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by John Henry Goldfrap**

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Around a smoldering fire lay several men.
(Page [28](#)) (*The Border Boys With the Mexican Rangers*)

THE BORDER BOYS

WITH THE MEXICAN RANGERS

By FREMONT B. DEERING

AUTHOR OF

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



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The Border Boys with the Mexican Rangers.

CHAPTER I.

AN IMPRUDENT BEAR.

Professor Wintergreen sat bolt upright amidst his blankets and listened intently. Had it been daylight, the angular figure of the scientist would have made a laughable spectacle. But the canyon in the State of Sonora, in Western Mexico, in which the Border Boys and their preceptor were camped, was pitchy dark with a velvety blackness, relieved only by a few steely-looking stars shining from the open spaces of a fast overclouding sky.

The night wind soughed in melancholy fashion through the trees that clothed the sides of the rugged abyss in which the camp had been pitched that evening, and the tinkle of the tiny stream that threaded its depths was audible. But although these were the only sounds to be heard at the moment, it was neither of them that had startled the professor. No, what he had heard had been something far different.

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Waking some hours after he had first fallen asleep, the man of science had indulged his sleepless moments by plunging into mental calculations of an abstruse character. He was deeply engrossed in these, when the sudden sound had broken in on the quietness of the night.

"Bless me, I could have sworn that I heard a footstep, and a stealthy one, too," muttered the professor to himself, "I must be getting nervous. Possibly that is what made me wake up, and—wow!"

The ruminations of Professor Wintergreen broke off abruptly as he suddenly felt something warm and hairy brush his face.

"It's a bear!" he yelled, springing to his feet with a shout that instantly aroused the others,—Jack Merrill, the rancher's son; Ralph Stetson, his schoolmate from old Stonefell; Coyote Pete, and Walt Phelps.

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"A b'ar!" yelled Coyote Pete, awake in a flash, "wha'r is ther varmint?" As he spoke, the plainsman drew forth his well-worn old forty-four and began flourishing it about.

Before the others could say a word a dark form bolted suddenly through the camp, scattering, as it went, the embers of the dying campfire.

"It's a bear, sure enough!" exclaimed Ralph, as the creature, a small bear of the black variety, howled and stumbled amidst the hot coals.

All at once its shaggy coat burst into flame, and with a cry of intense agony it dashed off into the woods.

"Poor creature!" cried Jack Merrill, "it will die in misery unless it's put out of its agony quickly. Pete, lend me your gun."

The plainsman handed it over with a quick interrogation to which he received no reply. Instead, Jack made a swift dash for the spot, a few feet distant, in which the horses of the party were tethered. Throwing himself on the back of one, with a twisted halter for a bridle, he set off in hot pursuit of the unfortunate bear.

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He could see it quite plainly as it lumbered along through the woods, crying pitifully. Its long coat, greasy and shaggy, burned like a torch.

"Get along, Firewater, old boy," breathed Jack, bending over his animal's neck to avoid being brushed off by the low-hanging branches, for, after a short distance, the tangle on the hillside at the canyon's bottom grew thick and dense.

But Firewater, alarmed and startled at the spectacle of the flaming beast rushing along through the dark woods in front, balked

and jumped about and misbehaved in a manner very foreign to him when he had his young master on his back.

But Jack never made the mistake of allowing a pony or horse to think it could get the upper hand of him, and, consequently, Firewater soon quieted down and realized that there was no help for it but to go whither he was directed. [9]

At length Jack arrived within pistol shot of the frenzied bear. Aiming as carefully as he could for a death shot, he pressed the trigger and the wretched animal,—the victim of its own curiosity,—plunged over and lay still.

“Poor creature,” quoth Jack to himself, “you are not the first to pay the toll of too much inquisitiveness. Gee whiz!” he broke off the next instant with one of his hearty, wholesome laughs, “I’m getting to be as much of a moralist as the professor.”

Having ascertained that the bear was quite dead and out of its suffering, the Border Boy remounted his pony and pressed back toward camp. But as he neared it, it was borne in upon him that the adventures of the night were by no means at an end, for before he reached the others, and while a thick screen of brush still lay between him and the glow of the newly made camp fire, a sudden volley of shots and the clattering of many horses’ hoofs broke the stillness. [10]

A touch of the heel was enough to send Firewater bounding forward. The next instant the brush had been cleared, and a strange spectacle met Jack Merrill’s eyes. His companions, their weapons in hand, stood about the fire staring here and there into the darkness. A puzzled expression was on all their faces, and particularly was this true of the professor, who was scrutinizing, through his immense horn spectacles, a scrap of paper which he held in his hand. He was stooping low by the firelight the better to examine it.

“Oh, here you are,” cried Ralph, as the returned young adventurer came forward into the glow.

“Yes, here I am,” cried Jack, throwing himself from Firewater’s back. “I despatched that bear, too, but what on earth has been happening here?”

“Read this first, my boy, and then I will tell you,” said the professor, thrusting the not over-clean bit of paper into his hands.

“Read it aloud,” urged Pete, and Jack, in a clear voice, read the untidy scrawl as follows:— [11]

“Señors; you are on a mission perilous. Advance no further but turn back while you are safe. The Mountains of Chinipal are not for your seeking, and what you shall find there if you persevere in your quest will prove more deadly than the Upas tree. Be warned in time. Adios.”

“Phew!” whistled Jack, “that sounds nice. But what was all the firing—for I suppose that had something to do with it?”

“Why, the firing was my work,” struck in Walt Phelps, looking rather shamefaced, “and I’m afraid I wounded the man I shot at, too.”

“You see it was this way,” went on Ralph Stetson. “We were watching the woods for your coming when, suddenly, a horseman appeared, as if by magic, from off there.”

He pointed behind him into the dark and silent trees.

“Under the impression that we were attacked, I guess, Walt opened fire. But the man did not return it. Instead, he flung that note, which was tied to a bit of stone, at our feet, and then dashed off as suddenly as he had come. What do you make of it?” [12]

“I don’t know what to think,” rejoined Jack in a puzzled tone; “suppose we ask the professor and Pete first.”

“A good idea,” chorused the other boys. “Well, boys,” said the professor anxiously, “not being as well versed in such things as our friend Mr. Coyote, I shall defer to him. One thing, however, I noticed, and that was that the note is worded in fair English, although badly written in an uneducated hand.”

“Maybe whoever wrote it wished to disguise his writing,” ventured Walt Phelps.

“That’s my idee of it,” grunted Coyote Pete; “yer see,” he went on, “ther thing looks this yer way ter me. Some chap who knows of a plot on foot ter keep us frum the Chinipal, wanted to do us a good turn, but didn’t dare be seen in our company. So he hits on this way of doing it and gits drilled with a bullet fer his pains.” [13]

Walt Phelps colored brilliantly. He felt ashamed of his haste.

"Don't be upsot over it," said Pete, noticing this, "it's ther chap's own fault fer dashing in on us that way. I reckon, though, he kalkerlated on finding us asleep, an' so we would have bin if it hadn't a bin fer Mister flaming b'ar."

"The question is, are we to heed this warning, or is it, what I believe is sometimes termed a bluff?" asked the professor anxiously. He drew his blankets about his skinny figure as he spoke, and stood in the firelight looking like a spectacted and emaciated ancient statue.

Coyote Pete considered a minute.

"Suppose we leave that till the morning fer discussion," he said. "In my judgment, it will be best fer you folks ter turn in now and sleep ther rest of ther night."

"And you, Pete?" asked Jack.

"I'll watch by the fire in case of another visit. I don't think there'll be one, but you cain't most gen'ally always tell. Gimme my gun back, Jack; I might need it."

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There was no dissuading Coyote from his plan, so the others turned in once more, and, despite the startling interruption to their slumbers, were soon wrapped in sleep.

As for Coyote, he sat by the fire till the stars began to pale and the eastern sky grew gray and wan with the dawn. Except for an occasional swift glance about him the old plainsman's eyes were riveted on the glowing coals, seemingly searching the innermost glowing caverns for some solution of the situation that confronted them.

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CHAPTER II.

RUGGLES—THE DERELICT.

But you lads who are not already acquainted with the adventurous Border Boys, must be wishing, by this time, to know something about them and of the quest which brought them into this wild and rugged part of the great Mexican Republic. In the first volume of this series "The Border Boys on The Trail," it was related how Ralph Stetson, a somewhat delicate young easterner,—the son of "King Pin" Stetson, the railroad magnate,—came out west to visit his school chum Jack Merrill, the only son of a ranch owner.

The lads' adventures in pursuit of a band of cattle rustlers,—headed by Black Ramon de Barros,—were related in full in that volume. There also, it was told how they escaped from the mysterious old mission and found a rich treasure in a secret passage of the mouldering structure. Jack's bravery in preventing Black Ramon from destroying a dam and flooding the country was also an incident of that book. But although the boys had succeeded in routing Black Ramon for the nonce, that scourge of the border was destined to be re-encountered by them.

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How this came about we told in the second volume of this series, "The Border Boys Across The Frontier." Beginning with their discovery of the subterranean river leading from the Haunted Mesa across the border, the lads were plunged into an amazing series of adventures. These culminated in the attack on the Esmeralda,—a mine owned by Jack's father,—and the gallant defense of it by our lads and their faithful friends. The attacking force was composed of Mexican rebels and they were only repulsed by an unexpected happening. Black Ramon was active in this part of the boys' adventures, too. For a time it looked as if they at last had brought the rascal with the coal black horse to book. But it proved otherwise, and Black Ramon once more made good his escape from the arm of the law.

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Their adventures in Mexico over, and the revolution brought to a termination by the abdication of President Diaz, the Border Boys settled down to spend the rest of their vacation in comparative monotony. A few weeks before the present story opens, however, an incident had occurred which seemed destined once more to provide some excitement for them.

Mr. Stetson, whose railroad interests had brought him to Mexico during the fighting days, had paid a hasty visit to the ranch and spent some time in consultation with Mr. Merrill. Professor Wintergreen had also been summoned to the conference. It appeared that the railroad king had, some years before, materially aided a young college friend who had fallen on hard times. The beneficiary of his aid had, however, ultimately wandered away from the position with which Mr. Stetson had provided him, without leaving a word or a sign of his destination. The years rolled by and Mr. Stetson had practically forgotten all about the man, when, during his stay in El Paso, a wretched, ragged figure had confronted him on the street one day and disclosed his identity as Stewart Ruggles, the outcast.

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Mr. Stetson, shocked at his old friend's abject appearance of misery and illness, ordered a carriage and took him to his hotel. Here, after Ruggles had been suitably clothed and fed, Mr. Stetson listened to his story. After wandering off so many years before, Ruggles, it seems, had fallen in with bad company. He finally had become connected with a bank robbery and had been compelled to seek refuge in Mexico. After knocking about for many lonely years, he became a prospector.

One spring had found him in the mountains of Chinipal, with his burros and prospecting outfit. He met with indifferent luck and was about to vacate the country, when, one day, in a rugged pass, he heard groans coming from the trailside. Investigating, he found a Yaqui, who had been swept from his horse by an overhanging branch, and whose leg was broken. With characteristic brutality and callousness, the rest of the tribe had passed on, leaving the wounded man to shift as best he might.

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Ruggles, who had some rough knowledge of surgery, set the

man's leg and tended him for several days. At last one day the Yaqui was ready to ride on. But before he left he confided to Ruggles the location of a mountain known to the Indians as the Trembling Mountain. In a cavern in the interior of this eminence,—so the Indian legend had it,—a vanished race of aborigines had hidden vast treasures of gold and sacrificial emblems of great value. Asked why, if this was the case, his own tribesmen had not sought for it, the Yaqui had declared that rather than enter the mountain his fellows would cut off their right hands. It was, according to their belief, guarded by the spirits of the dead and gone race, and terrible vengeance would light on the head of the luckless mortal who offended them.

Under the Indian's direction Ruggles had drawn up a rough map of the location of Trembling Mountain and then, determined to investigate it, had set out for the north to find proper equipment for his quest. But he found the land in the throes of revolution, and where he was not laughed at as a lunatic he was told to wait till times became more settled. In poverty and despair he was wandering the streets of El Paso when chance threw him across the path of his old college mate.

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Mr. Stetson, who had been known as one of the most daring operators on Wall Street, believed where others had scoffed. He agreed to back Ruggles in his quest to any amount. But while active preparations were still on foot, a fever seized the prospector. His impoverished frame was unable to resist the attack, and in a few days he breathed his last, not before, however, he had confided to Mr. Stetson his wish that the latter would carry out the quest.

The railroad king faithfully saw the remains of his unfortunate and erring friend to the grave, and then began to consider the feasibility of the enterprise to which he stood committed. It was clear, he decided, that the mission was no ordinary one. It could only be performed by trustworthy agents, for, in the event of the treasure being there, the temptation to play him false would be tremendous. Then, too, it must be kept secret, because, on the face of it, the venture appeared such a far-fetched and desperate one that unless success crowned it its promoter was likely to be heaped with ridicule from one end of the country to the other.

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Altogether, Mr. Stetson was at a standstill till he suddenly bethought himself of the Border Boys and their companions, Coyote Pete and Professor Wintergreen.

With his customary promptitude, he had lost no time in getting to the Merrill ranch. At first the rancher was unwilling that his son should embark on such an enterprise, but on Jack's pleadings to be allowed to participate, he finally agreed on the condition, however, that no unnecessary risks were to be run.

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The fact that Coyote Pete and Professor Wintergreen were to go along played no small part in enabling the rancher to make up his mind. As for Mr. Stetson, he remarked:

"Ralph will have to play his part in the world before very long now, and such adventures are good for him. They form character and make him quick in action and decision."

And so it came about, that a week before, our party had disembarked from, the queer little narrow-gauge train at Esmedora, on the borders of Sonora,—the starting point of their three hundred and fifty mile trip into the unknown. Not unnaturally, some excitement had been created at Esmedora by the arrival of so many strangers. It had been given out by Professor Wintergreen that the expedition was a scientific one and their real destination was, of course, carefully concealed. Firewater,—Jack's favorite pony,—had been the only animal brought from the States by the party, as it was understood that excellent animals could be purchased in Esmedora. This proved to be the case.

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Coyote Pete was provided with an excellent little buckskin, while Ralph and Walt Phelps each secured a calico pony. The professor's mount was a tall, bony animal, almost as lanky as himself, but one which Coyote Pete pronounced a "stayer." Its color was a sort of nondescript yellow, and the man of science, when mounted on it with all his traps and appendages, cut an odd figure. Besides the horses and ponies, two pack burros were purchased to carry the somewhat extensive outfit of the party.

Naturally, in that sleepy part of the country, such purchases and preparations caused quite a stir. By that species of wireless telegraphy which prevails in parts of the world unprovided with

other means for the transmission of news, the information was, in fact, in the few days the party remained in Esmedora, diffused over a considerable part of the country round about.

In due course it reached the ears of a person to whom it was of peculiar interest. This individual was one whom we have met before, and whose presence in the vicinity would have caused the Border Boys considerable anxiety had they known of it. Who this man was, and what effect his presence was to have upon events in the immediate future we shall see before very long.

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And now, after this considerable, but necessary digression, it is high time we were getting back to the camp in the canyon where we left the lads and the professor enjoying peaceful repose, and Coyote Pete hard at work thinking. Before the morning was far advanced, however, the plainsman aroused his comrades and a great scene of bustle was soon going on.

While the professor visited the creek to indulge in a good wash in its clear, cool waters, Walt Phelps, who had already performed his ablutions, cleaned up the "spider" with sand, and having scoured it thoroughly he set about getting breakfast. Coyote Pete attended to the horses and the two burros, and Ralph Stetson, always fastidious, "duded up," as Jack called it, before a small pocket mirror he had affixed to a tree.

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As for Jack, while all this was doing, he set off for a stroll.

"Too many cooks spoil the broth," he remarked laughingly, as he started. With him he carried a light rifle thinking that he might encounter an opportunity to bring down something acceptable in the way of a rabbit or other "small deer," for breakfast.

His path took him by the spot on which the night before he had killed the bear. The animal, charred and blackened to a crisp, still lay there. As he neared the place, however, a heavy flapping of wings as several hideous "turkey buzzards" arose heavily, apprised him that the carrion birds had already gathered to the feast. The lad noted that, before rising, the gluttoned creatures had to run several yards with outspread wings before they could gain an upward impetus.

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The crisp beauty of the morning, the smiling greenery of the trees, and the thousand odors and sounds about him all combined to make Jack wander rather further than he had intended. Then, too, a boy with a rifle always does go a longer distance than he means to. That's boy nature.

All at once he found himself emerging from the brush at a point rather higher up the canyon side than their camp in the abyss. So gentle had been the rise, however, that he had not noticed it. Before him lay a sort of roughly piled rampart of rocks. The boy was advancing toward these to peer over their summits into the valley below, when something suddenly arrested his footsteps as abruptly as if a precipice had yawned before him.

The sharp, acrid odor of tobacco had reached his nostrils. At the same instant, too, he became aware of the low hum of voices. The sounds came from immediately in front of him, and seemingly just below the rock rampart. With a beating heart, and as silently as possible, the lad crept forward to ascertain what other intruders besides themselves had come into the primeval fastnesses of the Sonora country.

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CHAPTER III.

JACK'S ADVENTURE.

A few stealthy footsteps served to bring him to the edge of the natural rampart, and then, removing his sombrero, he peered over. What he saw a few feet below him caused him to exercise all his self-control to avoid uttering a sharp exclamation. Around a smoldering fire, above which hung an iron pot that emitted a savory odor, lay several men. Swarthy Mexicans they were, with villainous countenances for the most part, although, to Jack's astonishment, one of the party had a fair Saxon skin and reddish hair, which, with his blue eyes, made him seem oddly out of place in the midst of the dark-skinned, black-orbed group.

But Jack had little time to note these details, for something else entirely occupied his attention. This object was nothing less than one of the party who sat somewhat apart, trying the edge of a hunting knife he had been sharpening upon a bit of madrone wood. In the hawk-like countenance and slender, active form, Jack Merrill had not the least difficulty in recognizing Black Ramon de Barros himself. At a short distance from the swarthy rascal grazed his famous coal-black horse. Even in his somewhat awkward position Jack could not repress a thrill of admiration as he gazed at the splendid proportions and anatomy of the glossy-coated beast, through whose delicate nostrils the light shone redly.

"Lucky thing I'm down the wind from that outfit," thought the Border Boy. "I've heard it said that Black Ramon's horse can detect the presence of a stranger as readily as a keen-scented fox."

Most of the Mexicans were rolling and smoking slender cigarettes of powdered tobacco and yellow corn paper. These had occasioned the acrid smell which had luckily betrayed the existence of the camp to Jack before a false step could make them aware of his presence. Expelling a cloud of blue smoke from his thin lips, Black Ramon began speaking. He was addressing the red-haired man who looked so oddly out of place although he wore Mexican garb, red sash, flowing trousers, short jacket and cone-crowned sombrero with a mighty rim.

"You are sure that this Ruggles was not mistaken, Senor Canfield?" he was saying.

The other shook his head.

"I'd take my oath to that on a stack of Bibles," he said. "Ruggles was a pretty level-headed chap although he led a fool's life, and if he says the In'jun told of a treasure in the Trembling Mountain he was right."

"What puzzles me, though, is that he should have told you of it as well as this Americano Stetson,—curses be upon him,"—grumbled Black Ramon. "If he was, as you say, 'on the level,' why should he have betrayed his friend's confidence?"

"Well, you see," responded the man addressed as Canfield, slowly, "Ruggles and I had roughed it together a bit, and I reckon he was a little off his head with worry and the approach of the fever when I met him in El Paso. Anyhow, he spun out the whole yarn, with the exception of the plan."

"We can do without that," said Black Ramon, "I have often heard of the Trembling Mountain, and can, I believe, find it without difficulty. But you are sure that Senor Stetson has the plan?"

"I know it for a fact. That was the reason that I hastened to dig you up as soon as I knew he was fitting out an expedition to go after the treasure. I thought you were the most likely man in Mexico to carry out the job."

"And you were not mistaken, Senor Canfield," rejoined the other with a gratified smile. "If the treasure is there we will get it out, even if it were only to obtain revenge on those Gringos, Jack Merrill and his chums. They drove me off the border, they tricked me in Chihuahua, but now the cards have changed, and I hold the trumps. But you are certain we are far ahead of them?"

"Positive," was the rejoinder, "they are at least two days' march behind, and with our swift animals we shall make the strike first, do not fear."

Jack was puzzled.

Clearly, from what he had heard, the Mexican leader knew nothing of their doings, but that they had started from Esmedora. On the other hand, it appeared equally positive that Canfield was the man who had carried the message into their camp the night before and created so much excitement. Jack noticed now, too, as a further means of identification, that Canfield's hand was bandaged. Ramon seemed to notice this also at the same instant.

"Your hand is hurt, *senor*," he said sharply, with a suspicious inflection.

"I cut it this morning while closing my knife," rejoined Canfield glibly.

Ramon nodded and said nothing. In the meantime one of the Mexicans had been busy dishing out the contents of the pot and handing portions about. The smell reminded Jack that he was excessively hungry and concluding that he had heard about all he wanted to, he prepared to depart as silently as he had come. But as he moved his legs an alarming thing happened. The rock upon which he had been resting gave way without the slightest warning. Jack made a desperate effort to avoid crashing down with it, but he was unsuccessful. With a roar and crash, amid a flying cloud of dust, stones and twigs, the rock and the Border Boy slid together into the midst of the camp of the man whom Jack had every reason on earth both to fear and detest.

But even as he was making his avalanche-like slide down the steep bank. Jack's active mind was at work.

The instant his feet touched solid ground he sprang upright with a terrific yell:—

"Yee-ow-ow-ow!"

"*Todos Santos!* It is *El Diablo*," shrilled some of the Mexicans. But Ramon, superstitious as he was, was not to be thus easily alarmed.

"It's a man!" he shouted, and then the next instant:—

"*Santa Maria!* It's one of the Border Boys!"

But so quickly had Jack moved that by the time Ramon, the first to regain his wits, had recovered from his surprise, the lad was already among the Mexicans' horses which were tethered at some little distance. Jack's quick eye had noted that one of them was saddled and bridled. Like a flash he was in the saddle, and plying the quirt with might and main. Behind him came a fusilade of shots, and he could feel the bullets whistle as he crouched low on his stolen steed's neck. But he had assumed, and the event proved correctly, that the Mexicans would not risk killing one of their horses.

"Don't hit the horse!" the fleeing boy heard Ramon shout, as he dashed off. He really had no idea in what direction he was going, but flogging his mount with unmerciful ferocity for the kind-hearted Jack, the lad made all speed from the vicinity of the Mexican camp.

"Hooray, I've shaken them off, anyhow," he thought to himself, as, after ten minutes or so of hard riding he heard the shouts and cries of the Mexicans grow faint behind him.

But in this assumption Jack had reckoned without his host, in the shape of Black Ramon's famous sable steed.

As he drew rein he heard distinctly the sound of a horse coming toward his halting place at a terrific gait. No other horse than Black Ramon's could have kept up such a speed over such ground, and Jack, with a sinking heart, realized that if he did not act quickly he was likely to fall into the outlaw's hands once more.

The spot where he had halted was a small rocky eminence surrounded by the luxuriant fern and scrub growth which clothed the rugged floor of the canyon.

To turn his panting animal and head off into the dense growth was the work of an instant. Hardly had he vanished, however, before the fern parted once more and disclosed the form of Ramon's black horse with the outlaw himself upon his glossy back.

Like Jack, Ramon halted as he reached the little eminence, and listened intently. Despite the speed he had made in pursuit, the black showed hardly a trace of fatigue. His finely carved nostrils dilated a little more than usual and his large, intelligent eyes shone more brightly perhaps, but that was all. He pricked his delicate ears and seemed to be as keenly on the alert as his master, whose face, just now, wore an expression of almost diabolic rage and baffled

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fury.

In the meantime, Jack was loping along at as fast a pace as he dared to go. The ground, as has been said, was rough and stony to a degree,—the worst sort of going for one who wished to conceal the sound of his advance. But there was no help for it; press on the boy must, or fall into the hands of men whom he knew would give him short shrift indeed.

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“If ever this old plug stumbles—”

Such was the thought in Jack’s mind when the exact event he had dreaded transpired.

His purloined animal gave a plunge forward as its feet caught in a rock and a tangle of fern.

The next instant Jack was shot like a projectile through space, while the horse, with an almost human groan of pain, sank to the ground. At the same time Ramon, halted on the little hill, caught the sound of the crash.

A cruel smile curled his thin lips, exposing his long yellow teeth—almost like those of some beast of prey. With a whispered word to his black horse the Mexican outlaw plunged into the brush in the direction of the sound which had just reached his ears.

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CHAPTER IV.

A BATTLE ROYAL.

Jack struggled to his feet and surveyed the scene of his disaster with dismay. A brief examination of his fallen horse told him that it would be impossible to continue his flight on the animal. Its knees were cut and bruised, and it lay with an expression of dumb suffering in its eyes that touched the sorely-tried lad's heart. If he had not dropped his little rifle in the excitement of his escape he would have despatched the creature,—risking the chance of detection from the sound of the report.

"Well, here's where I take to Shank's mare," murmured Jack, setting off once more,—when something whistled through the air and settled about his neck in a stifling coil.

It was a rawhide lasso, hurled with deadly accuracy by Ramon, who had entered the glade just as Jack arose from his examination of the fallen horse.

[39]

Before the boy had time to realize what had occurred, he was yanked from his feet and thrown violently to the ground for the second time.

"So I've got you fast and tight, at last, eh," sneered Ramon vindictively, gazing down from his great horse at the crestfallen, dust-covered boy.

