supper that were going on around them. Venison steaks were broiling on the coals, potatoes roasting in the ashes, and coffee-pots simmered and sputtered, filling the camp with the odor of their aromatic contents. Cattle and horses cropped the herbage that grew along the edge of the gully, and noisy children, all unconscious of the danger that threatened them, rolled about on the grass, or relieved their cramped limbs by running races along the road. But, although the camp wore an air of domesticity and security, preparations for battle were everywhere visible. The saddles and bridles had not been removed from the horses as usual, the emigrants wore their revolvers about their waists, and kept their rifles within easy reach. There were pale faces in that camp, and men who had all their lives been familiar with danger started and trembled at the rustle of every leaf.

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Julian Mortimer, from a neighboring wagon, on which he had perched himself to await the return of the guide, watched the scene presented to his gaze, as he had done every night since leaving St. Joseph, and bemoaned his hard lot in life.

"Among all these people," he soliloquized, "there are none that I can call relatives and friends, and not one even to speak a kind word to me. How I envy those fellows," he added, glancing at a couple of boys about his own age who were seated at the nearest camp-fire conversing with their parents. "They have a father to watch over them, a mother to care for them, and brothers and sisters to love, but they do not seem to appreciate their blessings, for they are continually quarreling with one another, and no longer ago than this morning one of those boys flew into a terrible rage because his mother asked him to chop some wood to cook breakfast with. If he could be alone in the world for a few days, as I have been almost ever since I can remember, he would know how to value that mother when he got back to her. If the Indians attack us to-night some of the emigrants will certainly be killed, and the friends they have left behind them in the States will mourn over their fate; but if I fall, there will be no one to drop a tear for me or say he is sorry I am gone. There is nothing on earth that cares whether I live or die, unless it is my horse. If the Indians kill me perhaps he will miss me."

Julian's soliloquy was suddenly interrupted by a light footstep behind the wagon in which he was sitting. He turned quickly and discovered a man stealing along the barricade and examining it closely, as if he were looking for a place to get through it. Julian's first thought was to accost him, but there was something so stealthy in the man's actions that his curiosity was aroused, and checking the words that arose on his lips he remained quiet in his concealment, and waited to see what was going to happen. He had often seen the man during the journey across the plains, and knew that he was one of the emigrants, but why he should seek to leave the camp at that time and in so unusual a manner, was something the boy could not understand.

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The man walked the whole length of the barricade, turning to look at the emigrants now and then to make sure that none of them were observing his movements, and finally disappeared under one of the wagons. Julian heard him working his way through the obstructions that had been placed between the wheels, and presently saw him appear again on the outside of the barricade.

Almost at the same instant the boy discovered another figure moving rapidly but noiselessly down the road toward the camp. At first he thought it was the guide, but when the man came within the circle of light thrown out by the camp-fires he saw that he was a stranger. He was evidently a mountain man, for he was dressed in buckskin and carried a long rifle in the hollow of his arm, and the never-failing knife and tomahawk in his belt; but he was the worst specimen of this class of men that Julian had ever seen. His clothing was soiled and ragged, his hair, which had evidently never been acquainted with a comb, fell down upon his shoulders, and his face looked as though it had received the very roughest usage, for it was terribly battered and scarred. One glance at him was enough to frighten Julian, who, knowing instinctively that the man was there for no good purpose, drew further back into the shadow of the wagon-cover.

The emigrant who had left the camp in so suspicious a manner, discovered the stranger the moment he reached the outside of the barricade, but he did not appear to be surprised to see him. On the contrary, he acted as if he had been expecting him, for he placed one foot on the nearest wagon-tongue, rested his elbow on his knee, and when the trapper had approached within speaking distance, said in a suppressed whisper:

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"How are you, Sanders?"

The latter paid no more attention to the greeting than if he had not been addressed at all. He advanced close to the wagon in which Julian was concealed—so close that his brawny shoulders were almost within reach of the boy's hand—and peered through the barricade, taking in at one swift glance all that was going on inside the camp. He next looked up and down the road, fixing his eyes suspiciously on every tree and rock near him that was large enough to conceal a foe, and having satisfied himself that there was no one near him, he dropped the butt of his rifle to the ground, and growled out:

"Wal!"

"Well," replied the emigrant, "I have been to Missouri, and I have returned, as you see."

"I reckon you're satisfied now, hain't you?" he asked.

"I am. I am satisfied of four things: That the boy is alive and hearty; that he remembers more of his early history than we thought he would; that he has come out here to make trouble for us; and that he is at this very moment with this wagon train."

As the emigrant said this he folded his arms and looked at his companion to observe the effect these words would have upon him. He, no doubt, expected that the trapper would be surprised, and the latter's actions indicated that he certainly was. He stepped back as suddenly as if a blow had been aimed at him, and after regarding the emigrant sharply for a moment, struck the butt of his rifle with his clenched hand, and ejaculated:

"Sho!"

"It's a fact," replied his companion.

"Wal, now, I wouldn't be afeared to bet my ears agin a chaw of tobacker that you're fooled the worst kind," said the trapper, who was very much excited over what he had heard, and seemed quite unable to bring himself to believe it. "The boy was young when he was tuk away from here—[15] not more'n eight years old—an' do you 'spose he could remember anything that happened or find his way across these yere prairies to his hum agin? Don't look reason'ble."

"It's the truth, whether it looks reasonable or not. I have seen Julian Mortimer, and talked with him, and consequently may be supposed to know more about him and his plans than you who have not seen him for years. What was that?"

Julian, astonished to hear his own name pronounced by one whom he believed to be a stranger to him, uttered an ejaculation under his breath, and forgetting in his excitement how close the men were to him, bent forward and began to listen more intently.

The very slight rustling he occasioned among the folds of the canvas cover of the wagon was sufficient to attract the attention of the emigrant and his companion, who brought their conversation to a sudden close, and looking about them suspiciously, waited for a repetition of the sound.

But Julian, frightened at what he had done, and trembling in every limb when he saw the trapper turn his head and gaze earnestly toward the wagon in which he was concealed, remained perfectly motionless and held his breath in suspense.

The men listened a moment, but hearing nothing to alarm them, Sanders folded his arms over the muzzle of his rifle, intimating by a gesture that he was ready to hear what else the emigrant had to say, and the latter once more placed his foot on the wagon-tongue, and continued:

"It is time we had an understanding on one point, Sanders. Are you working for my cousin, Reginald, or for me?"

"I'm workin' fur you, in course," replied the trapper. "I've done my level best fur you. I had my way with one of the brats, an' put him whar he'll never trouble nobody."

"Has he never troubled any one since that night? Has he never troubled *you*?" asked the emigrant, in a significant tone. "Could you be hired to spend an hour in Reginald's rancho after dark?" [16]

"No, I couldn't," replied the trapper, in a subdued voice, glancing nervously around, and drawing a little closer to his companion. "But that thar boy is at the bottom of the lake, an' I'd swar to it, 'cause I put him thar myself. What it is that walks about that rancho every night, an' makes such noises, an' cuts up so, I don't know. You had oughter let me done as I pleased with the other; but you got chicken-hearted all of a sudden, an' didn't want him rubbed out, an' so I stole him away from his hum for you, an' you toted him off to the States. If he comes back here an' makes outlaws of you an' your cousin, it's no business of mine. But I am on your side, an' you know it."

"I don't know anything of the kind. It is true that you did all this for me, and that I paid you well for it; but I know that you have since promised Reginald that you would find the boy and bring him back here. Will you attack this train to-night?"

"Sartin. That's what we've been a follerin' it fur. If you want to save your bacon, you'd best be gettin' out."

"I intend to do so; but I don't want the boy to get out; do you understand? You know where to find me in the morning, and if you will bring me his jacket and leggins to prove that he is out of the way, I will give you a thousand dollars. There are a good many boys with the train, but you will have no trouble in picking out Julian, if you remember how he looked eight years ago. You will know him by his handsome face and straight, slender figure."

"I'll find him," said the trapper; "it's a bargain, an' thar's my hand onto it. Now I'll jest walk around an' take a squint at things, an' you had best pack up what plunder you want to save an' cl'ar out; 'cause in less'n an hour me an' the Injuns will be down on this yere wagon train like a turkey on a tater-bug."

The emigrant evidently thought it best to act on this suggestion, for without wasting any time [17]

or words in leave-taking he made his way carefully through the barricade into the camp.

The trapper watched him until he disappeared from view, and then said, as if talking to himself, but in a tone of voice loud enough for Julian to hear:

“A thousand dollars fur doin’ a job that you are afeared to do yourself! I don’t mind shootin’ the boy, but I’d be the biggest kind of a dunce to do it fur that money when another man offers me \$5,000 for him alive an’ well. If that youngster, Julian, is in this camp, I’ll win that five thousand to-night, or my name ain’t Ned Sanders.”

The trapper shouldered his rifle, and with a step that would not have awakened a cricket, stole along the barricade, carefully examining it at every point, and mentally calculating the chances for making a successful attack upon it. When he had passed out of sight in the darkness, Julian drew a long breath, and settled back in his place of concealment to think over what he had heard.

CHAPTER III. A RIDE IN THE DARK.



TO DESCRIBE the feelings with which Julian Mortimer listened to the conversation we have just recorded were impossible. He knew now that he had been greatly mistaken in some opinions he had hitherto entertained. He had told himself but a few minutes before that there was no one on earth who cared whether he lived or died; but scarcely had the thought passed through his mind before he became aware that there were at least two persons in the world who were deeply interested in that very matter—so much so that one was willing to pay a ruffian a thousand dollars to kill him, while the other had offered five times that amount to have him delivered into his hands alive and well. It was no wonder that the boy was overwhelmed with fear and bewilderment.

"Whew!" he panted, pulling off his sombrero and wiping the big drops of perspiration from his forehead, "this goes ahead of any thing I ever heard of. I wonder if Silas had any reference to this when he said that there were two men in the world who would be willing to give something nice to get hold of me! I'm done for. If I am not killed by the Indians, that villain, Sanders, will make a prisoner of me and take me off to Reginald. Who is Reginald, and what have I done that he should be so anxious to see me? I never knew before that I was worth \$5,000 to anybody. Who is that emigrant, and how does it come that I am in his way? He says that he has talked with me and knows all about my plans, but I am positive that I never spoke to him in my life. I never saw him until I found him with this wagon train at St. Joseph. I have had some thrilling adventures during the past few weeks, and I can see very plainly that they are not yet ended."

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Julian, trembling with anxiety and alarm, clambered out of the wagon, and leaning on the muzzle of his rifle, looked down into the gorge, thought over his situation, and tried to determine upon some plan of action. His first impulse was to acquaint the emigrants with the fact that one of their number had been holding converse with an enemy, and have the traitor secured at once. His next was to provide for his own safety by collecting the few articles of value he possessed and making his way back to the prairie; but he was deterred from attempting to carry out this plan by the fear that while he was fleeing from one danger he might run into another. The savages had probably surrounded the camp by this time, and he could not hope to pass through their lines without being discovered. The best course he could pursue was to wait until the guide returned. He would know just what ought to be done.

Julian was so completely absorbed in his reverie that he forgot to keep an eye on what was going on around him, and consequently he did not see the two dark figures which came stealing along the road as noiselessly as spirits. But the figures were there, and when they discovered Julian they drew back into the bushes that lined the base of the cliff, and held a whispered consultation. Presently one of them stepped out into the road again and ran toward the camp. He did not attempt to escape observation, but hurried along as though he had a perfect right to be there. He seemed to be ignorant of the boy's presence until he heard his voice and saw the muzzle of his rifle looking straight into his face.

"Halt!" cried Julian, standing with his finger on the trigger, ready to enforce his command if it were not instantly obeyed. "Who are you?"

"A friend," replied the man. "Don't shoot!"

"Come up here, friend, and let us have a look at you."

As the stranger approached Julian saw that he appeared to be very much excited about something, and that he breathed heavily as if he had been running long and rapidly.

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"If you are a friend what are you doing on the outside of the camp?" asked the boy.

"Why, we've been trappin' here in the mountains, me an' my pardner have, an' to-day the Injuns driv us out," replied the stranger. "We jest had to git up an' dig out to save our har, an' left all our plunder in the hands of the redskins—spelter, hosses, traps, an' every thing except our rifles. While we were a makin' tracks fur the prairie we come plump agin somebody; an' who do you 'spose it was? It was Silas Roper. We used to be chums, me an' him did, an' have hunted and trapped together many a day up in the Blackfoot country. We found him watchin' the camp of Ned Sanders an' his band of rascals, an' Silas said that if he had just one more man he could kill or captur' the last one of 'em. He told me whar his wagon train was, an' axed me would I come down an' get one of the fellers to lend a hand. He said that Julian Mortimer was plucky an' a good shot, an' he'd like to have him. Mebbe you know him an' can tell me whar' to find him."

"I can. I am Julian Mortimer," replied the boy, proudly.

"You!" The trapper seemed to be first surprised, and then disappointed. He surveyed Julian from head to foot, and then continued: "Sho! I expected to see a *man*. What could a little cub like you do with Sanders and his gang?"

"I am man enough to put a ball into one of them if I get a fair chance," replied Julian. "I know something about Sanders, and have reasons for wishing him put where he will never see me again."

"Wall, you're spunky if you are little, an' spunk is the thing that counts arter all. Mebbe you'll do as well as any body. Will you go?"

"Of course I will, if Silas sent for me."

"'Nough said. Go easy now, an' do jest as you see me do."

The trapper shouldered his rifle and started down the road at a rapid run, with Julian close at

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his heels.

When they passed the first bend in the road a man came out of the bushes, where he had been concealed, and followed after them with noiseless footsteps. Julian did not see him, and neither did he see the dark forms that were hidden behind the trees and rocks on each side of the path; he saw no one except his guide until he came suddenly around the base of a cliff and found himself in front of a camp-fire, beside which lay half-a-dozen rough-looking men stretched out on their blankets.

Julian stopped when this unexpected sight greeted his eyes, but his guide kept on, and seating himself on the ground before the fire, jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the boy, and coolly announced:

"Here he is, fellers. Leastwise, he says that's his name."

Julian stood like one petrified. He looked at his guide, at the trappers that were lying around, and then his gaze wandered toward an object which he had not before noticed. It was Silas Roper, who stood on the opposite side of the fire, with his back to a tree, to which he was securely bound.

One glance at him was enough for Julian, who now saw that he had been duped. He understood the trick that had been played upon him as well as though it had been explained in words, and wondered at his own stupidity. If it had been true, as the strange trapper had told him, that Silas was keeping guard over the camp of the outlaws, and needed just one more man to enable him to effect their capture, would he have sent for an inexperienced person like himself when there were at least a score of old Indian-fighters among the emigrants? Julian told himself that he ought to have known better.

These thoughts passed through his mind in an instant of time, and in his excitement and alarm, forgetting everything except that he was in the presence of enemies, he faced about and took to his heels; but he had not made many steps when the man who had followed him from the camp, and who was none other than Sanders himself, suddenly appeared in his path.

"Not quite so fast!" said he, in savage tones. "You're wuth a heap to us, if you only knowed it, an' we couldn't think of partin' with you so soon."

As the trapper spoke, he twisted the boy's rifle out of his grasp, tore the belt which contained his revolvers and hunting-knife from his waist, and then seized him by the collar and dragged him toward the fire—Julian, who knew that it would be the height of folly to irritate the ruffian, offering no resistance.

"I call this a good night's work," continued Sanders, who seemed to be highly elated. "We've been waitin' fur both them fellers fur more'n a year, an' we've got 'em at last. This is Julian. I knowed him the minute I sot my eyes onto him, and could have picked him out among a million. He hain't changed a bit in his face, but he's grown a heap taller an' stouter, an' p'raps is a leetle livelier on his legs than he was when me an' him run that foot-race eight year ago. Remember that—don't you, youngster?"

"No, I don't," replied Julian. "I never ran a race with you in my life. I never saw you until to-night."

"Didn't! Wol, I've seed you a good many times durin' the last two months, an' have talked with you, too; but I was dressed up like a gentleman then, an' mebbe that's the reason you don't recognize me now. Dick thinks he knows more about you than anybody else, but I reckon he don't."

"Who is Dick?" asked the boy.

"He's the feller who was talkin' to me to-night while you were settin' in that wagon listenin' to us. I didn't know you were about thar until Dick had gone back into the camp, an' then I seed you come down from the wagon. I wanted to get you away from thar, 'cause I was afear'd that if you were in the camp durin' the fight some of the Injuns might send a ball or arrer into you, an' that would have been bad fur me an' my mates, 'cause it would have tuk jest \$5,000 out of our pockets. I didn't see no chance to slip up an' make a pris'ner of you without alarmin' the emigrants, so I come back here an' got one of my men, an' me an' him made up that story we told you. It worked first-rate, didn't it."



JULIAN SUDDENLY FOUND HIMSELF A PRISONER IN THE TRAPPERS' CAMP.—See page [21](#).

"But you have not yet told me who Dick is," said Julian, without answering the outlaw's question. "How did he become acquainted with me; and what reason has he for wishing me put

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out of his way? I heard him say that he would give you a thousand dollars if you would kill me.”

“Them’s his very words. But you needn’t be no ways skeary, ’cause I wouldn’t hurt a hair of your head—not while I can make more money by takin’ good care of you. As fur the reasons Dick’s got fur havin’ somethin’ agin you, that’s his business an’ not mine. Mebbe you’ll know all about it one of these days. But I reckon we might as well be movin’ now. What have you done with the critters, Tom?”

The man who had guided Julian to the camp of the outlaws arose from his seat, disappeared in the bushes, and presently returned leading three horses. At a sign from his captors Julian mounted one of the animals, Sanders sprang upon the back of another, and seizing Julian’s horse by the bridle rode off into the darkness, followed by Tom, who brought up the rear. The boy wondered what the outlaws were going to do with him, and hoped that Sanders, who had shown himself to be quite communicative, might see fit to enlighten him; but the trapper seemed to have relapsed into a meditative mood, for he rode along with his eyes fastened on the horn of his saddle, and for half an hour never opened his lips except to swear at Julian’s horse, which showed a disposition to lag behind, and to answer a challenge from the foremost of a long line of Indians who passed them on the road.

When Julian saw these warriors he thought of the emigrants, and knew that the fight the guide had predicted was not far distant. It was begun that very hour, and the signal for the attack was a single, long-drawn war-whoop, which echoed and re-echoed among the cliffs until it seemed to Julian as if the mountains were literally filled with yelling savages. No sooner had it died away than a chorus of frightful whoops arose from the direction of the camp, accompanied by the rapid discharge of fire-arms and the defiant shouts of the emigrants, which came to Julian’s ears with terrible distinctness. Although he knew that he was at a safe distance from the scene of the conflict, and in the power of men who would protect him from the savages, he could not have been more terrified if he had been standing side by side with the pioneers battling for his life.

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“What do you think of it, anyhow?” asked Sanders, noticing the boy’s agitation. “Never heered sounds like them afore, I reckon.”

“No,” replied Julian, in a trembling voice, “and I never want to hear them again. It is some of your work. Silas says the Indians would not be half as bad as they are, if it were not for white renegades like you and your friends, who are continually spreading dissatisfaction among them, and urging them on to the war-path.”

“Wouldn’t!” exclaims Sanders. “I don’t reckon we’re any wuss than other folks I’ve heern tell on. Thar are men in the world—an’ some of ’em don’t live so very far from here, nuther—who walk with their noses in the air, an’ think themselves better’n everybody else, an’ yet they are bad enough to offer men like me an’ my mates money to put some of their own kin out of the way. We’re jest about as good as the rest if we are outlaws.”

For the next two miles the route pursued by the trappers and their prisoner lay through a deep ravine, where the darkness was so intense that Julian could scarcely see his hand before him, and at every step of the way the reports of fire-arms and the whoops and yells of the combatants rang in his ears. There was a fierce battle going on at the camp, and the boy wondered who would gain the victory.

The question was answered in a few minutes, for when the three horsemen emerged from the valley, and reached the summit of a high hill, over which the road ran, Julian looked back and saw a bright flame, which increased in volume every moment, shining over the tops of the trees. Then he knew that the emigrants had failed in their attempts to beat off their assailants. The savages had succeeded in setting fire to the wagons which formed the barricade, and when that protection was swept away, the battle would be changed to a massacre. The Indians would pour into the camp in overwhelming numbers, and surrounded as the emigrants were on every side, not one of them could hope to escape.

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“Thar’s another wagon train gone up,” said Sanders, with savage exultation. “It’s a pity that every one of them can’t be sarved the same way. Why don’t folks stay in the States whar they belong, instead of coming out here whar they know they ain’t wanted? How would you like to be in that camp, youngster?”

“I don’t know that I should be in a much worse situation than I am now,” replied Julian. “If I were with the emigrants I should probably be killed, and I am not sure that I shall fare any better at the hands of the man into whose power you intend to deliver me.”

“That’s a fact,” said Sanders, reflectively. “If I was in your place, an’ was tuk pris’ner, I believe I’d as soon be among the Injuns as in the hands of Reginald Mortimer.”

“Reginald Mortimer!” repeated Julian, in great amazement.

“He’s the very feller whose name I spoke,” replied Sanders, turning around in his saddle and facing his prisoner.

Julian looked earnestly at the trapper for a few seconds and drew a long breath of relief.

“I begin to understand the matter,” said he. “I knew you were mistaken as to my identity.”

“Which?” exclaimed Sanders.

“I mean that you have got hold of the wrong boy. Because my name happens to be Mortimer, you think I am the one this man Reginald wants; but when he sees me and knows my history, he will release me.”

When Sanders heard this he threw back his head and burst into a loud laugh, in which he was joined by Tom. Julian could not see that he had said anything calculated to excite their mirth, but the outlaws could, and they were highly amused—so much so that it was fully five minutes before they recovered themselves sufficiently to speak.

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"Wal, you are a green one," said Sanders, at length. "The minute Reginald puts his eyes on you he will say that you are the very chap he's been a-lookin' fur so long, an' instead of releasin' you he'll lock you up whar you'll never see daylight again. Maybe he'll do something wuss—I don't know."

"I wouldn't put myself in your place and run the risk," chimed in Tom. "But I'd a heap sooner be rubbed out to onct than be shut up in that rancho of his'n. Sich queer doin's as they do have thar! The ole man can't keep a thing in his house."

"What is the reason?" asked Julian.

"'Cause it's stole from him, that's the reason—money, we'pons, clothes, grub—everything. He can't keep nothing."

"Why doesn't he lock his doors?"

"Haint every door in the rancho got mor'n a dozen bolts an' chains onto it, an' don't he keep three or four big dogs on the outside of the house, an' as many more inside? An' haint he sot up night after night with his pistols in his hands watchin' fur the thieves? It don't do no 'arthly good whatsomever. Things is missin' all the while, an' nobody don't know whar they go to. You see," added Tom, sinking his voice almost to a whisper, "thar's some folks besides the ole man livin' in that ar rancho, an' they don't need doors an' winders. They can go through a keyhole, or a crack an inch wide, and even a solid stone wall can't stop 'em. I slept thar one night, an' if I didn't see ___"

"Hold your grip, Tom," interrupted Sanders, hastily. "Somehow I don't like to hear that thing spoke of. That rancho is a bad place to stop at, that's a fact; an' I'd as soon fight a fair stand-up battle with the biggest grizzly in the mountains as to spend an hour thar arter sundown. I wouldn't be half so bad skeered."

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After saying this Sanders relapsed into silence again, and so did Tom; and Julian, who had heard just enough to excite his curiosity, tried in vain to induce them to continue the conversation. He wanted to learn something about Reginald Mortimer, and know what the trappers had seen in his house that frightened them so badly; but they paid no heed to his questions, and Julian was finally obliged to give it up in despair.

How far he traveled that night he did not know. He was so nearly overcome with fear and anxiety, and so completely absorbed in his speculations concerning the future, that at times he was utterly unconscious of what was going on around him. All he remembered was that for five long hours Sanders kept his horse at a full gallop, leading the way at reckless speed along yawning chasms and under beetling cliffs which hung threateningly over the road, that he became so weary that he reeled about in his saddle, and that finally, when it seemed to him that he could no longer shake off the stupor that was pressing upon him, Sanders suddenly drew rein and announced that they were at their journey's end.

Julian looked up and found himself in an extensive valley, which stretched away to the right and left as far as his eyes could reach. In front of him was a high stone wall, over the top of which he could see the roof of what appeared to be a commodious and comfortable house. The building was evidently intended to serve as a fortification as well as a dwelling, for the walls were thick and provided with loop-holes, and the windows were protected by heavy iron-bound shutters.

All was dark and silent within the rancho; but when Sanders pounded upon the gate with the butt of his revolver, a chorus of hoarse growls arose on the other side of the wall, and a pack of dogs greeted them with furious and long-continued barking. Presently Julian heard a door open and close in the rancho, and saw the light of a lantern shining above the wall. Then came the rattling of chains and the grating of heavy bolts, and a small wicket in the gate swung open and was immediately filled by the bull's-eye of a powerful dark lantern. The person who handled the lantern, whoever he was, could obtain a good view of the horsemen, but they could not see him, for he remained in the shade. He consumed a good deal of time in making his observations, and Sanders began to grow impatient.

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"Wal, Pedro," he growled, "when you get through lookin' at us you'll let us in, won't you? We've got business with the ole man, an' we're in a hurry. I don't want to stay about this place no longer than I can help," he added, in an undertone.

The sound of the outlaw's voice must have satisfied the man as to the identity of his visitors, for he closed the wicket, and after a short delay opened the gate, and Sanders led the way into the rancho.

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CHAPTER IV.

JULIAN FINDS A RELATIVE.



HAD JULIAN been entering a prison, knowing that he was destined to remain there for the term of his natural life, he could not have been more terrified than he was when he found himself surrounded by the gloomy walls of the rancho, and heard the ponderous gate clang behind him. He was playing an involuntary part in a strange and mysterious drama, and the uncertainty of what might be the next scene in which he would be forced to assist, kept him in a terrible state of suspense. But he was blessed with more than an ordinary share of courage, and when the first momentary thrill of terror had passed away, he called it all to his aid, and prepared to meet whatever was in store for him with an undaunted front. He appeared to be much more at his ease than the two trappers, for they had suddenly lost their swaggering, confident air, and were gazing about them uneasily as though they were apprehensive of discovering something they did not care to see.

"He's all grit, haint he?" whispered Sanders, who, as well as his companion, seemed surprised at the captive's coolness and indifference. "He's a genuine Mortimer."

"Mebbe he'll look different afore he has been many hours inside these yere walls," replied Tom, in the same cautious whisper. "Wait till he gets into the house an' sees *him*, as I saw him one night."

"Well, if you're going in you had better dismount, hadn't you? Or do you intend to ride your horses in? Who's this you have here?"

It was Pedro who spoke. He had lingered to fasten the gate, and now came up and elevated his lantern to take a survey of the trappers and their prisoner. When the rays from the bull's-eye fell upon Julian's features he staggered back as if he had been shot, his face grew deadly pale, and his whole frame trembled violently.

"It isn't—it isn't——"

Pedro tried to pronounce some name, but it seemed to stick in his throat.

"No, it isn't *him*," replied Sanders; "it's the other."

"Not Julian?" exclaimed the Mexican, plainly much relieved.

"Yes, Julian, an' nobody else."

"Why, how came he here? Where did you find him?"

"Now, Pedro, you haven't offered us \$5,000 to bring him to you safe an' sound, have you? Them's questions we don't answer for nobody except the ole man. We want to see him, an' purty quick, too."

Sanders dismounted from his horse, and at a sign from him Tom and Julian did the same. Pedro led the way toward the door of the rancho, shaking his head and ejaculating in both Spanish and English, and turning around now and then to look sharply at Julian as if he had not yet been able to make up his mind whether he was a solid flesh and blood boy or only a spirit. He conducted the trappers and their captive into the house, and after pausing to fasten the door, led them through a long, wide hall, the walls of which were hung with old-fashioned pictures and implements of the chase, and ushered them into an elegantly furnished room; and after taking one more good look at Julian, waved his hand toward a couple of chairs and asked the trappers to be seated.

"I will go and tell the governor who you are, and whom you have brought with you," said he.

"Hold your horses!" exclaimed Sanders, suddenly, and in great excitement. "You haint a-goin' to take that light with you an' leave us here in the dark? I wouldn't stay here fur all the money the ole man's got stowed away in that cave of his'n, if it's \$50,000."

"Fifty thousand!" sneered Pedro. "You have queer ideas of wealth. Better say fifty million; and he don't know where it is any more than you do. He'll find out now, however," added the Mexican, with a hasty glance at Julian.

"Wal, put that lantern on the table if you're goin' out," repeated Sanders.

Pedro muttered something about having any thing but an exalted opinion of a man, who, after braving innumerable dangers, was afraid to remain in a dark room for a moment or two, but he complied with the request. He placed the lantern on the table and went out, leaving the trappers and Julian to themselves. The latter sunk helplessly into the nearest chair, while Sanders and his companion, after looking all about the room to make sure that there was no fourth person present, moved up closer together and stood regarding one another with an expression of great amazement on their faces.

"Fifty million!" whispered Sanders, who was the first to speak. "Do you believe it?"

"That's a monstrous heap of money," replied Tom—"more'n the hul State of Californy is worth. But I've allers heern tell that old Reginald had more yaller boys stowed away in this rancho than a wagon train could haul away. If it's a fact, we've made a mistake by——"

He finished the sentence by jerking his thumb over his shoulder toward Julian.

"Sartin, we have," replied Sanders. "We hadn't oughter give him up for no \$5,000. Pedro told us that the ole man don't know whar the money is any more'n we do, but that he would find out all about it now; and when he said that he looked at Julian. Did you notice?"

Tom replied in the affirmative.

"That means that the money is hid somewhars; but it can't be that the boy knows whar it is,

'cause he was so young when he was took away from here. Thar's a heap o' things about this house an' family that I would like to have made clear to me. But I know one thing, an' that is, we can make up on the other feller what we lose on Julian; an' besides, we can watch our chance an' steal the boy out agin when—what's that? Did you hear anything, youngster?"

Sanders' voice trembled as he asked this question, and facing suddenly about he gazed first toward the farther end of the room, and then toward Julian, who had started to his feet, and stood looking the very picture of bewilderment. [33]

"I did," replied the boy, in a scarcely audible whisper; "and I saw something moving those curtains, too."

The walls of the room into which Julian and his captors had been conducted, instead of being plastered or papered, were concealed by crimson hangings which extended from the ceiling to the floor. These were the curtains of which he had spoken.

As he sat listening in a dreamy sort of way to the whispered conversation of the trappers, he heard a grating noise on the other side of the hangings resembling that which would be occasioned by a key turning in a rusty lock.

A bright, dazzling light blazed up for an instant and was extinguished, and then the hangings were pushed aside and a pair of eyes appeared at the opening and looked into the room.

Julian saw a portion of the face to which they belonged and sprang to his feet in great astonishment, for he thought he recognized the features of the emigrant whose conversation with Sanders he had overheard. But the face was withdrawn almost as soon as it appeared, and Julian was not allowed a second look.

"What did you see?" cried Sanders, his face ghastly pale, and the hand which rested on the lock of his rifle trembling visibly.

"I saw some one looking in here," replied Julian, "and it was the same man who offered you a thousand dollars to put me out of the way."

"Dick Mortimer!" Sanders almost shrieked.

The expression of terror on his face gave way instantly to a look of profound astonishment. He dropped the butt of his rifle heavily to the floor, and Tom uttered a long-drawn whistle.

The two men stared vacantly at one another for a moment, and then with a common impulse sprang across the room and tore aside the hangings. [34]

There was no one there. Nothing was revealed except the solid stone wall which formed that side of the room. Where could the emigrant have gone? He certainly had not come into the room, and neither could he have retreated through the wall. Julian stood transfixed.

"I know I saw him there," said he, as soon as he could speak. "It beats me where he could have gone so suddenly."

"That's nothing," replied Sanders. "You'll be beat wuss than this if you stay in this rancho all night, I can tell you that."

But the trapper's actions indicated that it was something, after all, for as soon as he had satisfied himself that the emigrant had disappeared, he dropped the hangings as if they had been coals of fire, and snatching the lantern from the table retreated toward the door with all possible haste, with Tom close at his heels. Nor was Julian far behind the trappers when they reached the hall.

He did not wonder now that they were impatient to transact their business and leave the house. He would have been glad to leave it himself. His captors had told him that there were some "queer doings" in that rancho. Did they refer to scenes like this? Were people who, like this emigrant, had no business there, in the habit of walking about the house every night, and of vanishing after such a bewildering fashion when discovered; and was he to be compelled to remain there a witness to such proceedings.

The boy trembled at the thought. He was not superstitious. He knew that he had seen the face of a man peeping out from behind the hangings, and he believed, too, that his sudden and mysterious disappearance could be explained, and that there was nothing supernatural about it; but nevertheless he resolved that as long as he was allowed the free use of his feet he would not remain in a dark room in that house without company.

When the trappers retreated into the hall he went with them, and like them, kept his back turned toward the room, and impatiently awaited Pedro's return. Nor was he obliged to wait long. [35]

In a few seconds he heard a door open and close, a light flashed into the hall, and two men came hurrying toward him. One of them was Pedro, and the other was a tall, foreign-looking gentleman, in dressing-gown and slippers, who came along with a smile on his face, and his hand outstretched, as if about to greet some friend from whom he had long been separated.

Upon reaching Julian's side he threw his arms around him and clasped him in a most affectionate embrace—to which the boy submitted without uttering a word. He had not expected such a reception as this; and, if one might judge by the expression on the faces of the trappers, they had not expected it either. Their underjaws dropped down, they stared at one another for a moment, and then Tom gave utterance to another long-drawn whistle, and Sanders pounded the floor with the butt of his rifle.

"Julian! Julian! is it possible that you have returned at last?" cried the gentleman, holding the boy off at arm's length for a moment, and then straining him to his breast once more. "Don't you know your Uncle Reginald?"

"It's him sure enough, ain't it?" asked Sanders.

"Of course it is he," replied the owner of the rancho, still clinging to Julian as if he never

meant to let him go again. "I should have recognized him if I had met him in Asia. No one but a Mortimer could ever boast of such a face as that. Where did you find him? Julian, why don't you tell me that you are glad to see me?"

"I say, gov'nor," interrupted Sanders, "couldn't he talk to you jest as well arter we are gone? Me an' my pardner are in a monstrous hurry. How about them \$5,000?"

"I will place it in your hands this moment. Come with me."

Seizing Julian by the hand, Reginald Mortimer—for that was the gentleman's name—led the way along the hall, and into a room which the prisoner saw was used as a sleeping apartment, for there was the bed from which this man, who claimed to be his uncle, had just arisen. [36]

Conducting the boy to a seat on the sofa, and leaving the trappers to stand or sit as suited their fancy, the gentleman produced a bunch of keys from his desk and unlocked a strong box which was standing at the head of his bed.

When the lid was thrown back Julian opened his eyes and leaned forward to obtain a nearer view of the contents of the box.

Such a sight he had never seen before. The box was literally filled with gold coin—some of it packed away in little drawers, and the rest tied up in canvas bags. Two of these bags the owner lifted out of the box and handed to the trappers, saying:

"There is the money I promised to give you if you succeeded in restoring Julian to me safe and sound. I give you my hearty thanks beside, for you have rendered me a most important service. Pedro, show Sanders and his friend to the best room in the house."

"Nary time, if *you* please!" exclaimed the trapper, with a frightened look. "We'll feel a heap better, an' sleep a sight easier, if we camp in the mountains."

"But I want to talk to you about Julian. Where did you find him?"

"We'll tell you all about that when we bring the other feller to you."

"The other fellow?"

"Yes; that is, if we can come to tarms."

"Whom do you mean?"

"Silas Roper. Say another five thousand fur him, an' we'll have him here to-morrow bright an' arly."

"Silas Roper!" exclaimed the gentleman, gleefully. "Am I not in luck? Certainly, I say it; bring him immediately."

"It's a bargain. Come on, Tom."

"Well, go, if you must, and remember that although I am under obligations to you now, I shall be vastly more your debtor when you give that man into my hands. My plans are working splendidly." [37]

When the door had closed behind the trappers Reginald Mortimer locked his strong box and once more turned toward Julian. The latter, who since his arrival at the rancho had moved like one in a dream, aroused himself by a strong effort and looked squarely into the man's face. He gazed at him a moment, and then sprung to his feet with a cry of alarm and ran toward the door.

CHAPTER V. JULIAN'S HOME.



WE HAVE said that Julian Mortimer was the hero of our story, and in order that you may understand what brought him to the mountains, and how it came that several persons whom he believed he had never seen before should take so deep an interest in him, we must go back and relate some events that transpired previous to the beginning of our story.

On the banks of the Missouri River, about fifty miles below St. Joseph, was a small clearing, in which stood a dilapidated cabin inhabited by the family of John Bowles. It was a gloomy-looking place, and that was not to be wondered at, for Jack, as he was familiarly called, was not the man to waste any of his time or money in beautifying his home. Both were much too precious for that. His time was spent in hunting and trapping, and his money—what little he earned—was devoted to the purchase of bad whisky, of which he was exceedingly fond. He was a tall, heavy, broad-shouldered man, and looked the very impersonation of laziness. His two boys, Jake and Tom, were chips of the old block, and his wife was a sharp-featured, ill-tempered woman of wonderful strength and daring, and it was said that in a fair rough-and-tumble fight—for things came to that sometimes in the cabin of Mr. Bowles—she was more than a match for her redoubtable husband.

The neighboring settlers had but little to do with Jack. They remarked that his family went clothed in rags from one year's end to another; that they were sometimes destitute of even the common necessities of life; and that Jack hunted early and late and spent every cent he made at the grocery at "The Corners." But one stormy night a stranger was seen to ride rapidly away from the cabin, and from that hour things seemed to take a turn for the better with Jack Bowles. He and his family appeared in brand new suits of clothing; the boys sported silver-mounted rifles in place of the rusty single-barreled shot-guns in which they had before taken so much delight; a neighbor, who knew something of the use of carpenters' tools, was employed to patch up the cabin, and Jack gave up hunting and spent his days and nights in lounging about the grocery, drinking whisky and showing large rolls of bills and handfuls of gold and silver. The settlers noticed, too, that the cabin had an inmate whom they had never seen before—a slender, fair-haired boy about eight years of age, who seemed to be altogether out of his element there. And they told one another also that Jack and his wife had reasons for wishing to keep him out of sight as much as possible, for whenever any one passed the clearing the boy would be summoned into the house by the shrill voice of Mrs. Bowles, and the door closed upon him. [39]

From this they naturally concluded that the boy and the money Jack spent so freely were in some way connected; and, when hard pressed, Jack acknowledged that such was the fact. He said that the boy's name was Julian Mortimer; that he had been brought to the cabin by a stranger who wished to leave him there for a month or two while he went on a business tour to New Orleans; and that he had paid a few weeks' board for him in advance. There was one thing, however, that Jack did not see fit to disclose, and that was that the stranger had cautioned him to keep strict watch over the boy, and under no circumstances to allow him far out of his sight. For awhile the settlers wondered greatly at this story; but it soon ceased to be the topic of conversation, and finally even the circumstance of the stranger's visit was forgotten.

Weeks grew into months, and months into years, and Julian Mortimer was still an inmate of Jack Bowles' cabin, which he had learned to call home. The money that had been paid for his board had long ago been squandered at The Corners, and Jack had been obliged to overhaul his long-neglected implements of the chase, and resume his old occupation of hunting and trapping. [40]

The cabin was in a worse condition now than it was before it was repaired. It was built of rough, unhewn logs, and contained but one room. It had no floor—the ground, which had been trampled upon until it was as hard as a rock, answering that purpose. The only furniture it could boast of were two miserable beds, and a three-legged pine table that had been pushed against the wall to enable it to retain its upright position. As for chairs, there were none; the places of these useful articles being supplied with boxes and empty nail-kegs. There were no windows in the cabin, all the light and air being admitted through the door, which was allowed to stand open during the coldest days in winter.

A ladder on one side of the room led to the loft where Julian slept. It was the most uncomfortable part of the house, for some of the boards at the gable-end had fallen off, the shingles on the roof were loose, and during a storm the rain and sleet rattled down on his hard pillow. There was nothing inviting about Julian's bed, for it was simply a pile of husks, with a large gunny sack, a tattered blanket, and one or two ragged coats spread over it. But he always went to that bed aching in every muscle after his hard day's work, and slept as soundly there, in spite of the cold wind and rattling shingles, as if it had been a couch of down.

One end of the cabin was occupied by an immense fire-place, with a stick chimney, which leaned away from the building as if about to topple over. A fire was burning brightly on the hearth one cold afternoon in March, and before it stood Mrs. Bowles, watching some venison steaks that were broiling on the coals, and smoking a short cob pipe, which was held firmly between her teeth. She was angry—that was plain enough to be seen—and, indeed, it would have been difficult to find her in any other mood. She thought she had good reasons for showing her temper occasionally, for "that Julian," as she called the household drudge, was the plague of her life. More than half an hour ago she had sent him out after firewood, and although she had called him three times, and promised to dust his jacket for him the moment he came within reach of her arm—a threat that never failed to quicken the pace of her sons—he had not yet returned. [41]

watched the broiling steaks for a few minutes, listening the while for the sound of footsteps, and then went to the door, removed the pipe from her mouth, threw back her head and shrieked:

"You, Julian! Have you gone clear to St. Joe arter that firewood?"

This time her shrill tones reached the ears of a young fellow about sixteen years of age, who was at work in the edge of the woods at a short distance from the house. We ought rather to say that he *had* been at work, and was resting from his labor, leaning on his ax and gazing thoughtfully at the ground when the woman's sharp voice broke in upon his reverie.

"There it is again," said he, with a long-drawn sigh, lifting his ax and resuming his work. "It's Julian! Julian! from morning until night. Julian has to do everything that is done on the farm. I shouldn't mind the work so much if they would only give me some warm clothes and say a kind word to me now and then; but they won't do it. Look at that," he added, pausing, with his ax suspended in the air, and gazing down at his boots, which were so sadly out of repair that they afforded his feet but very little protection from the mud, and none whatever from the sharp, biting air. "This coat is so thin that the wind blows right through it; and as for this hat—well, perhaps it is better than none at all, but not much. These are the only clothes I have in the world, and they are the best I have owned since I came to this place eight years ago. I have money enough to buy others, but I dare not do it, for fear that they will be taken away from me and given to that lazy Jake or Tom. And as for the treatment I receive—why, there isn't a dog on the place so badly abused. I suppose I shall get another beating now for keeping Mrs. Bowles waiting for this firewood."

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When Julian had finished his soliloquy and his chopping, he threw down his ax, and shouldering one of the heavy back-logs he had cut, made his way slowly toward the house. Mrs. Bowles was too busily engaged with her preparations for supper to think of the rawhide which she had taken from its accustomed nail behind the door and laid upon the table close at her side, and Julian succeeded in transferring his pile of wood from the edge of the clearing to the cabin without attracting her attention. This done, his work for the night was over, and he was at liberty to attend to a little business of his own.

Drawing on a pair of tattered gloves he left the house, and walking briskly past the corn-cribs, struck into the path that led through the woods to The Corners, turning his head now and then to make sure that there was no one observing his movements. Had he taken pains to look closely at one of the corn-cribs as he went past it, he would have discovered two pairs of eyes peering through an opening over the door; and had he glanced behind him when he reached the cover of the woods, he would have seen the door fly open and two figures spring out and run swiftly along the path in pursuit of him.

Julian had set out to visit his traps. Minks, foxes and raccoons were abundant in the woods about the clearing, and he was very expert in taking them. During the last two winters he had earned a sum of money that was quite a respectable fortune in his eyes; and more than that, he had purchased an excellent rifle, a supply of ammunition and a fine young horse, which he intended should some day carry him miles and miles out of the reach of Mrs. Bowles' rawhide.

The rifle, together with his money and stock of furs, was concealed where no one would ever think of looking for it; but the horse was claimed by Tom Bowles, Jack's younger son, who took possession of the animal as soon as Julian brought him home. But that was a matter that did not trouble our hero. Of course he was denied the pleasure of riding the horse—for Jake and Tom followed the example set them by their parents, and tyrannized over Julian in every possible way—but he knew where to find him when he wanted him; and when he was ready to undertake the journey he had been planning and thinking about, he intended to take possession of him without consulting Tom Bowles or any one else.

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On the day that Julian first brought the horse home he created quite a commotion in the Bowles family. When he told Jack, in the presence of his wife and sons, that the animal was his own private property, and that he had paid \$75 in cash for him, the inquiry very naturally arose, where did the money come from? That was a matter that Julian did not care to talk about. If he replied that he had received it for the furs he had trapped, he knew that Jack and his boys would hunt the woods over until they found his dead-falls, and then rob and destroy them.

He declined to enlighten them on this point, and that created an uproar at once. Jack swore lustily; Mrs. Bowles flourished her rawhide; Tom took charge of the horse and led him off to the stable; and Jake threatened to black his eye for him. But Julian, who was not one of the sort who are easily frightened, remained firm, and Jack and his boys were compelled to change their tactics and resort to strategy.

They told one another that they would keep a sharp eye on all Julian's movements, and follow him wherever he went; and if they did not find out what he did in the woods while he was there, and what it was that took him away from home so regularly every night and morning, they would know the reason why.

But even this plan failed, for Julian was always on the alert and could not be caught napping. His ears, as sharp as an Indian's, always told him when he was followed. On such occasions he would stroll carelessly about through the woods, as if he had no particular object in view, and finally make his way home again and go to work. Then Tom and Jake would be angrier than ever, and Julian was certain to suffer for his watchfulness.

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On this particular evening, however, Julian was not as careful as usual. The plans he had been so long maturing were almost ready to carry into execution, and he was so completely wrapped up in his glorious anticipations concerning the future that he did not hear the light footsteps of Jake and Tom as they dodged through the bushes behind him.

He walked straight to the creek, and from the force of long habit, paused on the bank to look

about him. Having satisfied himself that there was no one in sight, he sprung into the bed of the stream, and looking under the overhanging roots of a beech where he had set one of his traps, discovered a large mink caught by one of his hind feet.

A blow on the head with a stick stilled the animal, and after resetting and baiting the trap, Julian picked up his prize, and rejoicing in the thought that the skin of the mink would bring \$2 more to be added to his little fortune, hurried on up the creek.

