

COMRADES OF THE LONE STAR

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COMRADES
OF
THE LONE STAR

By WILL HENRY SPINDLER

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To the memory of his Brother
JOHN H. SPINDLER
the Author affectionately dedicates this Book.

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PREFACE.

THE land of the Lone Star again is beckoning to me, luring me back to that far land of prairie and blue skies, and I must respond to its ever enchanting charms. As I write I seem to see the billowy Plains stretching endlessly before my eyes, and I hear the murmur of the rippling waters of the Rio Grande. In "Comrades of the Lone Star," I have attempted to picture life on the Texas border as it actually existed back in those grand days of the early 70's, which distant land of unbroken prairie, wild yet, almost, as it ever was, stretched out its magnetic arms to lure many a young man to the romantic West.

COMRADES

of the LONE STAR

CHAPTER I.

GREASERS.

Tom Rivers and Jim Black paused when they had gained the summit of a gently sloping hill, and dropping to the ground they placed their ears close to the earth, Indian style, and listened intently. For fully a moment they remained in this motionless attitude, and then rising to their feet with an air of dissatisfaction, they continued their journey. But they made but slow progress, their eyes continually scanning the range of yellow buffalo grass about them. Their actions indicated plainly enough that they expected the presence of others.

"It's shore time for Bill to come with our horses—wonder what's keepin' him so long," muttered Black as he stopped to wipe the perspiration from his sun-browned face. It was an unusually hot day in mid-summer and both men perspired quite freely.

Earlier in the day the two individuals mentioned, with Bill Wade, the trio employees of the Lazy Bar

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ranch located in western Texas, had received orders from their foreman, John Higgins, to form an ambuscade for a band of terrorizing cattle rustlers from over the Mexican border, which was expected to attempt a raid on the Lazy Bar on the night following the opening of this story.

The place which had been chosen for the scene of ambush was an old trail which led over some of the roughest and wildest country of the Lone Star. An old, romantic trail made in other days it was indeed. And it was the only short route that led to the vicinity of the Lazy Bar from the Mexican border. By making a wide detour the ranch could be reached from a different direction, but it was a well known fact that Mexicans bent on plunder and cattle rustling never took the trouble to make more miles under the cover of night than absolutely was necessary. The trail was narrow in the region where the ambush was planned, and led along the steep walls of gigantic cliffs for a long distance, forming a passage for horsemen in single file several hundred feet below the rim of the cliffs forming a canyon wall. The foreman's reasons for choosing this trail for an ambuscade can thus readily be seen. His plan was to hold up the "greaser" transgressors before they had the opportunity to show their hand in the pillaging of the Lazy Bar and possibly neighboring ranches.

For the past two years this same outfit of Mexican Bandits had been terrorizing the country round

about, averaging three or four big raids annually. If popular rumor held it correctly, the bandits consisted of seven sworn members, including James Ponto, the leader. So many successful raids had been accomplished recently, or rather in the last year, that the gang was growing desperately bold.

James Ponto was a name that spelled terror on the Texas border back in those romantic days of 1874. A born horseman and clever, wily diplomat in evading law, he exercised a wonderful influence over his fellow brothers in crime. Already he was wanted in many towns scattered across the border. The authorities had even gone so far as to offer a reward of five hundred dollars for his capture, dead or alive. And of such a character was this early border raider whose very name struck terror into the hearts of many, whose hands had caused many widows and orphans in the land of the Lone Star.

The eagerness to put forth the best of efforts to affect the capture of such a personage can thus readily be seen. No time was at hand in which to pick up more men for the expedition and the remainder of the Lazy Bar outfit could not possibly be spared from the immense herd of long-horns in their charge. However in such a location, three men could do as much as twenty, and no doubt on this theory the foreman had based his decision in sending only the three men on this errand of so pressing responsibility. At once Wade had been sent to the ranch

with the three tired mounts to secure fresh ones. Already several hours had elapsed since his departure, and his comrades were uneasy for his return.

"Chances are he had a hard time catchin' 'em," Rivers said, in response to Black's comment.

"Mebbe he did, but even allowin' for that, he ought to be here now. If he don't show up pretty sudden its going to hump us some to reach our den an' get ourselves located before that pack of greasers passes over the trail. It's only an hour to sunset now," Black continued.

"Don't you worry, Jim. Reckon Bill is on to his business. He'll be here inside of half an hour—see if I aint right now. Here's the divide where he said most likely he'd meet us, an' we'll get a chance to catch a little rest before he comes. An' rest will strike me exactly in the right spot now."

"Same here, Tom. That's some walk we made—some walk for guys used to nothin' but a horse an' saddle under him. But *time* is what's countin' just now, an' we'll save Billy several miles—at least five—by our long walk, even if it does take all the pep out of a fellow."

The slight divide was soon reached. The pair, now lay down on the soft grass and stretching themselves out prone upon their backs, placing their big sombreros over their hot faces to protect them from the dazzling rays of the sun, they rested and awaited the arrival of Wade with their fresh horses.

CHAPTER II.

INTO THE STORM.

When Will Wade reached the ranch he found everything had not proven exactly to suit his own occasion. The extra mounts, which he had supposed would surely be corraled where they could be caught at once, had been turned loose and had drifted a long distance from the corrals on over the sea of tossing prairie.

"Hang such luck," came from Wade's clenched lips when the stable-tender, an ungainly, raw-boned fellow, told him of this misfortune. "Now I'll have to do some tall ridin' if I want to get the horses to the boys by sun-down. But I won't waste no time at least"—and with these words he put the spurs to his already tired mustang and started on a swift gallop in the direction of the grazing horses.

Arrived here, he found that they were herded by only one man, old Sandy Natchez, a half-breed Indian. This was more hard luck for Wade. It would be a difficult task for two men, mounted on tired ponies, to drive twenty wild ponies four or five miles over the prairie to the corrals, which place, knowing they were always driven here to be caught up and saddled, they generally sought to avoid.

But after an hour's hard chase they succeeded in getting them safely corralled; then Wade, picking out the three horses he considered the fastest in the herd, "roped" them and tied them to the heavy plank corral. Next he and Sandy changed the saddles from the exhausted ponies to the fresh ones. Then mounting the one he had chosen for himself, a gray of rather high spirits—his favorite cowpony—and leading the other two, Wade rode off.

The sun was just sinking in the west when he reached the place where Rivers and Black had halted to rest. A cold supper of pork and beans, which Wade procured from his saddle bags, was hastily consumed, and without further delay the trio mounted their fresh mounts and set out for the place of their destination in high spirits. Yes, in high spirits. And did they not have good reasons to be in this mood? For every moment drew them nearer the place where they would meet the noted "greaser gang" in battle. And was not the place of their destination of a very suitable character? Such were the thoughts that coursed through their minds as they rode onward in the cool night's air.

But the cowpunchers had forgotten to reckon with the elements. As the night wore on dark clouds loomed up in the west, and spreading overhead soon shut out the starlight completely. This made it much more difficult for the Texans to hold their route over the trackless plains.

Swiftly through the dark night sped steeds and riders, riding abreast and keeping close together, to avoid becoming separated in the blinding darkness. The steeds were as intent on their errand as were their riders. Their sensitive ears were ever on the alert and continually their noses sought the ground for signs by which to keep their course over the dark prairie.

As the moments rolled by the sky became darker still. Now and then the discordant rumbling of fast approaching thunder came distinctly to the Texans' ears.

"Reckon we're in for a little rain an' wind. Hope she waits though with the wind business until we get in shelter of the brush along the cliff," Wade muttered through clenched teeth.

"So do I," Black replied, "but a feller don't need to look twice to see it's goin' to storm like blue blazes—an' pretty sudden too!"

"Well I reckon none of us will melt by any means," spoke up Rivers. "When we once reach the trail we'll have plenty of shelter, an' when we get ourselves concealed this lightning will help us to locate them greasers. We must be within two or three miles of the place where the trail hits the canyon side now, aren't we?"

"Reckon we're even nearer than that—one will measure it I think," continued Wade. "Say, that lightning is gettin' d—n sharp! I'm thinkin' old

Ponto mebbe will put off his program of devilment for another—Hello there!”

“What?” gasped Rivers and Black in a breath.

“Why the cottonwoods—there’s the cottonwoods where the trail begins! We’re all O. K. now boys. Watch for the next flash an’ you’ll see ’em plain as day—There!”

Lightning flashed and the crash of thunder deafened their ears. There in sombre shadow were the cottonwoods sure enough—the clump of cottonwoods that marked the place where the old trail began its ascent.

“Sure enough,” said Rivers in a tone of relief. “I was beginnin’ to think we had lost our way in the dark. These cottonwoods will be the place to get rid of our horses an’ they’ll have some protection from the storm. Let’s hurry though. The sooner we get into that brush by the trail the better it’ll be for our health, for it won’t be more than a week before that storm hits.”

Putting spurs to their mustangs they soon reached the little clump of cottonwoods. Then dismounting, the trio tied their mounts in places where they would best be protected from whatever might come. Next they climbed up into the trail to their right and facing north they followed the route the trail took. Nothing of the no doubt grand scenery about them could be seen in the heavy mantle of darkness that enveloped them; only the dark, rough canyon side at

their right, which they hugged closely to avoid getting too near the edge of the trail, and down below, at their left, darkened space. In this manner they proceeded for possibly a mile, and then Wade called a halt.

"Here's as good a place as we'll find," he said, climbing down into the heavy underbrush that now lined the canyon side close up to the worn trail. "This is all the shelter we want. The brush is heavier yet a little ways farther I reckon. Look out an' don't make a misstep or you'll shore take a free ride to the foot of this here cliff."

Scarcely had they secluded themselves in the shelter of the dense brush when the storm bore down on them. The wind—the first usherer of the tornado and thunder storm—swept down in frightful, awful, hissing gusts. Sharp electrical currents shot zigzag over the scene at intervals; deafening thunder echoed and boomed in the deep canyon below. The first wild onslaught of the tornado was gigantic, superhuman in its violence. Only those who have passed life on the open plains of the west can know how the wind can blow. The loud smashing of timber resounded in the ears of the Texans nestling desperately in the thick underbrush; torn from their very roots by that unseen Herculean power and dashed down the decline, or lodging in other timber skirting the abrupt cliff. Desperately the men clung to their

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places, a heavy din filling their ears. The storm held full sway.

And now the rain came in driving, mad, roaring torrents. The lightning revealed one unbroken sheet of water dashing down into space, blending all else from view. Almost the first mad deluge wet the party to their skin. Only their firearms did they strive to keep dry. Clinging to the wet brush, besmeared with mud and leaves, the dashing torrents nearly carrying away their breath, they braved the fury of the elements. And how the rain came! All of the Texans had been out in heavy rains, but not like this. It must be a heavy cloudburst!

The trail a few feet above them was one frenzied, mad flood of waters. Vividly the flashing lightning revealed it, roaring and dashing on in angry waves. Deafening claps of thunder resounded with the din of rushing waters and wind. Wide channels formed and down them shot the whirling flood of waters—shooting blindly down the declivity to right and left of the Texans. A sudden fear suddenly crept into their hearts. Now was their great danger. If one of these whirling, rushing masses should shoot over them, then!—

Then suddenly from below came a deafening, unearthly roar—the combination of a thousand deafening, rumbling sounds blended in discord. The very cliff seemed to vibrate with the terrifying new sound that filled their ears. Awe filled the hearts of even

the Texans. What could it be? In sudden terror they clung desperately to their wet stronghold, powerless to move in the spell cast over them. Never before had so deafening, incessant, unearthly a sound filled their ears. For fully a moment they remained hypnotized, scarcely drawing a breath. Then Wade's voice broke the spell and rang dim and distant in the ears of Black and Rivers.

"The stream! It's water pouring through the canyon! Hold on for your lives—Whew!"

The sudden swerve of one of the roaring, eddying currents of water brought Wade's exclamation. With lightning rapidity the current swerved from its general course and overswept their stronghold. Only one lightning sweep and then it had passed to their left. But in that awful avalanche of sweeping waters Rivers lost his hold and was swept like so much rubbish down the decline.

CHAPTER III.

THE ENCOUNTER.

Wade and Black gasped for breath after the lightning sweep of water had passed, carrying in its eddying volume their comrade. So suddenly, so utterly unexpected it had come and gone, that neither scarcely realized what had happened. Then the sound of the incessant roaring in their ears, the absence of their comrade, and with horrible realization the awful truth came to them. In horror both unconsciously shuddered. By what strange miracle had they escaped River's fate in that awful rush of waters over them?

Rivers had been swept down through the dark space below. Could he ever survive that whirlpool that had carried him with it? The cliff was not so abrupt here, both fancied, as in many other places, but then the awful speed of that rushing torrent! Involuntarily Wade gazed into the space of darkness as if his eyes were capable of penetrating its interior. A flash of lightning and he fancied the reflection of water met his gaze. Was it from the tumbling flooded stream below, or only the pouring rain that still shot into space? A cold chill shot through Wade at each new realization of the peril of his pal. Was he dead below?

Then the peril of their own situation came back to Wade. Desperately he scrambled to regain the hold he had almost lost in that mad swirl of waters. He must prepare for the next sudden onslaught. Involuntarily his eyes closed and he held his breath. But it did not come.

As suddenly as it had began the falling sheet of water ceased. The cloudburst had spent itself! And now the raging wind bore down on them and swept unmolested through the canyon. In even fiercer, more Herculean gusts than the first onslaught, now waged the tornado. Like grim fate the Texans clung to their places, the wet and prickly branches incited to sudden action slapping them mercilessly in their faces, the awful roar of the wind and rushing water drowning their ears. To them it was sickening, heart-rending—at least to Wade. No longer did he remember Ponto or his gang of desperadoes. Only his friend's—his brother's—possible fate tore at his heart. He was wet to the bone and shivering with cold, but he heeded not this. If only he could know his pal's fate.

At last the storm waned, the wind blew a parting gale and died away. The men heaved a sigh of relief. The storm was over. A still calm settled over them, broken only by the now fainter sound of the water below them. But not a word escaped the lips of either as they sat side by side in the cold wet brush. A spell seemed to have cast itself over both. Each

knew the other's thoughts and each waited for the other to act. The silence grew awkward. Neither trusted their voices to speak. Even in the enshrouding inky darkness they were avoiding each other's glances. A sudden weakness had been struck into both, and each was ashamed to disclose this strain to the other.

Moments passed. Once Wade's low voice broke the awful silence that was engulfed between them and muttered indistinctly something about a search for their comrade. But even before the other could reply he slowly shook his head. No, there was no use. It would be utterly incomprehensible. Even in his anxiety the cowboy realized the utter folly of such an undertaking. Even if they retraced their steps to the cottonwoods and at this point descended into the canyon, could they proceed a dozen rods in the canyon without utterly losing themselves in the inky darkness that hung over? And in what manner could he be of assistance to his pal now? What would come to pass already had passed, and no human could prevent it. They must put their faith in God and hope for the best until day dawned once more.

Moment succeeded moment, an hour passed, still the Texans sat huddled in the wet foliage scarcely changing their positions, uttering scarcely a sentence. Then gradually Rivers was lost in their minds and thoughts of their own situation and their duty to their foreman, to their employer, Mr. Davis, owner

of the Lazy Bar, and in fact to their state, entered to be pondered upon. Would their enterprise to quell robbery and bloodshed prove fruitful? *Murder* and bloodshed I should have said. For in that day really not so very long past, reckless murder and pillage of homes often went hand in hand with the old border raids of a degraded type of Mexican bandits. Their situation was one of the deepest responsibility. They were the advance guard to the prevention of these well known outrages. In their hands alone rested the safety, the welfare, the lives, perhaps, of their fellow ranchers. Were they equal to the situation?

Black first saw fit to put his sentiments into words.

"It's well past mid-night now, it must be, an' not a sign yet," he muttered. "They sure ought to be here by this time if they expect to do any big stunts yet before mornin'. The storm no doubt caught 'em back a little, but they ought to be due now. To tell the truth, Wade, do you think the varmints will *come* to-night?"

"Don't worry about *them* not comin' Jim," the other replied, bitterness in his tone. "You're a new hand in this country an' don't know 'em like I do. When a damn greaser once gits his head set on anything what'll bring him spoils the devil can't hold him back. An' young Woods is a fellow you can depend on to fetch only first hand information when yu' send him after it. He had just got back from spyin' on Ponto an' his gang when he rode up to the herd yesterday

noon. We might as well make up our minds to keep a stiff guard, for Woods can be depended on."

"But what under the sun is keepin' 'em? In four or five hours at the most it'll be light. Mebbe they intend to drive our herd as far as they can before daylight an' then drive 'em in some canyon an' hide 'em until to-morrow night—now since the storm made 'em tardy."

"Mebbe."

"Say but it's gettin' nasty in this wet brush. If I had my say I'd let old Ponto go to the hot place an' build a fire to dry my clothes. But then we shouldn't complain"—

"We're sure better off than Tom. I wonder how he's farin' down there."

This brought another silence. Black knew the agony of doubt Wade must be suffering for his pal and was silent. The latter again broke the silence with his brooding.

"You don't know Tom like I do. I've known an' been with him all my life. We've always been like brothers—me an' Tom, an' I never expect to find a pal I like so well as him. Tom always stands by a fellow. He saved my life once."

Again Black was silent and once more Wade continued to ramble on as if talking to himself.

"I can remember as well as if it was only yesterday the time him an' me an' his sister Viola, who's East at school now, come out here to Texas with the

Davis family. It was back in the early sixties. We were all kids then an' I am twenty-four now. The three of us was left orphans after a big massacre by the Confederate guerillas an' Indians back in Kansas, an' Mr. and Mrs. Davis took pity on us an' brought us along with them out here. There shore was some rough times too at first—Indians, greasers an' gun throwers to brush with. But me an' Tom always stuck together through thick an' thin an' watched the wild prairies gradually but slowly become conquered an' the wild, rough ways become tamer. We growed up like brothers. His ways was mine and my ways his. I have always thought as much of him as if he was my true brother an' he of me. Tom's as good a fellow as yu' can find, Tom is."

Black nodded in assent and once more Wade fell into his silent, brooding mood. Moments passed in monotonous silence. Not a sound was audible save the faint sound of the water below. Doubt began to assail the minds of both concerning the bandits.

Suddenly through the still air the unmistakable sound of a horse's hoofs striking gravel fell on their ears. Their hearts beat quick. The enemy was at hand! The next faint flash of lightning revealed a clump of horsemen rounding a curve of the narrow trail.

The hot blood rose in Wade's veins. To him the cruel barbarity of this band was not a stranger. The gleam of undying hatred and defiance crept swiftly

into his eyes to replace that of calmness that usually prevailed there. Still in his eagerness he did not forget caution. Would they, since their number had been decreased to only two, still be able to effect the capture of the villains that approached in yon enshrouding darkness? Could they retain the old glory of Texans and conquer three times their number of these degraded outlaws who held no regard for human life in their breasts?

They were rapidly approaching. Another flash of lightning followed to reveal at least half a dozen mounted greasers well armed and only twenty yards away. There was no time for consideration, for planning maneuvers. The bandits rode in single file. Even as the Texans pulled themselves cautiously in a position for an assault, the leader was upon them. Then like a flash they had drawn and covered the riders.

“Hands up! Quick—or you’re all dead men!”

It was the voice of Wade that greeted the astounded Mexicans to awaken them from their reveries of murder and plunder. As if a spell had suddenly fallen over them, that reckless, wild, dare-devil band stopped—came to a halt frozen in their tracks. Panic seized them. Horse collided with horse, rider with rider. Then all in a flash came a series of plunges and kicks and the horse and rider next in line from the leader plunged off the narrow trail. Madly the frenzied horse scrambled to regain footing, stumbled, and horse and rider dashed to their death below.

And now the hands of the remaining five shot up. "By whose order do we surrender?" came the astonished, trembling voice of the leader, whom Wade recognized as Jim Ponto. Fear rang in his every syllable of utterance.

"By the order of those what'll fill you with lead if you don't obey—Quick! Climb down from your horses! You're a prisoner this time, Ponto."

The wily Ponto fumbled as if to dismount instantly. Then suddenly the Texans were conscious of a sudden dip of the big burly form behind the neck of his horse, the rattle of spurs, and before either could pull a trigger they were brushed like chaff into the underbrush at their feet. Like a whirlwind it all occurred as a phantom before their eyes. Of one accord the daredevils had made a dash for liberty!

But now the Texans' revolvers let out their fatal spurts of fire and lead. The reports boomed, echoed, and re-echoed loudly through the canyon. Two of the riders pitched from their saddles and tumbled down the decline, bearing one of the horses with them. Only the two rear riders of the party now remained—and Ponto well in the lead.

Two more volleys sounded the knell for the two hindmost riders. Now only Ponto remained, but he had shot well past them. Mad despair sank into the hearts of both as their weapons played on his diminishing form in the darkness. Would the noted leader still escape them?

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Once more both weapons belched forth their fatal contents. No response. Only the clatter of hoofs and the dark figure vanished from sight in the shrouding darkness. Only one chance now remained of settling the outlaw's account—if his horse's breakneck speed should dash them both off the narrow trail.

In suspense the Texans waited for that crash that did not come. Finally even the clatter of hoofs died away on the air.

Ponto had escaped!

CHAPTER IV.

A STRANGE SURPRISE.

Sputtering and madly gasping for breath, Rivers emerged from the depths of the roaring, turbulent stream that shot through the canyon. A mass of tumbling, tossing, colliding wreckage of the storm met his first fearful gaze of terror. The rush of the hissing waters was terrible. Even before Rivers could make an attempt to hold his own in the awful torrent, he was again swept beneath the surface.

He rose again. Like a bobbing, tossing cork he was borne on the strong current so swiftly he could not get his breath. The rolling waves and falling rain blinded him. He was choking! How long could he endure? His brain was dizzy. The awful din of the flood deafened him. A mass of timbers shot by and dealt him a stunning blow on the head, then—darkness.

* * * * *

How long Rivers had been unconscious he could not know. But when he regained his senses he was lying prone upon cold, wet ground, one arm bent painfully under his body. A groan of pain escaped his lips as he raised himself half in a dream, half in reality, to extract the cramped, numb arm. A thou-

sand needle pains shot through it as he did so, and served to bring him more fully to his senses.

His next sensation was that of cold—cold that cut to the very bone. His teeth chattered as the chill passed through his body. Then he was conscious that his clothing was wringing with water, and this brought him to his feet with a start. Why he had been lying in a pool of water!

Fear, mystery, seized the cowboy. Where was he? Reeling he swung around. What were all those strange lights overhead? Stars—the stars shone! What strange place was he in? Giant black barriers rose to his right and left to hem him in. Was he dreaming? Why was he here?

Then the sound of rushing water, a stinging, aching pain in his forehead, and he understood. Warily he lowered himself to a sitting posture beside the shallow pool in which he had lain during his unconsciousness. Like a thunderbolt all came back to his dazed brain—the raging storm, the sudden sweep of that awful channel over him, carrying him in it's wake, the roaring, hissing stream, and then that awful blow on his head. After that his mind had been a complete blank.

The mere thought of his perilous adventure paralyzed Rivers. By what strange miracle had he been saved? A cold chill shot through him as he vividly recalled that steep canyon wall and that tumbling mass of water that had swept him downward in it's

mad shoot down to the flooded stream below. How had he ever passed through that and lived? The mere thought seemed incomprehensible. And then that turbulent, raging flood below, now close at his left and already well spent. How had he ever survived that? How had he gotten out in his unconsciousness?' Such were the exciting puzzles that absorbed his mind.

Then as Rivers gazed at the now quite calm stream an idea came to him. At the point close to where he sat, the stream took a sharp curve to the left. Almost instantly Rivers conceived the formula. This bend no doubt had saved him from a watery grave. That much was clear, for at this point the waves had naturally enough deposited him on the west bank in rounding the bend.

His excitement subsiding, the solution of at least a part of the mysteries simplified, Rivers got up again and looked about him. The pain in his head where that mass of timbers had struck him nearly drove him mad. He was so dizzy at first that he could hardly retain his equilibrium standing. But he must remain no longer sitting on that wet ground. His wet clothing hung tightly to his body, chilling him to the bone. He must get into motion to set his blood circulating and warm his chilled body. A fire must not be kindled, for still he held in mind the Mexicans and besides it would be a difficult task with everything about him drenched with water.

Everything about him lay in grotesque shadow. The giant barriers that rose to north and south of him to shut out the star-light announced to him that he was at the opening of a canyon that led off at right angles to the stream. Ah, it must be a grand, magnificent old canyon this! The ragged rims stood up like ghostly giant specters in the star-studded sky. Forest and thickets interlined the canyon continuously as far as his eyes could penetrate in the pale light of the stars. Everything had taken on a mystic, unreal atmosphere and Rivers marveled. Into what strange land had he been carried during his unconsciousness?

From far in the canyon came the howl of coyotes. Now and then the shrill notes of an owl filled the air. Rivers pondered. Was it approaching dawn? No, the position of the stars overhead told him it still lacked some time before dawn. How much time had elapsed during his unconsciousness?

Then suddenly his eyes detected something that made Rivers forget all else. The blood rushed to his head. Only fifty or sixty rods in the canyon a bright light gleamed through the thicket. Wildly he started in surprise. A light in this wild canyon! Where could it come from? This must indeed be a place of surprises. The gleam of a fire was the last thing Rivers expected to see in this place at this hour. Surely it could not be a campfire and still what else

could it be? But it was there at any rate and he must investigate to discover its origin.

With little hesitation Rivers directed his footsteps up the canyon to the west. Brightly the light gleamed through the thicket of spruces through which he passed. Why had he not seen it before? He must have been too absorbed in other grandeurs of the environment about him. He examined his revolver as he proceeded, to see how it had fared in the flooded stream. It was, fortunately, unwet, due to his trusty water-proof holster.

Ten minutes hard, wearisome scrambling through the thicket, crossing and recrossing a small creek that cut through the recesses of the canyon and joined the main stream where the canyons intersected, found Rivers within a dozen rods of the place from where the rays of light emerged. Yes, it *was* a campfire. Now he could see the flames as they shot up even higher than the thicket that enclosed the fire. Rivers was vexed. Who on earth would kindle a fire in so wild a place at such an hour? Mystery shrouded that fire. Could it possibly be that Wade and Black had kindled it? Surely it could not be the foolhardy work of the greaser bandits. Then, on second thought, it *could* be. The steep canyon walls on both sides would serve to conceal the fire from view from any point save that in a straight line with the opening of this canyon that led west. But the mystery of its real

origin was deep as ever as the Texan pushed on farther.

Now Rivers was forced to proceed on his knees, so dense and tangled became the thicket. His early boyhood on the open range had sufficed to teach him to proceed with silence in even such a place as he now found himself in. Thus by now he was an old hand at this trick. Now he was able to take in the surroundings of the fire at a glance. It had been built in a very small opening of the spruces and underbrush. Indeed so dense and tangled was the thicket that hemmed it in on all sides that at first it seemed utterly impenetrable. But after some moments hard fatiguing labor Rivers had the satisfaction of being almost at the edge of the thicket, within ten feet of the fire. Thrusting aside the underbrush that fringed the opening, he peered very cautiously through at the fire.

What met his view was enough to set Rivers' blood cold in his veins. There before his very eyes, with his rough bearded face resting easily upon his huge hands, his snake-like eyes peering into the fire, sat James Ponto, the noted leader of the Mexican outlaws!

CHAPTER V.

NEWS OF PONTO.

James Ponto gritted his teeth in sheer desperation as he heard his only remaining comrade pitch to his death in the darkness below. He feared every instant he would follow the example set by all his number. Hugging closely to the muddy bank as his horse dashed swiftly on, he tried hard to keep his equilibrium. He fully realized that one misstep by his faithful horse—and his fate was sealed.

On, on dashed horse and rider. The stones in the trail rang with the loud clatter of hoofs and sent out bright sparks of fire. In his excitement the burly outlaw still dug in his spurs.

On, still on through the dark they sped. Ponto's steed was clinging to the trail like a mountain burro. They were nearly out of danger now. Would his horse carry him safely through? Ponto held his breath in suspense. He must win out!

A few yards more and he would be beyond the "danger zone," for only a few yards farther the side of the cliff was not so abrupt and the trail was broader. He tried now to check his pony's speed, for the trail made a sharp curve to the left. He was too late in checking his speed. So suddenly came the

curve that both his hands clutched his saddle-horn with the determination of fate. Then in a flash he felt his horse's hoofs shoot from under him. Frantically his arms shot into the air over his head. He was going down!

But no. By some miracle Ponto felt his eager hands clutch a bush at the edge of the cliff. Like grim fate they clutched this single bush. Luckily his feet were free from the stirrups and his horse shot from under him and on to certain death into the canyon. This bush had saved Ponto's life!

Very carefully Ponto pulled himself over the ledge into the trail. He held his breath as he drew his weight upon the little bush. Upon this issue depended the outlaw's life. Inch by inch he worked his tedious way up. The bush held firm and he dropped safely but badly frightened into the trail.

For a few seconds he sat motionless on the wet ground. His narrow escape from death dazed him. If the single bush had not been there! He shuddered as he realized his close call from death at the foot of this canyon wall. If he had not grasped the bush, where would he now have been? Ask of the angry mass of rushing waters and timber in which the body of his faithful steed now no doubt floated. Ask of the black veil of night that shut out the sight of the dangerous depths below. Or better still, ask of the howling, yelping coyotes that suddenly burst out in fearful cries, and served to bring out stronger the

awfulness of the situation and the thought of his departed comrades.