"Well, my young senor," he continued, with a vicious intonation, "I can promise you that this time you will not escape so easily. This will be a treat for the boys."

Jack answered nothing. He struggled to rise but the rope was given a jerk by his captor which brought him to the ground once more. He could almost have cried with humiliation. At the moment this was his overmastering feeling. Of fear he felt little, but he would have given a lot just then to stand up with Black Ramon in a twenty-four-foot ring!

Having "thrown" poor Jack very much as he might have done a refractory calf, the outlaw turned his attention to the injured horse.

[40]

"So you have ruined one of our horses, too, you Yankee pig," he snarled; "well, it only makes one more score to settle up with you."

He drew one of his big revolvers from its chased leather holster, and carefully aiming it, shot the mortally injured animal between the eyes. The creature gave a convulsive shudder and straightened out,—dead. Without another word Ramon swung his black around, and before he could make a move Jack found himself being dragged over the rough ground at a swift pace. Within a few yards his side was bruised and cut, and the clothing torn from him.

"Great heavens, if this keeps up I shall be unable to move hand or foot," thought Jack in dismay.

For a moment his heart failed him, and then he suddenly bethought himself of his knife. To reach it in his side pocket—for his arms were partially free,—was the work of an instant, and with one quick slash he cut the rawhide that bound him.

[41]

Released of its burden thus suddenly, the sure-footed black lost its footing and almost stumbled.

"Diablo!" Jack heard Ramon shrill out as the Border Boy gave one quick leap into the dense woods.

When Ramon looked around there was not a trace of the lad he had had at the end of his lariat. Instead, a broken end of the rope dangled on the ground, its ends frayed out.

"Maledictions!" he yelled, all the fury of his Latin blood boiling to the surface in an ungovernable flood. "That cursed gringo pup has fooled me once more."

In one of those meaningless frenzies of rage into which his countrymen are apt to fall when thwarted in anything, Ramon began to vent his rage on the first animate object to hand. This was the black horse. On the beautiful creature's shiny coat the cruel blows of the Mexican's lariat fell furiously, raising great welts across the glossy surface.

[42]

For an instant the black quivered and stood motionless. The suddenness of the attack dazed it. But the next moment, its rage,—as ungoverned as that of its master, surged up in its equine heart.

With an angry squeal it gave a succession of huge bucks which would have unseated any ordinary—or extraordinary rider,—but which did not even disturb the Mexican's seat.

Then followed a magnificent exhibition of man versus horse. And it was not without its watchers—this Homeric struggle for supremacy between maddened man and maddened beast.

Jack, from his hiding place in the ferns and brush, heard the sounds and almost unconsciously he drew closer to the scene of the combat. Parting the ferns he peered through cautiously, and then was held spellbound.

If he were to have been captured for it the next instant he could not have withdrawn his gaze from the spectacle. [43]

With clenched teeth and face that was yellow and drawn with rage, Ramon plied quirt and spur. The big rowelled instruments he wore tore great streaks in the black's glossy hide. All the time his quirt fell in a perfect hailstorm of blows about the noble animal's flanks.

But if Ramon's rage was impressive from its very vindictiveness, how much more so was the just anger of the big horse.

Its delicately pointed ears were pressed close back to its shapely head, while its eye gleamed whitely. As the big silver-mounted bit of the barbarous Mexican pattern cut and gored its sensitive mouth, the animal champed and snapped,—like a rabid dog,—till its great chest was flecked with blood and foam. But it was unsubdued, as unconquered as its master.

"By George, what a rider!" was the involuntary exclamation of admiration forced from Jack as he watched.

And the next moment. [44]

"Gracious, what a horse!"

Suddenly the black reared straight upward, beating the air with its forelegs. For a breath it swayed and balanced perfectly, and then, losing its equilibrium—perhaps purposely—it fell backward.

A cry of alarm broke, against his will, from Jack's whitened lips. Ramon's death seemed certain. But instead of the black crushing his body in its fall, the agile Mexican was out of the saddle with the agility of an eel, and as the black leaped erect once more its master was back in the saddle breathing fresh maledictions and flogging and rowelling more unmercifully than ever.

But from that time on, there was no question but that the animal realized that it had met its match. Its bucks were no longer great, animated, splendid leaps, driven by the force of its powerful muscles. Instead, they were limp and dispirited.

But Ramon seemed bent on thoroughly humiliating the animal. Jack's blood began to boil as he saw the brutal punishment increasing in violence as the black grew more and more subjugated. Its sunken flanks heaved, its limbs trembled and actual tears rolled down its cheeks; but Ramon still flogged and beat and spurred as furiously as ever. [45]

"Oh, that such a rider should be such a brute!" thought Jack, watching the scene from his place of concealment.

"This has got to stop," he determined the next instant. So great was his anger at the brutal exhibition that had he had his small rifle he would almost have risked crippling one of the Mexican's arms or legs in order to end the sickening brutality.

But if Jack had not a rifle, he had another weapon perhaps even more efficacious in his hands. It will be recalled that Jack had performed some remarkable feats of pitching at Stonefell College, notably in the great game between West Point and Stonefell. What more natural then than that he should select from the plenty about him, a small, well-rounded stone, somewhat smaller than a league ball. [46]

Feeling sure that Ramon was too intent on his punishment to notice anything else, Jack stepped boldly to the edge of the little clearing, and with a preliminary twist he sent the stone hurtling straight and true at the head of the black's tormentor.

Like a tree that has felt the woodsman's axe, Ramon threw up his hands as the stone struck him, and without a sound pitched out of the saddle, crashing in a heap on the ground.

Jack felt rather alarmed as he saw this. He had not intended to throw quite so hard. For an instant a dreadful fear that he had killed Ramon—rascal though the man was,—clutched at his heart.

Coming boldly out from his place of concealment he hastened to the fallen man's side.

CHAPTER V.

CAUGHT IN A TRAP.

But Ramon was not dead,—far from it, in fact. As Jack bent above him he reached back, and with a swift, cat-like motion, whipped out a knife and, balancing it on his palm for the fraction of a second, sent it whistling past the lad's ear.

Before he could rise the boy was upon him, and for a space of several minutes they struggled on the uneven ground, the exhausted horse looking disinterestedly on. Had it not been for its recent punishment it is likely that the brute might have interfered, for some of the oft told tales along the border concerned the black's love for its master. But as it was, it made no move, not even when Jack, holding Ramon pinned to the ground with one hand, with the other jerked loose the lasso from the saddle, by its hanging end, and rapidly proceeded to bind the Mexican fast.

[48]

"Adios, Ramon!" cried the boy, as, his task completed, he turned away.

Had the black horse not been so completely worn out it is likely that Jack might have commandeered him. But as it was, he deemed it wisest not to bother with him.

And so he slipped away, leaving the exhausted horse and helpless master side by side.

After traveling some distance Jack began to realize that his woodcraft was seriously at fault somewhere. He had intended to make a detour which would bring him around the outlaw's camp and enable him to reach their own bivouac unobserved.

Instead of this, as he now began to dread, he had apparently headed altogether in the wrong direction, for the country into which he emerged after traversing the fern-brake and scrub-coppice, was of a kind distinctly foreign to anything they had as yet encountered in Mexico.

Almost bare of vegetation, it was riven and split as if by volcanic action. The earth was of a reddish color, as if it had been seared by elemental fires, and the beetling cliffs rose threateningly on either side.

[49]

"What a gloomy place," thought Jack, "it reminds me of that valley in which Sinbad the Sailor found the snakes and the diamonds. Wonder if there are any diamonds here? Tell you what, though, I'd give a whole handful of the gems right now for a good square meal."

The thought of the appetizing breakfast which had been preparing when he left camp made Jack hungrier than ever, a fact which he had not had time heretofore to realize in the rapid march of events which had occurred since his departure.

The Border Boy looked about him carefully. He realized that if not actually lost, he was in grave danger of being so. The thought quickened his faculties and he set about gauging his position in real earnest. Having, by the aid of the sun, calculated the direction in which the Border Boys' camp ought to lie, Jack struck out for it. His way led him across a corner of The Baked Land, as he had mentally christened the dreary valley.

[50]

He was hastening forward when, suddenly, as he stepped into what seemed a patch of ferns and high grass, the solid ground seemed to vanish from under his feet.

Straight down shot the Border Boy, clutching desperately, as he fell, at projecting rocks and bits of growth; but none of these remained firm in his grasp.

For twenty feet or more the boy fell, and then suddenly his drop was arrested by a heap of dried vegetation at the bottom of the pit or crevasse into which his hurrying feet had led him.

So well had the deceitful growth on the edges of this gulf hidden it, that it was small wonder that Jack, in his haste, had not perceived it. It was dark with a gloomy, damp sort of dusk in the bottom of the crevasse, only a dim, greenish light filtering in from the top.

[51]

The reaction from his hopes of a few minutes before almost unnerved the lad for the nonce, but presently he marshalled his faculties and set himself to the task of ascertaining exactly what had

happened to him, and what means of escape presented itself.

At a single glance he could see that there was no hope of getting out of the subterranean trap by means of climbing up the walls. Although they were rough and might have afforded a foothold, they overhung the floor of the pit at such an angle that even a fly would have found it difficult to maintain a foothold on them.

Yet rescue himself he must, or face death in that gloomy place. Without any definite idea in his mind, Jack struck off along the bottom of the abyss, which was overgrown with a short, coarse sort of grass of a pallid green color.

As he moved along his progress was suddenly arrested. His foot had encountered something that wriggled and squirmed horribly under his sole. It was a sickening sensation, this, of feeling that squirming mass under his foot. [52]

Jack stepped hastily back. As he did so something brown and mottled slid off through the grass, hissing angrily. As it went there came a dry sort of sound, like the rattling of peas in a bladder. At the same time a nauseating musky odor filled the air.

"This place may be alive with rattlers!" thought Jack, glancing nervously about him.

As he spoke he thought that from a dark corner at the further end of the rocky pit he could hear a sort of scuffling and rustling, unpleasantly suggestive of intertwined masses of scaly bodies writhing and contorting in snaky knots. At any rate, he decided to explore the rift no further in that direction. Instead, he turned back and sitting down on a projecting bit of rock,—after first carefully reviewing the surroundings,—Jack set himself to some hard thinking.

If only he had possessed a rifle or a revolver,—or even a knife,—his situation would have been different. By firing the weapons he might have attracted attention to his dilemma, and with the knife it might have been feasible to cut steps in the walls at some other part of the crevasse. [53]

Then, too, there is something in the mere feel of the good wood and steel of a rifle that gives a fellow confidence and courage. It seems like a friend or at least a protector. But poor Jack had none of this comfort. He was trapped in the bowels of the earth with only his bare hands to aid him out of his difficulties.

As it was unthinkable to dream of exploring the pit further in the direction in which he felt sure lay the den of snakes, Jack finally decided on striking off the other way. That he went carefully, you may be sure. He did not want again to experience that wriggly, crawly feeling under his foot.

The crevasse seemed to be of considerable length. In fact, he estimated that he had walked some half mile or more before he reached what seemed to be its confines. It ended abruptly in a steep wall of rock, and with its termination Jack's hopes of escape vanished also. Fairly unnerved, the boy sank down on a heap of dried fern and buried his face in his hands. [54]

Was he to be buried alive in this horrible place?

Then he fell to shouting. He yelled and hulloed till his throat was dry and sore, and his lips cracked. He knew that he ran considerable risk of attracting the attention of the outlaws, but in his present predicament he didn't much care what happened so long as he got out of the terrible place. But all his shouting came to naught, and after an interval of waiting Jack realized that it had all been in vain.

What was he to do next? Nothing but to wait for rescue or— But Jack would not allow himself to complete the sentence.

"While there is life there is hope," he murmured to himself, and involuntarily recalled the night when he had stood upon the tower of the old mission, a hundred feet above the ground, and deemed that his end had come. Yet he had escaped from that dilemma, and more impossible things had happened than that he should get out of his present scrape alive. [55]

All at once, while he sat thus meditating, the boy spied, not far above his head and only a short distance away, a dangling vine some two inches in circumference, and seemingly tough and fibrous.

"It ought to bear my weight," thought Jack, "and if only it will, I'll get out of this hideous place yet."

He began making brave efforts to reach the trailing tendon. Time and again, with hands that were cut and bleeding from the rough

surface of the rock, he was compelled to desist in his efforts, but at last, mustering his waning strength, he made a mighty leap. His fingers closed on the vine and he drew himself upward. But as the boy's full weight came upon the green trailer it snapped abruptly, and Jack was thrown violently to the ground.

[56]

He fell with such force that he was stunned and helpless. Claspings the broken bit of treacherous vine in his hands, the Border Boy lay on the floor of the crevasse, senseless.

[57]

CHAPTER VI.

AN EXCITING QUEST.

In the meantime, the keenest anxiety prevailed in the camp. After awaiting breakfast for a long time, it was at last eaten and the tin dishes scoured, without there being any sign of the missing boy.

"We must organize a search at once," declared the professor. "Following on the top of that warning last night, it begins to look ominous."

"Maybe he has lost himself, and will find his way back before long," suggested Ralph hopefully.

Coyote Pete gloomily shook his head.

"Jack Merrill ain't that kind," he said; "I tell yer, I don't like the looks of it."

"Why not fire guns so that if he is in the vicinity he can hear them?" was Walt Phelps' suggestion.

"Yep, and bring the whole hornets' nest down on our ears, provided they are anywhar near," grunted Coyote Pete. "No younker, we will have to think up a better way than that." [58]

"Would not the search party I suggested be the best plan?" put in the professor.

"Reckon it would," agreed Coyote Pete; "what you kain't find, look fur,—as the flea said to ther monkey."

But nobody laughed, as they usually did, at Pete's quaintly phrased observations. There was too much anxiety felt by them all over Jack's unexplained absence.

"Shall we take the horses?" inquired Walt.

"Sartin, sure," was the cow-puncher's rejoinder, "don't want ter leave 'em here for that letter writer and his pals to gobble up."

So the stock was saddled and the pack burros loaded and "diamond hitched," and the mournful and anxious little party got under way. It so chanced that their way led them to the little hill where Jack had stopped on the stolen horse and listened for sounds of the pursuit. Coyote's sharp eyes at once spied the tracks, but naturally he could make nothing of them. [59]

Suddenly Ralph Stetson, who had ridden a little in advance, gave a startled cry.

"Come here, all!" he shouted.

"What's up now?" grunted Coyote Pete, spurring forward, followed by the others.

"Why, here's a horse,—a dead horse, shot through the head, lying here," was the unexpected reply.

"Well, Mr. Coyote, what do you make of it?" asked the professor, after Pete had carefully surveyed the ground in the vicinity.

"Dunno what ter make uv it yit," snorted Pete. "Looks like ther's something back of this, as the cat said when she looked in the mirror, and—wow!"

"What is it?" they chorused as they pressed about the spot where Coyote was pointing downward, an unusual expression of excitement on his ordinarily unemotional features.

"See that?" he demanded. [60]

"Yes, I see several footsteps," said the professor, "but what have they—"

"Ter do with it? Everything. Them's Jack Merrill's footmarks or I lose my guess. And see here, this little wavy line,—a lariat's dragged here. Oh, the varmints!"

"How do you construe all this?" asked the professor.

"Easy enuff. Them rascals, whoever they be, hev roped Jack, hog-tied him and dragged him off."

"O-oh!"

The exclamation, half a groan, burst from all their throats. Examining the ground further, it seemed likely that Coyote's construction of the case was a correct one. All of which goes to show how very far wrong a theory can go.

"Let's hurry after them, whoever they are, and put up a fight," cried Ralph.

"Yes, we must rescue Jack," echoed Walt Phelps.

"Now, hold your broncs, youngsters," warned Coyote, "in the fust place we dunno how many of them there be, and in the second we dunno jus' whar they air. Am I right?" [61]

"Indeed, yes," said the professor. "Boys, you should not be so impetuous. Julius Caesar, when he——"

"Dunno the gent," struck in Pete, "but my advice is to kind of hunt around this vicinity and maybe we'll find some more clues. Go easy, now, boys, and make as little noise as possible."

A few moments later the ashes of the camp fire near which Jack had so suddenly alighted were found, but of the outlaws no trace remained. As a matter of fact, Ramon's shouts had attracted them, and as soon as they had rescued him the camp had been abandoned in a hurry. It did not suit Ramon just then to try conclusions with the Border Boys.

"Wall, here's whar they camped," muttered Coyote Pete, "we certainly had some close neighbors last night."

The boys examined the camp site with interest, while the professor and Coyote Pete conversed earnestly apart. At the conclusion of their confab, Coyote Pete spoke. [62]

"It's up to us to go forward, boys," he said. "Ain't no use lingering 'bout these diggin's."

"But mayn't the bad men have turned back down the canyon?" asked Ralph.

Coyote shook his head.

"Think agin, son," he admonished, "the floor of the gulch is too narrow for 'em to hev got by us without our knowing it."

"That's so," said Walt, while Ralph colored up a bit. He didn't like to be looked upon as a tenderfoot.

It was some time later that they reached the volcanic-looking stretch of country into the pitfalls of which Jack had fallen.

"Ugh! What a dreary place!" stammered Walt, a bit apprehensively.

Somehow they all felt the oppressive gloom in the same way. It depressed and made them silent. When they spoke at all it was in hushed tones, like folks use in church or a big museum. This is the effect of most awe-inspiring scenery, be it beautiful and grand, or merely gloomy and threatening. [63]

"In past ages volcanic energy was at work here," said the professor, gazing about with interest; "the formation of yonder cliffs tells an interesting story to the scientist. I wish my geological hammer was not in the packs, and I could get some specimens of the rocks. They would be excessively interesting."

"Not half so interesting ter me as a peek at Jack Merrill," grunted Pete. "I wish your science was capable of finding that lad for us, professor."

"Indeed, I wish so, too," sighed the professor, "but that is outside the realm of science. She can tell you of the past but is silent as to the future."

"I wonder if there are any volcanoes 'round about here now?" asked Ralph, looking about rather apprehensively. [64]

"No, indeed, the fires are long extinct," declared the professor, "this valley was formed at a remote period when no doubt hot water geysers and fires spouted through the earth's crust. But that will never occur again. In fact——"

"Look! Look there!" shouted Walt, suddenly pointing off to one side of the valley.

"By Jee-hos-o-phat—smoke!" yelled Pete, fairly startled out of his usual composure.

"A volcano!" cried Walt "Hadn't we better be getting away from here?"

"This is most extraordinary," exclaimed the man of science, "there is every evidence here that the internal fires have been long extinct and yet, as if to confound us, smoke comes pouring from that fissure yonder."

"Wall, my vote is that we git right out of hyar quick," declared Pete, "volcanoes and Peter de Peyster never did agree."

But the professor, filled with scientific ardor, was already spurring his bony animal across the scarred and arid plain toward the smoke. [65]

The others, watching him, saw him approach the fissure carefully and dismount. The next instant he uttered a yell that startled them all.

"Hez ther fireworks started?" asked Coyote anxiously.

The professor was waving his bony arms around like one of those wooden figures that you see on barns. He was evidently in a state of great excitement.

"What's that he's shouting?" asked Walt. "Hark!"

"Boys! boys! I've found him—Jack!"

This was the cry that galvanized them all into action. Without seeking for explanations, in fact, without a word, they spurred toward the professor's side. They found him peering down into the fissure, the edge of which was concealed by grass and ferns. Craning their necks, they, too, could spy a figure in the depths of the crevasse.

"Jack! Jack, old boy! Are you all right?" they cried anxiously. [66]

"Bright and fair!" came up the cheery answer, "but almost dead. I thought you'd never come. Got anything to eat?"

"Anything your little heart desires," Walt assured him.

In the meantime Pete had been busy getting a lariat in trim to lower to the beleaguered boy. Presently it was ready, and after much hauling and struggling, they got their companion once more to the surface. Jack reeled for an instant as he gained the brink, but Ralph's arms caught him. The next minute he had recovered his self-possession, however, and after eating ravenously of such provisions as could be got together hastily, he related the story of the strange things that had happened to him since leaving camp that morning.

"If I hadn't thought of those matches in my pocket and of igniting a fire of that dried grass, I doubt if I'd have been here now," he concluded. [67]

"I think you are right," said the professor gravely, "I am glad that that fire at least was not extinct."

CHAPTER VII.

THE CLOUDBURST.

Our adventurers, after a council of war, decided to press right on. As Coyote Pete put it:

"We've got a plumb duty ter perform and we'll see the game through, if it's agreeable to all present."

It was, and after Jack had fully recovered, which, aided by his natural buoyancy, did not take as long as might have been expected, the start was made.

"It's a race for the Trembling Mountain, now," cried Jack, as he once more bestrode brave little Firewater.

"So it is," cried Walt Phelps.

"And may the best man win," struck in Ralph rather pointlessly, as Pete reminded him.

"There's only one bunch of best men on this trip," he said, "and they're all with this party."

It did not take long to leave the dreary volcanic valley behind them, and they soon emerged on a rolling plain covered with plumed grasses of a rich bluish-green hue, on the further margin of which there hung like dim blue clouds, a range of mountains.

[69]

"There is our goal," cried the professor, with what was for him a dramatic gesture. He waved his arm in the direction of the distant hills.

"Yip-yip-y-e-e-e!" exploded the boys, in a regular cowboy yell.

"A race to that hummock yonder!" shouted Jack.

The others needed no urging. After their rough journey among the mountains the ponies, too, seemed to enter into the pleasure of traversing this broad open savannah.

Off they dashed, hoofs a-rattling and dust a-flying. But it was Firewater's race from the start. The lithe little pony easily distanced the others, and Jack, laughing and panting, drew rein at the goal a good ten seconds before the others tore up with quirts and spurs going furiously. Jack decided it was a dead heat between Walt and Ralph, and both declared themselves satisfied.

[70]

As the sun dropped lower, and hung like a red ball above the distant mountains, the question of finding a suitable camping place became an urgent one. Finally, however, on reaching the dried-up bed of a river, Coyote Pete decided that they had reached the proper spot.

"What about water?" inquired Walt rather anxiously.

"Plenty of that," said Pete, sententiously.

They looked about at the dry sand and rocks in the river bed and at the waving grass on either hand.

"You must have splendid eyesight," laughed Ralph, "I don't see a drop, unless it's in those clouds 'way off there above the mountains."

"I, too, must confess that I'm puzzled," put in the professor. "A more arid spot I have rarely seen."

"Wall, I'll guarantee that if you dig down a few feet right hyar you'll get all the water you want," said Coyote Pete calmly.

[71]

"Soon proved," cried Ralph, and aided by Walt he unpacked one of the burros and the two lads selected long-handled shovels.

How the dirt did fly then! Maybe it was an accident, and then again maybe it wasn't, when the professor, deeply immersed in a book he carried in his pocket, found himself the center of a regular gravel storm. He hastily moved out of the radius of the energetic diggers. But presently a loud cry from them announced a discovery.

"Struck oil?" asked Jack.

"Better still,—water!"

Sure enough, from the steep sides of the big holes they had dug, water was beginning to ooze. It was brownish in hue, alkaline in taste and distinctly warm, but still it was water, and men, boys and beasts drank eagerly of it.

But it ran in very slowly, and, as Jack observed, it was a long time between drinks.

[72]

"Wish some of that rain off in the mountains would strike hereabouts," observed Walt, as they sat down to supper.

"How do you know it's raining off there?" asked Ralph belligerently.

"I can see the dark clouds, Mister Smarty, and also, I have observed the fact that lightning is flashing among them."

"Hear the thunder, too, I suppose?" asked Ralph sardonically.

"Might if my ears were as big as yours," parried Walt.

Immediate hostilities were averted by the professor, who said:

"Boys! boys! Let us change the subject."

"The ears, you mean," muttered Walt, but he didn't say it out loud, and the meal passed off merrily after the little passage-at-arms. As it grew dark, they could see the lightning flashes in the far distance quite distinctly. It had a weird effect, this sudden coming and departure of blue flares on the horizon. Against the radiance the serrated outlines of the mountains stood out as if they had been cut from cardboard.

[73]

"Going to set a watch to-night?" asked Ralph, as they sat about a fire formed of the tough fibrous roots of the tufted grass, which was really more of a shrub.

"Of course," rejoined Coyote, "we don't know whether them varmints of Ramon's is ahead or ahind, but wherever they are, if we don't watch out, they'll do us all the mischief they can."

"Reckon that's right," agreed Ralph, "there's one good thing, though, they can't very well creep up on us here."

"No, that's one advantage of an open camp," agreed Jack, "on the other hand, though, we might have a job defending ourselves if attacked."

More discussion, none of which would be of vital interest to record here, followed. But it did not last long. Thoroughly tired out as our adventurers were, they one by one sought their blankets and the camp was soon wrapped in silence. That is, if the snores of some of the members of the party be excepted. But Coyote, who was on watch, was not bothered with sensitive nerves, and the noise disturbed him not a whit.

[74]

It was about midnight, and time for the plainsman to call Jack and Ralph to relieve him on guard, when a most peculiar sound arrested him in the act of crossing to the sleeping lads' sides.

The noise which had attracted his attention was a most unusual, an almost awe-inspiring one. Coming from no definite quarter, it yet filled the air with an omnipresent rumbling and roaring, not unlike,—so it flashed into Coyote's mind,—the reverberating rumble of an express train.

"But they ain't no night mails crossing this savannah as I ever heard on," he thought.

"Jumping bob cats!" he fairly howled the next instant.

In two bounds he reached the sleepers' sides and fairly shouted and shook them into wakefulness.

[75]

"What is it, Indians?" cried Jack, springing erect.

"Another bear!" gasped the professor.

"It ain't neither. It's worsen th'n both!" was Coyote's alarming, if oddly expressed, rejoinder.