For an hour Julian continued his walk, stopping now and then to bait and set a trap that had been sprung by some animal too cunning to be caught, or to take a fox, mink or raccoon out of another, and finally he stopped at the foot of a precipitous cliff with \$13 worth of furs thrown over his shoulder—not a bad afternoon’s work for a trapper of his years.

He now became more cautious than ever in his movements. His first care was to convince himself that there was no one following him; and in order to set his fears on this score at rest, he dropped his game and ran back along the bank of the creek, peering through the trees in every direction, and passing so close to Tom and Jake, who had thrown themselves behind a log to escape discovery, that he could have touched them. But he saw no one, and believing himself to be alone in the woods, he once more shouldered his game and made his way up the cliff until he reached a thicket of bushes that grew near the summit. [45]

Here he paused, and began pulling away the leaves with his hands, presently disclosing to view a small door which had been set into the face of the cliff. The opening of the door revealed what appeared to be the mouth of a cave, extending down into the ground. Julian threw in his foxes and minks one after the other, and then crawled in himself and closed the door after him.



CHAPTER VI.

JULIAN MEETS A STRANGER.



JULIAN'S first move, after he had shut the door, was to strike a match, and his second to light a candle which he took from a shelf close at hand. As the light blazed up, he held it above his head and took a survey of the cave, or, as he called it, his "store-house." It was a very small one—not more than six feet square—but it was large enough to contain all Julian's earthly possessions. All that could be seen was a quantity of furs, some already cured and neatly baled up, and others hanging against the walls stretched upon boards and frames to dry; but there were other valuable articles stowed away there, and as soon as Julian had glanced about the room to see that nothing had been disturbed during his absence, he placed his candle on the floor and proceeded to bring them to light.

The walls, floor and ceiling of the room were composed of small saplings, and two of these saplings concealed treasures that were of more value to Julian than all his furs. One of them was in the floor, and when it had been lifted out of its place by the edge of a hatchet, some of the young trapper's wealth, which would have made Jake and Tom open their eyes in amazement could they have seen it, was disclosed to view.

It consisted of a silver-mounted rifle, inclosed in a strong canvas bag to protect it from the damp and dirt, a hunting-knife, an ornamented powder-horn and a fawn-skin bullet-pouch, both the latter filled with ammunition.

Julian looked at these articles long and lovingly. He had come by them honestly—they were the first valuables he had ever owned, and he had worked so hard for them! He took the rifle from its case, drew it up to his shoulder and glanced along the clean brown barrel, as if drawing a bead on an imaginary deer's head, held it in a dozen different positions to allow the light to shine on the silver mountings, and finally returned it, with all the accouterments, to its hiding-place, and went to look after his other treasures. He removed one of the saplings that formed the ceiling, thrust his arm into the opening and drew out a small tin box, which contained money to the amount of \$80—the proceeds of two winters' work at trapping. Julian ran hastily over the bills to make sure that they were all there, then put back the box, returned the sapling to its place, and drawing his knife from his pocket sat down to remove the skins from the animals he had just captured.

"I'm rich!" he exclaimed, looking about him with a smile of satisfaction. "Counting in my money and what my horse, hunting rig and hunting furs are worth, I have at least \$250. I have purchased everything I need, and some fine, frosty morning, when Mrs. Bowles calls for 'you, Julian,' to get up and build the fire, he won't answer. He'll be miles away, and be making quick tracks for the Rocky Mountains. I only wish I was there now. There's where I came from when I was brought to Jack Bowles' house. I just know it was, because I can remember of hearing people talk of going over the mountains to California, and I know, too, that there were gold diggings on my father's farm, or rancho, I believe he called it. I'm going to try to find my father when I get there, and if I ever see him I shall know him."

Julian's thoughts ran on in this channel while he was busy with his knife, and in half an hour the skins had all been stretched, and the young trapper was ready to return to the miserable hovel he called home. He extinguished his candle, crawled out of the cave, and after concealing the door by piling leaves against it, hurried down the bluff and into the woods, happy in the belief that no one was the wiser for what he had done; but no sooner had he disappeared than Jake and Tom Bowles came out of the bushes in which they had been hidden, and clambered up the cliff toward Julian's store-house.

It was rapidly growing dark, and Julian, anxious to reach the cabin before his absence was discovered, broke into a rapid run, which he never slackened until he reached the road leading from The Corners to the clearing. There he encountered a stranger, who, as he came out of the bushes, accosted him with:

"Hold on a minute, my lad. I believe I am a little out of my reckoning, and perhaps you can set me right."

Julian stopped and looked at the man. He could not get so much as even a glimpse of his face, for the broad felt hat he wore was pulled down over his forehead, and his heavy muffler was drawn up so high that nothing but his eyes could be seen; but the boy at once put him down as a gentleman, for he was dressed in broadcloth, and wore fine boots and fur gloves. Julian looked at his neat dress, and then at his own tattered garments, and drew his coat about him and folded his arms over it to hide it from the stranger's gaze.

"Is there a hotel about here?" continued the gentleman, approaching the place where Julian was standing.

"No, sir," was the reply; "none nearer than The Corners, and that's ten miles away."

"Is there no dwelling-house near?"

"There is a shanty about a mile distant belonging to Jack Bowles, but I wouldn't advise you to go there."

"Then I am on the right road after all," said the stranger, with a sigh of relief. "Jack Bowles! He's just the man I want to see. I have some important business with him. He can accommodate me with a bed and supper, can he not?"

"He can give you some corn bread and venison, but as for a *bed*, that's a thing he doesn't keep in his house. If you happen to have half a dollar in your pocket, however, he will stow you away

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somewhere. Jack will do almost anything for half a dollar. Why, what's the matter, sir?"

It was no wonder that Julian asked this question, for the gentleman, who had now advanced quite near to him, took just one glance at his face, and started back as if he had seen some frightful apparition. He pushed his hat back from his forehead, pulled his muffler down from his face, and stared at Julian as if he meant to look him through. The boy was astonished at his behavior, and he would have been still more astonished if he had been able to look far enough into the future to see all that was to grow out of this meeting.

"Boy!" exclaimed the gentleman, in a voice which his agitation rendered almost indistinct, "who are you? What's your name?"

"Julian Mortimer," replied our hero.

"Julian! Julian Mortimer!" repeated the man, as if he could scarcely believe his ears. "It cannot be possible. Why, boy, you're just—ahem! I mean—what a striking resemblance."

The stranger spoke these last words hurriedly, and then, as if recollecting himself, hastily pulled his hat down over his forehead again, and once more concealed his face with his muffler—all except his eyes, which he kept fastened upon Julian.

"No doubt you think I act very strangely," he continued, after a moment's pause, "and perhaps I do, but the truth of the matter is, you look so much like a young friend of mine—a relative, in fact—that for a moment I was almost sure you were he. But, of course, you can't be, for he is dead—been dead eight years. If you are ready we will go on."

Julian was forced to be contented with this explanation, but he was not quite satisfied with it. It was made in a bungling, hesitating manner, as if the man were thinking about one thing and talking about another. More than that, the excitement he had exhibited on the first meeting with Julian seemed to increase the longer he looked at him; and now and then he rubbed his gloved hands together as if he were meditating upon something that afforded him infinite pleasure. He continued to watch the boy out of the corner of his eye, and finally inquired:

"Is this man Bowles, of whom you spoke, your father?"

"No, sir," replied Joe, emphatically. "I live with him, but he is no relative of mine. My father, as I remember him, was a different sort of man altogether."

"Eh!" ejaculated the stranger, with a start. "As you remember him? Ah! he is dead, then?"

"Not that I know of, sir. He was alive and well the last time I saw him. I'll see him again in a few weeks."

"Where is he?"

"Out West. He owns a rancho near the mountains with a gold mine on it."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because I can't help myself. I didn't come here of my own free will, but was brought by one who will have good cause to remember me if I meet him again when I become a man."

"Do you think you would know him if you should see him again?" asked the stranger, looking sharply at Julian, and putting his hat lower over his eyes.

"I am quite sure I should. He stole me away from my home and brought me here; but why he did it I can't tell. I don't intend to stay any longer, if it would do him any good to know it. I've got a good horse and rifle, and plenty of money, and I am going to leave here in a few days and go back to the mountains where I belong, and I shall not ask Jack Bowles' consent, either."

"Do you think he would oppose it?"

"I know he would. He would beat me half to death, or his wife would, and lock me up in the smoke-house till I promised never to think of such a thing again. I'm going to run away, and by the time he misses me I shall be a long distance out of his reach."

The man listened attentively to all Julian had to say, and when the latter ceased speaking he placed his hands behind his back, fastened his eyes on the ground, and walked along as if he were in a brown study. He did not look up until they reached the door of the cabin where Jack Bowles, who had just finished his supper, stood smoking his cob pipe.

"Wal, who have ye got thar?" was his surly greeting.

"A gentleman who wishes to find a place to stay all night," replied Julian.

"Why don't he toddle on and find it, then?" growled Jack. "I ain't a hinderin' him, be I? He can't stop here. I don't keep a hotel to take in every Tom, Dick and Harry that comes along. Wal, I be dog-gone!"

Jack suddenly took his pipe from his mouth, and stepping hastily up to the stranger, bent forward and peered into his face. Then something that was intended for a smile of recognition overspread his own countenance, and extending his hand with as cordial an air as he could assume, he continued:

"I allowed I had seed ye somewhar afore, Mr.—eh?"

Jack paused before the name he had been about to pronounce escaped his lips, interrupted by a hasty gesture from the stranger, who glanced toward Julian and raised his hand warningly.

"You are mistaken, my friend," said he, blandly. "You have never seen me before, but I hope the fact that I am a stranger to you will not prevent you from extending your hospitality to me for the night."

Jack stared, took a few long, deliberate pulls at his pipe, looked first at the eaves of the cabin, then down at the ground, and finally turned to Julian for an explanation.

"What's he tryin' to get through hisself?" he asked.

"He wants something to eat and a bed to sleep in," replied the boy.

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"Oh! Why didn't he say so, then? Wal, stranger, I reckon we can hang ye up somewhar," added Jack, who had seen and comprehended the warning gesture; "although, as I told ye afore, we don't make a business of takin' in every tramp that comes along. Ye see, in a new country like this it ain't safe. Ole woman, make up another batch of them corn-dodgers an' fry a slice or two of that bar's meat. Julian, what be ye a standin' thar gapin' at? Cl'ar yerself. Come in, stranger—come in an' set down."

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Julian moved around the corner of the cabin and remained out of sight until he heard Mrs. Bowles laying the table for the guest, and then he also entered.

It was not a very sociable party he found in the house. Mrs. Bowles was moving about preparing the corn-dodgers and bear meat; the visitor, who had removed his overcoat and muffler, was comfortably seated on a nail-keg in a dark corner of the room, and Jack Bowles sat in front of the fire, his elbows resting on his knees and his hat pulled down over his eyes, which were slowly moving over the stranger's person and scrutinizing his dress and ornaments.

Julian noticed that his gaze rested long on the watch chain that hung across the stranger's vest, and on the diamond ring that glittered on his finger, and the expression he saw on Jack's face alarmed him and made him wish most sincerely that he had never conducted the gentleman to the cabin.

No one spoke until supper was ready, and then the guest was invited to "draw up and pitch in." Julian tried to obtain a glimpse of his features as he came out of his dark corner, but the man, as if guessing his intention, kept his head turned away from him and took his seat at the table with his back to the fire, so that his face still remained in the shadow.

While he was busy with his corn-dodgers and bear meat, Jake and Tom came in. They glanced curiously at the guest, and Tom seated himself beside the fire opposite Julian, whom he regarded with a triumphant smile, while Jake went to one of the beds that stood in the room and carefully hid something under the pillows. Julian afterward recalled the movements of these two worthies, and wondered why his suspicions had not been aroused.

When the stranger had satisfied his appetite, the three boys, at a sign from Mrs. Bowles, sat down and made a very light meal of that which was left, and no sooner had they arisen from the table than they received a second signal from Mr. Bowles, who pointed with his thumb over his shoulder toward that part of the room in which the beds were situated.

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The boys all obeyed the order, but one of them, at least, had no intention of going to sleep. It was Julian, who, as he slowly mounted the ladder that led to the loft, told himself that he was in some way connected with the stranger's visit to the cabin, and that he would learn something about the matter before morning, if there was any way for him to accomplish his object. He stretched himself upon his hard bed, and drawing one of the coats over his shoulders, waited impatiently to see what was going to happen.

For half an hour all was still; then some one began to move softly about the cabin, a step was heard on the ladder, and a light flashed upon the rafters over Julian's head.

Presently a hand grasping a tallow dip appeared above the edge of the loft, closely followed by the grizzly head and broad shoulders of Jack Bowles, who stopped when he reached the top of the ladder and gazed at our hero long and earnestly.

Julian was wide awake, and through his half-closed eyelids could see every move Jack made, but the latter, believing him to be fast asleep, descended the ladder and joined his guest.

"My suspicions are confirmed," soliloquized Julian. "They intend to talk upon some subject that they don't want me to know anything about. I am going to learn something now. Perhaps I shall find out who I am and where my father is, and why I was brought here. What if this man should prove to be my father, who, for reasons of his own, does not wish to reveal himself to me?"

Julian, highly excited over this thought, rolled noiselessly off the bed upon the floor, crept to the edge of the loft, and looked over into the room below. Jack had just placed his candle on the table, and was approaching his guest with outstretched hand.

"Now, then, Mr. Mortimer," said he, "the boy is out of the way fur the night, an' thar's no use in settin' back thar away from the fire. Draw up an' give us a shake."

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"*Mr. Mortimer!*" was Julian's mental ejaculation.

His heart seemed to stop beating. He opened his eyes to their widest extent and kept them fastened upon the stranger, who pulled his nail-keg in front of the fire and seated himself upon it.

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CHAPTER VII.

THE FLIGHT.



WHEN THE gentleman came out of his dark corner, and the light of the candle fell upon his features, Julian took a good look at him, and an expression of great disappointment settled on his face.

"Whoever he is, he is not my father," said he, to himself, "for my father had gray hair. This man is a stranger, and as it would be a mean piece of business in me to stay here and listen to his conversation I will crawl back to my pile of husks and go to sleep."

Acting upon this resolution Julian began a slow and cautious retreat; but he had not gone far when a thought struck him, and he crept back to the edge of the loft and looked over into the room again.

"Jack called him *Mr. Mortimer*," soliloquized the boy, "and I should like to know who and what he is. The manner in which he acted when I met him in the woods makes me believe that he has seen me before, and that he knows something about me that he wishes to keep hidden from me. I have a good deal at stake and it will do no harm to listen a while anyhow."

It was a very handsome face that Julian's eyes rested upon, and one that he did not think he should ever forget. Although the man's language indicated that he was an American, his features had a decided Spanish cast. His face was dark and wore a haughty expression, his hair was long and waving, and like his mustache and goatee, was as black as midnight. Julian looked at him attentively, and was surprised to see that he shook hands with Mr. Bowles and his wife, as if they were old acquaintances whom he was glad to meet once more.

"It's a long time since I've seed ye, Mr. Mortimer, but I allowed I knowed ye as soon as I clapped my eyes onto ye," said Jack, drawing his nail-keg a little closer to the side of his guest. [56]

"And you came very near making a mess of it, too," replied the latter, with some impatience in his tones. "I believe that boy suspects me—he looked at me as if he did—and I would not have him know who I am for the world. You're sure he is asleep?"

"Sartin, 'cause I went up to look. We've kept him safe an' sound fur ye, 'cordin' to orders, hain't we?"

"An' now you have come to take him away from us—I jest know ye have," exclaimed Mrs. Bowles, raising the corner of her tattered apron to her left eye. "I don't know how I can let him go, 'cause my heart's awfully sot onto that poor, motherless boy."

"We've done our level best by him," chimed in Jack. "Ye told us when ye brought him here that he was a gentleman, an' a gentleman's son, an' we've treated him like one."

"When *he* brought me here," repeated Julian, to himself; and it was only by a great exercise of will that he refrained from speaking the words aloud.

He became highly excited at once. Mr. Mortimer was the one who had stolen him away from his home and delivered him up to the tender mercies of Jack Bowles and his wife—the very man of all others he most wished to see. He had been a long time coming, almost eight years, and now that he had arrived, Julian found that he was destined to become better acquainted with him than he cared to be. He watched the guest more closely than ever, carefully scrutinizing his features in order to fix them in his memory. He hoped to meet him some day under different circumstances.

"He haint never had no work to do, an' we never struck him a lick in our lives," continued Jack. "We've treated him better'n our own boys. He's got a good hoss of his own, an' I've been a feedin' it outen my corn ever since he owned it, an' never axed him even to bring in an armful of wood to pay for it. An' my boys do say that he's got a heap of money laid up somewhars. If ye have come to take him away I reckon ye'll do the handsome thing by us." [57]

"My friends," interrupted the guest, as soon as he saw a chance to speak, "I know all about Julian, for I have talked with him. I know what he has got and what he intends to do. Have you ever told him anything about his parentage?"

"Nary word," replied Jack.

"Then I wonder how it is that he knows so much about it. He knows that his home is near the mountains; that he was stolen away from it, and that he has a father there. More than that he intends to go back there very soon, and is laying his plans to run away from you."

"Wal, I never heered the beat in all my born days!" exclaimed Mrs. Bowles, involuntarily extending her hand toward the rawhide which hung on the nail behind the door. "I'll give him the best kind of a whoppin' in the mornin'. I'll beat him half to— What should the poor, dear boy want to run away from his best friends fur?"

"The leetle brat—the ongrateful rascal!" said Mr. Bowles. "That's why he's bought that ar hoss; an' that's why he's been a huntin' an' trappin' so steady—to earn money to run away from us, is it? I'll larn him."

And Jack turned around on his nail-keg and looked so savagely toward the loft, where Julian was supposed to be slumbering, that the eavesdropper was greatly alarmed, and crouched closer to the floor and trembled in every limb, as if he already felt the stinging blows of the rawhide.

"It seems that my visit was most opportune," continued the stranger. "If I had arrived a day or two later I might not have found Julian here. He would probably have been on his way to the mountains; and if he had by any accident succeeded in finding his old home, all my plans, which I have spent long years in maturing, would have been ruined. I came here to remove him from your

care. It appears that certain persons, who are very much interested in him, and who have been searching for him high and low ever since I brought him here, have by some means discovered his hiding-place, and it is necessary that I should remove him farther out of their reach. I shall take him to South America."

"What's that? Is it fur from here?" asked Jack.

"It is a long distance. I came down the river from St. Joseph in a flatboat," added the visitor. "I found that the captain is a man who will do anything for money, and I have arranged with him to carry us to New Orleans. It will take us a long time to accomplish the journey, but we cannot be as easily followed as we could if we went by steamer. If you will accompany me I will pay you well for your services. I can say that the boy is a lunatic and that you are his keeper."

"'Nough said!" exclaimed Jack. "I'm jest the man to watch him."

"But you must not watch him too closely," said Mr. Mortimer earnestly. "If he should accidentally fall overboard during the journey it would not make any difference in your pay."

"In course not," replied Jack, with a meaning glitter in his eye. "If he gets one of them ar' crazy spells onto him some dark night an' jumps into the river, why—then—"

"Why then you ought to be handsomely rewarded for your faithful services while in my employ, and discharged."

"Perzactly. Whar is this yere flatboat now?"

"I left her about twenty miles up the river. I told the captain to lay up for a few hours until I could have time to come down here and transact my business with you. She will be along about noon to-morrow. Have everything ready so that we can hail her, and step on board without an instant's delay."

"I don't fur the life o' me see how I can let him go—my heart is so sot onto him," sighed Mrs. Bowles, once more raising her apron to her eyes. "He do save me a heap o' steps, an' he's a monstrous good hand to cut wood an' build fires o' frosty mornin's."

"But he hain't never had it to do," interrupted Jack, who, for reasons of his own, thought it best to impress upon the mind of his guest that Julian's life under his roof had been one continual round of ease and enjoyment. "We allers makes our own boys roll out o' mornin's and cut wood, an' Julian can lay in his comfortable bed, as snug as a bug in a rug, an' snooze as long as he pleases. The reason we've tuk sich good care of him is, 'cause we thought ye sot store by him. Ye're some kin to him, I reckon. Ye're names is alike."

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"That is a matter that does not interest you," answered the guest sharply. "I pay you to work for me, and not to ask questions."

"I didn't mean no offense. But when I see a man like yerself totin' a boy about the country, an' leavin' him hid in a place like this fur eight year, an' then huntin' him up agin, an' runnin' him off to some other place, an' hear ye say that if he falls into the river an' gets drowned ye won't be no ways sorry fur it, I think there's something up, don't I? Ye don't do that fur nothing; an' since the boy ain't ole enough to be a standin' atween ye an' a woman, I naterally conclude that he stands atween ye an' money. Howsomever, it hain't no consarn of mine. I know which side of my corn-dodger's got the lasses onto it."

"Pap! I say pap!" suddenly cried a voice from one of the beds. "Ye think yer sharp, ye an that feller do, but ye ain't so sharp as ye might be."

"Hush yer noise, boy, an' speak when ye're spoken to," exclaimed Jack angrily. "Ye needn't be no ways oneasy, Mr. Mortimer," he added, seeing that his guest arose hastily to his feet and appeared to be greatly excited to know that their conversation had been overheard. "We're all true blue here, an' my boys has too much good sense to blab what they hears—leastwise while they are paid to keep their mouths shet. Ye, Jake, roll over an' go to sleep."

"All right, pap," said Jake, obeying the first part of the order. "If ye wake up in the mornin' an' find that yer bird has flew ye needn't blame me, 'cause I told ye."

"Eh?" roared Jack, jumping up in great amazement.

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"O, he won't be here, an' ye can bet yer bottom dollar on it. He's heered every blessed word ye said."

"Who? Julian?" gasped the visitor.

"Sartin. I seed his head a stickin' over the hull time ye was a talkin'."

Had a bomb-shell burst in the room the two men could not have been more astonished. They stood motionless for a moment, and then, with a muttered imprecation, Jack bounded across the floor and went swiftly up the ladder that led to the loft, closely followed by his guest, whose face was as pale as death, while Mrs. Bowles snatched the rawhide from its nail, and rolling up her sleeves took her stand in front of the fire-place, prepared for any emergency.

Jack sprung into the loft when he reached the top of the ladder and ran straight to the bed, expecting to lay his hands upon the eavesdropper; but he was not there. With eager haste he threw aside the tattered coats and blankets, and even kicked the corn-husks about, but no Julian was hidden among them. Nor was he anywhere in the loft; for there was no furniture there, and consequently no place of concealment large enough to shelter a squirrel.

"Dog-gone!" roared Jack, stamping about so furiously that the boards which formed the floor of the loft creaked and bent, and seemed on the point of breaking beneath his weight and letting him through into the room below.

"He's gone, as sure as ye're a foot high."

"He probably escaped through this hole," said Mr. Mortimer, running to the gable-end of the cabin where the boards had fallen off. "It isn't more than ten feet to the ground, and he could easily drop down without injuring himself. He must be brought back at any cost."

"In course he must, an' I know how to do it. I've got a hound that'll trail him. Ole woman, stick yer head outer that door an' holler for Nero."

While Mrs. Bowles was shouting out the hound's name, awaking the echoes far and near with her shrill voice, Jake and Tom were pulling on their clothes with all possible haste. [61]

"Here's a fine chance for a spec," said the former, slyly pulling a small tin box from under his pillow and putting it carefully into his pocket. "Mebbe that feller in the store clothes will give something to have Julian brought back. The ole man'll never ketch him 'cause he can't run fast enough; an' Julian's too sharp to give a hound a chance to foller him. We know jest the place he'll make tracks fur, an' if we go thar we can gobble him."

"Ye Jake!" cried Mr. Bowles, hurrying down the ladder, "when I get time, I'm a goin' to give ye the best wallopin' ye ever heern tell on."

"Ye needn't mind," replied Jake, in great alarm.

"But I *will* mind, I tell ye; an' I hain't a-goin' to forget it, nuther."

"I hain't been a doin' of nothing, pap."

"That's jest what's the matter. I'm goin' to lick ye fur not doin' something—fur not tellin' me that ye seed Julian a listenin'. Here he comes! Here's the feller that'll bring the runaway back to us in less'n five minutes."

At this moment the door was dashed violently open and in bounded Nero, who seemed to know that there was work for him to do, and was impatient to begin it. He was a magnificent brute—so large that when he sprang up and placed his paws upon his master's shoulders his head was on a level with Jack's. He showed a frightful array of teeth and growled threateningly at the visitor, who constantly shifted his position in order to keep Jack's burly form between himself and the savage beast.

"Thar's the dog fur ye, Mr. Mortimer," said Bowles, looking proudly at his favorite. "He'll ketch any thing ye tell him to, from a bar down to a chicken. Hand me that rope, ole woman. I'll have to hold him in the leash, or he won't leave enough of Julian to make it wuth while to take that trip down the river. Now, then, hunt 'em up, ye rascal!" [62]

Having made one end of the rope fast to the hound's collar, Mr. Bowles wrapped the other about his hand and arm, snatched a blazing fire-brand from the hearth, and hurried out of the door and around the house, to examine the ground there, and ascertain if Julian had really escaped from the opening in the gable-end. The hound struck the scent at once, and uttering a loud bay dashed off into the darkness, dragging the clumsy Jack after him.

"Now's your time," whispered Tom, when the yelping of the dog and the encouraging yells of his master began to grow fainter in the distance; "speak to him."

"I say!" exclaimed Jake, addressing himself to Mr. Mortimer, who was pacing nervously up and down the floor; "pap'll never ketch him, but we can, 'cause we know whar to look fur him."

"Then why don't you do it?" demanded the guest, angrily. "I will give you \$10 apiece if you will bring him back to me."

"Wal, that's business. We were jest waitin' to hear ye say something of that kind. Come on, Tom."

The two boys rushed out of the house, and running swiftly along the path that led by the corn-cribs, were soon out of sight.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHASED BY A BLOOD-HOUND.



JULIAN did not remain long enough in his concealment to overhear all the conversation we have recorded, for an action he witnessed on the part of Jake Bowles, shortly after that worthy got into bed, turned his thoughts from the stranger, and his plans into another channel. He saw Jake thrust his arm under his pillow and draw out a small tin box, which he opened, and after looking over his shoulder to make sure that his father and mother were too much engaged with their visitor to pay any attention to himself, he drew out of it a roll of bills. He ran his fingers over them caressingly, held them above his head to allow the firelight to shine upon them, and exhibited in various other ways the delight he experienced in having them in his possession; after which he returned them to the box, replaced it under his pillow, and settling himself comfortably between the blankets, threw his arm over his head, and as Julian thought, prepared to go to sleep. But Jake did not intend to do anything of the kind, for he saw the top of the eavesdropper's head over the edge of the loft.

"That's my box," thought our hero, his cheek growing suddenly pale, and his heart beating against his ribs with a noise that frightened him. "I've been robbed."

The knowledge of this disagreeable fact came upon him with a force so stunning and bewildering, that for a few seconds he lay as motionless upon the floor of the loft as if he had been stricken down by some powerful hand. His secret was discovered after all his pains, and by the very ones from whose knowledge he had wished most to keep it hidden.

"My horse went first," thought Julian, striving hard to choke back the tears that arose to his eyes, "and now everything else is gone; for, of course, if they found the box they must have found my furs and my rifle also. And I was always so careful never to go near my store-house until I had satisfied myself that there was no one in sight. I shan't give up those things, and that's all about it. Because I have never resisted their tyranny, Jack and his boys think I am a coward, but now I will show them what I am made of."

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Very slowly and cautiously Julian drew back from the edge of the loft, and retreated toward the opening in the gable-end of the cabin. So stealthy was he in his movements that even the wakeful Jake did not hear him as he crept across the floor, swung himself down from the gable-end and dropped to the ground.

The instant he landed on his feet he darted off at the top of his speed, directing his steps toward the corn-cribs.

"That much is done," panted Julian, "but the work is yet to come. It will be no trouble to saddle my horse and secure my rifle and furs, but how am I to obtain possession of that money? It is mine, and I am determined to have it. Here, Billy! Here, Billy!"

Julian's horse, which was standing under a dilapidated shed, raised his head on hearing his name pronounced, and seeing his master open one of the cribs, came up, expecting the ear of corn which the boy never failed to have ready for him whenever he passed through the stable-yard. Julian knew where Tom kept his saddle and bridle, and it was but the work of a few seconds to place them on the horse. When this had been done he climbed over the corn to the farther end of the crib, and began tossing aside the ears, muttering as he did so:

"This place is a regular repository for stolen goods. I have found more than one article belonging to me stowed away here, and unless I am very much mistaken—ah! I thought so. Here are my furs—all baled up and ready for transportation, thanks to Tom and Jake—my rifle and my hunting-knife. Now, if they had only left my money here I would be on my way to St. Joseph in less than five minutes. I must have it if it takes me a week to get it."

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Julian hastily pulled the canvas cover off his rifle, and slung the weapon over his shoulder by a broad strap that was attached to it, buckled his hunting-knife about his waist, placed his furs, which Tom and Jake had tied up in one bundle, close at hand, and once more began throwing the corn aside, searching everywhere for his powder-horn and bullet-pouch. While thus engaged his attention was attracted by a great uproar which suddenly arose in the house. He listened, and could hear the tramping of heavy feet and the sound of angry, excited voices, with which were presently mingled the shrill tones of Mrs. Bowles, who thrust her head out of the door and shouted for Nero.

"The blood-hound!" gasped Julian. "I didn't think Jack Bowles was as bad as that. Oh! for just one load for my rifle! But why should Nero harm me? He has known me as long as he has known any of the family. I have often shared my meals with him, and perhaps if he overtakes me he will recognize me."

Julian knew too much, however, of the nature of the fierce brute to indulge long in this hope.

Nero was the terror of the neighborhood, and when aroused he had been known to defy Jack Bowles himself. Our hero was perfectly well aware that the hound would trail him as he would a deer, and that if by any chance he succeeded in overtaking him, he would pull him down and throttle him without the least mercy. His heart beat a trifle faster than usual when he thought of the probable results of a fight with the terrible animal, and his hands trembled as he caught up his bundle of furs and clambered over the corn toward the door.

He had left Billy with his head in the crib, feasting on the corn within his reach, and he believed that he would remain there until he was ready to mount him; but when he came out of the door he saw him at the farther end of the yard, prancing and playing about in high glee.

The boy ran toward him, pronouncing his name in a low voice, but Billy, instead of obeying the

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call, kicked up his heels and galloped away to the other side of the yard. Just then Julian heard the door of the cabin thrown open, and looking back saw the hound spring into the room and fawn upon his master.

"I'm caught," thought our hero, in intense alarm. "I dare not wait to secure my horse, and on foot I can never hope to escape from that dog. I might as well give up now as any time."

The boy's actions, however, did not indicate that he had the least idea of surrendering himself without a struggle for his freedom.

After one more unsuccessful attempt to capture his unruly steed, he threw his pack of furs over his shoulder, leaped the fence that inclosed the stable-yard, and striking the path that led to the woods, ran for his life. He did not waste time in looking back, and there was no need of it, for his ears kept him posted in all that was going on. He knew when Jack and his dog came out of the cabin, and the cold sweat started out from every pore in his body when Nero's deep-toned bay, and his master's exultant yells, rang out on the still air, telling him that the trail had been found and the pursuit commenced.

Calling to his aid all the power he had thus far held in reserve, Julian flew along the path with the speed of a frightened deer, and with a few bounds reached the cover of the woods.

Without in the least slackening his pace, he threw his bundle of furs into the bushes on one side of the path, and pitched his rifle as far as he could in the opposite direction. His second move was to pull off his coat and wrap it around his left arm, and his third to draw his hunting-knife from its sheath, and tie the thong of buckskin which was attached to the handle around his wrist. His face all this while wore an expression that would have astonished Jack Bowles could he have seen it.

Being now relieved of every encumbrance, Julian flew along with redoubled speed, through darkness so intense that he could scarcely see his hand before his face, leaping logs and ditches, and struggling through thickets of briars and cane that at almost any other time would have effectually checked his progress, all the while listening to the baying of the hound, and wondering why the animal was so long in overtaking him.

When he had accomplished nearly half a mile, and the sounds of the chase began to grow fainter, showing that his pursuers were losing ground, he uttered an exclamation of delight, and slackened his pace.

"I thought Nero's music did not ring out as loud and clear as usual," said he to himself; "and now I know the reason. Jack is holding fast to him, and the dog is choking himself to death trying to get away. Mr. Bowles never saw the day that he could catch me in a fair race. I may as well go slower and save my breath."

But, even as these thoughts were passing through Julian's mind, he heard a sound behind him that brought from him a cry of alarm, and caused him to spring forward again with all the power he could command. It was a yell of rage from Jack, accompanied by a loud, ringing bay, such as Nero usually uttered when following a trail. The eager hound had escaped from his master's control.

The fugitive shuddered at the thought, and would not permit himself to believe it; but in a few seconds the fact became too apparent. Nero's bays sounded nearer and nearer, and presently Julian heard him crashing through the bushes behind him.

His lightness of foot could not save him now. The fight he so much dreaded could not be avoided, and the sooner he was prepared for it the better.

To think, with Julian, was to act. He at once decided that the little open glade he was then traversing should be the battle-ground. It was almost entirely free from undergrowth, and moreover, the branches of the trees overhead were not so thick as to entirely shut out the light of the moon, which, just then, as if in sympathy with the fugitive, made a feeble effort to shine through the clouds that obscured it.

A few rapid steps brought him to the opposite side of the glade, and to the foot of a huge poplar. Here he faced about, and taking his stand with his back against the tree, so that the shock of the first collision might not knock him off his feet, he wrapped his coat closer about his arm, and fastened it there by tying the sleeves in a knot with his teeth, grasped his hunting-knife with a firmer hold, and calmly awaited the appearance of the blood-hound. Nor was the contest long delayed.

Stimulated by the freshness of the trail, Nero came on with long and rapid bounds, and at last broke from a thicket on the opposite side of the glade, and with a bay which rang in Julian's ears like the knell of death, moved swiftly toward his victim.

The fugitive had barely time to settle his hat more firmly on his head and brace himself for the shock, when the fierce animal arose in the air and launched himself at his throat. The arm with the coat wrapped around it was quickly interposed, and Nero's ponderous jaws closed upon it with a power that, for an instant, rendered Julian incapable of action. He was borne back against the tree by the weight of the brute, but rallied in a moment, and then began the most desperate struggle of his life.

The hound was as quick as a cat in his movements, and seemed endowed with as many lives; for, although the boy's long, keen blade found lodgment in his body more than once, it appeared to make no impression upon him. He clung to Julian's arm with the tenacity of a bull-dog, never once loosening or shifting his hold; and now and then, throwing all his strength into the effort, he gave his antagonist a shake that brought him to his knees.

To make matters worse, Jack Bowles was not far behind. He was soon near enough to shout directions to his hound. He heard the sounds of the struggle, and believing that his favorite was gaining the mastery, ordered him to let go his hold.

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**"THEN BEGAN THE MOST DESPERATE STRUGGLE IN
JULIAN'S LIFE."**

"He is past minding, Jack," shouted Julian, whose courage and determination had never once flagged during all the doubtful contest; "and when I am done with him he will be past hearing you." [70]

Jack heard every word, and comprehended the situation as well as if there had been light enough for him to see everything that was going on. It was wonderful how quickly his tone changed.

"Hi! hi!" he yelled, forcing his burly form through the bushes with all the speed of which he was capable, "pull him down, Nero! Shake him to death, ye rascal! Drop that ar we'pon, Julian, or I'll larrup ye within an inch of yer life. I wouldn't have that dog hurt for \$100."

"You ought to have thought of that before you put him on my trail," replied Julian. "There! Thank goodness that ends it."

The hound ceased the battle as suddenly as he begun it. He became limp and lifeless all at once, and sank to the ground in a heap, dragging Julian with him. But even in death his jaws would not relax their hold. His long teeth had caught in the coat, and Julian could not release his arm.

Just then, Jack Bowles burst from the bushes, and came lumbering across the glade. He saw Julian kneeling beside the hound and knew instinctively what had happened. His astonishment and rage knew no bounds.

"Dog-gone!" he roared; "ye've done it now, boy. I wouldn't be in yer cowhide shoes fur no money. Hold on, thar! Come back here, or——"

The oaths and threats with which Jack awoke the echoes of the forest made Julian's blood run cold, but they did not check his flight.

Finding himself unable to obtain possession of his coat, he slipped his arm out of it and fled, leaving the garment in the hound's mouth.

He was out of sight in a moment.

CHAPTER IX. GOOD FOR EVIL.



JULIAN, almost exhausted by his violent exertions, was in no condition to continue his fight. He simply ran to the opposite side of the poplar, in front of which the fight had taken place, and threw himself flat between the roots, where he lay trembling with fear, and hardly daring to breathe lest Jack should discover him. But that worthy was too angry to see anything except his prostrate hound. He bent over the animal for a moment, and then rushed frantically off in the direction he supposed Julian had gone, stamping through the bushes like a mad man and stopping now and then to listen for the sound of the fugitive's footsteps. He made a wide circuit through the woods, searching everywhere for the object of his vengeance, and finally came back to his favorite again.

He seemed to be unable to bring himself to believe that he had seen Nero alive for the last time. He placed him upon his feet, called him by name, and even shook him to make him show some signs of life; and when at last he had satisfied himself that the dog was really dead, he jumped up and spurned him with his heavy boot.

"Only think!" he exclaimed aloud; "a hound that could pull down a four-pronged buck as easy as he could a chicken, that could stretch a two-year-ole bar while ye was a thinkin' about it, an' chaw up a full-grown wildcat every mornin' afore breakfast, has met his match at last in that leetle pale-face Julian, who doesn't look as if he had pluck enough to face a mouse. Nero, I am teetotally ashamed of ye. Whar is that Julian? If I don't ketch him I shall lose the money I was goin' to make by that trip to Orleans. But I'll make more outen Mr. Mortimer. I'll have that watch an' that ring, an' everything he's got in his pockets afore daylight. I hain't a goin' to be swindled on all sides, I bet ye."

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When Jack had finished his soliloquy—every word of which Julian had overheard—he once more began his search for the fugitive. The boy remained quiet in his concealment until the sound of his footsteps had died away, and then with a long breath of relief arose to his feet and went to recover his coat. He found it where Jack had thrown it after freeing it from the teeth of the hound. It had never been a very valuable piece of property since it came into his possession, and now it was in a worse condition than ever; but Julian, knowing that he was destined for months to come to live entirely in the open air, could not think of leaving it behind. He threw the garment over his shoulder, and taking a last look at the hound, and shuddering as he recalled the incidents of the fight, bent his steps through the woods toward his store-house. He wanted to see what Tom and Jake had done to it. Perhaps they had left something there worth saving. He was very cautious in his movements, stealing along with a step that would not have awakened a cricket and pausing every few feet to listen. But he heard no suspicious sounds, and when he reached the cliff in which his store-house was located he was satisfied that he had seen the last of his enemies for that night at least.

He found the ruins of his store-house lying all along the side of the bluff, for the young robbers, not content with taking possession of Julian's valuables, had pulled out the saplings of which the house was built and scattered them far and wide. As Julian stood looking at the ruins of the cabin, thinking how hard he had worked to build it, and wondering how Jake and Tom had ever discovered it, he heard a slight rustling in the bushes by his side, and before he could turn to see what occasioned it, he found himself lying flat on his back with a heavy weight on his breast holding him down. At the same instant he felt a strap passed around his wrist.

Had his assailant conducted his operations in silence, Julian, who believed that he had fallen into the clutches of Jack Bowles, and that it would be folly to resist, would have suffered himself to be bound without even a word of remonstrance, but his antagonist, having a confederate close by, and believing that he was likely to have more on his hands than he could well attend to, shouted lustily for help.

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"Here he is, Jake," he yelled. "Hurry up. I'll hold him an' ye can tie him. The \$20 are our'n."

"Tom Bowles!" cried Julian.

"Sartin; an' ye'll find it out as soon as we get ye fast. Don't go to bein' sassy now, 'cause we won't b'ar it. Tie that ar strap around his arms, Jake."

"Perhaps Jake isn't man enough to do it," replied our hero; and the sequel proved that he was not.

Julian arose to his feet as easily and quickly as though there had been no one there to prevent him, and seizing Tom by the collar, gave him a trip and a push that sent him heels over head down the cliff.

Without waiting to see what had become of him, Julian turned upon Jake, and then began another fight, which, although by no means of so serious a character as the one Julian had had a few minutes before, was quite as furious and determined. Jake was older and larger and stronger than Julian, but by no means as active. He was fighting for the \$10 his father's guest had promised him if our hero was brought back to the cabin a prisoner, and to retain possession of the \$80 he carried in his pocket.

He knew that Julian was aware that he had the money about his person, for the very first clutch he made was for Jake's pocket, in which he felt the box. His fingers closed upon it at once with a tenacity fully equal to that with which our hero had clung to his arm.

"Leave go, consarn ye," yelled Jake, "or I'll punch ye!"

"Let go yourself," replied Julian. "I earned it honestly—it is mine, and I am going to have it if I

have to fight you here till daylight."

"Help! Tom, help!" shouted Jake, doubling himself up and twisting about in all sorts of shapes to break Julian's hold. "Be ye a coward that ye stand down there gapin' that way?" [74]

Tom did not reply, and neither did he show any inclination to respond to his brother's appeals for assistance. He stood at the foot of the bluff, holding his hands to his side, which had been pretty severely bruised by his fall, and listening to the footsteps and ejaculations of some one who was approaching through the bushes at a rapid run.

"Ye know that I've got a'most a hundred dollars of his'n in my pocket!" yelled Jake, indignant at the conduct of his brother. "Be ye goin' to stand thar an' let him take it away from me?"

"A'most a hundred dollars!" cried a familiar voice in tones of great amazement. "Hang on to him, Jake, an' I'll say no more about the whoppin' I promised ye."

"O, won't ye ketch it now, Julian!" shouted Tom, almost beside himself with delight. "Pap's a comin'!"

Both the combatants heard the words, and the fight became desperate indeed. Julian strove with greater determination than ever to force the coveted box from Jake's pocket, and the latter, encouraged by the hope of speedy and powerful assistance, confidently continued the struggle which he had more than once been on the point of abandoning. But fortune favored the rightful owner of the money. An unlucky step on the part of his antagonist precipitated them both into the excavation in which the store-house had stood, and that ended the contest.

A severe bump took all the courage out of Jake, who, setting up a howl of pain, raised both hands to his head, while Julian, with a shout of triumph, secured the box and sprung out of the cave. A burly form met him on the brink, and strong fingers closed on his coat collar.

"I've got ye at last!" exclaimed Jack Bowles, so overjoyed that he could scarcely speak. "Give up them hundred dollars to onct, or I'll wallop ye till——"

Julian did not hear what else Jack had to say, for he was not there. Mr. Bowles stood holding at arm's length a tattered coat, to the collar of which he was clinging with all his strength; but the boy who had been in the garment when he took hold of it was bounding swiftly down the bluff. [75]

When Julian recovered his coat after his fight with the hound, he had thrown it over his shoulders and secured it by a single button at the throat. The button had given away under Jack's hold, leaving the boy at liberty to take himself off, which he did with a promptness and celerity that struck Bowles and his sons motionless with astonishment. By the time they had recovered themselves sufficiently to think of pursuit Julian was out of hearing.

"Hurrah for me!" soliloquized the fugitive, hugging his beloved box close to his breast and stealing along through the woods as noiselessly as a spirit. "I've got everything except my horse. As soon as Jack and his boys have gone to bed I'll catch him and bid good-by to Missouri. I am all right now."

At no time during the next half-hour was Julian out of sight of the ruins of his store-house, or out of hearing of the voices of Jack Bowles and his boys. He sat on a log so near them that had it been daylight he would certainly have been discovered, watching their movements and listening attentively to every word they said. He heard Jake relate the history of the box containing the \$80, and learned for the first time that he and his brother had followed him when he went out to examine his traps, and thus discovered his secret.

As Jack and his boys believed that Julian would make the best of his way up the river now that he had recovered his money, they did not attempt any vigorous pursuit. They ran a short distance through the woods in the direction in which the fugitive had disappeared, and then Jack, utterly discouraged and almost boiling over with fury, ordered his sons to follow him toward home.

"A'most a hundred dollars!" he repeated for the twentieth time. "Don't it beat all the world how that boy could make more money than the hul of us put together? An' ye say that he's got a bundle of mink skins as big as ye can shoulder that he stole outen the crib whar ye had hid 'em? They'll bring him forty or fifty dollars more, consarn it all. Why didn't ye tell me about the money an' the furs the fust thing when ye brought 'em home, like ye had oughter done? I'm goin' to foller him to-morrow on hossback. If I don't ketch him I shall owe ye two lickins, an' if they ain't sich as ye'll remember the longest day ye live, I'm a Dutchman." [76]

Jack and his boys walked slowly along the path that led from the store-house to the clearing, and as soon as they were out of sight in the darkness, Julian arose from his log and followed after them. He kept within hearing of their voices all the while, and when they reached the clearing he stood at the fence which inclosed the stable-yard, and saw them enter the house.

As soon as they had disappeared, he ran back to the place where he had left his rifle and furs, which, as he had taken particular pains to mark the locality, he was not long in finding. The rifle he slung over his shoulder, and the furs, together with the box containing his money, he concealed in a hollow log.

This being done, he once more bent his steps toward the clearing, resolved to make another attempt to secure his horse. The animal, which was still running restlessly about the yard with the saddle and bridle on, positively refused to permit himself to be captured, and Julian finally went toward one of the cribs, intending to try the persuasive effects of an ear of corn. As he drew near the door he stopped, almost certain that he saw the figure of a man standing in the shadow of the crib. A moment later he knew that his eyes had not deceived him, for the man, finding himself discovered, came out in plain sight and walked rapidly toward him. It was Mr. Mortimer.