Then suddenly the thought of his pursuers flashed into his dazed brain. He leaped to his feet. They must be after him. Did they have horses secreted along the trail or were they unmounted? He listened carefully. Faintly he imagined he could hear approaching footsteps but he was not sure. But they surely would follow and he hastened his footsteps toward the clump of cottonwoods he could make out a few rods ahead. Here fear of pursuit lent the fugitive wings and without a glance at the cottonwoods where the Texans' horses were tied, he broke into a run, heading down a steep slope to the southwest.

Luckily Ponto was well acquainted with the rough country over which he was compelled to flee. Many a time he had hidden in these very canyons to which he was now hastening, during his long career as a border outlaw, from sheriffs and ranchmen who had attempted to effect his capture. This place was like an open book to Ponto. He knew the location of every dangerous precipice that lay in the way, and so he was enabled to run on with no danger of being dashed to a violent death in the darkness.

In his mind Ponto already pictured his escape. He knew this wild country as no other person knew it. He would go into the very heart of these canyons and remain concealed until day dawned. Then, traveling all the while under cover, he would strike out

to the south until he reached Mexico, where he would be safe and ready to plan another raid on Texas ranches.

Ponto's guilty conscience spurred him on. If he was once captured he knew well enough what the consequences would be. Every second Ponto became more desperate and restless. Cold fear held him in its grip. Always he fancied he heard footsteps following him and time after time he paused to listen. Every object that rose in his path he imagined to be the tall crown of some Texan's sombrero. He was simply running away from his own fancies.

Finally Ponto found himself in a dark canyon which led to the west. He entered this canyon from the north, by means of another canyon intersecting it from that direction. As he emerged into the dark canyon the loud roar of water filled his ears, which he rightly judged came from the main stream, which must flow by the opening of this canyon on to the east of him. Slipping into a thicket of spruces that studded the narrow canyon, Ponto threw himself panting with fear and exhaustion down. Once secured in this hidden thicket he grew calmer. But by his sudden starting and his frequent hurried glances he shot to right and left of him it could be seen he still feared pursuit.

However after a few moments rest Ponto was more himself again. It was now that he realized that he was wet to the skin from the recent flood. So

numb from cold was the outlaw that he could not resist the temptation of building a fire to warm and dry himself. Ponto well realized the danger of this, that he was in enemy country, but he must not lie there shivering in his wet clothing. Even death might be the penalty if he remained in this condition until dawn, for the night air was biting cold. Besides would not these high canyon walls conceal the fire from the sight of his enemies? And surely they would not attempt to follow him far into this wilderness, with everything hidden in darkness. Thus carefully arguing his situation, Ponto soon had, in spite of the wet condition of everything about him, a bright sheet of flame rising in dense columns of smoke and lighting up the grand old canyon for quite a radius, giving it a fine appearance of grandeur and beauty.

This was the fire mentioned in the last chapter. Little did it's builder dream that it would bring him so much grief, and that it would prove his direct betrayer. But all of us mortals are destined to make some error at some time in life; and it is often only after it is too late and after the inevitable has happened that we realize we have made a mistake.

CHAPTER VI.

A GREASER'S TRICK.

For a long moment Rivers crouched hypnotized, gazing upon the motionless form of the Mexican bandit. A spell was over him. His glance riveted on the stooping figure of the bearded giant and he was powerless to move.

The gleam of the campfire upon the grizzled, bearded outlaw's face gave him all the appearance of a weird demon. His black matted hair protruded from under a huge Mexican sombrero with a high crown. About his weatherbeaten neck was a bright red bandanna handkerchief, tied cowboy fashion, which matched nicely with his purple flannel shirt. In the outlaw's belt dangled a long, wicked knife, whose blade glittered brightly in the fire light. On his opposite side, swung well to the fore, was a big Frontier revolver. His white angora chaps now entirely black and reeking with mud, helped to present a dirty aspect to the picture he made there in the light. Indeed Ponto presented a fierce, dare-devilish picture as he sat there by the fire—one that was enough to quicken the pulse of even the bravest frontiersman.

Rivers, at last his calm self again, cautiously let back the thick bushes and withdrew to a safer distance from the blazing fire. He pondered. The famous outlaw certainly was in his power now. He could easily send a bullet into the bandit's heart and he would never know what had happened. How easily he could settle with the big gunman in this way! Yes, he sure had the drop on the Mexican this time. But how should Rivers go about to slay or effect the capture of such a notorious character as sat by that fire? Of Ponto's reputation as a gun or knife fighter Rivers was well aware. He was conscious, too, of the Mexican's cowardly cringing nature, and he well knew the mercy Ponto would show his enemies.

Rivers was not of the type to steal upon his enemies unawares and slay them without warning and without giving them a fair chance. Not at all. The coward's program was an utter stranger to the Texan. To give everybody, no matter of what character, an equal chance—that was Rivers. No man could ever justly say Tom Rivers did not give even his most deadly foes the chance to surrender or "show their steel." And an excellent record this, in a land where a man failing to carry his guns at his hips, was no longer regarded as a man.

River's mind was set. Yes, he would give the bandit a chance for his life. He would try at his capture—not force bloodshed. Then if the Mexican,

in a last desperate stand, should take the choice of "drawing steel" he would be under just obligations to take the consequences. As Rivers thought, so he acted. He had no time to lose. He must play the game and play it safe, or not at all. Ponto might take alarm at any moment.

The Texan's mind was set. The enemy he had learned to loathe and despise was in his power at last! Rivers must not let him escape if it cost him his life. Indeed the gleam of battle was in Rivers' eyes of blue. His right hand clutched the butt of his revolver with a grip that nearly sent blood from beneath his finger tips, as he crept back toward the fire. What reasons had he to hate and despise this silent, grizzled man who sat at yonder fire, with so intense a hatred? His reasons were numerous enough. Were not the Texas authorities seeking this outlaw everywhere, dead or alive? And why did they strive to rid humanity of this border bandit? Had he not spread terror over the entire border by his blood-curdling raids of massacre and robbery, leaving only sorrow and bitterness in his checkered path? Was not James Ponto at heart a cruel, degraded brute, who attacked always from the rear and was never known to show mercy? Would he, even now, placed in Rivers' position, and Rivers at the fire, give the latter a chance for his life? Or would he steal slyly upon him and even worse than the rattlesnake whose treachery he typified, send without warning a bullet

or a dagger into his unguarded back? Was not Rivers conscious of the fact that Ponto and his cut-throat associates hated all Americans with a hatred that never slumbered? Of such a nature were the reasons for Rivers', as well as thousands of others, hatred toward these degraded border bandits.

Soon Rivers was at the fire again. Although it had slightly died down, the flames shot well up into the sky, making it difficult for the cowboy to keep in shadow as he drew closer. Ponto still retained his motionless attitude by the fast consuming fire, evidently pondering something of grave importance in his mind. Occasionally the outlaw shot startling glances about him and then, seemingly satisfied that no harm was approaching, he would drop back again into his solemn reverie and continue in silent meditation.

Rivers' heart softened a little toward the big outlaw as he crouched silently studying his features. Perhaps this seemingly heartless fellow had his sorrows and carried emotions of love and tenderness in his great breast after all. Who could say? No one probably would ever know. The outlaw's life was destined to pass like a storm, like a fierce whirlwind, like a horrible dream, like a fire, and his dastardly crimes would completely overshadow all his virtues. Then the Lone Star cowboy recalled the awful price at stake if he allowed this outlaw to escape and in his heart he cursed himself for ever showing pity

toward the villain who had caused so much bitterness and sorrow on the border. So eager Rivers became to get his hated enemy into his power that he seemed even to forget caution, and in rising his foot struck a dry stick with quite an audible sound. It was nearly his undoing! The Mexican's alert ears caught the sound and his eagle eyes shot quickly in Rivers' direction.

Their eyes met. The Texan took a quick step backward to get into denser shadow. It was his undoing! His right foot collided with some object and he reeled backward. Before he could regain his equilibrium Ponto had dashed out of the circle of light into the darkness.

In the excitement Rivers was quick to rally. Without an instant's hesitation he leaped into the firelight, actually cleared the blazing fire at a leap, and started in hot pursuit. Once out of the thicket he caught a glimpse of a dark figure already well ahead, gliding with lightning rapidity through the scattered timber, and Rivers redoubled his efforts. The Mexican must not, would not, escape while he had the strength to prevent it. The hot thirst for revenge spurred Rivers on. Like the wind he dashed down a steep slope and up the opposite side. He must not lose sight of the fugitive for a second. On, over swamps, fallen trees and other accumulated debris he sped, never stopping for anything. The small stream in his path he cleared

at a leap. The mad race was on. Was his endurance equal to that of the fugitive?

Once Rivers stumbled and fell headlong on his hands and face, but in a flash he was on his feet again and dashing on with unabated zeal. The Mexican seemed to know this canyon like a book and kept steadily onward, easily holding his own. This would not do. Rivers must risk a shot at all hazards or lose in the game entirely. He loosened his revolver in its holster as he rushed on. Then as Ponto emerged again from the brush on the opposite side of the stream, Rivers dropped to his knees and began training the weapon on his flying dark form. For fully thirty seconds he trained the death dealing instrument in the darkness and then pulled.

A yell from the fugitive and he pitched to the ground. Wild with excitement Rivers holstered his weapon and dashed eagerly on. He again cleared the stream at a jump, where Ponto had crossed a moment before. But now the fugitive was on his feet again running as for dear life and the race began anew. The shot must only have "barked" him.

Rivers' breath already came thick and fast. He could not run much farther. And still Ponto pushed on. His endurance seemed to know no end. Now he had turned at an opening of the canyon to the south. How many canyons joined this one leading west? Rivers stumbled heavily over some unseen

obstacle—a pile of collected debris—and cursed loudly under his breath.

Suddenly the loss of blood seemed to tell on the Mexican and his speed decreased. A yard—two—three—a dozen yards Rivers gained on him. So near he got that he could hear Ponto's hard breathing. A shot would easily settle Mexico's famous outlaw now, but that was not Rivers' motive. He would capture his prize alive if he possibly could. Ponto's limbs seemed to be failing him as he swayed from side to side in his running. Suddenly he pitched forward and almost fell headlong to the earth. Exhausted at last! No, he was running like the wind again.

A few rods more and Ponto pitched to the ground. Was he done for in earnest this time? Rivers did not have time to contemplate, for in that stirring instant his feet came into contact with Ponto's body and he tripped heavily. Instead of feeling himself strike ground he felt himself going down, down. He had tripped over the edge of a precipice!

CHAPTER VII.

A CALL FOR HELP.

Suddenly Rivers felt something slap his face a stinging blow. The next instant as if in a dream he felt his hands tighten about the branch of a tree that chanced to grow on the steep precipice side, and he clutched the branch like grim death. The inertia of his falling body was nearly enough to wrench his powerful arms from his shoulders, but the issue of life or death was in this move and his hands kept their iron grip. As Rivers felt his body come to a rest, he realized that only a miracle had saved him from a certain death below.

As he began carefully working his way toward the trunk of the tree his head swam in a giddy dizziness. How had he pitched over the edge of this steep precipice? What foolhardy act of his had caused it? Then the mocking, taunting laugh of Ponto came from far above him and in a sudden flash Rivers understood all. For a long moment he sat motionless on the branch, his face darkening with passion. In his heart he cursed the coward who had so cleverly worked this deadly trick on him and who now laughed at his supposed fate. For surely Ponto held no doubts but that his enemy had met death below.

Ponto, then, was only feigning when he pitched to the ground. The affair was plain as day now. No doubt the outlaw knew the exact location of this precipice and simply led his enemy to it. Most likely he had almost stumbled purposely the first time also, to convince Rivers of his pretended weakness from the loss of blood, and also to allow his pursuer to get close enough at his heels that he would be powerless to check his speed at the brink of the precipice.

At first Rivers wanted to yell to the Mexican and let him know that he still enjoyed life. Then he quickly decided it would be better to remain quiet. If Ponto once found his location, he could deal violently with him from his position above. Ponto indulged in another mocking laugh and then a great silence fell over the place and all was still as death. The cowboy was summarizing his situation.

"Whew, I shore had a close call this time," he muttered to himself. "But it all came out O. K. an' they say that 'all's well that ends well.' All wouldn't be well long though if that miscreant above knew how I was farin'. I reckon I'll have to camp here until mornin'. It all depends on how far from the boys I'm located though. If they could only break in here now an' nab old Ponto I would be plumb satisfied."

For possibly half an hour Rivers kept up this cheery mood. Then his seat in the crotch of the tree began to grow tiresome and monotonous. He was becoming so sleepy he could hardly keep from dozing off

to slumber, but this he knew he must not do. The surroundings about him lay in grotesque shadow with a prevailing silence that seemed to work on his nerves, broken only now and then by the faint call of an owl or the barking of coyotes from below. Rivers could see possibly ten feet below him and then all was darkness, but occasionally he imagined he could make out a dim reflection far below, which gave him the sensation that water was in those depths below him. No other sound had come from Ponto since his mocking laugh had ceased to echo. He had either fallen asleep where he lay or had moved on to other scenes. Somehow the Texan seemed secluded from the rest of the world. He sat dozing and thinking of Wade and Black. How had they fared with the remainder of the "greasers?" Perhaps they all had escaped, as the leader had done. However, he would hope they had not.

Then suddenly a bright thought seemed to strike Rivers' mind and a broad smile flitted across his features. The look of satisfaction still showed on his face as he drew his revolver from its holster, slipped more cartridges into the cylinder, and poised the weapon above his head—in a firing position. The next instant three reports had belched forth and echoed loudly in the depths below.

* * * * *

Back at the cottonwoods, wrapped in their heavy blankets, beneath the stars, Wade and Black had

fallen asleep. Some of my readers may argue that one of them should have remained awake to keep guard, owing to the fact that one of the outlaws was still at large. This is only just, as a guard is generally a necessity if one is in any danger, and who can say but that it might have been a better policy for one of the Texans to have kept up a vigilance? But both were young and youth is bold and venturesome. Besides both were true Westerners, accustomed to sleeping in the open with only the broad sky overhead, and they trusted to their keen sense of sound to keep them from harm.

They had slumbered on for some time when suddenly Wade was awakened by the sharp whinney of a horse. It woke the cowboy with a sudden start. This sign from one of the horses was generally a sign of approaching danger, and Wade quickly rose to a sitting posture and looked quickly about. There to his left the horses were quietly grazing. What had caused one of them to give this sign of warning? Was an enemy near—or had he whinneyed only from force of habit? This question seemed to be unsettled in Wade's mind, for rising to his feet he began a careful scrutiny of the surroundings about him. For some time he kept up his maneuvers about their camp and then seemingly satisfied that no danger was near, he went back to his blanket. Wade had just settled down and was preparing to sleep

again, when from the southwest came the faint report of a revolver.

"That looks as if there's trouble in the air," the cowboy muttered between his clenched teeth as he jumped to his feet again. Black still slumbered on. The strangeness of the situation, the whinney of the horse followed by the revolver shot, for an instant held Wade spellbound. Without hesitation he walked over to where he had left his saddle and drew his Winchester from its sheath. After a careful examination of the Winchester, he slowly retraced his steps back to where Black still slept. Then rolling up his blanket he sat down on it, and dropping the trusty Winchester across his knees, Wade was ready to begin his guard.

In Wade's mind that revolver shot was a mystery he could not begin to solve. Several theories he could advance, but none seemed to satisfy him. The sky was clear as crystal, the stars gleaming brightly, which made guarding camp an easy task for Wade and he could scarcely keep his heavy eyelids from closing in sleep.

As Wade sat there on guard, idly pondering on his situation, his mind drifted back to the plight of his comrade again. Why was he idle here, while Rivers, perhaps badly injured or even dead now, needed his assistance so badly? The sky was no longer darkened by clouds and driving wind and rain. Why could not he and Black begin the search at once

Before they had dealt that fatal blow to the bandits they were obliged to leave their pal to the various turnings of fate, but now that their work was accomplished as far as possible until day dawned again, they were free to go to the rescue. Certainly they would begin the search at once. Why had not Wade thought of this before?

The next instant Wade was awakened from his reverie by something that made his heart beat quick. Like one in a trance he heard three revolver shots, fired in rapid succession, ring out on the chilly night's air.

CHAPTER VIII.

COMRADES IN NEED.

Wade's first lightning thought was of his pal. Was this Rivers' call to them for assistance? How strange that these shots should burst in his ears at the very moment he had contemplated his comrade's rescue. He pondered hurriedly. Had they come to awaken him to his senses?

A little longer Wade pondered before beginning action. Yes, these shots surely must have come from Rivers. The latter and the outlaw leader were the only individuals located in yonder wild country, and why should the Mexican call for aid when all his comrades had met death and only his enemies remained?

Who then had fired the first shot? Perhaps it was Rivers. Perhaps he had had an encounter with some animal, wolves or panther, and was obliged to use his weapon. But all these theories were only random calculations and the real reasons for everything were still unsolved. Suddenly it occurred to Wade that he had better act at once. Deep in his heart the cowboy knew that at least the last shots had come from Rivers and if he delayed in going to the rescue, his comrade's—his brother's, rather—peril might become

so grave that he could render no aid. Grabbing Black by the shoulder he shook him roughly, yelling in his ears—

“Wake up, Jim! Come on—wake up!”

“Who? What?” gasped Black in sudden alarm, rising to his knees and gazing wildly about, no doubt awakening from a nightmare. However a few kicks administered by Wade soon brought him to his senses.

“What’n hell is all this fuss about?” Black grunted. “What the deuce are you kickin’ me for? What’s the game—what’s up?”

“If yu’ allow you’re awake now, I’ll tell yu’—not before. Have yu’ got your senses now?”

“Who could help but get ’em after them kicks yu’ give me? Now tell me what it’s all about an’ if your excuse is strong enough I’ll leave yu’ off with a good cussin’—although I shore ought to take one at your block.”

Wade told the story in a few words and with few other words, for each understood the current of the other’s thoughts. Wade and Black saddled their horses, and leaving Rivers’ horse tied in the clump of cottonwoods they mounted, turned their ponies’ heads in a westerly direction and rode off into the darkness.

* * * * *

Half an hour had elapsed since Rivers had sent out his call for assistance. Through another half hour’s

misery in his mansion in the tree top he had passed, and his eyes were heavy with sleep. Rivers was losing all hopes of rescue before day dawned.

"Confound the luck," he muttered under his breath, "I reckon I'll set in this solitary tree all the night. I'll say it's some tiresome too. My laigs feel like they're about to drop off. I'm afraid the boys will have a hard time locatin' me in this d——n wilderness."

The moments rolled on and still no sign of a rescuing party. The cowboy sighed deeply and changed his position on the limb of the tree.

"That sneak of a greaser is gettin' off too easy," he finally continued to ramble on in his mind. "Now if Billy and Black could have lit on the spot shortly after I shot off my revolver it would have been all over for the miscreant. But now he must be well out of our way—even if he does travel slow. Of course I knew the minute I shot my gun, if he had not already made himself minus, which I am rather inclined to think he did, he would know I hadn't been killed as he had imagined, an' either try to root me out of my hidin' place or else make tracks for a safer grazin' ground. But even that would beat stayin' in this tree."

Some twenty or thirty moments more he sat calmly thinking, rolling and lighting a cigarette to pass away the time. When would daylight come? It seemed ages now since he had taken his drop over the preci-

pice. Again he looked long and carefully down into the darkness, half expecting to see the bottom of a deep valley below him. But of no avail. Only a dungeon of darkness greeted his search and he sighed again.

"I sure wish it would get light sometime," next Rivers soliloquized, "an' give a fellow a chance to see where the deuce he's located. As dark as it is, I can't tell where I'm at—whether it's twenty or a thousand feet to the bottom of this cliff. Even if the boys *did* hear my shots I doubt if they could lend any help in this God-forsaken place in this wild canyon. Reckon it's me for the tree 'till daylight at least."

Another half hour, and Rivers was waxing desperate. What was wrong with Bill and Black? Could it be that the bandits had been victorious over his comrades? This struck Rivers like a sudden thunderbolt. He had not thought of such a thing before. Could it be true? Ah yes, something flashed upon his mind now that previously he had not considered. Indeed his first sight of the bandit leader seemed to transform him into a sort of demon, his purpose only to rid the country of this fiendish outlaw. From this point he had been moving as if in a sort of dream. But at last Rivers was awakening! This certain question placed itself before his mind and would not leave him; how had Ponto dared to kindle that fire without first sounding the knell for his enemies who sought his life? And if Wade and Black were not

badly wounded or worse, why were they not hot on the outlaw's trail? He was awakening from his dream.

Again Rivers longed for dawn. His watch was miles away—at the ranch—and he cursed himself for not having it with him. But surely it would soon be day. Perhaps, though, Billy and Black needed his assistance right now as they had never needed it before, and only the darkness, perhaps, prevented him from gaining either the summit or the base of this precipice whose height remained a mystery, and give it.

Next Rivers was muttering again in his usual drawl: "Guess I'll try another call to them," but his hopes ran very low as he slowly laid his hand on the butt of his Smith & Wesson, and he slowly shook his head as he did so.

He never drew!

At that instant, faintly but yet quite distinctly the report of one, two, and then a third shot floated on the air, coming from his left. Wildly his heart leaped with joy. Was he dreaming? Then before Rivers realized it, his own revolver had belched forth in reply. Then silence, but his comrades were—*safe!*

Now Rivers was conscious of a husky voice, now seeming almost directly overhead, calling to him in a tone that was not at all necessary—the voice of a comrade who in all trials and sorrows had proven himself at all times a man and a tried friend—Will

Wade. A thrill of love, joy, thanksgiving shot through Rivers' soul. He heeded not Wade's words. Both his comrades were spared and ready to lend a helping hand and that was enough.

"Be very careful for the cliff, fellows," Rivers was cautioning them, his voice sounding strangely unnatural to his ears. "I've dropped over a steep bank an' lodged in a tree part way down. Go careful or both of you will take a header too."

"Yes—but are yu' all right Tom?" came Wade's eager voice from the darkness above. "Will the tree hold out much longer?"

The cowboy could not help but note the tremor in Wade's usually calm voice.

"Reckon the tree is all right. It'll hold out for a century for that matter. Go careful now, I'm warnin' yu'. Yu' can't see the slide from up there, for it's dark as a dungeon, this slide is."

"How far down are yu' located, Tom?"

"Can't tell; eyesight not strong enough to see to the top. Jest drop me that twine an' I'll soon measure the heighth—Didn't I hear yu' uncoil your lariat?"

"Yu' bet—happened to be lucky enough to fetch her along. Wait a minute an' we'll have some light on the subject, an' then mebbe we can spot yu' better."

"Jest a minute, Bill. Is Black with yu' an' are yu' both all right?"

"Both sound as grizzlies. Ole Ponto give us the slip but we ain't through with him yet. We'll have a light in jest a jiffy."

Rivers wondered. A light? What sort of a light did Bill intend to use? Then he was conscious of light above and he was convinced. Why had he not thought of this? His friends had constructed a rude torch, and now were advancing nearer the edge of the precipice, ghostly shadows flitting magically down the rugged old decline as the blazing torch reached the brink almost directly above him and let the light down into space. Involuntarily Rivers shuddered as he beheld the light above him. Why it looked fully thirty feet to the top of the precipice from his position in the old oak. He could scarcely realize that he had dropped so far. Yes, there *was* water below, as he had anticipated. Rivers noted a bright reflection from what looked to him several hundred feet below. Ah, this must be a grand old precipice in daylight!

Now Rivers heard voices overhead, which echoed like magic down the depths below him.

"Do you spot him, Jim " Wade was asking.

"Yes, he's in the big oak down there! Can't yu' see him?" came Black's eager reply.

"Yes, now I do."

"Can yu' see the light, Rivers?" Black's voice floated down.

"Yu' bet. It's lightin' the old cliff up like day-time down here."

Then followed a short spell of silence, in which Rivers fancied he could hear the lariat in Wade's expert hands being coiled for the swing over the ledge, then—

"Swish!"

The lariat cut the air above Rivers. With that skill that the six-foot-two cowboy above usually displayed, the noose even encircled his shoulders. A wonderful shot this, in light so dim and through the branches of the oak. Rivers fastened the rope securely under his arms.

"Ready?" came from up above.

"Ready!"

Rivers felt the lariat tighten about his body. Slowly he was rising through the branches of the oak that had saved his life some hours before. A shade of melancholy overshadowed the Texan. Surely Providence had placed this oak in his way, for nothing else could have saved him from the inevitable. Would he ever see this dear old oak again? So absorbed was Rivers in the grandeur of this place, that he heeded not the hurricane of pebbles and earth that greeted his ascent. Then the blinding, dazzling light of the torch blinded his eyes, the strong hands of two giants grasped his in a grip of steel, and Rivers stood with his comrades.

* * * * *

For some time the debate waged whether it would be the wiser policy to begin at once the pursuit of the fugitive, or wait until day dawned. In the end the latter policy conquered. The trio were utterly unacquainted with this huge wilderness, and consequently an attempt to locate an outlaw who knew this wild country along the Rio Grande like an open book, could prove nothing but a failure. Then, too, the Texans' ignorance of this rough country might prove dangerous to them in the darkness, to which theory Rivers' incident had certainly attributed. On the other hand, if the party waited until day dawned, the trail could then most likely be found and they would take no chances of picking the wrong direction. So after carefully seeing to their mounts, the Texans spread their blankets down on the damp ground and sought a few hours rest before the toils of the ensuing day held sway.

CHAPTER IX.

SOUNDING OF PONTO'S KNELL.

The next morning before the sun had shown its fiery glow in the eastern horizon, the Texans had set out on the trail of the outlaw. The sky was bright and clear as crystal, and the day promised to be one of a very hot and sultry character. The trail of the fugitive had been discovered with even less difficulty than they had anticipated. It showed plain as day in the damp soil and foliage. Traces of blood among the leaves on the ground marked the beginning of Ponto's flight plainer still, a fact which made Wade mutter something about the outlaw "markin' his trail with signs."

Everything about them seemed to have taken on a new aspect after the rain. The creek, now calm again as it led down to the larger stream, flowed merrily on, at times overflowing its banks. Birds of numerous types refreshed themselves in its crystal liquid and flying on to some distant tree, expressed their praise to the great Giver in merry songs of good cheer. In the scattered oaks squirrels greeted the mounted intruders in their mischievous manner, now dashing down one tree and up the next, always with the rapidity of lightning and disorderly tumult

The men were filled with new life—new ambitions—as they rode on in silent repose, Rivers riding back of the saddle on Wade's horse. All nature seemed exposed in this secluded wilderness of what seemed to them romantic grandeur and beauty. The atmosphere that hovered over these hills and canyons seemed to possess a magic vigorating power, and the men seemed to grow stronger with each new draught of the fresh morning air.

The country became rougher and lonelier still as they proceeded. Farther up the stream they were following, where the country was not so rough and so thickly covered with timber and intersected by wild canyons, the ranchmen often drove their stock to water. But where the trail of the outlaw led the country was very seldom traversed and no sign of human habitation could be seen for miles about. As far as the eye could sweep were hills and broad valleys, and numerous canyons opening generally to the west; but the fugitive's trail steered clear of the rest of these canyons. Trees of hundreds of species dotted the landscape at every turn. Far to the northwest, a faint line of dark purple mountains could be seen, hazy in the distance.

When the trail continued to the south, the Mexican's plot became clear to the Texans. There was no doubt but that his steps were bent in the direction of his native land. Nothing else could be more

natural. Once across the old Rio Grande the greaser would be safe from all harm.

"The miscreant shore is hittin' her hard for old Mexico," muttered Rivers, as the trio rode slowly on, resting their panting mustangs. "An if we're goin' to get him it'll shore have to take place before he hits his own side of the Rio. I didn't have any idea he'd travel so d——n far as this after that dose of lead I fed him last night."

"He's wily, Tom—clever," replied Wade. "You didn't git him as good as yu' reckoned yu' did. Probably yu' barked one of his laigs an' jest enough to bring him down for a few seconds an' the rest he jest feigned—put on to fool yu'. Tricks come natural for a greaser."

"I shore *did* bring him down in a heap. I thought then for a second or two that he was done for good. But he was altogether too slick for me, that's all. Why didn't I shoot him when I got so close?—instead of lettin' him lead me over that cliff. That's where I played wrong. What hindered me from shootin'? Nuthin'—only that I was crazy about takin' him alive."

"If you could have nailed him then an' there, it would have saved us a lot of trouble shore enough. But then we all make our mistakes an' it's too late for a remedy now I reckon."

"How far are we from the cottonwoods now, would

you judge, Bill?" Black asked after a pause, turning back in his saddle to scan the landscape.

"Couldn't exactly tell you Jim, but we're a long ways I'd say. Wasn't it somewhere in these canyons leadin' west where the boys of the 'Triangle R' chased that outfit of greasers last fall, Tom? Yu' know old Jim Bowman got his arm plugged an' was swearin' around the ranch how he'd get that gang if they come back. That wasn't Ponto's gang though that time—like several parties thought it was. His gang's too slippery for that—don't yu' worry. His gang—Hello!"

"What?" asked Wade's companions in a breath, their hands involuntarily moving toward their guns.

"Why didn't yu' see that big splotch of blood in the leaves? There—there's more of it. This makes three times I've noticed traces of blood along the tracks, but not like this. I'm beginnin' to think yu' got the miscreant pretty good after all, Tom."

"Yes—just look at that would yu'!" Rivers said eagerly. "Why he must of lost a lot of blood hyeh. Look at them bushes."

"I reckon his den ain't far from hyeh," Wade said.