As he spoke the roaring became louder, closer, more ominous.

Through the darkness they could now see that rushing toward them down the dry river bed was a mighty line of white. In the very indefiniteness of its form there was something that gripped them all with a cold chill of alarm, the keener for its very lack of understanding of the nature of the approaching mass. Ralph snatched up a rifle, but Coyote, seizing his arm, checked him in a flash.

"Don't do that, son. It's not a mite of good," he cried, and then the next instant:—

"Run for your lives, everybody! Thar's bin a cloudburst in ther mountains, and here comes ther gosh darndest flood since Noah's!"

[76]

CHAPTER VIII.

ADRIFT ON THE DESERT.

The consternation which Coyote's words caused may be imagined. The Border Boys hastily snatched up what they could, and with Professor Wintergreen sprinting beside them, they dashed off, making for the higher ground off to the right of their camping place. Behind them came the wall of white, angry water, uplifting its snowy crest gleamingly through the darkness.

But suddenly Jack stopped short.

"Here, take these," he exclaimed, thrusting his rifle and blankets into Ralph's hands.

Before the other could reply Jack was off into the night, sprinting away as he had not done since the field meet at Stonefell, when he won that memorable two hundred yard dash. The lad had suddenly recollected, and bitterly censured himself for it, too, that in the first flash of panic he had entirely forgotten to turn their stock loose. Tethered as they were, the animals would be drowned and the party helpless, unless the creatures were set free to swim for their lives, or gallop off before the flood.

[77]

Fortunately, it was not far, as the animals were staked out some distance below the camp and in the general direction in which the active lads had been fleeing.

As he ran, Jack felt for and found his knife, a big-bladed, heavily-handled affair. Reaching the ponies' sides, he hastily slashed, with heavy sweeps of his stout blade, one after another of the tethers. The animals, super-sensitive to approaching danger, were already wildly excited, and as their halter lines parted one after another, they dashed off madly.

The last animal for Jack to reach was Firewater. But the pony, instead of dashing off like the others, nuzzled close to Jack, shivering and sweating in an extremity of terror. Do what he could, Jack could not get him to move. All at once the boy threw a quick glance behind as a rapid footstep sounded.

[78]

"Coyote!" he cried.

"Yep, Jack, it's that same dern fool," cried the cow-puncher, "I see you had brains enough to do what I orter done afore we started on the run."

"No time to talk about that now," exclaimed Jack. "Look behind you."

"Gee whillakers, boy, the flood's upon us!"

Jack's reply was to spring upon Firewater's back.

"Here, Pete! Up behind me, quick!"

"Go on, Jack, and get away; I'll take my chances."

"Not much you won't! Get up quick, now!"

The lad extended a foot. Pete rested his weight on it for a flash and the next instant was mounted behind Jack.

"Yip-ee-ee-ee!" shrilled the boy, driving home his heels into the pony's flanks.



Firewater, balky no longer, gave a mad leap forward. Behind them roared the oncoming flood.

Firewater, balky no longer, gave a mad leap forward. Behind them roared the oncoming flood.

[79]

"Make for the high ground!" shouted Pete, "it's our only chance."

Jack made no reply, but bent lower over Firewater's withers, urging the gallant little pony on. But suddenly their flight was checked. And that, too, just as they had reached the comparative safety of the higher ground on the banks of the dry water course which had become so suddenly converted into a menace.

Firewater stuck his foot into a pocket-gopher hole. He struggled bravely to maintain his footing, but what with the heavy load he was carrying and the speed at which he had been suddenly halted, the pony lost his equilibrium. The next instant Jack and Coyote were on the ground while Firewater, thoroughly scared now, dashed off, whinnying wildly in his terror.

Pete, too, was up in a flash, but Jack lay quite still. The force of the fall had stunned him. The cow-puncher caught him up in a jiffy and set off clumsily, running from the menace behind with the unconscious boy in his arms.

[80]

But like most men whose lives have been spent in the saddle in our great west, Pete was an indifferent runner. Then, too, his heavy leather "chaps," which he had not removed while on watch, hampered him.

Before he had run ten yards the onrush of water was upon him and his senseless burden. The irresistible force of the flood swept him from his feet in a flash and bore him on its swirling surface like a chip or a straw. But half stunned, choked and dazed as he was, the cow-puncher clung to Jack. How long he could have continued to do so is doubtful, and this story might have had a far different termination. But something that occurred just at that instant deprived Pete of further responsibility in the matter.

Something struck him a sudden blow in the back of the head and a thousand lights instantly surged and danced before his eyes. As he lost consciousness, Pete felt himself seized by what appeared to be a mass of rough arms or tentacles, and lifted bodily from his feet. Then everything faded from his senses.

[81]

When he recovered it was broad daylight and Jack was bending over him. Sick and weak as the rugged cow-puncher felt as his

senses rushed back like an arrested tide, he could not forbear smiling as he gazed at the lad.

Jack's costume was, to say the least, an airy one. It consisted in fact, of part of his night clothing, badly torn, and a pair of boots which he had just had time to put on in the hurried retreat from the camp.

The boy saw the smile and guessed its reason. But the smile was speedily replaced by a more serious expression as Pete sat up and at once sought to have explained to him just what had happened.

"Something that felt like one of them octopusses you read about, gripped me, and that's about all I can recall," he said; "what came next?"

"I hardly know much more about that than you," was Jack's response, "except that when I recovered my senses after that spill that Firewater gave us I found myself half drowned, all tangled up in the roots of a big tree that the flood was hurrying along. Feeling about me the first thing I discovered was you, and I can tell you I was mighty glad, too, Pete, old boy. No, don't glare at me. I know,—or can guess,—that it was you who saved my life after Firewater threw us both off and—"

[82]

"No more of that, youngster," snorted Pete sternly, although his eyes were filled with an odd moisture. "I reckon it was the old tree yonder that saved us both. We were both struggling in the flood when it hit me and put me to sleep for a while. It's a good thing it came on roots first or we might not have bin so chipper this partic'lar A. M."

They both regarded the tree to which they probably owed their lives. A big stick of timber of the pine variety, and evidently of mountain growth, it lay a short distance from them just as the flood had left it stranded. For the cloudburst over, the water had sunk in the dry river bed as rapidly as it had arisen. Hardly a foot of muddy liquid now remained in the river to show the aftermath of the wild watercourse of the night.

[83]

"But now, what has become of the others?" exclaimed Jack anxiously. "I hope they are all right."

"I guess so, son," said Pete, rising rather weakly to his feet, for the blow the tree had struck him, while it had not broken the skin, had been a stunning one.

"You see," he went on, "they got a good start of us and should have reached the high ground afore the water hit."

"That's so," agreed Jack, "and I can see now that the water did not rise so very high. It was its speed and anger that made it terrible."

"Wonder how far that blamed old tree carried us," said Pete, rather anxiously. "It's just curred to me that if we don't connect with the stock and some grub pretty quick, we'll be in a bad fix."

[84]

He gazed about him as he spoke. On every side stretched monotonous plains covered with the same gray-green brush as the savannah amidst which they had camped the night before. But the question in Pete's mind was whether or not it was the same plain or another altogether on which they stood.

But fortunately for them, for they were not in the mood or condition to stand hardship long, they were not destined to remain long in doubt as to the whereabouts of their companions. While they were gazing anxiously into the distance Jack's keen eye suddenly detected a sharp flash off to the eastward. It was as if the sun had glinted for an instant on a bit of sharply cut diamond. The flash was as bright as a sudden ray of fire. The next instant it was seen no more. But a second later it flashed up again. This time the glitter was to be seen for a longer interval.

"What on airth is it?" gasped Pete, to whom Jack had indicated the phenomenon.

[85]

"Wait one moment and maybe I can tell you if it is what I hope," cried Jack in an excited tone. With burning eyes he watched the distant point of light flashing and twinkling like a vanishing and reappearing star.

"Hooray!" he cried suddenly, "it's all right! It's Ralph and the rest and they are all safe. But they don't know yet where we are."

Pete gazed at the boy as if he suspected that the stress of the night might have turned his mind.

"Anything else you kin see off thar?" he asked sardonically.

"Nothing but that they say the horses are all right, and that if we see their signals we are to send up a smoke column," replied Jack calmly, his countenance all aglow.

"Look hyar, Jack Merrill, I promised your father ter take care of yer," said Pete sternly, "an' I don't want ter take back a raving loonertick to him. What's all this mean?" [86]

"That Ralph is signalling with a bit of mirror,—heliographing, they call it in the army," cried Jack, with a merry laugh, which rather discomfited Pete.

"Wall, that may be, too," he admitted grudgingly, "thar sun would catch it and make it flash. But how under ther eternal stars kin you tell what he's saying?"

"Simple enough," rejoined Jack; "he was making the flashes long and short,—using the Morse telegraph code, in fact. You know we had a cadet corps at Stonefell to which we both belonged. Field signalling and heliographing was part of our camping instruction, but I guess neither of us ever dreamed it would come in handy in such a way as this. That certainly was a bully idea of Ralph's. He knew if we were any place around we would see the flashes and be able to read them, whereas we couldn't have sighted them in the tall brush so easily and might have missed them altogether." [87]

"Wall, what air we goin' ter do now?" asked Pete, rather apathetically.

"Do? Why, light a fire, of course. Then they'll see the smoke column and come over to us with grub and the ponies."

"Hum," snorted Pete. "Got any matches?"

"Why, no. Haven't you?"

"Nary a one."

"Phew!" whistled Jack. "Now we are in a fix for certain. What can we do?"

"Keep your shirt—or what's left of it—on, son, you'll need it," said Pete slowly, a smile overspreading his sun-bronzed features, "thar's more ways of killing cats than choking 'em ter death with superfine cream. Likewise thar's more ways of lighting a fire than by using parlor matches."

Jack watched Pete wonderingly as he took out his knife in silence and strode off to the tree. He found a dead branch and whittling off the wet outside bark soon reached the dry interior. This done, he cut the wood down to a stick about two feet long and a little thicker than a stout lead pencil. Then he hacked away at some more of the dry wood till he had a small flat bit of thoroughly dry timber. In this he excavated a small hole to fit the point of the pencil-like stick. [88]

"Now git me some dry twigs from that brush yonder," he directed Jack, who had been gazing on these preparations with much interest and a dawning perception of what the old plainsman was going to do.

By the time Jack was back with the twigs,—the dryest he could find,—Pete had scraped off a lot of sawdust-like whittlings and piled them about the hole he had dug out. Then taking the pencil-like stick between his palms, he inserted its lower end in the hole, carefully heaped the sawdust stuff about it, and began rotating it slowly at first and then fast.

All at once a smell of burning wood permeated the air. From the sawdust a tiny puff of blue smoke rolled up. Suddenly it broke into flame. [89]

"Now the twigs! Quick!" cried Pete, and as Jack gave him the dry bits of stick he piled them on the blazing punk-wood, blowing cautiously at the flame. In ten minutes he had a roaring fire. But the old plainsman's work wasn't finished yet. He began hacking green branches from the tree and piling them on top of his blaze.

Instantly a pillar of dun-colored, smoke, thick and greasy, rolled upward into the still air.

Pete took off his leather coat and threw it over the smoking pyre, smothering the column of vapor.

"Now then, son," he said, with the faintest trace of triumph in his voice, "yer see that this here hell-io-what-you-may-call 'em, ain't ther only trick in the plainsman's bag. By raising and lowering that coat you kin talk in your Remorse thing as long as you like."

"Pete, I take off my hat to you," exclaimed Jack, feeling ashamed of the rather superior manner he had assumed when talking of the heliograph a while before. [90]

“That’s all right, son. But take it from yer Uncle Dudley that we none of us know everything. Thar’s things you kin larn from an Injun, jus’ as I larned how ter git that fire a-goin’.”

Kneeling by the smoldering smoke-pile, Jack raised and lowered the coat at long and short intervals, forming a species of smoke telegraphy easily readable by anyone who understood the Morse code.

An hour of anxious waiting followed and then upon the scene galloped at top speed the rest of the adventurers bearing with them some food, scanty but welcome, and best of all, the ponies and one rifle.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LONE RANCHO.

Well, that was an odd meal, that refecton of water-soaked biscuit and canned corned beef, with flood water as a beverage. Perhaps in all the adventures of the Border Boys, when in after years they came to recall them, no scene stood out quite so strikingly.

For one thing, Coyote Pete alone, of the party, possessed any sort of wardrobe. The professor was clad in his "barber pole" pajamas. Ralph boasted a shirt and Walt Phelps possessed the same with the addition of a pair of socks, which latter hardly fulfilled requirements so far as a covering for his nether limbs was concerned.

From time to time the Border Boys had to look at each other and burst out laughing. Only the professor viewed the matter in a serious light.

"Suppose we should meet some ladies," he asked indignantly. [92]

"Reckon thar ain't many of 'em hereabouts," ventured Coyote, spreading a big slice of beef on a bit of soggy bread. "The burros is ther only representatives of the gentle sex fer a good many miles, I opinion."

The burros, relieved of their packs, which had been swept away, wagged their ears appreciatively at this, and continued browsing on the short, coarse grass which grew in patches here and there, and which the boys were delighted to see seemed also to be palatable to the horses.

Ralph and the others had already related how the terrified animals had been recaptured without difficulty early that day. In fact, a circumstance which has often been noted was their good fortune, namely, that panic-stricken horses in lonely, wild countries, will actually seek human companionship,—provided, of course, that they have already been domesticated. As for the burros, their loud "hee-haws" had resounded all night. [93]

Ralph also explained how the idea of the mirror heliograph came to him. The lad who, as has been explained, was a bit of a dandy, was horrified to discover the abbreviated state of his wardrobe. But a search of his shirt pocket revealed his pocket-mirror with its folding brush and comb fittings. The railroad king's son had at once set to work to make himself presentable about the head at least, and was combing his hair neatly and wondering how Jack and Pete had fared, when the sun caught the mirror and it flashed blindingly into his eyes. This gave him the idea of flashing it in all directions in the hope that the others, if within sight, would catch its glint. Then came the happy thought of telegraphing with the bit of glass by alternately covering and uncovering it. The idea had met with the warm approval of the professor and Walt Phelps, although, perhaps, even they had not been over sanguine of results.

"Well," said Jack at length, after the events of the night and the following incidents had been discussed and re-discussed, "what are we going to do now?" [94]

"Get clothes," cried Ralph, without an instant's hesitation, regarding his bare legs disparagingly.

"By all means, yes," agreed the professor.

Coyote Pete grinned.

"Jack," said he, "will you be so kind as ter step ter the telephone and tell the Blue Front Store to send up a few samples of men's furnishings?"

All but the professor burst into a roar of laughter at this sally.

"At any rate," suggested Walt Phelps, "we're not likely to get held up."

"Not so sure about that," said the professor, "I have the money belt containing most of our finances around my waist. I always sleep with it there."

"Hooray!" shouted the boys, who, up to that moment had not once thought of the important question of finances. It struck them now with sobering force. [95]

"By George!" cried Jack, "if it hadn't been for your foresight, professor, we might have been penniless as well as wardrobeless."

"That's right," agreed Coyote Pete, "and ther chance that you'd stand of being helped out by the greasers would be about ther same as a snowflake 'ud have on a red-hot cook stove."

"My idea is to lose no time in striking out for a town or village where we can get some clothes, even if they are only Mexican garments," announced Jack.

"And food, too," put in Walt Phelps, who liked to get his three meals a day, "we'll be on starvation diet if we don't stock up on that."

After more discussion it was agreed to follow up the dry bed of the river, as the professor's map showed a small village some distance up a stream which, though unnamed on the map, seemed to be the one on whose banks they now were. This decision reached, no time was lost in mounting. There was no saddling to be done, for the saddles had been swept off with most of the rest of their outfit.

[96]

"If you ever catch me camping in the dry bed of a river again you are welcome to hang me to a sour apple tree," grumbled Walt Phelps, as he mounted.

"I reckon I'm ter blame fer it all," volunteered Coyote Pete, "but I never thought as how that far-off storm would affect us in the plains. That must have bin a jim-dandy of a cloudburst."

"I'd hate to have been any closer to it than we were," laughed Jack. "If we had been, we'd have been going yet, I imagine."

"I heard of a cloudburst once that did some good, though," struck in Pete; "ther thing happened to a friend of mine in Californy. He wuz a miner, Jefferson Blunt by name.

"Wall, sir, Jeff had struck such all-fired bad luck up on the Stanislaus River that he'd about concluded to pull out for other regions when, all of a sudden, one night up came a storm, and in the middle of it there come the all-firedest cloudburst that Jeff had ever heard of. It picked up his cabin and floated Jeff off down the river, a-going like a blue streak. He thought every minute that he'd hear Gabriel's trumpet and see ther golden stairs, but that little old cabin was well built and watertight, and it floated like a boat.

[97]

"It must hev been hours, Jeff says, afore he felt ther thing give a bump and stop. As soon as he dared he opened ther door and peeked out. He wuz in a part uv ther country he'd never seen. It was all cliffs and big trees and very imposing, and ther like of that,—that 'imposing' is Jeff's word.

"Wall, Jeff he steps out of his sea-going shack and looks about him, and ther first thing he sees is a big streak of ore just a-glitter with gold and stuck, like a band of yaller ribbon along ther cliff face above his head.

"Jeff had bin so unlucky that first he thinks it's jes' fool's gold and not the real article. But he soon convinces himself thet he's struck it rich at last. Wall, ter make a long story short, Jeff files a claim and in a few y'ars is a rich man, and what d'ye s'pose he called ther mine?"

[98]

"'The Cloud Burst,' of course!" cried Jack.

"How'd yer guess it?" asked Pete. "But yer right, and thet's ther only cloudburst I ever hearn' of, thet brought anybody any luck."

"Personally, if I could find a pair of trousers," wailed the professor, "I should esteem their possession almost above even such a lucky discovery as you have related."

"I think I'd trade it right now for a porter-house steak and trimmings, brown gravy and green corn, and——"

"See here," put in Ralph, with assumed indignation, "if you don't shut up I'll, I'll——"

"Go right home," chuckled Walt teasingly; "you'd be a fine sight in that rig. I'll bet the folks back east would have you put in the calaboose."

But by noon the gay spirits of the boys were considerably toned down. No sign of a town had yet come in sight and they were all hot, hungry and tired. The odd procession, with the burros tagging along behind, looked disconsolate enough as it followed the windings of the river. The shallow aftermath of the flood steamed and simmered under the hot sun, sending up unpleasant odors,—yet they had to drink it or go without.

[99]

By way of cheering the party up, Coyote Pete began to sing—or rather wail—in the high-pitched voice affected by cow-punchers singing to their cattle:

"O-ho-wa-hay da-own upon the Su-wahanee River,
Fa-har, fa-har a-way—"

But before he could begin the next line Ralph struck in with:

"There's where our pants are floating ever;
There's where they're gone to stay!"

[100]

In the general roar of laughter which followed, the "grouch" which had settled down on the tired wayfarers vanished like the spring snow under a burst of sunlight.

With a shout the boys, their troubles forgotten in an outburst of that good nature that makes the whole world kin, plunged forward, their shirt tails flying.

"Yip-yip-ye-ee!"

The joyous yell filled the air. And then it broke off into a real cheer, for, on surmounting the summit of a small eminence, they saw below them, not more than a mile off, a small adobe house of unusual type, for it had two stories. It was surrounded by a grove of green willows which delighted the eye tired by the endless gray-green stretches of grease-wood savannahs.

Even the dignified professor joined in the enthusiasm, and in a minute a cavalcade was bearing down on the place at breakneck speed. As they neared it in a thunder of hoofs and a cloud of yellow dust, a door opened and the figure of a gaunt Mexican, with long, shaggy, black hair hanging straight and lank to his shoulders, stepped out. His next move halted the leaders of the party abruptly.

[101]

He jerked a long-barreled rifle to his shoulder and pointed it threateningly.

"Mira rurales!" he yelled to some one within the house.

"No rurales! Americanos!" cried Coyote Pete.

The effect was magical. The man's startled air changed, and with a sheepish smile he stepped forward as Jack and Ralph, who were in advance, drew rein.

"What did he mean by rurales, I wonder?" asked Ralph of Jack in a low tone as the others loped up.

"Why, rurales are a species of police. Rangers, they are called sometimes. They are wild chaps, mostly recruited from the ranks of brigands and highwaymen. The government pays them a high figure to be good and keep law and order."

"But this man seemed to fear them."

[102]

"Maybe he has reason to. But we can't be particular. At any rate, we are a strong enough party to look after our own hands. But see, here comes his wife. I guess, after all, he is nothing more unlawful than a cattle rancher in a small way, who perhaps, once-in-a-while takes an unbranded calf or two from his neighbor's estates."

The woman who joined the man, who by this time had set down the rifle, was a stout, slatternly-looking creature in a greasy cotton wrapper. She shot out a few rapid words in a low voice to the other, who replied in equally low tones. So far as Jack, who was closest, could judge, the woman seemed to be protesting against something, and the man stilling her objections.

Coyote Pete as spokesman now advanced, and in Spanish asked if they could obtain lodging and refreshment for themselves and their stock.

[103]

CHAPTER X.

AFTER MIDNIGHT.

To their astonishment, the man seemed to hesitate. They had judged from the poverty-stricken look of his place and belongings that he would jump at the chance to make some money easily. But it seemed that this was not the case.

While the fellow still hesitated, glancing covertly at the newcomers, the professor did a foolish thing. He exhibited his money belt and tapping it made it give forth the suggestive jingle of coins. Coyote Pete's expression grew angry for a moment, but he checked his chagrin at the professor's foolish move.

But the exhibition of the party's financial solidity seemed to have decided the ill-favored Mexican and his wife, for after some more parley, which somehow appeared to Jack to be merely for form's sake, they agreed to shelter the party and their stock at two dollars each, Mexican, which is equivalent to one dollar of our money.

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"Cheap enough," said Jack, as ten minutes later they turned their stock loose in the corral and watched them attack with wholesome appetites the hay stack in the center of the enclosure.

"May be dear enough before we get through," thought Coyote Pete to himself.

He refrained from mentioning his mistrustful feeling to the others, however, as, after all, the Mexicans might be honest enough folks even if his impressions were otherwise.

After a wash-up in a small creek which flowed at the back of the place, the adventurers were quite ready to sit down to a smoking meal of frijoles (beans fried with red peppers) and eggs cooked in the Mexican style. Some thin red wine was served with the meal, but as none of the party had any use for alcoholic beverages in any form, they were content to wash it down with water from the great stone olla,—or water cooler which hung under the broad eaves of the veranda.

[105]

Jack had an uneasy sense that they were being scrutinized as they ate, by some unseen pair of eyes, and once looking up quickly he caught, or thought he did, a glimpse of the woman's print gown slipping from a shuttered window. Jack was not a boy to make a mountain out of a mole hill, though, and concluded that, in all probability, the woman, if she had been looking at them, had been merely curious at the advent of so many strangers.

The rest of the afternoon, for it was late when they concluded their meal, was passed in chatting and lounging about under the trees. Nobody felt inclined for more strenuous occupations. The professor, however, having obtained some old canvas, succeeded in fashioning a rough pair of trousers. They were short and shapeless, and his legs stuck out oddly from them like the drumsticks of a fowl, but they were better than nothing, he thought. As for the boys, they had bought some baggy garments of the Mexican type from the lone rancher, which would have to last them till they reached the nearest town. This, they were informed, was Santa Anita, and was not more than ten miles distant.

[106]

An early start being determined on, they sought their beds soon after supper, which consisted of the same fare as the other meal with the addition of some greasy pancakes. Jack ate some of these, not caring for a second dose of the peppery beans and a short time after felt, as he expressed it to himself, "as if a cannon ball were in his midst."

Perhaps this accounts for his wakefulness, for he found it impossible to sleep after they had all turned in, in one large room,—or, rather, garret,—which formed the second floor. The others flung themselves on the straw, which served for beds, with the lassitude of complete exhaustion, but Jack lay awake, with the pancakes on his chest like a leaden weight. At length he fell into an uneasy slumber, from which he awakened a short time later with a start and a queer feeling that something in which they were vitally interested was going forward.

[107]

His first vague feelings rapidly crystallized into more definite shape as, from the yard outside, he could now distinctly hear the trampling of horses' hoofs. There seemed to be several of them, to

judge by the noise.

Moonlight was streaming into the garret through an unglazed opening in the adobe wall, and holding his watch in the rays, Jack saw that it was half an hour after midnight.

"Queer time to receive visitors," he thought to himself.

At the same time he was conscious of an overwhelming curiosity to ascertain who and what the midnight arrivals could be. The boy had noticed a door in the wall of the garret when they first entered it that evening, and from his previous inspection of the exterior of the house he had formed an idea that it opened upon the top landing of an outside stairway. They had been conducted to the garret, however, by a ladder leading from the room below.

[108]

As well as he could judge, the noise came from the opposite side of the house to that on which the door was situated, so there did not seem to be much chance of detection in slipping out of the door, down the outside stairway and, from some point of vantage, seeing what all the racket might portend. There was one possible difficulty in the way, and that was that the door might be locked. But it proved to be unlatched, and Jack, swinging it open, after he had partially dressed, found himself, as he had surmised he would, on a landing or platform at the top of an outside flight of stairs.

In his bare feet, for he had not paused to put on shoes, he slipped as noiselessly as possible down the stairway and presently found himself in the yard. The moonlight cast black and white patterns of the overhanging willows on the ground, but a brief inspection convinced Jack that there was no human being astir but himself on that side of the house.

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As he reached the ground he could distinctly hear the voice of the slatternly woman crying out:—

"Hush!" to the new arrivals.