"I knew you would never go away and leave your horse," said he, in a tone of triumph. "I have been watching for you for the last half-hour. I have a legal right to control your actions, my boy, and you will save yourself some trouble by—Julian, stop! What do you mean?" [77]

The stranger lost his commanding, threatening air in an instant, and coming to a sudden halt, raised both his hands before his face, and turned away his head as if he had seen something frightful. The change was brought about by an action on the part of Julian who, believing that the man was near enough to him to prevent any attempt at escape, cocked his rifle and leveled it full at Mr. Mortimer's breast. He acted on his first impulse. Had he taken a second thought he would probably have made no move of this kind, for he knew that the weapon was empty. But Mr. Mortimer did not, and he stopped and backed away from the boy with much greater haste than he had used in approaching him.

"What do you mean, you young outlaw?" repeated the man, his voice trembling in spite of all his efforts to control it.

"I mean that I am not going to allow myself to be taken on board a flatboat and pushed overboard," replied Julian, calmly; and seeing that the empty rifle proved so valuable an assistant, he resolutely kept it pointed toward the stranger's breast.

"Turn that weapon away!" cried Mr. Mortimer, after shifting his position a dozen times to get out of range of the deadly muzzle. "I will have you arrested the first thing in the morning."

"Very good," answered Julian. "Then perhaps you will be called upon to show by what authority you took me away from my home and brought me here, and why you want me drowned in the river."

"I am your guardian, I tell you."

"I suppose I am at liberty to do as I please about believing that, am I not? But admitting that you are, it does not give you the right to abuse me, does it? Who made you my guardian?"

Before Mr. Mortimer could answer this question the door of the cabin opened, and Jack Bowles appeared on the threshold, and stood looking out into the darkness. Julian's guardian, if such he was, was about to call out to him, but checked the words that arose to his lips when he saw the muzzle of the rifle looking straight into his face. [78]

"Don't speak above your breath," said the boy, in low, earnest tones. "I have just one more word to say to you, and then I am off. I suppose you think I am the only one about here who has enemies, do you not? Well, you are mistaken. Your life is in danger, if you only knew it."

"My life!" repeated Mr. Mortimer, as soon as he could speak. "From whom?"

"Jack Bowles. He is bound to have money, and he don't care how he gets it. As he and his boys have failed in their attempts to rob me, and since he is likely to lose what you offered to pay him if he would accompany you to New Orleans, he has determined to rob you to-night. I heard him say so. If you go to sleep you will never see the sun rise again. This is one act of kindness I have been able to do you in return for the evil you have done me. Good night."

"Mr. Mortimer, be that you a standin' out thar by the corn-crib?" shouted Jack Bowles.

The gentleman heard the question, but he was thinking too busily about something else to reply. He stood motionless, watching Julian as he sped swiftly through the stable-yard, and when he leaped the fence and ran along the path that led toward the woods, Mr. Mortimer slowly and reluctantly returned to the cabin.

"Wasn't thar nobody out thar with ye?" demanded Jack.

"Yes," was the scarcely audible reply; "Julian was there, but I could not detain him, for he had a loaded rifle in his hands."

"Why didn't ye holler?" asked Jack fiercely. "I've got a rifle, I reckon."

"Would you call for help if you saw a weapon pointed straight at your breast?"

Jack made no answer. He stepped aside to allow his guest to pass, and Mr. Mortimer entered and took his seat on one of the nail-kegs. He glanced at his host, and saw that there was something about his person that he had not before noticed. It was a broad leather belt, from which protruded the buck-horn handle of a bowie-knife. Mr. Mortimer shuddered as he looked at it, and wished himself away in the woods with Julian. [79]

CHAPTER X.

JULIAN HAS A VISITOR.



IF WE were interested in the fortunes of Mr. Mortimer, we might put in an interesting chapter here by relating the various incidents that transpired in the cabin during the night; but as we have nothing to do with his personal adventures only in so far as they are connected with Julian's, it will be enough to say that it was a night of terror for him, and one that he never forgot; that, declining the pressing invitation his host extended to him to occupy the bed which Mrs. Bowles had arranged for his especial benefit, the guest took his seat in the corner in which the billets of wood for the fire-place were piled, and folding his arms and leaning his head against the wall, watched Jack as closely as ever a cat watched a mouse; that Jack, seeing that the gentleman's suspicions had been aroused in some mysterious manner, fumed inwardly, but believing that time and patience would accomplish wonders, settled back on his nail-keg to wait until his guest, overcome by weariness and want of sleep, should be compelled to seek repose; that, as the night wore on, and Mr. Mortimer never once changed his position or showed the least sign of drowsiness, Jack began to grow uneasy, and sat fingering the handle of his knife, and occasionally running his eyes over the gentleman's person from head to foot, as if mentally calculating the chances of a successful encounter with him; that finally, resolved on trying strategy, Jack threw himself upon the bed, and after snoring lustily for half an hour, suddenly opened his eyes, which had never once been closed in sleep, only to find Mr. Mortimer as watchful and seated as near the billets of wood as ever; that then Jack's patience was all exhausted, and he snored in earnest, but the visitor never moved until daylight began to stream in through the half-open door.

[81]

No one, to have heard the hearty good-morning Jack wished his guest as soon as he opened his eyes, would have believed that he had ever had designs upon his life. Neither of them alluded to the matter in any way, but Bowles noticed that his guest was always on the alert.

About 10 o'clock in the forenoon a flatboat might have been seen moored in front of the cabin. On the shore stood a party of three men, one of whom was Jack Bowles, another Mr. Mortimer, and the third the captain of the boat—a gentleman who looked enough like Jack to be his brother. After saying this it is scarcely necessary to add that he carried the face of a villain.

A fourth man was pacing the bank a short distance from the party mentioned, watching all their movements, listening eagerly to the few words of their conversation that now and then caught his ear, and noticing with some nervousness, which showed itself in the frequent changing of his hands from the arm-holes of his vest to the pockets of his coat, that they were looking at him rather suspiciously.

This gentleman, whoever he was, had evidently bestowed considerable pains upon his toilet; and the dignified manner in which he bore himself, as well as the satisfied and admiring glances which he occasionally cast down at his dress, indicated that he had a high opinion of himself and his personal appearance.

His garments were all of the finest broadcloth; but as some of them had been made for larger, and others for smaller men than himself, they fitted him oddly enough. His trowsers being too long, were rolled up around the tops of a pair of heavy cowhide boots; and his coat-sleeves being too short, revealed arms that were as brown and muscular as those of a blacksmith. A heavy watch-chain hung across his vest, and the fingers of both his hands were ornamented with enormous seal rings. But little could be seen of his face, for it was almost entirely concealed by thick, bushy whiskers, and by a large red handkerchief, which was passed under his chin and tied over his head.

[82]

"Who is he?" asked Mr. Mortimer, who became unaccountably nervous and excited the instant his eyes rested on the stranger.

"He gave no name," replied the captain of the flatboat. "He came aboard of us shortly after you left yesterday, and engaged passage for New Orleans. He is going to the West Indies for his health."

"For his health!" echoed Mr. Mortimer.

He turned and looked at the stranger again, taking in at a glance his powerful shoulders, which, like those of Tom Hood's coachman, were much "too broad to be conceived by any narrow mind," his quick, elastic step, ruddy face, and brawny hands and arms, and asked himself if a finer specimen of robust health could be found anywhere.

"I know that man in spite of his disguise," said he, at length, "and I know what brought him here. He must not be allowed to accompany us, captain. I will give you double his fare if you will order him to stay ashore."

"It is too late," replied the skipper. "He has paid his passage, and I charged him a good round sum too."

"Well, return it to him, and tell him that as your cabin is to be occupied by a dangerous lunatic and his keepers you cannot accommodate him."

"I will talk to him, but I don't know how much good it will do. He is very impatient to start down the river, and, what appears strange to me, he is anxious to go in my boat."

"It isn't at all strange to me. His name is Sanders, and he was sent out here to watch me, and by my cousin."

Mr. Mortimer, who in his excitement had spoken a little too hastily, suddenly checked himself

and looked savagely at the man whom he had called Sanders. The latter, observing his close scrutiny, pulled his handkerchief closer about his face and shifted his hands from his pockets to the arm-holes of his vest.

[83]

"Speaking of this crazy boy," said the captain, "reminds me that you have not yet told me when you will be ready to start with him. I have engaged to deliver my cargo of hoop-poles by a certain time, and I can wait for you but a few hours longer. You say that the boy has taken it into his head that he is rich, that he has friends living out West, and that he has escaped and concealed himself in the woods?"

"Yes," replied Jack. "He got away from us last night. Me an' Mr. Mortimer were jest goin' to start after him on hossback when yer boat come in sight. We'll have him here afore sundown if thar's men enough in the county to hold him. Mebbe this feller has heerd of him. I'll ask him."

The person referred to was a settler, who was just returning from The Corners, and who at that moment galloped up on his horse. He stopped when he saw Jack preparing to speak to him, and in reply to his question if he had seen or heard of Julian, said:

"Yes; I saw him at The Corners not more than two hours ago. He traded off \$45 worth of mink skins and bought some powder and lead. He said that he had made a camp on the bluffs over on Beaver Creek, and that he was going to stay there a day or two. Anything the matter with him?"

"He's gone clean outen his head, that's all," replied Jack.

"Crazy?" cried the settler.

"Sartin. He stole a'most a hundred dollars of me last night an' run away. He wouldn't a done that if he'd been in his right mind, would he?"

Jack, having gained all the information he desired, gave Mr. Mortimer a significant look, and the two walked rapidly toward the cabin, at the door of which their horses were standing, saddled and bridled, and springing upon their backs rode off across the clearing.

"Did I do right in sayin' what I did about Julian?" asked Jack, as soon as he and his companion were out of hearing of the men on the bank.

"Perfectly. I want everybody who is likely to meet him to know that he is not in his right mind. You see, when we take him on board the flatboat he may tell the captain or the crew that we are his enemies, and that he knows we intend to do him some injury; but as we have already told them that he is crazy they will pay no attention to what he says. Don't you understand?"

[84]

"In course. But ye hain't changed yer plans, have ye? Ye hain't a-goin' to put him in a 'sylum, be ye?"

"I never had any such intention. If he falls overboard you shall have \$200; but, of course, that is a matter that we keep to ourselves."

"I know jest what ye mean. Folks will think that we take Julian on board the flatboat to carry him to Orleans; but we don't. We take him thar so as to drop him into the river, an' get him outen yer way. Make yer mind easy. Them two hundred is mine."

The settler, who was very much astonished at what Jack had told him, and had half a mind to join in the pursuit, watched him and his companion until they were out of sight, and then continued his ride; but he had not gone far when when he was stopped by the odd-looking man in broadcloth.

"Stranger," said the latter, in regular backwoods vernacular, "whar is this yere Beaver Creek you was a speakin' of?"

"I don't know that I could direct you so that you could find it," was the reply.

"Who said I wanted to find it?" inquired the man. "I only axes you which way it is from here, an' how fur?"

"Well," returned the settler, facing about in his saddle, shutting one eye and gazing at the woods through the half-closed lids of the other; "it's four miles right north of here if you go through the timber, and eight miles if you go by the road."

The man in broadcloth walked off at once, and without stopping to thank the settler for his information. As long as he remained within sight of the cabin and flatboat he was very deliberate in his movements; but the instant the woods concealed him from view, he broke into a rapid run, threading his way through the thick bushes with a celerity that was surprising. Up hill and down he went, never once slackening his pace or deviating from the course the settler had given him, until at last he saw a thin cloud of smoke arising through the trees in front of him, and after climbing a precipitous cliff, found himself standing face to face with Julian Mortimer.

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The boy, who being busy with his preparations for dinner, had not heard the sound of his footsteps until he reached the top of the bluff, jumped up with his gun in his hand, ready to fight or run, as occasion might require. His first thought was that his enemies had tracked him to his hiding-place; but finding that his visitor was a stranger, and that he appeared to have no hostile intentions, he leaned on the muzzle of his rifle and waited for him to make known his business.

The man, whose breath was not even quickened by his long and rapid run, gazed about him with an air of interest. He looked at the brush shanty which Julian had erected to protect him from the weather, at the comfortable bed of blankets and leaves which was arranged under the sheltering roof, at the squirrels broiling before the fire, and then his eyes wandered to our hero, at whom he gazed long and earnestly. The boy did not look much now as he did when he escaped from Jack Bowles' cabin, for he was dressed in a suit of new and comfortable clothes, and sported a wide-brimmed hat and a pair of high-top boots.

"Julian," exclaimed the stranger, at length. "It's you sure enough, hain't it? I hain't seed you fur more'n eight year, but I would know you any whar."

"Would you?" asked Julian, throwing his rifle into the hollow of his arm and resting his thumb

on the hammer; "then have the goodness to leave here at once. I am suspicious of every stranger who calls me by name."

"An' well you may be," replied the man, earnestly, "'cause most of 'em are enemies to you. But I hain't. I'm a friend, an' I can prove it. Do you know that Dick Mortimer an' Jack Bowles are huntin' the country over to find you?" [86]

"Yes; but I wasn't aware Mr. Mortimer's name is Dick."

"Wal, it is. The flatboat's come, an' when they ketch you they're goin' to take you to Orleans an' lock you up fur a crazy boy."

"Why, they said last night that they were going to push me overboard and drown me," said Julian, as soon as he could speak.

"Mebbe they be. I don't know what they are goin' to do—I'm only tellin' you what I heerd 'em say."

"Who are you, any how; and how does it come that you know my name?"

"Why, boy, I've knowed you ever since you was knee high to a duck, an' your father afore you."

"You have?" cried Julian, greatly amazed.

"In course. An' your mother an' your brother, too. They live out in the mountains, an' I come to take you to 'em. They'll be monstrous glad to see you, an' they're waitin' fur you."

"Are they all alive?"

"The last blessed one of 'em."

"I remember my father," said Julian, gazing thoughtfully at the ground, "and it seems to me that I have some recollection of my brother; but I never knew anything about my mother. What brought you here?"

"I come to your camp to tell you that Bowles and Mortimer are comin' arter you on hossback, an' that if you want to save yourself you had better dig out. An' I come to Missouri 'cause your friends sent me here arter you. I know the hul lot of 'em, I tell you, an' if you will trust yourself to me I will take you to 'em safe an' sound."

Julian, astounded and bewildered by this proposition, dropped the butt of his rifle to the ground, and looked sharply at the man, as if he meant to read his very thoughts. Was he really the friend he professed to be? Of one thing the boy was certain—and that was that he was not an ally of Mr. Mortimer. If he had been he would not have warned him that another attempt was about to be made to capture him. [87]

How gladly would he have given himself up to the man's guidance if he had only been sure that he was trustworthy! He would have followed him all over the world, and braved all imaginable dangers, if he knew that by so doing he would be restored to his home once more. *Home!* How the word thrilled him!

"Who in the world am I?" Julian asked himself in great perplexity; "and how does it happen that the moment I am ready to carry my plans into execution, men whom I never remember to have seen before should suddenly appear and exhibit so deep an interest in me? If I have such good friends, who are so very anxious to see me, why did they leave me here for eight long years to be beaten, and starved, and treated worse than a dog? I can't understand it at all."

"What do you say?" asked the stranger; "will you go? You had better be in a hurry about making up your mind to something, 'cause I can hear the trampin' of hosses."

"Yes," replied Julian, "I shall go; but I shall go alone."

"Wal, then," continued the man, who was plainly very much disappointed by this decision, "let me give you a word of advice: If you won't trust me, don't trust nobody—do you hear? You'll meet plenty of folks who know you, an' who will have something to say to you; but don't listen to 'em. Jine a wagon train at St. Joe, an' when you reach Fort Kearney, stop thar. You will then be within forty miles of your hum. You'd best be gettin' away from here, 'cause them fellers is comin'—I can hear 'em."

"How did they find out where I am?" asked Julian.

"Why, some chap saw you tradin' off your furs this mornin' an' buying' powder an' lead, an' he told 'em. Why don't you run? Don't you hear 'em comin'?"

Julian listened, and could at last distinguish the rapid strokes of horses' hoofs on the hard road. He knelt down behind a log that lay on the edge of the bluff, and looking over the top of it, waited for the horsemen to come in sight. [88]

The sound of the hoofs grew louder and louder, and in a few minutes Mr. Mortimer came into view, and drawing rein at the foot of the bluff, sprung out of his saddle. Jack Bowles was not with him; he was alone.

"I am not afraid of him," thought Julian. "I kept him at bay last night with an empty rifle, and now I have a loaded one. He shall never capture me."

Julian arose to his feet, and turned to look at the stranger. He was not in sight. The boy had not heard even the rustle of a leaf to tell him that he was in motion, and yet he had disappeared. He wished now that he had paid more attention to the man's warning; but his mind was so fully occupied, and he was so deeply interested in what he had had to say about the home and friends that were waiting for him away off in the mountains, that he had hardly given a thought to the danger which threatened him. He began to think of it now, however, for he heard Mr. Mortimer ascending the bluff.

"Hold on, down there!" cried Julian. "I am watching you."

"Ah! you are there, are you?" replied Mr. Mortimer. "I will soon be there, too. If I had known

that your rifle was empty, I should have secured you last night.”

“Who told you it was empty?”

“We found your powder-horn and bullet-pouch in the corn-crib this morning. Don’t attempt any resistance now. You are surrounded, and cannot escape.”

“Surrounded!” echoed Julian.

He turned quickly, and sure enough there was an enemy in his rear, who had mounted the bluff on the opposite side, and approached so cautiously that the boy had not heard him. It was Jack Bowles.

CHAPTER XI. JACK'S PLANS.



THE EXPRESSION Julian saw on the face of his old enemy alarmed him greatly. His countenance was distorted with fury, and the boy saw enough in it to satisfy him that Jack intended to take ample revenge on him for what he had done. With a cry of terror he turned and took to his heels; but Bowles was already within reach of him, and before our hero had made many steps, he fastened upon his collar with one hand, and with the other twisted his rifle out of his grasp.

"Let's see ye slip outen yer coat an' get away from me this time," said Jack, with savage exultation. "I've got a long account to settle with ye, my lad. I'll larn ye to go about the country stealin' money an' killin' honest folks' huntin' dogs. We'd best tie him, hadn't we, Mr. Mortimer, fur fear that he gets one of them ar crazy spells onto him?"

"Certainly," said that gentleman, who, having by this time reached the top of the bluff, stepped forward to assist in securing the prisoner.

"An' sarch him, too," added Jack. "He may have some dangerous we'pons about him. Don't go to makin' a fuss now."

"I have no such intention," replied Julian, who, knowing that he was powerless, submitted to his captors, who bound his arms firmly behind his back. "But I can tell you one thing, Jack—you and Richard Mortimer. You are not going to take me down the river and put me into an asylum."

Mr. Mortimer was profoundly astonished at these words. He looked sharply at the prisoner for a moment and exclaimed: "Has Sanders been here?"

"Sanders?" repeated Julian.

"Yes; a short, thick-set man, dressed in black, and wearing an abundance of jewelry."

"I have no acquaintance with any such person."

"But you do not say that you have not seen him. You have talked with him—I am certain of it—or you would not know that my name is Richard. Sanders knows why I am here, and I know why he is here and who sent him. We are both playing the same game, and we shall see who will win. He shall never take passage on that flatboat."

As soon as Julian had been securely bound, Jack set himself to work to overhaul his pockets, searching—not for concealed weapons, but for the money belonging to the prisoner. A very short investigation, however, served to satisfy him that the coveted treasure was not hidden about Julian's person, and with an expression of almost ungovernable fury on his face he left him and began to search the camp. He picked up the prisoner's blankets, shook them thoroughly, threw aside the leaves which the boy had scraped together to serve as a mattress, and looked into every hollow stump and under every log on the bluff; but nothing in the shape of a box or pocket-book could he find.

"Whar is it?" he roared, unable to contain himself longer.

"Where's what?" asked Julian.

"The money, ye rascal—the \$145."

"I haven't got as much as that."

"Wal, you've got *some*. Whar is it, I axes ye?"

"It is concealed where you will never think of looking for it, and there it shall stay."

"I'll bet a hoss that it don't stay thar," shouted Jack, stamping the ground and shaking his fists in his rage. "Mark my words. Afore I'm done with ye, ye'll come to this bluff an' give me that money with yer own hands."

"And mark *my* words," replied Julian calmly. "I shall do nothing of the kind. I'll die first. It is mine—you've no right to it, and you shan't have it."

"Never mind the money now, Bowles," exclaimed Mr. Mortimer, who was becoming impatient at the delay. "You will have plenty of time to hunt for it after your return from New Orleans. We must begin our journey at once."

Jack, reluctant to abandon the search, took another turn about the camp, and after venting some of his spite by pulling down Julian's brush cabin and kicking over the squirrels that were broiling before the fire, picked up the blankets and the rifle, and seizing the boy roughly by the arm hurried him down the bluff. After placing him behind Mr. Mortimer on his horse he disappeared in the woods and presently returned, mounted on his own nag, and led the way toward the clearing. He did not follow the road, as Julian hoped he would, but to avoid meeting any of the settlers, held straight through the woods. He was moody and sullen during the whole of the ride, and the deep scowl on his forehead showed that he was thinking intently.

"The minute Julian drops overboard from the flatboat, that minute I shall have \$200 put into my hands," soliloquized Mr. Bowles. "That's a monstrous heap of money fur a poor man like me, but I'd like to have them \$145, too. Now how am I goin' to get it? That's what I'd like to know. I'll never find it unless Julian tells me whar it is, an' if he's at the bottom of the river he *can't* tell me. Hain't thar no way fur me to push him overboard without drownin' him?"

Upon this question Jack pondered long and deeply, and by the time he and his companions reached the clearing he must have found an answer to it, and a satisfactory one, too, for he brightened up and became lively and talkative.

The first person Julian saw when he reached the clearing was the stranger in broadcloth, who

was pacing up and down the bank. He did not look up when the boy and his captors rode past him, but pulled the handkerchief a little closer about his face, and sinking his chin lower into the collar of his coat, kept his eyes fastened upon the ground.

"If you are all ready to start, Jack," said Mr. Mortimer, as they drew rein in front of the door of the cabin, where Mrs. Bowles and her sons were waiting to receive them, "we will go on board the flatboat at once."

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"Wal, I hain't quite ready," returned Jack. "I shall be away from home a long time if we go to New Orleans, an' Jake and Tom'll have to look out fur things while I am gone. I want to tell 'em what to do."

"Your wife can do that as well as you can," replied Mr. Mortimer impatiently.

"An' more'n that," continued Jack, holding open his coat to let his guest see that it was in a very dilapidated condition, "I've got to have some clothes, if I'm goin' to a country whar white folks live. I don't want to make ye ashamed of me."

"You have nothing to fear on that score. Your clothes will do well enough."

"But I say they won't. I was born and raised a gentleman, *I* was, and I guess I know what sort of riggin' a gentleman had oughter wear when he goes a visitin'."

"I don't want to wait another minute. Don't you know that we are in danger as long as we remain here? Suppose some of the settlers should find out what is going on?"

"Oh, now, how be they goin' to find it out? We hain't a goin' to tell on ourselves, be we?"

"But the captain wants to start immediately," persisted Mr. Mortimer.

"I can't help that. I shan't be ready for an hour or two—p'raps more; 'cause I've got to go to The Corners arter some good clothes."

"Then you may stay there, if you choose. I can get along without your assistance."

"No ye can't, an' ye shan't, nuther," retorted Jack.

"I shall go without you," continued Mr. Mortimer, decidedly. "Then what will become of the \$200 I promised you?"

Jack approached his guest and placed his lips close to his ear.

"If ye go without me I'll have the officers of the law on yer track in less'n an hour," said he, fiercely. "Then what will become of ye? I can say, ye know, that ye offered me money to shove the boy overboard, an' p'raps ye'll have to tell some things ye'd rather the world wouldn't know. Ye've got money, an' ye can keep the boat here as long as ye please." Then aloud he added: "Ye an' Julian can step into the house, an' sit down an' talk to the ole woman, an' me an' the boys will go to the stable an' feed the hosses. I'll be back as soon as I get my business done."

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Mr. Mortimer, finding that he was at the mercy of his confederate, was obliged to await his pleasure. He conducted his prisoner into the cabin, while Jack led the horses toward the stable, followed by Jake and Tom.

The boys assisted their father in removing the saddles and feeding the animals, and when this had been done, Jack conducted them into one of the cribs, and after closing and fastening the door, seated himself upon the corn and proceeded to make his sons acquainted with certain plans he had determined upon.

He did not know that some one besides Jake and Tom was listening to every word he said, but such was the fact. It was Sanders, who having overheard enough of Jack's conversation with Mr. Mortimer to excite his curiosity, and seeing Bowles and his sons enter the crib and shut themselves in, made a circuit through the woods, and came up within hearing of their voices in time to learn as much of their scheme as he cared to know.

"I reckon Mr. Mortimer will get tired of waitin' fur me," said Jack, "'cause he hain't no ways likely to see me agin afore dark. I've got work fur ye to do, youngsters, an' if ye do it as I tell ye to, there's money to be made by it. Listen, now, with all the ears you've got. In the fust place, in order that ye may understand the hul matter, I must tell ye that this Mr. Mortimer is the same feller who brought Julian here years ago. He's some kin to him—his pap, mebbe, fur all I know—but he don't want to own him, 'cause the boy somehow stands atween him an' a fortin'. He wants to put him whar he'll never see him agin, an' so me an' him have give out that he is crazy, an' that we're goin' to take him to Orleans an' put him in a 'sylum. In course, he hain't no more outen his head than I be, but that's no business of mine. Mr. Mortimer's goin' to start down the river with him to-night, an' I'm goin' along to take care of him."

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Jack did not see fit to tell his boys that Mr. Mortimer had offered him money to push Julian overboard, and that he had promised to do it. That was a dangerous secret, and one that he did not care to trust to anybody's keeping.

"I shall get \$200 fur makin' the trip," continued Jack. "Now, I want to earn them thar two hundred, but I don't want Julian to be tuk to New Orleans an' shut up thar, 'cause if he is, we'll lose jest \$145 by it—the hundred he stole from ye last night, Jake, an' the forty-five he made this mornin' outen his mink skins. He's hid the money, an' I want to get a chance to make him tell whar it is; an' this is the way I'm goin' to work it. As soon as it comes dark, ye, Jake an' Tom, must get into the dug-out an' drop down the river in it, as easy as ye can, tie it to the starn of the flatboat, an' then lay down on the bottom an' keep still thar. Be sure an' make it fast with a short rope, so as to keep outen the way of the sweeps. When ye've done that I will go up to the house, an' me an' Mr. Mortimer an' Julian will go on board the flatboat, an' she'll put out into the river, draggin' the dug-out arter her. When Mr. Mortimer an' most of the crew have gone to bed, I'll untie Julian an' take him up fur a turn about the deck. I'll give him all the chance he wants to get away, an' he will be sartin to use it. He said that we shouldn't never take him down the river; an' bein' perfectly at home in the water, he won't mind jumpin' overboard and swimmin' ashore. As

soon as I see him in the water I'll whistle, an' ye must cut loose from the flatboat an' pick him up. Be as easy as ye can about it, an' when ye onct get hold of him hang on, no matter what happens; tie him hard an' fast, an' bring him hum an' put him in the smoke-house till I come. I'll be along some time to-morrer, 'cause when Mr. Mortimer finds out that Julian is overboard he'll think he's drowned, an' he'll pay me off an' discharge me. Arter I get hold of Julian, it won't take me long to make him tell whar he's hid them hundred an' forty-five dollars. When I get that an' the two hundred I'll be rich."

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"But, pap, how much be me an' Tom goin' to git fur doin' the job?" asked Jake.

"Ye'll git enough to satisfy ye," was the reply. "Jake shall have Julian's rifle fur his share. It's a good one, an' didn't cost a cent less'n \$25. Tom shall have his blankets, which he can sell at The Corners if he don't want to keep 'em, an' the clothes Julian's got on. Tom thinks a heap of good clothes, an' that shows that he's goin' to be a gentleman when he's growed up. An' more'n that, if I find Julian here when I come hum, I'll give each of ye \$10; but if he *hain't* here, ye shan't have nothin' but the dog-gondest wallopin' ye ever heern tell on, an' ye'll get that as sartin as ye're a foot high. It'll be wusser'n all the rest I ever give ye biled down into one. Now, be ye sure that ye know jest what ye've got to do?"

Jake and Tom were not quite certain that they did, and so their father repeated his instructions, and kept on repeating them until the boys thoroughly understood them.

Every part of the work they were expected to perform, as well as the treatment Julian was to receive prior to Jack's return, was discussed, and the latter being satisfied at last that there was no danger of failure, announced that it was his intention to pass the rest of the afternoon in sleep. He instructed Jake to return to the house and announce that his father had just set out for The Corners on horseback, and then concealed himself among the corn at the farther end of the crib, while his boys, after making sure that there was no one in sight, opened the door and went out. No sooner had they entered the cabin than Sanders left his position behind the crib, made another circuit through the woods back to the bank of the river, and once more began walking up and down, now and then shaking his head and chuckling to himself as if he were thinking about something that afforded him great satisfaction.

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CHAPTER XII. ON BOARD THE FLATBOAT.



AP! I say, pap! be ye goin' to sleep here till creation comes? It's pitch dark, an' me an' Tom have got the dug-out tied fast to the flatboat, like ye told us, an' the cap'n's jest been in the house a tellin' of Mr. Mortimer that he ain't a-goin' to wait no longer. Get up, consarn it all."

It was Jake Bowles who spoke, and while he was thus addressing his slumbering parent he was shaking him most vigorously. Jack opened his eyes at last, and after yawning and stretching his arms, and listening to what his hopeful son had to say about the dug-out and the captain's impatience, he began to understand the matter.

"All right," he replied, drowsily. "Now, Jake, I want to be sartin' that ye know what ye've got to do. Let me hear ye go over what I said to ye this mornin'."

Jake began and rehearsed his instructions, and went through with them to his father's entire satisfaction. When he had concluded Jack inquired:

"What did I say I'd give ye if ye brought Julian back here a prisoner?"

"Oh, I hain't forgot that, I bet ye," replied Jake, quickly. "Ye said ye'd give me his rifle an' \$10. Don't ye forget it, pap, when ye comes back."

"I won't. I'm a man what allers sticks to his word. Now let me see if ye remember something else. What did I say I'd give ye an' Tom if ye let him get away from ye?"

"A larrupin'."

"A little one or a big one?"

"A big one—wusser than all the rest."

"I'm powerful glad to see that ye hain't forgot it. I'll allers keep my promises, I told ye. Mind what ye are about, now."

Having thus cautioned his young ally, Jack staggered to his feet and walked slowly toward the house, where he found Mr. Mortimer pacing the floor in great excitement. The captain of the flatboat had just left him, with the information that if Jack did not return in half an hour he would be obliged to start without him, for he could wait no longer.

"You have come at last, have you?" was Mr. Mortimer's greeting.

"Hain't you got a pair of good eyes? In course, I have."

"I should say it was a high time. And you haven't got your clothes, either."

"Wal, that ain't no fault of mine, is it? I forgot to ax ye fur some money to git 'em with, an' the storekeeper wouldn't trust me. I'm all ready now, if you are."

"Then take charge of Julian and bring him on board the boat at once. Remember that I want him kept out of my sight as much as possible."

"I give ye the word of a gentleman that he shan't never trouble ye no more," replied Jack significantly.

Mr. Mortimer hurried out of the cabin, slamming the door after him. As he sprung upon the deck of the flatboat he was met by the captain, who was impatiently awaiting his appearance.

"We are ready at last," said the passenger, "and the sooner you get under way the better it will suit me."

"Stand by the lines," shouted the captain.

"Where's that man?" continued Mr. Mortimer.

His companion pointed toward the bow of the boat. Mr. Mortimer looked and saw Sanders pacing back and forth as wide awake as ever.

"He must be made of iron," said the skipper, "for he has kept up that walk ever since we landed here this morning, and shows no sign of giving out."

"There is nothing strange in that. He is working for money, and wants to be where he can see everything that is going on. Have you told him that he can not go down the river with us?"

"Not yet."

"Then do it at once. Use every argument you can think of to induce him to go ashore, and if you can not make him listen to reason call your crew and put him off."

Mr. Mortimer descended the stairs leading into a little dismal apartment in the stern of the boat that was dignified by the name of "the cabin," and the captain approached his passenger, and extending a roll of bills, said:

"I'm sorry to be obliged to say that I can't take you to Orleans."

"Sho!" exclaimed Sanders.

"It's a fact. My cabin has been given up to a crazy boy and his keepers, and I can't accommodate you. Here's the passage money you paid me."

"I don't want it. A bargain's a bargain."

"I tell you that I can't take you."

"O, I hain't no ways partickl'ar as to commodation. I can hang up anywhar."

"But I don't want you on board my boat, and you shan't stay either. Here's your money. Take it and go ashore."

"Now jest listen to me a minute, cap'n, and I'll tell you something," replied Sanders,

approaching the skipper and speaking in a low, confidential tone. The latter, believing that his passenger was about to communicate some secret to him, leaned forward and caught the words: "I shan't stir a peg."

"Then I shall use force," cried the captain in a rage. "I shall put you off."

At the mention of the word "force" all the combativeness in the stranger's composition arose and showed itself. His eyes flashed angrily, and doubling up one huge fist he brought it down into the palm of his hand with a report like that of a pistol.

"Look a here, cap'n," said he, with a great deal of emphasis, "my name is—Jones."

He had been on the point of pronouncing his own name—one that had more than once struck terror to a braver heart than the captain of the flatboat possessed—but recollected himself in time, and gave the first one that came to his mind.

"Yes, that's my name," he exclaimed, after a moment's pause—"Jones—*Tom* Jones. I'm the peaceablest feller you ever seed when I ain't crossed, but when I *am* I'm a leetle wusser than a hul passel of wild-cats. I can see through a grindstun as fur as the next man. I know why you don't want me here, but I'm a-goin' to stay, I can tell you, an' if you want to see bullets fly faster than you ever seed 'em fly afore, jest tell your crew to put me off."

As Sanders said this he placed his hands in the pockets of his coat, and when he brought them into view again, he held in each one a navy revolver. After flourishing them before the eyes of the captain he put them away again, and locking his thumbs in the arm-holes of his vest, resumed his walk up and down the deck. While this conversation was going on the crew had been busy casting off the lines with which the flatboat was made fast to the bank, and now one of them sung out: "All gone, sir."

The captain turned, and seeing that Mr. Bowles and Julian had just come on board, and knowing that it would be useless to make any more attempts to rid himself of his objectionable passenger, gave orders to get under way.

"Haul in that gang-plank," said he. "Get out the setting-poles and shove off for'ard. Man the larboard sweeps, and pull her bow out."

While the crew were busy working the boat out into the river, Mr. Bowles took occasion to stroll aft and look over into the water. It was very dark, but still there was light enough for him to distinguish the outlines of the dug-out dragging at the stern of the flatboat. So far his plans were working smoothly. His only fear was that the canoe might be discovered by the pilot; but, after all, there was little danger of it, for that officer, beside being obliged to give his whole attention to directing the course of the boat, occupied a position so far from the stern that he could not look over into the water, even if he had been disposed to do so. Jack took off his hat and flourished it about his head, and instantly another hat was thrust over the side of the dug-out, and being moved to and fro was pulled back out of sight. Jake and Tom were on the alert, and Mr. Bowles, being satisfied of the fact, returned to his prisoner and conducted him into the cabin.

Julian took the seat pointed out to him, and looked around with curiosity. The cabin was a very dingy apartment, and was dimly lighted by a smoky lantern, which hung suspended from a beam overhead. It contained a rusty cooking stove, a rough table, around which were arranged four long benches to serve in lieu of chairs, and two sides were occupied by bunks in which the crew slept.

One of them, a little apart from the others, was provided with curtains, which, being looped back, revealed a very comfortable-looking bed, that was doubtless intended for Mr. Mortimer. The latter gentleman had nothing to say to Mr. Bowles when he came in, but continued his walk in silence.

Jack took a turn about the cabin, and then seating himself in a chair near his prisoner, folded his arms, rested his chin on his breast, and closed his eyes as if preparing to go to sleep.

Being heavily loaded and short-handed besides, considerable time was consumed in working the flatboat out into the river; but at the end of half an hour a gentle, gliding motion, accompanied by the "lapping" sound of the waves against her sides, told Julian that she was fairly under way.

Presently the captain came below, followed by some of his crew. The men looked curiously at the passengers, especially at Julian, who sat in his chair with his hands tied behind his back, and without any ceremony divested themselves of some of their outer clothing and tumbled into bed.

The captain, after pointing out to his passengers the beds he had arranged for them, followed their example, and presently Mr. Mortimer also sought his couch.

Julian, almost worn down by fatigue and excitement, waited impatiently for Jack to give the signal for retiring, but the latter had no intention of doing anything of the kind. He waited until the sounds which issued from the bunks told him that their occupants were all asleep, and then he beckoned Julian to follow him to the deck. A terrible fear seized upon the boy as he arose to obey. Was Jack about to throw him overboard?

He tottered up the stairs, and when he reached the deck, was astonished beyond measure and immensely relieved by an unexpected proceeding on the part of his keeper, who, instead of conducting him to the side and pitching him into the water, began untying his hands.

"What in the world does he mean, I wonder?" thought Julian. "Does he expect me to remain on board this boat if he gives me the least chance to leave it? If he takes his eyes off me for one instant I'll astonish him."

"What are you untying that crazy fellow for?" exclaimed the pilot, who stood with his hand resting on one of the sweeps which served as the rudders of the flatboat. "The cap'n says he's dangerous."

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"An' so he is," replied Jack—"in the day-time; but at night he's as gentle as a kitten. I'm goin' to let him take a leetle exercise afore he goes to bed. He'll sleep the better fur it. Ye needn't be afear'd, 'cause I can manage him. Mind what ye're about now," he added in a low tone, addressing himself to Julian. "I've got my eyes onto ye."

Jack walked aft to talk to the pilot, and Julian, delighted to find himself once more at liberty, strolled leisurely about the boat.

The crew on watch were huddled together in the waist, and at a little distance from them, Sanders lay stretched out on the deck, apparently fast asleep. Julian walked past the prostrate forms, and taking his stand on the bow, gazed toward the shore. Half the width of the Missouri River lay between him and his freedom.

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"I can easily do it," said he to himself, "and I am going to try it. Good-by, Jack. When I set my feet on solid ground once more I will put a safe distance between you and me before I stop."

Julian seated himself on the side of the boat and looked down into the dark, muddy water, now and then turning his eyes toward Jack and the pilot. The former kept his back toward him and his gaze turned up the river, as if he saw something there that interested him, and finally the pilot, in response to some inquiry from Jack, faced about and looked in the same direction. This was Julian's opportunity, and he was prompt to seize upon it. Placing his hands upon the side of the boat he swung himself off and dropped into the river.

His sudden immersion in the cold water almost took his breath away, and for a moment he felt as if every drop of blood in his body had been turned into ice; but quickly recovering himself he struck out lustily for the shore.

There were two persons on board who had witnessed the whole proceeding. One was Sanders, who was wide awake, in spite of the terrific snores he uttered, and the other was Jack Bowles.

So delighted was Jack at the success that had thus far attended his plans that he could scarcely refrain from shouting.

Fearing that the pilot, if he had not also witnessed Julian's act, might soon notice his absence, he looked about for something to occupy his attention, and found it.

"I see a snag," said he suddenly. "Look out, or ye'll be afoul of it in a minute."

"I see it, too," replied the pilot. "I was so busy talking to you that I forgot to attend to my business. Snag on the starboard bow!" he shouted. "Man the sweeps, all hands!"

The crew jumped at the word, and Jack sprung down from the pilot's bench and walked aft whistling. Jake and Tom, who were curled up in the bottom of the dug-out, heard and obeyed the signal. They straightened up at once, and while one seized a paddle the other cut the painter with which the canoe was made fast to the flatboat, and in a moment more they were out of sight. Jack stood on the stern of the boat listening intently for fully five minutes, and then he was almost certain that he heard a splashing in the water and a smothered cry for help.

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"They've got him!" said he gleefully. "I was afear'd they might miss him in the dark. If they had, wouldn't I have dusted their jackets fur them, though? But they're good boys, Jake an' Tom are. The two hundred dollars are mine, an' the hundred an' forty-five besides."

By this time the snag had been passed in safety, and the watch once more huddled together in the waist to sleep until their services were again required. Jack took his stand beside the pilot, and waited for him to say something about Julian's disappearance; but as he did not refer to the matter, Mr. Bowles went below and tumbled into bed, satisfied that no one beside himself was the wiser for what had happened.

Jack awoke long before daylight, but remained quiet in his bunk, awaiting a favorable opportunity to carry out the rest of his plans. At last the cook entered the cabin and began preparations for breakfast. Shortly afterward some of the crew crawled out of their bunks, and the captain also arose. When Jack saw him he began to bestir himself. He got out upon the floor, and after dressing himself with great deliberation, went to the bunk which had been set apart for Julian's use. The bed certainly looked as if it had been occupied, but there was no one in it now. Jack started back with well-assumed surprise, uttering an exclamation that attracted the attention of every one in the cabin, and then rushing forward picked up something and examined it attentively. It was the rope with which Julian had been bound.

"Wal, if this yere don't beat all natur'," cried Jack.

"Is he loose?" asked the captain in alarm.

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"That's jest what's the matter. He's slipped his hands outen this rope and hid hisself somewhars. Help me find him, fellers," added Jack, in great excitement, leading the way toward the deck; "but look out fur yerselves, 'cause if any of ye had any we'pons he's found 'em, an' he'll use 'em, too."

A slight rustling among the bed-clothes behind the curtain which concealed the bunk in which Mr. Mortimer lay, proved that that gentleman was awake and listening to all that was going on. Jack heard the noise and noticed the movements of the occupant of the bunk, but the captain and his men did not. They were too busy with thoughts of the dangerous lunatic, whom they must assist in securing, to hear or see anything. They followed Jack to the deck, and during the next quarter of an hour the greatest confusion prevailed on board the flatboat.

Mr. Bowles that morning earned the reputation of being a very courageous man; for while he continually cautioned the crew to beware of the fire-arms of which he was sure his escaped prisoner had obtained possession, he exposed himself most recklessly, being everywhere foremost in the search, and advancing boldly into the darkest corners of the hold, where no one else dared to venture. Every part of the boat was thoroughly searched, but no Julian was found; and Jack and the captain, after talking the matter over, were obliged to come to the conclusion

that he had put an end to his life by jumping overboard.

The next thing was to inform Mr. Mortimer—who Jack said was some distant relative of the unfortunate youth—of the melancholy fact; but that gentleman had already learned the particulars from one of the crew, and had also made a most disagreeable discovery. Jack found him on deck, and when his eyes rested on him he stopped and gazed at him in surprise.

Mr. Mortimer's serious air might have been put on for the occasion, Bowles told himself, but he never could have assumed that pale face. Something was the matter with him. He listened in silence while Jack and the captain told him of Julian's mysterious disappearance, and when they ceased speaking he walked off to an unoccupied part of the deck.

The captain presently went down into his cabin and Jack joined Mr. Mortimer.

"Where is he?" asked the latter in a low whisper.

"At the bottom of the river," replied Jack in the same cautious tone. "He was standin' right there, jest this way," he added, stepping close to the side of the boat, "with his hands tied behind him, an' I come up an' give him a leetle nudge with my shoulder an' over he went. Nobody didn't see me do it, either."

"I don't care to know how it was done," interrupted Mr. Mortimer hastily. "I only want to be sure that it *was* done, and effectually."

"It sartinly was. He couldn't swim fur with his hands tied, could he?"

"No; but he might have been picked up. Have you seen Sanders this morning?"

"I hain't," replied Jack, looking about the deck, while an expression of anxiety settled on his face. "He wouldn't save him, would he?"

"Of course he would, if he got the opportunity. If he could take that boy to a certain man whose name I could mention he would make more money by it than he ever saw. He is working against me."

"Wal, he didn't pick him up. I was on deck fur ten minutes arter Julian went overboard, an' I didn't see him at all. Mebbe he's about somewhars."

"No, he isn't. He's gone; and so is the yawl belonging to the flatboat."

Jack started, and folding his arms gazed thoughtfully over the side into the water. Although he had not noticed the circumstance at the time, he now remembered that on the preceding day Sanders had kept as close as possible to him and Mr. Mortimer, and that he had more than once paused in his walk as if he were listening to their conversation.

Might he not by some means have become acquainted with his plans, and set himself to work to defeat them? And if Julian was so valuable to him, might he not have followed Jake and Tom in the yawl with the intention of securing their prisoner? The thought was enough to put Jack on nettles.

"Whar's them two hundred?" he asked, suddenly.

Mr. Mortimer, putting his hand into his pocket, produced a roll of bills, which he slyly handed to his confederate, and Jack continued:

"I can't be of no more use here, an' you might as well tell the cap'n to set me ashore."

"I will. I want to go myself. I am uneasy about that man Sanders. Here comes the captain now."

"I shall have to land to do it," said the skipper, after listening to the request of his passenger, "for I have no boat to send you off in. That strange-looking man in black has deserted us and stolen it. It was worth \$60, too."

"Say no more about that," returned Mr. Mortimer. "Put us on dry land and I will compensate you for the loss of your boat."

The captain gave the necessary orders to the pilot, called up his crew to man the sweeps, and in a few seconds the bow of the flatboat was turned toward the shore.

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CHAPTER XIII. IN THE SMOKE-HOUSE.



IF ANY one on board that flatboat is crazy it is Jack Bowles. He might have known that I wouldn't stay there long after my hands were untied. Didn't I tell him that I would never go back to that camp and give him my money with my own hands? I am free now, and if he ever captures me again I shall deserve to be obliged to remain under his roof for the rest of my days. The cabin can't be more than ten miles away. I can easily walk there in three hours, and it will be no trouble for me to slip into the house and obtain possession of my rifle and blankets without awakening Jake and Tom. Then I'll catch my horse, go back to my camp on the bluffs after my money, and by daylight I'll be twenty miles away."

While these thoughts were passing through Julian's mind he was striking out lustily for the shore. The flatboat was still in plain view, for the current carried both her and him down the river at an almost equal rate of speed. Julian kept close watch of her, expecting every moment to hear an uproar on her deck, telling him that his absence had been discovered. He little dreamed that his escape, which he had so easily accomplished, had been brought about by the assistance of his dreaded enemy, who was at that very moment creating a diversion in his favor; and he little thought, too, that the pursuers he feared were not coming from the flatboat, but from another quarter altogether. Had he looked up the river occasionally, instead of keeping his gaze so steadily directed across the stream, he would have discovered something.