"I hope you're right, Bill. What time of day is it gettin' to be?"

Black pulled out his watch.

"Ten minutes to 'leven."

By this time the heat of the day held full sway and a hot, sultry day it was indeed. Although the

party had not been making very fast time, still their mounts fairly reeked with perspiration.

Finally the fugitive's trail turned abruptly and descended into a deep wooded valley. Here the country took on a still wilder, rougher aspect. To the surprise of the Texans the fugitive's footsteps made for the dense thicket that studded the right side of the lonely valley. So difficult to follow they finally became that the party was obliged to leave their horses and proceed on foot. They proceeded with the utmost caution now. Here was the danger of a treacherous ambush, for the Mexican was wily, clever. The trail could plainly be traced through the dense, tangled thicket, zigzagging back and forth, here striking west, there south. No doubt Ponto had used so much haste that he had had no time to make an attempt to hide his trail. The party crouched low as they proceeded, to present as small a target as possible to the outlaw. The heavy foliage made it hard, disheartening work to push on.

"Go careful now, fellows," Wade was cautioning. "The greaser is close I reckon. I read his scheme the second he hit for this thicket. He most likely spotted us a ways back an' hit for the nearest shelter he could find. Keep your guns handy."

"You be careful now, Bill," Rivers cautioned to his comrade in the lead. "Don't take too many chances, Bill. It gives me chills to have you lead the way—you get too eager all the time. I won't ask

you again to let me pass yu' an' scent the trail, for I know how much yu'd listen to that. But do be careful, Bill—for my sake an'—an' for Viola's"

A deep flush of emotion overshot Wade's features as Rivers concluded in a voice that was far from steady. He stopped and turned to the latter and Black.

"I reckon the end of this trail ain't far off now," he muttered in a low tone. "Don't worry your head, Tom. I mean business this time an' I won't get in a rush. You fellows watch sharp to right an' left. Ponto don't always shoot from the front."

And once again they crept silently, slowly on. The continuation of the fugitive's trail through the thicket, never once leaving it for openings to right or left, had sufficed to convince them of their grave situation. There could be no doubt but that Ponto would make his last miserable stand in this very thicket. As Wade led silently on, thrusting aside numberless branches that overhung his path, lightning thoughts grew and pulsated through his brain. How far distant was this treacherous, wily Mexican they sought, who seldom showed himself in fair, open combat, and whose shot always proved true? Would the bandit sight them first and lying in ambush, let forth his fatal shot? Or could it be possible that they might sight the rattler before the sting of his fangs pierced their flesh. If fate had in store the latter all would be well; if the former, then—

Wade battled with contending passions that rose deep within him. Should he lead his comrades—his brother—into this place? Could not another, a safer scheme to effect Ponto's capture, be resorted to? If again the eagle eye of the border bandit proved true, they all might pay with their lives. But no—there could be no other choice. If they beat about the bush Ponto would simply escape into his native Mexico again, and would be ready once more to mete out more pillage and bloodshed to the Texas border. Wade peered through an opening of the thicket to where the purple line of mountains still was visible in the distance. His eyes lingered on that line of purple that dotted the far horizon. A look of sadness crept into the calm blue eyes. The atmosphere of death hung over this place—over this lonely valley and those purple mountains. When the western sun had dipped behind that line of purple and enchanting twilight held sway, death would have fallen to the lot of some one in this secluded place. Would it be he and his comrades, or Ponto?

Wade started. Something whistled by his cheek so close he felt it burn the flesh. He ducked low, his revolver levelled and smoke belched forth from it. At nearly the same instant a revolver shot behind him blended with Wade's report, and he saw Ponto pitch forward and fall prone upon the ground. For a few seconds they saw his huge hand clutch and half raise the deadly six-shooter it held. For only a few startling

seconds and then the outlaw's hand sank to the ground and he lay motionless a few yards ahead. Like a mere trance all had passed. The outlaw was down. Now they were approaching him cautiously. Was he really dead or only feigning? Several instances they recalled where this outlaw had successfully feigned death. The Texans had their guns in readiness. But a closer look convinced them that their task had been well done.

"He's done for," Wade muttered aloud as if to himself. Then a stillness like death settled over them as the men stood over the body of their fallen enemy. The monotony of that silence at once was terrible. In suddenly found weakness the eyes of each avoided those of the other, and in the awkward moments that ensued the gaze of all riveted to the ground and remained there. But death all had before witnessed in this wild life on the plains. It was not so much of a novelty, still they were not hardened to its pangs. A buzzard circled and wheeled overhead as if it already felt the presence of death and was impatient to begin a meal on the lifeless body of the outlaw. Otherwise nothing stirred. Thus was the passing of Mexico's desperado.

"I reckon he's fired his last shot," Wade muttered at last, slowly slipping his smoking revolver into its holster at his hip. "An' he's paid for it—considerin' he had the chance to give himself up without bloodshed. But then he knew well enough what the pen-

alty of surrender would be. Death is the debt we all must pay, boys, sooner or later, an' no doubt he figured he might as well go over the trail now, as near as possible to his native country an' fightin' in the greaser way, rather than to be placed in some miserable cell an' there left to pass the rest of his life in misery or more likely to end his life on the gallows. Of course I don't approve of the method he used (with this Wade rubbed his hand across his right cheek and wiped away the blood from a slight furrow Ponto's bullet had made there) but it's the only way a Mexican does business. But he was right in showin' fight to the end—an' not beggin' for mercy when he knew he deserved none. It's the way I hope to go. . . But come, let's get away from hyeh. We must show up to the foreman some time to-night or he'll send out a search party for us. Let's be Christians, fellows, an' give him as decent a burial as we can, even if he is our enemy. Of course you know the kind of burial we would get from him, but let's show that we have not clean forgot our Christian teachings, an' cover him with brush an' earth, where his body will be a little safer from the buzzards an' howling varmints of wolves."

Rivers and Black were struck with this bit of oratory on the part of Wade. It seemed to strike a strain of tenderness in them. They gazed at the conquered outlaw of the Mexican border, now motionless in death, with an air of gravity. Strange is life.

No one felt any enmity toward the bandit now that he was dead. In silence they covered his body with branches and earth where it lay, not a word escaping them. A slight pang of melancholy even tugged at the hearts of these mere boys as they thought of the awful situation this miserable sinner was in; dead in this lonely, God-forsaken place with no hopes of ever enjoying that eternal happiness and peace that the righteous are heir to in the next World. Here, deep in these forest shades, far from human habitation, the wild birds would sing their songs over him. Here, too, the howling wind would sweep down unmolested and howl angrily over this final resting place of a noted outlaw whose life had passed as a horrible dream. Here his body would again return to the dust from which it had been created. No one would mourn over the little mound, no parting tears would fall on his grave, and soon the once notorious bandit would pass on into the dim maze of oblivion.

As soon as they had accomplished their task of humanity, the Texans ate their noon-day meal in silence. Then walking to the place where they had left the horses, they mounted and began silently wending their way again through the canyon country in the direction of the place where they had camped on the previous night. When the sun was just dipping beneath the western range of hills, bringing a solemn silence over the scene, clothing the hills in scarlet and gold and dropping a deep veil of purple over the

deep valleys over which they had traversed, the party reached the clump of cottonwoods at the end of the trail where Ponto's band had met their fate. Here Rivers left his seat behind Wade's saddle and mounted his own horse which still was tied in the cottonwoods, and turning their horses' heads to the southeast they struck out on a gallop over the darkening prairies.

CHAPTER X.

THE "TENDERFOOT" ARRIVES.

"Say boys, hell shore will be a-poppin' to-night—jest wait an' see!" exclaimed Wade, walking up to where his friends, eight in number, sat by the camp fire. A month had passed since Ponto's tragic death, and for once all the men of the Lazy Bar outfit chanced to be at the ranch.

"How's that now?" asked Bud West, a small, freckled-faced fellow of rather slender build.

"How? Why the boss hauled out a tenderfoot with him from El Paso to-day—a genuine sissy from the East. An' believe me, boys, he's a Jim dandy! Seen an' talked a little with him up at the barn. Mamma! talk of style. He's shore got it now. High collar, smart cut coat, an' full cut pants, believe me he's a rarer. Old Sandy was joshin' him an' the way that pie-faced sissy blushed shore took the biscuits. Thinks he's smart as a whip, but I'll jest leave it to you guys to fetch him down a few notches in the scale."

"That's the way to talk, Bill," Bud replied with a sly wink at his comrades. "It won't be my fault if we don't take the sissy down a little. We'll shore let

him know he's struck the wild an' wooly west good an' plenty."

"So he's a tenderfoot an' from the East," ventured Rivers, rising to a sitting posture. He had been lying down, indifferently.

"All of that. He shore is some delicate flower, he is. Looks as if he hain't tackled a square meal for a month. He shore seems to be stuck on the boss; follows him around like a yellow dawg. Who's goin' to take the lead in initiating him, guys?"

"Leave that to me, Billy," said West, a broad grin overspreading his handsome features. "I'll see he gits his full share of amusement for one night, take it from me."

"How'll yu' begin on him, Bud?"

"Easy enough. I'm so used to kiddin' d——n sissies that it comes natural to me. An' if he's a pie-faced, shy, locosed young feller to begin with, I can have all the blame fun out of him I please an' besides it'll be as easy as rollin' off a log. Kiddin' poor tenderfoots is my chief hobby yu' know."

Wade turned his gaze in the direction of the plains and a quiet smile beamed on his face which no one witnessed.

"Wonder if he ever seen a bronc' or rode a horse on a slow walk," West continued. "Gee I pity the cuss if I ever get my jaw loosened on him. What rest he gits shore will have to come while he's

sleepin.' I can't rest 'till I git a sight of the young dude. Don't that define *your* feelin's, boys?"

"Up to perfection," replied Black, lazily.

"What kind of a guy is he, Billy—slick lookin' or homely," Bud rambled on.

"Pretty good lookin' I'd describe him, although he hasn't inherited none of the freckles that you're heir to, Bud." And Wade's eyes again seemed drawn out to the open prairie and a broader grin played on his mouth.

"He's comin'" said Rivers, gesturing with his hand toward the barn, which was surrounded by corrals made of heavy plank. Mr. Davis' house stood perhaps two hundred yards to the south of the barn—quite large and well constructed for a Westerner's dwelling. East of these buildings, and about equal distance between the two, stood the bunk house, a low, long, carelessly built structure. This the men of the outfit occupied when at the home ranch. To add to the roughness of the rude structure, it was unpainted and the boards, due to long exposure to a fiery sun and driving rains and storms, were badly warped out of shape.

All eyes turned toward the stable—all save those of Wade. As for that individual, his blue eyes stared composedly into the fire.

"What the hell—" burst from Bud, his eyes never once leaving the two figures approaching them from the stable. "What the— Where's the stylish clothes

yu' said? This guy's in rags—Bill, what the devil yu' laughin' at?"

"Come off now, Wade," chimed in Black. "What yu' been feedin' us? What dy'e think you're celebratin'?"

Wade burst again into a fit of laughter and Rivers joined in at the chorus.

"Come now—what's so d——n funny?" demanded the puzzled Bud.

"What's your joke?" demanded half a dozen in a chorus.

"Why the way I took yu' fellows in. Was yu' really astonished, Bud? Ha! Ha! I could of knocked your eyes off with a stick, Bud, they bulged out so far. Ha! Ha!"

"But this boy ain't the fellow yu' told us of," said George Lance, turning to Wade.

"Reckon he shore is, unless he's magic an' turned into another guy. I was jest jokin' with you fellows about that dude stuff an' described the kid exactly the opposite of what he really is. The stranger is a good fellow, boys. Guess there won't be so much poppin' in camp after all—eh Bud? This young fellow has cut his eye teeth long ago. Don't reckon he carries a cent in his pants pockets, but the lad's shore done some tall travelin' for one so young. Been all over these hyeh western states. I only talked about ten minutes with him but that was enough to get my

opinion of him—an' Bud, my opinion is that you'd better leave off the kiddin' part with the stranger."

"Pooh!" sneered the self-centered Bud, "leave off nuthin'. I reckon that stuff he told is all right to tell to *you* but it don't go down *me*. Not on your tin type, Wade. I don't see nuthin' so extry funny in your joke yu' made such a whirlwind of a fuss about."

"Yu' can't kid him an' get away with it, Bud—that's all. Bet yu' five bucks yu' don't get any ahead of that guy to-night—kid as much as yu' please."

All eyes flashed on Bud. He flushed hotly and defiance shone in his eyes.

"I'll jest take yu' up."

"Very well. Tom hyeh will hold stakes. All agreed. But shut up or the stranger will think we're startin' a conspiracy already."

All conversation ended here. Mr. Davis and the stranger, a mere youth of perhaps eighteen or older, melancholy, far-gazing gray eyes, a complexion of tan enclosed under a slouchy old black hat, in stature about the average size and rather slender, stood before the clump of men at the fire. The stranger's attire somewhat resembled the shabbiness of a tramp—although in regard to cleanliness it presented an entirely different aspect. His coat, much too small for him, was torn and patched in several places, and his trousers, roughly patched at both knees, presented a sorry spectacle. His shoes, shabby and old, had long ago seen the best of their days. But the hon-

est, freckled face of the boy attracted the attention of the men most. Davis quietly introduced the stranger to his men and after a few minute's pleasant talk all sat down to the supper "Hank," the cook, had prepared for the hungry outfit.

Supper over, George Lance and Albert Glasner mounted their horses and rode away to take their places as night herders. The rest drew up before the blazing fire and settled down for a few hours enjoyment before seeking their blankets. This was one of the real pleasures of cowboy life—one of the few amusements of this lonely life on the Plains. Evening after evening, long after the sun had disappeared in a fiery glow beneath the western range of hills and darkness had enshrouded the surrounding prairies, these grizzled riders of the range would gather about the crackling campfire, relating stories of adventure, early days, or mother and home, until sometimes the embers of the consuming fire had suddenly grown cold. Lingering memories of these old chats with their old-time comrades of campfire and saddle held themselves dearly in the recollections of many an old cowboy, long after he had ceased to take his place at the round-up or until he had been called away to the long sleep of the dead. To-night a "tenderfoot" inhabited camp. This always made campfire pleasures a little out of the ordinary, and of course all took a keener interest in the drift of the conversation. Then,

too, the wager between Wade and Bud West had not been forgotten.

"Say fellows, what kind of a job d'ye think a couple or three of us guys is goin' to strike to-morrow?" began Black, pushing back a little from the fire, at the same time winking slyly at Wade.

"Brand them mavericks the boss got from the Circle S?" guessed Hank Chase, the cook.

"Wrong Hank—shoot again."

"Dig post holes for that d——n corral?" guessed West.

"You've got another guess a-comin, too, Bud. We're goin' to ride that outlaw the boss got from Johnson—that rip snorter yu' know. He's vicious but he'll make a powerful good cattle horse an' of course Davis can't rest easy 'till he is broke in."

"That so? Say, there's a good place for you to shine, Bud. Goin' to tackle him, Bud?" asked Wade, and he winked back at Black.

"Reckon I shore am. Guess he's a bad one enough but then that don't cut any ice with me. I can ride anything on *this* ranch I reckon, bronco or no—What the deuce are yu' starin' so, kid. Didn't yu' ever hear of a bronco before, kid?"

The boy, or rather Dave Smith, appeared a bit abashed for an instant at this sudden reference to himself. It came at the most unexpected moment. But Smith was clever and evidently he did not exactly

fall in love with West's boastful nature. He turned to that individual.

"O yes, I've saw lots of them and saw them rode," he replied, "but I never had the privilege of tackling one myself. Will this be your first, Mr. West, or have you rode them before?"

This said in the most earnest, sincere tone brought a chorus of snickers and laughs at Bud's expense. He grew dreadfully red in the face and his lips tremored as he tried to frame some reply to the stranger's bold question. But whatever Bud might have muttered was drowned by the laughter the men indulged in. Bud quickly changed the subject to other grounds and after this he was less careless with his references to the "kid." But his thirst for popularity lured him on to another display of his wit within the next ten minutes. He must win Wade's five.

"Gee I bet old Doc will split the air like lightning unhitched when yu' straddle your chaps over him Bud," Wade was flattering him. "He's shore got the build an' appearances of a real genuine Texas bronc', ain't he boys?"

"Shore's a good thing my craw is fuller than a kid's there or I'd fly over the nag's head an' take a free ride to the Atlantic, shore as I live," Bud replied, smartly enough. "What the devil do yu' live on kid? Your craw looks like yu' hadn't come in contact with a square meal for six months. Or are yu' reducin'?"

"I've been reducing of late, but now I've got to change. What bill of fare would you recommend, say for a bronco rider like yourself—mule or horse flesh?"

Again the cowboys snickered and jeered and the color shot to Bud's face as he hastened to make some reply. Why did not his comrades join him in his attack on the "tender?"

"Which is it, Bud?" asked the jolly Black, a twinkle in his eye. "Why the kid's a chap after your own heart—he wants to know what yu' fare on, Bud."

"Reckon he'd soon find out if he took that flight through the sky from old Doc's back," Bud sneered. "Gee kid, what sort of a specimen are yu' anyway—d'ye belong to the rabbit or grasshopper type? Looks like the world shore has got a pick against yu' somehow, kid, seein' you're so blamed puny an' your belly's so caved in like a empty sack. Better look out or some old cow'll mistake yu' for her stray calf if yu' venture near the herd, an' adopt yu' into her family."

"If that's the case, Bud, mebbe it would be best if Doc *would* lite him out of this cruel west," Black said.

"An' send him back to his mamma in the East, eh?" Bud echoed joyously. "It would save him a lot of money now, wouldn't it? An' it would only be play for old Doc at that."

"I could enjoy the trip home provided you would do one great favor for me, Mr. West. Otherwise it would be entirely out of the question."

"Shore, kid, shore—what's the favor yu'd ask?"

"You're a bronco rider, but nevertheless I have no doubt but that you'd steer clear of doing the favor I'd ask of you. And if a favor can't be granted, what's the use of making it known?"

"Come now, yu' little pie-faced insect," Bud said. "Why I'd kill the fatted calf for yu'. I'm in love with yu' already, kid, with your sweet, innocent lost-dog look an' your sweet smile that makes a feller ashamed at hisself for not bein' like you. Speak kid—what would'st thou?"

"Mr. West, you give me some hope by those words. I'm going to get bold and ask this favor. All you've got to do is to accompany me on my long flight and be on hand in case my new stepma'rm lites into me with the rolling pin or fire shovel, for believe me, she's a snorter when—"

Smith did not complete the sentence. Loud and wild grew the din. The cowboys fairly roared with outbursts of laughter. Black slapped Smith soundly on the back and then threw himself over backward on the grass. As for Bud, while his pals continued to laugh and jeer, he picked himself up burning with mortification and sullenly stalked off to seek his blanket, not a word escaping his lips. The knights of the fire were radiant.

"D——n if yu' didn't hypnotize 'im, kid!" exclaimed old Hank after the laughter had subsided a little.

"Where did yu' pick up all that witty dope anyway?" was Black's attribution.

"Bud shore swallowed a hard pill that trip. . . . Wonder if Bud'll have happy dreams?" and "the credit goes to you, kid" were similar remarks that came from the cowboys.

"Bud lost five bucks too," Wade said finally. And he told Smith of his wager.

"I'm sorry I was the cause of his loss," Smith replied. "But I couldn't stand for his boasts and teasing any longer. Do you blame me, fellows?"

"Not in the least, kid," said Black. "Bud shore got what he deserved. He won't trouble yu' after this, an' that'll be some rest, for he shore is a tease if he knows he can git away with it. But how about that stepma'rm of your'n? She shore must be a terror from that remark yu' made to Bud. Was she the cause for you comin' West "

Smith seemed to hesitate at first and a dark shade overspread his features. Then he relaxed.

"Yes, indirectly you might say she was the cause," he replied. "Would you like to hear about her and my earlier life?"

"We shore would, Smith, but of course it's none of our business an' so do as yu' like," said Rivers. He had been a silent witness of Bud's attempt to "kid" the stranger, but he was as great an admirer of the latter as were the others.

“O I’ve told the story to lots of tramps like myself,” Smith said with a half bitter smile, “and so no harm can come from telling it to you fellows—providing you want to hear it. And as I am going to work with you fellows it is only fair that you know something of my past. I haven’t always been the mamma’s boy and had the easy life as I think Mr. West imagines I have had, as you’ll soon find out.”

All drew close to the stranger, forming a circle about him. In the big, plain hearts of all there seemed to be a great attraction toward the ragged boy—feelings, perhaps, of pity for the wanderer. And well might they listen, for seldom had so many tragedies and sorrows wound themselves in so young a life.

CHAPTER XI.

SMITH'S STORY.

"I was born in old Virginia, the son of a poor farmer," Smith began after a moment's thought. "My father must not have known the old saying that 'a rolling stone gathers no moss,' for he certainly was a drifter. From the coast of Maine he had drifted to the new land of Illinois, where he hoped to make his fortune. But luck was against him and he moved with mother and my older brother to Michigan. Here my brother died at the age of four, about a year before I was born, and my father, again discouraged, struck out in a covered wagon with mother for the wilderness state of Kansas. They had scarcely settled here when the Indians broke out and drove them from their home, and again they fled east back to civilization again. This time they settled in western Virginia and shortly after I was born. All this my father told me after I had grown older, and I mentioned these ramblings to give you some idea of how we came to be so poor.

"We certainly could not be considered well off in Virginia. Our little farm consisted of a small log cabin, a barn that could hardly be considered fit for horses even in dry weather, saying nothing of rain

and blizzards, and forty acres of the roughest, rockiest land in Virginia. How my father managed to make a living on this rocky soil I can hardly understand now. But he was a worker. Poor old daddy! I can feel for him now as I look back over the countless days of toil he spent on this rocky, unproductive soil, trying to keep us from starvation. And to what end? For every year life grew more miserable on this rough, forsaken plot of ground; and at last after a hard struggle father was again becoming utterly discouraged and was ready to turn his mind to other lands.

“We had been on this dingy little old farm for eight years and I was a youngster of eight, when suddenly mother died and left me and dad alone, for I had no other brothers and sisters. I can look back and recall the terrible night mother died as well as if it happened only yesterday. Something happened that night that I will remember to my death. It was the awful, piercing scream of an owl that came from the forest close to our house and nearly drove me wild with fright. There was something unearthly in that scream. Ever since her childhood my mother had been a superstitious believer in omens of the forest, for she was born and raised in the great timber country, and she had always considered the call of an owl the forerunner of evil or disaster. Mother had been bad for about a week and dad and I feared she would not get well. Then came that owl’s

scream and I knew she would not live. That scream did not seem real. It seemed to freeze the very blood in my veins. I had often heard the cry of this bird of night before, but this time it was different. It plainly sounded a knell. I ran into the house shaking like a leaf. Always I seemed to hear the echo of that scream—all through the night it rang in my ears. I could not sleep when dad made me lay down.

“Soon after this we sold our little farm for almost nothing, keeping only our old wagon and team and a few other necessary things and set out for Kentucky where father had relatives living. But the spring rains and storms made traveling difficult and we had to quit our journey and rent a small farm when our food and money ran out. This place was in Virginia too, about a hundred miles from the old home place we had sold. But the farm dad rented was a fine one and in the next two years we found we could make good on it and if luck remained with us, perhaps we could buy the farm in a few years. I was ten years old now and so was able to help dad with the work, besides doing most of the cooking for us. But finally for a reason I didn’t know then, dad began to find fault with my cooking and he told me he was going to hire a housekeeper.

“The new housekeeper dad brought from town one day didn’t prove at all in my favor. From the very first I despised this woman. She was a short, heavy built lady of about forty years of age, coal black hair

and eyelashes, and small piercing gray cat eyes. She was well dressed and I wondered at this as dad drove into the yard with her. I was still more surprised at all the trunks and suitcases she brought with her. That a housekeeper in so humble a home as ours should come so well dressed and have so many belongings I couldn't understand. But there were still other surprises in store for me. The new housekeeper seemed to be well acquainted with father, for the moment he came in from putting up the horses she began chatting and laughing with him in a very familiar way. Then together they began discussing plans for the future and I wondered still more. Finally dad told me that the woman was my new mother, and then with a pang I understood the whole affair. They had been married in town and this woman was my step-mother.

"Although I knew I could never care for my step-mother nor she for me, from the first I tried to do my best by her. I treated her as politely as I knew how and tried to help her with her work whenever I wasn't busy helping dad. But there was no use. She had it in for me. She must have hated me because I was dad's child. The first month she was in our home I got a hard beating from her—a licking I remembered for a long while. Always she had a look of hatred in her eyes for me, and I began to hate her more every day. Never did she speak a kind word to me. At every excuse she found I got

a licking with her big rawhide whip she kept especially for that purpose. I wasn't exactly the innocent young boy that could stand for such lickings long without putting up some resistance, and so once or twice I tried to jerk the whip out of her hands and use it on her. But she was an ox for strength and every time I tried this stunt I only got a double dose from her rawhide. I was no match for her and gradually she was breaking my spirit and I was becoming scared of her—so scared I would slink from her sight even after I got to be twelve years old.

“Work was not in my step-mother's line. Every time she had a hard job ahead she always made dad leave me from my out-door work to help her with it, when she could easily have done the work herself and left me to help dad. And then when I had helped her, she would complain to dad what a lazy good-for-nothing I was. Dad never knew of many of the lickings I got. She threatened to ‘half kill’ me if I told dad about the lickings and you can guess I never dared to tell. I was worked to death. At the age of twelve I did a man's work and I never got a chance for any play or leisure except sometimes on Sunday when her and dad had gone visiting, always leaving me at home, because my step-mother insisted on me staying, as she said, ‘where I belonged.’ Life was getting to be more and more of a burden rather than a joy to me, and I could see no brighter future ahead. Often I wanted to leave home and run away, but I hated to leave dad.

“Finally my step-mother’s brother came to live with us. This brought still more grief to me. He was a fellow about thirty years old with a very dark complexion and eyes and hair as black as coal. In all my life I have never seen a man so cruel, so clever, so stone-hearted as this cur. His name was Thad Penelope and some said he and my step-mother were half-breed Indians, and I later found it was true. From the first Penelope tyrannized over me, ordering me around as if he owned the place and I soon hated him even worse than his sister. I never got any ‘peace when he was near. He was the most cunning, heartless coward I ever saw, and he never done a full day’s work all the two years he was with us, he was so lazy and shiftless. He tyrannized over father too and they had many quarrels. Once in a fit of anger he struck father on the head with a big club and nearly killed him. He was unconscious for two days and he will carry the scar of that cringing coward’s blow to his grave. I was a witness of the cowardly cur’s deed. For a moment I was a mad demon. I thought he had killed father and I thirsted for Penelope’s blood. A good sized rock was near and in my rage I hurled it with all my strength at the murderer’s head. But I missed and here’s a mark I got from the cur to remember him by. My arm was broken there. He broke it with the same club he used on dad.”

Smith had turned back his coat sleeve and holding

his right arm up to the firelight, he showed the men a big scar just above his elbow.

"As soon as dad had recovered he ordered Penelope from the place. But that she-bear step-mother took the coward's part and by threatening to leave dad she persuaded him to let her brother stay. After this dad got along better with him, but he always had to give Penelope his own way about everything, and he was always very careful not to rouse him to anger again. But the half-breed was more overbearing than ever to me. I hated the very sight of him and he knew it. Somehow he seemed my born enemy. At every turn in my life he was there to make life a misery for me. I could stand it no longer. One night I ran away, taking enough food with me to last about a week, and for three days I followed along the wooded country of a creek, hiding from sight in the daytime and moving on by night. But Penelope I found was very clever at tracking and about noon of the third day him and dad discovered my hiding place and brought me home. Then after a good thrashing from Penelope my life went on as usual again, only that I was now closely watched day and night. For another year Penelope stayed with us and then something happened that got him away in a hurry. The foul cur disgraced a pretty young girl of the neighborhood, and when the authorities and an organized posse of angry farmers sought him, he disappeared from the country."

CHAPTER XII.

THE SAME (Continued).

“Among the people of our neighborhood I had made three friends I knew were true as steel to me,” Smith continued in his narrative. “They were two brothers and their sister—Earnest, Harry, and Lillie McKinney. But Lillie was my idol. She was the most beautiful girl I have ever seen in my life—dark hair and eyes, and graceful as a flower. I had known her as a girl of ten, and now when she was sixteen I found myself head over heels in love with her. She thought a lot of me too, and my life began to look bright, in spite of the sort of home I had. In the South girls generally married very young and so in three or four years I could picture myself the husband of this girl who meant more than life to me.

“I never saw two better boys than Harry and Ernie. Ernie, the oldest, was now a young man of twenty and Harry was two years older than myself. As children we had always been together whenever we could and now as youths we were the staunchest of friends. They always treated me white. A good many of the fellows I knew in Virginia looked down on me and refused to associate with me because father was a poor man. Most of the fellows were of this

sort and I can tell you it wasn't very pleasant for me. But not so of Ernie and Harry. They always treated me as their equal, although their father was as rich a man as there was in Virginia—or at least in our neighborhood. With these good-hearted, manly boys as my friends and Lillie as my lover, I began to have a brighter view of life, although I still fared no better with that step-mother.