The voices which had been loud at first were instantly lowered, and he could hear the riders, whoever they were, addressing quieting remarks to their horses.

"Well, I'm going to see what all this means, if it's the last thing I do," said Jack to himself, and suiting the action to the word he glided rapidly along in the shadow of the wall till he reached the corner of the house. There was a low outbuilding there, which might at one time have been used as a pigstye. This was just what Jack wanted. He placed both hands on the top bar of the little enclosure outside the pen-like erection, and the next instant had vaulted lightly over and was inside the little shack. The boards of which it was composed were interspersed by wide cracks, and applying his eye to one of these the Border Boy commanded a fine view of the moonlit yard at the end of the house.

[110]

As he had expected, it was full of riders, one of whom was mounted on an animal which somehow seemed familiar to the boy. He with difficulty suppressed a cry of astonishment, as the next instant the rider emerged into the moonlight, and Jack saw that he was none other than Black Ramon. The others, he now recognized as men he had seen in the camp on that adventurous morning following the delivery of the warning letter.

But Jack had not much time to meditate on all this, for he suddenly became aware that Ramon was riding behind the cantle of his saddle, and that lying across the saddle itself was a human figure. A second later the boy made out that it was the senseless form of a woman that the outlaw chief was carrying before him.

Hardly had he made this discovery before the woman and the man of the lone ranch came forward and lifted the inanimate form from the back of the black horse of the Border scourge. As they did so a mantilla of elaborate workmanship which covered her face, fell from it, disclosing her marble-like features, as pale as death. Jack then saw that she was young and very beautiful. As the girl was lifted by the lone rancheros, her consciousness returned, and opening her eyes she began to pour out a flood of Spanish. Jack, like most boys bred along the border, had a working knowledge of the language, and it didn't take him long to gather that she was promising rich rewards, estates, anything to her captors if they would release her and restore her to her parents.

[111]

But Ramon's rejoinder was a hoarse laugh. He informed the girl that he meant to exact a heavy ransom from her father for her freedom, and that if it were not forthcoming he would make her his own wife.

An astonishing change came over the girl at these words. From a pleading, terror-stricken maiden, she became a fine figure of scorn. Drawing herself up proudly, she exclaimed with blazing eyes:—

[112]

"I would die before such a thing happened. My father will find you out and punish you like the wicked men you are."

"Colonel Don Alverado will never find Black Ramon or see his daughter again if a hundred thousand pesos are not forthcoming before the end of the week," was the rejoinder.

In speaking these last words Ramon had unconsciously raised his voice, and the rancheros, with faces full of alarm, stepped forward.

"Hush! for heaven's sake not so loud!" the woman exclaimed, "there are several Gringos in the house!"

Ramon's face grew black.

"Gringos!" he snarled, "what do you mean by admitting the Yankee pigs when I have paid you well for the use of your house?"

"But they are here only for the night and are sound asleep," protested the male ranchero. "Depend on it, they will not interfere. They are pressing on toward Santa Anita to-morrow at dawn."

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"And then, too, they have a belt full of money, Senor Ramon," whined the woman, "there is no reason why your excellent self should not have it. We had that idea in our head when we consented to let them stop here."

"Oh, so that's the reason you suddenly became willing to let us stop," thought Jack in his hiding place.

But Ramon was now leaning forward with a sudden expression of keen interest.

"These Gringos, old woman," he asked, "tell me, are they three boys, a tough-looking, long-legged man with a yellow moustache, and a spectacled old man?"

"Si, senor," was the rejoinder.

"Santa Maria," exclaimed Ramon, "here is good fortune. It is those Border Boys and their companions delivered into our hands for the plucking. You did well to let them stop here, senora. They are all asleep, you say?"

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"Si. It is but a few minutes ago that my man crept up the ladder and peered into the garret in which they are sleeping. They are all snoring like the Yankee pigs they are."

"Bueno. We will attend to them shortly," was the rejoinder; "but now to dispose of the girl. Have you a room in which we can confine her?"

"Yes, in the small room at the other end of the house. It was formerly used as a wine room and is without windows, except a small one at the top for ventilation. It has a strong door, too, for when we grew vines and made wine, thieves used to visit us, ill fortune light upon them."

"That's a queer sort of morality," thought Jack, "for if I ever saw or heard of a precious band of rascals, these are surely they. That poor senorita! We must devise some way of aiding her to escape, but what can we do? I guess I'll sneak back now while they are busy elsewhere and wake up the others, for if I'm not mistaken we are going to have a tough fight on our hands before very many minutes."

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As Jack cautiously slipped back by the way he had come, he saw the senorita being led away into the house, proudly disdainful to parley further with her captors.

"There's a girl in a thousand," thought Jack to himself, "no hysterics or uproar about her. We've just got to help her out of the clutches of those ruffians."

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CHAPTER XI.

TRAPPED!

Cautiously awakening his companions one by one, Jack told them of his adventures while in the pig pen.

"The scoundrels!" exclaimed the professor, "we must act at once."

"Now hold your horses," drawled Coyote Pete in the easy tone he always adopted when danger was near, "it ain't our move yet. If I ain't very much mistaken we'll have all the action we want in a very short time, too. As a first step I'd suggest we bar that door yonder,—the one that Jack sneaked out of—I see it's got a good big latch on the inside. In that way we'll head off an attack frum thar, an' we'll only have the trap door from below to look after."

The heavy bar being noiselessly placed in its hasps, Pete outlined his further plans.

"They'll figger we are asleep," he said, "but it ain't likely they'll jump us till they've sent someone up to make sure. It's our play then ter git back on the straw and all snore as natural as possible."

"What then?" asked Walt Phelps in rather an alarmed tone. "We've only got one rifle."

"That's so, consarn it," grunted Pete, "wall, we'll hev ter do ther best we can an'—hush, hyar comes the advance guard now!"

In the room below they could hear cautious footsteps. Evidently Ramon had lost no time in hatching out his plans.

"Lie down, everybody, and sham sleep as hard as yer can," ordered Pete in a low, tense whisper, "our lives may depend on it."

The order was obeyed none too soon, for before many seconds had passed they could hear the creaking of the ladder as someone mounted it. Presently, from one half-closed eye, Jack perceived a head poked upward through the trap in the floor. By the light which streamed up from below he saw that it was the cranium of the red-headed man whom he was pretty sure was the author of the warning message which had been carried into their camp.

The man stood still as a statue for perhaps five minutes. During the tense moments Jack's heart beat as if it would break through his ribs. It was not fear, but intense excitement that thrilled him. The moment was at hand when they would be engaged in a desperate game against terrible odds. What would be the result?

Having apparently satisfied himself that they all slept soundly, the scout of the outlaws descended once more, the ladder creaking under his weight.

"It's goin' ter come in a few minutes, now," whispered Pete, rousing himself, "gimme the rifle, Walt. How many cartridges is in it?"

"Five," was the disheartening reply.

"An' we ain't got another one between us," moaned Pete. "Wall, it can't be helped, as the hawk said to ther chicken when he carried her of, leavin' her numerous family behind. Now, I'm going ter git right by this here opening and the first head that pokes through it gits a crack. We'll save the cartridges for an emergency."

"An emergency!" exclaimed Ralph, thinking that if ever there was an emergency the present situation had already arrived at that stage.

They could now hear whispers below, and worse still, the ominous click and slide of repeating rifles being got in readiness for use.

"There's some old furniture piled in that corner," exclaimed Jack suddenly, "couldn't we use it to block the trap with?"

"A good idea when the worst of it comes," assented Pete, "but we've got ter keep ther trap open so as to disable as many as possible before we have to come to close quarters."

The next ten minutes,—for though it seemed like the same number of hours, it was not in reality any more,—was the most painful period the boys ever recalled having put in. From the room below came furtive sounds, but they were so soft and infrequent that it looked as if the main body must have withdrawn further to

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discuss the attack.

"Say, let's rush them. I can't stand this any longer."

It was Ralph who spoke, but Coyote laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Easy, lad, easy," he admonished in a low breath, almost in the lad's ear, "it won't be long before they start tuning up for the performance, and it ain't goin' ter be a funeral march for us neither."

As he spoke, Pete "clubbed" their solitary rifle, holding it by the barrel. At the same instant a door beneath quietly opened and closed, and the next minute the ladder creaked as a foot was placed upon it.

"Up with you, Miguel," they heard Ramon whisper, "here's the knife. Remember the money belt is on the old man. Jose, you follow him closely, and Migullo, you come after. That is all it is safe to trust on the ladder at one time. I myself will come later."

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"The cowardly greaser," breathed Coyote, with one of his increasingly frequent lapses into plain English, "I guess he'll feel less like climbing than ever when he sees what's going to happen to the first arrival. It's a good thing for us they can't come but one at a time. In that way they'll have no chance of rushing us."

As he finished speaking the boys felt the peculiar thrill that comes before the enactment of some exciting deed. A black head poked itself cautiously through the trap and as it did so Coyote raised his rifle stock, swung it, and brought it down with crushing force on the head of the intruding wretch. He fell backward with a crash, and landed in a heap in the room below. Under ordinary circumstances, not one of the Border Boys would have stood for such drastic measures. But they knew that now it was their life or the Mexican's. Nevertheless they felt relieved as they heard the fellow stagger to his feet and begin cursing in picturesque Mexican.

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"Diablo! The fiend himself is in those Gringos," he raved, "I think they have broken every bone in my body."

"More fool you, for not being more cautious," growled Ramon, and then, raising his voice, he shouted up in English:

"It will be of no use to you to resist. I have a superior force and if you injure another of my men when I do get you it will go hard with you. Surrender and give me the money and no harm will come to you with the exception of Jack Merrill. I mean to deal with him as I choose."

"When you get him, you dog," shouted Coyote Pete, "which won't be yet or for a long time to come,—ah! you would, would you!"

As he spoke, the cow-puncher had projected his head thoughtlessly over the edge of the trap door. A bullet aimed to kill, which, however, whizzed harmlessly by his ear, was the result. The missile sang through the air and buried itself in one of the rafters.

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"We'll give you all you want of that directly," hailed Coyote Pete, essaying what is sometimes called "a bluff," "we have plenty of rifles and ammunition, and we can use them, too, so bring on your next man."

"You shall smart for this, you Gringo pig," cried Ramon from below. Evidently the complete failure of his first attack and Coyote's bantering tone had driven him beside himself with fury.

"Oh, I'm a smart fellow, anyhow," chuckled Coyote Pete, "come on. One cigar for every head I crack. That's the way they do it at the county fair with the Jolly Nigger Dodger, and I don't know as you greasers have anything on him."

"Rush up and bring them down out of that!" screamed Ramon furiously. But the sharp lesson they had just had seemed to hold the Mexicans in check. Evidently the Gringos above were not to be trifled with. Ramon strode up and down the room stamping and raging and biting his nails. Altogether he was in a fit of black Latin rage which is not so very different from the tantrums we occasionally find in our own nurseries.

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"Why not come up yourself, Ramon?" was Coyote's next thrust. "If your head is burning with such blazing thoughts it must need ventilating."

But the Mexican, wisely enough perhaps, did not reply. Instead, he called down the men from the ladder, seeing, in spite of his rage, that it was useless to waste his followers in that fashion.

"We'd better bottle up the trap door now," said Pete, as the

voices below became more inaudible. "Get that old furniture, boys, and we'll make things snug."

"Here's an old table top that might fit over the hole," said Jack, bringing the article in question, "it'll just fit too, and it's solid mahogany." [125]

"Just the thing, boy. Now quickly bring all the stuff you can to pile on it."

"Say, there's a pile of big stones over here where the chimney goes through," reported Ralph presently, "how would those do for weights?"

"Fine. Bring them right along. Your Uncle Dudley will pile them."

One would have said from the cow-puncher's boisterous spirits that he was in perfect security instead of a situation the danger of which he, perhaps, more fully realized than any of his companions, comparatively inexperienced as they were.

One by one the lads carried the big stones over and they were piled on the table top.

"That will do," said Coyote at length, "they'll never get that up unless they use dynamite."

"What do you suppose they'll do now?" wondered Jack as, the work over, they sat down about the newly covered hole.

"Try rushing that back door, most likely. Suppose you take a peek out of the window. It gives a view of the steps and it's too small for the varmint ter git through." [126]

The small aperture, mentioned before, was quite high up in the wall, but, hoisted up by Ralph and Walt, Jack was able to rest his elbows on the sill and peer out. He did so cautiously, which was just as well, for, as the astute cow-puncher had surmised, the next attack must come from the back door. So much was evidenced by a view of the steps which were covered with dark forms advancing stealthily.

"We'll give 'em another surprise party," announced Pete when he had heard his young lieutenant's report. "Jack, take the rifle while I guard the trap. There's a chance they may try to rush the two places at once. Aim through the keyhole, and when you think it time to, let 'em have it. Don't be scared of hurting them. Remember it's our lives or theirs."

Feeling a bit squeamish, but far too good a soldier to attempt to disobey orders, or even question them, Jack did as he was directed. Placing the muzzle of the rifle to the keyhole he waited with beating heart the first signal that their enemies had ascended the stairway and were actually on the balcony outside the door. [127]

He had not long to wait. Presently there came a scuffling, scratching sound without, as the Mexicans fumbled about the door, evidently feeling for a latch of some sort. With a hasty prayer that he might not inflict a mortal wound, Jack awaited the right moment, as he judged it, and fired.

There was instantly a loud yell of pain from without.

"Good for you, boy," grunted old Pete grimly "you brung him down."

CHAPTER XII.

THE GRINGOES MOVE.

From without the door there now came shouts of baffled rage. The Mexicans were finding out, as their kind has done before, that a party of brave Americans is more than a match for twice their number in a fight. Moreover, thanks mainly to Jack's presence of mind in slipping out of the house and performing scout work, our party was strongly entrenched. The door was stout, and the iron bar within solid. There was no apparent way of forcing an entrance by battering it down, for the landing was too small to use a "ram" effectually.

"Hooray, we've got 'em beaten!" cried Ralph thoughtlessly.

Coyote flashed a scornful eye on him.

"Beaten!" he scoffed, "we ain't got 'em beaten till we're out of this place and miles on our way. Why, if they kain't do anything else they kin starve us out if they want to."

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"That's so," assented Ralph sorrowfully, and then with a violent twist of spirits, "I guess we're goners."

"There, go galloping off the reservation agin," struck in Pete; "we ain't goners yit by a long shot, but we've got a powerful lot of work afore us, as the government said when they tackled digging that Panama Canal."

All now became silent once more, or at least the boys could hear nothing. Evidently the Mexicans had withdrawn for a council of war.

"This time they'll be in dead earnest," opined the cow-puncher, "so keep a smart eye open for 'em everywhere."

Hanging breathlessly on the least sound, the besieged party waited for the first sign of the coming attack. It was a long time in making itself manifest, and when it did, it was for a moment puzzling enough. It came in the form of a noise from above.

"Somebody's on the roof!" exclaimed Pete. "The foxy varmints! I wonder they didn't think of that before."

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The roof of the lonely rancho was flat, and soon they could hear several footsteps on it as their besiegers paced about.

"What are they going to do?" asked Ralph in a puzzled tone.

"Not hard to guess," rejoined the professor, "cut a hole in it, I guess, and then they'll have us completely at their mercy."

"If we let them," said Jack, "but why not try to escape by the trap, while they are busy on the roof?"

"That might be a good idea if it warn't likely that they have the foot of the ladder guarded, or most probably have taken it down," said Coyote Pete; "no, you'll have to guess agin, Jack. Think uv something new and original."

"I might say try that door, but I guess that's guarded, too."

"Not a doubt of it," was the reply.

"Tell you what we'll do," exclaimed Jack suddenly, struck with an inspiration, "we'll try the walls. There may be a secret passage or a concealed window in them some place."

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The cow-puncher laughed.

"This ain't a story book, son, and I never heard of such things outside of one. Lady Gwendolens in real life come out by the fire escape more often than by the old secret passage or the haunted wing."

Undismayed, however, Jack set about his task. He was in the midst of it, and had met with no success,—not that he had seriously hoped for any,—when a sudden sound pierced the darkened garret.

The noise was that of axes cutting into the roof.

As Jack listened a slight shudder ran through him. From that point of vantage the outlaws could shoot them down as they wished, and there would not be much chance of using their four remaining shots in return. By this time Jack had reached the spot by the big stone chimney from which they had taken the stone used to weight the table above the trap door.

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With a rather vague idea of using some more of the stones as weapons, he started pulling down the remaining loose ones. He had been at this work but a few minutes when he gave a sudden cry of

triumph.

"Look! Boys! Look here!" he cried, amazedly.

They scurried to his side to find him pointing into a black, yawning mouth, evidently intended originally for a fireplace but left unfinished, as the stones they had used now testified.

"It's big enough to swallow a horse almost," cried Ralph.

"It's big enough to save our lives, maybe," grunted Pete, "but maybe it's only a blind lead, and may come out nowhere. In that case a fellow at the bottom of a well would be better off than the chap in there, for ther'd be no way of gitting out uv that chimney once you got in, and—Jumping Jupiter! Come back, boy!"

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But it was too late. While Coyote Pete had been talking, Jack had slipped into the fireplace, and clutching the rough sides of the chimney had taken the daring drop.

The others listened above in breathless anxiety, and then, to their infinite relief, a voice trickled up to them from the depths.

"It's all right, boys! Come on, but take it easy, for I knocked all the skin off my shins in my hurry."

The blows on the roof were by this time becoming louder, and they could distinctly hear the sound of splintering wood as the axe blades cut into it.

"They'll hev pecked through that in ten minutes, now," said Pete, getting over to one side of the fireplace, "come on, boys. Be on your way."

But the boys insisted on the professor going first, now that they knew the drop was safe enough. Not without misgivings, to which he was too brave to give utterance. Professor Wintergreen, scientist and writer, cast himself into that black hole in the garret of the lonely rancho. An instant later, after a prodigious scraping and bumping, word came up that he, too, was safe. Ralph and Walt came next, the former softly humming:—

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"I don't know where I'm goin', but I'm on my way."

Coyote Pete came last; and now we shall follow the party, leaving the Mexicans still hacking away at the roof. It is a trip worth taking, too, for at the bottom of the chimney an astonishing condition of things prevailed.

The smoke duct led not into a cellar or into a blind hole, but instead, Jack, on alighting, had found himself, soot covered and scratched and torn, in a large open fireplace in a small room. As he made his sensational entrance there was a sudden sharp scream from a corner of the room and a female figure clad in white sprang up.

For an instant a dreadful fear that he had alighted in some sort of a trap flashed into Jack's mind. But the next instant he realized that the alarmed girl was none other than the senorita, and that the room into which he had fallen was the one selected as her prison.

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"Hush, senorita!" exclaimed the boy, as soon as he had given the signal to his comrades above that all was well, "do not fear me. I am not one of your enemies but a friend, an American. My companions are with me,—er—er—that is, they will be."

"Oh, senor!" cried the girl in English, "what a dreadful fright you gave me. You—you, if you will excuse me, you are so black. I suppose it's the soot in the chimney."

Jack could hardly refrain from smiling, as, for the first time, he bethought himself of the alarming figure he must present.

"I'm not as black as I'm painted, senorita, really, I'm not. Nor are these two new arrivals chimney sweeps, but young American gentlemen," he added with a sweeping bow, as Walt Phelps and Ralph popped out of the chimney. "Allow me to present myself. I am Jack Merrill, and these are my friends, Walt Phelps, of New Mexico, and Ralph Stetson, of New York. Not forgetting," he added merrily, as the professor straightened up from an instinctive brushing of his clothes, "our instructor and—er—er—chaperone, Professor Wintergreen, of Stonefell College, and," as the other member of the party appeared, "Mister Peter de Peyster, of the Merrill Ranch."

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"At your service, miss," said Coyote Pete with a low, sweeping bow and a deep flourish of his sombrero, to which even in his fall he had clung.

"Oh, I feel safer now," cried the girl delightedly, "but," and she clasped her hands, "*Madre de Dios*, what I have passed through! I was summoned to my garden this evening by a decoy message, that

one of the good sisters at the convent wished to see me. I had hardly set foot on the path when I was seized and carried off!"

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"The rest of your story we know, *senorita*," said Jack earnestly.

"You know it?" repeated the girl in an amazed tone, "but, *senor*, I do not understand."

"I will explain later," said Jack, "at least, we all hope to have the pleasure of doing so. I may add that I overheard the ruffians, your captors, discussing the matter while I was hiding in a pig pen."

The *senorita*'s large dark eyes grew larger than ever at this. She began to think Jack a very peculiar young person to come sliding down chimneys into rooms and to choose to eavesdrop on brigands from pig pens. But she made no comment, and the talk at once turned to the subject of escape.

The door of the room was of oak, barred and bolted on the outside, and impregnable. But the window, high up in the wall though it was, appeared to be just about large enough to squeeze through, ample enough even for Coyote Pete, who was the largest of the party.

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"Reckon we can reach it by putting this chair on that table yonder," declared Pete, "but we'll have ter look slippy, for those chaps will be through the roof before long, and when they discover we're gone and see the hole in the chimney, they'll guess the route we've taken."

When the table had been dragged over under the window and the chair placed upon it, Pete clambered up and found that he could easily reach the aperture.

"It's all clear outside, too, and the corral isn't more than a few rods away," he announced. "Boys, if we have any sort of luck we may get out of this and save the young lady. I'll go first, for it's a longish drop to the ground. Those that foller kin land on my shoulders."

The next instant he raised his lithe, ranch-toughened form and wriggled through the hole. In a flash he was gone.

"Your turn next, *senorita*," said Jack; "allow me to assist you."

The brave girl made no foolish hesitation about obeying. With a graceful little leap she was on the table and by Jack's side. In a jiffy he had assisted her through and she was caught by Coyote Pete outside. Next came the professor; following him, Walt and Ralph. As Walt alighted, he was ordered to creep over to the corral, keeping cautiously in the shadow of the willows. Once in the corral he was to get all their horses and a saddle for the *senorita*, if possible, selecting any one from the two or three hanging on the fence after the shiftless Mexican fashion. Presently Jack joined him at the risky work, having been the last to emerge from the window.

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They had got the last of their own horses and had selected one for the *senorita*, when there came a loud shout from behind them followed by a volley of shots.

A dreadful fear shot into Jack's heart. Had they been discovered?

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CHAPTER XIII.

SENORITA ALVERADO.

But the next minute, to their infinite relief, they decided that it was only a false alarm. In all probability, so Jack surmised, it signified that the Mexicans had broken through the roof and were firing a volley of shots into the garret to terrify its supposed inmates. He could hardly forbear a chuckle as he pictured the outlaws' astonishment, when, tired of their attempts to terrify, they should penetrate the garret and find it empty of life.

"Providence willing, we'll be far away by then," he thought to himself as, with a wave of his arm, he signalled to the others crouching in the shadows of the rancho, that all was ready.

The senorita laughed at the idea of a side saddle, when Jack apologetically indicated to her the ordinary Mexican affair which had been the only one they could raise. [141]

"A girl born and brought up on a Mexican hidalgo's estancia can ride in any saddle, senior," she said, "more particularly to oblige such gallant rescuers."

Jack felt himself coloring under his minstrel-like coating of soot as the girl spoke. The lad was somewhat susceptible, and the dark eyes of the senorita had made quite an impression on him.

"The pleasure is all ours, senorita," he said, with a vague recollection of having seen that phrase in print somewhere.

The young Mexican girl sat her saddle as lightly as a bird on a bough, and the mount they had selected for her,—"borrowing" one of the outlaws' animals for the purpose,—was a fine, springy-stepping creature, full of life and action.

"I guess our best plan is to head for Don Alverado's estancia," said Jack, as they crept as noiselessly as possible forward.

But, as a matter of fact, much caution was not necessary, for the Mexicans in the rancho, confident of having bottled up the Americans, were making so much noise that the light amble of the horses could not be heard above the roar. Their chief danger lay in being seen. [142]

This, however, was not so probable as might be imagined. The corral was separated from the house by quite a small plantation of willows and cottonwoods, among whose branches the moonlight filtered thinly. Once they had rounded the corral they would be practically invisible.

The senorita informed them that it was ten miles from there to Santa Anita, in the suburbs of which her father lived. This, as we are aware, Jack already knew, and the corral once rounded their steeds were set at a lively gait.

"Are there any police in Santa Anita, senorita?" asked the professor, as they rode rapidly through the night, the well-fed horses, refreshed by their rest, pacing strongly forward. The professor was a great stickler for law and order.

"No police, senior," was the rejoinder, "but it is the headquarters of the Mexican Rangers who have charge of the district. My father is the local magistrate and administrator, and has charge of them." [143]

"I sincerely hope that he will set them on the track of those ruffians," said the man of science severely, "Mexico should be known as a land of law and order like the United States."

"Yet I have heard that you occasionally have train robbers and all sorts of terrible criminals in the United States, senior."

The senorita spoke gently, but like all of her race, she was patriotic and a flash of fire was in her eye as she spoke.

"But we try to get rid of them, senorita," stammered the scientist, somewhat taken aback at this self-possessed young lady's reply.

"And so do we, senior," was the answer, which caused Coyote Pete to chuckle, "but you see, they won't always wait to be caught."

"You speak English charmingly, senorita," said the professor, in an endeavor to change the subject and pay a compliment at the same time. [144]

"That is to the credit of one of your American colleges, senior. I

was educated at Vassar University."

The boys exchanged glances. So that explained the senorita's poise and self-possession, which were far more those of an American girl than of a languishing Spanish beauty.

"I must compliment Vassar," said the professor, bowing his angular form. But he had forgotten that he was riding bareback and was not the most accomplished of horsemen in any event. His attempt at courtliness almost caused his downfall, for, losing his balance, he would have slipped from his gaunt steed if he had not grasped it desperately by the wither lock with one hand while his arm encircled its neck.