A dug-out was coming swiftly down the river, its prow being pointed directly toward Julian. In the stern sat Tom Bowles vigorously plying a paddle, which he used with so much skill that it made not the slightest sound as it rose and fell in the water. Stretched out flat in the bow was Jake Bowles, who kept his eyes fastened on Julian's head, now and then signaling to his brother with his hands, and showing him what course to steer. Julian discovered his enemies before he had swam a third of the distance to the shore, but then it was too late to make even an attempt to avoid them. He heard a hissing sound, made by the sharp bow of the dug-out as it cleft the water, and turned quickly, only to find himself in the grasp of Jake Bowles, who seized his collar with both hands and held fast to it.

"I reckon ye thought ye was gone, didn't ye?" he cried, in a triumphant tone; "but ye hain't, be ye? Yer ketched agin, an' this time ye'll stay ketched, I bet ye. Balance the boat, Tom, an' I'll haul him in."

"I thought I left you at home, Jake Bowles!" exclaimed Julian. "How came you here?"

"I guess we've got as much right on this yere river as anybody, hain't we? We come arter ye, that's how we come here, an' we've got ye, too."

For a moment Julian was too astonished to move. The approach of his enemies had been so noiseless, and their appearance was so sudden and unexpected, that he was utterly bewildered. Not until Jack had dragged him half-way into the dug-out did he begin to comprehend the situation.

"Let go!" he exclaimed, "or I'll capsize the boat."

"Nary let go," replied Jake. "I owe you a good poundin' fur stealin' them \$100 from me, an' fur knockin' me into that hole last night, an' I'm goin' to give it to ye afore I let ye go. Come in here."

"No, you come out here," said Julian. "I'll duck you sure if you don't let go my collar."

This was the second time the two boys had measured strength, and although our hero was fighting at great disadvantage, he tested the endurance and muscle of his antagonist most severely. He strove to the utmost to drag Jake into the water; but the latter had wrapped his legs around one of the thwarts and thrown his left arm over another, and Julian could not break his hold. Nor could he overturn the boat, for Tom watched the contest closely, and frustrated all Julian's attempts by throwing the weight of his body on the opposite side of the dug-out.

Jake, in the meantime exerted himself to drag his prisoner out of the water; but finding that it was a task beyond his strength, he held firmly to Julian's collar, determined to wait until the latter, exhausted by his furious struggles, should be obliged to surrender himself. But Julian's endurance seemed to have no limit. He resolutely continued the contest, and all this while the canoe was floating down the river side by side with the flatboat, which was scarcely more than a hundred yards distant.

"We're fightin' fur money now, *we* are," said Jake—"for the \$145. It's no use fur ye to kick about so, 'cause we've got ye, an' we're goin' to hold fast to ye."

"You'll not get the money, even if you succeed in making a prisoner of me," replied Julian, with as much spirit as ever.

"We'll see about that when we've got ye hum. I guess if ye go a few days without eatin' or sleepin', an' have the rawhide laid over yer shoulders ten or twenty times every hour, ye'll be glad to tell us all we want to know. Come here, Tom, an' hit him a clip with yer paddle. I guess that'll fetch him to his senses."

"Souse him under," replied Tom; "that's the way to make him give in."

Jake was prompt to act upon the suggestion.

Julian resisted him desperately, but one or two severe blows on the fingers with the edge of Tom's paddle broke his hold on the side of the canoe, and his head was forced under the water. Jake held him there a few seconds, and then pulled him to the surface, and after giving him time to draw a breath or two, and clear his eyes of the water, asked him if he would abandon the

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"JAKE BOWLES SEIZED JULIAN BY THE COLLAR AND HELD FAST."—[Page 109].

"No," replied Julian, not in the least daunted; "I'll never give up while I have any strength left."

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"Stick him under agin," said Tom, and down went Julian's head for the second time.

Jake held him under longer than before—as long as he dared, in fact—and when he pulled him up again, Julian was incapable of any serious resistance. He gasped for breath, and tried to lay hold of the side of the canoe.

Jake, quick to improve the opportunity thus presented, exerted all his strength, while Tom kept the boat trimmed in order to prevent a capsize, and finally succeeded in dragging his prisoner out of the water. In less time than it takes to tell it he was secured beyond all hope of escape, and the canoe was shooting swiftly up the river.

It was fully half an hour before Julian moved or spoke. He lay so quietly on the bottom of the dug-out that Jake and Tom began to be alarmed, fearing that in their eagerness to take all the fight out of their captive, they had gone too far, and taken the breath out of him.

But Julian was fast recovering from the effects of his ducking, and as soon as he was himself again the brothers speedily became aware of the fact, for he began to try the strength of the ropes with which he was confined. He thrashed about at an alarming rate, rocking the canoe from side to side, until at last the water began to pour in over the gunwales, and Jake and Tom were obliged to cease paddling and trim their craft in order to keep it right side up.

But they had done their work thoroughly, and Julian, finding his efforts useless, ceased his struggles, and listened to the threats of his captors, who tried by every means in their power to compel him to tell where he had hidden his money.

During the progress of the conversation he heard some things he did not know before, and one was that his escape from the flatboat and his recapture by Jake and Tom were a part of the scheme Mr. Bowles had set on foot for the finding of the concealed treasure. He was astonished to know that while he imagined he was working for his own interests he was playing into the hands of his enemy, and told himself that Jack still had the most difficult part of the undertaking before him.

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The prisoner suffered intensely during the journey up the river. The night was cold, the wind keen and piercing, and seemed to cut through his wet clothing like a knife. When at last the canoe reached the landing he was so benumbed that he could scarcely speak.

Having made the dug-out fast to a tree on the bank, Jake and Tom pulled their captive ashore, and finding him unable to stand alone, took hold of his arms and led him toward the house.

Scarcely were they out of sight when a heavy yawl, rowed by a single man, shot up to the landing and stopped alongside the canoe. The occupant sprung out, and without waiting to secure his boat, crept cautiously up the bank, and followed after Jake and Tom.

When the brothers reached the cabin they pushed open the door and entered, dragging their captive after them. Mrs. Bowles, who sat nodding on one of the nail-kegs, started up as they came in, and Julian knew from the first words she uttered that she was expecting them.

"So ye've got him, have ye?" she exclaimed, gleefully. "This night's work will make rich folks outen us. An' ye was goin' to run away from us, was ye—from me an' Jack, who have allers treated ye like a son ever since ye've been with us? An' ye've got \$145 hid away from us, have ye? What business have ye got with so much money? Take him out to the smoke-house an' lock him up thar. I'm too sleepy to wollop him to-night, but I'll tend to him the fust thing in the mornin'."

Julian had expected a terrible beating as soon as he was brought into the presence of Mrs. Bowles, and was much relieved to know that his punishment was to be postponed for a few hours. It was the first time he had ever known Jack's wife to be too sleepy to use the rawhide.

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"An he ain't got no business with them new suit of clothes, nuther," said Tom, who, while his brother was searching for a candle and the key to the smoke-house, was taking some of his own ragged wearing apparel down from the nails in one corner of the cabin. "He's got to take 'em off an' give 'em to me. Pap said so."

"Ye shall have 'em, Tommy," said his mother. "Ye've been a good boy an' ye desurve 'em."

"An' I'm to have his rifle an' \$10 besides," chimed in Jake, angling for a word of

commendation.

"So ye are. Allers be good an' ye'll be sartin to prosper."

When Jake had found the candle and key, and Tom had selected the garments he intended to give to Julian in exchange for his own, the two boys led their captive out of the cabin to the smoke-house.

The first business in order, after they had conducted Julian into his prison, was to rob him of his clothes. Jake untied his hands and stood close by his side, in order to seize him if he made any attempt to escape, while Tom picked up a heavy club and stationed himself in front of the door, ready to knock the prisoner down if he eluded his brother. But Julian, shivering violently with the cold and utterly incapable of any exertion, thought only of dry clothes and comfort and not of escape. He felt much more at his ease after he had relieved himself of his wet garments and put on those Tom had provided for him, and told himself that if his captors would bring him the blankets Jack had stolen from his camp on the bluff, he could obtain a night's refreshing sleep in spite of the cold and his bonds. But he soon found that they did not intend to permit him to go to sleep at all; and during the next few minutes he gained some idea of what was in store for him.

As soon as the exchange had been made, and Julian had again been bound, Tom dropped his club, and catching up a long rope which he had brought with him from the house, mounted upon a box and made one end of it fast to a beam overhead. At the same time Jake pushed his prisoner under the beam, and seizing the other end of the rope tied it to his hands. Julian was now confined so that he could neither sit, lie nor walk about. He must remain upon his feet and stand in one place during the rest of the night.

"I don't see any use in this," said he, dismayed at the gloomy prospect before him. "I can't escape from this house as long as my hands are tied."

"Wal, we can see use in it, if ye can't," replied Tom. "We're doin' jest what pap told us to do."

"An' we don't do it 'cause we're afeared of yer gettin' away, nuther," said Jake. "Ye've got to stand right here without a wink of sleep or a bite to eat till ye tell us whar that money is hid. Mebbe ye'll tell us now."

"No, I'll not," replied Julian promptly and decidedly.

"All right. Ye'll think different in the mornin', I tell ye. The ole woman will be here bright an' arly, an' if ye ain't ready to open yer mouth, she'll give ye a dozen or two as hard as ever she can lay 'em on. When pap comes home to-morrer he'll take the job outen her hands. Ye've got into a hard row of stumps, feller."

After carefully examining their captive's bonds, and looking carefully about the smoke-house to make sure that there was no opening in it from which he could escape, even if he succeeded in freeing his hands, Jake and Tom went out, locking the door after them.

When the sound of their footsteps had died away, and Julian began to ponder upon what they had said to him, and to realize how powerless he was in the hands of his enemies, his courage for the first time gave away utterly. He took a step forward and threw his weight upon the rope, but it was firmly tied to the beam above and too strong to be broken, and the movement only pulled his hands between his shoulders, thus "tricing him up" most effectually. He had never dreamed that his enemies would endeavor to torture his secret out of him in this way. He had expected to be beaten, and he believed that he could endure that; but was his fortitude proof against such a test as this? In order to save himself suffering would it not be policy to give Jack the information he demanded, and when his liberty was restored to him, resume his old occupation of trapping until he could earn enough to purchase an outfit for his proposed journey? He had worked hard for two winters to accumulate the little property he now possessed, and should he surrender it at the command of one who had not the smallest shadow of a right to it? Julian passed an hour debating such points as these, and at the end of that time his decision was made.

"I'll never do it," said he to himself. "It belongs to me alone. Nobody else has a claim upon it. The woods are as free to Jack Bowles as they once were to me—much more so, in fact, for there is no one to dog his steps, destroy his traps and steal his earnings—and if he wants money let him work for it. That's the way I got mine. He will find that I am not to be starved or beaten into telling him where that box is concealed. Jake and Tom are coming back again. I hope they have not brought the rawhide with them."

The footsteps which had attracted Julian's attention drew nearer and nearer, and presently a cautious hand laid hold of the padlock with which the door was secured. Julian listened to hear the bolt turned, but soon found out that his visitor, whoever he was, did not intend to effect an entrance with the assistance of a key; for after shaking the lock to assure himself that it was fast in the staple, he placed his shoulders against the door and tried to burst it open. The prisoner heard him panting and puffing as he applied his strength to the stout planks. He heard, too, the angry words he muttered when he found that his efforts were useless, and caught the sound of his footsteps as he moved around the smoke-house.

Julian wondered greatly. Who was he? Was he some friend who, knowing that he was confined there, had come with the hope of rescuing him? There was scarcely a man in the settlement who would not have hurried to his relief had it been known that he was in trouble, but unfortunately no one was aware of his situation. Of course, then, the visitor could not be a friend. Most likely he was some hungry prowler, whose only object was to filch a ham or a side of bacon from the smoke-house.

In spite of the unpleasantness of his situation, Julian became interested in the man's movements. He walked around the building and finally came back and tried the door again, but with no better success than before. Then there was silence for a few minutes, during which the man was, no doubt, thinking what was best to be done, and at length a noise at one corner of the

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house told the prisoner that he had decided upon a plan of operations. He was using the projecting ends of the logs as a ladder, and mounting to the top of the building. His success was certain now. The roof was covered with narrow oak boards, laid on like shingles, and held in place by small nails; and it would be a matter of no difficulty for him to pull a few of them off and drop down on the inside of the smoke-house. That such was the visitor's intention soon became evident. He attacked the shingles at once, using extreme caution in removing them from their fastenings, and in a few seconds an opening had been made in the roof, that was immediately filled by the head and shoulders of the man, who lighted a match and held it up to take a survey of things below him. Julian had a good view of him. Could he believe his eyes? He stared hard at his visitor, and uttered a cry of delight.

CHAPTER XIV.

SANDERS TELLS HIS STORY.



JULIAN'S visitor was the man Sanders. He recognized him by the handkerchief that was tied over his head. If he had come there to release him would it not be sufficient proof that he was really the friend he professed to be?

"Julian!" exclaimed the man, in a low but excited tone of voice.

"I am here!" replied the prisoner, so overjoyed that he could scarcely speak plainly.

"Wal, come out o' that. You needn't stay thar no longer."

"I can't go up there—I am tied."

"Are you? Then I'll soon be down to turn you loose."

After burning another match to make sure the way was clear below him, Sanders crawled through the opening in the roof, and hanging by his hands, dropped to the ground. A knife which he drew from his pocket made quick work with the prisoner's bonds, and in a few seconds he was free.

"How came you here?" Julian asked of his deliverer, after he had taken a few turns around the smoke-house to relieve his cramped limbs. "I left you ten miles down the river fast asleep on board the flatboat."

"Not much I wasn't asleep," replied Sanders, with a laugh. "I seed every thing that happened. But we hain't got no time to talk. Be thar any men in the house?"

"No. Jake and Tom are alone with their mother."

"Them boys? If I had known that, you wouldn't have been brought in here. Climb up on my shoulders now, and crawl out."

Not having entirely recovered from the effects of his long ride in his wet clothes, Julian was not very strong or active, but after some difficulty he succeeded in mounting upon Sanders' broad shoulders, and drawing himself up to the opening in the roof, he crawled through and dropped to the ground. The man climbed up the logs and followed him, and when he once more stood by Julian's side he gave utterance, with the first words he spoke, to the very thoughts that were passing through the boy's mind.

"I reckon that if I do a few more things of this kind you will be willin' to b'lieve that I am any thing but an enemy to you, won't you?" he asked.

"You have rendered me a most important service," answered the boy, guardedly, "and I am very grateful to you for it. I only wish I was as well satisfied of your friendship, and the truth of some things you told me this morning, as I am of the interest you somehow take in me. I can not understand why you, who are an utter stranger to me, should put yourself to so much trouble to assist me."

"I hain't no stranger to you," replied Sanders earnestly. "I tell you I knowed you and your brother afore either of you could walk. You were stole away from your home by Dick Mortimer. Your friends have just found out whar you are, an' sent me arter you. You're goin' to start for the plains now, hain't you?"

"I am, and in less than five minutes."

"Wal, I'm goin' the same way. You needn't travel in my company unless you're a mind to, but I'd be powerful glad to have you. I can show you the way to St. Joe anyhow, an' as we go along I will tell you about the folks you hain't seed fur so many years."

Julian leaned against the smoke-house and thought over this proposition. It was a very fair one, and he could not see that he would place himself in any danger by accepting it. He was *almost* ready to put entire faith in his new acquaintance, and to believe everything he had told him. He wanted to believe it, and if Sanders had made his appearance a few hours before—prior to his meeting with Mr. Mortimer—Julian would have placed unlimited confidence in him. But his experience with Jack Bowles' guest had made him timid and suspicious.

Sanders did not ask him to give himself up to his guidance and control, but seemed satisfied to wait until he was willing to do so of his free will; and Julian told himself that that was a good sign.

He at last decided that he would accept the offer of the man's guidance as far as St. Joseph, and that when he reached that point he would decide upon his future movements. In the meantime he would watch his companion closely, and leave him at the very first sign of treachery. This determination he communicated to Sanders, who seemed to be immensely delighted by it.

"I am monstrous glad to hear you say it," said he. "And I'll tell you what's a fact: If you go with me as fur as St. Joe, you will go all the rest of the way with me."

Julian did not quite like the tone in which these words were spoken, for it made him feel that there was more in them than he could understand; and had there been light enough for him to see the expression the man's face wore at that moment the opinion would have been confirmed.

"Whar you goin' now?" asked Sanders, as Julian moved toward the cabin.

"Jake and Tom have some of my property in their possession," was the reply; "a suit of clothes, a rifle and a pair of blankets. I must have them before I start."

"Taint wuth while," said Sanders. "You've got money; buy more."

"I may need the little I have for other purposes when I get out on the plains."

"Sho! You'll find more out thar than you ever dreamed of. You can walk up a ravine a little way

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from your father's rancho an' pick up nuggets of gold as big as you can tote."

"But I don't know how long it will be, or what I shall be obliged to pass through, before I get there," replied Julian. "Another thing, Jack Bowles and his boys shall not have the satisfaction of using anything that belongs to me."

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"Wal, go ahead, then, if you're so sot onto it, an' I'll be close by to lend a hand if you get into trouble."

While this conversation was being carried on Julian and his companion were walking toward the cabin, and now they were close beside it. The boy at once pushed open the door and entered, while Sanders took his stand upon the steps where he could see all that went on.

There was a roaring fire on the hearth, and by the aid of the light it threw out Julian could distinguish every object in the cabin.

Almost the first things his eyes rested upon were the clothes of which he had been robbed, spread out on a couple of nail-kegs to dry. His rifle stood beside the bed in which Jake and Tom lay fast asleep, and his powder-horn and bullet-pouch hung from a nail over their heads. Walking across the floor with his ordinary step, and without taking the least pains to avoid arousing the occupants of the cabin, Julian took the horn and pouch down from the nail, and while slinging them over his shoulder discovered the other articles of which he was in search—his blankets, which were snugly tucked around the shoulders of the sleeping brothers.

"You are very good to yourselves, are you not?" said Julian aloud. "You leave me to freeze in the smoke-house, and make use of my property to keep yourselves warm. You'll sleep colder for the rest of the night."

As he said this he jerked the blankets off the bed. The movement awoke Tom Bowles who started up in alarm, and was greatly amazed to see his prisoner standing unbound beside his bed.

"Ye Julian!" he exclaimed, as soon as he found his tongue.

"That's just what's the matter!" replied our hero.

"How come ye outen that ar smoke-house?"

"I crawled out."

"Ye'll crawl back agin mighty sudden, I tell ye," replied Tom, seizing his brother by the shoulder. "Wake up here, Jake."

"Hold on!" said Julian, lifting his recovered rifle over Tom's head. "No noise, now."

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If Tom was alarmed by this movement on the part of Julian, he was still more terrified when he saw a head and a pair of broad shoulders thrust in at the door, and a clenched hand, which looked as though it might have knocked down an ox, shaken threateningly at him. He understood the gesture and took his hand off his brother's shoulder.

"Good-by, Tom," said Julian, shouldering his rifle and gathering his clothes and blankets under his arm. "I am sorry that I am in so great a hurry, for I have several little accounts against you and Jake that I should like to settle up before I go. Give my very kindest regards to your father when he returns, and be sure and follow the excellent advice your mother gave you a while ago in my hearing."

So saying Julian left the cabin, and Sanders slammed the door after him. Followed by his ally, the boy walked toward the corn-cribs, and while he was pulling off Tom's tattered garments and putting on his own, which were now dry and comfortable, he saw the door of the cabin opened and the heads of Mrs. Bowles and her two sons thrust cautiously out. But they did not speak to him or venture beyond the threshold. They peered into the darkness a moment and then closed and fastened the door; and that was the last Julian ever saw of them.

Billy, proving more tractable than on a former occasion, was captured and saddled without difficulty. In two hours more Julian's camp on the bluff was again occupied. The brush shanty which Jack Bowles had pulled down had been restored to an upright position; a fire was burning brightly before it; Billy was standing hitched to a tree close by; and Julian, with his saddle under his head for a pillow, and the tin box containing his money safely stowed away in his pocket, lay stretched out on one of the blankets, while Sanders reclined upon the other smoking his pipe. The man had been relating how he had hidden behind the corn-crib and overheard Jack Bowles' plans concerning Julian, and thus been able to take measures to defeat them. He had been a witness to everything that happened on board the flatboat. He had seen Julian go overboard, and knowing that Jake and Tom were close by waiting to pick him up, he had clambered down into the yawl, as soon as he saw an opportunity to do so without attracting the attention of any one of the flatboat's crew, and pushed off to Julian's assistance. His story was followed by a long pause, which was broken by our hero, who said:

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"I am ready to hear what you have to tell me about my parents. You say they are both alive?"

"Both of 'em," replied Sanders.

"How does my father look?"

"Just as nateral as life—enough like you to be your brother, if it wasn't for his gray har an' mustache. He's a tall, broad-shouldered man, has an eye like an eagle's, an' is the best hossman an' rifle-shot in the West. He's awful rich, too; I don't b'lieve he knows how much he's wuth. You see, your mother—an' she's a lady, you bet—is a Spanish woman. Her father, long years ago," Sanders went on hurriedly, as if he did not intend to allow his listener any time to ask questions, "took it into his ole head that he wanted to be away from everybody, an' so he located out thar in the mountains. He allers was rich, but when he got out thar he found himself richer'n ever. Thar was gold all around him. He couldn't walk without steppin' onto it, an' he picked it up by cart-loads. Your father, who was out thar sojerin', resigned his commission in the army an' married his darter; an' in course when the ole man died he came into possession of all his gold dust. But

thar were some people about who didn't want him to keep it. The only kin folks your mother had after her father died were a brother an' cousin, an' you see if everybody else had been out of the way, all the money would have fell to her brother. They ain't the honestest fellers in the world, her kin folks ain't, I must say. They're the wust sort of gamblers, bein' monstrous fond of three-card monte, an' they are even suspicioned of doin' things a heap sight wuss than that; an' since your father an' his family wouldn't die an' leave them to take charge of the money, they laid a plan to hurry up matters an' divide the plunder between them. But all the harm they done was to steal you away from home, an' that didn't do 'em no good 'cause I've found you agin."

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"You say that Dick Mortimer is the man who kidnapped me?" asked Julian, when Sanders paused.

"Sartin, I do."

"And that he is a relative of my mother's?"

"Them's my very words."

"Well, now, is he her brother or her cousin?"

"He's her brother."

"Her *own* brother?"

"In course."

"How can that be? My mother's name wasn't Mortimer before she was married, was it?"

"Eh?" exclaimed Sanders, somewhat disconcerted by this question. "Oh, no; in course not. Her name was Cordova, an' Dick's her cousin."

"Then how does it come that his name is Mortimer?"

"Eh? I'm blessed if I know. I guess it jest happened so. An' your brother's alive an' all right, too. Now he's a *boy*, he is. You're mighty right. His name's Fred. Won't he make things lively for you though when you get out thar? You hain't goin' to sleep, be you?"

"Yes, I am," replied Julian, rearranging his blanket and resting his head on his hard pillow, "I have scarcely closed my eyes during the past forty-eight hours, and I begin to feel the need of rest. We have a long journey to make to-morrow, you know. Goodnight."

Sanders looked sharply at the boy, and settled back on his blanket, muttering as he did so:

"Did I tell him anything out of the way, I wonder? I am afraid I got that brother an' cousin business mixed up a trifle too much. I said jest what Reginald told me to say as nigh as I could. If I can only manage to keep him with me till we reach St. Joe, I am all right. It will make a rich man of me."

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"It is no use to waste time in listening to this fellow and building hopes on what he says," thought Julian, throwing his arm over his head, and watching his companion through his half-closed eyes. "He repeated his story as if he had learned it by heart, and some portions of it didn't hold together. I wish he would take off that handkerchief and give me a fair view of his face. Who is he, and why did he come here? My father never sent him, for, if he is alive and well, and knows where I am, he would have come himself if he wanted to have me near him. He is no friend of Dick Mortimer, for he is working against him. Is he up to some trick of his own, or is he employed by somebody? I'll not go to sleep, for I am afraid of him. I can't well avoid traveling in his company as far as St. Joseph, but when I get there I will have no more to do with him."

For a short while Julian was wakeful enough. His recent excitement and adventures, and his speculations concerning the future, kept his brain busy and banished sleep. But at last his thoughts became confused, his eyelids grew heavy, and in a few minutes more he was in the land of dreams.

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CHAPTER XV. THE JOURNEY COMMENCED.



WHEN Julian opened his eyes again the sun was rising. He started up with an exclamation which was repeated as soon as he was fairly awake. His first thought was of his companion. He was gone. A glance about the camp showed him that something else was also missing—his rifle, which he had placed under the eaves of the cabin close at hand and ready for use in case of emergency. A strange feeling came over Julian, and it was some minutes before he could muster up courage enough to place his hand upon the breast of his jacket in which he carried his box of money. But he did it at last, and was immensely relieved to find that his box was safe. He removed the lid, and saw that its contents had not been disturbed.

While he was trying to find some explanation for his companion's absence, and wondering why, if he had deserted him and stolen his gun, he had not taken the money also, Sanders appeared in sight over the brow of the bluff with Julian's rifle on his shoulder and several squirrels in his hand, which he had shot for their breakfast. The boy said nothing about the fright his absence had occasioned him, but assisted him in cooking and eating the squirrels, telling himself the while that whatever else Sanders might be he was not a thief. It was plain now that if he had any designs upon Julian, the time to carry them into execution had not yet arrived.

When the two had satisfied their appetites Billy was saddled, the fire extinguished, and the journey toward St. Joseph commenced. Julian rode the horse and Sanders walked by his side, striding along at an astonishing rate and keeping Billy in a trot all the way. He proved to be a very entertaining companion, and told stories of adventure in the mountains and on the plains till Julian became interested in spite of himself. Sanders, quick to notice the fact, again spoke of the home among the gold mines to which he was ready to conduct Julian if the latter would only trust to his guidance; but seeing very plainly that the boy did not believe a word he said, he dropped the subject and did not refer to it again.

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At noon they stopped at a farm-house, where both travelers and horse were regaled with an excellent dinner, and about 10 o'clock that night found themselves in a hotel in St. Joseph. Julian asked to be shown at once to his room, and after he had locked himself in and barricaded the door with the washstand and chairs, he drew a long breath of relief, and for the first time since meeting Richard Mortimer believed himself free from danger. The feeling of comfort and security he experienced was certainly refreshing, but it would have been short-lived had he known what his companion in the adjoining room was thinking about.

That worthy was up and doing at a very early hour, and his first move, after he had come out of his room and looked up and down the hall to make sure that there was no one in sight, was to place his ear and then his eye to the keyhole of Julian's door. He heard and saw enough to satisfy him that the boy had not yet arisen, and this point being settled he went down stairs and out of the house. He hurried along the streets, and after turning numerous corners found himself in front of a small and very dingy public house, which, as the sign before the door indicated, was called the "Hunter's Home." It was patronized exclusively by frontiersmen, and some of the guests were already astir and lounging about the doors. Sanders glanced at the groups as he walked by them, and turning the nearest corner passed on out of sight. No sooner had he disappeared than two men arose from the bench on which they had been sitting, and strolling down the street and turning the same corner, presently came up with Sanders, who was perched upon a dry-goods box in front of a store.

"I allowed it was you, Ned, but I didn't know," said one of them, advancing and extending his hand, which Sanders shook cordially. "You're dressed up like a gentleman. What luck?"

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"I've got him."

"You have?" cried both the men in concert.

"It's a fact. He's in a hotel not more'n a half a mile from here—Julian Mortimer himself, an' nobody else. I've had the wust kind of a time a gettin' him. Dick Mortimer was thar ahead of me."

"Sho!"

"Yes. An' we're goin to have a wusser time, I am afraid, gettin' him out of the town to the prairy. He's sharper'n two steel traps, that boy is, an' somehow he don't like the looks of me. He knows a heap about himself, an' is too smart to swallow a single one of the lies I told him. He's goin' to cut loose from me, I can see it in his eye; an' whatever we do must be done to once. He wants to jine a wagon train, if he can find one."

"Wal, he can," replied one of the men, "'cause thar's one goin' out to-day. Silas Roper's goin' along."

"Silas Roper!" replied Sanders savagely. "He's allers in the way. He musn't see the boy, 'cause if he does our goose is cooked—done brown. Come with me to the hotel, an' as we go along I will think up some way to manage this business."

Sanders jumped off the dry-goods box and walked rapidly away, closely followed by his two companions. When they arrived within sight of the hotel he stopped, for they saw Julian standing on the steps. Sanders' friends recognized him at once, and declared that they would have known him if they had met him on the other side of the world. They held a short, whispered conversation, after which the two men retreated into a doorway out of sight, and Sanders kept on and accosted Julian.

"You're an 'arly bird, hain't you?" said he, with an awkward attempt to appear cordial and

friendly. "So am I. I have been findin' out somethin' about the wagon trains, an' I am told that one went out yesterday bound for the very place you want to go. It will pass within a hundred yards of the door of your father's rancho. I am goin' to start after it directly. Thar won't be another goin' out under a month, an' I can't wait so long; fur I've no money to waste in payin' board bills."

"Neither have I," said Julian.

"Then you'd best go with me, hadn't you? We can easy ketch the train by day after to-morrow ___"

Sanders paused suddenly, finishing the sentence with something that sounded very much like an oath. He gazed earnestly down the street for a moment, and then turned and walked rapidly away, drawing his handkerchief close about his face as he went. He did not slacken his pace until he had left the hotel out of sight, and was joined by his two companions, who had made an equally hasty retreat. The expression on their faces indicated that they were terribly enraged about something.

"If they wasn't worth so much money to us I would make way with both of them in less time than it takes to say so!" exclaimed Sanders, in a very savage tone of voice. "Did you ever hear tell of such luck? I've done all that can be done at this end of the route, but I hain't beat yet. We'll go to the mountains now, an' have every thing fixed agin' the wagon train gets thar."

For some reason Sanders and his friends now seemed anxious to leave the town with as little delay as possible. They made the best of their way to the Hunter's Home, which they entered hurriedly, and when they again made their appearance on the street they were all on horseback and carried rifles on their shoulders and revolvers and bowie-knives in their belts.

No one not well acquainted with him would have recognized Sanders as the same man who had gone into the hotel but a few minutes before. His broadcloth and jewelry had disappeared, also the handkerchief which he had worn about his face, and he was dressed in a suit of buckskin, which had evidently seen the hardest kind of service. If Julian could have taken one glance at him now, he would not have felt the least inclination to renew his short acquaintance with him, nor would he have wondered that the man had been so careful to keep his features concealed from view. Perhaps he would have asked himself why he did not continually wear the handkerchief.

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His was the worst looking face that had ever been seen in the streets of St. Joseph—one that any man except its owner would have been ashamed of; and even *he* had thought best to hide it for a while lest it should bear testimony against him and defeat his plans. But as he was now about to leave the country of civilized men and go among those of his own kind, concealment was no longer necessary. He appeared in his true character, that of villain and desperado.

When Sanders and his companions were fairly out of the stable-yard, they put spurs to their horses, and rode swiftly away. They stopped that night long enough to ascertain that Julian was with the emigrants, and to make a demonstration, the result of which shall be related presently, and then resumed their rapid gallop, which they did not slacken in one day, nor two; and even at the end of a week, mounted on fresh horses, which they had stolen or obtained in exchange for their own jaded animals, they were still riding toward the mountains as if for dear life. In this way they gained considerably on the wagon train, and by the time it appeared in sight of Bridger's Pass, Sanders had mustered assistance, and was ready to accomplish by force of arms what he had failed to gain by strategy.

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CHAPTER XVI.

SILAS ROPER, THE GUIDE.



URPRISED at the abruptness with which Sanders had deserted him, and at the unmistakable signs of rage and alarm he exhibited, Julian stood looking after his retreating form until it disappeared from view, and then directed his gaze down the street.

He could see nothing there calculated to frighten Sanders or any body else. There were but few men in sight, and these appeared to have no hostile intentions toward any one, for they were going quietly about their business, and did not seem to be aware that there were such persons as Julian and his late companion in existence.

Among them was a man who attracted the boy's attention at once; and he also seemed to be an object of interest to all in his immediate vicinity, for every one who passed him turned to look back at him. He was the nearest approach to a giant that Julian had ever seen. Sanders, large and powerful as he was, would have looked like a boy beside him. He was as straight as an arrow, and moved along as if he were set on springs. He was dressed in a complete suit of buckskin, even to his moccasins, and carried the never-failing knife and revolver about his waist. But little could be seen of his face, for it was covered with immense whiskers, which reached almost to his belt. He walked with his hands in the pockets of his hunting-shirt, looking carelessly about him, as if he had determined upon nothing in particular.

Arriving at the steps where Julian stood, he seated himself upon them, and drawing a pipe from a little pouch which hung at his belt, prepared to fill up for a smoke.

Julian watched all his movements with interest, and felt a strange kind of awe in the man's presence. He was certainly a trapper, and he must be a daring one, too, unless his looks belied him, for he would have been picked out among a thousand as a man who was not to be daunted by any physical dangers. He must know all about life on the frontier, of course, and perhaps he could give some information concerning the wagon train of which Sanders had spoken.

"Sir!" said Julian, as soon as this thought passed through his mind.

"Wal!" returned the trapper, raising a pair of honest-looking brown eyes, which seemed to invite the boy's confidence.

"Can you tell me whether or not a wagon train left this place yesterday for the mountains?" asked Julian.

"I can."

"I understood there was," continued Julian, after waiting for the man to say something else.

"Then you understood what wasn't so."

"Was there none left?"

"No."

"What object could Sanders have had in view in telling me that falsehood?" thought the boy. "When does the next one start?"

"To-day."

"How soon?"

"To onct."

"Where from?"

"From a place 'bout a mile from here, right up this street."

"Could I go with it?"

"I reckon. Want to go to Californy?"

"No, sir; I am bound for the mountains."

"For the Peak?"

"No, sir; for the *mountains*."

"Wal, wharabouts in the mountains?"

"Whereabouts?" replied Julian.

He gazed at the trapper a moment, and seating himself on the opposite end of the steps, looked down at the ground in a brown study. The question propounded to him excited a serious train of reflections in his mind. He had always spoken and thought of "the mountains" without having any very definite idea concerning them. He had imagined that when he was once safe across the plains his troubles would all be over, and that it would be a matter of no difficulty to find the home and friends of which he was in search if they were still in existence; but the trapper's last words had opened his eyes and showed him the real magnitude of his undertaking. "Whereabouts in the mountains?"

This was a question that Julian could not answer. He remembered now to have read somewhere that the Rocky Mountains covered an area of 980,000 square miles. How could he hope to find his father in such a wilderness as that? He might be in Mexico, or he might be in Oregon—Julian didn't know. After all he had endured and accomplished, the obstacles that lay in his path were but just beginning to make themselves manifest. This reflection for the moment utterly unnerved him, and tears began to fall from his eyes. The trapper removed his pipe from his mouth long enough to say:

"Cryin'?"

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"I know it is unmanly," replied Julian, "but I can't help it. I have been through some difficulties lately, but I can see that there are worse ones before me. But I'll never give up—never!"

"Stick to that allers," said the trapper, now beginning to show some interest in what the boy had to say. "Never-give-up has carried many a feller through the wust kind of scrapes. Got any friends out West?"

"Yes, sir—or, rather, I had a few years ago; but I don't know where to find them. Did you ever hear of Major Mortimer?"

"I b'lieve I've heerd his name spoke."

"Do you know where he lives?"

"I can't jest say I do exactly. Thar's only two or three men who can tell whar he is now, but I know whar he used to live."

"He is my father."

"I know it."

"You do?" cried Julian. He looked at the man in utter bewilderment, and arose hastily to his feet. "Good-day, sir," said he. "I am obliged to you for the information you gave me about that wagon train."

The trapper made no reply. He took his pipe out of his mouth and looked after the boy as he jumped off the steps and hurried down the street, and when he disappeared he arose, thrust his hands in his pockets and sauntered after him. What would Julian have thought if he had known that he was running away from the only friend he had east of the mountains?

"I will have nothing to do with any one who has ever seen or heard of me," soliloquized the boy, as he hurried along, looking into the different stores he passed. "How does it come, I wonder, that so many men whom I never saw before know me? I am going to depend upon myself until I am satisfied that I am out of danger. If Sanders makes his appearance again I will send him about his business. I will go out with that wagon train, and perhaps before I reach the mountains I shall find some man who doesn't know me, and who can give me the information I want. This is the place I am looking for."

He stopped in front of a store, where a boy about his own age was at work taking down the shutters. It appeared to be a sort of variety store, for clothing and furnishing goods were displayed in one of the windows, and weapons and saddlery in the other.

Julian entered, and when he came out again, a quarter of an hour afterward, he had made as great a change in his appearance as Sanders did during the short time he remained in the Hunter's Home. He was dressed in a full Mexican suit, which the polite and attentive clerk had made him believe was just the thing to wear during a journey across the plains, and in the saddlebags, which he carried over his shoulder, was another and a finer suit of the same description, as well as a small supply of powder and lead, a brace of revolvers, and several other articles of which he thought he might stand in need. On his arm he carried a poncho—a rubber blanket with a hole in the center—which was to be used in lieu of an umbrella in rainy weather.

When he came out and bent his steps toward the hotel, a tall fellow in buckskin, who was leaning against an awning on the opposite side of the street, straightened up and followed after him. When he sat down to his breakfast the same man walked through the hall, and looked in at the dining-room; and when, after paying his bill at the hotel, he came out with all his weapons and luggage, and sprung upon his horse, the man in buckskin disappeared down a neighboring street, and presently came back again, mounted on a large cream-colored mustang, and rode in pursuit of Julian.

Our hero found that the information the strange trapper had given him concerning the wagon train was correct. The emigrants had been encamped on a common a short distance from the hotel, and when Julian came up with them they were all on the move. The road in advance of him was dotted with white wagon-covers as far as his eyes could reach. It was a novel and interesting sight to him, and he soon forgot his troubles in watching what was going on around him. The day that he had thought of and lived for so long had arrived at last, and he was fairly on his way to the mountains. The road the emigrants intended to follow might not lead him to his home, but what of that? It was enough for him to know that it crossed the mountains somewhere.

Billy, being in high mettle, insisted on going ahead, and his rider allowing him a free rein, was carried at a swinging gallop along the entire length of the train until he arrived at the foremost wagons. The emigrants all seemed to be in excellent spirits, and Julian heard them laughing and talking with one another as he dashed by. On the way he passed several boys, who were racing their horses along the road, now and then stopping to call back to their parents and friends in the wagons. Their merriment had an effect upon Julian. It made him contrast their situation with his own. In all that wagon train there was no one to greet him, no one who knew how he longed for a word of sympathy and encouragement from somebody, and no one who cared for him or his affairs.

"But I am free!" said the boy, who was not long in finding some crumbs of comfort with which to solace himself. "I can go where I please, and there is no Jack Bowles to dog my footsteps and beat me with his rawhide. I can eat, sleep and walk about in perfect security, knowing that there is no one to molest me. I am leaving behind me Richard Mortimer, Sanders and all the rest of my secret enemies, and the dangers and difficulties I have yet to encounter will be such as I know how to meet. If I do not find my home and friends before my money is gone, I have a good horse and rifle, and I know how to shoot and trap. I shall be able to take care of myself."

There were several men riding in company in advance of the train, and not wishing to intrude upon them, Julian fell in behind, and during the whole of that forenoon never spoke a word to any one. When noon came the wagons began to draw off into the woods one by one, and in a quarter

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of an hour the entire train had come to a halt, and preparations for dinner were actively going on. Julian, hungry and lonely, would have been glad of an invitation to join one of the happy parties that were scattered about among the trees, but no one noticed him. He dismounted a little apart from the rest of the emigrants, and after tying his horse to a tree, spread his poncho upon the ground, and was about to begin an attack upon the small supply of crackers and cheese stowed away in his saddle-bags, when some one spoke to him.

"Wal, my lad, its grub time," said a familiar voice.

Julian looked up, and there, leaning upon a rifle that an ordinary man could scarcely have raised to his shoulder, stood the tall trapper whom he had met in the streets of St. Joseph. At the sight of him his old fears were revived with redoubled force.

"Here's one enemy I haven't left behind me," thought Julian. "I must still be on the lookout for treachery. I know it is dinner-time," he added, aloud; "and I am just about to take advantage of it." [137]

"In what way? I don't see that you have got anything to eat."

"I have, nevertheless," replied the boy, laying his hand on his saddle-bags.

"Do you keep it in thar?" asked the trapper, with a laugh. "How long do you think it'll last you?"

"A day or two; and when it is gone my rifle must supply my larder. There must be an abundance of game on the plains."

"Humph! That shows how much you know 'bout prairie life. Sometimes thar's game an' sometimes thar hain't. An' sometimes when we know thar's plenty of buffaler an' antelope only a little ways off, we can't go out to shoot 'em fur fear of the Injuns. What'll you do under them sarcumstances?"

Julian didn't know. He would be obliged to go to bed hungry, he supposed.

"Yes, an' you'll go to bed hungry many a night afore you see the mountains, if this is the way you're goin' to do business," continued the trapper. "We can do better'n this fur you. Come into our mess; we'd be glad to have you."

Julian thanked the man for his kind offer, but took time to consider before replying. The interest his new acquaintance seemed to take in his welfare made him suspicious, and he wanted to keep as far away from him as possible. But, after all, if the trapper had any designs upon him, what difference would it make whether Julian remained at one end of the wagon train or the other? It would certainly be better to make sure of plenty to eat during the journey than to depend upon his rifle; and, if he saw anything in the trapper's actions to confirm his suspicions, he could easily avoid being left alone with him.

He arose and picked up his saddle-bags, and the trapper, who had waited patiently for an answer to his invitation, shouldered his rifle and led the way through the woods, presently stopping at one of the wagons, beside which a party of three men were seated on the ground eating their dinner. [138]

These looked curiously at Julian as he came up, and seemed to be waiting for the trapper to tell why he had brought him there; but as he did not appear to think that any explanation was necessary, they made way for the boy, and waving their hands toward the plates containing the corn-bread and bacon, went on with their conversation.

The trapper soon satisfied his appetite, and mounting his horse, which was grazing close by, rode off, leaving Julian alone with the three men. He listened to their conversation, and soon learned that they were from an Eastern State, that they had never been West before, and that their destination was the gold mines of California.

This silenced some of Julian's fears, and finally, venturing to inquire who the trapper was, he was told that his name was Silas Roper, and that he was the chief man of the wagon train—the guide. The men were enthusiastic in their praises of him, and if they told the truth, as Julian hoped they did, Silas was one in whom he could well afford to confide.

Our hero then explained how he came to be brought into the mess, following up the story with as much of his history as he was willing the men should know, and their hearty words of sympathy and welcome placed him at his ease at once, and almost made him believe that at last he had found real friends.

While the dinner was in progress a horseman came leisurely down the road, gazing earnestly at every group of emigrants he passed, as if he were searching for some one. When he reached the place where Julian and the three men were seated, he drew rein with an exclamation of surprise and satisfaction, and sat motionless in his saddle, staring at them as if debating some point in his mind. Having at last decided upon something he rode up to the party and accosted them.

CHAPTER XVII. ACROSS THE PLAINS.



THE MOMENT Julian's eyes rested upon the strange horseman he asked himself where he had seen him before. There was something about him that looked familiar. He was dressed in rough clothing, like the rest of the emigrants, wore high-top boots and a broad felt hat. His hair was cut close to his head, and his face, which was dark and haughty, was clean shaven; although the blue shade about his chin and upper lip showed that goatee and mustache had recently been growing there. His voice sounded strangely familiar, too, although Julian could not recollect where he had heard it before.

The man announced that he was bound for San Francisco, and that having been obliged to make his preparations for the journey in great haste, in order to join that wagon train, he had had no opportunity to lay in a supply of provisions. As their mess appeared to be small he would be glad to join it, if the men had no objections, and was willing to pay liberally for the privilege. Julian's new friends had no objection whatever. They liked good company, and if the stranger would agree to pay his share of the provisions he might come in and welcome. And so the matter was settled, and the new-comer became a member of Julian's mess.

Our hero had never carried a lighter heart than he did during that afternoon's ride. He no longer felt that he was utterly forsaken in the world. He had some one to talk to now—men who had never seen or heard of him before, who did not even know his name, but who nevertheless sympathized with him and took an interest in his affairs. And it was because these new-found friends were strangers to him that Julian felt safe in their company. He was still suspicious of the guide, notwithstanding the high terms of praise in which he had been spoken of by the members of his mess, and he disliked the appearance of the new emigrant also.

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The latter seemed desirous of cultivating the boy's acquaintance. He addressed a good many of his remarks to him, and whenever he said anything that he thought to be particularly interesting or witty, he would look at Julian and wink. This was quite enough to excite the boy's suspicions; but he comforted himself with the thought that neither the guide nor the emigrant would dare molest him in the presence of the whole wagon train, and that he would take care never to be left alone with them.

The afternoon passed quickly away, and it was sunset almost before Julian knew it. His day in the saddle had severely tested his endurance, and he was glad indeed when the train came to a halt. Being desirous of showing his new friends that he appreciated their kindness to him, he assisted them in making the camp, unharnessing the mules, providing the wood for fire, and bringing the water with which to fill the camp-kettle. The guide, whom he had not seen during the whole of the afternoon, made his appearance when supper was ready, and so did the emigrant; but the latter did not approach the fire. He stopped at a respectful distance, looked hard at Silas, whose back was turned toward him, and then walked quickly out of sight. Julian, astonished at his singular behavior, looked around at the other members of the mess to see if any beside himself had observed it; but the men were too busy with their corn-bread and bacon to pay any attention to what was going on outside their own camp.

Supper over, Silas and his companions stretched themselves on their blankets to enjoy their pipes, while Julian busied himself in gathering up the dishes and packing the remains of the supper away in the wagon. This done, he went out for a stroll down the road; he wanted to see how the camp looked by moonlight.