“Then suddenly the tide turned and my old enemy, Penelope, came back after an absence of four years. He had changed some and for a disguise he wore a heavy moustache and had his hair, which before he had always worn very long, closely cropped. Of course he could not live with us now, or he would soon be recognized by someone and made to pay for the foul crime he had committed, but he gloated and tyrannized over me in another way now, even as he always crossed my life to rob me of all my happiness. He found a job working at McKinney's, who did not at all recognize him as the outlaw that had made his escape four years before. But I recognized the cur the instant I saw him. I had been to McKinney's and going home I met my enemy coming in from the field. Penelope tried to pretend he didn't know me, but he must have seen the look that shot over my face as I recognized him, for after he had passed by he kept turning and looking around at me. All the rest of that day I wondered and feared. How did this rotten cur ever dare to show his face

in this vicinity again? Surely McKinneys had not recognized him and yet he looked so awfully natural to me. I would have known him in Greenland. And why on earth should he work at McKinney's? Could it be that Lillie was the reason why he was working there? That same night just after dark he suddenly crept into the barn where I was working. I was afraid of the overgrown monster and made for the door as I saw him enter by the light of my lantern. But Penelope blocked the way, and drawing a long knife he swore he'd kill me if I ever made known his identity. I loathed and despised the coward, but I knew he would make good his threat and so I promised never to tell on him.

"Things took the turn I had expected. At once Penelope began paying marked attention to Lillie. Often I saw him with her in the next month. I burned for revenge on this cur so unfit for Lillie. I know now that she never cared for him, but I could not stand to see him with her—he the wily corrupter of the young. I would not stand for it. I told McKinneys of Penelope's identity. I had an awful fear that the half-breed would carry out his threat, but I would rather die than have this villain wrong Lillie. I advised Mr. McKinney to have the sheriff come and take him and have him held for the crime he had committed four years before. But Ernie got too hasty and his life paid for it. Ernie and his father were both at my home when I made

known Penelope's real identity to them, and when they found their hired hand was that criminal of four years ago, no words can describe their anger as they started home. The rest I did not see, but now comes the tragedy that followed. When Ernie and his father got home they found Penelope had taken Lillie for a walk some distance up the creek and had not yet returned with her. Ernie's temper got the best of him and telling his aged father to stay at the house, he started out after his sister and Penelope. He soon found the two sitting on a log by the creek, and burning with anger he ordered Penelope from his seat beside his sister. Ernie acted as if insane. He had not a single weapon with him, but forgetting he could be no match at all for the big half-breed, he forgot all about the sheriff and serving out a warrant for Penelope, and pitched into him single handed. In the fight that followed Penelope suddenly drew a long knife and stabbed poor Ernie in the back. Ernie lived only a few moments and his brother arrived just before he died.

"Penelope struck out into the thicket along the creek as he heard Harry coming, and again evading the law and posses organized to capture him, he disappeared and never showed up again. Lillie wasn't herself for a long time after Ernie's death. She seemed to feel she was to blame for her brother's death. However we finally did succeed in comforting her and at last she could smile again. But alas!

she did not smile long. Only a little more than a year after Ernie's death the terrible accident occurred that made me the miserable guilty wretch I am and took away Lillie's other and last brother from her. I feel as guilty of murder as Penelope, but I could not help it and he could. I can't go back to my Lillie again, but some day I hope to make up a part of the wrong I have done against her by levelling that foul murderer of her brother to the ground. I think he came west, and somehow, somewhere, I feel strongly that I will meet the murderer. And if I do Ernie McKinney's death will not remain unavenged!"

Smith's voice had dropped lower and lower as he proceeded and it was with deep emotion that he had uttered the last words. He was simply relating a tale he had time and again related to hoboes with whom he had associated in his pilgrimages, but now in relating to these dwellers of the open air the miserable story of his life the words did not come so easy. As he paused to recall old memories the cowboys about him edged still nearer to him, eager to catch every word he was about to utter. Somehow a common tie of affection seemed to bind them to this wanderer. Poor lonely "kid." Little did he know of the history of these men who make up the West. Little did he realize the dark history even of one or two of the older fellows sitting around him listening to this tale of his life. That the Western man's past is his "own business" he had yet to learn.

CHAPTER XIII.

A TRAGIC EVENT.

"The tragedy happened about four years ago," Smith continued. "It was on Saturday that Harry and I went out duck hunting on a lake about three miles from McKinney's. Harry owned a shot gun and a revolver, and he carried the gun and I the revolver. I had never handled the revolver much before, but I was over confident and was sure I could handle it.

"It was about four in the afternoon when we got to the lake. Harry was a good shot and soon succeeded in bringing down two ducks, but after this it wasn't such easy work. For nearly an hour we trailed about among the swamps and bushes without getting another shot at them. Then suddenly a big bunch flew up right in front of us, and after emptying our guns we got two more. I can see Harry yet as he picked up the ducks and killed them as quickly as possible, to put an end to their suffering. Harry never could have anything suffer. Dear old Harry! Little did he dream as he slipped the ducks into his sack that they were to be his last on earth.

"We had just turned to leave the spot. Harry was walking a few feet ahead of me and we were load-

ing our guns as we went on. I was o busy loading the revolver that I didn't think of Harry ahead of me. Harry, the very boy who had taught me never to load a gun with the muzzle pointing toward anyone, he was to suffer from my carelessness.

"I was just closing the gun when suddenly, I don't know to this day just how it was done, it was discharged. The next thing I was conscious of was Harry staggering about and I realized what had happened. I jumped like a flash to his side and caught him in my arms as he fell. Blood shot from the wound in Harry's back and I felt sure the wound was a fatal one. But I tried my best to stop the blood. No use. I think the bullet must have struck close to his heart. I laid him on his side and tried again and again to stop the stream of blood. But the pressure was too great and I could do nothing. The agony I went through in the next half an hour will never be forgotten. I could only sit by and watch poor Harry's life ebb away. The sight of him can never leave my vision. Always when I think of the deed I can see him as plain as day—as if he was still before me. The sight of poor Harry will never leave me as long as I live.

"Harry regained consciousness just before he died. He seemed to suffer very little pain. His last words to me were, 'Good-bye Dave. Take good care of Lillie and my folks.' After Harry died I should have gone to his folks and told them all—like a man. Did

I do it? No! A bitterness filled my heart—a bitter curse for the fate that had made me kill my best friend on earth. I wanted to leave—to get away from everything. I could not go back to my Lillie and tell her I had killed her brother. Instead of going back to confess my deed, I slunk away like a whipped cur. I headed for the nearest railroad town like one moving in a dream. I had to cross the road at places and I met a few people, but they did not seem real. I had the revolver with me and twice as I went on I tried to get up nerve to take my own life with it. But I was too big a coward and finally I threw the gun away.

“It was hard for me to go without seeing Lillie. Several times I turned and started back to go to her. Then my fear and bitterness would seize me and I would turn again and make all the faster for the train that would carry me away. I was so frightened and so excited as I left the scene of the accident that I forgot to leave even a note for Lillie to tell her how her brother had been killed. I did not realize this awful error until I was speeding west on the swift passenger, and then it was too late. And what an error I made! I would give my life if Lillie could know and understand how her brother was killed—and not believe, as I know she must surely believe, that Harry was murdered by me. And still I don’t go back. Always with me there is that fear that Lillie will not believe me—that she would not

understand. I am a coward, boys, who does not dare to go back and account for the deed he has done."

Again the mere boy paused in his narrative and hardly a muscle moved in the audience. Visions of their own homes and sweethearts came back to these grizzled men of the Plains gathered in a circle. Some even were blinking their eyes to keep back the tears. Rivers, especially, could feel for the wanderer. Only a year ago he had seen his own sweetheart laid away to rest beneath the sod of the Lone Star, and the latter's heart went out in sympathy for the stranger.

"Go on with your story, won't yu'?" Black said.

"O yes, excuse me for stopping. When I reached Cumberland I was out of money and so I had to quit the train. I didn't think dad would find me here, so I decided to get a job and earn enough money as soon as possible to carry me on farther west. But finding work was not so easy I found out. Day after day I walked Cumberland's streets looking for a job and finding none. All the places seemed to be filled. I was soon out of food and had no place to sleep. Then I left the city and walked about through the surrounding country looking for a job on a farm. But I failed even in this. I was either too young or something else was wrong with me most of the farmers would tell me.

"For a long time I kept up my ramblings—and no success. Then I began to discover and see into something. On my travels I generally got my meals free

and sometimes a place to sleep. If I got these anyway, what was the use of working? Then I began to ask less and less for work and finally quit altogether and became a plain, ordinary tramp. My clothes soon became so ragged they hung on me like rags and my hair got matted and unkempt. I didn't care. I thought there was nothing left in this world but sorrow for me and so what was the use

"For quite a while my life was very lonely when everybody I met was a stranger to me. I felt like an exile in a foreign land. But finally I fell in with two other tramps and we stuck pretty close together. Of course I looked too young for an ordinary tramp and so I had the least trouble in getting food. I was no longer particular where I slept, a haystack or old barn generally answered the purpose. My partners soon put me wise to a clever trick. I want to laugh as I think of the trick now; but it was far from being right. I would leave my partners and go to the houses alone. I would always pretend I was just out of food and had a long journey ahead. Then the grub I got—the grub that was supposed to last me for three or four meals—would soon disappear down mine and my partners' stomachs.

"This trick of lying to these good, hard-working people was my first real step from the right. After this the rest came easy for me. I soon learned to steal rides on the brakes or on loaded or empty freight cars. Here my real traveling began. I soon became

an expert at stealing rides. And always I hit west. Somehow I wanted to shut from my heart the tragedies of Virginia, and I wanted to get as far from there as I could. Sometimes I could strike an easy job and work for a little while. But I was ever restless to be moving on and I never stayed long on one job. For several years I wandered on in this way. I saw nearly every western state in the union on my travels. But I went from bad to worse. At last I took to drinking after I had become so lonesome I could hardly stand it. At first John Barleycorn proved my friend and I drank often to drive away care and loneliness. This was one joy I had. But before long drink proved my enemy instead of my friend. I was drunk more than half of the time. Then once I jumped off the train before it stopped, in a fit of intoxication, and broke my leg. This was hard luck for me but it cured me from drinking. If it had not been for charity this accident would have put an end to my misery. But some kind friends took me into their home until I was well and able to look out for myself again. This settled me. I had learned the lesson of the world. At last I had awakened from a long sleep, and I turned over a new leaf. I quit the old life and went to work. I was working pretty hard when Mr. Davis found me in El Paso and hired me to work on this ranch. That ends my story. You fellows understand me better now. And boys, I've got a big debt to pay before I

can ever feel right before God. You know the task I have before me since I have turned over my new leaf. But one thing is certain; I can never pay my debt in full for the grief and sorrows I have caused for the McKinneys. Here's the only thing I have left on earth to remember Lillie by."

With these words Smith had reached a sun-browned hand into one of the pockets of his ragged coat and drew out a small, badly stained and faded photograph. The next moment these rough men of the Texas Plains were gazing down on the likeness of a smiling, dark-eyed young girl of about sixteen—the likeness of the Wanderer's last gleam of hope.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TENDERFOOT ON THE JOB.

All was hurry and commotion in camp the next morning. The outfit was up and about before the sun had scarcely shown itself above the eastern horizon, all ready for the day's work.

Smith, or the "kid" as some termed him, was one of the first to leave his blankets, eager to begin at his new work. Mr. Davis had bought him a new outfit in El Paso the day before—wide brimmed sombrero, flannel shirt, leather chaps, bright tan high-heeled boots, and shiny spurs—and Smith was anxious to try them out. They were just a little awkward to him at first. In all his ramblings he had not chanced to find employment on a cattle ranch, and so Smith might still be termed a "green-horn" at some things connected with a cowboy. Thus it came to pass that when the last straggler had finished his toilet, Smith was still employed in buckling on his heavy chaps.

"Git a move on yu' kid. Don't let them lazy devils beat yu' that way or they'll begin to look for a raise in salary—comin' out ahead of yu' that way," said the cook with a broad grin.

"Guess these things have a grudge against me," the "kid" replied, looking down at his stiff heavy chaps and trying to make up his mind how tightly they should be buckled.

"Reckon they must have—providin' there ain't something wrong with the kid what's tryin' to git into 'em." And the cook disappeared behind the chuck wagon just in time to save his face from associating with a heavy leather glove that whistled from Smith's hand by the rear end of the wagon.

The chaps were finally buckled on and the eager Smith was ready to try his hand at the new work. The first task was to drive in the bunch of saddle horses, which had been allowed to graze at will during the night. Then each cowboy must "rope" his morning mount, after which came the saddling. The saddling was generally accomplished only after somewhat of a battle between man and mount, for the ponies were always well rested and high spirited in the morning. All this was new work for Smith and he would surely have come to grief had it not been for Rivers, who helped him catch and saddle his mount, which for a Western pony, was quite gentle. The horses saddled and tied to the corral or to the wheels of the chuck wagon, the outfit was ready for breakfast.

Breakfast over in fifteen minutes, the dishes and other trappings of the outfit were loaded in the canvas covered chuck wagon, the cook took his place in the

driver's seat, the cowboys started the cattle in motion with their heavy whips, and the outfit and cattle began drifting eastward in quest of a better grazing ground and a greater abundance of water—the rancher's best friend. The *Lazy Bar* herd had been grazing west and south of the ranch for the past three months, but as no rain had fallen in this territory for a considerable length of time, the creeks had gone almost dry and the grass was very dry and poor.

The extra saddle horses were driven along with the cattle. Each hand had his extra mounts, numbered in accordance with the kind of work he had to perform. The "ring-leaders," to whom was assigned the tasks that required the greatest amount of hard riding, generally had four or five horses, while those that had tasks that did not require so much "horse flesh" did not have so many. Their excellent breed of thoroughbred horses was one thing the *Lazy Bar* could boast of.

For the first few miles the herd moved on quite rapidly, a surging, bellowing mass of tossing horns. But as the sun rose higher in its zenith and the day grew hotter, the cattle became lazy and then the real work of keeping them in anything resembling a compact herd began. The moment the men paused in their work the cattle would begin to slacken their speed and spread out like a great fan of many varieties of color on over the short yellow buffalo grass. The cowboys knew that this would not do, as there were

no streams within twenty-five miles and they would have to keep on the move if they did not want the cattle to suffer badly for water.

In a herd of any great size there are always some loiterers that need much urging to keep up with the rest of the herd. The old, the footsore, and the cows with calves at their sides, make up this division. The tenderfoot with the kind assistance of Pete Caldwell, or "Whirlwind Pete" as the cowboys sarcastically called him as a nickname for his slow, awkward gait and actions, was assigned to this unhappy task. This work indeed was no picnic to the tenderfoot at least—urging and pounding these sorry beasts on.

A few miles out on the prairie the outfit began passing outfits of different brands, and then it was hard work to keep the herds from mixing. A per cent. of most of these outfits were slouchy, awkward, grimy Mexicans, some of whom looked as though they might be of rather a dangerous character. This was another thing the Lazy Bar outfit could boast of; they had not a single "greaser" in their employ. The Lazy Bar men knew most of the men of these outfits, and they greeted each other with "Howd'y—How's business" or just "Howd'y." This was generally the Westerner's greeting. His farewell was a husky "So Long."

When noon came it was a hungry outfit that gathered about the cook's wagon for the noon-day meal.

The men ate while the cattle rested and soon they were moving on again.

The hot afternoon sun burned pitilessly down upon the men and stock. The prairie was so dry that as the outfit proceeded the cattle and horses kicked up great clouds of dust, which hovered about the moving mass of flesh and bone like a buzzard about some dead carcass, and settling on the men's perspiring faces, made the work far from agreeable. The cattles' tongues were lolling out of their mouths and already they thirsted for that which is needed to sustain all life—water.

As the long afternoon wore on, sitting in the saddle grew more and more monotonous and tiresome to young Smith. The seat of his big stock saddle seemed about a foot wider than any saddle he had ever used in old Virginia. The cattle became slower and slower, and began to work on his nerves. Finally the long speckled line moved so slowly that Smith climbed out of his saddle and proceeded to drive them on foot and give his tired, cramped limbs a rest from the cruel tortures of the big saddle.

Scarcely had Smith's feet touched the ground when to his utter surprise half a dozen of these seemingly weary loiterers whirled their heads around and faced him with danger printed in large letters in their wild eyes, stamping and pawing the grass as if to make a rush at him. This was enough for the "kid." He jumped into his saddle just in time to avoid a sharp

pair of horns and to hear "Whirlwind Pete" bawl out:

"Hey kid, what do yu' reckon yu're celebratin'? If yu'd of stayed on the ground a few seconds yu'd got a free ride up in the air so high yu'd get gray hair comin' down. Better take a little first-hand advice from Pete an' stay in yu're saddle when yu're in the society of these Texas cattle. Do yu' see?"

Smith did "see" all right and this was a lesson that served to last him all his life. Never again did he dismount in a large herd of range cattle. And this is a fact that all experienced cattle men know—that range cattle have no use or fear of dismounted men. So accustomed have they become to the sight of mounted men that they hardly know what to make of a man driving them on foot.

About the middle of the afternoon the outfit passed the "Circle S" ranch, which lay perhaps twenty miles east of the Lazy Bar. Five miles still farther east would bring them to an excellent watering place for their thirsty stock—Gopher Creek they called it. This creek they reached quite late in the afternoon.

Sitting in the saddle all day had had its effects upon the tenderfoot. When he dismounted he certainly presented a sorry spectacle. His limbs and body were so cramped and sore that he made each move with some pain. His heavy chaps now weighed down on him like lead. His new boots had pinched his feet and he took each step as if he was walking

on some easily broken object. He walked with as little limp as was possible to the chuck wagon and dropping down on the soft grass, he proceeded to snatch a little rest in the shade of the wagon before supper.

"Ain't yu' goin' to tend to your hawss, kid," the cook's gentle voice chimed in Smith's ear.

Smith started as one awakened from a dream.

"Why sure—What ails me? Might have known my horse needed care."

Then Smith perceived that all the others were busily engaged in unsaddling and rubbing down their tired ponies. Rivers looked up from his work.

"Never mind, kid," he said in his drawling, gentle voice, "go on an' take your rest. Reckon yu' need it bad enough. I'll tend to your horse. I'm a little more used to that work we done to-day."

But Smith would be no "quitter." He walked up to his mustang the best he could and removed the heavy stock saddle and rubbed him down. When he returned to the wagon the cook was just rattling his tins for supper and Smith pitched into it with the appetite of a hungry wolf. That night he did not linger about the campfire as he had done on the previous night, but sought his blanket as soon as supper was over, congratulating himself that the cowboys had not joshed him about his little stunt in dismounting among the cattle. But after he had fallen asleep, Smith herded cattle in the land of slumber, until he

was awakened by the fellow in the blanket next door and given a gentle reminder to be more careful as to what he kicked at next time.

The first few weeks in the saddle were hard ones for young Smith. Every morning he had to leave his blankets at sunrise, had his mount captured and saddled by breakfast, and then rode away to begin anew the previous day's program; riding to and fro after unruly cattle over many square miles of prairie covered thickly with rattlesnakes and prairie dog holes. This work kept him in the saddle until nearly dawn. Then came supper and at last sleep again—from which, after he had become better acquainted with the country and his work, he had to subtract several hours for night herding. Punching cattle was no picnic he soon found out. But every day Smith was learning more about his work and he promised to make an excellent hand before long.

Of course Smith had many advantages over the ordinary tenderfoot that comes West. In the West—that is, in the days of the Cattle Kings—the man who was a novice at punching cattle generally became the laughing stock of the jesting cowpunchers. All sorts of tricks were played on him, some of which were not very pleasant or gentle, and the poor fellow always had the choice of standing the abuses until he had become a full fledged cowboy or “pull his freight” for better localities. But with Smith the Westerner's treatment was different entirely. He had

not come west from some large city where he had plenty of rich relatives and considering himself in a class far superior to the cowboys, as many unfortunate young fellows had done. Not at all. Smith had been a worker all his life and this fact these rough and ready men of the Plains readily appreciated and respected. At once he secured a high place in the true hearts of all the Lazy Bar men, which he was destined to retain all his life.

Among the men of the Lazy Bar outfit there could be no stauncher, truer friendship than that which existed between Will Wade and Tom Rivers. These young Texans had been friends since childhood. When they were small children their parents and many other of their relatives had been murdered in a memorable Indian massacre back in Kansas and Rivers and his sister Viola, and Wade were left orphans in a wild, wilderness country of prairies. These children too would have fallen at the bloody hands of the Indians who had been incited to make the Sun-flower state a scene of murdr and carnage by the Confederate Guerillas back in 1861, had they not chanced to be some distance from their homes, gathering wild flowers on the level Kansas prairies. Mr. Davis, then a Kansas pioneer, knew the orphans' parents and took the trio into his own home to care for them as his own. When the Sunflower state continued to be a land of murder and depredation, Mr. Davis and a number of other Kansas pioneers loaded their be-

longings in covered wagons and pulled out for a still more distant frontier—some going south and others west. Mr. Davis, after a hard, thrilling journey, braving with his wife and these small orphans Indians, prairie fires, and storms, reached Texas, then a wild, utterly unorganized country and located there. And so as orphans in the free land of the Lone Star, Wade and Rivers learned together the way of the open range. Of course Viola took part in nearly everything they attempted, and when the trio had reached their “teens” she could almost compete with the boys in riding, shooting, and throwing the lariat.

Viola Rivers was another tie that bound the lives of these noble hearted men together. “Billy” and Viola had been sweethearts from early childhood. And so in all kinds of trials and hardships, the staunch friendship of these Texans never wavered. Together they had faced danger and hardships, joy and happiness, and always they had conquered. Two “Comrades of the Lone Star” were they.

CHAPTER XV.

AT THE DANCE.

The dance at Johnson's, owner of the "Triangle R" ranch, was at full swing when Wade and Rivers clambered up the big hay loft of the spacious barn. The strong odor of whiskey and the smokers' pipes and cigarettes was in the air, making it almost suffocating within, the smoke making the half dozen swinging lanterns appear like lights in a fog. The evening's enjoyment was at its climax, and the old were young again.

Bud West, Higgins, Black, and even old Hank Chase—all were there—dancing, loitering about the several kegs and bottles of strong liquor in the rear end of the hay loft, or perhaps some of that worthy band had already climbed down into some horse stall to take a rest and get rid of a certain giddiness, brought on from the effects of emptying too many glasses of strong John Barleycorn. All of the outfit was there at least, and that was enough. Indeed all Gopher Creek was there, young and old, and having the time of their lives—plenty of whiskey, fine music, lots of pretty smiling girls—in short a place the lonesome cowboy could find enjoyment in after long, monotonous work with stock. In the

neighborhood of the Lazy Bar, or speaking more accurately, the neighborhood of Gopher Creek, good dances did not occur every night. Thus one could scarcely afford to "play grandpa an' stay at home" as the cowboys termed failing to appear at a dance.

Most of the men that inhabited the vicinity of the liquor recognized the two Texans as they strode leisurely up to join them.

"Howd'y fellows—Kind of late ain't yu'?" greeted big Chet Caldwell, foreman of the Triangle R, and "Whirlwind Pete's" brother.

"A little I reckon. Toss over a couple of tin cups, glasses, or anything that strikes yu' right handy—won't yu' Black?" Wade said.

"Reckon yu' had to wait for your wives or yu' would have been hyeh long ago," ventured Floyd Anderson.

"Left mine at home," replied Rivers, lifting his glass to his lips.

"I thought yu' had swore off, Billy," said Caldwell, after the individual mentioned had drained his first glass of its fiery contents.

"I'd forgot they had dances an' free whiskey in Gopher Creek. I don't drink much though."

Just then a tall, heavy bearded stranger entered the circle of light, coming from the shadow at the opposite side of the room. Wade's last remark seemed to have brought him from out of his dark corner of the room.

"What was that last remark of your'n, kid? D'ye allow yu' ain't much on drinkin' red-eye?" the stranger muttered, with a darkening frown on his thin black face.

Wade regarded the stranger in some surprise

"I reckon that's what I said."

"That's fair enough. But yu' can't pull it though in this crowd, young feller," again the insulting awkward, dark visaged giant sneered.

"How's that, stranger?"

"Why yu' all has to be a man if yu' allow you're in this gang, pard—no kids allowed is the ticket. If yu' can't git away with half a dozen glasses of good old red-eye, you're nothin' more'n a piefaced sucklin'. Six full doses is the lowest limit hyeh—ain't I right boys "

No one among the men who surrounded the liquor replied. Wade really was at a loss as how to take the stranger's bold remarks. What was his motive in those bold affronts he had made? The bearded chin of the rather malicious, dangerous appearing stranger savored slightly of weakness, cowardice Was this huge giant a common, ordinary bully? His dress and all his appearances spoke of a person of dangerous character—a "bad man"—aside from that betraying chin.

"Yu' shore take a mighty keen interest in my welfare, stranger," Wade said. "But I'd rather yu'd go a little slower in your portrayal of my character.

You're a long ways off when yu' say that whiskey makes the man. If yu'd have said ruined the man I might agree with yu'. However if I need your advice, stranger, I'll jest call your way—not before."

"Look out there young man! You'r trackin' on dangerous grounds when yu' take sides agin' Arizona Pete—the man-killin' Pete from Arizona. I've killed a man several times fer makin' jest such smart remarks as yu' made, young feller. No back talkin' to Pete, partner. Kid, will yu' down the whiskey?"

"Thank yu' sir—but I reckon I won't go to the bother."

The stranger shot a quick glance at the crowd surrounding him. To his surprise no favor for his scheme showed on the faces of any that composed the crowd silently witnessing his antics. He was indignant. He had failed utterly in his judgment of this youth who bore himself so calmly. But he must finish his bluff now at all hazards.

"Fer the second time, young feller—Pete never has to give his orders more'n twice—will yu' do as I bid yu' an' be a man like the rest of us, an' not a piebald, galootin' sucklin'?"

The anger had risen in Wade's face, but still he was cool.

"Stranger, I don't want trouble with yu. If yu' reckon I can be trifled with an' run over, you've got another guess comin'. I ain't the kind that's lookin' for trouble to start all the time, but I *will* demand

my full rights in a free country. Stranger, I've picked out an' decided my own life for the last twelve years an' I reckon I don't need to call on anyone to guide me now. 'This hyeh is 'Texas—not Arizona. If yu' can pull this there, all right. But don't try it hyeh. 'Tend to your own affairs an' yu' can still keep from trouble. I have enough respect for this dance—these people hyeh—to start a fuss unless it's absolutely necessary."

For answer the bully stooped and filled a glass of the fiery liquid. Then swinging on his heel the towering stranger faced the crowd.

"Stan' back friends—easy now. Clear the way an' I'll show this young Yankee the result of disobeyin' Arizona Pete's orders. Keep your heads now, boys. First guy what tries to draw a gun I'll fill full of rat holes!"

The men gathered about the tempting liquor quietly drew back. As yet the dancing had gone on undisturbed, for the quarrel had not yet spread over the rest of the barn.

"Move back fellows," said Rivers in a calm tone. "Let me referee this game. Mebbe the stranger can pull this stuff in his country but it don't work hyeh in a bunch of civilized ones like us. Stranger, I reckon yu' got the names mixed when yu' called *me* your friend."

Anger, defiance, but still calmness illumined Rivers' eyes as he uttered these words. Rivers was

on the order of the more practical sort of Westerner. Like thousands of others of his type, his most ardent desire was to see his beloved West converted into a more civilized region. Hence nothing could serve to incite his wrath more than any desperado practicing maleficence of any sort, especially attempting to play the role of "bad man" at the expense of any of its citizens.

The bully advanced carelessly, brandishing the glass of whiskey before him.

"Young feller, will yu' drink this whiskey an' save trouble?" he demanded in a tone of bravado.

"Stranger, am I wrong in believing yu' can understand the American language?"

"Yu'll drink it, yu' young polecat, or by hell I'll pour it down your damn throat!" roared "Arizona Pete," now in real anger. His big burly arm shot out to encircle Wade, while with the other hand he contemplated pouring down the liquor.

Then something happened. The men held their breath as they detected a lightning move of Wade's right arm and a bright streak of light shoot from his hand. It all took place so quickly, so suddenly, no one knew at first what was happening. Then a loud crash and a shower of broken glass filled the air, and all understood. Wade had smashed the glass of whiskey in the bully's hand into fragments with the empty glass he was holding in his hand.

Next all were conscious of "Arizona Pete" whirling in a dizzy circle before their vision, blinded from the shattered glass and mad with rage. The glass of whiskey was in a straight "bee-line" with Pete's unguarded face and he had received full benefit of the broken glass, which for the moment blinded him. He was hopping wildly about, his teeth gnashing in rage. Again and again he pulled for his six-shooter clumsily. Then suddenly it was out and a little muffled sound burst from some of the bystanders. But before Pete could bring the gun into play, Wade landed him a terrific blow square on the jaw. The bully reeled and dropped to the floor like a log, his bullet going wild and boring a hole out through the roof of the barn. Wade was upon him in a flash. Before the bewildered "Peter" could again fire his gun he had it jerked from his hands and heard it clatter to the ground outside. The fight was ended. Wade let him up, and without even turning his head or uttering a word, the mortified "Arizona Peter" groped his way down into a manger below the hay-loft, a much sadder but wiser character.

By this time the dancers had surrounded Wade, eager to discover the cause of the disturbance and the revolver shot. Chet Caldwell told the story in brief, and after a few comments on "Arizona Peter's" fighting abilities on the part of the men, they went back to their dancing—greatly to the joy of Wade. The cowpunchers about the kegs took a drink to the

victor's health, and after that everything went on as if nothing had happened.