From this undignified position he was rescued by Coyote Pete, who spurred swiftly to his side,—it will be recalled that Coyote had saved his spurs out of the general loss of property—and aided him to recover his balance. [145]

They all had the grace to refrain from laughing, although the temptation was a sore one. The man of science, glancing suspiciously about him, was unable to detect the shadow of a smile on any of their faces, although the senorita did find it necessary to lean over and adjust her stirrup leather. When she looked up, however, her face was quite demure.

From time to time, as they rode forward over the level savannah, they glanced behind them. But the intervals grew longer as the distance between them and the Mexicans increased, and there was still no sign of pursuit.

"I guess they've discovered our escape, all right," said Jack, "but don't venture to chase us toward the town."

"That's it, I reckon," said Coyote Pete, "and in any event, with our horses we could outdistance them all with a mile start."

"All of them except that big black of Ramon's," said Jack. [146]

"Guess you're right," agreed Coyote, "I'd like to know if there air any relatives of that animal hangin' around. I'd buy 'em if it bust me. You don't meet up with a bit of horseflesh like that every day of your life."

An hour later, without any incident worthy of mention having occurred, they clattered through the sleeping town of Santa Anita, and, as daylight broke wanly, they found themselves outside the white walls surrounding the princely hacienda of the wealthy Don Alverado. But if the town was asleep, all seemed to be awake here. Lights could be seen flashing in the house which stood on a small eminence some distance from the outer walls.

As they neared the gate of the estate, it flew open and a dozen horsemen, fully armed, dashed out.

"Surrender, caballeros," they cried in Mexican, "or we shall kill you without mercy."

"Hold your horses," hailed back Coyote Pete, quite oblivious of the fact that, in all probability, none of the horsemen understood that free and easy form of English. [147]

But to the boys' surprise the cow-puncher's words were greeted with a shout of laughter from the advancing ranks, and a fresh young voice cried:

"Who are you,—for the love of Mike?"

"We are Americans who have brought back the Senorita Alverado," cried Pete, and was going on, but his words were drowned in a ringing cheer. The next minute explanations ensued. It appeared that the party which had sallied out at their approach was made up of young American mining engineers, resident in the neighborhood, who, on hearing of Don Alverado's loss, had at once formed themselves into a posse.

They had been starting out on a hunt for the abductors of the Don's beautiful daughter when they heard the advance of our party. Surmising that it might be the outlaws returning to commit further outrages, they had concealed themselves and dashed out intent on capturing or killing the disturbers of law and order. [148]

Their enthusiasm over the news of Senorita Isabella Alverado's rescue knew no bounds. Wheeling their horses they dashed off up the broad drive leading to the house to inform the Don,—who was anxiously pacing his library,—of the good news. They were followed, at a more sober gait, by the Border Boys and their party.

"My poor father! He must have known heavy grief in the past few hours," breathed the senorita, as they approached the house. Jack

was struck by the unselfishness of the thought. Of herself the senorita made no mention nor of all that she had endured at the hands of the outlaws. It was only of her father that she appeared to think.

Don Alverado, a tall, dignified looking old Spanish gentleman, with a gray goatee and aristocratically pointed moustaches, stood on the steps of the porch as they came up. His daughter threw herself from her mount as they drew close, and rushing into her father's arms, was held there for a brief interval. After his first emotion at recovering his daughter had subsided, Don Alverado bade the servants take the Americans' horses, and came forward, warmly thanking them for their services. It made the boys feel rather shamefaced to be thanked in such emotional fashion, for the Don would insist on kissing each of them, and by the time he got through his face was almost as black as their own sooty countenances.

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Then they entered the house where, after they had enjoyed refreshing baths, a hasty breakfast, but magnificent in its appointments, was served. In the meantime, Senorita Alverado had slipped upstairs and donned a clinging gown of black, in the bosom of which flashed an immense diamond. The boys gazed at the wearer of the gem with more admiration than at the stone itself. If Senorita Alverado had looked beautiful in the lone rancho she appeared absolutely regal now.

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"I see you regarding that diamond with interest, gentlemen," said Don Alverado, "it has an interesting history. It was the present to me many years since of a man who had received it from an Indian sheep herder. This man, according to my friend, had found a wonderful cave in some mountain that he called the Trembling Mountain. My friend tried to get him to give some detail, but the Indian declared that devils lived in the mountain who would kill him if they knew he had revealed the secret of their dwelling place to the outside world; so that except for the fact that there is the stone,—and you can see for yourselves it is a beautiful one,—I regret I can tell you no more details. But, even as it is, the diamond is doubly interesting outside of its intrinsic value on account of its history."

As the professor made no mention of their own peculiar interest in the legend of the Trembling Mountain, Jack and the rest said nothing about it. But, perhaps, all their hearts beat a little faster at this convincing proof that the strange story of Mr. Stetson's dead protegee was true.

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But it had been a long night and the lads could hardly keep their eyes open, even their sense of politeness flagging under the leaden feeling that had come into their eyelids. The Don noted this, and at once suggested bed. It was high time, too, as the early sun was already beginning to light up the magnificent grounds about the place, and the boys felt like regular night owls.

Servants in gorgeous livery escorted each lad to a bedroom furnished with the gloomy magnificence characteristic of the Spanish race. But not one of them noted his surroundings as, tumbling into the deliciously cool, clean sheets and sinking into the downy mattresses, they dropped into slumber as profound as it was dreamless.

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CHAPTER XIV.

EL FIESTA.

It was evening before the party reassembled. On arising each member of our party found, neatly folded upon his bed, a complete outfit. Investing themselves in which, they felt more like human beings again. For this kindness the Don would not hear of being paid.

"It is only a small part of my indebtedness to you," he declared.

After the evening meal that night, which the boys vowed was a starlight breakfast, the Don informed them that the next day being a Saint's Day and a holiday in the village, he had arranged for a series of sports of the country and a great fete. This was partly in recognition of his gratitude at his daughter's recovery.

"As you are all good horsemen, possibly you may wish to participate," went on the Don; "the prizes will be worth competing for. In the lassoing contest the prize will be a double-cinched saddle of Cordovan leather, silver mounted. In a novel game called Tilting the Ring, my daughter has donated as first prize a pair of silver spurs. The second prize in both events will be bridles fitted with silver-mounted bits and appendages. There will be other games, races and so on, but these two contests are the most interesting."

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Of course, this set the boys all agog. Their first rather bashful feelings at the sumptuousness with which they were surrounded, vanished, under the stimulus of discussion of the forthcoming contests. They all, with the exception of the professor, entered for the Tilting the Ring contest, which will be described later, while Coyote Pete and Walt Phelps put down their names as contestants in the lassoing events. Besides these, there were races and jumping contests, in all of which the boys decided to compete.

The next morning dawned fair and still. Jack, on opening the leaded sash of his window, gazed with delight at the landscape below him. Softly rolling hills spread far and near, dotted with park-like groves of trees. Cattle could be seen in the distance, and Jack guessed that they were part of the herds controlled by Don Alverado. At the foot of the hill upon which the hacienda stood, lay the red roofs and white walls of the village, with its cathedral towers rising above the green vegetation which picturesquely was intermingled with the dwellings. Blue smoke ascending into the still air from the chimneys proclaimed the fact that Santa Anita was astir early on the day of the Don's fete.

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Breakfast was a merry meal, and the boys gazed admiringly at the senorita, who looked more beautiful than ever in a white morning gown with a dewy rose stuck jauntily in her black hair.

"Say, she looks like an old Spanish painting, only more so," observed Jack to Ralph, as, leaving Walt and Pete to look after the stock and the professor to examine the Don's extensive library, they sauntered off to view the preparations.

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"Seems to me you are taking a lot of interest in old Spanish paintings, my gallant youth," chuckled Ralph with a knowing look.

Jack reddened.

"The Don has a whole gallery full of them," he said, "and naturally I made comparisons."

"With the advantage in favor of the living type," chuckled Ralph; "say, you're as easy to see through as a spy glass, and—"

"See here, Ralph Stetson, you shut up or I'll soak you," sputtered Jack, looking rather sheepish over his companion's raillery.

Ralph deemed it prudent to change the subject.

"They certainly do things in style here," he said, gazing in admiration at the scene of busy preparation which was going forward on the level fields at the base of the hill on which the hacienda was situated. Jack agreed with him. Already a big force of men was at work roping off a course for the sports, and decorating the poles in the national colors.

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At one end of the course several peons were erecting a rather tall pole with a swing cross-bar affixed to the top. From this cross-bar depended a cord to which was attached a ring by a snap contrivance. At the other end of the bar hung a heavy bag filled with

sawdust. This was for the game of Tilt the Ring, as they were to learn later. Each contestant was required to pass a lance through the ring so skillfully as to remove it from the snap bolt. If he did not succeed it was obvious that the bag of sawdust would swing around and deal him a blow before he could get out of its reach.

"Looks like a bully game," opined Jack, after the two boys had asked some questions of an English-speaking peon, "but what happens to you if the sack hits you?"

"Maybe stick on. More maybe you fall off," grinned the man.

"Humph," grunted Ralph, "I don't know so much about that game. Looks pretty strenuous to me."

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Soon after, they visited the stables where Coyote Pete and Walt already were. Coyote had his lariat out, stretching it and getting it supple and ready for the afternoon's test, for the sports were to commence after the midday meal. Walt was rubbing the knees of his horse with care. Firewater and Petticoats,—for Ralph had given his new pony the old name,—whinnied as Ralph and Jack entered, and their glowing eyes and shiny coats showed that they were in fine fettle. In a stall by them stood the horse they had appropriated from the outlaws. It was a fine beast, somewhat heavy, perhaps, but strongly limbed and sinewed.

"I'll bet Ramon would give a lot to have that horse back," observed Jack, gazing at the beast admiringly.

"Yes, considering that we chose him in the dark and in such a hurry, I don't think we made a bad choice," was Walt's rejoinder.

The boys ate sparingly at noon day, despite the variety and splendor of the dishes set before them. They felt that they were the representatives of America at the games, and that it would not do to risk a tummy-ache or any other uncomfortable feeling. Ralph, however, eyed the various dishes longingly, having, as we know, a fastidious appetite. But Jack's whispered, "You're in training," was enough to keep him to the agreement they had made before luncheon.

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"I will have your horses saddled for you and brought round," said the Don, after the conclusion of the meal. He was preparing to give the order to a servant when Jack interposed.

"Without meaning any discourtesy, Don Alverado," he said, "we would rather saddle up Ourselves. You see——"

"Say no more, say no more. It shall be as you wish," said the Don, but it was plain to see that he was rather nettled over the Americans' independence.

"You see," Jack explained to his chums later, as they wended their way to the stables, "the lower orders of Mexicans have no love for Americans, and they are capable of putting up any tricks on us. I don't say that they would, but then again it's best to be on the safe side."

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A chorus of assent greeted this. It did not take long to saddle up, the necessary trappings being among the gifts which Don Alverado had insisted on showering on the saviors of his daughter. The party had protested that they were well able to pay their own way, but the Don would not hear of it.

"We do not treat our guests thus, in Mexico," he said, "and you, of course, know that the hospitality of the old dons of Spain was proverbial."

The Americans made a fine-looking cavalcade as they rode at an easy trot down to the field where the contests were to be held. All wore sombreros, held under the chin by a strap of rawhide. Riding trousers of the loose, Mexican style, red sashes and short jackets completed their attire. It was in fact only by their clear, cleanlooking skins and erect bearing that you could have told they were not of the Spanish race.

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A large crowd had already gathered when they reached the "lists," as the scene of the contests might be called. People came in costly carriages with great C-shaped springs, in humbler vehicles, and in back-country burro carts. From the town a great procession streamed out on foot, and everywhere there were Caballeros dashing about on fiery horses, riding with the reckless abandon of the Mexican horseman.

"We're up against a likely looking lot of horsemen," said Ralph, as they came in full view of the gay scene.

"We'll have to do our best," said Jack simply, "the more skilled our opponents are, the more credit it will be to us to defeat them if

we can."

In a corral some distance off were the cattle that were to be used in the lassoing contests. A curious crowd was gathered about them expatiating on their good points. All at once a band broke out into the Mexican national hymn as the Don and his daughter, accompanied by a party of guests, rode up to their seats in a small stand, protected by a striped awning, placed immediately opposite the tilting ring apparatus.

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"Gee whillakers, it's hard to believe that we're in the twentieth century, ain't it?" asked Coyote Pete, as he gazed about him.

"It's like Don Quixote," cried Ralph, quite carried away by the shifting pictures of color and life on the greensward about them.

"Donkey who?" inquired Coyote Pete, whose reading in the classics had not been extensive.

"Oh, a certain old gentleman in Spain whose specialty was going about rescuing beautiful maidens and getting into trouble."

"Wall, that seems to be us," observed Pete dryly. "But look, the Don is announcing the first contest. It's the race to the town and back agin, carrying a letter to the city hall, or whatever they call it, and returning with an answer. Whoever makes the best time wins a fine horse blanket and a silver-mounted quirt. Any of you boys in it?"

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"No, I want to keep my mount fresh for the tilting," said Jack.

"Same here," announced the others.

They watched the contest with interest, however. It was won by a small Mexican on a wiry little animal who sped into the town and back in seemingly incredible time. As soon as he could escape from the congratulatory crowd, the wiry little horse was spurred toward where our friends stood in a group waiting for their contests to be announced.

"For you I have the letter," he said, as he rode up and extended a bit of paper.

"A letter for us. Impossible!" exclaimed Jack. "Who could have sent it?"

"It's addressed 'Senor Jack Merrill,' sure enough," cried Ralph, "and the address is printed, too."

"Somebody trying to disguise his hand," commented Jack, taking the note. "Well, let's see what it is, any how."

The note was only folded and when opened proved to contain but a few words, but those words were fraught with meaning.

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"Be on the lookout to-day. You are in great danger."

"Well, what do you know about that!" exclaimed Coyote Pete. "Is it a genuine warning, I wonder, or jest a trick to keep us out of the contests?"

"Hard to say," rejoined Jack. "Where's that little Mexican who brought it?"

But the man on the wiry little horse had vanished and a diligent search by the adventurers failed to disclose him.

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CHAPTER XV.

BY FAIR MEANS OR FOUL.

A bugle note cut short their search. It proclaimed that the start of the tilting contest was at hand. The boys, accordingly, rode up to the stand where the *senorita* handed each of them and the other contestants a sharply tipped lance decorated with white, green and red, the national colors.

They were then informed of the rules of the contest, which were simple. Each contestant was allowed twenty-five tries at the rings, and the one gaining the greatest number of points was to be the winner. A blow with the sawdust bag was to count one point off. As the Don finished announcing the rules, the Mexicans gave a yell and a flourish of their lances and galloped off to the starting point.

Jack, Ralph and Walt saluted with a wave of their hats and flourish of their lances, and then headed off after them. Their little display of gallantry caused quite a murmur of admiration to run through the crowd. This was increased to enthusiasm when it was seen how easily and well they sat their active little horses.

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"Diablo! Those Gringos can ride!" exclaimed more than one Mexican in evident amazement that any American could sit on a horse at all.

At the starting line the lads dismounted, as they did not wish to impose any more exertion than was necessary upon their ponies. Leaning their lances against the ropes of the course, they gave themselves over to studying intently the methods used by the tilters, some of whom were old hands at the game, or so one would judge by the confidence they displayed.

"By George, those fellows are doing magnificently," Jack had to admit, as one after another the Mexican contestants dashed down the human-fringed lane and neatly transfixed the ring without bringing the heavy sack around.

The next instant a roar proclaimed that one victim had been struck, and peering down the course the boys could see the one who had failed galloping off, shaking his spear angrily, while his hat hung all awry on his head from the force of the blow the sack had dealt him.

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But while everybody was still laughing at the mishap, and addressing all kinds of jocular remarks to the victim, Jack suddenly turned around as he heard a peculiar noise behind him. He was glad he had done so, for as he faced about the figure of a Mexican slipped away in the crowd. The fellow had been standing by the group of lances assigned to the Americans. With a few quick steps Jack reached the implements and found that an attempt had been made to saw one of them through in the middle. The rascal who had attempted the trick, however, had been detected so quickly by Jack's vigilance that he had not had time to do much more than scratch the tough ash handle.

"Guess I'll take charge of those lances," said Jack to himself, and he proceeded to do so.

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The next minute Walt was summoned to take his turn, and leaped into the saddle with a bound. Jack handed him a lance, making no mention of what he had discovered, for he had no wish to make his chum nervous.

Down dropped the starter's flag, and off dashed Walt down the lane of faces, his mount going like the wind. As he neared the post he crouched and drove his lance, as he thought, straight for the ring. But alas! he hit the arm of the tilting apparatus and around came the sawdust bag, hitting the Border Boy a blow on the head that almost knocked him out of the saddle. A chorus of yells and jeers that made Walt's ears burn, greeted his failure. He was much downcast, as he rode back to the starting place to await his turn to try again.

Ralph came next and fared no better than Walt. But he was more easy-going about it.

"Guess I'll do better next time," he shouted to the laughing Mexicans, none of whom understood him.

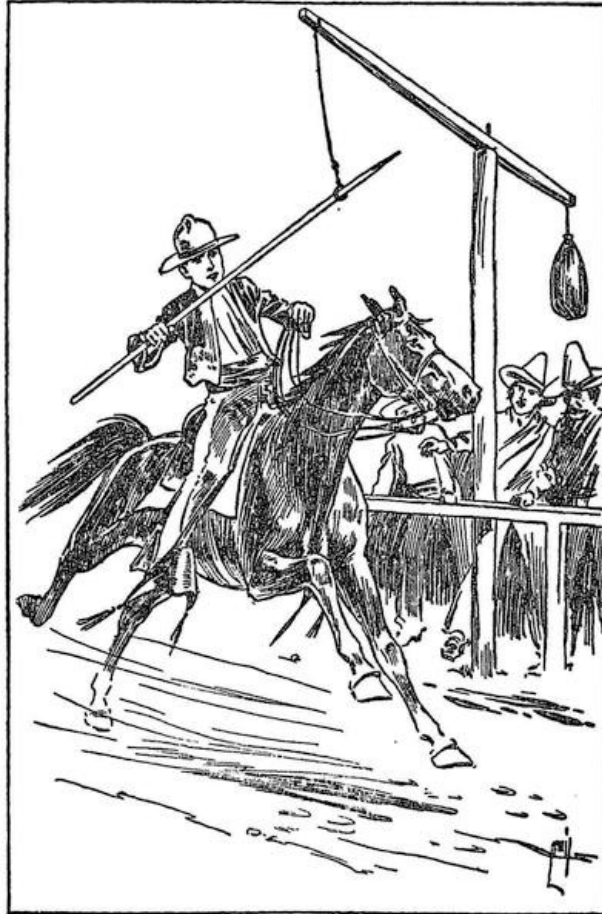
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Now came Jack. On account of his mount,—little Firewater,—he

perhaps attracted more attention than the others. At all events, a great ripple of sound swept like a wave through the crowd as he dashed down the lists. But as the Border Boy neared the ring and couched his lance for the tilt, a sombrero was hurled from the crowd, striking Firewater full in the eyes and causing him to stop and swing with an abruptness that would have sent a less practiced rider flying, and perhaps have caused him serious injury. But if this had been the intent of the man who hurled the hat, it failed, for Jack kept his seat almost without a perceptible shifting.

"A hundred pesos to the man who finds and captures that scoundrel!" shouted the Don angrily. "Senor Merrill, come here."

Thus summoned to the stand, Jack became the center of all eyes.



Jack swept by in a cloud of dust and transfixed the ring.

"That was an outrage, senor, for which I apologize to you in the name of my country," said the Don, his voice quivering with real chagrin.

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"Oh, it was cowardly!" cried the senorita, clasping her hands impulsively.

"Most probably it was the act of some irresponsible person," declared Jack, unwilling to give his host more pain.

"He shall suffer for it if he is caught," was the rejoinder; then turning to one of the officials of the course, the Don told him to announce that Jack would try again.

This time a roar of genuine surprise went up as Jack swept by in a cloud of dust and transfixed the ring as deftly as any of his predecessors.

"Bravo!" cried the Don, "and shame on any of my countrymen who will not say likewise."

This had its effect on those within hearing of the Don, but on the outskirts of the crowd, where the lower element of the town predominated, low hootings and expressions of dissatisfaction were heard.

On the next round several of the Mexicans failed, but Walt, Ralph and Jack each got one of the rings. This placed Jack and the three Mexicans who had succeeded on an even basis.

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The crowd began to shout encouragement to its representatives. One of them, a tall fellow on a splendid horse, turned to Jack as they

stood awaiting their turns once more.

"A bet of twenty pesos on the Mexican team, señor," he said.

"I don't bet," rejoined Jack, "but I hope the best man wins."

The Mexican, with a glance of contempt, replied:

"Peste! You are only boys. Mocho chico. What chance have you to win? You had better withdraw before you are covered with shame by your failure."

"Guess we're not worrying," rejoined Jack easily, "but it's your turn, señor."

"So it is. Behold, and you shall see with what ease I will get zee ring."

He thundered confidently off. Alas, for the caballero's hopes! It is true that he "got it" in one sense, but instead of getting the ring he got the bag with a force that sent his sombrero spinning into the crowd.

"Not so easy as it looks, eh?" laughed Jack, as the discomfited Mexican came riding back with a black frown on his face.

"Santa Maria, it was my horse's fault," he declared, "the brute is no good. He is a beast; what you Gringos call a 'skate.'"

He began spurring the animal savagely, making the poor creature jump and caper about in its agony.

"I wouldn't do that, señor," said Jack quietly, but with a gleam in his eyes. "By the way, we've a proverb in our country that might interest you."

"A proverb,—bah! what is it?"

"Why, they say a bad workman always complains of his tools," rejoined Jack, looking the other straight in the eye. "Think it over."

Before the other could reply it was Jack's turn once more, Walt and Ralph both having scored failures. Once more the Border Boy succeeded, thus getting one point ahead of the rest. On the next round, however, he missed the mark, while the three Mexicans still in the contest all scored.

"You see," said the tall Mexican, "we can easily, if we will, prevent you Gringos from scoring at our national games."

"By fair means?" replied Jack.

"By any means, señor," was the reply, "all is fair in love and war."

"Guess I'll keep an eye on you," thought Jack to himself.

With varying fortunes the game went on till two rounds from the concluding one only Jack and two Mexicans were left in the game. Walt and Ralph had dropped out in favor of Jack when they saw that they were too far behind to catch up. The scores of all three, the Mexicans and the Border Boy, were now even, and the excitement was extreme. No cheers or any other sounds were to be heard now. In intense silence the crowd watched every move.

The next bout found them still on even terms. Now came the last, with everyone fraught up to a tense pitch of excitement. It had ceased to be a game of tilting the ring. It was a contest for the supremacy of Mexico at one of her favorite games.

"Now, Jack, old chap, no misses," cried Ralph from the crowd.

"Go in and win, old boy. You can do it!" came from Walt.

Jack said nothing, but in his heart was a determination to get that ring at any cost but that of fair play. The tall Mexican now regarded the Border Boy with open looks of enmity. He made no attempt to conceal his hatred of the young American boy who had made the best horsemen in Sonora look to their laurels.

But Jack paid no attention to the fellow, concentrating all his attention on his lance, to see that it was in fit condition for the crucial test.

The tall Mexican was the first of the trio to dash off.

Yells, almost prayers, of encouragement implored him to transfix the ring. But just as he couched his lance his horse stumbled, and before he could regain his stride the prize was gone so far as that contestant was concerned. Next came his compatriot. But ill fortune followed him, too. In some unknown manner his aim, which had proved unerring, now failed him at the test, and he struck the ring with a jangling clink but failed to dislodge it.

Bang! Around came the sand bag, knocking him almost off his horse, which he had imprudently reined up, in his chagrin.

Now came Jack's turn. That lad would not have been human if he

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had not felt a slight trace of nervousness as he settled himself in his saddle and prepared for the word. Amid a breathless silence it came.

“Yip-ee-ee-ee!”

The cowboy yell broke from the throats of Walt and Ralph. It was the only sound but the clattering of Firewater’s hoofs as he rocketed down the course. But the next instant Bedlam broke loose as Jack’s lance entered the ring cleanly and removed it from its snap without a hitch. Howls and a few cheers filled the air, but the former by far predominated. But amid the confusion there came a sudden sound that abruptly halted the babel.

Three shots sounded out sharp and clear. At the same instant Jack, who had just reined in Firewater, was seen to reel from his saddle and fall apparently helpless to one side of it.

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CHAPTER XVI.

A BORDER BOY ERRANT.

But the bullets which had been meant to terminate Jack's career had not found their "billet." Instead, his sudden fall to one side of the saddle was a quick acting out of an old cowboy trick. The instant that the first bullet had whistled by his ear Jack had flung himself down thus, and as a consequence, the shots had missed their mark. The relief of Walt and Ralph, as they came elbowing through the crowd to find that their chum was unhurt, may be imagined.

The incident, too, had quite changed the temper of the crowd, as such things often will. An unpopular monarch has often been turned into his people's idol by an attempted assassination, and something of the same thing occurred now. Cheers for the American boy rang through the air. In the midst of the excitement Don Alverado came riding up, pressing his big chestnut horse through the throng. [177]

"Thank the saints you are not injured, my gallant boy," he cried in his impulsive way. "Not for my entire estates would I have had you even scratched. But what is this?"

The Don broke off in his congratulations abruptly, as a sudden commotion occurred on the outskirts of the crowd. Rising in his stirrups Jack could see that the center of the turmoil was Coyote Pete, and that he was dragging something at the end of his lariat, one end of which was wound around his saddle horn.