The day's journey, although it had been a hard and fatiguing one, seemed to have had no effect upon the spirits of the emigrants, who were as merry and laughed and sang as loudly as when they left St. Joseph. They seemed to be supremely happy and contented, and Julian did not wonder at it. They had everything their hearts could desire to make them happy, and he had everything to make him miserable. If he had had parents and brothers and sisters there he would have laughed too, and felt as light of heart as the best of them. But there was not a soul with whom he could claim relationship in less than a thousand miles, and perhaps not in the world. Julian was falling into his melancholy mood again, and he wanted to be alone; the sounds of merriment grated harshly on his ears. He left the camp and hurried down the road. On he went, regardless of the flight of time, through the woods in which the wagons had halted, to the prairie that lay beyond, brooding over the past and speculating on the future.

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How long his fit of abstraction continued he could not have told; but when he came to himself the camp-fires were out of sight, and he was standing on an extensive plain which stretched away before him as far as his eyes could reach, without even a tree or bush to break the monotony. He was alone; there was not a living thing within the range of his vision. This was Julian's first glimpse of the prairie, and it was not without its effect upon him. He gazed in wonder. What an immense region it was that lay between him and his home—all India could be put into it twice, he had read somewhere—and until that moment what a ridiculously faint conception he had had of it! What would he not have given to have been able to tell what lay beyond it? He listened but not a sound came to his ears. An unearthly silence brooded over the vast expanse—a silence so deep that he could hear the beating of his own heart. Julian was awed, almost frightened by it; and turning quickly about he started for the camp at the top of his speed.

Perhaps Julian would have been really frightened if he had known that he was not so utterly alone as he imagined himself to be. There were no less than four persons in sight of him all the while, and part of the time, five. Three of them were Sanders and the men who had left St. Joseph in his company. Having watched the train from a safe distance all that day, they entered the

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camp as soon as it grew dark to satisfy themselves that the boy of whom they were in search was among the emigrants. They saw him as he strolled through the woods and followed, hoping to find an opportunity to make a prisoner of him. The fourth man, who watched every move Julian made during the time he remained within sight of him, and who carried in his hand a revolver cocked and ready for use, was the emigrant; and the fifth was Silas Roper. The latter, unlike the others, who made use of every tuft of grass to cover their bodies, walked erect down the road, keeping always within rifle-range of Julian, whose form, being clad in dark garments, was thrown out in bold relief against the gray background of the prairie. The emigrant saw him, if Julian did not, and for some reasons of his own thought it best to abandon his pursuit of the boy. He concealed himself in the grass until the trapper had passed on, and then scrambled to his feet and slunk away in the direction of the camp.

Julian had not retraced his steps very far before he began to wish most heartily that he had turned back long ago. There was some one following him—following, too, for the purpose and with the determination of overtaking him. His ears told him that such was the fact, and there was no need that he should look back to make sure of it—he dared not do it. He heard the sound of the pursuit very plainly—the stealthy, cautious patter of moccasined feet on the hard road, which grew louder and more distinct every instant. Who was his pursuer? The guide, beyond a doubt, for he was the only man in the train who wore moccasins. Fear lent Julian wings, and he made headway astonishingly; but there was some one beside the clumsy Jack Bowles in pursuit of him now, and the lightness of foot that had brought him off with flying colors in his race with that worthy could not avail him.

"It's no use, Julian," said a gruff voice behind him. "I'm a comin', an' if I don't overhaul you thar ain't no snakes. You're ketched, an' you might as well stop an' give in." [143]

But our hero was not one of the kind who give in. He strained every nerve to escape, but his pursuer gained rapidly. He was close behind him now—Julian could hear his heavy breathing; but just as he was expecting to feel his strong grasp on his collar, a blinding sheet of flame shot out of the gloom directly in advance of him, and something whistled through the air close to his ear. In another minute Julian had run squarely into the arms of Silas Roper, and his pursuer had faced about and was making his way through the tall grass as if a legion of wolves were close at his heels.

"I reckon I throwed away that chunk of lead, didn't I?" said Silas. "You needn't be skeered now. I know you ain't hurt, 'cause I've had my eyes on you all the while."

Julian, weak with terror and utterly bewildered to find the guide in front, when he had all the while supposed him to be behind and in pursuit of him, could not reply. But if he was surprised at this, he was still more amazed at the manner in which Silas received him. He did not show the least desire to do him an injury, but on the contrary extended his arm around him protectingly, and supported him until he had somewhat recovered himself.

"You're lively on your legs fur a little one," continued the trapper, "but you're well nigh give out, ain't you? If thar had been just a trifle more light Sanders would have been past harmin' you now."

"Who?" gasped Julian.

"Sanders. You didn't think to hear of him again so soon, did you?"

"I never expected to hear from him again."

"Sho! Wal, you'll hear and see more of him durin' the next few weeks than you'll like, I tell you. That was him a chasin' you, 'cause I've seed him often enough to know him," added the trapper, leading the way toward the camp, loading his rifle as he went.

"You said you were watching me," said Julian. "Why did you do it?" [144]

"'Cause I'm a friend to you."

"I begin to believe you are," replied the boy, casting all his suspicions to the winds. "If I had been sure of it to-day when I first saw you, I shouldn't have run away from you; but I have seen so much treachery lately that I distrust everybody."

"I can easy b'lieve that. I know purty near what Dick an' Ned have been up to."

"You told me this morning that you know who I am. Of course, then, you know my father."

"Sartin I do."

"Is he alive?"

"He is."

"And my mother?"

"No, she's dead—died when you was a little feller."

"And my brother?"

"He's all right."

"Can you take me to my father?"

"I reckon not."

"What's the reason?"

"'Cause I don't know whar he is—that's the reason. I'll allers be a friend to you, howsomever."

During the walk to the camp Julian asked innumerable questions about his home and friends, but the information that we have just recorded was all he could extort from the trapper. He taxed his ingenuity to the utmost, and propounded his inquiries in a dozen different ways, but Silas could neither be surprised or coaxed into revealing more than he had already told. Nor did Julian ever hear anything more from him, although he saw very plainly that the trapper knew all about him, and could easily gratify his curiosity if he felt so inclined. Day after day he renewed his

endeavors to worm out some small item of information, but all he could ascertain positively was that his father and brother were alive and well, and with that he was obliged to be content. Of another thing he was also pretty certain, and that was, that he should not find his home—if he found it at all—the pleasant and inviting place that Sanders had represented it to be. But in this respect he was not much disappointed, for he had built no hopes upon anything his false friend had told him.

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During the journey across the plains nothing worthy of record occurred to vary the monotony of Julian's life. He met with no more adventures, for Sanders had disappeared, and although the boy was certain that Silas could tell what had become of him, all his questioning failed to elicit the desired information. The emigrant kept himself as much as possible out of sight. The members of the mess expressed some surprise at his abrupt desertion of them, and asked one another what could have been the occasion of it; but no one knew, and in a day or two the matter was forgotten.

As the days progressed Julian's friendship for and confidence in his silent friend steadily increased. Silas on his part cherished an unbounded affection for his young companion, and manifested it by a thousand little acts of kindness. He beguiled many a weary mile of their journey with stories of what he had seen and done, and descriptions of life in the Far West, but said not a word about Julian's affairs unless he was asked.

At last the Rocky Mountains began to loom up before them, and on the same day Silas, who as usual was riding in advance of the train with Julian, pointed out a hostile Indian on the summit of a distant swell.

"How do you know he is hostile?" asked Julian. "Can you see the paint on his face at this distance?"

"No, but I know who's been a smokin' an a talkin' with his tribe around the council fires," replied the trapper. "You think you've been through a heap since you fust seed Dick Mortimer, and p'raps you have; but you'll go through a heap more if you live a week longer. You needn't be afeared of the Injuns, howsomever," added Silas, seeing that the boy's cheek blanched, and that he cast anxious glances toward the distant warrior. "They won't harm you. If every man, woman and child in the train is massacred, you'll be kept safe, unless you are hurt by accident."

"What makes you think so?"

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"I don't think so, I know it; but I hain't got time to talk about it now, 'cause I must ride back an' keep the wagons closer together."

This was always the way with the trapper after he had said something that Julian was particularly anxious to have explained—he had no time to say more on the subject just then, but must see to something that demanded his immediate attention.

Julian was greatly perplexed by what he had just heard. It sounded very unreasonable, but he did not doubt the truth of it, for he had learned to put implicit faith in the trapper's word.

In two days more Bridger's Pass was reached, and the emigrants made their camp for the last time.

We have already related how Julian was enticed away from the wagon train by the outlaws, who carried him on horseback to Reginald Mortimer's rancho, and that during the ride he heard the sounds of a fierce battle going on between the Indians and the emigrants, and saw the train consumed by fire.

We have also told of his introduction to the man who called himself his uncle, and described the reception that gentleman extended to him. He was conducted into Mr. Mortimer's sleeping-apartment, and saw the outlaws receive a heavy reward for delivering him into the hands of the owner of the rancho, after which Sanders and his companion took their departure, and Julian was left alone with his new relative.

Then for the first time he raised his eyes and took a fair look at the man. Surely he had seen that face and figure somewhere. They were those of Richard Mortimer. He had left him on board a flatboat more than a thousand miles away, and here he was in the mountains where he least expected to see him, ready now and able to carry out his plans against Julian's life.

One glance at him was enough for our hero, who, with a cry of terror, turned and ran toward the door.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

THE EMIGRANT AGAIN.



TOP!" cried Reginald Mortimer, in great astonishment. "Come back here!"

Julian heard the command, but he did not heed it. He strove with nervous haste to open the door, but the knob refused to turn for him. He dashed himself against it with frantic violence; but the stout oak planks had been intended to resist a stronger force than he could bring to bear upon them, and they did not even tremble beneath his weight.

Reginald Mortimer appeared to be utterly confounded by the boy's behavior. He watched his movements for a few seconds, and said:

"Julian, you could not leave the rancho if you were to effect an entrance into the hall. Shall I call Pedro, and tell him to let you out?"

It was now Julian's turn to be astonished. He had expected violence, but was not prepared for the accents of kindness. He looked timidly at the man, and took his hand off the door-knob.

"Come here and tell me all about it," continued Reginald Mortimer in a mild tone. "Why should a glance at me alarm you? Is there anything so very frightful about me?"

"No, sir; but you are the man who stole me away from my home and took me to live with Jack Bowles."

The owner of the rancho opened his eyes, but said nothing.

"And you came to his house not long ago and offered him money to drown me in the Missouri River," added Julian.

Reginald Mortimer was profoundly astonished. After hesitating a moment, as if undecided how to act, he extended his hand to Julian, and leading him to a seat on the sofa, placed himself beside him. [148]

"My dear boy," said he, kindly, "what delusion is this you are laboring under? You have made a great mistake. That this house is your own, and that you will some day have a better right here than I or any body else, I admit. And that you were stolen away long years ago by some bad man is equally true; but I knew nothing of it until after it was done, and neither did I know where you were, for all my efforts to find you were unavailing. I never heard of Jack Bowles before. I have not the least idea where he lives, and neither do I know who the man was who wanted to drown you in the river. It certainly was not I."

"Then it was some one who looks exactly like you," said Julian.

"There is but one person in the world who resembles me, that I am aware of, and that is my cousin—your Uncle Richard. It could not have been he, for he has tried as hard to find you, and is as much interested in your welfare as I am. Besides, he went to Fort Stoughton two months ago to shoot buffaloes, and has not yet returned. It could not have been Sanders either, for he does not look at all like me. More than that, he is a firm friend of our family, and has worked hard to find you—not with any intention of doing you an injury, but in order to restore you to your home and friends once more. You must be dreaming."

While Reginald Mortimer was speaking Julian was looking him sharply in the face and thinking busily. He was not deceived by the man's apparent sincerity. Although greatly mystified he knew that he was not dreaming. His thoughts wandered back to that memorable night on which he had first seen Richard Mortimer at Jack Bowles' cabin. He remembered how closely he had scrutinized his features in order to impress them upon his memory, and when he compared them with the features of the man who was now seated at his side he told himself that any one not intimately acquainted with the two gentlemen would have declared them to be one and the same person. But something that just then occurred to him satisfied him that they could not be. He thought he must be growing very dull, or else he would have known long ago that the emigrant who had joined the wagon train at St. Joseph, and watched all his movements so closely during the journey across the plains, could be none other than Richard Mortimer. He wondered that he had not thought of it before, and especially that he had not recognized him when Sanders pronounced his name in the reception-room. [149]

Another thing that suddenly became clear to him was that the trapper, Sanders, was the same man who had rescued him from the smoke-house.

Julian saw the reason for his pretended friendship now, and knew why it was that the man had been so anxious to accompany him to the mountains. He wanted to make \$5,000 by delivering him into the hands of Reginald Mortimer. But there were still a good many things that he could not understand, and he wondered if they would ever be made plain to him.

"You are greatly in need of rest," said Mr. Mortimer, laying his hand gently on the boy's shoulder. "You are completely exhausted. Go to bed now, and I will talk these affairs over with you in the morning. I will then explain everything. If you feel timid in this gloomy old house I will tell Pedro to make you a bed here on the sofa."

"I would rather be alone, if you please," replied Julian. "I have been through a good deal tonight, and I want time to think it over. My mind is greatly confused."

Reginald Mortimer lighted a candle, and after unfastening the ponderous spring-lock which held the door and prevented Julian's escape from the room, he conducted him along the main hall for a short distance, and turned into another that ran at right angles with it, finally ushering him into his sleeping apartment.

"This is your room," said he. "You are master here, and if you will take the trouble to look

about you, you will find that I have neglected nothing that I thought would add to your comfort. Now, if you will dismiss your fears, if you have any, as I hope you will, for they are certainly groundless—you can enjoy a refreshing sleep. You need not hurry yourself in the morning, for I will wait breakfast for you. Goodnight, and pleasant dreams.”

Reginald Mortimer placed the candle upon the center-table and went out, closing the door after him. Julian stood listening to the sound of his retreating footsteps, and when it had died away, and he heard a door open and close in some distant part of the house, he stepped carefully across the floor and tried the lock. It was not fastened.

“This looks as though there might be some truth in that man’s story,” said he to himself. “The doors in this rancho—if that is what the house is called—seem to have a way of locking themselves, and I fully expected to find myself a prisoner. I’ll see that no one enters here to-night. If Dick Mortimer is still prowling around he shall never see the inside of this room. And Reginald doesn’t know that Dick is about here at all. He thinks he is off on a shooting excursion at Fort Stoughton, wherever that is. Dick evidently keeps his movements hidden from his cousin, and that proves that he is up to something he doesn’t want him to know.”

Julian turned the key in the lock as he said this, put down the catch, and seeing two strong bolts on the door, one above and the other below the lock, he pushed them into their sockets. Not satisfied with this he tilted one of the chairs against the door, and placing the back under the lock, and bracing the hind legs firmly against the floor, thus formed a barricade that could not have been easily forced from the outside, even if the lock and bolts had been undone.

This much being accomplished, Julian took his stand in the middle of the floor and looked about him. His quarters were large and airy, and contained a greater variety of elegant furniture than he had ever seen before. The floor was covered with a soft carpet that gave out no sound as he stepped across it. The walls were concealed by blue and gold hangings, and in one corner stood a comfortable bed, which, with its clean white spread and pillow-cases, presented a great contrast to the miserable couch to which Julian had been accustomed for the last eight years. Opposite the bed was a huge fire-place, and over it was a mantel-piece of black walnut, on which stood an ornamental clock. In the corner beside the fire-place was a small book-case, containing a collection of works that would have delighted any boy who was as fond of excitement and adventure as Julian. In spite of the limited advantages he had enjoyed in his old home he had learned to read and write, and having an all-devouring passion for books, he had perused every thing that came in his way. On the opposite side of the fire-place stood a finely carved wardrobe, and the first things Julian’s eyes rested upon when he opened the doors was a double-barrel shotgun, a rifle, and a belt containing a revolver.

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“This is just what I’ve been looking for,” said he joyfully, as he drew the elegant six-shooter from its holster. “If I am master of this room, as that man says I am, I have a right to do as I choose. I choose to say that I want to be alone here to-night. Dick Mortimer had better keep his distance, and so had those strange people Sanders spoke of, who can go through key-holes, and cracks an inch wide, and even solid stone walls. If they trouble me I will see if a bullet can go through *them*. Now, where is the ammunition?”

That was a question easier asked than answered. The accouterments belonging to the weapons were all in the wardrobe—the powder-horn and bullet-pouch depending from the muzzle of the rifle, and the shot-bag and flask hanging from the ramrod of the double-barrel; but they were empty. Nor was there any ammunition in the room. Julian overhauled the drawers in the lower part of the book-case, but they contained nothing but writing and drawing materials. Then he searched all the drawers in the bureau; but although they were filled to overflowing with all sorts of trinkets and valuables dear to the heart of youth—nothing in the shape of powder and lead could be found.

With a sigh of regret Julian returned the useless revolver to its holster, and throwing himself into a large easy-chair, which extended its arms invitingly, stretched his feet out before him, thrust his hands into his pockets and went off into a reverie.

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“What a change a few short weeks have made in my circumstances,” thought he. “It seems only yesterday that I was living in a den that a respectable dog would turn up his nose at, going about clothed in rags, starving both summer and winter, and beaten and sworn at by every one of the family. Now I find myself under the roof of a man who speaks almost the first kind words to me that I ever remember of hearing, who embraces me and tells me that he is my uncle, and leading me to a room fitted up like a palace informs me that I am sole master of it. And I need not get up in the morning at the first peep of day to cut firewood and help Mrs. Bowles lay the table and cook corn-dodgers, but may sleep as long as I please, and my breakfast will be kept waiting for me. This man tells me, too, that I shall some day have a better right here than he, who now claims to be the owner of the rancho. Isn’t it enough to turn any one’s head? I will go to sleep now, and perhaps in the morning some of these things, which now seem to be involved in such impenetrable mystery, will be clearer to me.”

Julian arose to his feet, and having turned down the quilts began to divest himself of his jacket. Suddenly he paused and stood holding the garment in his hand, and looking first at the candle on the table and then at the hangings which concealed the walls.

“I’ve heard and witnessed enough to-night to make a coward of almost anybody except Silas Roper,” thought he, “but I believe I’ve got the nerve to do it. I am going to see what is on the other side of those curtains. If there is any way for that emigrant, or for those people that Sanders spoke of to get in here, I want to know it. I shouldn’t like to wake up in the night and find them prowling about my room. Gracious!”

Julian felt the cold chills creeping over him, and glanced quickly about the apartment, half-expecting to see some frightful object advancing upon him from some dark corner.

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At first he was half-inclined to pass the night in the easy-chair, and never go to sleep at all; but dismissing the thought almost as soon as it entered his mind, he snatched the candle from the table and hurrying across the room raised the hangings.

Nothing was to be seen but the huge blocks of stone which formed the walls. On one side of the room there was no opening except the fire-place, opposite to which was the door. The other two sides, as Julian discovered when he raised the hangings, were provided with windows.

He placed his face close to the panes, but not even the twinkle of a star could be seen through the gloom. Somewhat surprised thereat, Julian deposited his candle on the floor, looped back the curtains and carefully raised the window. It opened into what appeared to be a deep recess in the wall. At the opposite side was a heavy iron-bound door, just the size of the window, which swung inward as Julian drew the bolt, and then he saw the stars shining down upon him, and the full moon rising above the mountain tops.

"This house was certainly intended for a fort," thought the boy, gazing in surprise at the massive walls around him, which seemed strong enough to resist the heaviest artillery. "There isn't a wooden partition in it as far as I've seen. They are all of stone, and must be six or seven feet thick. I can't see the use of it."

This was a point upon which Julian was enlightened before he was many hours older. He learned that the walls were not as solid as they appeared; that there were long corridors and winding passage-ways running through them, communicating with every room in the house, and all leading to a gloomy cavern in the hill behind the building, with which he was destined soon to become well acquainted.

Julian held the shutters open and took a survey of the scene before him. He saw the high stone wall which surrounded the house on all sides, the ponderous gate which had opened a short time before to admit him and the trappers, the well-beaten bridle-path leading across the valley toward the mountains, and noted even the smallest object within the range of his vision, but nothing looked familiar. [154]

The home of his boyhood was not so gloomy and desolate a place as this in which he now found himself. There was no high wall to shut out all view of the outer world, but there were flowers blooming before the door, a pleasant grove close by, and people constantly coming and going. And there was a jolly old gentleman, from whose side he was scarcely ever separated, who used to take him on his knee and talk to him for hours; and now and then a laughing, blue-eyed boy would make his appearance after a long absence, spend a few days in romping with him and then go off again. Where was that father and brother now? If they were alive and well, as Silas had so often assured him, why were they not living there in the rancho, if that was their home? Why should they remain away and allow a stranger to take the management of their affairs?

"If I have a home and friends I must look further to find them, that is plain enough to be seen," soliloquized Julian, closing the shutter and creeping back into the room. "But before I go I should like to know what object this man has in view in bringing me here and claiming me for his nephew. When I meet him in the morning I will call him Uncle Reginald, and act as though I believed— What are you doing here?"

When Julian stepped down from the window-seat into the room he had just left, he found that it had an occupant who had no business there. It was not a spirit, either, for spirits do not need lanterns to guide their footsteps, and revolvers to defend themselves, and this intruder had both. One was held in his left hand by his side, and with the muzzle of the other he was covering Julian's head. It was the emigrant, clean shaven and close cropped, as he was when the boy first saw him with the wagon train.

"What do you want here, Dick Mortimer?" cried Julian, recoiling before the muzzle of the revolver. "Clear out!" [155]

"So you know me, do you?" inquired the man, with some surprise. "That villain, Sanders, has been posting you. He has deserted me and gone over to my cousin; but, fortunately, I shall have no further occasion for his services. Put on your jacket and come with me; and mind you, no noise!"

"By what authority do you order me out of my own house?" demanded Julian, scarcely knowing what he said. "I am master here, if you please."

"Ah! Reginald has been posting you, too, has he?" exclaimed the emigrant angrily. "You have learned more than I ever intended you should know; but it can't be helped now. This is my authority," he added, raising his revolver to a level with the boy's head and placing his finger on the trigger; "and you will do well to respect it. What else did Reginald say to you? Did he tell you who you are, or give you any information concerning your father?"

"No; but I know that he is alive and well."

"Then Silas has been posting you. Do you know where he is?"

"That's my business. Have you a man with you waiting to earn that \$1,000, or do you intend to do the work yourself?"

"You know that too, do you? No; you need stand in no fear of bodily harm as long as you obey my commands. I have come to the conclusion that I can use you to as good purpose as Reginald can. No more words now. Put on that coat and come with me."

Julian mechanically obeyed. His bodily powers were so nearly exhausted, and he was thrown into such a state of bewilderment and alarm by his new adventure, that he suddenly seemed to become insensible to every emotion. He could walk and talk, but he received no more impression from the objects around him than if he had been in a dream. He no longer shrunk away from the revolver which was kept pointed straight at his head, nor was he surprised when the emigrant raised the hangings at the foot of the bed and disclosed to view an opening in the wall—that solid [156]

stone wall which Julian had so carefully examined but a few minutes before. He clambered through without waiting for the order, and followed his captor along a narrow passage-way and down a flight of steps into a commodious underground apartment, which, judging by its general appearance, was used as a cellar and store-house. Here the emigrant spoke again, and the sound of his voice aroused Julian to a sense of his situation.

"Yes, yes," said he, "I have changed my plans concerning you. Silas Roper is the man I want now, and in order to get hold of him I must hold fast to you. I have a comfortable little shooting-box up in the mountains, and there you can stay and enjoy— Great heavens!"

The emigrant ceased speaking and started back as if he had been shot. Julian looked up into his face and saw that it was white with terror, and noticed, too, that he was trembling violently in every limb. His eyes were staring fixedly toward the farther end of the cellar, and following the direction of his gaze Julian discovered something that made his heart beat a little faster than usual.

It was not a frightful object his gaze rested upon—nothing but the figure of a feeble and decrepit old man, who was walking across the opposite end of the cellar. He moved along with tottering step and form half-bent, his thin silvery hair streaming down over his shoulders, and one withered hand grasping a staff upon which he leaned heavily. He seemed ignorant of the presence of the emigrant and his prisoner, and walked on without looking either to the right or left. Suddenly, however, he turned and approached the foot of the stairs. Julian could not see his eyes, which were fastened upon the ground, but he obtained a fair view of his face. He could discover nothing in it calculated to frighten any one, for its expression was mild and benevolent, but the emigrant seemed unable to endure the sight of it. He retreated as the old man advanced, growing more and more terrified every moment, and finally with a shriek of dismay dashed the lantern upon the floor, extinguishing the light and leaving the cellar shrouded in darkness. Julian turned and made a feeble attempt to ascend the stairs, but exhausted nature gave away at last. He felt himself falling—falling—and then all was blank to him.

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CHAPTER XIX.

UNCLE REGINALD EXPLAINS.



WHEN Julian's consciousness returned it was broad daylight. The instant his eyes were open the thrilling events of the night came back to him, and he started up in alarm, expecting to find himself still in the power of the dreaded emigrant. But, although he saw enough to astonish him beyond measure, there was nothing to terrify him. His persevering and relentless enemy was nowhere to be seen. He was snugly tucked up in bed in the same room to which he had been conducted by Reginald Mortimer, his clothes were lying in order on a chair close at hand, the curtains were thrown back, the windows and shutters all open, and heaven's bright sunlight was streaming in. And what was very surprising, there was the door locked and bolted and secured by the chair, just as he had left it.

"Can it be possible that those things never happened, and that Dick Mortimer, with his lantern and revolver, the long, dark passage-way, and the feeble old man who frightened him so terribly, were objects that I saw only in my dreams?" exclaimed Julian.

As this thought passed through his mind he sprung from the couch, and running to the opposite side of the room pulled up the hangings, fully expecting to find there the opening through which his captor had conducted him into the passage-way. But the wall was as solid as ever—not one of the huge blocks of stone was out of place.

"If I dreamed *that* I did not dream that I left these curtains all down and the windows closed, did I?" Julian asked himself in deep perplexity. "Somebody has certainly been in here while I was asleep, and he didn't come in through the door either. I've spent my last night in this house. I didn't hear any of those frightful sounds Sanders heard the night he slept here, but I've seen enough. If I ever get outside these walls I'll not come back. What's this?"

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After hastily throwing on his clothes Julian stepped to the table to help himself to a glass of water from the pitcher that some thoughtful hand had placed there, when his eyes fell upon a paper, folded in the form of a letter, and addressed to himself. With eager haste he opened it, and after some trouble, for the spelling was defective and the writing almost illegible, he deciphered the following:

"Have no fear. Watchful friends are near you, and no harm shall come to you. Reginald Mortimer is your uncle. Treat him as such."

Julian read these mysterious words over and over again, and finally carried the paper to the window and examined it on all sides, in the hope of finding something more—something to tell him who these watchful friends were, and where the missive came from. Being disappointed in these hopes he put the letter carefully away in his pocket and resumed his toilet. He was a long time about it, for he frequently stopped and stood at the window gazing out at the mountains on the other side of the valley, or walked up and down the room with his eyes fastened on the carpet. His mind was busy all the while, and by the time he was ready to leave the room he had thought over his situation and determined upon a plan of action. Just then the little clock on the mantel struck the hour of 10.

"I am getting fashionable," said Julian, who, remembering how carefully Richard Mortimer was always dressed, and believing that Uncle Reginald, as he had determined to call him, might be equally particular, stopped to take another look at himself in the mirror before quitting the room.

It was a very handsome face and figure that the polished surface of the glass reflected. A finely embroidered shirt with wide collar and neck-tie, a closely fitting jacket of dark-blue cloth, black velvet trousers, brown cloth leggings with green fringe, light shoes, and a long crimson sash worn about the waist, completed an attire that set off his slender, well-knit frame to the very best advantage. One could scarcely recognize in him the half-starved ragamuffin whose daily duty it had been to keep Mrs. Bowles supplied with back-logs and fore-sticks.

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Having satisfied himself that he was presentable, Julian undid the numerous fastenings of the door, smiling the while to think how inefficient they had proved to keep out the intruders of whom he stood so much in fear, and was about to pass out into the hall when the sound of voices reached his ears. He paused and listened, his attention being attracted by the mention of the name of one in whom he was now more than ever interested.

"Wal, I don't reckon we could help it, could we?" growled a voice which the boy knew belonged to the trapper Sanders. "Me an' my pardner ain't the men to let \$5,000 slip through our fingers without doin' our level best to hang onto it, be sure?"

"A couple of blockheads, I say!" replied the voice of Reginald Mortimer, in angry, excited tones. "Two desperadoes like you and Tom to allow a single man like Silas Roper to get the better of you. Go and hide yourself. How did it happen?"

"Why we was a bringin' him down here this mornin' on hossback, me and Tom was," replied Sanders, "an' the first thing we knowed he slipped his hands out o' his bonds, which we thought we had made hard an' fast, an' afore we could say 'Gen'ral Jackson' with our mouths open, he jerked Tom's gun out o' his hands, knocked him from his saddle as clean as a whistle, an' sent the ball into me."

"Hurrah for Silas?" thought Julian, gleefully. "He has escaped. Now, if there is any way in which he can assist me he will not fail to do it."

"He was out o' sight an' hearin' afore we could raise a finger to stop him," continued Sanders. "I guess my broken arm an' Tom's bloody head is proof enough of what I say, hain't it? We

couldn't help it."

"Perhaps you did the best you could," replied Reginald Mortimer in a milder tone. "That Silas Roper is a match for any two men in the mountains. Come into this room and let Pedro dress your wounds."

"Nary time," said Sanders emphatically. "I've had jest the wust luck in the world ever since I had anything to do with you an' your house, an' now I'm goin' to cut you. I came here to tell you that, an' I ain't never comin' nigh you again. Let us out o' here."

"You will come whenever I choose to send for you," said Mr. Mortimer fiercely.

"Oh, if it comes to *that* cap'n, in course we will," replied Sanders, dropping his angry, confident tone very suddenly. "We're bound to obey orders, but don't ask nary one of us to come here agin. We'd a heap sooner you'd send us out to steal hosses and rob miners."

"Silence!" said Mr. Mortimer in a hoarse whisper. "Do you not know that the very walls in this house have ears? You *must* capture Silas Roper; and I will give you the money I promised you whenever you deliver him into my hands. He is about here, and he will remain in the vicinity as long as I hold fast to this stool-pigeon."

Uncle Reginald and the trappers passed through the door into the yard, and Julian strolled along the hall, and not knowing where else to go, entered the reception-room. While he was walking about with his hands in his pocket, he was thinking over some portions of the conversation to which he had just listened.

"Captain?" he repeated. "What is Uncle Reginald captain of? Steal horses and rob miners! Silas told me that the mountains were full of men engaged in that kind of business, and I wonder if this new relative of mine is in any way connected with them! He must be; and he must be their leader, too, for Sanders acknowledged that he was bound to obey his orders. Good gracious! What sort of a place have I got into, anyhow?"

While Julian, appalled by this new discovery he had made, was pacing restlessly up and down the floor, Uncle Reginald hurried in. The scowl on his forehead indicated that he was in a bad humor about something, but it cleared away instantly when he discovered Julian, and advancing with outstretched hand he greeted him in the most cordial manner.

"I hope you rested well after the fatigues and excitements of yesterday," said he with a friendly smile. "You look as if you had. Breakfast is waiting, and while we are discussing it we will have a social chat."

The boy, making some satisfactory reply, returned his uncle's smile and the hearty pressure of his hand, and accompanied him toward the breakfast-room, which was located at the farther end of the hall. He glanced over the well-filled table as he took the chair pointed out to him, and told himself that if this breakfast was a fair sample of Uncle Reginald's style of living he would never go hungry while he remained under his roof. Corn bread, salt meat and buttermilk did not constitute the substantial part of the repast as they invariably did in the cabin of Jack Bowles. There were juicy venison steaks, hot muffins, wheat bread, eggs, boiled and fried, toast and potatoes in abundance, and also coffee and chocolate, which Pedro, who waited upon the table, drew from a silver urn which stood on the sideboard. More than that, the cloth was spotless, the dishes clean and white and the table was altogether so nicely arranged, and looked so inviting, that Julian grew hungry the moment his eyes rested upon it.

When Pedro had supplied the wants of his master and his guests, he retired, and the two were left alone.

"Well, Julian," said Uncle Reginald in a cheery voice, "do you feel inclined for a gallop on a swift horse this morning? I have some business that will occupy my attention until dinner, and if you in the meantime wish to amuse yourself in that way, there is a very fine filly in the stable which I purchased expressly for you, and which I hope will supply the place of the horse you lost last night."

"You must have been expecting me," said the boy.

"Certainly. I have been looking for you every day for the last two months; and as this introduces the subject which I know you are impatient to talk about, I will now make the explanation I promised you. In the first place, do you know that last night you slept in your old home for the first time in eight years? You were born in this house, and every thing in and about it—money, horses, cattle and gold diggings—will come into your undisputed possession the moment you are twenty-one years old. It is a fact. You are by no means the pauper you have always supposed yourself to be."

Julian dropped his knife and fork, and settling back in his chair looked the astonishment he could not express in words. He gazed earnestly at his uncle, and then ran his eyes around the room as if he were trying to make an estimate of the value of his possessions from the few articles he saw about him.

"It is the truth, every word of it," repeated Reginald Mortimer. "It is all yours, and it is a property worth having, I assure you. Your father, who was my brother, is dead, and so is your brother Frederick. I am your guardian, and stand ready to surrender your patrimony to you whenever you are competent to take charge of it. I assumed control of your father's affairs immediately after his death. At that time you were eight years old and your brother nine. Fred died, and shortly afterward you were stolen away by some one, who, as I this morning learned from Sanders, who told me all about it, took you off to Missouri and left you there with one Jack Bowles. For eight years I made every effort to find you, and I have at last succeeded. I do not intend that you shall be separated from me any more."

"Well," said Julian, when his uncle paused.

"Well, that's all."

"All!" echoed the boy. "Am I to learn no more of my history than this brief outline? Do you not know who it was who stole me away?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Or what he stole me away for?"

"Why, of course your property had something to do with it, but just what I can't tell."

Julian, who had settled into an easy position in his arm-chair with the expectation of hearing something exciting about himself, straightened up, and with an expression of great disappointment on his face, resumed his toast and coffee. He wanted to hear more, and he was satisfied from his uncle's manner that he could tell him more if he felt so inclined; but it was plain that he did not, for his next words related to another subject. [164]

"I hope you are now convinced that the fears to which you last night gave way were entirely groundless," said Mr. Mortimer. "I shall endeavor by every means in my power to make your life here a pleasant one. I have been very lonely and I want you to cheer me. I want you to feel that you are one of the family, that you have a right to be here, and that you are at liberty to go and come whenever it suits your fancy. You shall have the best horse in the stable, a pack of hounds, a servant to wait on you, and live like a gentleman. There is a fort about two miles distant. Some of the officers have their families with them, and among them are several boys about your own age. Whenever you want company, bring them up here. They will find enough to interest them."

"Perhaps they would also find some things they would not care to see," said Julian, thinking of his recent adventure with the emigrant.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, some of those strange people who go about of nights making such unearthly noises."

"That sounds just like Sanders," exclaimed Uncle Reginald impatiently. "Julian, I hope you are a boy of too much good sense to pay the least attention to any thing that low, ignorant fellow may say to you. There isn't a word of truth in it."

"Nor about the secret passage-ways that run all through the house?"

"Not a particle. It is all moonshine."

"Or about the old man who lives in the cellar?"

"All the veriest nonsense in the world."

"Or about your missing things?"

"Why, as to that, I have missed some things, that's a fact, but I know where they went. Pedro took them. He is a great rascal." [165]

"Why do you not discharge him if he is a thief?"

"Because servants are not so easily procured in this wilderness. More than that, he is a valuable fellow in spite of his faults—understands all my ways, and knows just how I want every thing done. You will stay with me?"

"Certainly, sir. I have not seen so much of the comforts of a home that I can afford to throw them away as soon as they are offered to me. Beside, I want to see the bottom of this mystery."

"What mystery? Well, perhaps it does seem a little strange that I, a man whom you never remember to have seen before, should claim you as a nephew, and tell you that I hold in my hands a valuable property which is all your own, but it is nevertheless true."

"And there are other things that seem strange to me," continued Julian. "One of them is that you can live here unmolested, as you evidently do, while peaceable emigrants are butchered at your very doors."

"That is also easily explained. In the first place, that wagon train was quite a lengthy step from my door when it was attacked—about forty miles. In the next, there is a fort and a regiment of soldiers almost within call of me. I have twenty-five herdsmen in the valley, and at the very first sign of a war-party they would come flocking into the house, which could withstand the assault of all the Indians on the plains. Now, if you have finished your breakfast, and are ready for your ride, I will show you your horse."

If Julian had given utterance to the thoughts that were passing through his mind, he would have told his uncle that he was not quite ready for his ride. There were other questions that he would like to have had answered. He wanted to know what sort of an organisation it was of which his uncle was captain; why he was so much interested in Silas Roper that he was willing to give \$5,000 for his apprehension; if he knew that his cousin, Richard Mortimer, instead of being at Fort Stoughton hunting buffaloes, was prowling about somewhere in the immediate neighborhood, and that he had twice visited the rancho the night before. He wanted to know which of the two men who claimed to be his guardian was so in reality; how Uncle Reginald had found out that he was hidden in the wilds of Missouri; why, since he was so very anxious to find him, he had sent the trapper after him instead of going himself; and why Sanders had deserted him so suddenly when Silas Roper made his appearance in the streets of St. Joseph. He wanted to know who Silas Roper was; how he had learned so much about himself; and what Uncle Reginald meant when he said that the guide would not leave the vicinity of the rancho as long as the "stool-pigeon" was there. These and other questions had Julian intended to propound to his uncle; but the abruptness with which all the topics upon which he most wished to converse were dismissed, satisfied him that it would be a useless waste of time, and that his relative did not intend to enlighten him any further than he saw fit. Julian would have been glad of an opportunity to talk to one of those "watchful friends" spoken of in the note. He had a great deal to say to him. [166]

"Romez, bring out Snowdrop."

It was his uncle who spoke, and the sound of his voice aroused Julian from his reverie. They had now reached the stables—which were built under the same roof with the house and

surrounded by the same wall—and were standing in front of the door.

The Mexican hostler to whom the order was addressed disappeared in the stable, and in a few minutes came out again, leading a beautiful snow-white mare, saddled and bridled.

Julian looked at her with delight, and declared that he had never seen a finer animal. She was very showy, and pranced about as if impatient to exhibit her mettle.

“I did not care to ride at first, but I do now,” said Julian. “I will be ready as soon as I get my rifle and revolver. But I must have some ammunition.”

“Pedro will supply you,” replied Uncle Reginald. “Go to him for everything you want.”

It was but the work of a few minutes to run to his room, throw his rifle and accouterments over his shoulder, buckle his revolver about his waist and return to Pedro for the powder and lead. He was out again almost as soon as he went in, and vaulting into the saddle he bade his uncle good-by and rode at a full gallop out of the gate.

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CHAPTER XX.

JULIAN GETS INTO BUSINESS.



IF THERE is anything better calculated than another to put one at peace with himself and all the world, it is a brisk gallop on a good horse of a fine summer's morning. It is a specific for melancholy. When Julian was safe outside the gloomy walls of the rancho, and felt himself being borne through the air with the speed of a bird on the wing, his spirits rose wonderfully, and in the exuberance of his glee he swung his sombrero about his head, and gave utterance to a yell almost as loud and unearthly as any he had heard uttered by the savages the night before. The spirited mare responded to the yell with a fresh burst of speed, and her rider, giving her a free rein, was carried at a rapid rate through the valley in which his uncle's rancho was located, through the willows that skirted the base of the mountain, and finally found himself in a rocky defile which wound about among the cliffs. Here the mare voluntarily slackened her pace to a walk, and Julian wiped his flushed face with his handkerchief and looked about him. He could see nothing but rocks. They hemmed him in on all sides, and towered above his head until their tops seemed to pierce the clouds.

"I don't know why I ever allowed myself to be brought in here," thought the boy, "or why the horse should leave a level path to follow so miserable a road as this. Perhaps Uncle Reginald purchased her of some miner or settler up here in the mountains, and she thinks she is on her way home. At any rate she seems to know where she is going, and so long as she doesn't lose me I don't care where she carries me. I hope I shall find some one to talk to. Since uncle will not tell me anything about myself, I must learn what I want to know from other sources. Halloo!"

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This exclamation was called forth by an unexpected sight that greeted his eyes. As he came suddenly around an abrupt bend in the path, he found before him a long, low, narrow cabin, built snugly under a beetling cliff which hung threateningly over the gorge. Two well-beaten paths appeared at this point; one leading to the doors of the building, and the other running on down the gorge. The mare, which seemed perfectly familiar with the locality, quickened her pace at once, and before Julian could gather up the reins to check her, she had turned into the first mentioned path, and galloping up to one of the doors stopped as if waiting for her rider to dismount. After looking all about him, without discovering any one, Julian began to take a survey of the premises.

There were two doors in the house, both opening out on the path. A short examination of the ground in front of the one at which his horse had stopped, showed him that it led into a stable; while the other, no doubt, opened into the living-room, for there was a rough bench beside it for the accommodation of loungers. While Julian was wondering by whom and for what purpose the house had been erected in that remote and lonely spot, his attention was attracted by the movements of his horse, which, after pricking up her ears and looking intently at the door in front of her, as if expecting the arrival of some one, began pawing the ground impatiently.

"She thinks there ought to be somebody here," thought Julian. "And there certainly is something in the stable," he added, after listening a moment, "for I can hear the stamping of horses. Halloo! the house!"

Julian waited for a reply, and listened for some movement in the cabin which would tell him that his call had been heard; but the only response he received was the echo of his own voice thrown back from the cliffs. This satisfied him that the owner of the premises was absent; and picking up his reins, he was on the point of turning back toward the valley, when, by the merest accident, he discovered something that he might have seen before if he had made good use of his eyes. It was a small window close under the eaves of the house, which was filled by the muzzle of a revolver and a pair of gleaming eyes looking straight at him.

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Too astonished to speak, the boy sat in his saddle wondering what was going to happen now, and presently saw the six-shooter disappear and the eyes approach closer to the opening. A moment afterward a shaggy head, crowned by a broad-brimmed hat, was thrust slowly out, and a masculine face, that was by no means handsome or prepossessing, was exposed to his view.

"It's you after all, hain't it?" growled a deep voice, in no very amiable tones.

"Yes," replied Julian, "it is I. But I heartily wish it was somebody else," he added, mentally.

"Why in tarnation didn't you whistle? I didn't know you in them new clothes, and I might have put a ball into you just as easy as not. I'll be out in a jiffy."

As the man said this he drew in his head and closed the window. Julian was glad indeed when his villainous face disappeared, and trembled when he reflected that perhaps that revolver had been leveled at his head, and those evil eyes fastened upon him ever since he arrived within sight of the cabin, and he had never suspected it. He saw at once that he had placed himself in a dangerous position. One of two things was certain. The owner of the rancho was either hiding from pursuit, or else he was engaged in some unlawful business. If he were an honest man he would not act so strangely.

"But how does it happen that he recognizes me?" Julian asked himself. "Does he know who I am, or does he take me for somebody else? If he knows that I am Julian Mortimer, he may be a man of the Sanders stamp who has been hired to put me out of Dick's way. If he thinks that I am an acquaintance of his, or an accomplice, he will certainly discover his mistake as soon as he has a fair view of my face, and then what will he do to me? I think I had better not wait for him."

As quick as thought Julian wheeled his mare and touched her with his spurs; but the animal, knowing probably that good care and plenty of corn awaited her entry into the stable which she

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regarded as her home, responded very reluctantly. Before she had made many bounds the door of the stable was jerked open, and a voice called out in surprised and indignant tones:

"Halt! halt! I say, on the instant, or you're a dead man!"

Julian knew that the speaker was in earnest, for his command was followed by the click of the lock of his revolver; but he would have kept on in spite of his fear of the bullets had not his horse, which doubtless recognized the voice, came to a sudden stand-still. Julian looked back and saw that the man's pistol was pointed straight at his breast.

"If you ain't a *little* ahead of all the fools I ever saw in all my born days my name ain't Bob Smirker, and never was," exclaimed the owner of the rancho fiercely. "That's the second time I have come within an inch of shooting you. Come back here now, and let's have no more fooling."

Julian, not daring to attempt to continue his retreat on his unwilling steed, was compelled to obey. Calling all his courage to his aid, he turned about and rode back to the cabin. Smirker looked sharply at him as he came up, but Julian met his gaze without flinching, and even succeeded in calling a smile to his face. Believing that he had nothing to gain by deception, he began to explain who he was and how he came to be there; but the man interrupted him, and Julian was afterward glad that he had done so.

"I hope I am not intruding, sir," he began. "I was out for a breath of fresh air——"

"Oh, hush your nonsense!" cried the owner of the rancho angrily. "You're always 'out for a breath of fresh air' when you are doing something you've no business to do. That was what you said to me on the day you found my secret passage-way which leads down from the top of the cliff. I didn't want anybody but myself to know about that passage-way, and when I found that you had discovered it I was mad enough to shoot you. You're eternally up to some foolishness, and it's the greatest wonder in the world you haven't been killed a thousand times. Everybody says so. Now, Fred, if you should come here every hour in the day for the next ten years, don't ever ride up without giving the signal, and don't try to run away when I open the door. This ain't boy's play we're at, as you would soon find out if them soldiers or some of the settlers should get hold of you. You hadn't ought to done it, 'cause I didn't know you in that Mexican rig. Come in. I've got something for you."

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While the man was speaking he was looking squarely into Julian's face, and the latter was waiting in an agony of suspense to see what he would do when he discovered that he had mistaken the identity of his visitor. But Smirker did not seem to think he had made a mistake. Having delivered his lecture and thus worked off a little of his indignation, he returned his revolver to his belt and led the way into the stable, closely followed by Julian's horse, which moved after him without waiting for the word from her rider. Julian drew a long breath of relief, and told himself that the danger for the present was past. The difficulty now was to personate the boy whom Smirker believed him to be.