Wade now made his way through the crowd to find a partner, for the fiddles were sounding for another dance. Rivers was in no hurry to begin, but finding a comfortable seat on a bench in one corner, he sat down and chatted with several cowboys already collected on the alluring bench, and watched the dancers as they went whirling by, listening to the music of the fiddles. His pal was not long in finding a partner and Rivers soon recognized his tall, graceful form among the dancers. How Wade could dance! A secret pride for his old pal stirred Rivers. For to him every inch of Billy was a hero—Billy, his staunchest friend and brother, and his sister's lover.

But Wade was destined to have hard luck for the rest of the evening. Before he had commenced dancing he had noticed with sudden surprise that Matilda Perkins, a rather pretty girl but of not very good reputation in Gopher Creek vicinity, had returned from her exile of two years from Gopher Creek and was seated boldly with the dancing ladies. Wade had known the girl nearly all his life and had always had a dislike for her, for reasons that were numerous enough. In the past few years he had grown to despise Miss Perkins. It had been her wily diplomacy in thrusting her associations upon him that had started the gossip about the two and culminated in forcing Matilda Perkins to leave the country, al-

though the cowboy was absolutely blameless. In spite of Wade's dislike for her, still Matilda had always tried to force herself upon him, often inciting the just jealousy of Viola Rivers, and forming a fine field for rank gossip of which even Gopher Creek did not lack.

Wade's love for Matilda had not increased during her absence and from the first he had tried to evade her sight. He must not dance with this woman who once had all but brought on his ruin in Gopher Creek society. All the time he had imagined she was unaware of his presence at the dance as yet. But the cowboy had underestimated Matilda's keenness of eyesight. Before Wade realized it, he suddenly found himself face to face with his old enemy and she greeted him as a long absent brother. His face flushed hotly as she grasped his hand with her own neat, white little hand and gave it a hearty shake. He was cornered. Matilda fairly took her captive by storm and then suddenly he heard the sound of the fiddles starting once again, and was conscious of the dancers crowding the floor about him and Matilda where they stood. Matilda had gained the strategic point. Wade could not be impolite to a woman and before he had even realized the action, he had asked her to dance. On the sudden quick impulse of the moment it had slipped from him. Then the second it was too late, the sacred vow he had made to his Viola came back to his clogged brain, and he realized

the words of his condemnation had been spoken in asking for this dance with this enemy.

So dazed Wade became, he now scarcely heeded his pretty companion's rapid, lively conversation as they danced along. He had been a fool. What a step he had taken in that thoughtless second! A step capable even of changing destiny. If he had only been impolite it would have been far better than this. For had he not vowed to Viola—the Viola of his love—not to do the very thing he was doing—never to associate with Matilda Perkins again? And now—grim despair clouded his vision. What would Tom—dear old Tom—think now? For Rivers well knew of his vow to his sister. What would Viola say when she heard the story? And oh, she would hear of it—hear of him breaking his very vow to her! For what would not get into circulation about his dancing with Matilda? Surely every eye would single him and Matilda out and the result of gossip in full sway certainly could mean much in blasting his happy future with the girl he loved.

Wade looked over to where his comrade sat, in utter hopelessness of despair. Yes, Rivers already had sighted them. Surprised astonishment shone in his pal's blue eyes and Wade's own eyes dropped hopelessly to the floor. For once he could not meet Rivers' eyes. Oh why had this happened—Why had it come to this? He cursed himself for committing this blunder of all blunders. Always he was con-

scious of critical eyes singling him and his partner out. His brain was dizzy. Then he remembered a bold remark Matilda once had made about himself and her, and he wanted to hurl his enemy from his sight.

While the cowboy brooded so deeply over his awful error, Matilda was having the enjoyment of her life. All the while as they danced she chatted gaily on. Bill was as fine a dancer as ever, she soon found, and so she had to give little heed to the step as they danced on. But Matilda's cheery, ringing voice held no charms for Wade, and he was scarcely hearing or answering her. Only one thought filled his mind; he had been a fool and now must pay dearly as the result.

Just then Wade chanced to glance over in the direction of the single door that led down into the main interior of the big barn. As he did so the blood rushed hotly to his face. Everything swam in dizziness before his bewildered vision. There near the door stood Viola Rivers silently gazing at him with a bewildered look on her beautiful face!

CHAPTER XVI.

GRIM DESPAIR.

Dark, grim despair seized Wade with his sweetheart's soft brown eyes gazing so puzzledly into his own. His gaze dropped to the floor in shame, but once again raised and rested on the graceful, girlish figure of Viola. How beautiful she was to him in that moment! He had never seen her so handsome before—supple and graceful of form, dark brown hair, brown eyes, cheeks slightly tanned and full of color. How his heart craved for her at this moment! But there was no use. The instant Viola discovered she had been espied by him, her eyes quickly dropped and in a sort of proud defiance she ignored him.

Matilda was unaware of Viola's presence and she kept up her lively chatter. But her words fell on deaf ears. Only one thought filled the clogged brain of the cowboy—Viola had seen him break his sacred vow to her. Would his dance with this woman he hated and despised never cease, so he could be at freedom to find out his fate from his Viola? After what seemed a decade to his wounded pride the fiddles ceased, the men led their ladies to a seat, and his dance with Matilda, thank God, was over. Ma-

tilda would have remained on the floor with him to hold him for another dance, laughing and chattering in her truly charming way, but he quickly took her to a seat.

"Why Bill, how rude you are tonight!" Matilda said as he turned to go. "You seem to pay not the slightest attention to me, even when it's been so long since you saw me. We used to be great friends you know and I really don't understand you. What's the matter with you, Bill?"

"I don't think I was rude, considerin'—considerin' —" Wade began and stopped abruptly. "Reckon I was payin' too much attention to the dancin'," but he knew he had framed a poor excuse. And he didn't care.

He turned again to go.

"Don't forget to call on me again, Bill. You're just as fine a dancer as ever and I certainly do enjoy a dance with you. Bill, I'm sure you have forgotten that little trouble we had—" she said, looking boldly into his eyes and smiling coquettishly up at him.

"Thank you," Wade said coolly. He moved quickly off, leaving Matilda gazing after him. Suddenly for the first time Matilda sighted Viola and her dark eyes flashed fire as she beheld Wade push through the crowd toward her rival. So that was what had caused him to leave her so suddenly, was it? A red spark of anger crept into each of her cheeks. Then a malicious little smile slowly overspread her

pretty features as she thought of the trouble her dance with Bill might bring between the lovers, and Matilda watched the two as a hawk would its prey.

Viola was conversing with a tall, middle-aged, dark complexioned fellow, who, with his coal-black hair and dark restless eyes, seemed to possess all the characteristics of a half-breed Indian, although he was quite handsome, when Wade entered the circle of light. Wade paid no attention to the stranger but went straight to his Viola. His hopes ebbed low as he detected how she sought to avoid him.

"Hello Viola—When did you' come?" he stammered extending his hand to greet her. He marveled at the strange sound of his voice. Some unseen force seemed to deprive him of further words.

"Why how are you, Wade?" he was next conscious of his sweetheart's usually soft, lovely voice ringing now cold as ice in his ears. "What made you leave Matilda? You'd better go back to her--she's waiting for you I'm sure. I saw you dancing with her and you two certainly make a fine couple. I won't bother you in the least."

Thunderbolts of grim despair sank into Wade's breast and overpowered him. When before had he ever heard that voice he so loved speak to him in tones so awfully icy. The very coldness, curtness of her tone shattered his hopes like a giant thunderbolt.

What a vast, huge gulf it placed between sweetheart and him! Was he dreaming? Could that really be

his own Viola's—his childhood's same lover's—voice ringing in his ears? He was dazed. Speechlessly dumb he stood, a lump rising in his throat.

“Pardners for the next dance!”

At last the caller's husky voice seemed to awaken Wade. Once more he recovered and bent nearer Viola. Speech came again to his hungry, mortified soul, but he was acting as one in a trance. He heard his voice speaking feverishly. For once he had lost all his calmness.

“Don't—talk—like—that—Viola! I can't help—on my word I couldn't help it. Oh forgive me this once. Say you'll dance with me, won't yu', Viola?”

Wade waited for her reply as one who would wait for a sentence of life or death to be pronounced.

“Thank you, but I have this dance with Mr. Tracey here,” her curt response greeted him, a mocking, taunting smile playing on her pretty mouth.

“Stranger, I have this dance with Miss Rivers. Yu'd better clear out or there'll be trouble,” the dark stranger spoke for the first time. The hot blood of anger rushed to Wade's face. How the stranger's tone mocked his soul! In it seemed to chime the very essence of mockery—insult. Wade's angry glance met the piercing dark eyes of the stranger and hatred, defiance shone in his blue eyes which narrowed to steel slits. The stranger cowered under that gaze. Viola saw the look in his eyes and it amused her. Wade detected the smile that suddenly overspread

her face. It nearly drove him mad. He could not help it. From the innermost depths of his soul came the craving for revenge on this cringing half-breed who could not meet his eyes—who had dared to step between him and his darling. What right had this half-breed to Viola? He was the very unfittest companion for her.

"Come on, Miss Rivers, let's begin the dance," the stranger's charming, musical voice broke the awkward silence, the musical voice that so many of the Red Men of the Plains are heir to. The sound grated like steel on Wade's tense nerves. To him that voice seemed to sound a distant knell.

"Certainly, Mr. Tracey," said Viola, turning to her partner and leaving Wade alone on the floor. "Wade, you had better dance with Matilda again. See how terribly lonesome she looks over there without you. I am sure she's patiently waiting for you," and with a mocking laugh Viola turned to her partner to begin the dance.

That laugh stung Wade to the heart. Never before had any strife marred their happiness and to them love had been as one happy dream. Sweethearts from childhood they had always been—ever loyal and true as steel to each other. But now—Wade grew dizzy, sick at heart. His brightest hopes and happy plans of the future seemed forever blasted with that mocking laugh ringing in his ears. Would Viola ever forgive him—care for him again? He was

angry at Matilda, at himself—at the world. Viola—the only girl of his love—had laughed in his face! And his old enemy had brought it about and his face clouded with dark passions.

Now the dancers were crowding the floor about him and Wade started for the rear of the room as one moving in a dream. He was growing strangely dizzy. How dim the lights were growing! Now the dance had begun and he hurried his steps. Viola and the stranger danced by him but he no longer heeded them. The floor had ceased to remain stationary but seemed to whirl in a dizzy circle before him. Would he never gain the rear of the room and get out of the dancers' way? Wade seemed to sink lower and lower and the lights seemed to drift away. Once he almost stumbled and fell. Only one thought filled his mind; his sweetheart had laughed at him. He suddenly felt his feet collide with some unseen obstacle, and he pitched heavily against the hard wall, his head striking a huge plank. Thank God, he had at last gained the rear of the hay loft and was out of the dancers' way. He looked neither to right or left but climbed mechanically down the hay loft, going he knew not where. Grim darkness of despair went before him.

Wade heard footsteps coming after him but he did not look back. He walked silently by the tied horses out through the open door. Outside the stars shone above him. How distant, how cold those stars looked!

The footsteps still followed and he quickened his pace. Who followed him? He swung 'round on his heel.

"Is this you, Tom?" he asked, wondering at the strange echo of his voice, as he made out the old familiar figure of his pal approaching him.

"Reckon it is. Where are yu' goin' " asked the familiar voice in a tone sadly changed—a tone of icy curtness. This iciness of Rivers' tone brought Wade to his senses. As if a shot had struck him he started. Could it all be true? Even his staunchest friend—his brother—was taking sides against him for the error he had committed. It was with some effort that Wade spoke.

"Tom, I've been a fool. Yes, worse than a fool. I reckon I'd better pull my freight for home now."

"Reckon yu'd better an' damn sudden too if yu' can't do any better'n yu' jest did. Yu' thought yu' was pullin' grand stunts, didn't yu'? Don't get in such a rush now all at once. I've got a little business with yu'. What was yu' doin' with Matilda Perkins a few minutes ago?"

Wade winced. Straight at him came the question from his pal that he dreaded—the very question he would avoid. Could he make Tom understand him? Or would Tom continue to believe him the heartless, deceiving traitor he certainly must have appeared to his comrade?

"I'll shore explain this thing to yu', Tom. That question is only fair. But yu'll have to wait. I can't talk now."

"Don't try to get around me now. Don't yu' try that. I want to know *now*. Why did yu' break your vow to my sister?"

The voice that replied from the darkness was deep with emotion:

"Tom, I shore want *you* to understand me an' the fool I've been if no one else ever will. You've always been a true brother to me an' I know *you* will understand and believe me. Tom, I'm goin' to tell yu' all. Before I start let's look back a little. How long have we been together, Tom? How long? All our lives. In all that time our ways have been exactly the same. Your ways have always been my ways and my ways yours. Tom, in all these years have I, if I could help it, ever done anything yu' didn't approve of—anything yu' were ashamed of or considered wrong? Have I now?"

"No—yu' haven't—But that ain't answerin' my question."

"Tom, do yu' think I am goin' to begin now?"

"Will yu' answer my question or not? From what I seen with my own eyes you've already made a be-ginnin'. If yu' can't explain this affair truthfully like a man to me we'll have to take different directions in our ways an' quick too. Do yu' imagine for a second that I'll let this thing slip by? Bill, how

could yu' do it? An' after what yu' promised Viola? Have yu' lost your sense of honor—shame? Remember the dirt Matilda Perkins done yu'. What kind of stories do yu' reckon will soon be started about you an' her? An' Viola will find it out too—yu' needn't worry. Yu' can't work *my* sister that way an' get by it. Mebbe yu' thought yu' could, but yu'll find out different. Viola is goin' to know about this too—even if I have to tell her myself. An' I won't hesitate a minute from tellin' her."

"Tom, I reckon yu' needn't bother—"

Like a thunderbolt the change suddenly came over Rivers—the change in him to burning, bitter anger. As if by magic his head raised high in proud defiance, his teeth clenched tightly. Even in the pale light the other saw his eyes narrow to mere slits with the awful passion that suddenly mastered him. His fists clenched tightly and he drew back for a mad blow as he confronted his old pal in awful anger.

"I *will* tell her. *You* can't stop me, you—you deceiving traitor! So yu' *did* think this would all pass by and my sister wouldn't know it, didn't you?"

"Tom, Tom, don't rush things now. Will yu' listen to reason? Viola already knows it—knows the fool's part I've played—everything. She saw—"

"That's a lie! How could—"

"Will yu' listen to plain, common reason? Tom, haven't yu' saw her yet—talked to her? Don't yu' know that your sister is hyeh at the dance?"

"You're a liar! So you expect me to believe that do you?" Rivers flashed in a tone of stinging bitterness. All his calmness and good nature had suddenly departed and he was white with anger. His comrade still was cool.

"Tom, no other man on earth would dare to call me what you jest said. I hope *you* know that. But you don't mean it. Yu' know yu' don't mean it. That is God's truth; your sister is here an' knows all. Nothin' is left out to her. I know how you feel, Tom. I can't blame yu', Tom, try to think it wasn't wholly my fault though. I have already began to reap the results. But God knows I couldn't help it—that I did not purposely break my vow. I'll tell yu' all, Tom, and don't be too harsh in passing your judgment. I want to be fair to you to-night an' tell yu' the truth more than I ever did before. Everything went wrong to-night—everybody went against me. But try to say to yourself, 'He couldn't help it.' For Tom, you know I am still as true to your sister as I always was and always will be. I want yu' to understand me if no one else ever will—an' try to feel I couldn't help it when I danced with that girl you know I hate. Listen."

And in a tone of drooping despair Wade told all—of his unexpected encounter with his old enemy, his utter thoughtlessness in that moment, of his sudden realization that he had broken his vow to Viola. Then lastly he concluded with mention of the stranger

half-breed and Viola's cold reception of him. How good it felt to Wade to have this one trusty, deep-hearted brother in whom to confide all the sorrows of his aching soul. And when he had finished Rivers' anger had melted to repentance.

"Never mind, old pal," Rivers consoled him. "That's sufficient. I understand yu'. But don't fret so about it. Yu' can't expect anythin' but this—now. But my sister will forgive yu' when she understands your mistake—that you didn't purposely do injustice to her. Forgive me, Bill, I was unjust to you. I didn't understand. I should never have called yu' what I did, but I was just that mad. I hardly knew what I was sayin'. It's my temper. All the Rivers family was that way—quick temper. But I take all that back. Here's my hand, Bill."

How like a gentle shower Rivers' words fell on Wade's heavy heart! His hand grasped that of his pal with a hard grip of steel. Wade could worship the big-hearted cowboy who stood before him at this gloomy hour of night.

"I knew yu' wouldn't wholly condemn me, Tom," he said, his voice trembling with the flush of emotion he sought hard to conceal. But the new found shame each felt at the weakness they had shown, made it awkward for both and soon, after a husky farewell, Wade mounted and rode away into the darkness.

When Wade reached the ranch and his blanket he could not sleep. Dave Smith was enjoying undis-

turbed sleep in his blanket close by, but for him sleep was out of the question. His thoughts had not followed him home but lingered far across the prairies—at the dance. Could he ever right himself with his Viola? Would she ever care for him again? Tom had made light of the matter, but as he lay there alone in the dark with his thoughts, it really was grave beyond question. Tom had told him that surely Viola would forgive her boy when she understood the incident and his error. It had looked easier then for a moment. But now with no one at hand to cheer him on, his situation appeared grave indeed. Would Viola even listen to any explanation he could offer? He had his fears. Her spirit was as invincible as her brother's. Nothing could move her from her purpose. So far Wade's love for the sweetheart of his childhood days had been a love unmarred by storm or strife. Never had they quarreled. But now as if in a trance all had changed; now his bright future seemed blasted.

Moment after moment rolled by as Wade lay gazing at the cold stars overhead. He drifted back again to the stranger with the handsome face and charming, musical voice, whose cringing eyes had dropped under his gaze. Wade despised the half-breed. Who was he and how did he chance to be Viola's partner? Could he be trusted with her? His very being spoke of cunning, of distrust. But then there was no cause for worry, for surely Tom could look after his sister.

Moment succeeded moment, hours passed, still he did not sleep. Wade wondered if it would ever be morning again. Why were not his comrades returning from the dance? If only Tom was present to talk to him again. But Wade listened in vain for the happy sound of a horse's hoofs beating the sod. His misery became more stifling every moment. His head ached dreadfully. He envied Smith's peaceful, unbroken slumber. Poor lonely "kid." How dull and lonely life must be for *him* out here in the Lone Star state, so far from home and friends, with no fond mother to cheer him on his weary way. For life must be weary and lonely for Smith—judging from his sad story of sorrow and tragedy. But alas! care and sorrow had long ago entered his young life and robbed him of all thoughts of pleasure or happiness. Although in years young, Dave Smith was still a boy—an honest, sunbrowned boy—in mind he was already a man. Of his real boyhood he had been robbed. But still Smith did not complain and he could sleep as one sleeps who never has known the sorrows and cares of life, and Wade envied him that.

At times Wade would nearly doze off to slumber. Then his old miseries would come back and coursing through his tired brain, leave him as much awake as ever, again renewing the battle within his soul with new zeal. Oh this was a night of misery to him! He got up and walked the prairie for a while, to see if he could not relieve his mind of some of its burden.

A chilly night wind blew from the north and chilled him to the bone. That air was damp, disagreeable. Overhead the stars shone coldly down and seemed to mock him and gloat over him in his misery and he soon returned to his blanket, no farther away from his thoughts than before.

For perhaps another hour or two Wade tossed and pitched about and then tired and utterly worn out, he began to feel signs of drowsiness pass over him. As he dwelt on the last brink between consciousness and sleep, the faint music of the violins back at the dance seemed to fall on his ears. And at last this was bringing him rest. They were playing an old familiar tune—the one he and Viola had often used to sing in days gone by in Kansas. It was bringing a soothing effect over his nerves. The sound of the fiddles seemed to carry him back to other days—back to his dear old Kansas home. He was going back. He was gathering wild flowers on the prairies with his Viola again. Then clouds loomed dark and threatening overhead and they were hurrying to the humble home of old Judson the trapper for shelter from the rain and storm that had begun.

“Hurry, Viola, or we’ll get wet. . . . Wonder if Judson is at home. . . . How hard the win— . . . Oh there goes your hat. . . . I can’t reach. . . . But I’ll get it after the wind stops.” ’ ’ ’

Wade was dreaming.

CHAPTER XVII.

LONELINESS.

The days that followed the dance at the Triangle R were lonely ones indeed for Billy Wade—days filled with lots of hard, disagreeable work, with little time for leisure or amusement. The outfit remained only a few days at the ranch, during which came the hard work of branding, and then drifted back to Gopher Creek again; back to the same old work of range riding to keep the herd together and prevent it's mixing with the other range cattle in the vicinity of Gopher Creek. So with it Wade was compelled to leave the ranch and his Viola to pass more lonely hours in the saddle with his comrades almost the only humans he could hardly expect to see in all that time.

Wade had tried to take Viola for a stroll to the old lone cottonwood situated on a hill a few miles out on the Plains, and explain the whole Perkins affair to her. Simply a lone cottonwood it was to tourists, and to the ranchmen it held few charms. It had always been there—everybody knew that—but just why and how it came to be there nobody knew. Some said the tree marked the grave of some Indian brave that had fallen in battle, or the graves of a number

of Indians, but these were only random calculations, it's real life's history was securely concealed beneath it's weatherbeaten bark and nobody was destined ever to know how it came to be there save the lonely hill upon which it grew. And no one cared—no one save Billy Wade and Tom and Viola Rivers. If the lone cottonwood should suddenly be razed to the ground by some random stroke of merciless lightning, of course everybody would note the change in the appearance of the landscape. But as long as it stood alone on the hill, braving all the erosional agents that tended to destroy the tree's existence, nobody paid any attention to it. But for Wade the lone cottonwood had held charms dearer than gold to his heart since the days of his boyhood. To him the tree marked a hallowed spot. Here beneath it's grateful shade he had passed many golden hours with Viola Rivers; resting their tired ponies, or chatting away the long hours of a Sunday afternoon, from ever since the time when they were children together. Here too, last autumn, just as the sun sank in all the golden splendor of a Western sunset, giving the Plains a hue no poet could hardly describe, Viola had given him her sacred promise to be his wife. These were golden days—days his fond memories loved to dwell on. And he longed for another talk with the girl of his dreams under this same old lone cottonwood on the hill.

It was on Sunday afternoon, the day before the outfit left the ranch, that Bill asked Viola to take this stroll with him. This was really the first chance he had had even to speak to her since the dance, so skillfully Viola had avoided him. She was sitting on the veranda of the rancher's house busily engaged in reading, when Bill came upon her. She gave a little start when she saw how she had been cornered by him.

"Won't yu' go for a walk to the cottonwood with me, Viola?" he asked her. "It's an awful fine day and—and I have something to tell you. Won't yu' come, please?"

"Thank 'you, but I don't feel like walking!" Viola's answer short and defiant, stung him.

"But I must see yu'—talk to yu'. I haven't hardly even seen yu' since—since you're back. Won't yu' come with me, please?"

"No Will, I will not," she snapped, closing the book she was reading on her finger. "I want to spend the afternoon reading, and besides I don't think I would exactly enjoy a walk with *you*."

The cowboy crushed the soft black crown of his big sombrero he held in his hands on the cool veranda, and he swallowed hard. "But I—— want you to understand me, Viola—this—this trouble I've made. I'm sure you don't—don't understand it altogether correct. We leave the ranch to-morrow an' so yu' see this is the last chance I'll have with you. And

I don't want to leave with you feelin' toward me the way yu' do. Won't yu' come?"

Poor Viola was angry, bitter. "What more do you want?" she cried. "How many times must I tell you that I refuse to go and listen to your cleeve excuses? After what you're going to say you think I'll entirely forget the injustice you did me. You're mistaken. I am not so easy. You're also mistaken, Mr. Wade, in believing you still have another chance to talk to me the way you want to talk now. Your last chance has already gone. You have ceased to care for me, Will. You have forgotten me—or else in doing the thing you promised me not to do, you thought I would never know. Either way, you and I have come to the parting of the ways. I will be no longer in your way to bother you. I always tried to be true to you, Will, and keep my promises, but you have not done likewise toward me. So I don't understand this little affair, or trouble as you call it? Perhaps I don't. Perhaps I was only dreaming when I saw you break your promise to me. But I'm glad you *do* go with the cattle soon, for it is best that we see as little as possible of each other from now on."

More terrifying thunderbolts of despair, of utter hopelessness, of longing, sank within Wade as he heard the bitter words he had wrung from Viola. Would she ever forgive him? From some dark unseen depths a wide gulf seemed suddenly to have welled between him and his Viola and torn them

asunder forever. Oh she had always, always, been true to him! He cursed the fate that had made her utter such words of irony, sarcasm, bitterness, accusation against him. This time she had not called him "Billy" as she always used to call him. How utterly changed her voice was to him. And all his own fault! A look of pain was in his far-gazing deep blue eyes as Wade slowly sat down on the soft cot beside her, turning his black sombrero 'round and 'round in his hands.

"Listen Viola"—his voice had dropped to a lower pitch—"Don't say I have forgot you'. I can't have you' say it. Oh I do love you! Always you have been a part of my life—the biggest part—*all* of my life. What would my life be to me now without you? Nothing. . . . I have wronged you I know, but Oh I didn't mean to break my word to you! I tried to do my best by you while you was gone an' I thought I was succeedin'. Then in a moment of utter thoughtlessness I condemn myself in your sight. You have known me all your life, Viola. Can you believe I would willingly break my promise to you? Viola, you are dearer than life to me. Believe me, won't you, I"—

"Don't talk that way to me now," Viola cut him short. "I will not listen to it. The time has come for you to go your way and me mine. When I find you really could not help the wrong you did me you may come back—not before. That's all I have to

say. Now go your way and be a man. Try to prove as true to others as you have proved false to me—yes, false to me!" she ended, and suddenly rising, she turned abruptly and hurried into the house without waiting for his answer.

And so in a whirl of anger Viola parted with her boy she loved. All through the long Sunday afternoon, while the sun burned pitilessly down on the grassy prairies, and the numerous rattlesnakes lay basking in its fiery rays, she remained caged in her room. She pretended to be reading at times, but her thoughts were far from the book she held in her hands. Always in her mind was that picture of a sun-browned boy—her childhood chum—now grown a man. Night came but there was very little sleep for the girl. Oh should she send her Billy away like this? How much he had done for her! How lonely his life would be with the herd, far from her and civilization, with no happy memories of her to linger over—no parting words from her to cheer him on. . . . But he had proven himself unworthy of her trust and love and so must abide by the consequences. With this argument at last reached, she had fallen asleep. But the next morning shortly after sun-rise, as the herd and riders began slowly drifting out to the Plains, a sad pair of brown eyes gazed after them from her room and lingered on the tall, supple form of one who sat on his horse like one born in the saddle. And it was . . . too late.

* * * * *

Loneliness filled the life of the little ranch-bred girl for a while after the outfit left the ranch. She missed the good-natured cowboys with their jests and laughs, and in spite of herself she found a daily longing deep in her heart for her girlhood chum, Billy. But Voila was too much of a lover of the great outdoors and the open air to let loneliness completely crush out her happiness. Whenever she found leisure from her household duties with kind Mrs. Davis she was always working in her garden, weeding and hoeing the productive soil that would in turn bring forth delicious vegetables for the table in a very short time. Already her flowers were in full bloom, the flowers the motherly Mrs. Davis had planted for her during her absence, and this flower garden was a beautiful sight indeed. Besides the most beautiful wild flowers grew everywhere over the wild prairie lands and Viola spent many golden hours in gathering the wild beauties. She loved flowers, for they were so much like herself. And then she often took her favorite pony, Primrose, for a gallop over the Plains and this helped much to keep dull care away.

Viola Rivers was a young lady of talent. At school she had always learned with surpassing rapidity, and now at the age of twenty she had completed her education. At the piano she was an expert, as she was also a beautiful singer. Her voice was the pride of

her foster parents, Mr. and Mrs. Davis. In their old age there was nothing that pleased the benevolent old folks more than to sit in their easy chairs of an evening, after the tasks of the day had been completed, listening to the beautiful voice of the pure young girl who had always been the sunshine of their lives ever since kind Providence had placed her in their home. Her songs seemed to drive sorrow and sadness from their lives. Viola was also well versed in society. In her earlier days Mrs. Davis had been a prominent figure in the circles of society and in her training of Viola, she had lavished all her gathered spoils upon the girl. Every person who knew her was pleased with her becoming manners and politeness. Her suitors numbered not a few, to the effect that not a few girls in Gopher Creek envied the Davis' foster daughter. And where was the young Gopher Creek cowpuncher who did not supremely enjoy tying his horse at the Davis gate?

But of her many suitors, only one had found a place in the secret chambers of Viola's heart. This one had been her true friend in days gone by—Billy Wade. In spite of the fact that everything about her teemed with bright and joyous life and there was much to divert her from her train of painful thought, still Viola found her longing for him growing stronger and stronger as the days rolled by. She often visited the old places and scenes so closely associated with Billy and herself, trying to console her hungry heart

in this way. Many were the visits she paid the lone cottonwood, the old cave in the side of a hill, and many other points so closely intermingled with their happy childhood days. But how different! Never did Viola find the solace she sought for. Always there was something lacking—his laugh—his voice—his sunny presence. Then she would recall the injustice he had done her and she would sigh a deep sigh. One afternoon she was sitting in the shade of the bunk house, utterly indifferent to all the outer world, indulging in one of her usual melancholy reveries, her legs crossed and her sunny head resting wearily against the rough side of the bunk house with a far-away gaze in her bright, dreamy eyes, when suddenly Mr. Davis appeared 'round the end of the bunk house and broke in on her reverie. She started and in the confusion she felt, she blushed slightly, but Mr. Davis smiled in his pleasant way and sat down on the bench beside her. And she could guess what was coming.