Suddenly the crowd rushed in on this object, whatever it was, but the next instant the wave of humanity surged back again, as Coyote drew two pistols and aimed them right and left into the throng.

"The first one that touches the varmint gits a taste of these!" he was shouting, and although few in the crowd could understand the words, they all caught the significance of his tones and fell back. Thus, left with a free path, Coyote spurred his horse on and rode up to where the Don and the Border Boys were assembled. The professor had, by this time, joined the group and brought word that Senorita Alverado wished to be informed at once of Jack's condition, and if he had been seriously injured. Word was at once despatched to her that he was unharmed. [178]

What Coyote Pete had at the end of his lariat was now at once apparent. It was a human being who struggled to his feet as the cow-puncher drew rein. Covered with dust as the man was, and bleeding from his not over gentle treatment by the first of the crowd who had rushed in on him, Jack yet had no difficulty in recognizing the man as the tall Mexican who had been defeated, and who had declared his intention of shutting out the American boy by fair means or foul.

"What is this?" demanded the Don, as the abject object stood cringing and whining before him.

"This is the pesky critter that fired them shots at Jack Merrill, your Donship!" announced Coyote. "Stand up thar, you dirty dog, and let 'em git a good look at you. Yer see," he went on, "arter that hat was thrown at Jack, I was on the lookout fer dirty work, so I jest took up my stand near the tilting post, fer I judged thet if thar was truble it 'ud come thar. Wall, I seen this fellow miss and ther look on his face when he realized it. 'Ole hoss,' thinks I, 'I'll jes' watch you close.' Wall, I did, but afore I could stop him he fired them shots. Arter that he sneaked off in the crowd, but I got arter him with my lariat, and I reckon I got him good an' tight and hog-tied for branding." [179]

The Don's face grew black.

"I know this fellow," he said, "he is a former employee of mine whom I discharged for quarreling and gambling. But this outrage will terminate his career. As a magistrate of this district, I convene court here and sentence him to——"

But with a piercing scream the abject being whom Coyote had lassoed cast himself on the ground. He writhed, he dug at the dirt with his nails, he grovelled and begged in an agony of terror. But the Don was unmoved. It was different with Jack, however. While the fellow's cowardice disgusted him, at the same time he felt a faint sentiment of pity. At any rate, he did not wish human life taken on his account. [180]

Just then a woman rushed through the crowd holding a child by each hand. Word flew around that it was the would-be assassin's wife and children. This decided Jack. Pressing his pony forward, he rode to Don Alverado's side.

"Don't you think, sir, that leniency might be observed in this case?" he said. "The man's wife and children, the excitement, the chagrin of losing the contest, and——"

"Say no more; say no more," was the abrupt reply. In fact, at the sight of the man's terrified wife and bewildered children, the Don himself had experienced a feeling of compunction, "Jose, your life is saved——"

The abject creature sprang up, pouring out a fulsome stream of thanks and blessings. But the Don abruptly checked him. [181]

"Had it not been for your wife and children, and for the noble intercession of this young man whom you attempted foully to assassinate, I should have hanged you without loss of time. But their pleadings have had weight with me——"

"Oh, the blessings of the saints on the caballero's head,——" began the Mexican, but once more he was cut short.

"But I only remit your sentence on one condition," went on the Don, "and that is that you leave this part of the country forever. My overseer will supply you with the money. If within twelve hours you are in the neighborhood of Santa Anita, your life shall pay the penalty. Now go!"

The Mexican reeled to his feet, and, shunned by the crowd, tottered off. Only his wife and children clung to him.

"Strange that often the worst of men will have the most faithful wives and devoted children," mused the Don. "But come," he said, putting aside his momentary gravity, "do not let us mar the day by this incident. Senor Merrill, you will now proceed to the stand where your prize awaits you." [182]

At this the crowd set up a great cheer, and surrounded by his friends, Jack rode to the grandstand where the senorita, still pale, but radiant, presented him with the prize. Jack, crimson to the roots of his hair, stammered out something in reply, he never knew what; and then bending low he presented the lance tip on which the ring still reposed to the senorita. With a blush and a smile she took the ring and snatching a red rose from her hair affixed it to the point of his lance. What a shout went up then! And in the midst of it our party rode off, for the roping contest had been called.

"Say, where did you learn that trick, all that bowing and doo-dadds, and all that?" grinned Walt, as the chums rode side by side.

"Yes, old chap, you acted like a regular knight errant. Polite as a floor walker," chortled Ralph; "there's only one thing you've forgotten to do." [183]

"What's that?" asked Jack innocently.

"Why, press the rose to your lips, you chump. I never read of any regular blown-in-panel knight who didn't do that."

"Well, I'm not one of that brand, I guess," laughed Jack. But just the same, it may be set down here that he took particular care of that rose for many a long day.

To his chagrin, Coyote Pete only came off second best in the roping contest, but, as the boys remarked, "It wouldn't do for these people to think we are hogs and want all the prizes."

"That's right," agreed Pete, good humoredly, "an', as somebody said, some place 'thar's glory enough fer all.'"

Early the next day after participating in the festivities of the evening, the lads and their elders once more took to the trail. In the meantime, the professor had attended to the renewing of their supplies and "scientific paraphernalia," and they had decided to confide their adventures and the object of their quest to Don Alverado. [184]

"You are on an adventurous mission," he commented, "and I wish you all success."

Before they set out the generous Don confided to Jack's care a document in Spanish.

"If you fall in with any government officials," he said, "that will act as your safeguard and passport. Adios, señors."

"Adios!" shouted the boys, as they rode off. Jack, looking back in the early dawn, thought he saw a handkerchief fluttering from an upper window of the hacienda. At any rate, he waved his sombrero

gallantly and bowed low.

"Guess it's a good thing we got Jack away from the hacienda," chortled Walt, in an audible tone.

"Guess it'll be a good thing for you to maintain a discreet silence," growled Jack, in what was for him such a savage tone that Walt looked rather alarmed. But before they had gone many miles Jack, who had been silent and thoughtful, began to become his old self once more under the influence of the trail and looked-for adventure.

They traveled that day without any incident worth chronicling, and nightfall found them camped on a fertile plain, deep in waving grasses and plentifully watered. The level expanse was almost at the foot of the gloomy Chinipal Range, in which was located the mysterious mountain in search of which they had journeyed so far. That night all lay down to rest with the feeling that the morrow would see the beginning of their real hard work.

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CHAPTER XVII.

THE TRAIL OF THE TREMBLING MOUNTAIN.

But the Trembling Mountain still lay far from them. Following that bivouac at the foot of the somber chain of mountains, they made their way for some days through the most magnificent scenery they had ever seen. Even Grizzly Pass could show nothing to compare with it. It was an enchanted land of soaring peaks, deep and narrow canyons in whose depths lay perpetual twilight, mighty cliffs and crags and leaping waterfalls.

Sometimes on topping an eminence they could see far off to the southwest a circle of snowy peaks vaunting it above their timber clothed brethren. From some of these peaks issued columns of blue smoke. Somewhere among those smoldering volcanoes, the professor told them, lay the object of their quest. At noon every day careful observations were taken, but they still pressed onward, the mystery and charm of their quest increasing all the time.

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Often, seated about the campfire, they discussed the possibility of the Ramon gang having trailed them; but the consensus of opinion was that they had succeeded in throwing the rascals off their tracks.

"But the scoundrels are keen on the scent where gold or treasure is concerned," said Ralph one evening, "and I'll bet that if they are not now on our trail they are trying to get upon it. I've got a private presentiment that we are not destined to land that treasure without a struggle."

"If only we could encounter those Mexican Rangers of Colonel Alverado's, our task would be easier," said Jack. "I've a good mind to look about at daylight to-morrow before we get under way, and see if I can discover some trace of them."

"Not a bad idea," assented the professor, "the Don said that his men were off in this section somewhere, as it was suspected that the rascally gang of which Ramon is the head would make in this direction to seek shelter in the wild fastnesses."

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The next day, dawn had hardly made things visible before Jack was stirring, and saddling the big horse which they had taken from the Mexican outlaws at the lone rancho, set forth on his quest. They had wished to leave this horse as a present to Don Alverado for his kindness, but the Don would not hear of it. He argued that they might need an extra horse, and his words had proven true. The extra animal had come in handy once or twice when one or another of their own mounts was crippled temporarily by the rough mountain roads.

Jack did not set out without an objective point. This was the summit of a cliff at some distance which he felt sure he could reach by a sort of natural trail he had observed from below. It was going to be risky, though. To begin with, the trail was too narrow for him to turn back if he found it ended abruptly, but it was the only way of reaching the cliff top, and Jack felt that only from there could he obtain a good view of the surrounding country.

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To his relieved surprise, however, the trail, though narrow enough in places to give a timid rider heart failure, was yet wide enough toward the summit to afford a foothold to a sure-footed horse like the one he bestrode. After about half an hour of breath-catching riding, the Border Boy at length reached the top. As he had anticipated, the view from there was as extended as it was magnificent. Peak after peak in serried ranks stretched away on every side. Deep canyons lay between them, with here and there a solitary eagle soaring above the dark depths. The sky above was a blinding blue, and the newly risen sun shone brightly, but yet, at that great altitude, Jack felt chilled.

But if he had expected to see the smoke of campfires, or spy a distant line of moving dots on this vast panorama, he was mistaken. No human note marred the impressive solemnity of the scene. Jack Merrill, poised with his horse on the cliff top, might have been the only being in the world for any evidence to the contrary.

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"Well, I suppose I'd better be getting back again," he thought to himself. "What a magnificent country! It is like those cloud palaces you see among the thunder heads on a still summer's day in New

England."

With half a sigh at leaving such a spectacle behind him, the boy turned his horse, and as he did so gave vent to a shout of surprise.

Kneeling on one knee behind a rock, and pointing a rifle full at him, was the figure of a man who must have crept quietly up while Jack had been admiring the view. This figure made a gesture cautioning Jack not to move, and then gave a shrill whistle. Instantly the woods all about galvanized into life. A score of wild-looking horsemen sprang out. They were all armed, and Jack, utterly at a loss to know what this could portend, stopped short.

"Well, senors, what is it?" he asked politely. [191]

"Get off that horse, Miguel de Acosta," ordered one of the men sternly. "It is useless to resist, and——"

"But my name doesn't happen to be Miguel de Acosta," protested Jack.

"In that case, what are you doing with his horse?"

"Whose horse?"

"Why, De Acosta's. If you are not De Acosta and have his horse you are a horse thief, which is as bad under our laws as any of the crimes of which De Acosta is accused."

"Will somebody please tell me what all this means?" cried Jack, looking about him bewilderedly.

"Please let me examine the brand of that horse," said the first speaker, who seemed to be a kind of leader; "ah, just as I thought. A bar and a flying U. That's De Acosta's horse and you are the man we're after. Get off now."

"But—but——," began Jack, beginning to think that this adventure might turn out seriously after all. [192]

"No explanations now. You may make those to the commandante later. Come, senor," as Jack still hesitated, "are you going to dismount?"

"Nothing for it I suppose but to obey," said Jack, clambering out of the saddle.

The man who was conducting this inquiry while the rest looked grimly on, was excessively polite, but there was something alarming in his very suavity. As Jack's feet touched the ground a sharp order was given in Spanish, and two of the horsemen who had so suddenly appeared stepped to his side. As they did so they tapped their rifles significantly. But suddenly Jack noted something, and that was that on the butt of each of the rifles was stamped Republica de Mexico, No. 2, Sonora.

A great light broke upon him.

"Why, you are Mexican Rangers,—Rurales,—are you not?" he demanded of the seeming leader.

"Si, senor. None should know that better than you." was the grave reply. "We are the second division of Sonora, with headquarters at Santa Anita." [193]

"Hooray, then it's all right after all," cried the boy, and plunging his hand into his breast pocket he drew forth the paper which Don Alverado had given him before they departed from his hospitable roof. The officer scanned it with raised eyebrows.

"Why, senor. A thousand pardons. I see that a mistake has been made. But pardon me, how do you come to be riding the horse of the notorious outlaw, De Acosta, who is one of Black Ramon de Barros's chief lieutenants?"

"Oh, I see it all now," cried Jack, "you were in search of Black Ramon, and when you saw a horse answering the description of De Acosta's, you at once jumped to the conclusion that I must be he. Say, that's quite a joke."

"It wouldn't have been much of a joke for you, if you had not proved your identity, senor," was the grave reply of the officer,—for such Jack now knew he must be, "do you know what we would have done with the real Acosta had we found him? Hanged him to the nearest tree and left his body for the gallinazos and the buzzards." [194]

The day was warm, but Jack shuddered as the leader of the Mexican Rangers spoke.

"But, senor," went on the young officer, "you hinted just now at having a story to tell about how you came by the horse. Will you breakfast with me at our camp yonder, and you can relate your story as we eat? It may be of great value to the State if it throws any light on the ways of Black Ramon."

Jack assented to this proposition. For one thing, he was hungry. For another, he saw that the Mexican Rangers might prove valuable allies in case of a brush with the Ramon outfit. All the rurales, among whom a very democratic spirit prevailed, were much interested in his tale. They hung closely about the officer's quarters, a blanket stretched on the ground, while Jack related his story of the happenings at the lonely rancho. It made an odd scene, this conclave under the great mountain pines. There was the clean-cut American lad sitting tailor fashion opposite the young officer who listened eagerly, while all about hovered the forms of the rangers, clad in bright sashes and brilliant-hued serapes, with immense cone-topped hats lavishly decorated with gold and silver braid. Jack learned later that some of these men oftentimes pay as high as two hundred dollars for their headgear, and that a good sombrero will pass down from father to son and grandson without deteriorating.

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At the conclusion of Jack's narrative, the officer expressed a wish to visit the camp of the Border Boys, more especially as it was in a part of the mountains unfamiliar to him. No time, therefore, was lost in mounting and getting under way. The Rangers used bugle calls like regular troops, the trumpeter riding at the leader's side.

In single line they defiled down the steep trail by which Jack had ascended, and were soon at the foot of the mighty cliff.

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"And where is your camp, senor?" inquired the officer, after they had ridden for some time in the direction in which Jack knew it lay.

"That's what's puzzling me, senor," rejoined the boy anxiously, "it should be here, but——"

He broke off abruptly. Undoubtedly from the litter and the still smoking embers upon which they had just that minute stumbled they must be at the site of the camp. But where were the lad's companions?

Had the earth swallowed them they could not have vanished more completely, nor did a painstaking search by the Rangers reveal any clue as to their whereabouts or the manner of their departure.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

BLACK RAMON'S TRICKERY.

"This looks like some of that rascal Ramon's work!"

Jack paused in the fruitless search and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

The officer of the Rangers, whose name was Antonio Del Rio, carefully rolled a brown paper cigarette and lighted it before he glanced up at the troubled young countenance before him.

"I think you are right, *senor*. During your absence he and his band must have surprised the camp and carried your *amigos* off as prisoners, that is, unless they themselves have taken to the trail."

"And leave me behind! Not likely. No, *senor*, they have met with some foul play."

"I proffer you my services and those of my Rangers," was the prompt rejoinder, "we will set out at once."

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"But the question is, in which direction shall we go?" asked Jack, frankly bewildered.

"Wait. I will call Juan Andreas. He is the most expert tracker in the Rurales, and if there is a chance of picking up their trail, he will do it."

Andreas proved to be a small, shrivelled Mexican on a "paint" or spotted pony. Jack saw that his eyes flashed like those of an old hunting dog, as, in obedience to his superior's command, he slipped from his pony and began running about in the surrounding woods, crouching low, with his nose almost on the ground.

Suddenly he stopped, straightened up, and with a gesture almost regal, he raised a hand and pointed to the west.

"They go that way," he said in Mexican.

The young officer nodded. The notes of the bugle rang out, and an instant later the camp site was once more deserted as the cavalcade dashed off through the dense woods in hot pursuit of the missing men and boys.

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It is now time that we inquire for ourselves just what was happening and had happened to Ralph, Walt, Coyote Pete and the professor. After Jack had left the camp then, the professor with his geological hammer had started out to get specimens, of which he already had several pounds, much to Coyote Pete's disgust.

He wandered down the canyon and had perhaps gone further than he intended, when suddenly he was seized from behind, his arms pinioned and the cold muzzle of a pistol pressed to the back of his neck.

"Now march," came a crisp order, and the man of science, being also a man of discernment, "marched." He did not dare to turn his head, but from the trampling of hoofs behind him he judged that several men must be following in his wake. Before long he found that they were undoubtedly headed for the Border Boys' camp. But he dared make no outcry, for the old man had guessed already that his captors must be Black Ramon's men, and he knew that they held human life no dearer than so much dust.

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Arrived near to the camp, the old man was tied to a tree and gagged, and then his captors, whom he now recognized as Ramon's band, scattered among the trees in such a manner that they completely encircled the camp. All at once one of them began to make a peculiar sound,—a perfect imitation of the "gur-gur-gur-gobble" of the wild turkey.

How the professor longed to warn the boys of the crafty trap that was being set for them! But he was powerless to do anything. As the wily band of marauders had guessed, the "skirling" of the supposed turkey was enough to set the camp agog. Snatching up shotguns, Walt and Ralph plunged off into the underbrush. They had not gone twenty paces before the brigands, noiselessly as panthers, seized and bound them, old coats being held over their heads to prevent their making any outcry. This done, they were bound to the same tree as the professor.

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The capture of Coyote Pete alone, now remained to be accomplished. For, as we know, though the marauders were not aware of the fact, Jack was far from the camp at the time. But in

Coyote the Mexicans caught a Tartar. The old plainsman was frying some bacon, stooping low over the coals, when the sharp crack of a twig behind him caught his attentive ear. Like a flash he bounded erect, but not before the muzzles of a dozen rifles were aimed at him from the underbrush.

Black Ramon was taking no chances with Coyote Pete, whom he knew both by reputation and experience.

For one instant, as he took in the situation, Coyote was still as a figure carved from marble. Only the heaving of his chest under his blue shirt showed that he was, for him, considerably startled.

Suddenly, and without the slightest warning, the old plainsman crouched low, and then dashing straight at the nearest Mexican, seized him by the legs, and before the others had recovered their senses, he had hurled the fellow backward by an expert wrestling trick. The astonished Mexican alighted in the midst of the campfire, overturning the spider, from which he was plentifully sprinkled with scalding bacon fat.

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In this way Coyote, cut off from reaching his own weapons, managed to possess himself of a rifle.

"Now," he shouted, "the first varmint that fires at me gets some of this lead. I may only have one shot, but I'll make that one tell."

A storm of bullets was the result, but Coyote with that quick foresight which was his characteristic, threw himself flat behind a large rock, with the result that the leaden hail spattered against the solid stone.

Suddenly a figure on a black horse rode into the little clearing. It was Ramon himself. Without the slightest hesitation Coyote threw up his rifle to his shoulder, and, disregarding his own danger, fired point blank at the outlaw leader.

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But for once Coyote Pete's aim was at fault. Ramon was not even scratched by the missile.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Pete, "I begin ter think thar is suthin' in that story that he bears a charmed life arter all. I had a plum bead on him and—"

In his astonishment at his missing such an easy shot, the cow-puncher had not noticed several forms creeping through the dark woods behind him. Before he had a chance to defend himself, he was dealt a mighty blow on the back of the head by a "clubbed" rifle in the hands of one of the outlaws whose head was encircled by a big bandage.

"Take that for the blow you struck me at the rancho," grunted the fellow, as Pete, spreading his arms, fell forward like a stunned ox. The man who had dealt the blow was the same whom Pete had knocked off the ladder on that memorable night at the lonely rancho.

"Pick him up and place him with the others," ordered Ramon, without the slightest trace of any emotion whatever showing on his copper-colored face.

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This order was swiftly carried out, and the consternation of the others may be imagined when they saw the cow-puncher's lanky form being carried by two of the raiders. They had heard the shots and at first they feared that Pete was dead, but to their relief, the next minute, they overheard Ramon remark:

"Throw him upon his horse when you bring it up. He'll be all right in a short time."

Presently the boys, with eyes that flamed with indignation, saw the Mexicans leading up their stock, not forgetting the pack burros, whose burdens had been hastily hitched on.

"Caramba, but I would like to lay my hands on that other one, that Merrill boy, more than all the rest," snarled Ramon through his yellow teeth. "Take the gag out of that boy's mouth yonder, and ask him where Jack Merrill is," commanded Ramon of one of his men, none other in fact than the Acosta for whom Jack had been mistaken.

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Ralph was the prisoner designated by Ramon, and not a little relieved was he to have the not-over clean bit of cloth, with which his mouth had been stopped, removed from his teeth.

"Now then," blustered Ramon, "where is Jack Merrill?"

"Far from here and on a mission to Santa Anita," retorted Ralph boldly. He was an honest lad, but in such a case deceit was the only course possible. If he had told the truth, the bandits were quite

capable of hiding and waiting for the boy, thus enmeshing the whole party.

"What has he gone there for? Be careful, boy, and speak the truth."

"To get the Mexican Rangers to run down all such rascals as you," was the bold reply, and one which an instant later Ralph wished he had bitten out his tongue before he made.

"Well, that being the case, forewarned is forearmed, as you say in your country," rejoined Ramon. Then in Spanish he gave orders to mount immediately. First, however, he presented Jack's pony Firewater to Acosta, as a recompense, presumably, for the loss of the latter's own animal.

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The boys and the professor were hustled into saddles and their legs tied together under the ponies' bellies. Ramon stood by looking on sardonically while this was being done.

"You are not at the lone rancho now," he chuckled, "but in the heart of the most lonesome range of mountains in Mexico. That was a clever trick of yours to escape with the senorita, but now you are going to pay for it. Ah, yes, I shall have a revenge, and such a revenge it will be, too!" He showed his long yellow fangs as he spoke, and chuckled hideously. In spite of their determination to be calm, the lads shuddered a bit. But the professor stared stonily at the ruffian.

"Am I to understand that it is your intention to abduct us?" he demanded.

"It is," was the rejoinder, "I mean to make you useful to me in many ways. As my slaves in Trembling Mountain I'll make you wish every hour of the day that you had never tried to thwart Black Ramon. Forward!"

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At the command the band dashed off. Coyote Pete, still unconscious, tied to the saddle of his horse. The boys' gags had been removed, as had the professor's of course, and as the rush of hoofs drowned other sounds, Walt found an opportunity to say to Ralph:

"Thank goodness, old Jack's still at large. Depend upon it, he'll find some way to get the Mexican Rangers and help us out of this."

But Ralph shook his head.

"We're at the last ditch now, Walt," he replied. "I don't see a chance for us."

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CHAPTER XIX.

WHAT COYOTE DID.

Coyote Pete, as Ramon had prophesied, came out of his swoon before long. His return to consciousness was enlivened by some of the most picturesque language the Mexicans had ever heard. But as Coyote had been tied to the saddle he could not relieve his mind otherwise than by using all the opprobrious names he could select from a copious vocabulary. Now it was a peculiarity of Pete's that he never swore,—that is, actually used bad language,—but he had invented a language all his own to express his feelings when angry. Set down on paper it would look tame, but as Coyote Pete used it, it was tremendous,—exterminating almost.

But after his first outbreak, Coyote remained unusually calm. He was thinking with all his might, but all his thinking did not bring him any nearer to a solution of their difficulties. They were in the hands of the most bloodthirsty band of rascals in Mexico. Even if they escaped, they would be bound to perish miserably in those rugged wilds without food or the weapons to procure any. The nearest settlement, Pete knew, must be at least two hundred miles away, and probably more.

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Truly, it was not a cheerful predicament. In fact, as Ralph had said, it looked very much like the last ditch. But Coyote was not of the kind of human that gives in and throws up its hands just because on the surface of things it seems time to abandon hope. Far otherwise, as the readers of other volumes of this series know. There probably was not a cooler head nor a better one along the border than Coyote Pete, but even he had to own that, for the present anyhow, he was "stumped."

At noon a halt was made for a few minutes, and frijoles, corn bread and muddy black coffee (cold) was given the prisoners. The professor could not eat, he was in such a state of mind. But the others fell to heartily enough; the boys, because they were boys, with appetites that nothing could upset, and Coyote Pete, with the idea of "firing up" with nourishment in case he might find some way out of it for all of them.

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All the afternoon they traveled, reaching higher and higher altitudes. Every now and again Ramon would consult earnestly with the red-haired outlaw of unmistakably American origin, who had, as Jack felt certain, left the warning notes on two occasions,—once at the camp in the canyon, and again at Don Alverado's fete. But on the latter occasion, unless it was one of the band that hurled the sombrero at Firewater's head, the outlaw's plans did not seem to have materialized.

But if this man was friendly to the boys he did not give any sign of it. Instead he glared at them as malevolently as did any of the others.

"You're the kind of American that looks best decorating a tree," thought Pete, who was now allowed to sit erect on his pony, although, like the boys and the professor, his feet were tied underneath.

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On and on they traveled throughout the afternoon, Ramon urging his followers up to a terrific pace considering, that is, the nature of the country they were traversing. Now they would plunge down into dark and gloomy defiles where perpetual purple twilight reigned, and again on mounting some crest they would see, spread out before them, a panorama of much the same sort as had so delighted Jack on the cliff summit before he fell in with the Mexican Rangers.

"If I don't miss my guess," said Pete, when he found a chance to exchange a word with the boys, "we are getting into the Trembling Mountain country. See that big peak over thar? It's smokin' away like old man Jones with his corn cob evenin's."