While his companion lingered to fasten the door, Julian dismounted and ran his eye about the stable, which was lighted by a lantern suspended from one of the beams. It was much larger than it appeared on the outside, showing that it extended under the cliff. It was provided with stalls for a dozen horses, three of which had occupants. The mare being left to herself, walked into one of the stalls and immediately began munching some corn which had doubtless been placed there for her.

"Now, then," said Smirker, when he had fastened the door, "where is it? Hand it out here."

"Where is what?" asked the boy.

"Why, you know. Didn't you bring it?"

"No," replied Julian, who of course had not the slightest idea what the man meant.

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"Didn't they say anything about it?" asked Smirker, who appeared to be very much disappointed as well as angry.

"Not a word."

"Well, now, this way of doing business don't suit me, and you may tell 'em that I said so. I run just as much risk here as them that steals the swag—every bit; 'cause how do I know but them soldiers will be down on me when I ain't looking for them? Looks like they wanted to swindle me out of my share. But, after all, they ain't ahead of me much, 'cause I—you won't blow on me, Fred?"

"Of course not," replied Julian.

"I've got a little plunder here that I'm going to keep till they come down with the yellow boys they owe me."

"What sort of plunder?"

"Why, nuggets and gold-dust—twenty-five hundred dollars' worth. You see, I was down in the mines the other day, and heard of a man who had struck a lead and was going home that very day. But he didn't go."

"Why not?" asked the boy, when Smirker paused.

"'Cause I knocked him on the head—that's why. I've got the gold hid away safe. Do you want to go back now, or will you stay awhile? I am lonesome here all by myself."

"I had better go now," replied Julian, who was eager to escape from the man's presence at the earliest possible moment. "I am in something of a hurry."

Smirker struck up a lively whistle, and taking a bridle down from a pin beside the door, went into one of the stalls and brought out a horse which looked enough like Snowdrop to have been her brother. He was the same color, the same size, and just as stylish and spirited. Julian knew that he was expected to ride this horse away and leave his own steed in the care of the man; and, although he did not quite like the arrangement, he consoled himself with the thought that if he

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never saw Snowdrop again he would lose nothing by the exchange.

"You ride good horses, Fred," said Smirker, as he put Julian's saddle on the horse he had just brought out, "but you had better take my advice and get others of a different color. White horses don't do for such business as this, 'cause they show too plain of nights; and any one who happens to pass you on the road will remember of having seen you. There are plenty of better horses in the world, and the one I am going to send with you is one of them."

Smirker having by this time saddled and bridled the white nag, went into a second stall and brought out a large bay horse which he walked up and down the stable for Julian's inspection. The moment the boy's eyes rested on him he became reconciled to the loss of his mare, and even eager to part with her, if by so doing he could gain possession of this magnificent animal. If his speed and endurance were equal to his beauty, he was certainly a horse worth having.

"He's lightning on wheels," declared Smirker, as he slipped a bridle over the bay's head, "and perhaps he will give you as much as you want to do to lead him. He came from Fort Stoughton, and was stolen from the major, who had just brought him from the States. There you are," he added, waving his hand toward the horses, intimating by the gesture that Julian was at liberty to take charge of them as soon as he pleased. "I wish you a pleasant journey. You have been very lucky so far, and I hope your good fortune will continue."

The boy was prompt to take advantage of the permission thus given him to leave the cabin. He quickly mounted the white horse, inquiring as he did so:

"Any word to send to anybody?"

"Yes, there is," replied Smirker, "and I came near forgetting it. You can tell the fellows below that the captain's cub has got back at last."

"What cub?"

"Why, Julian; the one he's been looking for so long. We'll finger some of that money and find out where that hidden gold mine is now." [175]

"Does this—this *cub* know where it is?"

"No, but Silas Roper does. Sanders was here this morning and told me the whole secret."

"The captain hasn't got hold of Silas, has he?"

"Not yet, but he will have him before long. It is a little the queerest thing I ever heard of, this plan of the captain's is," continued Smirker, placing one hand on the horn of Julian's saddle, and settling into an easy position against the side of the horse as if he had a long story to tell, "and it shows what a head he's got on his shoulders, and what education will do for a man. You see—but in the first place you know that he is no more of a Mortimer than I am?"

Julian, not daring to trust himself to speak, nodded his head, pulled out his handkerchief ostensibly for the purpose of wiping his forehead, but really to conceal the sudden pallor which he knew overspread his face, and the man went on:

"The captain's playing a deep game, and he's going to succeed in it, too. He's making a decoy duck of Julian—using him to keep Silas Roper about here until he can catch him; and when he once gets hold of him and finds out where the money and the nuggets are, he'll make short work with both of them."

What else Smirker was about to say Julian never knew, for an unexpected interruption occurred at that moment. A shrill whistle, sounding from some point close at hand, echoed through the gorge. It produced a strange effect upon Julian's companion, for he turned as pale as death, and the hand which he placed upon the butt of his revolver trembled visibly. He stood motionless until the whistle was repeated, and then hurried across the floor and mounting a short ladder that leaned against the wall of the stable, opened the window before spoken of.

No sooner had he looked out than he sprung to the ground again, and with a volley of oaths that made Julian's blood run cold, strode up to him and seized him by the collar.

"Look here, my cub," he hissed, between his clenched teeth, "I suspected you all along. There ain't two White-horse Freds in this country, and I know it. Who are you? Speak quick!" [176]

As he said this he pulled his revolver from his belt and leveled it at Julian's head.

CHAPTER XXI.

WHITE-HORSE FRED.



JULIAN, who had been congratulating himself upon the ease with which he was about to extricate himself from his perilous situation, was dismayed at this turn of events. He comprehended the matter perfectly. White-horse Fred, so called probably from the color of the animals he rode, was a member of a band of horse thieves and robbers, and it was his business to assist in moving the plunder from one point to another. The man Smirker belonged to the same organization, and it was his duty to receive and care for the booty until such time as the authorized agents of the band called for it. He had probably been on the lookout for his confederate when Julian arrived.

"But why didn't he know that I wasn't White-horse Fred as soon as he looked into my face?" thought the boy, so nearly overcome with terror that he did not hear the words that had been addressed to him. "And how does it happen that I was riding Fred's horse? How did my uncle come by him? I can't understand it?"

"Speak quick!" repeated Smirker, savagely, "and don't try to draw no weapons. Who are you?"

He pulled back the hammer of his pistol with the thumb of his right hand as he spoke, and shifting his left from Julian's collar to the butt of the revolver which the boy was on the point of pulling from his belt.

"Who should I be?" returned Julian boldly. "If I've no business here how came I by that horse I brought you? That's what I'd like to know."

"And if that fellow out there ain't White-horse Fred how did he give Fred's whistle so exact, and how did he come by Fred's clothes? That's what I'd like to know." [178]

It was plain, both from Smirker's tone and manner, that he began to believe that he had been a little too hasty. He let go Julian's pistol, lowered the hammer of his own weapon, and stood gazing at our hero with an expression of great bewilderment on his face.

"Wouldn't it be a good plan to ask him?" suggested Julian.

Smirker thought it would. He jerked open the door of the stable, and Julian, who was on the point of dashing his spurs into his horse and riding over the robber and making good his escape, found his way blocked up by a dashing young fellow, who rode gayly into the stable, but stopped short on discovering Julian, and checked the words of greeting that arose to his lips. For fully a minute no one spoke. The two boys sat on their horses staring at one another, and Smirker, after closing and locking the door, took his stand between them, looking first at the new-comer and then at Julian, apparently unable to come to any decision concerning them.

The strange equestrian was a youth about Julian's age and size, only a little more robust, and had the two been dressed alike it would have been a matter of some difficulty for any one to tell them apart. Julian looked as if he had just come out of a lady's handbox, while the new-comer seemed to have bestowed but little care upon his toilet that morning. His dress consisted of a red flannel shirt, open at the throat and worn without a coat, coarse trowsers, which were thrust into a pair of high-top boots, and a broad-brimmed hat. A belt encircled his waist, supporting a knife on one side and a revolver on the other. He rode a small Indian pony, which, judging by its appearance, had been driven long and rapidly.

"Now, then," said Smirker, who was the first to recover the use of his tongue, "one of you two fellows has got himself in the worst kind of a scrape—one that he will never get out of alive. Which is White-horse Fred?" [179]

Julian had shown a tolerably bold front as long as a hope of escape remained, but now that he found the door of the stable locked upon him, and himself completely at the mercy of the two robbers, his courage gave way utterly, and he could not have made an intelligent reply to Smirker's question even if he had had anything to say.

The new-comer was the genuine White-horse Fred—there could be no doubt about that, for he had given the signal when he approached the cabin, and more than that, Smirker had recognized him by the clothes he wore.

Giving himself up for lost, Julian waited almost impatiently for the strange horseman to speak, believing that the opening of his lips would be the signal for his own death. What, then, was his amazement when he heard the boy exclaim:

"White-horse Fred! If there is any one here that goes by that name, it must be you or that young gentleman over there."

"Then you ain't him!" said Smirker, growing more and more perplexed.

"No. Do I look like him!"

"You sartinly do, and act like him. What were you whistling out there for?"

"Oh, just to hear the echo."

"And what made you come in here?"

"Because you opened the door."

"You talk like White-horse Fred, too. But if you hain't him you're where you've got no business to be, and you'll never get away, nuther."

Smirker raised his revolver and pointed it at the boy's breast. Julian, faint with terror, turned away his head and held his breath in suspense; but the stranger never flinched so much as a hair's breadth.

"Don't do anything rash," said he calmly. "I have told you who I am *not*, and now you had better ask me who I *am*."

"I don't care who you are. You're a dead man."

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"And you will be another in less than an hour," replied the boy, without the least sign of alarm. "My Uncle Reginald Mortimer's servant is close behind me. He will know that I came in here, and if I don't go out again he will also know what has become of me."

Smirker lowered his revolver, and falling back a step or two, stared blankly at the speaker, and then at our hero. The astonishment his face exhibited was fully reflected in Julian's. The latter's terror had all given way to surprise. He forgot Smirker and his revolver, the danger of his situation, and every thing else except the last few words the stranger had uttered: "My Uncle Reginald Mortimer." Who was this fellow who was going about claiming Julian's relative as his own?

"You have concluded not to shoot me, haven't you?" asked the boy, whose coolness and courage were wonderful to behold.

"Who are you?" demanded Smirker.

"My name is Julian Mortimer. I am a stranger here, having but just arrived from the States. I came out this morning to take a ride, and it seems I have got into a place where I am not wanted. I beg pardon for my intrusion, and will thank you to open that door and let me out."

"Julian Mortimer!" exclaimed Smirker.

"*Julian Mortimer!*" echoed the owner of that name, in a scarcely audible voice.

If our hero had been surprised before, he was doubly so now. He could scarcely believe that he had heard aright. If this stranger was Julian Mortimer, who in the world was *he*, Julian asked himself. Were there two boys of that name in existence, and was Uncle Reginald the guardian of both, and holding in his hands a valuable property to be surrendered to them when they reached their majority?

He rubbed his eyes to make sure he was not dreaming, and looked hard at the stranger, who seemed not a little astonished at the sensation he had created.

As for Smirker, he was as nearly beside himself as a sane man could well be; and, what was very singular, he seemed all of a sudden to have discovered some reason for wishing to keep as far away from Julian as possible, for he backed into one of the stables and stood eying him like a caged hyena.

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"Well, what of it?" said the stranger. "Perhaps you don't believe what I told you. If it is necessary that I should furnish proof, I can do so. Open the door and let me out."

"You spoke that name just in time," said Smirker fiercely, "for in a minute more you would have been done for. If you are really the captain's cub, you are worth too much to us to be put out of the way yet awhile. But not much I won't let you out-doors. Your story may be true, and it may not. I am going to keep you here till I can send to headquarters and find out."

"All right," replied the boy, swinging himself from his saddle and gazing about the stable as if everything he saw in it was full of interest to him. "I am easily suited. I'd as soon stay here an hour or two as not. I never was in a house like this before. What makes you call 'em all *ranchos*?"

"Look a here," added Smirker, turning to our hero. "If this fellow is Julian Mortimer, who are you?"

"Are you not yet satisfied that I am White-horse Fred?" asked Julian in reply. "Perhaps you want me to prove it."

Julian's terror had all passed away now, and he was in his right mind again. There was still a chance of escape. Although he had not the remotest idea who the new-comer was, he had heard and seen enough to satisfy him that he was a stranger in that wilderness as well as himself, and that he was not White-horse Fred, consequently he ran no risk in continuing to personate the character he had been compelled to assume. Indeed, it was the only thing he could do. He was impatient to be off, too, for the real White-horse Fred might arrive at any moment, and then something would certainly happen.

"There's a mystery at the bottom of this, and I'll bet a horse on it," said Smirker, shaking his fists in the air, and striding up and down the stable. "I know you are White-horse Fred," he added, addressing himself to our hero, "but—but—what's the rest of your name? Fred what?"

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"Fred nothing. That's all the name I've got. I never had any other."

"Well, you have got another, and if it is the one I think it is, I don't see how in the world you come to be riding about here. You had ought to be at the bottom of the lake. I'll see the fellows below this very night, and have a new runner put on this route, or I'll give up the station. I ain't a going to have no such fellow as you coming about me. You can't get out of here any too sudden."

This speech was all Greek to Julian, except the last sentence. That he understood perfectly, and was quite ready to act upon the suggestion it contained. The moment Smirker opened the door of the stable he dashed the spurs into his horse, which sprung forward like an arrow from a bow, and tore down the path with the speed of the wind, the bay following. In a few seconds he was out of sight.

Scarcely waiting for Julian to get fairly out of the stable, Smirker slammed the door and locked it, and turning fiercely upon his new prisoner disarmed him by jerking off the belt which contained his knife and revolver. Having thus put it out of the boy's power to do any mischief, Smirker suddenly seemed to become unconscious of his presence. He had much to think about, and for the next quarter of an hour he gave himself up entirely to his reflections, never once casting a single glance toward his companion. He paced up and down the stable with long strides, shaking his head and muttering, and trying in vain to find some explanation for the

strange, and to him bewildering, incidents that had just occurred. They were more than bewildering—they were absolutely terrifying, as the expression on his face and his whole bearing and manner abundantly proved. He walked with a very unsteady step, his burly frame trembled like an oak in a storm, and now and then he raised his hand to dash away the perspiration which stood on his forehead like drops of rain.

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The prisoner was as cool and collected as ever. Being left to himself, he strolled carelessly about the stable, examining every object in it, and occasionally directing his gaze toward the open door leading from the stable into the living-room of the cabin. Finally he leaned against one of the stalls, and when Smirker's back was turned hastily pulled something from his pocket and tossed it into the manger—something that gave out a ringing, metallic sound as it fell. The noise, slight as it was, caught the man's ear and aroused him from his reverie. He turned and confronted his prisoner at once.

"What you doing there?" he demanded.

"Nothing at all," was the reply. "I am waiting as patiently as I can for you to explain why you have robbed me of my weapons, and are keeping me here. I assure you that my Uncle Reginald will have something to say to you about this before you are many hours older."

"What you doing there?" repeated Smirker fiercely; "I heard something chink."

"Perhaps it was my persuaders," said the boy, lifting his boot and exhibiting a huge Mexican spur, ornamented with little silver bells, which tinkled musically as he moved his feet about.

"P'raps it was, and p'raps most likely it wasn't. Haven't I lived long enough to tell the difference between the rattling of spurs and the jingling of money? I have, I bet you. I'll soon find out what you've been up to."

Smirker walked into the stall in front of which the boy was standing, and then for the first time the prisoner began to show signs of anxiety. He closely watched the man's movements, and cast frequent and impatient glances toward the door of the living-room, as if he were expecting and earnestly desiring the arrival of some one.

Smirker was in the stall but a few moments, and when he came out he carried in his hand a small canvas bag, at the sight of which the prisoner turned white with terror. Taking his stand under the lantern, Smirker untied the string with which the bag was fastened; but no sooner did his eyes fall upon its contents than he dropped it as if it had been a coal of fire, and his face grew livid with rage and alarm.

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"Betrayed!" he roared, stamping his feet furiously upon the ground, and flourishing his fists in the air. "And, fool that I was, I might have known it! I suspected it from the beginning."

"What's the matter?" asked the boy, and his voice was as firm and steady as ever.

"What's the matter?" shrieked Smirker, driven almost insane by his intense passion. "Do you stand there and ask me what's the matter? It's the last question you will ever ask me, for you are as good as a dead man already. Didn't I say that there was something at the bottom of all this? *You are White-horse Fred*—that bag proves it. It contains nuggets, and gold-dust, and money—my share of the swag which I have received and sent to the fellows below. I expected to get it from that other boy, and asked him for it; but of course he couldn't give it to me, being an imposter. And I allowed him to go off scot free, and even told him some secrets that nobody outside the band ought to know. How long will it take him to ride to the fort and tell what he has seen and heard, and lead a squad of soldiers back here? And you helped him out in it—you, a sworn member of the band! Now, you shall tell me what you mean by acting as you have done. Speak in a hurry, or I'll choke it out of you!"

Smirker, howling out these words with a fierceness and energy which showed that he was terribly in earnest, advanced toward his prisoner in a low, crouching attitude, something like that a wild beast would assume when about to spring upon its prey.

The boy's face was very pale, but he bravely stood his ground. Knowing that escape was impossible, he was prepared to fight desperately for his life.

"Will you tell me?" asked the robber, creeping forward with a slow, cat-like motion.

"I have nothing to tell," replied the boy, "except this: I have friends close at hand, and they ought to be here now."

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"Then I will have this business over before they arrive."

"Come on, and I will show you what a Mortimer is made of."

Before the words of defiance had fairly left the boy's lips, Smirker bounded forward, and the two closed in a death struggle.

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CHAPTER XXII.

THE SPECTERS OF THE CAVE.



THE FIGHT was of longer duration and was much more desperate than one would suppose it could have been, considering the immense advantage which Smirker possessed over his wiry antagonist in weight and muscle; but of course it could end in but one way. White-horse Fred, bruised and exhausted, was borne to the ground at last, with the man's knee on his breast and his brawny hand at his throat.

"Now let's hear from you," hissed Smirker. "Who was that fellow who came here and passed himself off for you, and why did you help him out in it? Speak, before I choke the life out of you."

If Fred could have obeyed his reply would have been as defiant as ever; but the powerful grasp on his throat rendered articulation impossible.

"You won't tell me?" demanded Smirker; "then take the reward of your treachery."

The robber's hand glided around his side to his belt, and when it came in sight again it brought with it a gleaming bowie-knife, which was raised in the air above the prisoner's breast; but just as it was on the point of descending it was arrested as effectually as though the arm which wielded it had been turned into stone.

"Hold hard, thar!"

The words, uttered by a strange voice and spoken in a tone of stern command, rang through the stable with startling distinctness. Smirker raised his eyes and there, standing in the door to which Fred had so often directed his gaze, was a gigantic figure clad in buckskin, holding in his hands a long, heavy rifle, the muzzle of which was pointed straight at the robber's head.

"Silas Roper!" gasped Fred's antagonist.

"'Tain't nobody else, as you'll find out mighty sudden if you move an eyelid," was the reply. "Drop that we'pon an' get up from thar."

The command was no sooner uttered than it was obeyed by the trembling Smirker, who threw down his knife and slunk away like a whipped cur before the stalwart trapper, as he came striding into the stable, and retreating toward the nearest stall, held both his hands above his head in token of surrender.

"None of that ar, now," said Silas, as he bent over the prostrate form of the boy. "Keep out in plain sight whar I can have an eye on you. Are you bad hurt, Fred? If you are, that feller's signed his death-warrant."

"No! no!" moaned the boy faintly. "Don't touch him."

Smirker was amazed to hear the one who had so narrowly escaped death at his hands interceding for him. It relieved him of all fear of bodily injury, and he straightway began to recover his composure; but he drew a step or two nearer to Fred's side, thinking it best to keep as far as possible out of the reach of the giant, whom he knew had good cause to be at enmity with him.

"I shall be all right as soon as I have had time to recover the breath he choked out of me," continued the latter. "Oh, Silas, I am so glad to see you! But why didn't you come just a few minutes sooner. I have seen *him*. He was in this very stable."

"Him!" repeated the trapper. "Who? Not Julian?"

"Yes, Julian. I didn't think I should know him when I met him, but I did. I wanted to throw my arms around him and tell him that he was my brother, but Smirker was in the way. I am terribly disappointed in him, Silas. He is from the States, you know, and I expected to see a boy who hadn't courage enough to face a sheep. But he'll do."

"Why, how come he here?" asked Silas in great astonishment.

"I haven't the least idea. Make Smirker tell. He'll do anything you ask him."

"How was it?" demanded the trapper, turning to the owner of the cabin. "Tell nothing but the truth."

Smirker was too completely cowed by the presence of the giant, with whose powers he had more than once been made fully acquainted, to fabricate a falsehood even if he had anything to gain by it. Not daring to disobey, or even to hesitate, he began, and in a faltering voice told the story of Julian's visit to his cabin just as we have related it. He also described what had taken place after Fred's arrival, but added that Silas must ask the boy to explain that, for it was something he could not comprehend.

"I can soon make it plain to you," said White-horse Fred, now taking up the story. "You can't imagine how surprised I was to find Julian here, and if Smirker had possessed any control over himself I should not have known what to do. But the way he looked and acted gave me a clew, and I saw through the whole thing as clearly as if it had been explained to me in words. Uncle Reginald, you know, happened to ride by old Antoine's cabin the other day while I was absent, and seeing one of my horses, Snowdrop, there, suddenly conceived a violent passion for her and took possession of her without saying so much as 'by your leave.' I wondered what he intended to do with her and now I have found out. He gave her to my brother. Julian this morning thought he would take a ride and look over the country, and not knowing that the horse belonged to a band of robbers, gave her a loose rein and she brought him here. Finding that he had got himself into trouble, he acted upon some hint that Smirker gave him and passed himself off for me; and if I had not arrived just as I did, he would have got away without being suspected. To help him out of the difficulty, I told Smirker that my name was Julian Mortimer, and the blockhead believed it."

"Thar ain't nothing so very strange in that," observed Silas. "No man on airth could tell you two apart if you was dressed alike."

"But we were not. Smirker has seen me in these clothes a hundred times, I suppose, and I should think he ought to have recognized me. Now that I think of it, I ran something of a risk, didn't I? Suppose that when I said that my name was Julian Mortimer, my brother had lost his courage and revealed himself? Wouldn't I have been in a scrape? I depended entirely upon his presence of mind to carry me through, and I didn't lose by it. But wasn't he astonished, though? I thought he would tumble out of his saddle. But he behaved pretty well, considering that he is from the States."

"Why didn't you want to tell me who he was?" asked Smirker, who had listened attentively to the story.

"I would have been smart to do that, wouldn't I?" returned White-horse Fred. "Suppose I had told you, and you had succeeded in making an end of me before Silas came, what would you have done? You would have gone straight to Uncle Reginald and told him what had happened, and he would—Well, it's enough for you to know that he would have made trouble for Julian. Silas, if you had only come a few minutes sooner he would have been with us now. I am uneasy about him. He will get into difficulty when he gets home, now you see if he doesn't."

"I couldn't come no sooner," replied the trapper; "'cause I had more trouble than I thought I'd have crawlin' down that long, dark passage-way that leads from the top of the cliff. What's the matter with you?"

This question was addressed to Smirker, who suddenly began to exhibit a greater degree of terror than the circumstances seemed to warrant. The show of courage he had maintained ever since he found that Fred was disposed to stand between him and the vengeance of the trapper vanished as quickly as it had appeared; and scarcely able to retain an upright position, he was obliged to lean against the wall for support.

"You needn't be no ways skeery," said Silas, who seemed to feel some compassion for the trembling wretch. "We've got plenty agin you, but if you behave yourself, nobody's goin' to hurt you. All we ask of you is to tell us something we want to know; an' if you will do that, we'll turn you loose, an' you can dig out of this country as soon as you please."

"I'll tell you anything," replied Smirker quickly. "But first I'd like to have you tell me something. When I was going to pitch into you," he added, turning to White-horse Fred, "you told me to come on, and you would show me what a *Mortimer* was made of, didn't you?"

"I did," replied the boy. "I knew, of course, that you were too much for me, but I wasn't going to surrender. That's something I don't know how to do."

"And you have said two or three times that Julian is four brother, hain't you?" Smirker went on.

"I have, and he is."

"Then you must be the son of old Major Mortimer?"

"I am proud to say that I am."

"Well, now if you *are*, what business you got walking about on top of the ground? That's what I'd like to know. You had ought to be at the bottom of the lake that lies behind your father's rancho. Sanders put you there, 'cause I seen him do it with my own eyes."

"I know he did, and my body is there yet," replied White-horse Fred.

"Eh?" exclaimed Smirker, drawing away from the boy toward the trapper.

"Don't you know that a Mortimer can't be killed?" asked Fred, who, having recovered from the effects of his struggle with the robber, was his jolly, reckless self once more. "And have you not yet learned that the members of our family have the power of throwing the shield of their protection around their servants? It's a fact. You remember old Juan, do you not? Dick Mortimer shot him twice with his own hands, and you knocked him on the head with the butt of your rifle; and then you both picked him up and threw him over a cliff, didn't you?"

"There ain't no use in saying we didn't," replied Smirker. "But I was hired to help in that work."

"Oh, of course. Men always have some excuse for doing wrong. Well, that old fellow's body may be at the bottom of that gorge now, but I don't believe it is. There is something that looks wonderfully like him walking about above ground this very day. If you want to see it we can show it to you."

"You needn't put yourselves to no trouble," whined Smirker. "Ask me all the questions you want to and turn me loose."

"The old chap walks around of nights, too," continued White-horse Fred, in a tone of voice that made the cold chills creep all over his listener, "assisting his friends in every possible way and executing all sorts of vengeance on his enemies. How would you feel if you should wake up about midnight and see him coming toward you just this way?"

Fred threw himself into a crouching posture, similar to that which Smirker had assumed a few minutes before, drew his head down between his shoulders, distorted his features, opened his eyes and mouth to their widest extent, spread out his fingers like the claws of a wild beast, and crept slowly toward the robber.

"Don't!" cried Smirker.

"We're goin' to take you right whar he was seed last," said Silas, who believing that time enough had been wasted, thought it best to bring Fred's pleasantries to an end; "and if you don't tell us what we want to know we'll show him to you as sure as you're a hoss-thief. Put the saddles on the critters, Fred, while I tie this feller."

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"I will tell you what you want to know now," said Smirker, who continued to exhibit the most abject terror.

"Yes; but you see we want to take you to a place whar we can keep you safe till we find out whether or not you tell us the truth."

As Silas spoke he detached a halter from one of the bridles hanging on the wall, and with it securely bound the arms of his prisoner, who remonstrated earnestly against the proceeding, but never once thought of resistance.

By the time this was done Fred had saddled the two horses in the stable, one of which was Snowdrop, and the other an animal belonging to Smirker, replaced the belt containing the revolver and knife about his waist, and also secured possession of the bag containing the nuggets and gold-dust. Silas then mounted Smirker's horse, and bending down from his saddle and placing his arm about his prisoner, raised him to a seat behind him as easily as if he had been a child.

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In a few minutes more the trio were riding down the gully at a brisk trot. Silas and his young companion held their weapons ready for instant use, and kept a good lookout on all sides of them. If they chanced to meet any of the band of which their prisoner was a member, they might be called upon to fight for possession of him. But they accomplished the descent of the gorge, crossed the valley, and entered the woods on the opposite side without meeting any one, and finally found themselves in the vicinity of the rancho. Here they became very cautious in their movements, White-horse Fred leading the way at a slow walk, and frequently stopping to look about and listen. Presently he dismounted in a dense thicket, and having tied his nag to one of the bushes, seated himself on the ground, his example being followed by the trapper. For fully half an hour they and their prisoner sat motionless in their place of concealment, and at the end of that time Silas Roper's quick ear caught the sound of a stealthy footfall. He communicated the fact to Fred in a whisper, and the latter was instantly on the alert. He crept away through the bushes, and presently came back again.

"It's Dick," said he, in a low tone; "and after Julian again I'll warrant. Isn't he persevering? He is coming down the hill. Do you think I could get ahead of him?"

"I reckon you might if you're right lively," replied the guide. "But be careful of what you do. One mistake would spile everything."

The active Fred was out of sight almost before Silas had ceased speaking. Threading his way rapidly but noiselessly through the woods, he reached the bottom of a wide and deep ravine, which he crossed with a few swift bounds. Arriving at the base of a hill on the opposite side, he pushed aside a thick cluster of bushes, disclosing to view a dark opening, which seemed to extend far down into the regions below. Into this he dived like a squirrel going into his hole, and in a second more was out of sight.

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The bushes which concealed the opening had scarcely sprung back to their places when Richard Mortimer appeared in sight, moving down the ravine with slow and cautious steps, and pausing every few feet to look about him. When he reached the mouth of the cave he backed into the bushes, and concealing himself among them, stood for a long time listening and gazing up and down the ravine. Being satisfied at last that his movements were unobserved, he drew back into the opening, and hurried along a narrow passage-way, which led first to the store-room before spoken of, and thence through the hill to Reginald Mortimer's rancho.

"I am now going to make amends for the cowardice I exhibited last night," soliloquized Richard Mortimer. "I am heartily ashamed of what I did, and I shall never again allow myself to be frightened from my purpose by so shallow an artifice. It couldn't have been old Juan's ghost I saw, for there are no such things. Neither could it have been the old man himself, for he was put out of the way long years ago, and as I was present when the deed was committed, and even assisted in it, I know that the work was thoroughly done. The apparition certainly looked exactly like him, and if it comes in my way to-night I am going to find out what it is. My Derringers are freshly loaded, and I will see what impression the bullets in them will make upon it."

The passage-way was as dark as midnight, but Richard Mortimer, being perfectly familiar with all its windings, walked rapidly through it, and turning an abrupt bend, found himself at the place where the passage opened into the store-room. Although he had braced his nerves, called all his courage to his aid, and was fully prepared to encounter something here, he could not repress the thrill of horror that ran through him, or the exclamation of astonishment that escaped his lips the moment he emerged from the passage-way.

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A pale green light, whose source was invisible, and through which objects could but be dimly seen as through a mist, was streaming through the cellar. To Richard Mortimer's excited imagination it seemed to proceed from the bodies of two persons who were slowly approaching him from the opposite end of the apartment—one a very aged man, and the other a youth who looked remarkably like White-horse Fred. They were walking side by side, gazing into each other's faces, and appeared to be conversing earnestly, for their hands were constantly employed in gesticulating, and their lips moved, although no sound came forth. The light, which gave a strange and unearthly appearance to their features, seemed to move as they moved; and, instead of diffusing itself about the room, was confined to a narrow space in the immediate vicinity of the figures. Richard Mortimer gazed, and as he gazed felt his courage oozing out at the ends of his fingers. His first impulse was to turn and take to his heels, but the weakness was only momentary. Recovering himself by a strong effort, he advanced boldly into the store-room, but its mysterious occupants took no notice of him. He drew one of his Derringers from his pocket, and leveled it at the old man's breast.

"I have just one bullet apiece for you, my friends," said he, his voice trembling in spite of his efforts to control it, "and unless you stop that pantomime and speak to me, I will bring this farce

to an end in a way that you probably have not expected.”

He paused, but no answer was returned, nor was there the least change in the expression of the countenances of the two figures to show that his words had been heard. They continued to approach the place where he was standing, talking earnestly and gesticulating.

They were now quite near to him—so near that Richard Mortimer retreated a step or two, and as he did so his finger pressed the trigger. There was a bright flash, a stunning report, and when the smoke, which for a few seconds obscured his vision, cleared away so that he could see the effect of his shot, he dropped his empty weapon and staggered back as if he were about to fall. There stood the old man erect and unharmed, still talking with his companion, and neither of them seemed to have heard the report of the pistol. [195]

To draw the other and discharge it was but the work of an instant, but it had no visible effect upon the objects of his vengeance, who continued to advance, the light keeping pace with them, and their faces appearing to assume a more ghostly and unearthly look the nearer they approached.

And now Richard Mortimer discovered something that had hitherto escaped his notice—a tiny stream of blood which was trickling down the old man’s temple, and two holes in the breast of his buckskin jacket. White-horse Fred was as wet as if he had just come out of the lake, and the water dripped from his garments as he moved along. The sight reminded Richard Mortimer of one memorable night when scenes of horror and bloodshed had been enacted at the rancho, and drove away every particle of his courage. With a wild shriek of terror he turned and fled like the wind.



CHAPTER XXIII.

JULIAN MAKES A DISCOVERY.



UR HERO rode away from the cabin which had been the scene of his recent thrilling adventure in an ecstasy of bewilderment and alarm. He could not find a satisfactory explanation for a single one of the strange incidents that had happened there—they were all shrouded in a mystery which he could not penetrate. Of one thing, however, he was certain, and that was that that gallant young fellow, whoever he was, who had so narrowly escaped death at Smirker's hands, should not remain long a prisoner. He would have him out of that cabin if there was any way by which his release could be effected, and find out what he meant by claiming to be Julian Mortimer. Perhaps that "watchful friend," who had addressed that note to him and visited his room the night before while he was asleep, could tell him what ought to be done under the circumstances, if he could only obtain an interview with him. This he would use his best endeavors to accomplish by returning at once to his uncle's rancho, and remaining awake all night. If his mysterious friend should come into his room before morning he would be sure to see him.

Julian's new horse was quite as swift as Snowdrop, and showed the same willingness to go ahead. He flew down the rocky path at break-neck speed, the bay quietly following. For two hours he continued that mad gallop, and at the end of that time suddenly slackened his pace to a walk. This aroused Julian, who straightened up and looked about him, expecting to see his uncle's rancho close before him; but not a building of any description was in sight. His horse was toiling up a steep mountain path, which led through a wilderness of trees and rocks that Julian did not remember to have seen before. He knew that he had not passed that way in the morning. He had been so completely absorbed in his reflections that he had not thought of directing his steed, but trusted to the animal to carry him back to his uncle's rancho. But now he remembered, with a thrill of terror, that he was not riding Snowdrop, but a horse belonging to a robber—one, too, which was in the habit of making frequent and perhaps daily journeys between certain points. The animal seemed to know where he was going, but Julian did not. He had not seen the valley since he left Smirker's cabin, and that proved that the horse, without attracting his attention, had turned into another path, and was carrying him deeper into the mountains. But to what place? To another robber station beyond a doubt. Julian shuddered at the thought.

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To add to his alarm, night was rapidly coming on, the sky was overcast with clouds of inky blackness, the lightning was playing about the mountain tops, and the hoarse mutterings of a storm could be heard in the distance. What was to be done under such circumstances? He could never retrace his steps and find his way back to the valley in the dark. He knew by the experience he had already had with Snowdrop that the animals White-horse Fred rode, having become accustomed to a particular line of duty, objected to having their usual manner of proceeding interrupted; and if the nag on which he was now mounted should show the same disinclination to turn back that Snowdrop had exhibited to leave Smirker's cabin, what could he do? He would be obliged to depend entirely on himself, and he would become hopelessly bewildered before he had gone a hundred yards. To camp beside the path and wait for daylight would be equally hazardous, for the crash of fallen timbers in the distance told him that the swiftly approaching storm was sweeping every movable thing before it. He must go on—he had no alternative.

"There's some consolation in knowing that I can't get into a much worse scrape than that which I have just got out of," thought Julian. "If I don't succeed in passing myself off as White-horse Fred, I will reveal myself and trust to luck. In that event the robbers will only make a prisoner of me, for I am worth too much to them to be harmed. Smirker said so, although I haven't the least idea what he meant by it."

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Having settled this point, Julian put spurs to his horse, which, having by this time gained the summit of the hill, set off at the top of his speed. The gloom of night settled rapidly over the mountains, growing more and more intense every instant, and finally even the nearest objects were shut out from his view, save when the occasional flashes of lightning burst from the thick blackness overhead. To increase his uneasiness, he became aware that the path over which he was being carried with all the speed his horse could command ran along the brink of a deep precipice. Trusting entirely to the white nag, and leaving the bay to take care of himself, Julian clung with a death-grip to the horn of his saddle, closing his eyes when the lightning illuminated the scene, that he might not see the dangers before him, and then when darkness once more settled over the mountains holding his breath in suspense, momentarily expecting to find himself whirling headlong to destruction. But the sure-footed animal, having carried the real White-horse Fred along that same chasm on many a night like this, was too familiar with the way to run into any dangers.

Nearer and nearer came the storm, a roar like that of a thousand express trains filling the canyon behind him, the lightning flashing incessantly, the thunder booming and echoing among the cliffs like rapid discharges of heavy artillery, the crash of falling timber sounding louder and plainer every instant, and faster and faster flew the white horse with his terrified rider. He sped along like a bird on the wing, never once abating his speed even in the roughest and most difficult places, and finally, to Julian's immense relief, carried him into a thickly wooded ravine, and after making several abrupt turns and plunging through a dense thicket of bushes, came to a sudden halt. On the instant the boy placed his hand to his mouth and gave a perfect imitation of White-horse Fred's whistle.

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"Ay! ay!" came the response through the darkness, the voice sounding close at hand.

"Whew!" panted Julian, drawing his handkerchief across his dripping forehead. "Wasn't it lucky that I had my wits about me? I heard a window close, and a bolt rattle as it was pushed into its socket; and that proves that some one heard my approach and was on the lookout. If I hadn't given the signal just as I did I might have been shot. Wouldn't I give something to know what I have got to go through with now?"

Julian could not see even the faintest outline of a house before him, but nevertheless there was one there. The sound of voices and the tramping of heavy feet on a stone floor came faintly to his ears, followed by the grating of bolts and locks; and presently a door swung open close at his side—so close that if he had thrust out his hand he could have touched it—a flood of light streamed out into the darkness, and a man with a lantern appeared on the threshold. Julian's horse at once moved forward, carrying his rider into a stable similar to the one adjoining Smirker's cabin, and the bay followed closely at his heels. Scarcely had they reached the shelter of the friendly roof when the storm burst forth in all its fury.

Julian rolled off his horse rather than dismounted, and the hostler, after closing and fastening the door, held up his lantern and peered sharply into his face.

"Why, boy!" he exclaimed in great amazement.

"It is all up with me now," thought Julian. "I am discovered at last."

"Well, sir!" continued the man, after a pause. "I have seen something to-night I never expected to see in my life—White-horse Fred frightened."

"I guess you would be frightened if you were in my place," returned Julian, greatly relieved.

"The soldiers haven't been after you, have they?"

The boy replied in the negative.

"Oh, it's the storm, then. It's awful, that's a fact. I never heard such thunder or such a roaring of wind. You got here just in time, didn't you? Listen to that rain. The water in the gullies will be breast high to a horse in five minutes. Where did this fellow come from?" asked the hostler, leading the bay into one of the stalls.

"From Fort Stoughton. He was stolen from the major."

"Is this all you've got? Haven't you brought any dust or nuggets?"

"No. That was all Smirker had to give me."

"The fellows up there are getting lazy. They never send anything but horses lately. What do you know that is interesting or exciting?"

"Nothing. Smirker told me to tell you that the captain's cub had got back."

"Glory!" exclaimed the man, looking over his shoulder at Julian, and bringing his horny palms together with a noise like the report of a pistol.

"I don't know what he meant by it," added Julian, hoping that the man would finish the story Smirker had been relating to him when White-horse Fred arrived.

"Of course you don't, but I do; and it is the best piece of news I ever heard."

"Why is it?"

"That is a secret known only to a few of us whom the captain is willing to trust. But, of course, as you are a faithful member of the band, you will one day share in the benefits of it. I'd like to tell you, but I'm sworn to tell nobody. Your supper is waiting."

That was something Julian was glad to hear. Uncle Reginald had kept him in such a state of excitement that morning that he had eaten very little breakfast, and he was as hungry as a wolf. Fortunately there was but one door leading out of the stable beside the one at which he had come in, and he knew which way to go to find the living room of the cabin.

Being satisfied now that he could pass himself off anywhere for White-horse Fred, he boldly pushed open the door and found himself in the presence of two rough-looking men, who were stretched out on benches, with their saddles under their heads for pillows.

At one end of the room was a table, made of unplanned boards, upon which was a goodly supply of corn-bread and bacon, a tin plate with a fork beside it, and a quart cup, which a villainous-looking Mexican, who entered from another door just as Julian came in from the stable, was filling with very black-looking coffee. The men on the benches greeted him with rude cordiality, the Mexican bowed to him, and Julian, assuming an air of carelessness and indifference that he was very far from feeling, threw his sombrero into one corner of the room and seated himself at the table.

The nervousness and timidity he felt on first entering the room very soon began to wear away. The men, after making some coarse jests concerning his new clothes, entered into a lively conversation with him, and asked a multitude of questions about persons and places which Julian had never seen or heard of. From some remarks they let fall he found out why they were so inquisitive. They were obliged to remain in that cabin month in and month out, scarcely over stirring beyond the threshold; they never saw any new faces except those of the captain and the two agents who brought the stolen property there and took it away again; and they knew nothing of what was going on in the outside world except what their visitors told them. Julian gratified their curiosity by relating a very few things that had happened that day in Smirker's cabin, and a good many things that had not happened. He repeated every word that had been told him about the "captain's cub," in the hope that the men would tell him the rest of the story, but in this he was disappointed. They expressed unbounded delight at the intelligence, but said, somewhat fiercely, that Smirker ought to have held his tongue.

But little was said after this. The men having listened to all Julian had to tell them, rearranged

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their blankets and prepared to go to sleep; and the boy, being left to himself, gave his whole attention to the corn-bread and bacon. When he finished his supper and arose from the table, the robbers were both snoring lustily.

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"What's the next thing on the programme, I wonder?" soliloquized Julian, who, not knowing what else to do, walked about the room looking at the weapons which hung upon the wall. "I am afraid to make a move in any direction for fear I shall act so unlike White-horse Fred that somebody will suspect me. I'll stroll around a little and see what sort of a place I have got into."

The Mexican who had served up the supper came in at this moment to clear away the dishes, and when he went out again, Julian walked to the door through which he disappeared, and stood there looking about him, and wondering if it would be safe to venture beyond it. It led into a long, narrow hall, at the opposite end of which was a second door that communicated with the kitchen. This door was open, and the sounds that issued from the room told him that the Mexican was engaged in washing the supper dishes.

After a moment's pause Julian kept slowly on, intending to take a peep into the kitchen; but when he had gone about half-way through the hall, he saw another door at his left hand, which he had not before noticed. It was open, and led into a room which presented a great contrast to the one Julian had just left.

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"HE SAT BY THE TABLE, WITH HIS HEAD RESTING UPON HIS HAND."

It was nicely furnished, carpeted, provided with a comfortable bed, and there were ornaments on the mantel over the fire-place, and pictures hanging upon the walls. In the middle of the floor was a table with the remains of a supper upon it, and beside it sat a tall, military-looking gentleman dressed in a faded suit of black. He sat with his head resting upon his hand, and his eyes fastened upon the floor; and there was something in his face, which was turned partly toward him, that attracted the boy's attention and excited his sympathy at once. He knew instinctively that the man was in trouble. A second glance showed him that he was a prisoner—that he was in double irons.

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Who was he, and what had he done to incur the displeasure of the robbers that they should keep him so closely confined? If Julian had been able to answer this question, and had known the full value of the discovery he had just made, he would have been astonished and excited beyond measure.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

PEDRO MAKES ANOTHER.



THE PRISONER raised his head with a weary, languid air when Julian stopped before his door, but no sooner did his eyes rest full upon the boy than his whole appearance changed as if by magic. The look of utter dejection faded from his face, and was succeeded by an expression in which excitement and hope were strangely blended. Placing his finger upon his lips with a warning gesture, he arose to his feet, and then Julian saw that he was even more securely confined than he had supposed, being chained to the floor.

The prisoner, who was considerably past the prime of life, was a man of very commanding appearance, and in his youthful days must have been a model of strength and agility; but now his frame was emaciated to the last degree, his cheeks were pale and sunken, and his eyes, which were fastened eagerly upon the boy, had a wild, defiant look in them.

As he arose slowly and tremblingly to his feet, he beckoned to Julian impatiently, almost fiercely, to enter the room, at the same time drawing a letter from his pocket and tossing it toward him. It fell upon the carpet just inside the door, and Julian, filled with wonder, stepped forward and picked it up. An instant afterward he would have given everything he ever hoped to possess if he could have recalled the action.

The rattling of dishes in the kitchen suddenly ceased, and the Mexican cook came into the hall, humming a tune and snapping his fingers as if he felt at peace with himself and all the world, and Julian knew, as well as if it had been told him, that he was coming into that room.

The anxiety and alarm he exhibited were fully shared by the prisoner, whose face was the color of ashes. He could not have been more fully alive to the dangers of the boy's situation if he had been in the same peril himself. After looking all around the room, searching for some avenue of escape or place of concealment, he pointed with a quick movement behind the door, and sinking back into his chair rested his head upon his hand. Julian understood the gesture and was quick to obey it. He dodged behind the door like a flash of light, and a moment later the Mexican came into the room.

"Have you finished your supper?" he demanded roughly.

"No," replied the prisoner. "Come in again in a few minutes."

"Now, I want you to hurry up; do you understand that? I am not going to wait all night for those dishes."

The Mexican went out again and stood looking up and down the hall. Once he started toward the living-room, and the movement gave Julian new cause for alarm. What if he should go in there and discover his absence? What would the robbers do to him if they should find him concealed in the room with their prisoner? The fears these questions conjured up were speedily set at rest, however, for the man turned about and went into the kitchen again; and when the rattling of the dishes told Julian that he had resumed his work, he thrust the letter into his pocket, slipped from behind the door, and with noiseless steps retraced his way to the living-room. He arrived there just in time to escape danger from a new source, for the door of the stable opened and the hostler entered. He found the boy seated beside the table, with his arms folded and his head resting upon them. He had assumed this position in order to conceal his face, which he knew was as pale as that of the dead.

"Wake up here, Fred!" cried the man, striking Julian on the shoulder with his open hand. "You've no business to go to sleep. You know it's against orders for anybody except us four fellows to stay in this rancho all night. The storm is over, and you can start back now."

"Start back!" thought Julian, raising his head and rubbing his eyes as if he were very sleepy. "Must I ride along that dreadful chasm again to-night? Where will that horse take me? Back to Smirker's, probably."

"You will have a pleasanter time going than you did coming," continued the hostler. "The moon is shining brightly."