"Viola," he began, turning to her, "I must have a talk with you. Don't become alarmed now, dear, for it's no reproof I have to offer you. Just a little friendly face to face chat with you. In fact I hardly know just how to begin and what to say, but I feel it my sincere duty to talk a few things over with you that have come to my mind in the past week. I have been wanting to talk with you for the last week upon a certain subject, but I always lost my courage

to do so. I feared I would only make a mess of it and only bring you more trouble. You know, my child, there are times when words only make sadness and loneliness greater. But now I have brought myself to the task of discussing this thing with you at all hazards. My talk may only bore you, but I certainly hope it will not. On the contrary, I sincerely trust I may be of assistance to you in this little trouble that is tearing at your heart—making your life miserable. May I trust that my words will help rather than offend my little girl?”

“Daddy, anything you will say cannot prove amiss,” the girl replied. “I have learned to trust in you. But I don’t think I am sad and lonely—at least not so *very*.”

“Viola”—there was a tremor in the kind old gentleman’s voice—“do you know how good your words sound to me? When I hear you talk like that I know I have not been disappointed; that I have not sent you away to obtain an education in vain. I know you are still the same dear little girl that left me last autumn. The charm of the great city has not misled you as it has led astray thousands of boys and girls in your position. Let us go back a little. Last fall it was with many misgivings that I sent my only daughter away to a mighty city well practiced in crime and evil, and so far away and so entirely different from her native haunts. I feared she might come back to me an entirely different girl—a daughter

whose sterling worth and high ideals had given way, as that of many other girls of your age gives way, to the love only for pleasure and luxury. I feared the old ranch would hold no more charms for her when she returned. True I should have trusted enough in my daughter's noble character to know she could not be led astray, and besides hadn't she already spent four years at school in the city of St. Louis and remained unchanged? But there was a vague fear of New York in my heart as I sent you there, even in spite of the fact that—that several of my brothers lived there. It seemed so far away—so different.

“But after my girl's return from the city I was not long in discovering that she had been spared to cheer our old age. She was the same girl as of old—save for one change that I now note much plainer than I did at first. A cloud of melancholy, a touch of sadness, has in the past week overshadowed her life. No longer does our girl sing the cheery songs she used to sing. Now there is always a tinge of sadness in her voice when she sings and in the last few days she has hardly sang or played at all. Can it be that I am mistaken after all in believing the ranch has not lost it's charms to our girl?”

“Oh no, father, never! Never will the dear old West lose any of it's charms to me. I love the Plains and the open. Worry no more for me, father. I am happier here than any other place I could possibly

be. Can I ever cease to care for this the place of my childhood? Come, let's forget this and speak of more cheery things. You will give me the blues if you keep on, daddy."

"Viola, I can trifle no longer with the subject of your sadness. I am going to quit beating about the bush and tell you in plain words the things I have to say. Perhaps you think I am mistaken but I know what is troubling you dear—have known it for the last week. And I believe I have tidings that will bring you comfort. I don't believe you exactly understand this little affair at Johnson's dance—Now dear, you needn't start so, for I know all about you. And I know just how you feel about it. But listen, Viola. Do you feel that you are doing yourself and Will justice? Have you considered this question carefully enough from every standpoint? Have you given Will a fair chance? I don't believe you have. From what I hear from your brother, my child, Will was not entirely to blame for the thing he did that night. Didn't he play fair with you too, and try to right his wrong to you? And I think you should—"

The hot blush of anger had shot to her cheeks as Mr. Davis proceeded.

"If you're going to try to work him free, you may as well stop right here. I will not hear it! Have you no consideration for my own feelings—my pride? How do you think I can forgive him after the way he has treated me? Until I find he really was inno-

cent and could not help doing the thing he did, I am through with him. I always could trust in him before. How far can I trust him now? I belong to the sex you men consider weaklings but I always have and always will demand my own rights, and I am not to be tampered with. What can be worse than to have one in whom you put absolute trust, break his word to you in your very sight? Tell me that. True you may say that mine was a very queer vow to have had him make to me. But I did not require him to make this promise to me because I was envious of Matilda. I did it to put a stop to all this gossip and save Will's own good name. It was all for his own good. His own sense of honor should have made him stay away from that woman after the trouble she brought him. But did he do it? And what ridiculous gossip will be—"

"Steady, steady, my good child," Mr. Davis interrupted her. "You're getting too hasty now. I fully realize all this you have been speaking of, but don't look only at the consequences Will's error has caused. Ask yourself this question my child: 'Did he willingly break his promise to me?' Do you think he did? I can never see it that way. I don't believe—I can't believe—that Will would break his promise to you for all the world. Didn't he at once repent of his act and try to right himself with you? I understand this boy—yes, to me you and Will are both children yet—better than many fathers understand their own

sons. But there are unguarded moments in the lives of every one of us, and it was in one of these moments of thoughtlessness that Will condemned himself in your sight. His own honor should have told him better than you are waiting to say. Yes, it should have. But there are also times in our lives when we do the things we would a thousand times rather not do, merely out of politeness and a fear that we would be very rude if we did not. No doubt it was this that made Will speak the words that broke his promise, for have you ever seen one so sensitive to the feelings of others as he is? And he did not seek Matilda out to dance with her, but she simply forced herself on him. Your brother told me all of this and how Will had tried to avoid Matilda. And Tom also gave me orders to try and keep you happy if I could, for he feared you would be lonely and down-hearted after my boys left for their work," the old gentleman concluded with a smile.

"The dear old boy!" Viola cried passionately, unable to control the emotion she felt.

"Yes dear, Tom has indeed proved himself a most kind, thoughtful brother to you," Mr. Davis concluded. "And the love Will and Tom have always had toward each other is another reason why I want you to forgive Will. Where is there a better, truer, stauncher friendship than that which binds the lives of these noble boys together? I can never think of these two orphan boys but as brothers and as my own boys. Every day their lives seem to run closer to-

gether, and always together they fight life's battles. And you have always been a sister to both, as true—I take joy in saying it—to one as to the other. What would life be to Will without you now? Consider this before you condemn him and break him in spirit. For you have power over him as no one else has—the power to decide the kind of life he is to lead. Think of the environment of this wild Western country, the trials and temptations it holds to everyone, and consider how easy it would be for him to go wrong if he is condemned by the one he loves dearer than life. But excuse me if my talk sounds too much like a sermon. Now just a few more words about Will and I am through. I am going to tell you a few things about Will, for I know you will never hear them from him. Since you gave him your promise last autumn he has been a much better boy. He has refrained from excessive drinking and smokes very little now. In the time that you were absent I have never seen him intoxicated, although all the other boys, save Tom and the foreman, have at least appeared once before me intoxicated. I know the time of your absence weighed heavily on him, for he never seemed quite at ease, and I think he has proven himself worthy even of a girl like you—”

“Please—don’t—say—any more, father. Please don’t,” Viola’s pleading tones suddenly stopped him, almost in a sob. He turned quickly to her and saw her eyes swimming in tears. Then wisely Mr. Davis spoke a few words more of cheer to her, and then

quietly walked away from her, leaving her to her own meditations. And he knew his words had not been entirely in vain.

* * * * *

Ever since their meeting at Johnson's dance, Tracey, the half-breed with the handsome face and musical voice and who had been Viola's partner on that particular occasion, had been and continued to be a frequent caller at the Davis ranch. On most of these calls he would take Viola for a horseback ride with him over the Plains, always chatting with her in his clever, easy way. He seemed entirely at home in her society, and Viola always enjoyed the rides she took with him. How different this man was from most of the rather slow, bashful young cowboys she knew. His speech and manner were those of a polished gentleman and Viola often found herself wondering where he had received his training. Evidently he must always have lived among the whites. He was strangely handsome too. True his dark restless eyes and quick, nervous movements spoke some of distrust, and at first Mr. Davis did not approve of the stranger's calls to see Viola, although he said nothing to her. But his cultured manners and gentlemanly ways spoke well for him and as Viola needed a cheerful companion in her loneliness he thought no harm could come from the stranger's calls. However could he have read the dark secrets the stony heart of this wily half-breed contained, he might well have cause for fear.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BREWING STORM.

With the approach of autumn the steers of the Lazy Bar ranch were in fine trim for a speedy and profitable market. The grass had been unusually good, the weather quite calm with few storms or heavy rains to cause stampedes or wreak other havoc among the herd, and the summer's enterprise had been an excellent one. Indeed the Lazy Bar shipment would be in better condition for market than they had been for a good many seasons.

The outfit still camped to the east of the ranch on as good a grazing region as could be found in the state of Texas. Through the heart of this region dear old Gopher Creek meandered its toilsome way for many a long mile, here following some wooded valley eastward, there curving back again to the west, in some places overflowing its shallow banks and spreading out into some marshy valley, but keeping a general north and south course. This creek, besides numerous small "water holes" furnished the cattle an abundant supply of water. On both banks of the creek, sprinkled along in a disorderly manner, were numerous trees and brush of many species, from cottonwood and locust to underbrush. As the weather

grew more chilly and disagreeable the cowpunchers made good use of some of this timber by erecting a small but quite comfortable hut in which to sleep at night. For a door they stretched a calf hide, taken from a yearling that had been killed for meat, across some poles, fastening the poles across the opening by means of a couple of pieces of rope. This hut completed, the outfit settled down and prepared to "take things easy" until the time came to drive the one thousand head of cattle to the nearest shipping point.

In the meantime rumors began to travel from camp to camp that bands of Mexican desperadoes were making repeated raids in their vicinity, driving off thousands of cattle which the ranchers intended to ship within a few weeks. The cattle along Gopher Creek were in such excellent condition that the temptations of the thieves to make easy money were doubly great and from the rumors that were going the rounds, they were growing desperately bold. One instance was reported where the Mexicans had slain four night herders in their attempt to drive off the herd. Other similar instances soon followed and soon the cow camps were a scene of intense excitement.

As soon as these rumors reached the Lazy Bar outfit, the men at once began to be on their guard. It would be at least a week before they could make preparations to drive the steers to their shipping point, and every day they remained encamped on the Gopher, they were in danger of losing all or at least

some percentage of the herd. The number of night "hawkers" was greatly increased, half of the outfit keeping guard generally from eight to twelve o'clock, the rest from twelve to dawn. With this change the danger of a night surprise was greatly lessened.

Things went on in this manner for nearly a week. The men, deprived of so much of their much-needed sleep, grew restless and ill tempered. Occasionally one could hear muffled oaths escape their lips, which if one should listen carefully enough, he would have found were directed at this outfit of cattle rustlers that were causing this trouble. Affairs had reached a crisis and John Higgins was on the point of dispatching Rivers and young Smith to the ranch to consult with Mr. Davis concerning an immediate shipment, when one morning just as the outfit sat at breakfast a rider suddenly appeared on the eastern horizon riding like the wind straight for their camp.

The men gathered about the chuck wagon jumped to their feet in a body, some involuntarily gripping the butts of their dangling revolvers at this sudden interruption of their breakfast. But soon they were convinced that no gun play was in the air. The rider's face as he drew near was deadly pale and haggard and he was clinging to the pommel of his saddle like grim fate. The horse was utterly exhausted and his gallop was staggering and unsteady and he was literally covered with foam and bloody froth. A little later the horse came to a halt in their very midst and

the rider slipped limp as a rag from the saddle to the soft earth, the blood bursting forth anew from an ugly wound the men now noted for the first time on his right shoulder.

"Run down to the creek and fetch some water," said Higgins in a hurried tone. "Quick, for he's fainting."

Wade seized a pail and in a short moment returned with the pail full of water, which he poured on the upturned face of the wounded rider who, no doubt from much suffering and pain, had fainted away. The water soon revived the stranger. He sat up and gazed bewildered at the clump of cowboys gathered about him. Then as the pain from his wounded shoulder seized him again he sank back on the earth, a groan escaping his tight set lips. The foreman quickly knelt down on the grass beside the stranger and while several of his men wrapped the exhausted horse in a blanket and cared for him, he went about to attend to the wound. He soon found it was not a dangerous wound, and while the sufferer must have lost a considerable amount of blood on his wild ride, it was found that the bullet had only cut a furrow just below his right shoulder and luckily no bones had been struck.

When the stranger's wound had been properly dressed, Higgins helped him carefully to a sitting posture and propped him up with a couple of blankets. Then as the wounded man saw the eager expres-

sions of the cowboys about him he rested a few moments and then proceeded to explain his wild morning ride into the Lazy Bar camp.

"My name is Dodson," the wounded man commenced. "I was with five other guys about twenty-five or thirty miles from here I should judge, tendin' a big drove of cattle for a feller by the name of Wilkinson. This herd shore was in devilish good shape an' we calculated to send 'em over the rails within ten days. For the last week we had heard of a gang of damn greasers bein' in the vicinity for a purpose not for the good, but we never paid much attention to the rumors what reached us, thinkin' the biggest part of 'em was only hot air, an' so we wasn't much on guard. We hadn't the least idee we was in any danger.

"Well about an hour afore dawn this mornin' we was all awakened from our nice blankets by our night hawkers dashin' lickety-split into camp bringin' news that the greasers was visitin' our herd good an' plenty. We jumped up an' made for our horses which were near by. Just as we struck out we heard shots to our left and the whole d——n herd started on a genuine stampede. We imagined the whole greaser layout was after us an' we dug in our spurs an' hit straight for the spot from where the shots had come. An' here's where we got the surprise of our lives. On the heels of the rushin' stampede rode about a dozen Comanche Indians an' some greasers!"

A sudden gleam of astonishment shot across the visages of all present.

"Comanches?"

"Yes," the stranger replied in a bitter tone of sarcasm, "it was some of these *friendly* Comanches yu' know."

"I thought we had cleaned the Comanches up good an' plenty the last time we fit 'em," ejaculated Hank Chase.

"That's the way I had looked at it, but I find I've got another guess comin'. The second we come in sight the red imps begin circlin' 'round us, shootin' at us from under their ponies' necks. We returned the fire an' emptied two saddles the first crack out of the box. But the red devils had almost surrounded us with twice our number an' seein' our only safety was in ridin' we dug in our spurs an' made for the outside of the circle. They got three of my pals in this deal, but the rest of us got by O. K. Diggin' in our spurs we made for the west with about half of the hounds close at our heels.

"Bullets whistled thick an' fast over our heads but we plugged on. My horse proved the fastest of the three, for I soon found myself well in the lead. I heard something crash to the ground an' I looked back over my shoulder. One of my pal's horses had been shot from under him an' the poor fellow was at their mercy. Just a young boy he was too. I dared not go back to rescue the poor lad. I realized that a

little delay would mean certain death from the Comanches. Suddenly a devilish yell came from the red sons of the devil behind me. My last pal had been shot and I was alone."

The men noted the look of anguish that was in the stranger's eyes as he told of the death of all his comrades. Dodson was still only a young man, and his fine mould of form was characteristic of a young athlete. His face was haggard and drawn from the effects of the awful horrors he had passed through. His eyes were badly blood-shot and his breath came fast and feverish. He paused and panted for breath before he again rambled on.

"Now commenced a race to the finish with me only a quarter of a mile in the lead of the foremost warrior. I soon left the rest of 'em out of shootin' distance, but this one cuss kept at my heels like a blood-hound. Our speed was so great that neither of us used our guns. But I soon begin to see he was gainin' on me, slow but sure an' in time I figgered he would over-haul me. I had to act quick too. If he got much closer he would fill me with lead. I had shot my gun empty but I filled her again as we dashed on an' then watched my chance. He was comin' on lickety-split but he was on to his business as close as me an' kept his gun ready. All at once I stopped an' whirled my horse around an' we exchanged shots, an' I got him on the arm. It was here that I got my wound. After this he hung back a little. But another buck was

gradually edgin' near him an' I hadn't any time to throw away. The pain of my wound nearly drove me mad an' the blood shot from it at every jump my horse made.

"This new buck hadn't got the lesson from me his friend had, an' came on after me like he was chasin' a rabbit. The devil hisself must have got into his horse, for he soon passed the wounded buck an' was gainin' on me at every jump. Ever so often he would peek back over his shoulder like a careless kid to see how far back his pal was, never keepin' much guard. I watched my chance an' just as he turned his head I swung my horse around an' before he could duck behind his nag's neck, my bullet took him square an' he rolled from his horse. This put an end to the scrap. The other buck soon dropped back an' thought it would be better for his health to tend to his own business and let me go. I guess that last shot of mine must have hit the buck mostly by accident for it was still hardly dusk yet an' I couldn't much more'n make out the red imp, but I believe too that it saved my life. I guess that's all of my story, fellows, an' if some of yu' will lend me a hand I'll get into that cabin of yours out of the cold, damp air. All of my strength is gone and I'm weak as an infant."

"Just one word," said the foreman. "What direction did yu' say the stampeedin' cattle took?"

"They was headed straight for Mexican soil. The devil hisself can't head 'em off now. After they're

once over the border it's good-bye cattle for us ranchers. I am a feller that generally don't cry over spilt milk, but I shore do hate to have them reds an' greasers make such a devilish raid an' lose so few men in the deal. But lend me a hand boys an' get me out of this cold. I am shivering like a leaf in a November gale."

Wade carefully helped the stranger to his feet and helped him into the rude hut, assisted by Higgins. Weakened from fatigue and loss of blood the wounded man soon fell into a deep sleep, in which he was undisturbed by the cowboys, who soon withdrew from the hut. As soon as all were outside the foreman turned to his men.

"Boys," he began, gravely, "you all heard this fellow's story an' I reckon yu' all know exactly what this means. It means that we've not only got greasers but also Comanches to brush with if we stay hyeh. Now there ain't another herd within twenty miles of hyeh, so yu' can easy see what easy pickin' we would be for a pack of greasers and Comanches, for they do their work on a strictly partnership basis yu' know. We are now only forty or fifty miles from the Mexican border. If the thieves came in sufficient number they could run our herd across the border in spite of hell. We might risk a shipment of course, an' by pushin' away from the border towards our shippin' town get out of the greasers' way. But even this would be a big risk if the Comanches are on

the war path an' besides we must drive the herd to the ranch before we ship the steers. However I don't reckon we'll ship for a little while. Of course the boss give me orders to ship the last time I seen him, but I know he'd say not to risk it after he knows all the circumstances of the case, an' drive the herd to the ranch an' guard it there until the storm blows over, which I for one feel would be our best policy now. Rivers, I want you and Smith hyeh to make a little detour of the country 'round about us an' be back by noon or a little after to report to me.

"Then after yu' get back an' have had your dinners I intend to send yu' same two fellows to see if the boss approves of our plan, which I think he will after yu' have told this fellow's story. Yu' can have your chat with the old gentleman to-night an' be back with your report some time to-morrow mornin'. That's all for you fellows. Yu' can set out at once. The rest of us will continue our work as usual. We'll have to keep sharp watch to see that none of the cattle stray far from the herd and watch close for any suspicious signs the devils might present. I hardly look for trouble but it will be best to be on the look-out. That's all I've got to say. All of yu' stand by an' do your d—n best an' I'm sure we'll come out with all four aces."

The men obeyed and each began at once the respective task assigned him, riding away one by one until only the cook remained in camp with the

wounded stranger. It was with some misgivings, however, that Wade obeyed the orders from his foreman. He was utterly dissatisfied with the task assigned him. Why could he not go with Rivers to the ranch in place of young Smith? He had a newly awakening longing to see his Viola again in spite of the angry parting he had had from her. He was certain too that it made no difference whatever to Smith whether he went with Rivers or stayed with the herd. Why could not he have this one opportunity of seeing the girl of his love again? But the foreman had given his orders and obeyed they must be. Perhaps Higgins knew best after all. He was a character who had learned to have a reason for whatever he did and in him the Lazy Bar men confided. And so with his thoughts far across the Plains with his Viola, the lonely cowboy mounted and rode away—the last man to leave camp.

Rivers and Smith returned from their exploring trip about the middle of the afternoon, having no news to report. Their hasty meal soon over, they set out at once for the ranch, which they reached just before sunset. Here they found that Mr. Davis was not at home but intended to spend the night at Kirklands ranch, some ten miles distant. However he would be back early in the morning and they could wait until then with their business with him. Upon this decision they led their tired mounts into the barn and unsaddled them and rubbed them down. Then

they walked to the house to partake of the delicious supper they knew the good rancher's wife would prepare for them.

But grim fate will take its course and they were destined to miss entirely the benefit of this hearty meal. Viola had not yet returned from her afternoon's ride on Primrose, but good Mrs. Davis kept them busily engaged in conversation for some time and they were just seating themselves at the big table in the cozy dining room, when they heard the loud clatter of a horse's hoofs without. Both men left the table of one accord and reached the door just in time to witness old Sandy Natchez dash down the lane into the yard with his powerful horse at top speed and white with foam. The very expression of the old man's face spoke of bad news. Rivers rushed out to the gate, Smith close at his heels.

"What ails yu', man?" Rivers asked eagerly. "Speak up—what has happened?"

Sandy gasped for breath, his power of speech seeming suddenly to have deserted him.

"Your—sister—has been captured by 'Tracey an' his gang of Comanches," Sandy finally burst out.

Black spots shot before Rivers eyes. His sister in the hands of the Comanches! The intelligence felled him like a staggering blow. Eagerly, roughly he grasped old Sandy's arm.

"Who did you say led the gang?"

"Tracey—the educated Injun. He's the foulest half-breed that ever trod the earth, is this man with the silver voice. He does his work in the dark."

Rivers hand gripped the butt of his revolver with a grip that sent the blood tingling to his finger tips. This degraded half-breed with the "silver voice" had dared to cross his path! The mere thought nearly drove the brother mad. At this juncture Mrs. Davis arrived on the scene, asking half a dozen questions at once. By degrees they heard the story from the excited Sandy. Viola must have fallen asleep under the old lone cottonwood for it was there where Sandy had seen the man he recognized from a distance as Tracey and five Comanche warriors steal upon the girl and take her captive. He had chanced to be a silent witness of the whole scene from a distance and only after it was too late to lend any assistance to the helpless girl. Then Sandy had hurried to the ranch to summon aid.

"My child—my child!" moaned Mrs. Davis when she had heard all. "Father should never have trusted that man. Oh my helpless girl! Where will they take her? Tom, you had reasons indeed to despise that villian."

"Don't take it so hard, mother," said Rivers gently. "Don't fear for we'll save her yet. We'll go at once. Sandy, you see that no harm comes to mother while we're gone, an' stay to watch the ranch. We may be in the saddle all night or longer, but we won't

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return until sister is safe an' that dog's carcass left to sicken the howling wolves and the buzzards!"

With these words of parting the speaker and his comrade dashed off to the stable. A few moments later those at the house saw them lead out their saddled horses, spring into their saddles at a leap, and dash off into the gathering dusk.

CHAPTER XIX.

A WILD NIGHT.

On over the darkening prairie swept Rivers and Smith, riding abreast and keeping their trusty horses headed in the direction of the lone cottonwood.

Neither spoke a word but leaning well forward in their saddles, they urged the steeds on still faster. No horses but those accustomed to hard usage on Western Plains could withstand the strenuous work ahead. But their riders put all confidence in their endurance and urged them on faster, still faster.

Earlier in the day heavy clouds had gathered in the west. Even now the low mumbling of thunder and frequent flashes of lightning spoke of a fast approaching storm. But their thoughts were elsewhere and they could pay no heed to the elements.

Before they realized it the Texans had reached the hill upon which grew the solitary cottonwood, so rapid progress had they made. Here the maddened brother leaped quickly from his saddle and made a hurried survey of the grounds, to see if he could discover some clew as to the capture. But nothing was visible in the now inky darkness that enshrouded the earth and once again they dashed on in the direction Sandy had seen Tracey's band take. Rivers led the

way, his teeth tightly set, and always urging on his tired mustang. Only the clatter of Smith's horse's hoofs told him that Smith followed.

Suddenly like a thunderbolt the storm was upon them in all its fury. First a long-drawn roaring, rumbling sound filled their ears and then the wind bore down in fearful gusts. Only those that have had the misfortune to be out in the open during a Western tornado can tell how the wind can blow. The Texans could ascertain their direction only by the wind striking with fearful force their right cheeks. And now the rain gushed down in one dense sheet. Lightning flashed over the scene in every direction, accompanied by deafening claps of thunder.

And still the wiry mustangs dashed on into the night, their riders clinging to their wet backs.

For miles over the rolling prairies dashed horses and riders. If they had not gotten off the track they must be getting close to the fugitives now. But there was no way of ascertaining. If they were taking the wrong course in the storm, then—

“Bang!!”

A sharp flash of lightning followed almost instantaneously by a deafening crash of thunder filled the air. The Texans' hearts nearly leaped into their throats and a cry burst from Rivers—one wild cry of joy. There only thirty yards ahead swept the very band they were looking for just *then!*

Mad for revenge on the villainous half-breed, careless of his own life, the brother dug in his cruel spurs mercilessly. They were almost upon the fugitives the electrical flashes showed them. But they dared not fire, for Viola too rode in the fugitives' midst.

"Stop!" yelled the angry brother hoarsely. "Surrender your prisoner an' yu' all go free. Attempt to escape with her an' yu' die like coyotes."

No reply. The storm swept down with renewed fury and swept and howled unmolested over the Plains.

"Damn that cur!" burst from Rivers' clenched teeth and he jerked his revolver from it's holster.

They were nearly in the midst of the desperadoes now but still neither side fired a shot. Then suddenly a flash of lightning revealed the horse on which Tom recognized Viola and the half-breed, in the rear of the party. Now he saw his chance and like a flash the cowboy levelled his weapon at the half-breed Tracey's big bay.

But Rivers never fired. In that instant that his finger tightened on the trigger the inevitable happened. His horse stepped squarely into a prairie dog hole and pitched headlong to the earth, executing two somersaults after doing so and hurling Rivers well over his head. Smith was too late to check his speed, so close behind was he, and his horse reared and fell over the body of Rivers' horse and landed the unfortunate fellow upon that individual.

Rivers jumped in terrible wrath to his feet.

"D——n it!" escaped hotly through his teeth and again: "D——n it!"

Smith still sat rubbing his bruised limbs when a third rider suddenly dashed into their midst from out of the blinding rain and darkness. At the sudden appearance he drew his revolver and covered the rider. Rivers had lost his revolver in his journey over his horse's head. But to the sudden joy of both, the rider was none other than Bill Wade. In spite of the intense gravity of the whole situation the latter could not help but laugh at his friends' sorry plight. The meeting was one of joy, thanksgiving.

"But have yu' seen your sister, Tom," Wade concluded eagerly. "Are we still on her trail?"

"Yes, the band's not far ahead," Rivers replied. "But what do you know about this—was you followin' 'em too? Is it true? Speak, Bill, tell me."

Before Wade could reply a moan from the darkness where Rivers' horse lay told them that the animal had suffered injury in that awful crash to the earth. Rivers had expected nothing less than a broken leg for the horse and he was right. As for Smith's horse he was on his legs again and was unhurt. But Rivers' horse would never rise from that fall.

"We must tend to my horse first," Rivers said. "His leg is broken off for I heard it snap when his foot went into that hole. You end his pain, Bill, right

away. I must look for my gun—an' I hate to do her too."

In the din of the storm the men had to talk at the top of their voices to make themselves heard. Wade examined the horse as best he could in the darkness and slowly shook his head. Death was the most merciful reward for the horse now. Taking his Winchester from his saddle Wade aimed as carefully as he was able in the inky darkness and driving rain, and fired. His aim was true and the unfortunate beast rolled back with a bullet through his brain.

At once Wade turned to his comrades and conversed with them in hurried tones. While riding alone far from the herd he had come squarely upon the party under Tracey just at sunset. But luckily Wade had got a good view of them from the opposite side of a small arroyo without himself being discovered, and realizing that he was powerless to rescue his Viola from such odds while it was still light, he had been content to follow them at a safe distance until night-fall, when he had contemplated a rescue. Then had come the storm and he lost the party in the darkness. By some strange turn of fate the Texans had gotten between the fugitives and Wade and had dashed on through the blind night unconscious that reinforcements followed close in their rear.

With few other words the trio mounted and again pushed on into the night and driving torrents of rain. Wade now led the way, mounted on his favorite pony,

Trixy, Rivers and Smith following closely on the latter's horse. Still the Texans kept their route only by the driving wind and rain.

On, still on, over the trackless Plains they sped. The storm ceased, the clouds scattered, and the stars shone through, still the tireless mustangs held their way. Once they came to a halt and Smith changed from his place with Rivers to a position behind Wade's saddle. Only a brief moment and they were off again. As yet no trace of the fugitives' route had been detected. They grew uneasy. Had they picked the wrong way from the scene of their accident? Finally Rivers, who now rode in advance, halted his panting pony and turning in his saddle he addressed his comrades.

"Boys, I reckon we'd better call a halt until mornin'," he said. "We are only playin' our horses out an' we don't know but what we're goin' farther away instead of closer to the varmints. Our horses will be fresh again—or at least in better condition to travel than they are now—in the mornin' an' we can find the trail then. I know you are as eager to find my sister as I am, but we can wait. Yes, we can wait. Am I right, fellows?"

"I agree with yu', Tom," replied Wade. "My horse is about all in now an' we are certainly goin' to have a big demand for horseflesh before this thing is settled. I think yours will be our best policy now."

Upon this decision the trio dismounted and unsaddling, they turned their horses loose in the sage. Then they rolled up in their blankets upon the cold, wet ground and sought that rest they were destined to need for the coming morrow.