This was a fact. The smoking mountains, smoldering volcanoes that the boys had observed in the distance on their trip into this wild country, were in fact getting closer. And splendid sights they were, too. Some of them shot up into the blue sky to a height of fully seventeen thousand feet. The walls of the canyons they began to traverse now were different, too, from those they had left behind them. Instead of being composed of dull gray or slate colored rocks,

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these great rifts flamed with red and yellow strata, intermingled with gorgeous bands of purple and sometimes wavy strata of green. Evidently the internal fires of the earth had been busy here in the youth of the globe.

Occasionally, boiling springs sending up jets of sulphurous-smelling steam and bordered by brilliant green plants, were encountered. It was the most impressive country the boys had ever traveled through, and had a few fiends, all dressed in red, with hoofs, horns and tails complete, suddenly appeared from behind a mass of rocks, they would hardly have been surprised. The place seemed a fitting setting for an Inferno.

By dusk they were on a sort of plateau at the mouth of one of these mountain canyons. Trees and rocks of normal shapes and hues stood about in almost park-like fashion. Wild oats and plenty of bunch grass offered good and abundant feed for the horses, and from a cliff side of this little oasis in that land of gloomy horrors bubbled a crystal spring of cold water.

No wonder Ramon, with his countrymen's instinct for selecting good camp sites, elected to halt there. As for the boys, even in their predicament, they could not help admiring the soft intimate character of the scenery, coming, as it did, after their experiences in the gloomy abysses and profundities behind them.

The prisoners were taken from their horses and then carefully rebound, although so stiff were their limbs from their long confinement that it is doubtful if they could have run just then, even had they found an opportunity. Supper was the same rough meal as the midday refection had been. To add to the unpalatable nature of the food, the boys had the doubtful pleasure of watching Ramon and his followers dine sumptuously on the contents of the Border Boys' packs.

As night fell sentries were posted about the camp, and the prisoners could not but admire the caution which led Ramon, although in a presumably uninhabited part of the country, to post his outguards as carefully as if an immediate attack was to be expected. One by one the outlaws threw themselves on their blankets and were soon wrapped in that heavy slumber characteristic of the hardy dwellers of the open places. Only Ramon did not sleep. For hours he strode up and down in front of the fire with his head sunk on his breast. He seemed lost in thought. Once or twice he paused and seemed to listen intently. Was it possible that with his half-wild instinct he sensed the peril that was even then drawing in upon him through the night?

At last, however, even he sank off into slumber, and then, with the exception of an armed outlaw posted to guard the captives, the camp was enveloped in dense silence. The guard hummed softly to himself some old Spanish riding songs as he sat by the blaze, the firelight playing on his almost black features.

There was some tall grass at the back of the spot in which the boys and their elders had spread themselves out to snatch uneasy slumbers, and before long Pete's quick ear detected a stirring in it. Suddenly a voice spoke softly:

"Don't say a word or appear surprised, I'm going to help you out, just because I'm a Yankee myself and I know Ramon means to kill you all when he gets a chance."

Coyote kept a hold on himself, and hardly moving his lips, rejoined in the same cautious tones:

"Who are you?"

"That doesn't matter," replied the other, who was the man we know as Canfield, the former friend of Ruggles the miner, "it's enough to say that I was once decent, back north; but that's long ago, and no use crying over it. Look out, I'm going to cut you loose."

As the words were spoken, Coyote felt the unseen Samaritan slash his bonds, but the cow-puncher prudently did not at once draw his hands from behind his back. Instead, he darted a furtive look about. The sentry, crooning by the fire, seemed to be half asleep. Doubtless he didn't see much sense in giving too vigilant a watch to such helpless prisoners.

"I tried to keep you out of this, you know," came the voice again; "I got one note to you and got shot for my pains. Then again at Don Alverado's fete I despatched another one. It was Ramon's intention to shoot Jack Merrill that day, but the vengeful Mexican, Jose, took the task out of his hands."

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"Was Ramon in the crowd?" gasped Coyote in astonishment.

"Yes. But he is as skillful in disguise as he is in most other things. He was disguised as an old peddler of sweetmeats. But in his basket he had hidden a carbine, which if he had ever used it, would have put that young Merrill out of the way forever."

"Great bob cats! he——"

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But a sudden rustling in the grass behind him apprised Coyote at that juncture that he was alone. With another quick glance about he set to work on his leg-thongs. So intent was he on his work that perhaps he relaxed his vigilance a trifle, for when he looked up, directed by some strange instinct to do so, it was to see the form of Ramon standing over him with a revolver pointed grimly at the cow-puncher's head.

In this terrible emergency Pete's mind was made up in a flash. With one quick slash he finished freeing himself, and then, shooting up like an uncoiled spring, he rocketed forward just as Ramon fired. The ball grazed his cheek, but before Ramon could pull the trigger a second time, Pete had rushed in between his legs upsetting him with a crash. So heavily did the Mexican chief fall that he was stunned for the instant, but the drowsy guard by the fire suddenly galvanized into action, and sent a bullet flying after the cow-puncher as he vanished in the darkness.

The uproar awakened the other captives, who realized as soon as they saw that Coyote had gone, what must have occurred. Their hearts beat fast with apprehension for the brave plainsman, as Ramon, coming out of his swoon, ordered the now aroused camp to saddle at once and scatter in pursuit of the refugee. The outlaw chief himself took part in the search, leaving only three men in the camp to guard the captives. As the sound of the pursuing hoofs grew faint and far the boys interchanged gloomy looks. If Coyote had not seized a horse the chances were all against his making good his escape, however he had managed it.

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"I fear we are worse off than ever, now," moaned the professor, shaking his head gloomily.

Coyote, meanwhile, who had familiarized himself with the nature of the country as they rode through it in the afternoon, made at once for the tall scrub and brush at the lower end of the valley. Through this he glided like a snake, and had put half a mile between himself and the outlaws' camp before he heard the clatter of horses' hoofs. He listened a minute and then shook his head grimly.

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"Bad!" he muttered, "they're doing just what I thought they would, spreading out in fan-shaped formation. The only chance for me to escape that human fine comb is to outflank 'em and double back."

Crouching low he darted along once more, heading this time, however, in a direction sideways from his former course. If he could reach the end of that line of horsemen before they encroached on his line of progress he might escape them yet. He found himself hoping that they were riding in open formation. If that were the case,—although the starlight was pretty bright,—he might be able to slip in between two of the riders.

On and on he dashed and was just deeming that success had come to him when he was brought to an abrupt halt. Before him yawned blackly a chasm of some sort, and Coyote had seen it only just in time to avoid plunging over its brink into the unknown depths below. The thought chilled him. He shuddered apprehensively.

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"One more step and it would have been 'goodnight, Coyote,' for sure," he soliloquized.

Suddenly there came a loud shout behind him. It was followed by a fusillade of bullets whistling about his ears and pattering against the rocks. In his shock at finding how near he had been to a terrible death, Coyote had thoughtlessly stood erect. Thus he offered a target that could be seen for some distance against the stars. That this had been the case, he could not doubt as the shouts grew closer.

For one of the very few times in his life that such had been the case, the old plainsman was at a loss. In front was the chasm. Behind, the Mexicans. But suddenly he saw something that he thought might serve at a pinch.

It was a log, decayed and hollow, that lay near the edge of the gulf into which he had so nearly fallen. The instant he perceived it, Pete dived into it. Not that he did not feel some repugnance to such

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a thing, for it was punky and rotten and might, for all he knew, have sheltered snakes. But there was nothing else for it. Hardly had he crawled inside it, carefully drawing in his legs, before Ramon and the advance guard of the pursuers rode up.

Coyote Pete lay perfectly still. He hardly dared to breathe, and heartily wished that he could suspend his heart-action.

"Caramba! He was here an instant ago!" exclaimed Ramon, glaring about, "where is the accursed Gringo now?"

"Possibly struck by a bullet," put in Canfield, the red-headed man, who, having aided Pete to escape, was now compelled to assume a bloodthirsty role once more.

"Not likely. Perhaps he dropped over the edge of the cliff and has escaped," put in another of the outlaw band who had just ridden up.

"But that would be suicide. The gully is deep and he would be dashed to pieces in its depths," struck in another. [222]

"Hold on!" shouted Ramon suddenly, "I have it!"

"What, you see him?" the query came from a dozen throats.

"No, but I can guess where he is."

"Where?"

"Here!" Ramon tapped the log with his foot, while Coyote Pete fairly perspired in rivers.

"Let's make sure," cried the voice of Canfield. He was about to dismount when Ramon checked him.

"No. I have a better way."

A kick on the log emphasized the Mexican's statement, and a sharp shock passed through Coyote at the thought of the awful fate in store for him. Had he had time at that moment he would have emerged from the log and risked all. But before he could move, a dozen hands laid hold of the timber and began to roll it toward the cliff edge.

"Stop!" shouted Pete. [223]

"Ha!" exclaimed Ramon, "then I was not mistaken. Good! Go to your grave, you Yankee pig, in the coffin you have made for yourself!"

Faster and faster the log rolled, while cries of real fear and entreaty broke from Coyote's lips. In vain he tried to extricate himself.

All at once, the log gave a clumsy leap, and, amid a brutal shout from the Mexicans, it spun over the edge of the gulch and shot sheer over into the black void that yawned below.

CHAPTER XX.

WITH THE MEXICAN RANGERS.

Coyote Pete felt that he was passing through the most critical moments of his adventurous life. At the very least, he estimated the drop to the bottom of the gully must be several hundred feet.

Obviously it was impossible for him to extricate himself from the hurtling log, yet to remain in it was to doom himself to almost certain destruction. Yet, as the log shot down like an object dropped from a balloon, he realized that when it struck the earth he would be battered into annihilation.

But even in a situation which would have caused most men to swoon with terror, Coyote could think, and think coolly, too.

Suddenly, though, there came a sudden interruption to the downward progress of the great log with its human freight enclosed.

Crash!

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Every nerve in Coyote Pete's frame seemed to be ripped asunder. Every tooth in his head was jarred. He lay still, feeling pounded and stunned, like a boy who has just had a hard fight with some school tyrant.

"The log has landed, evidently," he exclaimed, "but how? Where? Why aren't I dead?"

Suddenly he became aware that the wood encasing him like a coffin had become easier in its pressure on him. He moved, and with a tearing, rending sound the log burst asunder.

Like a butterfly from its cocoon,—if Coyote will forgive me for comparing his rugged form to a butterfly,—the cow-puncher, bruised, wounded and sore in every limb, peered forth. Where was he?

All at once he felt the portion of the log which remained beneath him gently swaying like a boat on rippling waves. In a short time, by cautious feeling about him, he found that the log had, by some providential miracle, landed on a sort of island of trees growing, apparently, right straight out from the cliff face. As he realized his position the cold sweat burst out in great drops on his brow and all over his body. If this was the case his fate was to be worse than if he had been dashed to pieces and mercifully killed outright.

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Hung where he was between heaven and earth, he would have to die miserably of starvation, unless madness intervened and he leaped crazily to his own destruction. All at once, as he made his investigations, his foot slipped, and with a cry of actual terror the cow-puncher felt himself beginning to dart downward through space. By a desperate, despairing effort he clutched the branches as he fell, and drew himself, with infinite pains, back upon his precious perch. Once there he lay trembling and nauseated at the thought of the narrowness of his escape from a plunge into the abyss.

Of all the tight places he had ever been in, Coyote Pete was surely now in the very worst. He felt the wall behind him when he had somewhat recovered from his attack of deadly sickness. It was smooth as glass. No chance of climbing up. He would have examined his surroundings at greater length, but he dared not risk another slip like the one that had so unnerved him.

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It was many years since Coyote Pete had prayed, but he did so then, commending his soul to his Maker, for that he would ever escape from his frightful predicament he did not dare to hope. Somewhat calmer after his devotions he lay still, not daring to move lest the motion of his body might dislodge some of the rotten wood, and he could not bear to think of hearing it go dropping down into that awful gorge beneath, finally losing all sound in the dread profundities.

It was unlikely in the extreme that he would ever be found, for in that unfrequented part of the mountain fastnesses it was most improbable that anyone ever passed. It was only the thirst for gold that had brought Ramon into the rugged place.

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There came no sound from above, and Coyote concluded that the outlaws, hearing the crash of the landing, had concluded that he was dead, and departed.

"What a story fer the boys and the professor to hyar," groaned

the unhappy man, burying his face in his hands.

So the dark hours rolled away and daylight came. But those hours of terror had unnerved Coyote terribly. With the coming of day he dreaded more than ever to look beneath him. He felt that if he ever dared to gaze into the voids which he felt must lie beneath his fragile perch, that he must be impelled by a crazy desire to leap into space.

So strong did this feeling become that he lay there, not daring to look about him, until a sudden sound smote on his ears,—the sharp rattle of hoofs, coming apparently from the canyon above which his log was perched in such a precarious condition. [229]

The sound in arousing Coyote's hopes of rescue,—though how they were to rescue him he did not know,—had likewise temporarily banished his keener fears. Cautiously he peeped over the edge of his eyrie and then gave vent to a shout of astonishment that went echoing and roaring off among the canyon walls.

"Mother of all the bob cats!" he howled, "here I've bin lying all night ez scared ez a sick puppy and not ten feet above the ground!"

Such, in fact, was the case. The trees in which the log had so fortunately landed, grew out from almost the base of the great cliff. Coyote, glancing up, saw that they were the only ones on its hundred and fifty feet of height.

"Coyote, you old idjut, ain't you never goin' to larn?" the cowboy admonished himself. "Why didn't you drop suthin' down ter see how far you was above the ground, you consarned, double-barreled old chump? You'd hev saved yourself some gray hairs ef you hed." [230]

Reproaching himself thus, the cow-puncher dropped lightly from one of the lower branches of the trees to the ground.

"Wish I'd done that when I slipped last night," he said. "Hold on, though, on second thoughts, I don't. I'd have bin dead o' fright afore I touched the ground in that case."

But now the hoof beats which had attracted his attention were coming nearer. The floor of the canyon was so strewn with Titanic rock masses, though, that it was impossible to see more than a few yards in either direction.

"Wonder if that ain't thet Ramon and his bunch come ter look at ther remains?" thought Pete. "Guess I'll be on the safe side and jes' duck a 'hind this yar rock till I make sure."

So saying, he slipped between two boulders into a small natural cave in which he felt he would be secure from observation, and yet be able to see what was going forward. He had not long to wait. Suddenly, around the corner of one of the huge rock piles, there swung a troop of gaily caparisoned riders; Mexicans, beyond a doubt. Their serapes streamed out behind them in the wind like gaudy streamers. [231]

"Now, what bunch of pesky greasers is this yar?" Pete was beginning to himself, when suddenly he broke off in amazement:

"Jack Merrill's among 'em, by ginger. He's a prisoner! No, he ain't! He's talking ter that chap in front with ther silver-mounted rifle. Bob cats! I have it now. It's a troop of rurales, and they're on the trail of Ramon!

"Yip-yip-yee-ee-ee!"

Giving vent to the long-drawn cow-puncher yell, Coyote Pete dashed from his place of concealment, and a more astonished lad than Jack Merrill I can assure you, you never saw, when he perceived the old plainsman suddenly bob up out of a great rock mass in that lonely canyon.

In his excess of joy Coyote fairly flung his arms about Jack's neck.

But scant time could be given to greetings. Explanations were in order. Exclamations of indignation and of fury ran like wildfire among the Rangers, as the old plainsman told his tale. Then Jack related how he had fared, and how they had trailed the marauders, being much delayed at times, though, by faulty tracks where the party had passed over hard ground. [232]

"By ginger, I never noticed till now, that we are in the same canyon we came through with that outfit of Ramon's late yesterday!" exclaimed Pete. "Gloomy place, ain't it? And it seemed pretty glum to me last night, I can tell you."

He gazed at the cliff and shuddered a little. He could not help it.

"Say, Jack, hez my hair turned white?" he asked suddenly.

"No," laughed the boy, "why?"

"After what I went through, I hardly tell of such things. Me for a nice snug place in a stampede, or the front rank in a shooting scrape after this. I've no more use for exciting sports."

"Senors," interrupted the leader of the Rangers presently, "we had better be proceeding. Ramon may have broken camp and gone on by this time, and again he may have——"

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"May have what?" asked Jack, for the capitano paused and seemed unwilling to proceed.

"I do not wish to alarm you unduly, senior," said the young officer, "but I know the character of that notorious outlaw well. It is possible that if we do not hurry we may arrive too late to save your friends from a terrible fate."

The thought was maddening to Jack.

"Oh, that we have been fooling away time here!" he exclaimed impatiently; "Pete, you can mount behind me. There. Are you all right? Yes? Then forward!"

"Forward!" shouted the officer, and the bugle rang shrilly out.

Amidst a cloud of dust the Mexican Rangers swept on down the canyon, intent on their errand of vengeance.

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CHAPTER XXI.

THE CAPTAIN PLAYS A TRICK.

All at once, as they reached a part of the canyon where it narrowed into a mere defile, something came rattling down the side of the steep wall to the right. It was a dislodged pebble, but it caused the advancing corps to look up swiftly.

Above them, outlined against the sky, were several figures,—those undoubtedly of the men of whom they were in search. As they were still looking upward, the men on the cliff summit began to pump down lead, the bullets singing and droning and pattering about them like a leaden hail storm.

“Hot work,” grunted Pete, noting with enthusiasm the absolute collectedness of the leader of the Rangers. He gave a sharp command and his men swung into single file and pulled their ponies over till they were riding so close to the rock wall of the canyon that it was necessary for the riders to throw one leg up on the saddle. This made it impossible for the marksmen on the summit to pick them off, for the cliff hung outward a little.

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“As I thought, the rascals were prepared for us,” said the young officer, “how far is it now, Senor Coyote, to the camp?”

“Ten minutes should bring us thar,—ah!”

A big rock hurled from above struck the ground in front of and a little to one side of the advancing cavalcade. It split to pieces from the force of its impact.

“If that had hit anyone his troubles would hev bin over,” snorted Pete without turning a hair.

Jack paled a little, though. In a few seconds they would reach a part of the canyon where they could no longer crowd in under the slightly overhanging cliff. At this point they would be exposed to the full fury of any rifle fire or stone volley which the brigands above might pour down on them.

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But the officer of the Rangers had, it seemed, anticipated this. He ordered one of his men to dismount and remove his regimentals. This done, the empty garments were filled with brush and leaves, and the sombrero was tied securely to the upper part of the dummy, which, at a distance, and particularly from above, would resemble pretty closely a real man.

The dummy was then mounted on a pony, a lame animal and not good for much. After its “rider” had been securely fastened in place, the pony was given a couple of whacks with the Rangers’ long quirts, and frenzied with excitement it plunged forward.

These operations had all been carried on in the shadow of the overhanging cliff, and those above had no knowledge of the trick that was to be played on them till they saw the apparently daring rider suddenly dash from the shelter. Instantly a volley of rifle shots was poured down upon the dummy, and a veritable avalanche of mighty rocks and boulders were hurled downward. The luckless pony galloped bravely down through this inferno of bullets and missiles, only to have its life exterminated by a quick-killing bullet after about five minutes of flight.

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“Now, senors!”

The young officer, his eyes aflame, dashed forward, followed by his Rangers and our adventurers. The Ranger, whose pony had been sacrificed, was carried on the back of another trooper’s saddle. In a minute they were in the open and a howl of fury from above testified how thoroughly the outlaws had been tricked. Their fire had been drawn and they had exhausted the available supply of large rocks on the dummy!

As the column dashed across the unprotected space, a scattering fire whistled about them, but no more injury than a few punctured saddles and a damaged hat or two was done. The next instant the cavalcade swept out of the canyon and into the small plateau where the camp of the night before had been made.

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A delighted shout burst from Jack’s lips, and was echoed instantly by Coyote Pete as they perceived, still tied and bound, their companions in adventure. A feeble cry answered them, and an instant later the reunited party was furiously shaking hands,

slapping backs and jumping about in a thousand ecstatic antics, while the Rangers looked on, shrugging their shoulders at the mad Gringoes, and rolling cigarettes.

"Shall we pursue the outlaws?" asked Jack, after the first transports were over and comparative quiet had settled down.

The officer shook his head.

"It would be useless now. We have scattered them and let us hope that we have heard the last of them. It will be my duty, however, to keep a constant lookout for them."

To the boys' delight, their stolen stock was all there, too. Firewater whinnied delightedly as he saw his young master, and even the burros seemed to take part in the general rejoicing. While the brigands had made some inroads on the boys' provisions, there still remained enough food to last them, with care, on the remainder of their dash for the Trembling Mountain. [239]

After the tension of the last few hours it was delightful to feel a sense of security once more. Their enemies were scattered and it was unlikely that the band would attempt any more high-handed methods. Should they do so, however, it would be too late, for before they set forward on the last stage of their journey the adventurers arranged with the captain to meet him and his Rangers at a spot near the Trembling Mountain in three days' time.

The young officer willingly agreed, but expressed some curiosity as to the nature of their quest. He was informed that the object of the expedition was a scientific one, to investigate the reports of the relics of a forgotten race that lay within the bowels of the mountain.

Jack parted with the Rangers with regret. He had come to admire them for their dash, courage and resource. They were ideal troops for the rough country they patrolled and kept in order by rough and ready methods. The young officer, too, felt much regard for Senor Jack, as he called him. [240]

So a few hours after the reunion in the outlaws' abandoned camp, the two parties set out in different directions. The Rangers followed the course they assumed that Ramon had taken in his flight, while our adventurers struck out for the smoking peaks which were now much nearer than when they had had their first sight of them. They traveled the rest of that day at a good speed, and sunset found them camped in a pleasant little valley where the broad-fronded banana tree grew, whose fruit afforded a welcome addition to their menu.

The next day, at noon, the professor, after making an observation, announced that they were then within a few hours' travel of the Trembling Mountain. This announcement was, in fact, hardly necessary, for all day a mighty peak, from whose snow-covered summit there issued a lazy roll of smoke, had overshadowed their way. Everybody guessed that the frowning acclivity was the mountain for which they had come so far in quest. [241]

Late afternoon brought them to its base, and with his measuring instruments the professor, an hour after camp had been pitched, located the entrance which no other American, assuredly, had ever passed. Their pulses beat swift and hard, as the lads and Coyote followed the old man over the rock-strewn slopes to the spot.

Amid a grove of dark, sombre trees,—somehow suggesting a sacrificial grove,—lay the entrance to the Trembling Mountain. All felt a sense of mystical awe as they stood in the solemn shadows. It was as if they had come under the spell of some tremendous brooding presence. Quite unconsciously they spoke in whispers.

It was the same feeling that overcomes one in the aisle of some mighty cathedral. As if to accentuate the similarity of impression, the wind sighing softly in the dark, dome-shaped trees, sounded like a solemn chant, now high and tremulous, now low in a rumbling diapason that thrilled. [242]

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DWELLING OF A VANISHED RACE.

"Gee, it's kind of lonesome, ain't it?" said Pete, expressing exactly what they all felt.

Although they now stood in the presence of the long-sought goal, somehow each one of the party felt uncomfortably impressed. A nameless fear hung about the place. It was with difficulty that they shook off the feeling and examined the surroundings further.

The entrance to the cave itself must have escaped observation had one not known it was there. It was square, with a mighty cross-bar of unhewn stone supporting its summit. In this cross-bar were cut some rude hieroglyphics, but even the professor, savant though he was, could not hazard a guess at their meaning.

The professor, alone, seemed unimpressed by the gloomy majesty and mystery of the place. His eyes burned with a scientific fire and he rubbed his hands briskly together. [244]

"At last!" he breathed, as if in an ecstasy, "who knows what unknown treasures we may reveal to the world, beyond that portal!"

"Shall we go inside?" asked Jack presently.

"We might as well now as at any other time," said the professor, "Ralph, will you and Walter go back to the camp and get the torches?"

The lads at once hastened off on their errand. Truth to tell, they were each rather glad to get, for a short time only, out of the spell of that somber spot.

The torches referred to were of the kerosene variety, but specially made to burn for twenty-four hours continuously. They had been made to the professor's order for the expedition.

The boys returned shortly with the illuminants. Ralph also brought a supply of matches and a canteen of water, and both boys had stuffed their pockets full of what food they could hastily get together. The professor praised their foresight and then, from his own pocket, produced a huge spool of coarse, strong thread. [245]

"I took the hint from the classics," he said, "you all recollect the tale of the labyrinth? Well, we will make this thread fast at the entrance, and as we go along we will unwind it. In that way if we get lost we can find our way back by feeling along the thread."

"That's a splendid idea," cried Jack, "I tell you I shouldn't much fancy the idea of going in there, unless I was pretty sure how I was going to get out again."

"I don't blame you," said the professor, "and now are we all ready?"

"All right!" came in a chorus, and led by the man of science, the adventurers crossed the mystic threshold. A thrill shot through even Coyote Pete, the least impressible of the party, as they did so. How long had it been since the race of ancient dwellers of the Chinipal had swarmed those subterranean corridors, now as silent as midnight? [246]

The torches soon became necessary for the passage sloped abruptly downward from the portal. The smoky light showed them that they were in a sort of corridor, seemingly hewn out of the rock. It was about ten feet in width and some eight or nine in height. The floor was worn almost concave by the constant tread of the feet that had passed and repassed in the bygone ages.

For some distance the sloping passage ran on, and then they suddenly found themselves in a vaulted chamber where their footsteps rang echoingly. Great stalactites hung from the roof glittering whitely as the torch light fell upon them.

"This is magnificent!" breathed the professor, "a wonderland of science." His voice, raised a little in his enthusiasm, went booming and reverberating hollowly through the place. From the remotest corners there came rumbling back echo-like the last words of his exclamation.

"I guess we had better not talk so loud," said Ralph, shivering a bit at this uncanny manifestation.