"Any messages?" asked Julian.

"None that I think of. Be down again to-morrow?"

The boy, replying in the affirmative, accompanied the hostler to the stable, and in a few minutes more heard the heavy door locked behind him, and was flying along the zigzag path that led from the rancho to the chasm.

The ride proved to be much more to his liking than the one he had taken a few hours before. The moon lighted up every object within the range of his vision, and he had a fair view of the dangers through which he had passed. The horse carried him along the chasm in safety, and when that was passed Julian threw the reins loose on the animal's neck and gave himself up to his reflections. Of course the prisoner occupied all his thoughts. He pulled the letter from his pocket and looked at it on all sides. There was something written on it—probably the address of the person to whom it was to be delivered; but Julian, with the aid of no better light than that afforded by the moon, could not make it out. He had two prisoners to assist now, he told himself—Smirker's captive and the old gentleman who had given him the letter. The former, as we know, was no longer in need of help; but the other was, and in Julian he had a friend worth having. He had others, too, shrewd, active, daring men, who had labored unceasingly for years to discover his whereabouts and effect his release, but without the least hope of success. Silas Roper would

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have given the best years of his life to have known what Julian knew.

It seemed to our hero that the ride would never come to an end. He made no attempt to guide his horse, but kept a good lookout on both sides in the hope of seeing some familiar landmark. He did not intend to be carried back to Smirker's cabin if he could prevent it. An hour later he emerged from a deep ravine into a broad, level valley, and then he knew where he was. His horse showed a desire to carry him up a narrow path which led to a high hill beyond; but Julian insisted on having his own way, and by the help of his spurs soon induced the animal to yield to his guidance. The five miles that lay between him and his uncle's rancho were quickly accomplished, and when Julian drew rein in front of the gate he felt as if a mountain had suddenly been removed from his shoulders.

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"I never expected to see this place again," thought he, as he pounded upon the gate with the handle of his hunting-knife. "Uncle Reginald told me this morning that he wanted me to feel that I had a right to go and come when I pleased, and I guess he will think I haven't been slow to take advantage of his permission. It must be long after midnight, but I can't go to sleep, for I don't want to miss seeing that watchful friend of mine, if he comes about."

The furious blows Julian showered upon the gate brought the dogs out in full chorus, and in a few minutes Pedro also appeared with his lantern. He must have known who it was demanding admittance, for he did not stop to look through the wicket, but opened the gate at once, and Julian rode in.

"I am sorry to be obliged to disturb you at this hour," said the boy, as he dismounted in front of the door of the rancho, "but I couldn't help it."

"I was up and waiting for you," was the reply. "Your uncle has given me orders to hold myself in readiness to attend to you at any hour of the day or night; so you see—well—I—*Carrajo!*"

The Mexican, who had taken Julian's bridle from his hand, ceased speaking very suddenly, raised his lantern, and after surveying the horse all over, opened his eyes to their widest extent, and broke out into a volley of Spanish oaths and ejaculations indicative of the greatest astonishment. He had made an alarming discovery.

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"Well, what is it?" asked Julian. "Do you see anything strange?"

"No," answered the man hastily. "Take this lantern to light you to your room, and I will put your horse in the stable."

"Is anything new going to happen, I wonder?" thought Julian, as he took the proffered lantern and made his way along the hall to the sleeping apartment. "Pedro has found something to surprise him, and I can't imagine what it can be. I guess Uncle Reginald would be surprised, too, if he knew where I have been and what I have seen since he last saw me."

Never before had a room looked so cozy and comfortable, or a bed so inviting, as Julian's did that night. He was almost exhausted by his long ride and the excitement through which he had passed, but he had a matter of importance before him, and he could not think of retiring. His first move was to light the candle that stood on the table and extinguish the lantern, and his second to draw his easy-chair beside the table and take the mysterious letter from his pocket. It was soiled and crumpled, and Julian thought it must have been written a long time, and that the gentleman had carried it constantly about his person, waiting for an opportunity to give it to some one. The words written on the outside were:

"To any good Christian into whose hands this letter may come."

"That means me," thought the boy. "That poor gentleman is in great trouble, I know, and I am Christian enough to help him out of it if I can."

He opened the letter, little dreaming what a surprise was in store for him, and looked at the signature to see who the writer was. He looked, and the blood went rushing back upon his heart, leaving his face ghastly pale. He rubbed his eyes, held the letter closer to the candle, and slowly read aloud the words:

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"Yours, in dire distress, SAMUEL MORTIMER,

"Late Major of the Army of the United States."

"It is from my father!" gasped Julian, sinking helplessly back into his chair.

"Is it? Then give it to me," said a stern voice close at his elbow.

A hand suddenly appeared from behind his chair, and clutching the letter, attempted to snatch it from his grasp, but the boy's fingers closed upon it with a most determined grip. Thinking of the emigrant, he started up with a cry of alarm to find himself confronted by Uncle Reginald, whose face was as black as a thunder-cloud.

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CHAPTER XXV. HOW IT RESULTED.



WHEN PEDRO took charge of Julian's horse he did not lead him directly to the stable, but to the back part of the house, where he left him until he could run into the kitchen and procure another lantern. When he came out again he made a thorough examination of the animal, and having at last satisfied himself that he made no mistake, he ran into the house and pounded loudly upon the door of Uncle Reginald's bed-room. The summons quickly brought that gentleman to his feet, and when the numerous bolts and locks had been undone, Pedro pushed open the door and entered without ceremony. The excitement and alarm depicted upon his features must have been contagious, for no sooner did Mr. Mortimer glance at his face than his own assumed a very anxious look.

"Did Julian ride Snowdrop away this morning, or did I dream it?" asked Pedro, before he was fairly inside the door.

"You did not dream it," was the reply. "He did. Why do you ask the question?"

"Because here's the very mischief to pay. I told you just how it would be if you turned that boy loose to run about the country like a wild colt. I shouldn't be surprised if your little game was brought to an end in less than twenty-four hours."

"What do you mean?" cried Uncle Reginald in alarm. "Speak out plainly."

"I mean that if Julian rode Snowdrop away he has brought Bob back—that's what I mean."

Pedro's employer was utterly confounded by this intelligence. His under jaw dropped down, and he looked at his companion without saying a word. [12]

"It is the truth?" continued the Mexican. "Now where did he leave Snowdrop, and where did he get Bob? Either at Smirker's or at the *other place*; and if he has been *there*, it proves something."

"It does, indeed," cried Reginald Mortimer, turning white to the lips. "It proves that some of my trusted men have turned against me; for he could never have gained admittance to either place except through treachery. I must talk to him, and see if he has learned anything he ought not to know."

Uncle Reginald threw on his clothes with all possible haste, and hurried along the hall to Julian's room. The door opened when he turned the knob, and entering without attracting the boy's attention, he found him in the act of reading a letter. When Uncle Reginald saw the letter all his worst suspicions were confirmed. He knew where Julian had been, and he knew, too, by whom the missive had been written, and what it contained. Approaching the boy's chair with a cat-like tread, he leaned over his shoulder and made an attempt to take the paper out of his hand; but Julian detected the move in time to defeat it. He sprung to his feet, and for a moment the two stood holding the letter between them, and glaring at one another like wild beasts at bay. Uncle Reginald was astonished at the look of defiance and determination he saw in the eyes that were fastened upon him. It taught him something of the spirit of the youth with whom he had to deal.

"Julian," said he, in a tone of voice which he intended should frighten the boy into obedience to his commands, "I have a good deal to say to you; but, in the first place, give me that letter."

"I would as readily give you my life," was the prompt reply.

"Let go, I tell you," said Uncle Reginald, in a still sterner voice, making a vain effort to unclasp the sinewy fingers that were closed upon the letter.

"Let go yourself. It is from my father. I have more right to it than you have, and I will not let go."

"I am your guardian, Julian, and have the right to control you, as you will quickly learn to your cost, if you do not obey me." [213]

"I don't care if you are the King of the Sandwich Islands, you shan't have this letter. I don't believe you are my guardian. You have done nothing but tell me one falsehood after another ever since I have been here. You said my father was dead, and he isn't. He is alive, and I have seen him—seen him, too, in prison and chained to the floor. You say you are my uncle, and you are not. You have no more right to the name you bear than your Mexican servant has—not a bit."

"Who told you all this?" asked Uncle Reginald, making a strong effort to keep back the tempest of passion which was almost ready to break forth.

"Your man Smirker. I am going to have him arrested as soon as I can go to the fort. He killed a miner and stole his money; he told me so."

"He told you so!" repeated Reginald Mortimer.

"Yes. He mistook me for a rascally accomplice of his—White-horse Fred."

"Did Smirker introduce you into Hale's rancho—I mean the place where you saw this prisoner?"

"No. The horse he gave me in exchange for mine introduced me there."

"Well, go on. What else do you know?"

"I know you had better let go this letter instantly; for if you don't—"

Julian finished the sentence by placing his hand upon the butt of his revolver; but before he could draw it from his belt Reginald Mortimer released his hold upon the letter, and bounding forward, seized the boy by the throat, and attempted to throw him to the floor.

Julian was neither surprised nor frightened. He retained his presence of mind. His first

thought was not of defense but of the letter; and having secured that by thrusting it into his bosom he was ready for the struggle. How the contest would have ended if he had been left to himself it is hard to tell; but help was close at hand. The hangings at the foot of the bed were thrust cautiously aside, and a pair of eyes appeared and looked into the room. They watched the combatants a moment and then disappeared, and shortly afterward the hangings were again raised and three figures sprung from behind them. The foremost was Silas Roper; close at his heels followed the strange horseman whom Julian had met at Smirker's cabin; and the rear was brought up by the feeble old man, who, by simply walking across the cellar the night before, had saved our hero from being carried away captive by Richard Mortimer.

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At this moment the door through which Uncle Reginald had entered was cautiously opened, and another head was thrust into the room. It was the head of Pedro, the Mexican, who, after just one glance at what was going on inside the apartment, drew back out of sight.

"The jig is danced at last," said he to himself, as he ran along the hall, "and those of us who are found in these parts in the morning will be called upon to settle with the fiddler. It is nothing more than I expected, but I know how to block this little game."

Pedro went straight to the stable, led out the horse Julian had brought there a short time before, and springing upon his back, rode off toward the mountains.

Silas and his friends had come into that room on business, and their actions indicated that they were disposed to waste no time in carrying it out. The trapper walked straight up to Reginald Mortimer, and seizing him by the collar and tearing his hand from the boy's throat, threw him at full length on the floor. Julian staggered to his feet as soon as he was relieved of the weight of his antagonist, to find a pair of strong arms clasped about his neck, and to hear himself addressed in terms of endearment, to which he listened like one in a dream. Then he felt himself forced into a chair, and knew that Silas came up and shook hands with him, and that he was followed by the feeble old man, who said something that was doubtless intended for a welcome; but Julian's mind was in such a whirl of excitement that he could not understand a word he uttered.

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"What's the matter with you, anyhow?" asked White-horse Fred, bringing his hand down upon Julian's shoulder with a force that fairly made the boy's teeth rattle. "Can't you say you are glad to see me, or are you above owning a brother who belongs to a band of robbers?"

"Let me collect my thoughts a little, and then I will talk to you," replied Julian. "I can't quite understand all this."

"And there's another as much in the dark as you are," said Fred, pointing to Reginald Mortimer. "You perhaps imagine you are dreaming, and I know he wishes he was, don't you, captain? There are two of us here whom you never expected to see in the flesh again; are there not? Take your time, Julian, and think the matter over, and while you are about it I will look around and pack up a few articles that may be of use to you, for we are going to find new quarters for you now."

Julian settled back in a chair and gazed long and earnestly at all the persons in the room—at the old Mexican who stood at his side leaning upon his staff; at Silas, sitting upon the bed and smiling complacently at him as if he enjoyed his bewilderment; at Reginald Mortimer, lying bound and helpless on the floor, and who, like Julian, was almost overwhelmed with astonishment; and then at his brother, who was skipping about the room, overhauling the bureau, wardrobe and book-case, now and then depositing some articles which he took from them upon a blanket he had spread on the floor.

"*My brother!*" said Julian aloud. "How strangely it sounds."

"Doesn't it!" replied Fred, pausing in his work and looking over his shoulder at Julian. "But it is the truth. I don't know what you think about it, but I am delighted to claim the relationship. A brother is something worth having out here in this wilderness, I tell you."

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"What is your name?" asked Julian.

"Fred—White-horse Fred, if it suits you better—sworn agent for a band of outlaws and rascals of which our worthy uncle here is the acknowledged leader. Any objections to my company?"

"Then you are not dead?"

"Do I look like it?"

"And you are not *Julian* Mortimer?"

"By no means. How could I be when you are that lucky individual?"

"Then why did you tell Smirker so?"

"To help you out of a scrape," replied Fred, picking up the bundle he had made and throwing it over his shoulder. "But I say, Julian," he added, a shade of anxiety overspreading his merry countenance, "of course you are not aware of the fact, but you have jeopardized the life of one who is very dear to both of us by getting into this fuss with Uncle Reginald."

"How?" asked Julian.

"Why, our father has been a prisoner in the hands of the band of which I am a member for eight years, and if anything happens to the captain—Uncle Reginald—his jailors have orders to shoot him as soon as word comes to their ears."

"The news is on the way to them now," said the robber chief, with savage emphasis, "and he will be shot before daylight. Pedro is already on his road to the mountains."

"Who sent him?" demanded White-horse Fred.

"I expect he sent himself," cried Julian, starting from his chair in great excitement. "I saw him put his head in at the door just as you came in. We must be off at once."

"But where will we go, and what shall we do?" asked Fred. "We don't know where father is; if

we did, we should have released him before this time."

"Well, I know where he is, and I have seen him. More than that, I've got a letter from him."

"Hold hard thar!" exclaimed Silas, as Julian drew the letter from his pocket, and moved nearer the candle. "Don't read a word of it here, for thar's no knowin' how many pairs of ears thar may be listenin' to it. Come with us, an' we will talk this matter over."

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Julian had never seen three persons more excited than the trapper and his companions were over the announcement he had just made. It did not take the form of words, but showed itself in their countenances, and in their hurried, nervous actions. They prepared to leave the room at once. Silas raised the captive robber to his shoulder as if he had been a sack of flour, while the old Mexican skipped before him like a boy of sixteen, and held up the hangings which concealed the entrance to the secret passage-way. White-horse Fred, who had looked into the muzzle of Smirker's revolver without flinching or even changing color, was pale enough now, and the hand with which he extended Julian's sombrero to him now trembled like a leaf. They left the room without saying a word, and followed Silas, who led the way along the passage to the cellar, where they found a man with a lantern waiting for them. It was Romez, the hostler. He was greatly astonished to see the trapper carrying Reginald Mortimer on his shoulder, but without asking any questions he turned and mounted a ladder which rested against the wall of the cellar.

While Julian was going up he had leisure to make an examination of the store-house. It was a natural cave in the mountain, and seemed to have no roof—at least there was none that could be seen. The wall against which the ladder was placed arose for the height of thirty feet, as smooth and perpendicular as if it had been fashioned by the hand of man, and terminated in a broad, level platform. When the parties stepped upon this platform they paused until Romez had drawn up the ladder, and then mounted to a second ledge of rock higher up the cavern. This ladder was also drawn up, and the journey resumed along a narrow, slippery path, that finally ended in a dark opening, which proved to be the mouth of a smaller cave.

The interior of this cavern presented a scene which filled Julian with astonishment. Almost the first object his eyes rested upon was Smirker's burly form stretched out on a little pallet in one corner. He was securely bound, and did not look much now like the reckless desperado he had appeared when Julian first met him in his cabin. But the presence of this man did not occasion him so much astonishment as the sight of the gold that was scattered about the room. He saw it there in all shapes—in dust, nuggets, quartz and coin. It was stowed away in chests, tied up in little bags, and packed upon shelves and piled in corners as if it had been merchandise of some description. Julian had never dreamed that all the gold mines of California could produce as much of the precious metal as he saw collected in that one small room. The cave was also used as a receptacle for various odds and ends—rifles, revolvers, muskets, hunting-knives, saddles and bridles. As Julian glanced about him he told himself that he knew now what had become of some of the articles Uncle Reginald had missed from his rancho.

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"During your travels to-day did you hear Smirker or anybody else say anything about some hidden treasure which he hoped to handle some day?" asked White-horse Fred.

Julian replied that he did.

"Well, here it is. This is the cause of all our trouble. If it hadn't been for these yellow boys we might have been a united, happy family to-day."

"I don't reckon it'll be very long afore we're all together agin like we used to be," said Silas, as he deposited his prisoner upon the pallet beside the other. "If the major is where we can get at him we'll have him out this very night. How did you find him, Julian?"

"Smirker gave me a horse in exchange for mine that took me straight to his prison," replied the boy. And then he went on to relate, in a few rapid words, how his curiosity had led him to walk about the rancho, and that while on his way to the kitchen he had found the prisoner. He described, too, how narrowly he had escaped discovery by the Mexican when he came in to remove the supper dishes, and told what had passed between Uncle Reginald and himself prior to the arrival of Silas and his friends.

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"You are a lucky fellow, Julian," said White-horse Fred, when he had finished his story. "I have been making regular daily journeys to that rancho for more than a year, and never saw or heard anything to lead me to suspect that affairs were not all right there. I used to wonder why there were four men at that station and only one, or at the most two, at the others, and have thought it strange that they should always be so particular to hurry me away. No matter how bad the weather was they wouldn't let me stay all night. But what is to be done, Silas? Pedro has gone to the mountains to warn Hale and his crowd, and if he gets there before we do, the discovery Julian has made will be of no value to us."

"Tain't wuth while to do anything in a hurry," replied the trapper. "Let's hear what's in that letter."

Julian drew the letter from his pocket, and taking his stand near the lantern, began reading it aloud.

We do not reproduce it because its contents have no bearing upon our story. It was just such a letter as any one of us would have tried to write had we been placed in Major Mortimer's situation. It described some events that happened long years before, and which we shall presently hear from the lips of White-horse Fred, and pleaded for assistance in language that would have wrung tears of pity from any but a savage.

Julian's cheeks were wet long before he ceased reading, and once he stopped and turned toward the robber chief as if he had half a mind to take an ample revenge on him. The old Mexican wept like a child, and gave vent to his indignation by pounding on the floor with his staff; while Silas and White-horse Fred stood, with clinched hands and compressed lips, gazing at

Julian with eyes that would grow dim in spite of them.

A dead silence succeeded the reading of the letter, which was finally broken by the trapper, who, after a short consultation with the two boys, determined upon a plan of action. This he explained in a few words, and preparations were at once made to carry it into effect.

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Leaving the old Mexican to watch the prisoners, the rest of the party descended to the cellar and thence made their way into the stables. Julian mounted Snowdrop and Fred went in pursuit of her mate, but he was gone.

“Good luck attends us on all sides to-night!” said he gleefully. “Here were a dozen horses in the stable, and instead of taking a fresh one that blockhead Pedro selected an animal which has already traveled forty miles to-night. So much the better for us. We’ll overtake him before he has gone five miles.”

The party mounted in haste, and galloping out of the gate directed their course down the valley.



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CHAPTER XXVI.

FRED'S STORY.



HITE-HORSE FRED and his long-lost but now recovered brother were boys who were not much given to sentiment; but although they did not go into ecstasies over one another, they were none the less delighted at their reunion. They kept as close together as possible, and clung to each other's hands as they galloped along, as if afraid that something might again come between them to separate them.

"Well, old fellow," said Fred at length, "it didn't take you long to raise a row after you got here, did it. Uncle Reginald little dreamed, when he was working so hard to find you in order to further his own ends, how completely you would kick over his kettle of fish in less than twenty-four hours after your arrival. We'll keep those white horses as long as we live, won't we? They are the best friends we've ever had."

"I believe that now," replied Julian; "but I didn't think so when they were roaming about among the mountains with me and carrying me to robber dens. But, Fred, you are not a horse-thief?"

"I never stole a horse, or anything else, if that is what you mean; but I have been a member of the band for more than a year. I've had charge of a good many dollars' worth of stolen property first and last, and if I had happened to fall into the hands of the settlers while I had it in my possession, I'd have been gone up sure."

"Why, Fred, what made you do it."

"I had an object in view—one that justified even worse things than that. It will not retard our speed in the least if we talk as we go along, so I will tell my story first—I know you are dying to hear it—and then I will listen to yours. Where shall I begin?"

"At the beginning, of course. Tell me who I am, how I came to be an inmate of Jack Bowles' cabin, and all about it. I have lived among mysteries for the last few weeks, and I want every one of them explained."

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"And yet there isn't a single mystery connected with your history, or mine, either," replied White-horse Fred. "I can make everything plain to you in ten minutes. In the first place, that old rancho back there is our home. It was built by Grandfather Cordova, our mother's father, who came out here in early times. When I tell you that it was intended as a fort as well as a dwelling, you will know how those secret passage-ways came to be there. Such a building was necessary in those days, for it was hardly safe for white men about—"

"Safe!" interrupted Julian. "It isn't safe now."

"Oh, things have changed wonderfully since that house was built, and even during my recollection. We call ourselves a quiet, orderly, well-disposed set of people; but when grandfather first came out here he saw some excitements, I tell you. He was a native of Mexico, and brought with him a small colony of his own people. The Indians were so troublesome that the government was obliged to keep a strong body of troops here, and father was one of their officers. He commanded the fort; and Silas, who was in more than one battle with him, says he was a fighter worth looking at. He had not been out here very long before he fell in love with and married our mother, Inez Cordova, threw up his commission, and went to digging gold and raising cattle. Everything went on smoothly until grandfather and mother died, and then the trouble began. In one night our family was completely broken up by a couple of adventurers, who ought certainly to have had some mercy on us if they had no affection for us, for they were our mother's brother and cousin.

"So far your story corresponds with the one Sanders told me," said Julian.

"Can't you remember anything about those happy days?" continued White-horse Fred. "I can, but then I am almost two years older than you are. I can remember that Juan—the old fellow who came into your room with us to-night—and his two boys, Romez and Antoine, were great favorites of mine. Juan was father's *major domo*—he had charge of everything in the house. Romez was the hostler, and Antoine was the chief herdsman. They were life-long servants of our family, and they and a few others have since proved themselves as true as steel. When I became old enough to be trusted alone with a horse, I used to ride out to Antoine's hut, which was located in the lower end of the valley, and spend weeks at a time with him, assisting in herding the cattle and learning to throw the lasso. Father would occasionally ride out there to see that I was all right, and now and then I would come home to spend a day with you."

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"I can remember those visits," observed Julian.

"At that time, in spite of the gloom thrown over it by the death of our mother, which occurred when you were about three years old, our house was not the desolate place it is now. The officers of the fort used to visit there regularly to talk over army matters with father, eat Juan's excellent dinners, and enjoy the splendid shooting the mountains afforded. Father did considerable trading with the trappers and friendly Indians; the house was always full, and there was always something interesting going on there. Somehow the story got abroad that father was immensely rich. Well, he was wealthy, but he didn't have as much money as most people supposed he did."

"How much was he worth, anyhow?" asked Julian.

"Perhaps a couple of million, and the most of that once belonged to grandfather."

"Why, I heard Pedro tell Sanders that he had fifty millions stowed away somewhere."

"Ah, nonsense! Pedro has about as clear ideas of wealth as he has of the moon; and that's

something he knows nothing at all about. The story got wind from this simple circumstance: Father was one day walking up a little ravine a short distance from the house, prospecting, when he found a pretty good-sized nugget. The next day he picked up another, and a week or two afterward he found a third. He told some of the officers of it, and they spread it around. There were a few miners here then, and they at once crowded into the ravine and turned up every inch of it; but not another nugget was brought to light. That, however, did not serve to convince them that there was not a gold mine of wonderful richness hidden about there somewhere. They industriously circulated the report, and finally the story, together with the news of grandfather's death and mother's, reached the ears of a couple of men in San Francisco, who at once laid their plans to possess themselves of father's wealth. They were Reginald and Richard Cordova, mother's brother and cousin.

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"They were graceless scamps, those same fellows—professional gamblers, who had been cast off by grandfather on account of their profligate habits. As our parents had never mentioned their names, no one out here knew that there were such men in existence. They came to the mountains, and, as bad luck would have it, the first man whose acquaintance they made was Ned Sanders. They pumped him carefully, and found that he was just the fellow they wanted, for he knew a good deal about our family, and would do anything for money. They unfolded their plans to him, which were to murder father and his boys, and claiming to be his brothers, seize upon his property. Sanders entered heartily into their scheme, but he proposed a slight change of programme.

"'I've got better ideas nor them,' said he. 'The ole major's got a heap of money laid up somewhar, but it ain't a drop in the bucket to what we'd finger if we could only find that hidden gold mine of his'n. We'll make way with the boys, 'cause they won't be of no use to us; but we won't harm the major. In course he won't want to tell us whar the gold mine is, and we can't scare him into it, nuther, 'cause he's one of them kind of fellers that don't scare wuth a cent; but we can force it out o' him in another way. We'll make a pris'ner of him, and shut him up away from his horses, an' his hounds, an' his cattle, an' keep him shut up till he is willin' to tell us what we want to know.'

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"Just see the heathenish ingenuity Sanders exhibited!" exclaimed White-horse Fred angrily. "Knowing full well that father could not be frightened into revealing his secret, he resolved to torture it out of him; and he decided, too, upon the only method that could by any possibility prove successful. Being a man of active habits, it would be but little short of death for him to be shut out from the world and deprived of occupation. Liberty and something to do were as necessary to his existence as the food he ate.

"Sanders also told the plotters that Major Mortimer and his boys were not the only ones with whom they would have to deal. There were some firm friends of the family who must be got rid of, or they would make trouble. First, there was Silas Roper. During a battle with the Indians, father had saved his life at the risk of his own, and Silas was so grateful for it that he gave up hunting and trapping and turned herdsman in order that he might always be near father. It wouldn't be a safe piece of business to attempt to harm the major or any of his family while Silas was about. And there was old Juan and half a dozen others, who had been employed in the family in grandfather's life-time. They could never be induced to lend their aid to so villainous a scheme, and they must be killed. In order to cope with so many men—Silas was a small army in himself—it would be necessary to have more help, and this Sanders agreed to furnish.

"The plan was thoroughly discussed, and a time set for carrying it into execution. When the night arrived, Sanders appeared with three choice spirits, named Smirker, Hale and Lutz. They began operations by effecting an entrance into the rancho through the cellar. Father was surprised in his bed, and bound hand and foot; three of the obnoxious Mexicans were murdered in their sleep; but old Juan, taking the alarm, fled from the house. He was seen, however, pursued, and overtaken on the brink of a deep gully, a short distance away. He was stabbed, shot twice, beaten on the head with the butt of a rifle, and finally thrown over the cliff; but he is to-night hale and hearty, in spite of his wounds and his ninety-five years.

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"The next in order was Silas Roper. They surrounded his cabin, broke open the door, and there their operations in that quarter ceased. The trapper, who says he always keeps himself in trim for a fight, assumed the offensive at once, and whipped out his assailants with an ease that must have astonished them. Lutz, who was the first to enter the cabin, was shot dead in his tracks; Reginald received a blow over the head that laid him aside for a week or two; Sanders got another, and so did Smirker; and Silas escaped without a scratch.

"The next thing was to go back to the house after you and me. I remember as well how I felt when I awoke and found the outlaws in my room as if the incidents I am trying to describe had happened only yesterday. I remember, too, of seeing you jump out of bed, and draw a bee-line for the door. You got out, but Sanders ran after you and brought you back."

"That must have been what he referred to when he told me that he and I once ran a foot-race," said Julian.

"I can recall the thoughts that passed through my mind when Sanders and Smirker, accompanied by Richard, were taking us down to the lake to throw us in. I remember of falling through the air and sinking in the water, but beyond that all is blank to me. After I was thrown in, an idea suddenly occurred to Richard, and he concluded to make a change in his programme, and save you alive for some future emergency. A time might arrive when an heir to the hidden gold mine—in the existence of which he and his cousin firmly believed—would be a convenient thing to have about. There were a good many ways in which he might be used. So Richard, after seeing his cousin disposed of in some remote place where he would not be likely to be discovered, and giving Sanders some very minute instructions, took you and started off to Missouri.

"In the meantime, old Juan had recovered his consciousness. When he was thrown into the gorge he did not fall to the bottom, but lodged on a leaning tree about four feet below the brink of the cliff. When he came to himself he crawled down to the lake to bathe his wounds, but stopped just before he reached the bank, for he saw Richard and the two outlaws coming down with us. He saw them throw me into the water, and when they went away with you he jumped in and rescued me.

"In the morning those of the servants who had not been molested, and who had slept soundly in spite of all the noise and confusion, awoke to find the rancho almost deserted. The owner and his family had disappeared, and some of their own number were lying dead in their beds. They went at once in search of the commanding officer of the fort, who came up, but could make nothing of our disappearance. At the end of a week or two, as nothing was seen or heard of us, he concluded that we also had been foully dealt with, and thought it high time that some one was put there to attend to things. He asked the servants if they knew whether or not father had any relatives near, and Sanders, who happened to be present, said he had heard him speak of two brothers, Reginald and Richard Mortimer, who were living in San Francisco. The officer decided to send a letter to them, and Sanders agreed to carry it. He made a great show of starting off, but rode only about five miles through the mountains to a miserable little hut where Reginald was waiting for him.

"Two months afterward Uncle Reginald was acknowledged by the officers, the settlers, and the servants as the lawful master of the rancho, and father was languishing in the prison into which he had been thrown, with the assurance that he should never come out of it until he told where his wealth was concealed. He denied all knowledge of the gold mine, but said that he had some money stowed away in a safe place, and that he would die in confinement before he would tell where it was."

"Why didn't Silas and Juan go to the commander of the fort and tell him what had happened?" asked Julian. [228]

"I was just coming to that. They met the next morning in our treasure-house, which you visited to-night, to talk the matter over. They had both seen enough to satisfy them that father had been carried away as a prisoner, and they had no difficulty in guessing at the object his captors had in view. If they told the commander of the fort he would send his cavalry scouting about among the mountains, and that would alarm the robbers, and perhaps lead them to murder father. The first thing to be done was to find out where he was confined, and it would be time enough to call in the help of the troops when that had been ascertained. But with all their efforts—and they did everything men could do—they failed to gain the slightest clew to his whereabouts. He had disappeared as completely as though he had never existed at all. They spent years in the search, but until you told them what you had seen to-night they knew no more about the matter than they did when father was first captured.

"About four years ago I thought I was getting old enough and shrewd enough to take a part in the search myself; but Silas and Juan would not permit it. They said that as long as I kept out of sight everybody would believe me dead, but that if I showed my face I would be recognized at once, and Reginald would send some one after me who would make sure work of me. But at last I could endure the inactivity no longer; and once, when Silas was away in the mountains, I came out of the cave in which I had spent the best part of four years of my life, and began to look about to find something to do. Most of father's servants were gone, and their places were supplied with new ones; but there were some of the old ones left, and among them were Romez, Antoine and Ithuriel. The latter had been promoted by Richard Mortimer, as he called himself, to the position of body-servant; Romez held his old position as hostler, and Antoine was still a herdsman. I lived with the latter for two years, assisting him in his duties, and waiting impatiently for something to turn up. I was careful to keep out of sight of Reginald and Richard, but mingled freely with the rest of the people about the rancho, and even with the soldiers and settlers, and no one knew me. I paid regular nightly visits to old Juan, who lived in the cave where father's money was hidden, and once while on my way there something happened that suggested to me a plan of action. [229]

"There are two passage-ways that lead to the cellar—one from the house and the other from the outside of the hill. I always went in through the latter, and I went very slowly and cautiously too, for fear of finding some one in there whom I did not care to see. One night I did find some persons there—Reginald and Richard, who were examining the walls of the cellar by the aid of a lantern. Old Juan said they used to spend a good deal of time there looking for the concealed treasure.

"I was so surprised to see them that I did not think of retreat, and after I had time to collect my thoughts I did not feel any inclination to turn back. Although I had often seen the men at a distance, this was the first time since that memorable night that I had ever been so near to them, and I wanted to take a good look at them. Silas and Juan had often told me in the most emphatic language never to attempt to harm one of them, even if I got the opportunity—and knowing that they had father's welfare at heart, and that they were wiser than myself, I had promised to obey. But I could not resist the temptation to draw my rifle to my shoulder and cover both their heads with the sight—they were standing closely together and squarely in line, so that one bullet would have passed through them both—telling myself the while how easily I could shoot them, and how richly they deserved it. While I stood in this position Reginald turned toward me. Finding that I was discovered, I did not lower my rifle, but kept it at my shoulder, determined that if he offered to molest me I would resist him to the best of my ability. But I soon found that I had nothing to fear. He stood for a moment gazing at me with eyes that seemed almost ready to start from their sockets, and said in a husky voice: [230]

"Merciful heavens! Dick, look there!"

Dick looked, and one look was enough. He pronounced my name with a shriek, and dropping his lantern, fled from the cellar, closely followed by his cousin. At first I was greatly astonished at their behavior, but after thinking the matter over, I began to understand it. Reginald and Richard are very ignorant men, in spite of their fine flow of language, and of course they are superstitious. They believe in signs and omens, and apparitions, and knowing that they had put me at the bottom of the lake, they could not comprehend how I came to be standing there alive and unharmed. This, as I have said, suggested to me a plan of action. I knew all about those secret passage-ways, and I made use of them to keep those two guilty men in a constant state of alarm. I gave up herding cattle and spent all my time loitering about the house, listening to the conversations between Reginald and his followers, and showing myself whenever I saw an opportunity to frighten somebody. I tied a piece of thick green cloth over the bull's-eye of a dark lantern, and carrying this in my hand I used to wander about the passage-ways of nights, uttering the most unearthly shrieks and howls. I paid regular visits to Reginald's sleeping-room and Dick's, and took possession of everything I could carry away, such as money, weapons, clothing and furniture. Old Juan undertook to watch the cellar. He showed himself every time Reginald, Richard, or Pedro went in there, and finally frightened Richard so badly that he left the house and went to live in a little cabin he built in the mountains.

"One night I went into a room to see what I could pick up, and whom should I find there but Ned Sanders and an outlaw friend of his fast asleep in bed. I took possession of their weapons, carried them into the passage-way out of their reach, and then placing my lantern in one corner, and taking my stand in the middle of the room where the light would fall squarely on my face, began to groan awfully. I was not long in arousing them, and when their eyes were fairly open they were not long in leaving the room either. I never found an opportunity to appear to Sanders after that, for he shunned the rancho as if it had been a grizzly bear's den."

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"I spent a good many months in this way, and at last finding that I could learn nothing about father, I went to herding cattle again. In the meantime Uncle Reginald and Sanders had organized a band of robbers and horse-thieves; and this, as I afterward learned, was the occasion of a fierce quarrel between the cousins, who came to blows over it. Richard didn't want anything to do with such an organization, believing that it would endanger the success of their plans, but Reginald carried his point. Richard never forgave his cousin for that, and being determined to be revenged upon him he has been working for the last two years to obtain possession of all father's money, intending as soon as he gets it to decamp and leave Reginald in the lurch."

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CHAPTER XXVII. FRED'S STORY, CONCLUDED.



ELIEVING that some of the members of this band of robbers knew where father was," continued White-horse Fred, "I watched for an opportunity to join it, and finally succeeded in my object. I became one of the runners, or couriers; that is, it was my duty to convey orders and the stolen property from one point to another. It was a subordinate position, although I ran just as much risk as Sanders, or any other member of the band who did the stealing, and I knew that as long as I held it I could not hope to learn much of the secret business of the organization; consequently I worked hard for promotion, and, if I am to believe what I have been told, I did some reckless things. At any rate, it wasn't long before the name of White-horse Fred became pretty well known about here. I have been chased and shot at by soldiers and settlers more times than I can remember, and I have been in the fort when the officers were talking about me and laying plans for my capture."

"Why didn't they recognize you?" asked Julian.

"I didn't say that *I* was well known, did I? I said my *name* was. The officers didn't know who I was—that's the reason they didn't recognize me. There were only five men who knew me by the name I bore—Smirker, and the four fellows at Hale's rancho. No one dreamed that White-horse Fred and the apparition who kept Uncle Reginald's rancho in such an uproar were one and the same person, and I had emphatic orders from Silas and Juan never to reveal myself. Everybody had heard of the queer doings at Uncle Reginald's, and it was whispered about among the robbers that Fred Mortimer and old Juan had risen from their graves to torment their murderers. I was in hopes that we would soon frighten Reginald away; but he had come there after father's money, and he was determined he would not go until he got it.

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"All this while—my story has now covered the space of more than seven years—Reginald was keeping father closely confined in some hidden prison, hoping to break his spirit and force him to tell where his money was concealed. But father remained firm, and Reginald became tired of waiting at last, and so did Sanders. The latter finally thought up another plan by which to obtain possession of the treasure, and when he had matured it he went to Reginald to talk it over.

"Old Juan, who was always on the watch, saw him go into the rancho, and believing that he had some private business to transact that it might be well for him to overhear, he went into the passage-way, opened the secret door that led into Reginald's sleeping-room, and set himself to listen. We afterward learned that there was another listener to that conversation, and it was Richard. He and Reginald were now at open enmity. He never made his appearance at the rancho in the day-time, but loitered about there of nights, searching everywhere for the money, and taking notes of all that was going on—and I ought to say right here that Richard and Sanders, who had hitherto been fast friends, had a falling out. Richard, for some reasons of his own, did not want his cousin to know that you were alive. Sanders and Smirker were the only ones beside himself who were acquainted with the secret, and as soon as they found out that he wanted it kept from Reginald's knowledge they demanded yellow boys as the price of their silence. Richard supplied their wants as long as he could, but at last his funds were exhausted and he could obtain no more. Sanders had been expecting this, and having pumped Richard's pockets dry, he deserted him and went over to Reginald.

"'Capen,' said Sanders, when he and Reginald had locked themselves in the bed-room in which their private interviews were always held, 'I'm gettin' monstrous tired of waitin' fur a sight o' them big nuggets. The old major's never goin' to give in—he'll die fust.'

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"'I am afraid so,' replied Reginald; 'but what can I do more than I have done? It is a very easy thing to deprive a man of his liberty, but it's quite a different matter to make him open his mouth when he's determined he won't. If we had only been smart enough to keep the boys alive, we could have worked on his feelings through them. But he knows they are dead, and that's what makes him so desperate.'

"'I know nary one of 'em hain't dead,' replied Sanders. 'I mean, you see—'

"'Yes, I know what you mean. You mean that they are both dead, but that one of them has come back and walks around nights,' said Reginald, looking all about the room as if he expected to see something frightful. 'But you haven't seen the other—Julian—have you.'

"'No; but I know he's alive. Oh, it's a fact,' added Sanders, seeing by the expression on Reginald's face that he was hardly prepared to believe this. 'He wasn't never hurt at all. Fred was flung into the lake and drowned—an' I don't see why in creation he don't stay thar—but Julian wasn't.'

"And with this preface, Sanders went on to tell what Richard had done with you, and why he had saved you alive. He said that from some remarks Richard had accidentally let fall he had learned pretty nearly where you could be found, and added that for a suitable consideration he would produce you.

"'An' when we get him out here, capen, we'll have two strings to our bow,' continued Sanders. 'I don't go in very strong fur attemptin' to work on the feelin's of the major—leastways not till we have tried something else—'cause he's awfully hard-headed, an' when he onct makes up his mind to a thing he's as sot as one of the Rocky Mountains. Thar's one other man in the world who knows whar the nuggets is hid, an' if we can get hold of him, I b'lieve we can make *him* open his mouth. It's Silas Roper. You see, him an' old Juan used to do purty much as they pleased here in the major's time, an' they knowed all about his private business matters. Juan would be the best

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one to work on, 'cause he hain't got Silas's grit, but he hain't come back here in sich shape that we can manage him.'

"'But we don't know where Silas is,' said Reginald.

"'Never mind. He's about here somewhar, an I'll bet a hoss onto it. An' I'll bet on another thing, too: As soon as Silas finds out that we've got Julian here he'll come out of his hidin'-place, an' we can captur' him. Understand my plan, don't you?'

"Reginald did understand it, and gave it his hearty approval. He spent an hour talking the matter over with Sanders, giving him some very minute instructions, so that there could be no possible chance for failure, and brought the interview to an end by telling him a long list of lies to be repeated to you, and furnishing him money to bear his expenses to the States."

"I have often wondered what object Sanders could have had in misrepresenting things as he did," remarked Julian.

"I can tell you. Reginald thought it very probable that you had been left in some thickly settled part of the country, and he was afraid that Sanders, if left to himself, might attempt to carry you away by force. By doing that he might have aroused the settlers and the officers of the law in the neighborhood, and thus defeated his plans. If he had once succeeded in getting you out on the prairie away from everybody, he would have thrown off his mask and appeared in his true character very quickly.

"Sanders started for the States that very night, and so did Richard. The latter was determined that if he could not possess father's money nobody should, and he hoped to reach your hiding-place in advance of Sanders, and dispose of you so effectually that you never could be found. Old Juan told Silas about it when he came in from the mountains, and he also started for the States, intending to wait for you at St. Joe, and to take charge of you if Sanders brought you there. He succeeded in getting hold of you at last, and brought you to the mountains. Richard, finding himself outwitted, joined your train in disguise, hoping to find an opportunity to shoot you during the journey, while Sanders came on ahead and raised a band of Indians to attack the train. He had been promised \$5,000 if he would deliver you into Reginald's hands, and that money he was determined to have. Our affairs have been pretty well mixed up for the last eight years, but this night will see them straightened out again."

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"I certainly hope so. But, Fred, why didn't Silas, when he found me, tell me that he was a friend, and that he would assist me?"

"He did tell you that. If he had told you more, would you have believed him? Hadn't Sanders deceived you and made you suspicious of everybody? When you and Silas were sitting on the steps of the hotel in St. Joe, and he told you that he knew who you were, didn't you jump up and run away from him? The old fellow isn't much given to talking anyhow. He believes in actions rather than words. You know that he was captured by Sanders and some of his band on the night the train was attacked, and that he escaped from them the next morning."

"What would Reginald have done to him if he had been brought to the rancho?"

"He would have tried to force him to tell where father's money was hidden, and if he had refused, as he certainly would have done, that would have been the last of Silas. Then Reginald would have used you to frighten father, telling him that he had you in his power, and that if he didn't tell where that money was he would do something dreadful to you."

"What was Reginald's object in treating me so kindly? Why didn't he keep me a close prisoner?"

"Why, he wanted to make Silas Roper show himself, so that he could be captured. That could never be done by shutting you up. The best way was to give you full swing, and allow you to roam about as much as you pleased, for then Silas would be sure to see you, and you would sooner or later get into the habit of meeting him regularly; and when that state of affairs had been brought about, it would be but little trouble for Sanders and some of his band to surprise and capture Silas. In order to make you contented and willing to stay with him, Reginald provided you with every comfort, and told you that story about your being the sole heir to the property. He thought that would serve as well as bolts and bars to keep you about the rancho, for no boy in full possession of his senses would be likely to run away while he believed that he had a million or two in prospect.

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"I was out riding my route on the night you arrived, but old Juan was on the watch as usual, and he knew when you were brought into the rancho. He frightened Richard, and made him abandon the idea of carrying you off to the mountains; and when you fell down in a swoon, he and Romez took you back to your room and put you to bed. It was Juan who wrote the note you received, and opened your windows the next morning before you awoke."

"I shall never forget how surprised I was to find that some one had been in there," observed Julian.

"When I visited Juan the next morning I found Silas with him. They told me what had happened the night before, adding that you had just gone out riding on Snowdrop. I was very much disappointed, for I had hoped to meet you as soon as you arrived. You see, to explain how you came by that mare, I make my home with Antoine, the herdsman. When I return from Hale's I generally go there and leave my horse, and then set off to visit old Juan. Yesterday morning when I went home I found Snowdrop missing, and Antoine told me that Reginald had taken her. He gave her to you, and that one move on his part did us more good than eight years' hard work has done.

"I had an encouraging piece of news for Silas. Smirker had told me that he knew where father was confined, and the trapper and I, after talking the matter over, decided to arrest him, and force the secret from him. On the same day he told me this he communicated to me another piece

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of news, and that was that he had two holes to his burrow, and a way of escape to be made use of in case of an attack from the soldiers or settlers; and thinking that if we concluded to make a raid on him when Silas came home, it might be well enough to know where that other hole to his burrow was, I spent one whole day in looking for it. I discovered it at last, and when I came down through it and burst into his cabin, Smirker was so angry that he had half a mind to shoot me."

"He told me about that," said Julian. "But did he never suspect your identity?"

"Never until this morning; and then he did not suspect me at first, but you. He was one of those who threw me into the lake, and when he learned that I wouldn't stay there, and that I had come back to Reginald's rancho, and was cutting up dreadful shins, he became badly frightened. He often talked to me about it, and acknowledged that he was afraid that the "haunt," as he called it, might take it into his head to visit his cabin. When he saw us together this morning, and found out that one of us was a Mortimer, he knew the other must be also, for he says we look exactly alike, and so does Silas. Hale and his crowd must also see a very strong resemblance, or else you never could have passed yourself off for me in that rancho, where they are constantly on the lookout for treachery. Smirker believed that you were White-horse Fred, and also that you were Fred Mortimer, and the discovery he thought he had made alarmed him greatly. He breathed much more freely after you had gone out, and so did I.

"For myself I should have felt no fears, had it not been for one thing. I had with me a bag containing nuggets, dust and money, which I was to deliver to Smirker; if he searched me and found that bag in my pocket, he would know that I had deceived him—that I was the real White-horse Fred—and my life wouldn't be worth a moment's purchase. I tried to dispose of the bag, but he detected me in the act, and the result was just what I expected. He called me a traitor, told me that my time had come, and was on the very point of making his words good when Silas appeared. He came down the secret passage-way that leads from the top of the cliff, and arrived just in time.