CHAPTER XX.

WITH THE FUGITIVES.

On pell-mell through the blinding storm rode captor and captive, surrounded by Comanche warriors, five in number. A malicious grin illumined Tracey's sallow face as he heard his pursuers collide with fate and pitch to earth. His arms tightened with a firmer grip about the slender waist of the lovely girl in the saddle before him and he spurred his powerful bay to a greater speed.

Viola could hardly suppress a scream that came to her lips as her faithful followers collided with the earth and fell back. But she realized in time that this would only incite the foul fiend in whose power she was, to more cruelty, and biting her lips she was silent.

Poor Viola! Rescue seemed far distant now. At first the girl had struggled desperately with the half-breed, when he had first come upon her and she realized his purpose. Then realizing the folly of resistance against such odds, she had begged and prayed him to change his mind—but all of no avail. The heart of this treacherous half-breed had long ago forgotten mercy and at last, exhausted from fatigue and

losing all hope, the poor girl had yielded to the inevitable.

On under the canopy of heavy clouds the party held their course, led on by a faithful Comanche guide who knew this country, even in the darkness and waning storm, as one would know an open book. Viola was silent now, but suppressed anger and hatred toward her captor burned deeply within her. She had already given up all hopes of succor until day dawned. But then her brother, for she had plainly recognized him by his voice when he had called to Tracey, and a comrade no doubt as true were hot on their trail and she knew they would never leave it until the foul villain in whose power she was bound had bitten the dust.

But on the contrary, could only two men, for the girl was positive that two were all that followed, rescue her from these desperadoes? Then too they might take the wrong course in the darkness, and before they could even raise a hand to prevent it, Tracey might reach his destination, which she was inclined to believe was in the wild, unsettled territory to the east, along the Pecos river. The mere thought of ever living with this man she now hated and despised with all her soul nearly drove her mad as they continued ever on into the night, now with the horses at a stiff canter, now at a walk. Viola could hardly realize that she was in the power of this half-breed. Instinctively she bent her gaze upon her captor. The

storm had passed an hour ago and now the light of the stars revealed something that made her face flush with anger and hatred. It revealed a taunting, wolfish smile on Tracey's sallow face, giving his thin features all the cunning deviltry and appearances of a sneaking coyote. Only one smile it was, but that was sufficient to arouse all the fierce outbursts of passion the angry girl had strived to keep down.

"Laugh now, you stony-hearted villian, laugh!" she cried in a low, angry tone. "Yes, laugh now—while you have the opportunity to be in this mood. Tomorrow my friends shall find you and your foul life shall pay for your unmanly act."

"So you're still thinkin' of *them*, are you? Better forget them, gal," came Tracey's reply in a tone of mockery.

"Forget my friends and remember my enemies! But I need expect no other reply from a man who has forgotten all virtuous things and remembers only evil and foulness. How I wish I had never known you—you, who even dares to call himself a man!"

Tracey laughed—a low, hissing laugh that grated like cold steel on the girl's nerves.

"Don't make yourself so disagreeable now, my lonely Prairie Queen. When we are once settled down in our new home among my red Comanche brothers, with a hundred warriors to fight my battles and act as my servants, you will be happy. You will then be my wife and the red chiefs will envy your

beauty. They will say 'Our pale brother is a great chief. His eyes are always open and his ears never closed. He has gone among the pale-faces and stolen from them a wife whose beauty excells the wild flowers of the prairies.' Your life will then be happy as the day is long. You will be proud of your husband.

"When the snows and rains come to greet the earth, and the howling storms pass over you need not fear. The wigwam my red brothers shall build for you in a little valley among the great mountains shall shelter you and keep you safe from all harm. When my red brothers of the hills return from the hunt, a bounteous share of the wild game shall be yours. The fish that dwell in the river that empties into the great sea are numerous as the wild fowls of the air. You shall share my wigwam and prepare my food. We will then be happy as the brook that the Great Spirit sends through the heart of our hunting grounds to supply His favored race with cool water to drink."

The voice that uttered these words, musical and rich of tone as it always was, had lowered itself many degrees in pitch and as he proceeded in his narrative scarcely exceeded a strong whisper. In all his previous conversations with the girl he had always avoided the figurative language of the Indian and had always carried himself as a polished gentleman. But now his mother dialect came more natural and the smooth-tongued orator talked fluently on, vainly

striving to implant within this pure girl the impression of the superiority of the life and customs of the red race over that of the white. He pictured to her the glory of the hunt; he talked of the pleasant times experienced among the Comanches; he pictured in short to her all the advantages of the future life he intended for her to lead over the life of her past. But his last words certainly brought back her anger in full force—if it had in the least abated during his clever speech.

“Then you will be content to forget you ever had a home among the pale-faces,” Tracey concluded, as they rode slowly along in the starlight, giving their tired mounts a little of that rest they so needed. “They have always kept you caged up as a bird. But it shall now cease. If your brother and his dog of a pale-face friend find my trail after the sun has changed darkness to light their lives shall pay for the act, for my strong warriors that surround me ready to do my bidding shall slay them and leave their bones to bleach on the prairies. Am I not right?”

“Oh you cunning, heartless brute!” cried the angry girl, a dangerous gleam in her usually dreamy eyes. “That is all I can expect from you—you who would murder the helpless in cold blood. I would rather die than be a slave in your power. I would sooner trust myself in the power of the Comanches than in the power of a fiendish villian of a degraded white who has sank to a state of barbarism. This deed

will add to the blood upon your soul. Would that I had known your *real* character, your Hunnish barbarism, and never have disgraced myself by even associating with you. You are worse even than the Comanches, who always"—

"Hold your tongue, girl," suddenly interrupted Tracey, his face growing dark with anger. "No more of your haughty speech if you value your life. You were once loved by me—now you are hated. But you are in my power, soul and body. I will cure you of your insolence and break your stubborn pride if I have to kill you in the attempt. I have asked you to become my wife—the wife of a great Chief of the Comanches who holds the reins of power over that tribe. But now you shall become simply my toy—my slave. You are the first woman that has dared to go against me. No I must say the second one. And what has happened to the first? Nothing as yet. But the great Chief of the Hills never forgets nor forgives. I am even now on the trail of the dog she loves more than life and before many moons pass by he shall be slain by my hands. Now tend to your own affairs and let me hear no more from you. The Chief of the Comanches has spoken."

The fighting blood of an old line of ancestral knights flowed through the veins of the helpless girl in his saddle. She must not—would not—let this man tyrannize over her. As she heard his taunting words her face grew deadly white with anger.

"Oh for a single weapon, to deprive the earth of its greatest monster! I am a girl but I could do it. You have driven me to it, murderer. Your soul is stained with red blood. I know you are the very leader of all these recent murders and outrages done by the Comanches. My brother did right to distrust me with you. But I never dreamed you could be so treacherous as to forget even what your Comanches always remember; to return good for good. Oh foul murderer! You shall suffer for this at the last great judgment—when you are called to account for your crimes by the Great Ruler of all. You are much more guilty than these Comanches who help you in your bloody work. You are fully capable of distinguishing between good and evil and yet you would implant in the simple minds of these creatures the desire for bloodshed and outrage upon the innocent ranchmen. You may kill me but you will never bring me under your submission while I live, cringing coward of a half-breed dog!"

The daring girl's brave words drove Tracey wild with anger. The color came and went in his face. In that awful moment his knife came out and its long blade gleamed as he raised it menacingly above the girl. Wildly she struck out her arm to ward off the blow. The next instant a stinging sensation shot through her arm and when the blood shot from a sickening wound just below her elbow, she fainted.

* * * * *

Just how long the girl was unconscious she could not know. But when she finally came to, day had dawned again and the sun was already well up in the sky. At first Viola was at a loss to understand just where she was. She gazed horror stricken at the grinning half-breed behind her saddle and at the warriors surrounding her. Then a sharp pain in her arm, which was now badly swollen and discolored, brought back her horrible situation anew and she sighed deeply.

It was now day. Why did not her friends appear to rescue her? She gazed anxiously about her for any signs of the pursuers, a great fear for the man who had dared to use a knife upon a defenseless girl growing in her heavy heart. But no signs of pursuit were visible along the broad horizon and with another sigh her sad eyes dropped to the ground in despair.

Viola could not help but note the change in the scenery the night's ride had wrought. The short, sparsely scattered grass, the sandy soil, the prevailing yellow hue of all plant life—all spoke of a desert country—a land poorly blessed with rain. Far to the southwest, the direction the party took, mountains loomed in the clear horizon, of purplish hue in the distance. No sign of human habitation could be seen in this barren waste. The despairing girl felt like a stranger in a foreign land as they journeyed onward. She could ascertain the direction their course lay in

only by the sun, which burned down upon them like a great red ball of fire.

When the sun reached its meridian, the party came to a halt for the first time. Only long enough to eat a hurried dinner, which Tracey procured from the saddle bags and to water their tired mustangs at a tiny spring which the Comanche guide chanced to discover in a small gully, and then they were on their toilsome way again. For an hour or more after their short halt the mustangs made quite rapid time. But the long journey and the fierce rays of the sun had told on them, and so their riders were obliged to let them down to a walk, which occasionally gave way to an easy trot.

The afternoon was perhaps half spent when Viola fell asleep, her weary head resting upon her arms in a very uncomfortable way. The loss of blood from her wound and loss of rest and sleep had made her so weak that she could no longer refrain from slumber, try as she would. Tracey paid no attention to her but continued in his quiet, unconcerned attitude, occasionally gazing about him for any signs of a hostile force, for he dreaded pursuit from the two Texans he had encountered on the night previous. Now and then he sent out his trusty Comanches to scout the country about and keep up a sharp watch. The Texans might increase their number and attack them in force, he feared.

How long Viola slept she could not exactly ascertain, but she was suddenly awakened by a number of shots far in their rear. She started and anxiously scanned the clear horizon. Tracey still retained his seat behind her saddle and now spurred the horse on to a strong gallop. But what had become of the Comanches? Only the guide remained in sight, riding perhaps a hundred rods ahead. The others must have encountered some foe—most likely her brother and his companion—and shots had followed. If only Viola could rid the horse of the silent villain behind the saddle, now would be her chance to escape. But this she dared not attempt. She must only wait in anxious suspense for the outcome.

Finally more shots came faintly from far back in their rear and Viola held her breath. Her pursuers must be hot on her trail! After an interval three of the warriors suddenly appeared to the right, riding like the wind. But in vain she looked for the pursuers. The warriors never drew rein until they were squarely upon them. Then they held a hurried council of war with their leader, talking rapidly and gesturing about in a very exciting manner. Of course Viola could not understand their lingo, but their meaning gestures plainly indicated that one of their number had met death. After more gesturing and hurried conversation the half-breed pointed a long bony finger in the direction of the guide, and pushing their horses to a gallop they hurried toward the

place where the guide had just disappeared beyond a hill.

Tracey was growing uneasy. He feared pursuit from the two Texans in whose hands he realized his life would be of little value. Like a hunted fox he continuously scanned the country about him, as the mustangs put forth their best efforts to carry their riders beyond danger. Viola continued to strain her eyes in the hope of sighting her trusty friend and brother. But all of no avail. Something held them back. Perhaps they waited for darkness before attempting a rescue it would be dangerous for so small a number to attempt.

The sun had already dipped beyond the western horizon when their route suddenly began descending into a deep canyon. Once within this canyon, fringed with old outcroppings of bed-rock, the sides enclosed them, towering majestically above them at the dizzy height of a thousand feet.

For some time the party followed a small stream that meandered sluggishly through the wild recesses of the canyon. Finally they came upon a small log cabin situated on the west bank of the stream and so completely hidden by timber that the cabin could not be seen until within a few yards of it. Here the guide called a halt and the party hastily dismounted. Darkness was now settling in earnest. They hastily secluded the tired mustangs in the heavy forest where, secluded as they were, any one would scarcely find

them near this old place of an earlier day. Next the party opened the battered old door of the cabin—a door whose threshold had perhaps been untouched by human feet for nearly a generation—and went within. Here they intended to pass the night where, hidden deep in the wilds of this canyon, they believed they would be unmolested.

CHAPTER XXI.

HOT ON THE TRAIL.

With the approach of dawn, the Texans were again in their saddles, riding with renewed energy after their few hours' rest. The heavy rain had washed away all traces of travel that had occurred before and during the storm, and for several hours they spread out and searched the Plains in vain for Tracey's trail. Indeed, the sun already spoke of mid-day before the trail was at last found, just before it entered the hot sands of the scorching desert.

A few miles into the desert and everything retained the appearance it had before the storm. Evidently no rain had fallen here, for the sand was dry as powder and scorching to the horses' hoofs. The country about them took on an entirely different aspect. The tall scattered cacti appeared like giant sentinels posted in this broad expanse of "No-Man's Land." The trail here was not so well traced as before entering the desert, but by keeping a sharp lookout the Texans were able to follow it with little trouble.

"I believe the fool is headin' his party for the mountains across the Pecos country," said Rivers as they rode leisurely on. "That's where the Comanches have their layout now I reckon—doin' their devil-

ment an' then rushin' back to hide in the mountain breaks is the way they do their business at present—after the damn greasers an' 'breeds have put 'em wise to it. But if Tracey expects to get into his den before we corner him he's plumb mistaken. I can't believe that my sister is with that half-breed. But I can wait. I will avenge this cowardly act an' if he harms her in the slightest that half-breed cur will die like a dog."

"I am as eager for her rescue as you can be, Tom. But if we want to make this thing a success we had better wait until dark with the real work. We can keep on their trail all day an' try to sight 'em before darkness sets in an' locate their hidin' place. The rest should be quite easy," said Wade.

"I am afraid, too," put in Smith, who usually silent, sometimes expressed his opinions when he deemed it necessary, "that if we try to rescue your sister in daylight, that cowardly sneak will kill her with his own hands, or at least use her as a shield against his own life before he would give her up. I have known men of just his type to do the same thing, and I don't think it is too low for this cur to stoop to when his temper is up."

"Perhaps you fellows are right," replied the brother. "I can wait. The tracks in the sand are beginnin' to show up a d—n sight plainer now. Reckon we could chase up the outfit in three or four hours if we put our horses to their best, for yu' know they

must be about all in by this time if they kept on the go all the night. But I guess your plans is best, fellows. If we expect to find the cusses, though, we'll have to get well up in their rear an' follow 'em sharp. These Comanches are about as slippery customers as I ever heard of, an' if it wasn't for me an' you, Bill, knowin' a little about this hych country as we do, our chances would be as slim as findin' a needle in a haystack."

"You've said it, Tom," replied the other. "D——n but this desert is hot as a bakin' oven. Mighty good thing we have plenty of water in our canteens, for I reckon there ain't much chance of findin' water in this consarned hell's country until we strike the valleys on this side of the mountains. Curse that breed of a Tracey! He's runnin' things exactly his own way now, but it's a long night that never finds the day, an' his day is growin' shorter every minute."

And so the conversation drifted on as the Texans rode on over the scorching desert soil, with nothing in sight but these broad stretching Plains of very short, sparsely covered grass, dotted here and there with cacti, which somehow seemed to break the otherwise painful monotony of the scenery. A spark of hatred and loathing burned brightly within the breast of each, waiting only to be kindled into the lust for the blood of the cowardly half-breed. No pomp they showed, no displayal of arms they presented—simply three men riding on to defend the principles of right

and of humanity. No bugle or beat of drum sounded the advance of these Knights of Chivalry, but the Indians regarded this mode of warfare with even more deadly awe than an army that moved on in orderly arranged column and to the sound of drum. To rescue the unprotected and preserve the traditions of humanity was their goal—the price might be death.

The ever lengthening shadows drooped well to the eastward when suddenly they sighted a band of four Comanche warriors. The warriors evidently sighted them at about the same instant, for with a sudden show of surprise they began circling widely about them, yelling and displaying their rifles, but keeping at a safe distance. The Texans hastily scanned the desert about them with their field glass. Tracey might have joined forces with a larger band of his brothers and there was danger of being surrounded. But nothing could be seen. When the cowboys made no immediate attack and seemed to pay no attention to their presence, the Comanches grew bolder and edged nearer, within rifle range. A volley of hurried shots followed but neither side suffered casualties. After this the warriors edged off to their right as if to withdraw from the fight.

But only for a mile or so. Then they wheeled and began circling again, this time shielding themselves behind their horses' necks and firing from underneath, approaching within rifle range. Hurried shots followed and one of their horses dropped dead. Be-

fore the Comanche could climb up behind one of his comrade's horses, a bullet from Wade's trusty Winchester sent him enroute for the "Happy Hunting Grounds" of his fathers. This was the missing Indian mentioned in the previous chapter. The remaining number seemed suddenly to forget all thoughts of fight and started their ponies on a dead run westward. The pursuers followed at a distance, keeping careful watch for any signs of an ambush or other treachery. Soon, however, their foes had disappeared from view and they searched for the trail again. But the fugitives were so scattered now that they could not be tracked to any advantage, and so all now depended on luck and judgment.

The rest of the afternoon they kept on due west, reaching the canyon country on the opposite side of the desert shortly before it was dark. Providence seemed to guide them on, for just as a veil of darkness enveloped them they struck the opening into the canyon described in the last chapter of my narrative. And as destiny would have it they at once suspicioned this canyon to be the one where the half-breed would conceal himself, for Rivers and Wade knew something of the wild nature of this old canyon in this picturesque part of the country, and they agreed to halt at the opening until a later hour before descending to accomplish the work before them. Quickly their horses were concealed in a small arroyo and the

Texans threw themselves down on the grass to rest and hold a council of war.

"Fellows, you all know that my sister is without help hyeh in this wild range of country, and in the power of a rascal that has no more regard for a woman's honor than a cat has for a mouse," Rivers said. "That both of yu' will stand by me I won't question, for I know yu' will. But we must get busy. The worst may already have happened. We hope an' trust it has not—that we will be able to get sister before Tracey has reached his Comanche friends. Before we push into this canyon headlong, it'll be a wise policy to know a little about it first. The whole thievin' pack may be down there for all we can tell, an' I reckon it'll be best for me to make a scout down there an' see just how they're fixed. One can do the work better than twenty an' besides the risk will be too great for more than one of us to try, for it's my belief that we'll need our full number before the sun rises. I am goin' down right away. Yu' fellows stay hyeh an' keep close guard at the entrance."

"What hinders me from goin'?" asked Wade.

"Because it's my place to go, Bill. I know yu' love her as much as I, pal, but I am the fellow to go. It's my sister in danger, not yours. Now say no more, but you an' Dave stay here on guard."

"Listen hyeh, Tom," argued Wade. "It's my place to go. I am alone in this world. I have no sister or brother to mourn for me when I go under. You

have. I know there is danger, but my loss wouldn't be felt as yours would. You an' Dave stay an' let me go."

"Do yu' expect me to listen to that, Bill? No. Could I ever feel right with myself if I let you go an' me stay behind? Never. Your life is worth as much as mine. As for me I put myself in the power of Him who watches over us an' trust He will bring me back. Now stay, Bill, for my sister's sake if yu' love her."

"It's d—n hard to do, Tom, but I know there's no earthly use in arguin' with yu' when your mind is once set. It is as much my place to go as yours, but yu' can't see it that way. But what will yu' do—crawl into their camp?"

"Yes, that's my plan. Of course, they won't dare to build a fire an' I'm afraid it'll be a tough job spottin' the devils. But I'm goin' to try. Still, who can tell. They might be miles away from this old canyon, but still considerin' the fitness of this place for a hidin' nest, I reckon they shore would choose the first canyon they struck. An' now hyeh's the part I want you guys to play—part jest as important as mine—only your work don't begin quite as soon. My signal to yu' fellows will be the howl of a coyote drawn out good an' plenty. If yu' hear it, beat it for the spot where it comes from, for there'll be work ahead for yu'."

"An' what if they get yu'?" asked Wade.

"If I don't show up in two hours time yu' can decide I'm a prisoner or at least have been hindered from comin' back. An' right hyeh is all the more reason why only one of us fellows what's acquainted in this wild canyon should risk a trip down below, for if they got us both the first crack out of the box, it would leave no one to finish our work. If they should get me, there still will be you an' Dave to do your d—nest, and I could trust you two for makin' it warm work for the miscreants. But I must go. Remember my signal will be the howl of a coyote drawn out. Listen for it an' if yu' hear shots or I don't come back in the time I set, yu' will know the fightin' is all up for me at that lap of the game."

Rivers had risen to his feet and started forward, when suddenly Dave Smith stopped him short.

"What now?" he asked in surprise.

"I want to go in your place, Tommy," the freckled lad said simply. "It's too much of a risk for you to take when we can't afford to lose you from our fightin' force. I don't know much about this canyon, but I think I could do the work all right and my loss would be nothing as compared with you two fellows in the work that will follow. Besides I am a stranger in a far land. I am a loafer—a castaway from home and I could not return now if I wanted to, after the thing I did. I have no one to care for me in this life—no one to shed tears for me when I'm gone. As I sat listening to you and Will the

questions always come to me: 'Why don't *you* go Why should either of the two that are needed so badly later on risk their life while the more worthless fellow does nothing.' I did not speak before because I was so completely lost in my thoughts that I forgot myself. But now I beg you to let me go."

Rivers could feel, even in the darkness, the eagerness imprinted upon the humble boy's face and his pleading tone thrilled Rivers. Why was this youth so willing to risk so much to be of aid to a girl he never even scarcely knew? A strange feeling of love and pity for the lonely boy throbbed in the cowboy's breast, but he could not understand. For a moment he regarded the wanderer in silence. Then he slowly shook his head.

"No kid," he muttered, "that won't do—that won't do. I shore do appreciate your offer, an' you've proved yourself a man. That is all any one can do. But that would be carryin' things too far, sendin' yu' down yonder. No, it won't do. Why hell, you would lose yourself before yu' went fifty feet in that dark canyon. I know how yu' feel, kid, but don't feel that way about it. You can't possibly locate the devils for you're not acquainted with this canyon an' this kind of work as us other two are."

"Let me go with you then at least. If they get us in a trap two may come in handier than one. But listen," he added. "The reason above all else why I want to go is because I feel it is my duty. Even if

I go under it will not quite pay the debt I owe. I have never been of any good to anyone in this world and I have brought sorrow to others. I feel that I am a murderer and can never return to the girl I love. It was a half-breed too, you know, who tried to ruin her and I consider it my duty to save your helpless sister from this dog of a half-breed. The debt I owe is too great to pay in full, but this is the chance I have to make even an attempt at pay. If I should go under, I will die happy in the realization that I have paid a part of my debt to the girl I love. Please let me go with you."

The cowboy regarded the lad as he sat there in the dark for a long moment, his head bowed in deep thought.

"Reckon I'll let the kid go," he finally muttered to Wade. "That sand of his will do us good if the reds cross our trail. An' mebbe two of us *will* be better after all. You stay hyeh at the opening, Bill, an' head the devils off if they should take a comical notion to get out of the canyon a d—n sight faster than they went in. Come on then, kid."

A little later the pair had disappeared in the enshrouding darkness, with Wade sitting quietly at his post.

CHAPTER XXII.

FOREBODINGS OF FATE.

On down the dark opening into the wild canyon Rivers and Smith pushed. The descent was quite abrupt, the trail that led down on the strata of decaying bed rock, and they were obliged to proceed with much caution if they did not wish to be suddenly dashed to their death down the decline, or fall a prey to some other hidden danger that might lay in the way.

The air gradually grew cooler as they descended, until finally they were in the canyon depths. For a moment they were at a loss as to what direction they should choose in the grim darkness, but soon they discovered that the narrow recesses of the canyon and the narrow strip of more open country on the right bank of the stream, bordered on the opposite side with timber and dense underbrush, allowed only one route to take; to follow the course of the main canyon to the south.

Once within the depths of the canyon the Texans proceeded with greater caution still. Tracey may have scouts at any point now, for in the veil of darkness Rivers already felt they were in hostile country and at any instant they might be confronted by a

treacherous savage eager to spill blood. If once Tracey or any of his confederates, the Comanches, sighted them at an unguarded moment their chances would be small. The earnest hope of bringing aid to his poor sister and the burning lust for revenge upon her wily kidnaper and his party lured the maddened brother on into the night.

The route they took grew exceedingly more toilsome as they proceeded, the open territory winding zigzag to right and left, here descending into some wild little arroyo within the wild canyon, here crossing the small stream and at a short distance recrossing back again, but generally following hard by the right bank. But no time was being lost. The brother led the way at a gait that made young Smith exert himself to equal, admiring the tall, shapely form of Rivers, as he pushed on ahead, his fine form looming up a few feet in advance. What a fine specimen of noble, excellent manhood was here! Fully six foot, one inch in height, the broad shoulders and deep, full chest of a man of power, yet the slender waist and nimbleness of arms and limbs of a young athlete and the light elastic step of the red men of the Plains—all were found in the form of this man. Somehow Smith had always noted ever since his first meeting with these two Texans he now considered as staunch friends, a strong resemblance between the silent man in his lead and Will Wade. True Wade was an inch taller, his hair was several shades lighter, and

his eyes a deeper blue, yet there was always that resemblance—that fine mould of form typical of men destined to be leaders of men.

At times the low, deep rumbling of distant thunder could be heard rolling through the canyon. Faint flashes of lightning illumined the dark sky at intervals, disclosing the lofty, ragged old walls of the canyon—"Hell's Blowout" as it was commonly known to the ranchers and Indians—grotesquely outlined against the sky, resembling two ghostly giants ruling over the universe. The awful altitude of those ragged rims sent a cold thrill through both. Not a breath was stirring in these wild, lonely, desolate depths of solitude from the other world, a stillness like death hanging over the scene, broken only occasionally by the sudden scurrying of a rabbit from its place of hiding.

Once the canyon took a sharp swerve to the right, the stream at this point terminating in a swift little water-fall. So dark was it that this sound of falling water led the Texans to the confusing idea that the left side of the canyon was only a short, steep barrier in their paths and without a second thought they began an attempt at scaling it. For some time they struggled and toiled to gain the brink, in darkness making very poor progress. Only a merciful flash of lightning revealed to them the folly of their error after some hard work, and quickly swinging to their right they proceeded on again.

"If that don't make a fellow hate himself, I don't know what would," muttered Rivers in a low tone of disgust. "When I heard that cursed little falls I figured there must be rough territory ahead. I should of had my eyes open wider, but I didn't have any idea the fool canyon would change it's mind to take another direction."

"Yes, and this little incident goes to show how easy it would be for us to run into our enemies without knowin' it," responded Smith in the same low tone.

"You're right Dave—exactly right. It's Indians we're buckin' up against this trip. These red sons of old Satan have forgot more about cleverness an' sneakin' means of warfare than us whites ever knew. It seems a copperskin will scent a chap if he gits within a mile of him, even if it's so damn dark yu' can't see your hand six inches from your face. Just one of their natural gifts I reckon—that an' the environment of their ancestors have always taught them the wise lesson of lookin' out for themselves. An' I'm tellin' the world if we don't keep our eyes an' ears open an' our mouths shut, we're goin' to have the whole pack of 'em down on us in a heap an' hell to pay, for if I'm not d——n badly mistaken, I reckon I seen a light over yonder about a second ago."

"A light? Where?"

"Yonder—far up the canyon," unconsciously gesturing with his hand. "I only jest seen it an' it was

gone like a flash. It all happened so quick that it could of been only my imagination, but I ain't much in the habit—Imagination nothin'! There she comes again! See? Step back hyeh an' look—quick!"

"I see it now! Shall we make for it?"

The other stood regarding the light in silence for some time before he saw fit to reply to Smith's question.

"I don't know what to make of it. Who can it be? It is too faint for the light of a campfire—unless—unless it's about burned down to ashes. An' who can be located in such a God-forsaken place except the gang we're after? Then too, I shore don't reckon that half-breed would be so plumb locosed as to try his luck at lightin' up this black dungeon with a fire when he knows we're hot on his trail. But we can't lose no time. She is in the hands of that cowardly dog an' I can't rest until Viola is found. My hand jest itches to level the rotten cur to the earth. We mustn't let that light go without an' investigation. See how it disappeared an' then come on again. Now it's gone. Come, follow me."

No more time was lost. With this the speaker led on again, a dense thicket looming boldly a few yards ahead. Into it's dark interior they plunged with no thought of hesitation, stooping low to avoid encountering numberless branches that overhung their path. Suddenly as they entered the thicket a piercing, long drawn hoot issued from an owl far into the woods.

As if a bullet had struck him, young Smith started and reeled. He almost fell crash into Rivers so suddenly did he jump and start. Evil forebodings—fate was against them! For the instant Smith's heart stopped beating and an icy chill froze the blood in his veins. That scream had struck the very depths of his soul. A death knell echoed loudly with that scream of this owl of Night and Smith's brain clogged.

Fearful of few things, the lad from old Virginia held the hoot of an owl at night as a bad omen. To him it was a death knell. And this legend he had inherited in his mother's blood, in whose strange life in the great forests of other climes this bird of Night had always played a magic part from her early childhood on. Ah yes, and this very bird had sounded that mother's death knell years ago, as the reader will recollect from Smith's story of his life he told on that night of his arrival at the Lazy Bar. Again the old fear of the owl's hoot that had haunted him on that eventful night of his mother's death, came back and gloated over him and claimed him again. In terrible suspense Smith waited for another blood-curdling scream to sink into his soul. Why had the hoot of this owl brought over him such an awful spasm of cold fear? What was there about it so awfully familiar and yet so strange and supernatural? Why he had heard an owl's hoot many, many a time since his mother had passed away, but gradually his fears

had so subsided that in the past few years he had scarcely even heeded the phenomenon. Why should all his old fears be suddenly revived? This scream seemed to have in it something that was not of the earthly—the very same *something* that was in that horrible scream that had sounded his mother's knell! And this scream, too, sounded a knell.