"No, somebody might hear you," scoffed Walt, who was putting [247]

on an air of great assurance. Suddenly he emitted a yell and jumped about four feet. Something had crept up behind him in the darkness and laid a cold hand on the back of his neck. It was Coyote Pete who had noted the boy's arrogance and wanted to give him a lesson. After that Walt was as quiet as a lamb.

Pressing forward, their torches showed them the entrance to another dark passage on the other side of the vaulted chamber.

"Shall we keep on?" asked the professor of his young charges.

"By all means, so far as I am concerned," was Jack's reply. "I don't know about Walt, though," he added a trifle maliciously.

"Oh, I'm all right. Don't worry about me," the ranch lad assured him.

"Then forward it is," announced the professor, plunging once more into the narrow confines of a subterranean corridor.

But suddenly an alarming thing happened. A great rush of wind beat against their faces accompanied by a roaring, rushing sound, somewhat like the voice of the cloudburst on the never-to-be-forgotten night when they had lost their equipment.

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In a flash their torches were extinguished and they were plunged into total darkness, something soft and clammy brushed by Jack's head and then a perfect avalanche of the same unpleasant things was upon them. They were knocked down like ten pins by the charge, and badly scared, too, as you may imagine.

Presently the noise and the turmoil ceased, and the passage was quiet once more with the roar of the mysterious creatures dying away in the distance.

"Let's get out of this!" cried Walt tremblingly.

"Nonsense," said the professor. "We might have expected some such thing. Those were bats. Thousands of them, I guess, who have made their home here undisturbed for centuries."

"Wonder if they are of the kind that suck your blood?" shuddered Ralph, with the horror of the contact of the clammy bodies still upon him.

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"Vampires, you mean?" asked the professor. "No, at least I don't think so. We are too far north for that. The vampire is found in South America, in Brazil and so on. But let us light up the torches again."

Ralph produced the matches and a cheerful red glow soon radiated upon the stone walls and roof. A sickly, musty smell, the trace of the bats, was still in the air, however, as a reminder of their passing.

The passage soon ended, and the professor's feet encountered a steep flight of steps cut in the stone, or so it seemed.

"Be careful, boys," he warned, "a slip here might prove fatal."

Very cautiously, therefore, they descended into what at first appeared to be a bottomless pit. Suddenly their torches glittered on something that shone like molten metal beneath them.

"Water!" cried the professor.

"A lake," added Jack, raising his torch so that the light illumined what appeared to be a considerable body of water.

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"Water, sure enough," echoed Pete, "maybe it's another subterranean river like that one at the Haunted Mesa."

"This is no river," said the professor. "See, its surface is as smooth as glass."

By this time they had descended to the rocky shelf which ran all around the edge of the subterranean lake, while above their torch-light fell redly on a domed roof of dark stone.

"Look! Look!" cried Walter suddenly, "Fish!"

Sure enough, they could now see shoals of white-tinted fish swimming near the surface.

"Can it be that the light attracts them?" wondered Jack.

"Not likely," said the professor, "I guess they are blind. It is not unusual to find fish in these subterranean lakes. Specimens have been found in our own country and in many places in Europe which boast similar bodies of water."

Walt had been leaning over the edge of the lake intent, apparently, on trying to catch one of the blind fish. Suddenly he gave a sharp outcry, which was immediately followed by a splash.

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"He is overboard!" cried Pete, rushing to the spot and throwing himself on his stomach so as to catch Walt when he rose to the

surface. But at that instant a startling thing happened.

Simultaneously almost with the splash of the unlucky ranch boy, there came a sound as of some great body rushing through the water from some remote corner of the cave to which their light did not penetrate. The next instant a cry of real horror broke from all their throats as a terrible misshapen head with blind eyes reared itself above the water and darted at Walt as he rose to the surface.

It was apparently a might eel, a creature of undreamed of dimensions. Its slimy, whitish-colored body was thick as a barrel and its loathsome head and sightless slits of eyes gave it a hideously repulsive appearance.

"Pete! Pete! Save me!" shrieked Walt.

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But in another instant it would have been too late had it not been for the old plainsman's coolness. Stretching out one hand to Walt as he struggled in the water, the cow-puncher's other hand slid to his waist. The next instant a shot rang out sharply, and they saw the monster's head sink, a stream of red blood crimsoning the water where their torches gleamed upon it.

Trembling in every limb at this narrow escape, Walt was dragged out. The professor had had the foresight to carry with him some stimulating medicine, and a portion of this he poured down the half-fainting lad's throat. Under its influence the naturally strong lad soon revived, but there was still a scared look in his eyes.

"What could that monster have been?" asked Jack with a shudder in his tones.

"Undoubtedly a creature of the eel or giant conger tribe," rejoined the scientist, "I have read that some of the ancient races used to keep such creatures, and in some cases worshipped them even to the horror of nourishing them on human lives."

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"Ugh!" exclaimed Jack, "I'm glad that Coyote's shot killed the beast. But it could hardly have been one of the original ones."

"Hardly," said the professor, with a smile, "but there is no reason why such creatures should not multiply, and, as we know, there are plenty of fish in the lake for them to feed upon."

"Then there may be others in the water?" asked Ralph.

"I see no reason why not. In fact, I—but, good gracious, what is that?"

The water became suddenly violently agitated as the body of the dead eel, fully forty feet in length, arose lazily to the surface. The reason was an onrush of its brethren gathering to a cannibal feast. It was a fearsome sight to see their jaws clamping and tearing, while their long white tentacles waved.

"Let's get away from here," said the professor presently. "See there is another passage. Let us find out what that leads to."

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As he spoke there came a startling interruption.

A rumbling sound, somewhat as if a heavy train were passing overhead, filled the cavern. It shook violently and the waters of the lake became wildly agitated. The monsters at once left their feast and sank into the lake, leaving the mangled body of their dead mate floating on the surface.

The rumbling grew louder and the cavern shook till the lake was lashed into little wavelets.

"It is the voice of the Trembling Mountain," said the professor solemnly; "somewhere the mighty forces of nature's forges are at work."

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CHAPTER XXIII.

THE HEART OF THE MYSTERY.

"Sounds more to me as if Mrs. Nature had a tummy ache," said the unromantic Coyote Pete.

But nobody laughed at this remark. The sounds were too awe-inspiring. Suddenly they ceased as abruptly as they had begun, the rumblings dying out like a sharp clap of thunder.

"Is there any danger?" inquired Jack.

"I don't think so," rejoined the professor, "this must have been going on for centuries, and, as we know, the force of a volcano wanes instead of waxing stronger as the centuries pass by."

"Hope so, I'm sure," put in Walt, "I can tell you, I've had quite enough excitement for one day."

"Well, I guess that is the case with all of us," was the rejoinder, "but amid all these natural wonders and alarms we must not forget that we came here on a definite mission,—namely to carry back with us what we can of the reputed treasure."

"That's right," agreed Coyote, "and so far as I'm concerned, I'm for pushing on."

That seemed to be in accordance with the wishes of the entire little company, so, forward it was.

They plunged into the passage that the professor had indicated and traversed it for some distance before they struck anything out of the ordinary.

It was perhaps half an hour before they began to notice that the tunnel was beginning to be irradiated by a light far stronger than that thrown by their torches, a bright piercing glare that seemed to burn like white fire. It grew very much warmer, too, and the perspiration streamed down all their faces.

"We are approaching the subterranean fires," said the professor, "in all probability some titanic flame of natural gas. By the roaring sound I hear, I believe that to be a correct statement of the facts."



In the midst of a rock chamber, there arose a great flame of an almost white hue.

"Sounds like a blast furnace in full swing," said Ralph.

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Suddenly the passage widened and a dazzling scene broke upon their gaze. In the midst of a rock chamber even larger, as well as they could judge, than the cave of the lake, there arose a great flame of an almost white hue. It was blue at the base like an ordinary gas flame and roared straight up with terrific force as if fed by great reservoirs of natural gas.

"In all probability it was ignited at the time that the volcano was active and has burned ever since," opined the professor. "Young men, if we found nothing else within this cavern we have already experienced more than falls to the lot of even exceptional men in their lifetime. Such sights as these we shall never forget."

"It's a Flower of Flame!" exclaimed Jack poetically.

"If you could corner that light and sell it, there'd be a pile of money in it," said the practical Ralph.

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"Well, as time is precious, let us be pressing on," said the professor, "for, speaking of money, we must recollect that we have, as yet, found no trace of the treasure."

After converging upon the chamber of the Flower of Flame, the passage once more plunged into the innermost regions of the mountain. For a space it twisted and turned, and then, without the slightest warning, the adventurers experienced a sharp shock. They faced a blank wall.

"Well, here's the finish," announced Walt, holding up his torch.

"Looks like it," agreed Jack, "yet it seems odd that those old tribes would have gone to all the trouble to drill that passage if it ends right here."

"Just what I think, my boy," said the professor, "and by the same token, look here!"

He indicated a big ring of some yellowish metal that hung directly in the center of the seeming blank wall.

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"I'll experiment," he said, giving it a twist.

But nothing occurred.

Then he tried tugging it. Again no result followed.

"Look," cried Ralph suddenly, "there's a metal plate under your feet, professor. Perhaps if you stand on that and then tug you will have some results."

"That sounds reasonable," said Professor Wintergreen, doing as the boy had indicated.

This time, amid a cheer from the boys, something did happen. The door slowly swung on invisible hinges and beyond it their torch-lights fell on a scene of almost overwhelming grandeur.

It was a chamber, seemingly of gleaming white marble. Around the walls, at regular intervals, were ranged the figures of what appeared to be idols, but which they presently discovered were perfectly embalmed bodies of past rulers of the mountain dwellers. At one end of the chamber on a raised dais was a hideous figure which they readily guessed to be the deity of the forgotten race.

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The face of this image was spread into a monstrous expression of malignant cruelty. But it was the eyes that startled them. They blazed in the torch-lights like two balls of fire.

"They are rubies!" cried the professor, rushing forward. As he did so, his eye fell upon a heap of golden ornaments and jeweled vessels at the foot of the huge statue. Evidently they had been left there as offerings on the day of the mysterious occurrence that had wiped out the tribe.

But as the man of science made his dart toward the pile, a strange thing happened. The gaping mouth of the statue opened wide, and from it there poured a puff of gas so baleful in odor that the boys reeled back. But the professor, upon whom the full force of the blast had concentrated itself, gave a few staggering footsteps and then plunged to the marble floor in a senseless condition.

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"So that is the way those old fellows protected their treasure," snorted Pete. "Wall, it was a good one, too, and no mistake. Come on, boys, and drag the professor out of that."

"Isn't there danger of our being poisoned by that gas, too?" asked Walt, still shaken by his previous experience in danger.

"Even if there was, it 'ud be our duty ter get the professor out of that," said Pete severely, "but I noticed that the professor stepped on a particular stone as he reached for them treasures. I guess it is only that stone, behind which the stuff is piled, that works the gas

consarn."

And so it proved. By carefully avoiding the stone which was of a dark blood-color, they dragged the professor to a place of safety, and with water from the canteen and some of his own stimulant, they soon had him on his feet again.

"I should have been upon the lookout," he said, "I ought to have known that the priests of the tribe would have taken some precautions to protect the offerings from marauders."

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"But the gas only works when you step on that particular stone," objected Jack.

"I suppose with the ignorant folk with whom they had to deal, one lesson of that sort was quite sufficient. That is the logical stone to step upon, and having once tested it, nobody was likely to try again," rejoined the professor.

"And now to gather up the treasure, or what we can of it," said Jack.

Pete produced a big roll of sacking which, on being distributed, proved to consist of burlap bags, one for each member of the party.

"Here we are, on Tom Tiddler's ground,
Picking up gold and silver!"

So sang the boys, as sacks in hand they rushed forward.

"This girdle for me!" cried Jack, holding up a belt of golden coins with great, rough rubies encrusting it.

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"This goblet takes my eye," quoth Ralph, stowing a golden vessel, likewise jewel-encrusted, into his receptacle.

Besides the wrought gold there were ingots of gold in the rough, silver articles of all sorts, and all gem-studded. The heap blazed and flashed with a hundred fires as the torches gleamed upon it. They all worked like beavers and before long the sacks were full with a burden that was quite heavy enough for any of the party to wish to carry.

"Well, this will be all for this trip," decided the professor when their task was completed, "and now for the open air."

With the scientist leading the way, his long legs fairly sagging under his burden, they began to retrace their footsteps, fingering the thread as they went.

"What should you estimate the value of this haul at?" Ralph asked, as they once more passed the portal.

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"At a rough guess at least \$500,000, apart from the value of the collection as antiquities," said the professor. "It is without doubt the most valuable archeological collection ever stumbled upon."

Past the Flower of Flame and past the lake of the blind, monstrous eels they retraced their steps, their hearts beating triumphantly at the magnificent conclusion of their long and adventurous quest.

But as they reached the Cave of the Stalactites the subterranean chambers were filled with a sudden terrifying sound. It seemed to drive the ear drums in with its fierce impact. The adventurers felt themselves lifted from their feet and then violently hurled to the ground again. A rush of nauseous smelling gas enveloped them, splitting their heads with its pungent fumes.

The earth shook and trembled and a reverberating roar as of the explosion of a powder magazine filled the whole atmosphere.

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Some terrific catastrophe had occurred within the confines of the caves in the heart of the Trembling Mountain. Following the explosion there came a sound like that of a landslide.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

THE DEATH TRAP.

"What can have happened?"

It was Jack who spoke some ten minutes later.

"In my opinion some cataclysm has occurred," said the professor.

"Meaning by that, that there's bin a most almighty bust-up?" inquired Pete.

"In colloquial language that was the idea I intended to convey," said the professor, with dignity.

"Well, what do you think this catty—what-you-may-call-'em has done?" asked Jack.

"Sealed forever the treasure caves," said the professor promptly. "That explosion we heard was either the ignition of gas from the mouth of the idol or it marked the birth of a new Flower of Flame. In any event the roar and tremble which followed was pretty good evidence that there had been subsidence of the rock in that neighborhood, which, of course, means that the passageways must have caved in.

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"Well, we got our share out of it," said Ralph philosophically.

"Yet it is a great pity that such a thing has occurred," said the professor sorrowfully, "I had been in hopes of making this cave the Mecca of scientists the world over. This explosion has blasted my dreams of such a thing."

"Wall, don't feel too bad about it, professor," comforted Pete, "we got enough stuff to start a show of our own with, anyhow."

As there was nothing to be gained by remaining in the cave, they decided to get out to the open air as soon as possible. As they went Jack spoke up suddenly:

"Has it occurred to you fellows that we are carrying a bait that might tempt less dangerous fellows than that band of Ramon's to plunder us?"

"That's right," agreed Pete, "but I guess we won't be bothered. Nobody but Ramon had wind of our mission, and I don't imagine that after the lesson the Rangers gave him that he'll come back in a hurry."

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"I'm not so sure about that," said Jack, "from what I know of him he's not the sort of man to let go of a good thing if he can help it, and he'd certainly have a good thing in us, providing he could get the treasure away from us."

"Always provided," said Ralph, "but I'll bet we'd give him a sharp tussle for it."

"Let us hope nothing of the kind occurs," said the professor, "we have had difficulties enough on our mission, and now that it is over let us hope we can bring it to a peaceful conclusion."

"Amen to that," agreed Pete, "but in time of peace prepare for war, you know. Have you any plans for the return home?"

"Yes," said the man of science, "the city of Hermosillo on the Mexican West Coast Railroad is not many miles from where we now are. My idea is to make for that and take the train back home."

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"Hooray for the good old U. S. A.!" shouted the Border Boys in chorus.

Conversing cheerily in this manner they reached the mouth of the passage and were about to step out into the starlight, when Pete, who was in advance, held up his hand in a signal that they all had no difficulty in interpreting.

"Stop!"

The keen eyes of the cow-puncher had detected several dark forms skulking in the shadows of the grove about the portal of the cave. From their manner of pacing about, Pete immediately guessed that they were sentries posted there by somebody, whom he concluded could be no other than Ramon.

Retreating down the passage, Pete told the others of his suspicions and a council of war at once followed.

"We're hemmed in beyond a doubt," said Jack finally.

"And the question is, how to get out," put in the professor, as

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solemnly as if some question had been raised about the matter.

"Wall, if we don't git out afore long, we're gone coons," was Pete's gloomy contribution.

Suddenly Jack spoke up.

"Do you think the sentries saw or heard us, Pete?"

"No, I don't. If they had, we'd uv heard of it by now. My idea of the situation is this: Ramon outwitted the Rangers and back tracked on us. Arriving at our camp and finding it deserted, he guessed we'd gone arter the treasure. The rascal thinks to himself that we will make fine cat's-paws to draw his chestnuts out of the fire, and so, knowing he has us bottled up, he sets those sentries on duty arter he's tracked us up the mountain side."

"I guess that's about it," rejoined the boy; "the question is, what are we to do?"

"Wait till I go and look the land over a bit," said Coyote. "In the meantime, put out those torches. If one of those greasers should come snooping into the passage, he might see the glow and nose us out."

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So they waited in total darkness while Coyote departed on his scouting errand. It was a long time before he came back. When he did he was chuckling to himself.

"They're the worst scared bunch you ever saw," he said, "I laid behind a rock and listened to ther talk. They think that at any moment some spirits or ghosts is likely to pop out of this hole. They likewise opine that we shall never be seen again because the bogies in the mountain have gobbled us up."

"But what good does that do us?" asked Jack.

"I dunno," admitted Pete, "except that it sounded funny to hyar a bunch of grown men so scared of spooks."

"Light up a torch, Ralph," said Jack the next minute, "it makes me feel creepy to sit here in the dark."

Ralph reached into his pocket for the bundle of sulphur matches. As he drew his hand out, his fingers, moistened with perspiration, gleamed greenly with the phosphorus which had adhered to them.

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"Gee, look at that stuff blaze!" he exclaimed, "you'd think I was on fire!"

But Jack was on his feet doing a sudden ecstatic war dance.

"Hooray! Hooray! I've got it!" he cried.

"The extinguisher?" inquired Walt anxiously.

"No, a plan. A great plan! Those greasers outside are all half frightened out of their lives already. We'll finish the job!"

"How?" the question came in chorus.

"We'll smear our faces with that phosphorus from the matches, and then rush out looking like a lot of green ghosts. If that won't stampede them, we'll have to fight. We can't stay mewed up in here."

"By hookey, boy, you've got it all right!" cried Pete in a voice vibrant with excitement. "We'll try it. As you say, we can't stop hyar and starve, and that's what it amounts to if we don't git out."

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"So it's scare them or fight them," said Ralph.

"That is, with the odds in favor of the former," laughed Jack.

Each of the party wet his face with water from the canteen, and then rubbed the matches over his features till they glared greenly in the darkness with a truly terrifying expression. Then they gave their hands similar treatment.

"Gee, I'll bet I'd be scared of myself if I could see myself," laughed Ralph, "you fellows look hideous enough to frighten a pack of brass monkeys."

"Now to see if it will work on those other monkeys outside," said Jack.

In single file, Pete first, Jack second, and the others coming behind, they softly approached the end of the passage. In the starlight they could see the dark forms of the sentries huddled pretty close together, for companionship doubtless.

"Now!" whispered Pete suddenly, "and the more hoorendously you yell, the better it will be!"

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With a series of the most unearthly screeches, the Border Boys and their companions dashed from the cave mouth. Truly they must have been a terrifying spectacle with their glaring green faces and hands, emerging as they did from a cave which the superstitious

Mexicans firmly believed to be haunted.

As the first shrill cries rang out, the sentries gave an answering series of yells. Only their cries, instead of being menacing and uncanny like our adventurers', were shrill screams of terror.

"Caramba! The ghosts of the caves!" they shrieked.

"Santa Maria! They are after us!"

"Run for your lives, hombres!"

Without stopping to collect their rifles, which they had carelessly piled against the trees, the Mexicans dashed off at top speed, stumbling and then struggling to their feet again and dashing on in their wild panic.

The adventurers at once possessed themselves of the rifles and then came to a halt. But Pete addressed them:

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"We must foller up our advantage. We have 'em on the run. Foller 'em while we've got 'em going!" he cried.

Once more off dashed the green ghosts, hotly pursuing the fleeing Mexicans, whose yells resounded everywhere. In the camp was Ramon himself. He was suddenly aroused as his terrified band came stumbling in, imploring aid from all the saints in the calendar.

"What is this, you dogs!" he bawled, "what does this mean?"

"Oh, the ghosts! The ghosts with the green faces that burn, and the fiery hands!" screamed the panic-stricken Mexicans.

The shrewd outlaw at once guessed what had occurred. But even his iron nerve was shaken as he saw the green-faced spectres sweeping down the mountain side toward him. He stood his ground, however, and by his side stood Canfield, the red-headed American. But the two, unsupported by the band, were no match for the well-armed Border Boys and their companions, and they knew it.

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"Surrender or be shot down like a dog!" cried Coyote Pete in Spanish, as they rushed into the camp. In the distance could be heard the yells of the scared Mexicans as they leaped to their horses and dashed off, deserting their leaders.

Ramon's reply was to fire point blank at the cow-puncher. The bullet grazed his cheek and caused a temporary halt. In that brief instant Ramon and Canfield turned and dashed away at top speed. They scrambled upon their horses bareback, and in a jiffy the thunder of hoofs told that they, too, were off.

The adventurers instantly saddled their own stock and set off in pursuit. They had no intention of losing such an advantage as they now possessed. But their animals were no match for the fleet black, and daylight found them far to the rear of the chase.

But in the meantime Destiny, which had overtaken Ramon at last, had arranged a fitting finale for his tempestuous career. The Rangers, true to their promise, were on their way to meet our party at the place agreed upon, and at daybreak Ramon and Canfield, white faced, dust covered and desperate, encountered the rough and ready cavalry in a narrow defile. Ramon at once swung his black and dashed off like the wind, leaving Canfield on his exhausted beast to fall an easy prey to the Rangers. Leaving a file of men to guard the prisoner, the captain of the Rangers dashed off in hot pursuit of Ramon and his fleet steed. But the great horse easily outdistanced his followers, and had it not been for the hands of Destiny, Ramon might once more have escaped his end.

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But as he shot out of the defile he spied, coming toward him, the Border Boys. The rascal was fairly trapped. Behind him were the Rangers, in front the Border Boys. As he hesitated, Coyote Pete cried in a loud voice:

"Do you surrender?"

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The Mexican's reply was to dash back once more. Perhaps he hoped to ride and trample his way through the Rangers. But what desperate thoughts raced through his mind in those last moments we shall never know, for presently, as the Rangers approached, a volley came whizzing about the cornered desperado.

One chance of escape only, had he. On the opposite side of the defile lay a narrow ledge running to the top of the sheer cliff. Could he gain that he might stand a chance of escape. Before they realized what he was about to do, Ramon saw the desperate loophole and gathered his horse for the impossible leap across the chasm.

The gallant black, true as steel to his unworthy master to the last, never faltered. Straight out into the air he shot, while the Border Boys and the Rangers alike sat spellbound by the scene.

The horse's forefeet touched the opposite ledge, but the hold was too weak. With a shrill whinny of terror, with which mingled a terrible scream from Ramon, the beautiful and gallant animal went crashing backward, down, down into the depths of the abyss,—while the horror-stricken onlookers sat paralyzed in their saddles!

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* * * * *

The next day a happy party set out from the region of the mystic caves, carrying a freight of treasure and escorted by the Mexican Rangers, who, by Don Alverado's wish, were to offer them all the protection possible.

An examination of the caves had shown that the professor's guess that they had been sealed for all time by the explosion of the natural gases was correct. Beyond the first great chamber the foot of man would never more penetrate.

At evening on the second day of their journey, the roofs of Hermosillo came in sight. And then the captain of the Rangers turned to our party.

"Our duty is done, senors," he said, saluting, "yonder is the end of your journey."

"One moment," said Jack, reddening a little and lowering his voice, "here are two letters I will ask you to deliver when you reach Santa Anita once more. And a packet," he added, handing the officer the articles.

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"I shall see that they reach their destination safely," said the officer, taking them and thrusting them into the bosom of his coat. "And now, adios!"

"Adios!" The cry was caught up by the Rangers and went echoing out along the mountain side.

At the same instant, as though moved by a common impulse, the Mexicans swung their wiry ponies and dashed off toward the East. The Border Boys stood watching them till in a cloud of dust they vanished from their sight forever. Then turning in silence they rode down into Hermosillo. Here telegrams were despatched telling of the success of their quest, and the next day they boarded the train for home. The ponies traveled less luxuriously than their masters, in a stock car, while in the express coach, guarded by shotgun messengers, were the precious trophies of the cave.

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"Say, Jack, if I'm not too curious, what was in that package that you handed the officer yesterday?"

The question came from Ralph.

"A present of gems for himself and his men," was the rejoinder. "I knew you would think I did right in giving it to them. In fact, I had the professor's permission to do so."

"And the letters?" asked Ralph.

"Well," said Jack, "one was to Don Alverado thanking him for all he had done, and bidding him good-bye. The other was to—somebody else."

For a time the boy sat silent, gazing from the windows at the flying landscape,—and seeing nothing of its details!

But the past was behind them, and Jack was not the boy to waste time on moonshiny thoughts. In fact, while all the party lingered long in memory among the strangely varied scenes of their recent experiences, life was full of a new zest, and the future beckoned them.

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Ere long, to share with you our prophetic knowledge, the keenest faculties of the Border Boys were to be called into action. In Texas, the Lone Star State, some work, play and adventure lay in front of them, and those who have hitherto followed our Border Boys through their careers of incident and excitement, may find more about them in another volume, which will be called "The Border Boys With The Texas Rangers."

THE END.

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