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"We tied Smirker, put him on a horse, and started to carry him to our cave. As it was rather early—we make it a point never to go in and out of the cellar during the day-time—we dismounted to wait until it should grow dark. While we were sitting in our place of concealment, Richard came down the ravine, and I knew that he was about to make another attempt to capture you. I hurried down the mountain, reached the cellar before him, held a short consultation with Juan, called Romez out of the stable to assist us, and by the time Richard arrived we had a nice little surprise in store for him. I poured a bucket of water over my head—that was to make me look as if I had just come out of the lake, you know—and Juan, who had on the same clothes he wore on the night he was thrown over the cliff, made himself hideous by putting a little red paint on his forehead. Romez perched himself upon the top of the cellar wall with my dark-lantern in his hand, which, by the aid of green cloth and a wide band of birch bark around the bull's-eye, was so arranged that it would reflect only a narrow streak of green light; and when Richard came in Juan and I were walking across the cellar with the light shining full in our faces. He had come prepared for just such an emergency as this, and drawing his Derringers from his pocket, he fired them both at Juan; but finding that the old fellow didn't fall as he expected he would, he threw down his weapons and took to his heels. I've got them now," added White-horse Fred, drawing the Derringers from his boots. "I may have a chance to try them on Joe Hale to-night, and if I do he'll *drop*. There are bullets in them this time."

"Were there no bullets in them before?"

"Not when they were fired at Juan. You see, Richard is too much of a gentleman to do anything for himself that he can make another do for him. He thinks Ithuriel, his servant, can be trusted to any extent, but, as it happens, he is one of the best friends we have, and it is through him that we have learned so much about Richard and his doings. Richard told him to load his Derringers very carefully, adding that he wanted them to shoot something that had appeared to him the night before. Ithuriel, knowing very well what that something was, charged the pistols heavily with powder, but put in no bullets. He came straight down to Juan, and told him what he had done, and so when Richard pointed his pistols at us, we were not afraid of them. I guess now I have told — Halloo! There he is. Come on, Julian."

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Fred, bringing his story to a sudden close, put spurs to his horse, and dashed away at the top of his speed.

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE ATTACK ON THE RANCHO.



JULIAN was not long in discovering the cause of his brother's excitement. It was a white horse which was moving along the mountain path a short distance in advance. He ran heavily as if almost ready to drop with fatigue, and carried on his back a man dressed in Mexican costume. The horse was Bob, and his rider was Pedro.

A race ensued at once. Bob was as fleet as the wind, but he was wearied with his night's travel, and the pursuers, mounted on their fresh horses and led by Silas Roper, who coiled up his lasso as he went, gained rapidly. The white horse disappeared in a thickly wooded ravine; but Silas and his party soon came up with him standing motionless in the path, and Pedro was seen darting into the bushes which lined the base of the cliff. An order to halt, followed by the whistle of a lasso and the ominous click of three revolver locks, brought him to the path again, where he stood holding his hands above his head in token of surrender. Silas and Romez dismounted, bound the prisoner hand and foot, and after concealing him behind a log that lay at the base of the cliff, the party resumed its journey as if nothing had happened, Fred leading the white horse. As this incident had been confidently looked for, it brought no comments from any one except White-horse Fred, who said, as he resumed his place by his brother's side:

"If Pedro had had half the sense I have given him credit for, he would have known that an iron nag couldn't stand sixty miles in a full gallop over such roads as these. I hope Bob will recover a little of his wind before we reach Hale's, for I want to use him then. When we caught sight of Pedro," he added, "I was about to remark that I had finished what I had to say, and would listen to you. Now, tell me all about yourself. I know you have seen some exciting times."

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Julian's story was quite as interesting to Fred as the latter's story had been to Julian. It took him fully half an hour to complete it, and by that time they were in the vicinity of Hale's rancho. When they reached the chasm which had been such a terror to Julian, they dismounted, and after a short consultation had been held, and Fred had exchanged his red shirt and coarse trowsers for his brother's natty Mexican suit, he placed himself at the head of the party, and conducted them on foot to Major Mortimer's prison. As noiselessly as spirits they approached the building and drew up around the door. Not a whisper was uttered, for their plans had been thoroughly discussed, and each one knew just what he was expected to do.

Having seen his companions stationed to his satisfaction, Fred crept back along the path again, and disappeared in the darkness. He was gone nearly half an hour, and then the sound of horse's hoofs on the hard path told his impatient friends that he was returning. Louder and louder grew the clatter of the hoofs, and presently Julian knew that it had been heard by the robbers, for there was a movement in the cabin, and a small window beside the door, close under the eaves, was slowly and cautiously opened. In a few seconds the horse and his rider appeared dodging about among the thick bushes that grew on each side of the path, and drew up before the door. Fred's whistle met with a prompt response.

"Ay! ay!" exclaimed the man at the window. "What's the matter now? Anything wrong?"

"I should say there was," replied Fred in a voice that trembled with excitement. "The soldiers have sprung a trap and caught every soul of us in it except the captain and me. There isn't a gentleman of the road left down our way—not one."

The robber expressed his surprise at this piece of news by a volley of oaths and exclamations that made Julian wonder.

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He opened the slide of a dark lantern, and allowing its rays to shine out of the window upon the young horseman, said:

"How can that be possible? Things were all right this morning—the captain said so."

"Well, if you could see him now he would tell you that things are all wrong," replied Fred.

"Where is he?"

"He is hiding at Smirker's. He sent me down here with a note," replied White-horse Fred, showing the letter that Julian had received from his father. "It's an order, and an important one, too, I guess, for he told me to give it into the hands of no one but Joe Hale."

"Now I'll be blessed if there isn't something mighty queer about all this," said the robber after a little reflection. "You had better come in and give an account of yourself."

"I am perfectly willing to do that. Open the door, and be quick about it too, for I am in a hurry to get through here. I tell you I am not going to stay in this country after what I have seen. I am off for 'Frisco this very night."

The robber was in no hurry to open the door. He thrust his lantern out of the window and took a good look at White-horse Fred and the animal on which he was mounted; but he could see nothing wrong about them.

The horse, which was covered with foam, stood with his head down and his sides heaving plainly, very nearly exhausted. A single glance at him and at his rider's pale face was enough to satisfy the robber that there was more truth in the boy's story than he had at first believed.

"I guess you *have* seen some strange things, Fred," said he. "You're as white as a sheet."

The boy had nothing to say in reply, but told himself that any one would have shown some nervousness in his circumstances. His father's life depended upon the movements of that man who was leaning out of the window talking to him. If he opened the door all might be well; but if he carried on all the conversation through the window, and kept the door closed, their expedition

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would end in failure, and Major Mortimer would be a doomed man. It was no wonder that Fred's face was pale.

The appearance of the horse and his rider went a long way toward allaying the robber's suspicions; but ever on the lookout for treachery, he thought it best to examine the ground in front of the rancho before opening the door. He thrust his head and shoulders out of the window and held his lantern down beside the wall. There was some one there, but the robber was not allowed time to see who it was.

Silas Roper was crouching close beside the door, directly under the window, and he knew by the sudden gleam of surprise and intelligence which shot across the man's face that he had been discovered. Fred knew it too, and gave up all hope; but not so Silas. He was fully equal to the emergency. Crouching lower, for an instant, like a tiger gathering himself for a spring, he bounded into the air with the quickness of thought, and seizing the robber, pulled him bodily from the window to the ground, stifling his cry for help by a strong grasp on his throat.

"Never mind us," whispered the trapper, as his companions sprung forward to assist in securing the prisoner. "I'll take care of this fellow, an' do you open that door while you've got the chance."

Julian saw the necessity of prompt action, and so did Romez. White-horse Fred had told his companions that there was but one man on guard at a time at Hale's rancho, and now that he had been secured, the next thing was to make good their entry into the building before the other robbers were aroused.

Romez took his stand under the window, and Julian, mounting upon his shoulders, dropped down on the inside of the stable. The locks and bolts with which the door was secured were quickly but noiselessly undone, and Silas and his two companions rushed in and followed Julian, who, with his revolver in one hand and the lantern in the other, led the way to the living-room. [245]

Hale and his companion were found fast asleep on the benches, and were pounced upon and secured by Silas and Romez before they had time to think of their weapons, which were lying close at hand.

White-horse Fred, having seized an ax as he passed through the stable, kept close behind his brother, who led him straight to his father's prison.

"This is the door!" cried Julian, scarcely able to speak, so great was his excitement and delight—"down with it! Come here, Mexican!" he added, leveling his revolver at the cook, who, having been aroused by the noise, at that moment came out of the kitchen; "you're a prisoner."

If the man was too sleepy to comprehend the fact just then, he became fully sensible of it a few seconds later, for Silas and Romez came bounding through the hall and seized and tied him in the twinkling of an eye.

Fred, meanwhile, was showering furious blows upon the door, and when he had loosened the hinges, Silas placed his broad back against it and with one push sent it flying into the middle of the room. Fred and Julian rushed into the apartment side by side, expecting to find their father waiting with open arms to receive them, but stopped suddenly and recoiled with horror before the sight that met their gaze.

The major was sitting limp and motionless in his chair, his chin resting on his breast, and his hands—which had been relieved of the irons, probably to allow him to retire to rest—hanging by his side. His face was paler now than when Julian saw it a few hours before, and at the sight of it he cried out in dismay that they had come too late.

"No, we hain't nuther!" exclaimed Silas, raising the insensible form of his beloved commander tenderly in his arms. "Thar ain't nothing the matter with him—all he wants is air."

Silas carried the major into the living-room and laid him upon a pile of blankets which Fred and Julian had spread upon the floor. There he left him to the care of the boys while he and Romez proceeded to complete the work that had been so well begun. Their first care was to ransack the building and satisfy themselves that no one else was confined there, and their second to dispose of their prisoners so that they could be found again when wanted. They could not take the robbers with them when they returned to the valley, for they had other work to do, and must ride rapidly. It would not be safe to leave them in the rancho, for they might be discovered and released by some of their friends. They must be gagged to insure their silence, and hidden away in the woods where no one would ever think of looking for them. [246]

When they returned to the living-room after performing their work, they found the major standing erect and holding his boys clasped in his arms. Rough men that they were, they were touched by the sight. They remained respectfully apart, watching the happy group and listening to their conversation, now and then glancing at one another, and drawing their hands hastily across their eyes; but when they went up to greet the major they were the every-day Silas and Romez, as calm and indifferent, apparently, as they had been a few moments before while dealing with the horse-thieves.

Romez took off his sombrero, and said, "How do!" in his imperfect English, while Silas gave the major a military salute, and informed him that he was powerful glad to feel his grip once more. The emotion was all exhibited by the rescued man, who clung to the faithful fellows who had labored so long and perseveringly for his release as if he never wanted to let them go again.

The major's unexpected restoration to his family and to liberty had a wonderful effect upon him. His buoyancy of spirits, his strength and energy, returned at once; and during the ride homeward, he led the way at such a rate of speed that continued conversation was quite out of the question. He rode the bay horse which Julian had brought from Smirker's cabin, and which the boy regarded as his own special charge. He knew where the animal came from, and he hoped at no distant day to be able to restore him to his rightful owner. [247]

After crossing the valley the party made a wide circuit through the mountains on the opposite side, arriving just at daylight in front of a small cabin. The door was forced without ceremony, and one of the two men who were surprised in their beds was secured before he was fairly awake. The new prisoner was Richard Cordova, and his companion, who armed himself and joined the major's party, was Ithuriel, his servant. In a little less than five hours Silas and his three companions had ridden more than fifty miles over rough mountain roads, captured eight desperate fellows, and that, too, without having once been called upon to use any weapon more formidable than the ax, with which White-horse Fred had cut down the door of his father's prison. When Julian thought of it, he told himself that the trapper was indeed a man of action.

The major and his party rode at once to the fort, and his appearance there among the officers, with several of whom he had once been intimately acquainted, produced a great commotion. The commander listened in amazement to his story, and acting upon the information which Silas was able to give him, at once dispatched his cavalry to the mountains in pursuit of the robbers who were yet at large. The history of the wrongs of the major and his family spread like wild-fire, and everybody who heard it was astonished and enraged. The trappers about the fort, and the sutlers and miners flew to arms to assist in hunting down the outlaws, and during the week following Julian and his brother found ample opportunity to gratify their love of excitement. The avengers did their work quickly and well, and the summary manner in which the captured desperadoes were disposed of served as a warning to other lawless spirits in that section for all time to come.

At the end of a fortnight the fighting was all over, the excitement had somewhat abated, the settlers and miners had resumed their various avocations, and the major and his boys were once more in peaceable possession of their home, which soon began to wear its old familiar look again. The high stone wall which surrounded the rancho was leveled to the ground, and flowers planted where it stood. The officers of the fort visited there regularly as of old, and the rooms which had so long been silent and deserted echoed to the sound of laughter and music.

Everybody looked upon Fred and his brother as heroes. The almost inexhaustible fund of stories the former had collected during his connection with the robber band, as well as the adventures he met with while in the performance of his perilous duties, were listened to with interest by all the visitors at the rancho, and none were more delighted with them than the officers who tried so hard to capture him. He and his brother for a few weeks led a life of quiet ease, for the keen and rational enjoyment of which they had been fully prepared by their recent perils and excitements. The time never hung heavily on their hands. They had much to talk about, and when weary of fighting their battles over again, there were their horses, hounds, guns and fishing-rods always at their command. We might relate many interesting incidents that happened in that valley before the boys bade good-by to their father and their mountain home to become students in an Eastern academy, but "A Brave Boy's Struggles for Home and Fortune" are ended, and our story must end with them.

The few who had remained faithful to their employer during his exile were not forgotten. The major and his boys showed them every kindness and attention in their power, and among all those who had claims upon their gratitude and esteem none commanded a larger share than Silas Roper, the guide.

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AN IDEA AND A FORTUNE.

BY OWEN HACKET.



WITH their backs toward Placer Notch two young men of about twenty-one, burdened with prospectors' kits, came silently down the trail. The well-worn way ran beside the murky stream that for the twenty-five years had run through the sluices of the Placer Notch Mining Company's claim, which, singularly, included in their four acres the only paying claims that had ever been staked in McGowan's Pass.

As the young prospectors neared Sol Brunt's supply depot at the foot of the pass, the latter broke the silence and said moodily:

"I wish I had known three months ago as much as I know now."

"Three months ago, Tom, we both knew what we had to expect; that was all talked over."

"Well, it's one thing to see hardship and failure at a distance, but it's another thing to go through them. I didn't know then, as I do now, what real hardship was. I thought I did. Handy man on a farm seemed about as near slavery as we could find in a free country."

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"Our experience is not unusual, Tom. We may succeed yet—we may not. I am going to stick it out another month and so are you——"

"I'm not so sure of that," interrupted Tom.

"Yes you will, if I know you, Tom, and I guess I do. You like to have your little growl now and then, and I'm glad you do; it makes me argue on the bright side, and to see the pleasant features and the hopeful prospects."

"It's a pity hopes don't sell in the market, Phil; you'd be pretty well off if they did."

"Come, now! none of your sarcasm, old man. I tell you we are going to stick this for a month yet. We have no money, it is true; but we can work our way, and we are free and are seeing the world. That beats eighteen hours a day on farm work."

The trail here ran close to the edge of the stream and about a foot above it. Phil Gormley the hopeful, happened to step on a loose stone; it gave way and down went his right leg into the water.

"I like that!" he exclaimed in vexation, as he pulled his foot out with much difficulty. He regarded his shoe with surprise on seeing it covered to the top with soft mud. He sat down on a log and squeezed the water out of his trousers leg, gazing all the while at the muddy shoe in a reverie that attracted Tom Danvers' attention.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I was trying to account for such deep mud in the bed of a mountain stream. I am certain this mud is the year's deposit of the dirt that is separated from the gold in the sluices above at Placer Notch."

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"Well, what of it?"

"It simply flashes across me that this silt must be very rich in the waste gold that is washed out with the dirt from the sluices."

"Are you thinking of staking out a mud claim?"

"Not quite as bad as that. A man might scoop mud out and wash it till doomsday without getting enough to keep his pipe alight from year to year. But just fancy how many millions must have passed down this stream! You heard what the miner said up in the Notch—twenty per cent of the gold product was washed away from the sluices. If they have panned out fifty million dollars there, that would make ten million swept away into the big river below, with more constantly going the same way."

"That's all very well in theory, but what does it amount to any way? We can't get hold of any of these millions."

"No, of course not. But this I do believe: if any one could afford to turn this stream into a reservoir and wait ten years he would have enough gold silt to tackle in a wholesale sort of way that would pay. It would be only a question of devising a cheap system of washing the silt from the gold more thoroughly than they do at the mines. I'd take the contract to invent the process, too. But come! We won't waste any more time over it. No one is going to wait ten years to get his good money back."

They took up their journey again, and had not walked five minutes when a turn in the trail and the stream brought them in sight of the tidy establishment of Sol Brunt. Sol was one of those who came into the hills with the rush when gold was discovered, but had seen fit to find his fortune in trade while others tramped the hills for paying claims. Those who thus went into business invariably had a sure fortune before them. Sol's place had grown up from a shanty store to a tidy house that in time had received additions, making it a very considerable establishment. The trail had been much used in the past, but besides what he made out of the casual traffic over it, he supplied all the Placer Notch wants by contract, and turned a pretty penny out of it, too.

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No man had ever come into sight of Sol Brunt's while the sun was up and failed to find the

Star Spangled Banner flying at the staff head.

Sol's tidy wife came out to meet the boys, closely followed by the trader himself.

Phil was spokesman.

"Mr. Brunt this is my partner, Tom Danvers; my name is Phil Gormley. We've been in the hills three months and haven't found a grain, but we don't give up just yet. We have no money between us, but we have been hoping you could give us enough work this week to pay for board and lodging and some stores to give us a lift to the next range."

"Well, boys, I'm right glad to see you," said Sol, and Mrs. Brunt looked at them with pitying eyes. "As to the lodging and the things, I'll just take verbal acknowledgement of the debt when you leave. Young fellows who talk as you do usually get along and pay their debts too. As to the work, I want a little help on my hay this week, and I don't mind reducing your little bill in that way."

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"Just the thing for us," exclaimed Tom Danvers. "You'll find we're experts in that line."

"So much the better then, my boy," responded their genial host.

The shadows were falling in the valley as the sun sank behind the mountain tops, and Mrs. Brunt went inside. Her reappearance was heralded by savory odors from the kitchen, and after a refreshing splash in cool water from a mountain rill the boys sat down with their hosts to a bountiful supper. Then chairs were brought to the doorway, where in the gloom they watched the rising and falling light of Sol's pipe while he spun countless yarns of mining life which were, in truth, largely interspersed with mining death, mostly tragic in character.

Before bidding the boys good night, Sol delicately offered to give them some advice, which the boys eagerly accepted.

"I like pluck," said Sol, "and I don't want to discourage it; but I do hate to see it turned into an empty sluice. You've prospected all over the pass here and found nothing. Thousands have done the same before you. What is true of Placer Notch is pretty generally true of all the hills. In the early days the country swarmed with men, and almost every acre was gone over many times. What wasn't found is not worth looking for. I don't say the richest pay dirt ever discovered may not yet be turned up, but to waste your best years on a gamble is not the thing for boys with grit in them. Go into some business; it will pay you better if you have to start on three dollars a week; with a head and a backbone you may get to be of some account in a line where every minute sees something to be accomplished."

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As the boys were preparing for bed, Tom remarked:

"It looks like prospectors without a prospect."

"What Mr. Brunt said as to our chances is probably true, judging from our experience so far; but I wish to prove it to my own satisfaction before I accept it," replied Phil. "Whatever my judgment may tell me, I can't help feeling that there is rich pay earth *somewhere* in the hills."

"Well, I think you'd better stop right here and tackle the mud yonder."

"Perhaps I will when the month is up," replied Phil good-naturedly. "Good night!"

"Good morning, Mrs. Brunt! We've had a splendid sleep and are ready to pitch in with the pitchfork," exclaimed Phil the next morning when the boys came downstairs bright and early.

"I'm glad to hear it," responded Mrs. Brunt heartily. "You've been sleeping on the best mattress within fifty miles, and that accounts for it. Perhaps you'd like to look around a little before breakfast. You'll find Mr. Brunt milking the cow down by the pond. Just follow the trail and you'll find him."

The boys gladly acted on the suggestion, and sauntered over a rustic bridge that spanned the stream. The trail led them into a thick grove of firs filled with the murmurs of the babbling waters, which here flowed over a sharp descent. A sudden turn in the path brought them to the edge of the grove where a splendid prospect burst upon their view.

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One feature of it made Phil Gormley stop and clutch Tom by the arm!

The mountain pass widened suddenly at this point in the form of a semicircle on each side, while a quarter of a mile away the flanking mountains swept so close together again that there was only a very narrow outlet between two opposing spurs. A great basin was thus formed of over a quarter of a mile across—how deep, they could not tell, because a great sheet of still water filled the hollow. Beyond, from spur to spur, ran a chain of spile heads, which showed that man, not nature, had made this lake. Over the dam the water lazily trickled, forming the continuation of the stream they had followed from Placer Notch. It was not necessary for Tom to ask the cause of Phil's agitation. Their conversation of the day before had flashed across him as the artificial lake burst into view. Just below them was Sol, seated on a rock and milking his single cow, in a strip of meadow that fringed the sheet of water.

Phil's face was flushed and his eyes were very bright, but he made a visible effort to calm himself as he approached.

The boys and their host passed cordial morning greetings, and then Phil said carelessly:

"Such a fine sheet of water is something of a surprise in such a spot. Did you build the dam, Mr. Brunt?"

"Not I," replied the storekeeper. "There's a story to that. They say a mining inspector named John Martin, who took in Placer Notch on his circuit twenty-five years ago, saw this hollow when he first passed by and got the idea into his head that if he could trap the muddy water that ran off from the sluices and thus collect the tailings, in the course of time the mass of mud in the bottom would pan out rich from the gold that was constantly going to waste. He located this place in the

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land office, and had the dam built. Before he could take title he disappeared while on his rounds, and was never again heard of. I finally got the title myself, for it struck me that perhaps some day if the country around here grew up and there was any use for it, I could use the pond for water power: or I could drain it off and plant on the bottom, which ought to be the richest kind of soil. There's thirty feet of mud on that bottom, I calculate."

"He must have had a tremendous job to build a dam that would make a pond over thirty feet deep," commented Tom.

"No; it wasn't such a big job. Luck was with him and started the work. Just before Martin began, a landslide filled up the narrow space between the two mountains where they come together. You can see this from the other side of the dam. There wasn't much left to be done; he drove some logs and did some filling in; the stream gradually filled up the hollow, and when the water rose as high as the dam it began to run off down the pass just as it used to, leaving a deposit on the bottom of the basin that has been rising ever since."

"But, Mr. Brunt," asked Phil indifferently, "haven't you ever thought of following up the inspector's idea of separating the gold that is in the bottom?"

"I can't say I have—not seriously. There must be a great deal of the dust there, but the proportion is so small that I guess it wouldn't be worth while to waste any money on such a scheme." [257]

Hearing this, Tom cast a sly glance at Phil as if to say, "What did *I* tell you?" but he saw that Phil was driving at something and he had sense enough to say nothing.

The milking was done, and they all went back to breakfast, where they were met by Mrs. Brunt, whose round face was all aglow from the labors of cooking. Then they went down to the strip of meadow again and made an onslaught on the hay-field, in which Tom, who tackled that part not yet mowed, cut such a swath as made old Sol stare. They finished early in the day, and as they turned back to the store the owner surveyed the stack he and Phil had built with the greatest satisfaction imaginable, remarking that the two had accomplished in less than a day what would have taken him the best part of a week.

Phil had indeed worked hard during the day; he had thought hard also. Ideas had been chasing through his head in numbers. How rich in gold was the deposit? How could he test it? How could it be separated in bulk at a cost low enough to pay? Ah, that was the vital question of the whole matter! And yet if that were solved other questions would follow. How to promote or float the scheme? Whom to apply to? How to proportion the profits? Yes, Phil had been thinking very hard, indeed, and thinking to such purpose as to be fully prepared to talk to the point. The subject of the pay bottom was not referred to again during the day; but when they had taken their places in the doorway, as on the previous evening, while the merry rattle of the plates and the "clink" of the knives and forks and spoons betokened dish washing in the kitchen, Phil began to speak his little piece. [258]

"I want to talk to you seriously, Mr. Brunt, about a matter that I have had in mind since yesterday. As we came down from the Notch I noticed the muddy bed of the stream, and remarked to Tom here, that I believed if that sediment could be coraled there would be money in it. I found this morning that another great mind—and Phil laughed at his own conceit—had run in the same channel, and had built twenty-five years ago what I had proposed yesterday as a good thing.

"Now, Mr. Brunt, if I can show you that your idle pond is exceedingly valuable in gold, I want to know if you will share equally with me any profits that I may show you the way to get out of it?"

Sol chuckled good-naturedly, but incredulously, and said:

"Aye, aye, my boy! You can have half the profits and more too."

"It is agreed seriously?" persisted Phil.

"All right, my boy—only understand I put up no money."

"That leads me right to the next point. Providing, as before, I could prove value here, a third man or syndicate, or something meaning capital, would have to be brought in. Speaking in a general way, will you agree to give the use of this bottom and your adjoining land on a basis of, say, one-third of the profits to each of the three concerned—you, for your mine; myself, for the process I *know* I can invent, and the third man for his money to float the enterprise." [259]

Phil was conscious all the while that he was furnishing Mr. Brunt with more amusement than matter for earnest thought, but having obtained a really serious promise of the donation of land on the basis referred to—always providing of course, it could be proved by actual test that the gold could be separated at a profit—Phil took Sol inside, where in the lamplight he told all his ideas and schemes, his theory of the separating process and a score of other points, while Tom could only stare open mouthed and wonder where his chum had learned all this about stock companies and spiral wheels and hydraulics.

By-and-by the dubious smile vanished from the face of Sol Brunt, and he not only listened seriously and admiringly to Phil, but also supplemented his proposals with suggestions, corrections and advice that his mature experience stamped as very valuable. But Sol's part in the discussion was taken only on the hypothesis that the twenty per cent of waste gold that was doubtless in the silt could be got at, and it was arranged that the next day a test should begin by hand. If the test panned out, machinery would step in and do in one hour what manual labor would take days to accomplish; and, as Phil shrewdly pointed out, one of Sol's own original ideas would supply by natural means one of the necessities for the mechanical process—power—which otherwise would be a huge item of running expenses.

Accordingly, next morning the boys sallied out, accompanied by Sol, to overlook their [260]

operations. They carried with them a barrel, buckets to carry the silt and a scale to weigh it. They set up a barrel and half filled it with water, then into it they dumped several bucketfuls of silt. With staves they stirred the mixture so violently that each particle of fine silt must have been separated from the others. When at last they stopped they were dripping with perspiration. They gave the muddy water a few minutes to partly settle and allow the grains of gold, if any there were, to make their way to the bottom of the barrel; then by tipping the barrel carefully the water was drained off, leaving only a few inches of residue at the bottom of which was a thin layer of mud—and gold?—that was the question. It was not time to answer yet. In went half a barrelful of water and more buckets of silt. This was agitated as before and the water again drawn off.

When this had been repeated several times it was noticed that the layer of mud on the bottom was a foot deep. Thereupon two washings of this were had in the same way without adding new silt, until the deposit at the bottom had been partly drained off. Then more silt was stirred in, and so they labored nearly all day, until Sol called time, saying there was no use of wearing themselves out.

The next day the work was continued until afternoon when they had at the bottom of the barrel the residue of about two hundred and fifty pounds of silt; in this residue, only some six inches thick, was to be found nearly every grain of gold that the successive lots of silt had contained. It was time for the test. They broke the barrel, and carefully scraped and washed every grain of the muddy residue into the largest porcelain basin that Sol's store contained, and in this more limited way made many successive washings until at last at the bottom of the white basin there gleamed nothing but a fine golden sand sparkling in the sunlight. There was gold in the mud, that was certain. How much and in what proportion was the next question? They thoroughly dried the golden sediment and called Sol's fine apothecary's scales into requisition. The dust weighed just five penny-weights.

Phil had no sooner ascertained the weight than he began figuring excitedly on a scrap of paper. This is what he was figuring on: "A layer of mud, quarter mile square and average thickness of thirty feet—how many tons of silt are there?"

His recollection of tables of weights and measures was perfect and he could therefore calculate this approximately, as can any schoolboy. He figured about three hundred and sixty thousand tons. Then he calculated: "Five penny-weights of gold to about two hundred and fifty pounds of silt, makes, say forty dollars per ton and—"

"Mr. Brunt," said Phil, looking up and with difficulty restraining his excitement, "I figure there is at this moment in that pond nearly FIFTEEN MILLION DOLLARS' worth of dust!"

Months had passed; Phil and Tom had come to Cheyenne City with a letter from Sol Brunt to the president of the Placer Notch Mining Company—Mr. Van Amrandt—introducing Phil's scheme and authorizing Phil to represent him in the preliminary discussion of the whole matter.

Phil had impressed Mr. Van Amrandt most favorably as a young man whose youthful enthusiasm was held in check by a thoughtfulness and judgment beyond his years. But time had passed; the president had been very busy with other matters, or there had always been some other reason to keep things at a stand-still for a long while. Finally the president went so far as to have the superintendent of the "P. N." mine go down to Sol's place and assay a quantity of the silt. Phil and Tom had been enabled to bide a winter's delay as far as actual needs went, through the kindness of the president who had given them both subordinate clerical positions in the company's office; there Phil was looked upon rather suspiciously by his fellow clerks as a sort of upstart who, by some hook or crook, could procure long interviews with the president and engineer, and come out of their respective offices looking as if he had been discussing questions of tremendous importance, as, in fact, he had.

One afternoon in March the door of Mr. Van Amrandt's private office opened and the president himself stood on the threshold with a paper in his hand.

"I say, Gormley, come here, will you?" and he retired again to his desk.

Phil rose and entered the private room.

"Shut the door and sit down. I have here the report of Jasper who has been assaying up at Brunt's "duck pond." He reports forty-one dollars to the ton—a little better than your own estimate."

Phil's heart beat away at a tremendous rate all this while, and when the result of the assay was announced it seemed to stop altogether. The president continued in a most matter-of-fact tone:

"I have just told the engineer to go over those plans of yours which he has approved in a general way and, in connection with yourself, perfect the details of your device."

Phil seemed to hear this from a great distance, and Mr. Van Amrandt seemed to be far off and in a sort of mist. He could not move or speak or even think—he could only comprehend the joyful news.

"By the time the designs are perfected I shall have procured the necessary appropriation from the directors for the machinery. They have terrible tales to tell of the weather up in the Notch it seems, Gormley; only last week there was a heavy fall of snow which the superintendent says is swelling the streams greatly as it melts. To return to the subject, though, I have just sent Jasper's messenger back with a message to Brunt, asking him to come into town to sign a conveyance of his claim to the company; then we will issue the new stock to Brunt and yourself on the basis we spoke of last month."

By this time Phil had regained his self-possession. He rose and began:

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"Mr. Van Amrandt, I thank you very——" when the door opened and Sol Brunt appeared on the threshold. He advanced dejectedly and said:

"The dam burst yesterday! Twenty streams from the sides of the hollow are tearing into the basin, and what silt is left by to-morrow I will sell you for a ten dollar note!"

The clerks outside were startled by the sound of a heavy fall.

Phil Gormley had given way under the blow.

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A fortune lost! you will say. Yes; part of the fourteen millions was washed away, part was covered by the debris of land slides which the unusual freshet of that spring caused. What remained amounted to nothing in comparison. That was five years ago. The Placer Notch Mining Company has been reorganized since—just a few weeks ago, in fact, and this whole matter was only brought back to my mind at this time by the receipt of a letter from a friend of mine, who announced that he has just been put in on the reorganization as secretary of the company. I refer, of course, to Phil Gormley. He lost his lucky fortune, but he is working out a better one, because it is coming slowly and with honest difficulty. But it was his idea of working the "duck pond" that planted this slow-growing tree of fortune, for it was that which took him to the company's office.

Out here on my quiet farm I do not hear many echoes from the busy outside world, but none could give me greater pleasure than does such news of my dear friend Phil—for I am no other than Doubting Thomas Danvers.

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THE GRANTHAM DIAMONDS

BY RUSSELL STOCKTON.



OW it did snow, to be sure! The flakes, and very small ones they were, came down in slanting drives or bewildering spirals, to be taken up again from the earth in fierce gusts and whisked along in blinding drifts.

John, the austere-looking butler, was putting the finishing touches on a tempting spread in the dining-room of the Grantham mansion. There was a salad and a dish of nuts; there was a generous plate of cake and a heaping pile of gorgeous red apples; but it would never do not to have something hot on such a cold night as this, so, alongside of a silver chafing dish was a fine English cheese and two eggs, which of course meant rarebits, and a tea urn with six dainty and varied tea cups and saucers, which of course meant girls.

The antique hall clock blinked like an old man at the dancing flames in the great fire-place and slowly sounded eight o'clock. Almost at once there came the merry jingle of sleigh bells, then a few shrill shrieks, a ring, and then a fierce stamping of small feet on the veranda. [266]

Almost before John's dignity could carry him to the hall door, Miss Maud Grantham ran swiftly down the stairs, followed, partly on the stairs, but mainly on the bannisters, by little Bobbie Grantham. Four rosy and very pretty faces came in with the snow gust at the door; there was much embracing and such a chattering, Maud failed to get a word in edgeways, and so resorted to the exorcism of holding aloft the yellow sheet of paper she held in her hand so that every eye could see it. The effect was instantaneous: a hush fell on the quartet at the sight of that dreadful messenger—a telegram.

"Now don't be afraid, girls! It's nothing very terrible," and she handed the sheet to Sadie Stillwell, who read aloud:

"HUDSON, N. Y., Nov. 28, 1891.

"To C. V. Grantham, Yonkers, N. Y.—Train stalled. Don't expect us till morning.

WES."

If the girls looked relieved for a moment they certainly showed regret the next, especially Minnie Trumbull; but she said nothing. Ella Bromley, on the contrary, exclaimed in great vexation:

"What a shame! For two whole days I've been promising myself *such* a time teasing that scamp Dick almost to death. I think it's too bad."

"Never mind," replied Sadie; "you will have four days in which to work out your horrible purpose. Why, is not slow torture better than killing him off in one night?"

"Why, girls! How can you stand there joking," spoke up Grace Waldron, "while those poor boys are slowly freezing to death in the middle of a snow bank?" [267]

"Nonsense!" replied Maud. "Where there's a telegraph office there must be a station and a stove. It is too bad, indeed, that Wes and Dick must miss the little surprise party. But come along! I've done everything to help out for a jolly time. There's the supper—I've had that all fixed, and I've told John we wouldn't want him, so he's gone off to bed, I suppose. Then mamma and papa have gone to the Bruces' *musicale*, so there isn't a soul in the house to disturb. Isn't that just delightful?"

With a deafening din of joyous exclamations they followed Maud Grantham into the music room, and there all the evening they played games, and gossiped, and danced and sang, totally unsuspecting of the grave proceedings that were taking place within sound of their voices.

While this festive event was in progress Wesley and Richard Grantham, the sons of a wealthy New York banker, were really speeding on toward their home by the Eastern express. About four o'clock in the afternoon they had run into a snow drift just after drawing away from the station at Hudson. Things had looked for a time as if they were to be held in that town over night: so, when the train had backed to the station they had sent the telegram to their father. But when they saw a crowd of laborers file off with spades and shovels toward the deep drift, they had followed and watched the work, done in the faint light of many lamps; and they had of course chafed and grumbled, as well they might at being delayed on the eve of a school holiday and almost at the threshold of their luxurious home, quite oblivious of the fortunate outcome of the delay. [268]

The fierce winds that had swept the drift in place had helped to clear it away, and by six o'clock, when it had long been dark, the laborers had shoveled it nearly all off. The train moved out and plunged into the shallow layer of snow that remained, sweeping it up into the air in great feathery plumes, and the obstruction was vanquished.

"See that group, Dick! What a picture! Did you notice the beautiful effect of the tiny lights on the snow and how weird those grim Italians——"

"How about a good hot cup of coffee and the burning logs in the fireplace—there's a picture for you!" scoffed young Dick, who had not yet cultivated that eye for the picturesque that his elder brother affected, and little more was said during the remainder of the ride.

It was about ten o'clock when they slowed up at Yonkers. The boys tumbled out of the train and halted to turn up coat collars and pull mufflers more closely around their throats.

"Not a carriage in sight? Well, I like this! It would seem as if everything was contriving to keep us away from home on the eve of Thanksgiving," growled Dick.

"We can certainly appreciate our good home all the more. Perhaps we can give thanks more heartily for it to-morrow."

"Oh, bother!" was Dick's reply. He was an impatient youth, certainly. "Who'd expect a fellow to feel thankful when he had to climb a little St. Bernard in a storm like this. Here goes for footing it, if you're ready!"

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They grasped their traps and plunged into the inky darkness, and in a moment were at the foot of the steep hill. The wind was cutting and the snow blinding. Even if they had not kept their heads well down against the blast they could not have seen an arm's length before them—only a dimly white sheet under their feet.

Dick, plunging ahead knee deep in the snow suddenly felt a terrific shock; for an instant he knew nothing; then he came to the realization that he was lying on his back in a snow bank with Wesley bending close over him and calling his name anxiously. He sat upright at once and confusedly asked:

"What was that, Wes? I did not see a thing."

"It seemed to be a man running down the hill. After he collided with you he just brushed me. Look! there he is now!"

Wes was pointing toward the station, where the train, for some reason delayed, was just beginning to move out. What Wes saw through the falling snow was the figure of a tall man dash into the circle of the station's dim light and leap on the platform of the last car, just passing away. It all occurred in an instant and Dick looked too late to see the hurrying figure.

"Did you recognize him, Wes?"

"No, of course not. The snow blurs everything at such a distance."

"Worse luck! I wish he'd missed that train. I'd go right back and interview him—yes I would! I think I'm hurt, Wes; that fellow's elbow or shoulder struck me over the eye."

"Just a moment and I will light one of those fusees. It is fortunate I bought them from that ragged Italian—nothing else would hold an instant in this gale."

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After some fumbling in pockets with gloved hands the box of vesuvians was found. Wesley struck one and by its sputtering light examined as best he could Dick's eye. There was only a slight abrasion, apparently, but as Dick complained of a smarting in the eyeball a handkerchief was tied over the injured orb.

"Now how are we ever to find our traps? They must have gone in every direction. Oh, I'd just like to—" Dick shook his fist at the darkness in the direction of the departed train and then began to tramp around in the snow to find his things. First, Wesley put his foot into Dick's hat which had rolled some distance off; then Dick kicked his bundle of canes and umbrellas and, lastly, he tumbled flat over his large hand satchel. He felt around it and then broke out again:

"I *am* a stupid. I never strapped this confounded bag in the car and the lock has slipped. The thing is perfectly empty, Wes!"

"Let us see what we can do with the aid of these fusees, Dick. They are a good example of 'bread upon the waters,' aren't they?"

"Hang it! I'm thinking of bread in a better place just now. Come! give me some of those things, too. If we don't get along soon I shall freeze stiff."

They burned one after another of the vesuvians and gathered up all sorts of miscellaneous things in the way of clothing and boxes and little packages and what not, and at last they concluded it was useless to look further, as every inch of ground had been gone over for quite some distance. The things were jammed in pell mell and the bag was strapped this time: then they again began the ascent, cold to their very bones.

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It was a toilsome tramp up the hill in knee-deep snow, with sometimes a soft drift into which the travelers would plunge and flounder around till they could finally extricate themselves. But at last the warm lights of the brilliantly illuminated mansions on the Crescent began to light the way and cheer them on, and, in a very few minutes the great Grantham house came into sight, all dark excepting the music room. There the windows were a blaze of light, and, when the boys reached the terrace, the sound of a piano almost drowned in girlish laughter, vied with the whistling and wheezing of the wind.

"Methinks there is a 'sound of revelry by night,'" quoted Dick. "Wonder what's up."

The boys tiptoed along the veranda and peeped in on the bright scene.

"Great Scott, Wes! you're in luck; there's Minnie Trumbull at the piano," and he nudged his elder brother in a knowing way; for Minnie, be it known, was a rather serious girl who read deep books, painted in water colors and played the piano brilliantly, and it was toward her that Wes usually gravitated when he was at home.

"I am very sorry for you, Dick, for I see Ella Bromley there, dancing with our sister, and I know you are in for a quarrel;" at which Dick looked a little conscious, for when Dick was at home he wanted nothing better than to quarrel with Ella, just for the pleasure of making up.

At this moment a shrill shriek pierced the air. One of the girls had discovered two faces glaring in at the window: one had a bandaged eye and "Tramps!" was the idea that for an instant filled every mind. But the boys pressed their faces closer to the glass; there was a general recognition and an impetuous rush to the hall door.

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Handshaking, questioning, explanation, a great pulling off of coats helped by willing hands—such a hearty welcome home made up for all their trials and misfortunes on the way.

“Maud, if you’ll ring for John to carry these things upstairs, Dick and I will go to *our* rooms for a few minutes to get into presentable shape,” said Wes.

“I’m sorry, boys, but you’ll have to carry the things yourself, for I sent all the servants off to bed hours ago.”

“Well! it seems we’ve got another climb, after all, Wes,” and the boys disappeared above.

Just as every one was sitting down to the supper table Mr. and Mrs. Grantham came in and another round of loving greeting ensued. When the parents retired upstairs the fun around the supper-table became furious. At its height Mr. Grantham came to the threshold of the room and said:

“Boys, I shall have to take you away for a few minutes.”

The words were said pleasantly enough, but Sadie was sensitive enough to notice something in her father’s tone that placed her in dread. She followed the boys and asked fearfully:

“What is the matter, father—something, I know!”

“Simply this: there has been a cunning thief in the house, and he seems to have taken off some of your mother’s jewels. Don’t alarm your friends, but let them go as soon as they wish to.”

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When the trio reached Mrs. Grantham’s bed-room a glance showed that something strange had been going on. The drawers of the bureau had been pulled out and rummaged; the escritoire had been treated in the same way. The shelves of the closets showed signs of confusion, and finally a cedar chest had been pried open. In this the robber had found Mrs. Grantham’s jewel case. Singularly enough he had left some of its contents behind, but he had taken the priceless necklace of large diamonds, the great solitaire earrings and two costly finger rings.

“Dick go up to John’s room and ask him to dress and step down here,” directed the master.

Dick departed, to return in a moment with the exciting news that John was not in his room and his bed was quite undisturbed. It was one of the butler’s nights on duty! Sadie, who arrived a few minutes later, having dismissed her friends, was sent to interrogate each of the female servants. They had seen nothing of the butler. Some of them had heard him go downstairs about nine o’clock, come back and go down again about ten: but they had thought nothing of that.

“Everything points to John Simmons as the thief,” said Mr. Grantham. “But it is so difficult to realize a common burglar in this man, so dignified, so steady, so—”

“Wesley Grantham! didn’t you get some idea of that brute who ran over me?” interrupted Dick excitedly.

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“No; only that he was very tall—just as John was. It is likely, I think, that it was he who was in such a hurry to catch the train for New York.”

“Your eye seems to be very much inflamed, Richard,” said Mr. Grantham. “Go to your room and bathe it and then go right to bed. Wesley and I will go into the library and write out a description of this fellow to send to the chief of police early in the morning. Go now, my boy; nothing further can be done to-night.”

Young Dick departed and Wesley sat down to write out a minute pen picture of John Simmons, butler. If their sight could have pierced the wall they would have seen Dick unpacking the disorderly hand satchel that had been burst open on the road. They would have seen him arranging its contents in and on his bureau. Among these things were several small boxes—one for his scarf pins and trinkets, another for his engraved cards, and so on. But one that came to his hands seemed to interest him particularly: the others he had indifferently put in their proper places—this one, about four inches long by three wide, covered with ivory white enameled paper, he examined thoughtfully, opened and—

“Are you quite through with your description of the thief?” asked Dick at the doorway. There was a singular gleam in his eyes, and he seemed to labor under some suppressed excitement.

“All but the eyes. We can’t seem to decide whether they were gray or blue.”

“The person who has those jewels has dark brown eyes—almost black,” answered Dick.

“Why, my son, what a poor memory you have! John was fair and florid—the English complexion, with fairly light eyes. But put it down gray. It really doesn’t—”

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“But it is not John who has those diamonds,” insisted Dick. He would have liked to keep his discovery back longer to puzzle his auditors, but he simply couldn’t. He stepped to the library table, and, taking a hand from behind his back, placed a white enameled jeweler’s box on the cloth in the fierce glare of the lamp. His father looking at him in surprise, said under his breath.

“What can be the matter with the boy?”

Wesley mechanically opened the box and both he and his father jumped to their feet in surprise, for the sharp gleam of many diamonds dazzled their eyes!

Mr. Grantham reached for the little box and pulled out, first, a necklace of twelve large pendant diamonds; to this hung one big solitaire diamond earring; the other lay in the box, and with it were a cluster diamond ring and another of rubies, sapphires and diamonds.

“I do not understand,” said Mr. Grantham uncertainly; even the man of affairs was dazed by the sudden and peculiar entrance of these gems, supposed to be in the pocket of a thief in New York City.

“I guess you’re surprised. Fancy how I felt when I found them in my satchel.”

“Your satchel? Who could have put them there!”

“I myself. This is the only explanation I can think of. It must have been the thief—John, supposedly—who was rushing to catch the train. Perhaps he saw the gleam of the head-light up

the road from one of the upper windows. He may have bundled on his wraps, thrust the box into his overcoat pocket or somewhere and started out to sprint for the train.

"When he struck my manly form the shock that heeled me over must have knocked this box out of his pocket or wherever it was, and I gathered it in with the things spilled out of my bag in the snow."

"I think you have found the solution Dick. Your injured eye is not a *very* large price for sixteen thousand dollars worth of gems," was the comment of Wes.

"Wonderful! wonderful!" exclaimed Mr. Grantham. "I must go at once and tell your mother. She is quite prostrated at this loss." He started off, but Dick stopped him by calling:

"Father! What reward did I hear you say you had offered for the finding of these shiners?"

"Ha! ha!" laughed the banker. "I don't think you heard me state the figure, Dick. But didn't you say something about a sloop yacht the other day—eh?"

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE:

- Obvious print and punctuation errors were corrected.
- A Table of Contents was not in the original work; one has been produced and added by Transcriber.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JULIAN MORTIMER: A BRAVE BOY'S STRUGGLE FOR HOME AND FORTUNE ***

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