Slowly but surely Smith was awakening as if from a dream. Rapidly and with increasing conviction the solution of that unearthly owl's scream was dawning over him. *This* cry was the sounding of his own knell. Why sure, how natural the solution! Why only the other night he had dreamed a horrible dream to the same effect and it's memories had been haunting him day and night ever since. Plainly now he was becoming conscious of the striking connection between his strange dream and that hoot of the owl. And always there was before his vision that demoniac, wolfish, snarling face of a fiendish man—the main actor in his tragic dream.

In his dream Smith had found himself utterly lost in a dark, gloomy forest of strange trees of a species he never before had witnessed. Suddenly from a clump of bushes a dark figure leaped squarely before him, brandishing a huge knife and wildly cutting the air above his head with it as he came on. Just at this moment a strange dazzling light shot over the whole scene. For an instant this dazzling light revealed the awful features of the intruder. On his

face was an awful look of mingled hatred and malice. The deep set eyes, starting wildly from their sockets, stared at him like those of a demon, piercing the very depths of his soul. He could never forget that look. Somehow that face, those very eyes, were strangely familiar to him, yet in his trance as well as after, he could not make out their identity. In his dream Smith's fear had suddenly given way to deadly anger and hatred. Maddened with frenzy, eager for some revenge, his revolver came out. But the apparition fought like a fiendish maniac and even as he tried to discharge the weapon a hand that possessed Herculean powers brushed it to the ground. Vainly he struck out his arms but the whirlwind sweep of the apparition brushed them aside as the gleaming hunting knife cut the air straight for his heart. Smith tried to utter words of mad hatred, words of loathing and defiance, he tried to reach the maniac's throat, but the knife was descending! A sudden sharp pain in his side—the stinging sensation of a million needles—and blood seemed to choke him. Then—darkness and with an awful start and a muffled cry he had awoke.

Yes, he had dreamed that night. But how real this dream had been. Sleep had not been in his line for the rest of that long night while the wind moaned mournfully over the Plains. Somehow he could never forget that demoniac face. How familiar and yet how strange! Yes, Smith was sure he had

seen that same face years ago, but not so very long ago either, but where? Had that look of unearthly hatred, of cunning and ferocity imprinted upon the apparition's haggard face disguised the identity of his features? Only a dream but its memory haunted him every place he went. In the flames of the camp-fire at night it was always there, glaring at him from out of the very tongues of flames. Yes, this dream, this owl's scream, all forecasted his death. Try as he would to tear this theory in pieces, it only came back at him with renewed and strengthened conviction and haunted him the more. But they would be successful in rescuing Viola, even if he did go under. Something seemed to plainly convince him of this. And even if he went under, why should he not be willing to make this sacrifice that he felt it his sincere duty to make?

A rabbit scurried from its place of hiding with a sudden stir. At almost the same instant a sharp electrical flash split the atmosphere about them. With a start Smith awoke from his reverie. His eyes bulged in wonder. A distinct interjection escaped his lips. The light! How long had it been there? Had not Rivers saw it? Why it loomed only forty yards ahead of them!

"Hush"—Smith was conscious of Rivers' husky whisper. "We're in dangerous country now. Don't go above a whisper. Didn't yu' see the light before this?"

Smith's face fell as the hot blood rushed to his head.

"Not before this—It took me by surprise," he said, wondering at the strange hollow sound of his own voice, ashamed of his unexcusable error in making that error. He had been caught utterly off guard. What would Rivers think of his vigilance now? A while back he had offered his opinion in regard to vigilance. Was he proving true to his words? He had begged for the privilege of accompanying the brother on this important scout to investigate as to his sister's rescue. Was he doing full justice toward the cause?

"That's strange now. Why I've been seein' it for quite a while now. It's gettin' plainer every step we go. Did yu' forget about that light we saw back there?"

This hurt Smith even more. Oh why had that light so completely left his mind? And if it had not surprised him so completely. Then Rivers would not have known of his utter invigilance. He wanted to talk to his older friend and explain to him why he had so completely forgotten the very thing they were in quest of. But then there was that very unpleasant fear of being misunderstood. Smith wanted to confide the mystery of that owl's scream to Rivers, but here was no place for that. Rivers seemed to pay no more attention to him after that last speech he had made but pushed on in silence, never turning his

head to even see if he followed. Smith's heart grew heavy, his pride was hurt. He cursed himself for his error that could only lower himself in this silent, volcanic cowboy's estimation. All was happening contrary to Smith's hopes.

What strange kind of forest was this into which they were pushing, from out of whose depths the light loomed forth? Were those stately trees towering majestically above their heads real? They did not seem so. Smith no longer felt in the presence of real things. A strange, weird, ghostly murmur seemed to glide swiftly on every disturbed rustle of their towering branches. Otherwise a stillness like death enshrouded the gloomy thicket they were in. Was his dream already coming true? What was that black object off to his left? Did it not move? No, it was only a fallen log. . . . Where could that light be coming from? Much brighter than it was when he had first spotted it, still it was only a small ray of light. And it was too highly elevated in the timber to be coming from the smouldering embers of a consumed campfire. Or was there a knoll ahead to cause this? Why did they not reach the place from where issued that light? Was it farther away than they had anticipated? . . . Rivers still led on in his silent way, his tall form looming like a statue ahead. What was there so volcanic about this man's awful silence? Once he stopped abruptly and dropping to his knees, made a hasty survey of the ground but said nothing.

Even to a question he asked as they proceeded the cowboy scarcely even replied and when he did the answer came in a short and seemingly curt, cool tone. What was wrong? Had the latter ceased to place further confidence in him after this show-down of his utter invigilance?

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They had gained within a few yards of the light now. To the utter surprise of both it was issuing from a small cabin carefully concealed in an enclosure of heavy timber and tangled vines. Rivers was as much astounded as Smith. Did a cabin exist in Hell's Blowout? Why he had traversed the recesses of this canyon on several occasions in broad daylight, but never before had even a sign of a cabin presented itself to his view. Perhaps it was so carefully hidden in these wilds that before it had escaped his notice. However, it existed within the canyon and that was sufficient.

After some difficulty they discovered a very narrow, winding path which seemed to be the access through the dense foliage. Very cautiously they followed it. Chances bid fair that this was only the rude hut of some lonely trapper secured in these canyon wilds where game was very plentiful, and no relation existed between it and the half-breed and his gang. But they must take no chances. The path led to the door of the cabin, and to gain the north side, from which the light streamed they had to work their

tedious way through the tangled briars and vines. Instead of issuing from a window as they had imagined, the light was streaming from a good size crevice between two logs of the rude structure. After a hurried scrutiny to make sure no one guarded the outside, Rivers bent his tall form down and peered through the crevice within.

Like a hawk would watch its prey, Smith studied the cowboy's face as the light from the crevice illuminated it. In anxious suspense he held his breath for any signs of that face that would betray the secret of what the cabin held within its walls. The answer came in a dark cloud that suddenly settled on Rivers' tanned face.

"What is it?" Smith whispered impatiently.

For a long moment no reply came, the tall form remaining in its cramped position as if the power of movement had suddenly flown, his face growing darker still with fierce passion. Smith's suspense was becoming unbearable. Then slowly the other rose.

"Take a look an' see," he whispered.

Eagerly Smith bent down until his eyes was at a level with the aperture. The first sight that met his view drove away all visions of a peaceful trapper's hut. Huddled together on the rough floor opposite the wall through which he was looking, so close to him he could have laid his hands on them had the size of the aperture allowed, lay a group of several sleeping Comanches. Another warrior, no doubt

posted as a sentinel, had dozed off to slumber with his rifle balanced across his legs, seated on a little stool next to the single window of the cabin. This window had been carefully covered within with a blanket, to prevent the light from shining through without, which could be the only factor that could reveal the cabin's hidden location to the enemy. Evidently the crevice through which he peered had been overlooked by the party in making their den secure. And so, in some manner or way, evil is always destined, at some stage in the game, to be made light to the world. This striking moral could not help but implant itself in the youth's mind as he continued to gaze within.

But now the chief center of attraction met his vision and caused him to forget all else. There in the rather dim light of the farther corner of the dwelling, seated on rude benches opposite each other, sat the main actors of the drama—the half-breed and Viola. They seemed evidently to be quarreling, as could be noted by Tracey's nervous, excited manner and his hot flushed face, as well as the white face of the girl as they conversed in hurried but hardly audible tones. This is what had brought that dark cloud over the brother's face. How his soul must crave to end this outrage and get this breaker of law into his power! No wonder the cloud had deepened as he witnessed more of the episode. And had poor Viola's swollen, discolored arm, the result of this base coward's mad

display of temper met his searching glance, it is very doubtful whether the brother could have been restrained from sending a bullet into the unprincipled outlaw's heart from where he stood.

The half-breed sat in a position such that his face presented itself in a side view to Smith. His eyes seemed to rivet on that dark, rather handsome face clouded with anger. He found himself engaged in studying all its characteristics; the Roman nose, the high cheek bones, the black, handsome eyebrows, and most of all those restless, nervous black eyes, which now and then shot hurried glances about the room. He knew Rivers must be growing impatient behind him, but still he continued in his study. All the characteristics of that dark face seemed to possess a striking tinge of familiarity to him. Had he met this person before? Even in the dim light he did not appear at all a stranger. But it could not be. The half-breed's name was Tracey and he was certain he had never known anyone of that name.

Just then the breed turned his gaze squarely in Smith's direction, the light for the instant shining full in his face. With an awful start that made him strike his head a blow against the log, the blood rushed wildly to his head. His eyes stared wildly from their sockets and he grasped the log for support. There before his very eyes was the demon of his dream, and it was his old enemy—*Thad Penelope!*

Even as Smith looked on in dumb amazement Penelope and the sentinel jumped to their feet of one accord. Both flashed a wild look of fear in his direction. His collision with the log had reached their keen ears. Then even as he started back into shadow—darkness within. The light had been extinguished. Next Smith was conscious of Rivers pushing him around the corner of the cabin with a rapidity that nearly pitched him headlong upon his face. Then as they reached the one and only retreat—the narrow path—a dark form glided by him with the silence and speed of an arrow and the cowboy forged ahead, motioning him to follow. He waited for no second bidding. His error had revealed their presence. Already he imagined he could hear Penelope and his Comanches pouring from the hut in pursuit. He redoubled his efforts to hold his own with the fleet deer in his lead, never checking his speed for a look behind him.

For only a short distance Rivers kept to the footpath. Then ducking low he made a leap into the shelter of the thicket. Smith followed his example and just as a prickly branch flew back and slapped him a stinging blow in his face, a sharp coyote's yell rent the air a few feet ahead.

CHAPTER XXIII.

VIOLA'S PERIL.

In the darkness of the cabin, panic prevailed. For a few startling seconds both men stood stock still, too dumbfounded to act. Then Penelope, who was the first to regain his senses, reached the door at a leap, nearly tripping headlong over one of his Comanches just starting up from his sleep. Who was without? Had their hiding place been discovered? His brain was dizzy. With shaking hands he jerked the door open and peered into the darkness without. The sight that met his gaze was two flying forms just disappearing beyond a clump of bushes.

Hurriedly the door closed again and Penelope turned within. In hurried tones of excitement and hurried gestures with their hands a hasty council began with the sleepy sentinel and his warriors. Their actions struck fear and dread, but also mingled joy at the thought of rescue near at hand, into the heart of the girl captive. What would they do with her now? A new hope suddenly sprang up within her. Now was the time to make an attempt at escape, while the excitement held sway! She made a quick move in the direction of the door, brushing by a big warrior in the dark. But even in the darkness the eagle eyes

of Penelope, alias Tracey, detected the movement and backing up he stood with his back against the door. Her plan was foiled.

For some time the excited council waged. Of course Viola was unable to make out a word of their strange lingo, but the warriors and Penelope seemed to disagree on some point and the latter's anger was rising. Viola's sympathies were for the Comanches. They were as slaves in this cunning villain's power and would bear the brunt of conflict while Penelope reaped the gains. But she was this coward's victim and could only stand helpless, hoping and praying for the best. Continually he beckoned first to the door and then to the group of warriors, muttering rapidly in an angry tone. At last one of the warriors threw open the door and stepped softly without, all following his example but one.

The half-breed and the remaining warrior now drew close to the door and conversed in low tones. Viola watched their every move with thumping heart. How would they handicap her while they fought their enemies without? For she could readily guess that it was her friends and *his* enemies that had caused this sudden excitement. How the error that had revealed their presence had occurred was a mystery to her. But she had other things to think of now. Would these two stay in the cabin to guard her while the battle raged outside? Once the Comanche pointed in

her direction and she knew that the question of her disposal was the very one they were discussing.

Suddenly the big warrior swung round on his heel and like a flash his sinewy arms encircled her slender waist, pinning her arms to her sides. It all occurred in the batting of an eye. The suddenness of it almost carried away her breath. She tried to scream but at that instant the wily half-breed covered her mouth with a handkerchief and as she struggled desperately to free herself, he passed it quickly around her neck and tied it tightly behind. Frantically she struggled with her captors. Across the rough floor from one corner to another the unevenly matched struggle waged, the combatants stumbling and reeling over chairs and benches hidden in the darkness, the blaspheming half-breed cursing his fair captive in the most profane language. The vigor and strength of youth were in Viola's muscles, her loathing of this coward incited her to madness, and she fought with all that was in her, several times nearly freeing herself from the iron grip of her captors. But that struggle could not last long. Her endurance gave way and panting with exhaustion, her hands and feet securely bound with heavy deer thongs, she sank into a rude chair the Comanche procured for her.

Both men now silently left the cabin and for a little while she was left alone. They soon returned however and Penelope, after groping about in the darkness by the window, no doubt making sure it

was still covered, struck a match. He now dropped to his knees and she watched him closely. Holding the blazing match in one hand, with the other he groped about on the floor until his hand encountered a nail driven into the floor. Was he searching for something? His hand was so nervous he could hardly clutch the nail. Then to her sudden horror, he drew a trap door, perhaps three by four feet in dimension, from its resting place near the west wall!

A great fear crept into Viola's heart. Like a flash she saw the coward's motive. This hut contained a secret underground hiding place! To one who did not know of its existence, the door was invisible. This had no doubt been carefully plotted out beforehand. *There* is where he would keep *her* while he and his warriors went out to assist their allies in the extermination of her brother and his comrade.

The girl's captor looked up at her. A taunting smile flitted over his dark features as he beheld the awful look of terror on her white face. He pointed first to her and then to the open space of darkness and a gleam of savage joy was in his wicked black eyes. Again her nature rebelled and her hot temper outflowed its bounds. Her cheeks burned like fire and her breath was hot and fast. But she was powerless even to speak. Oh for a revolver to rid the world and society of this monster she loathed and hated from the very depths of her heart, who sought only to lead her to disgrace and her ruin! Penelope struck

another match and held it into the evacuation the removal of the trap door had disclosed. Involuntarily she gazed within. It looked only about four feet to the bottom of the evacuation and it was not at all of the dimensions she had anticipated; not more than large enough to accommodate her body comfortably within. The bottom was covered with a brightly colored Mexican blanket, but the shaggy decayed sides were only the cold, damp earth.

“Here will be your dwelling until we give that bold brother of yours and that other white dog their call, Miss Rivers,” the musical voice she once had thought so charming rang mockingly in her ears as she gazed horrified within the cavern that was soon to be her prison.

As Viola looked within a sudden truth dawned within her. Suppose all her captors should be slain by her protectors—what would be her fate then? No one on earth could find her then. The door was utterly invisible to anyone ignorant of its existence. Like lead this sank to her heart. Oh this stone-hearted beast was cunning. If he could not bind her, soul and body, to his own selfish, egoistic self, he would take her life in the most horrible manner conceivable, rather than allow others, even her own people, glory in her possession. All hopes of freedom ended the moment she was a prisoner in this cavern—all save those of Providence. If those who fought for her release were victorious, the verdict

would be almost certain death; if her captors, worse even still, the slave of the fiendish brute she hated and despised. In a last desperate effort she bent her gaze on the silent Comanche. Would no one show mercy toward her? In the hardest, almost expressionless eyes of the savage the girl imagined she detected the slightest tinge of sympathy, but the half-breed detected her glance and motioned in the direction of the door, muttering something in the Indian tongue. Without a word the Comanche skulked back into shadow and picking up his long rifle, quietly left the hut. Viola's last hope was blasted.

The match flickered and went out. As if in a hurry to get his prisoner safely concealed, Penelope quickly arose and picking her up into his arms, none too gently, began lowering her into the darkened depths. In her helpless condition she offered no resistance. Oh how she wanted to beg of him to show mercy! Yes, on her knees, her pride wholly humbled, she would beg, she would entreat him to be merciful. It would make her deep sense of pride burst forth in revolt, but anything she would do to quell this fiend's savage scheme of having her languish, perhaps to die the most horrible of deaths, in the dark depths of this cavern. Too late. She could not turn the tide now. With a silent prayer on her lips she yielded to the inevitable.

All had been carefully prepared within. Penelope struck another match after he had deposited her on

the blanket and she beheld four stakes driven into the ground on each side of her body, with heavy deer thongs fastened to the two at her right. Carefully sticking one end of the match into the soft cavern side, he hastily passed one of these thongs over her chest and tied it securely to the stake at her left. In like manner he passed the other thong across her limbs at the knees. Her captor was taking no chances. These would prevent her from rising.

His task completed, as Penelop reached for the match which had by this time almost spent itself, to remove it, something dropped from his vest and struck the blanket near her right arm pionioned at her side. It was his watch, for the chain even struck her across the knuckles of her hand. Reaching down he procured it just as the match went out, cursing under his breath as he arose without a word to her. Next she heard the door above her being slipped into place and—silence. A little later she heard the door of the hut slowly open and close on it's hinges. Penelope had gone without.

A thousand countless thoughts and fears crowded the girl's brain as that door closed upon her; the first, dreadful, awful thoughts of the fear of this damp, unholy place into whose obscured darkness the rays of the sun never penetrated, filled her with cold fear and undefineable horror. What filthy, poisonous venom breed of toads and lizards and even snakes

might inhabit unseen burrows in these cold, damp prison walls? Hers was as horrifying a situation as the mind could picture; powerless to move, a heavy shroud of darkness hiding everything and the very nature of these prison walls, crumbling and decayed, speaking of a fine breeding place for germs of contagion and cold-blooded, venomous, straggling, writhing forms belonging to the class of reptiles. Out on the open prairie she held little fear of even the deadly rattler. Quite a number she had killed with her own hands. But here it was entirely different. For what protection had she in her helpless condition?

A repulsive odor she had not at first noticed soon became dominant; the odor characteristic of a place that had previously contained raw hides in the process of curing, which led her to the rightful theory that at some time this hut had been the rude abode of some venturesome trapper and this evacuation had no doubt served as a cache to conceal the furs he had taken from the tempting eyes of Indians passing up and down the canyon when he chanced to be absent on some trapping expedition. Aside from this, the air, while of course rather close, was not so smothering as she had anticipated of so small an enclosure. Evidently the trap door was not by any means air tight, but cracks existed between the boards through which ventilation passed. But that animal odor was nauseating to her sensitive nostrils and al-

ready she longed for a few breaths of the chilly evening air.

For what seemed ages to the wearied girl she lay in that black den of darkness, not a sound save now and then the low rumbling of thunder reaching her ears. But the storm was passing around the canyon, for the discordant rumbling gradually became more distant and the lengths of the intervals between greater. Her lot far from spoke of comfort. Her ankles and wrists, bound so tightly as nearly to stop the flow of blood, already gave her torture. That ugly gash on her arm the knife had made, while it was healing and improving as well as could be expected, due to the careful application of healing herbs and bandaging by one of the Comanches, still gave her much pain also. Her head ached dreadfully from her exertions in that short, whirlwind struggle with Penelope and the big warrior. Lying prone upon her back, securely bound there by the thongs passed over her body, she was powerless even to attempt a change in her position when it became unbearable. And so here it was her lot to lie and wait in patience for what the various turnings of the wheels of fate held in store for her.

In her dire extremity Viola found thoughts of her cowboy she had slighted entering the horizon of her mind. Did Wade know she was in the power of this half-breed? Again as it had done many times before her mind flew back to that incident at the crowded

barn dance at the Triangle R ranch. How deceiving the half-breed's charming ways and politeness had proven! There she had considered him the perfect type of a gentleman, her ideal of society—a little above the level of most of her Gopher Creek admirers. Of course, he could hardly compare with Wade, but in her extreme anger at seeing the latter with her old enemy she had taken great pleasure in giving her captor the preference. But this had not been her own fault entirely. The sight of Will with Matilda had driven her mad with anger. She could never forget that awful malicious look of hatred that shone in her lover's eyes as they had riveted on the handsome half-breed. It had given her a strange joy then, but now she saw her error when it was too late, for now it was not hard to realize that her confinement in this vermin infested den of darkness was the result of her thoughtless folly with the almost stranger to herself. Will had hated and no doubt mistrusted Penelope's manner and appearances from the first. Oh why had she put so much confidence in this clever, smooth-tongued orator, whose wily, clever ways and piercing berry-black eyes spoke so plainly of distrust?

Viola sighed deeply. If only she had listened to Will's explanation and been ready to forgive him, this half-breed need not have come between them. But her pride was too great for that, and besides she had really thought him insincere. If she had only

understood the affair then as Tom had later explained it to her it would have been different.

The many happy times she had spent with "Billy" she found becoming reminiscent. To her he would always be Billy. It was the name Mr. Davis had given him years ago and with her she still retained it. Old visions of this chum of their childhood were coming back to her from afar; recollections of scenes enacted long ago on the dear old Davis ranch, both their homes from childhood up, and memories still more dimmed by years on the wild prairies of the Sunflower state, before the untimely deaths of their parents had left her and Tom and Billy orphans—the many strolls back and forth to the old district school with him and Tom; their pleasant horseback rides over the Plains, Billy mounted on old Prince, Tom on an old discarded cowpony Bess, and she on fleet gray Pigeon; their many visits to the dear old lone cottonwood on the hill—all were coming back to her. Billy had always been her protector, her knight. She felt a deep tinge of pity for him as she revived the numerous battles he had fought in her behalf, the many sacrifices he had made for her. There was his fight with Seth Trullinger, the bully of the neighborhood, who had dared to frighten her with a vicious dog. This was years ago and the result had been a "black eye" and a blood-stained face for her Billy; but later he had proven himself more than a match for Trullinger and whipped him. His ap-

pearances as a boy were as fresh in her mind as if it had been only yesterday that he had stood before her as a little chap of ten—the slouchy old brown hat one of Mr. Davis' hired hands had given him, that had covered a jolly, good-natured face of tan, the old blue coat he used to wear so much and that looked so manly on him, the bright bandanna handkerchief knotted about his neck in the fashion of his idols, the cowboys, the red or gray flannel shirt, the overalls torn and faded with wear, and those tan boots generally shabby and through at the "toes," that aided so much in giving him that gracefulness she so admired in him. These, with the sun-browned hands sometimes encased in an old pair of leather gloves, completed this picture her mind so loved to dwell on to-night.

How did Bill Wade the man compare with that Billy Wade of old? Time had wrought no great change. True the slouch hat and the old blue coat had disappeared and the high-heeled boots were always well polished now, but although he had put away all "childish things" and perhaps his manner and dress had undergone certain changes, still in the tall, deep-chested form it was not at all hard to recognize many characteristics of her old playmate. In his manners and very careful attention to his dress he was a perfect gentleman now. Always courteous and polite, especially to the fairer sex, she could not recall a single instance in which he had treated even

his enemies with disrespect or cruelty. Of rather a grave, moody disposition—a weaver of dreams—still in social affairs among the young people of the vicinity he was a general favorite. He was an excellent dancer and his handsome face and winning sunny smile, with his supple gracefulness of form made him a very attractive companion. Although of an easy good nature, no breeder of trouble, yet no man dared trifle with him. He seemed to possess a wonderful influence over his associates. Constant use of firearms from a small boy up had made him a dead shot with rifle and revolver. On many an occasion the latter trusty weapon clutched in the small hand of this usually silent fellow had prevented unnecessary trouble and bloodshed among drunken, bullying personages—and this the hand of a mere youth. This in the last few years had been a constant source of fear to her; that some day her boy would be overpowered by bullying odds and go under. But left alone in a world of sin and wickedness when a small boy he had learned the costly lesson of the world—that of self reliance. He fought his own battles and conquered.

Who was this dreamy youth with the handsome face and sunny smile, whose politeness and pleasant disposition and cheery voice won for him the popularity of all who knew him, but with whom even no grown man dared trifle, whose graceful, shapely hand and unerring aim knew how to deal out death and

justice? How suddenly he had grown to vigorous, splendid manhood. Why only yesterday he was a boy, her old playmate. To-day he was a man.

And so as the long, dreary moments rolled slowly, silently by in her dark prison, she longed for her boy again. Would he come back to her? She was not sure her pride would let her forgive him yet, but then she must. He was not the fault of their quarrel after all. She must not leave her Billy to Matilda or her other rivals. If only some unlooked for event would turn up to give her some excuse for forgiving him, then it would be easier. If only his strong arms were without to assist in the extermination of the coward in whose power she languished, then she could feel assured that he would receive his due from her. For in him she still trusted as she trusted in no other man. But most likely he was far away with the Lazy Bar herd on Gopher Creek, perhaps even ignorant of her captivity. Even if he did realize she was in the half-breed's power, perchance he had already ceased to worry about her. But no. She would not accuse him of that.

The sudden crack of a revolver followed quickly by a succession of other shots, brought her to her senses. Like one who is struck a reeling blow the poor girl sank under those awful notes of those instruments of destruction and death. Oh how those shots echoed! Each report must have carried death in it's wake, for never before had the echo of a

revolver shot rang so awful in her ears. The fight for her deliverance was on. The hideous, blood-curdling yells of the Comanches rent her soul. A sickening fear sank into her fluttering heart. Maybe some of those shots had sounded her brother's knell.

For ages the girl lay there in awful suspense. Again and again the death yell of a Comanche rang horribly in her ears. The battle was waging fiercely without. Now and then more of those awful shots rent the air. A flood of tears almost choked her as she prayed to God for the safe deliverance of her brother and his comrade who were laying down their lives for her. Then at last the last savage yell died away on the evening air, the shots ceased, and all was still as death. It was over, thank God. Only the barren, cold, lifeless walls of her cruel prison cell were witnesses of the awful agony she endured in the ensuing moments after the tumult without had ceased. Vivid, awful conceptions of that grim reaper called death rippled through her dazed mind. Why did not the victors return to claim their prize of battle? It was not yet time, she told herself. For what seemed another generation to her she waited in patience. Still no response. Oh God, had all been killed or wounded without? She held her breath. Heavy footsteps sounded on the rock outside and the next instant the door swung open on its hinges. Were her brother and his friend or her captors returning?

Her brother's exclamation of surprise after she heard a match being struck, no doubt on finding the hut deserted, convinced Viola it was the former. Thank heaven, her brother was spared to her. But by what strange miracle had both brave protectors escaped death or serious wounds in the encounter with three times their own number? For now another voice told her that two had entered. And that last voice, with its tremor of deep pathos, sent a quick thrill of joy through her pulse. It was Wade's voice, sure as she lived! Thunderbolts of conscience mingled with unfathomable love, pity, tenderness, admiration for him shot through her. If only she could make her presence known!

Above her a hurried search had begun. Chairs grated over the rough floor in discordant tumult. They were searching every nook and corner of the room for her. Several times their footsteps even sounded on the very hidden trap door that concealed her from the world. They conversed in tones of alarm and fear now. Oh they would never find her here! In the mad folly of despair she tried to hurl herself bodily against the hard stake at her side, anything to make a noise and attract their attention. Of no avail. She tried to scream. No sound escaped her lips. The search had ended. Wade's fervid voice was speaking:

"What can have happened to her. She ain't in this den, that's sure. But where under the sun *can* she be?

Out to the thicket again an' the stream. It's dark as a raven without, but we must not rest until she is found. That rotten cur met but too easy a death. Come on, Tom."

Oh she longed just then to fly to those strong arms—at least to let her Billy know she had forgiven him. If she could utter but a single word! But her brutal captor had done his work well in gagging her. As the door opened and then closed with a bang her senses reeled wildly and her head dropped limply back. Was she doomed to die in this God-forsaken den?

CHAPTER XXIV.

FRIEND AND FOE.

Like a creeping tiger about to encounter some deadly foe, Rivers crept through the thicket, his big Winchester at a trail. With astounding rapidity that made the youth behind him tax himself to the utmost to equal, he made his way over ground that to the eye in daytime would look utterly impenetrable. The foot-path was of no avail now. An encounter with the half-breed and his savage Comanches must be avoided if it possibly could until Wade arrived. But could they be held at bay so long? Like a hunted fox the tall form ahead ceased suddenly in its motion, the eagle eyes peered hastily to right and left, then he dropped prone upon his stomach and placed a keen ear close to the earth. Smith watched him in wonder. In his heart he admired the keen sense of sound he knew the Plainsman must possess, due to a life spent in the open air and this age in which these instincts always proved a necessity.

Suddenly Rivers rose first to his knees and then stood upright crouching low in the thicket.

"The creek—let's try the creek."

Somehow the speaker's voice told Smith there was danger—they were closely followed. Silently and

with extreme caution they crept on in the direction from which the rippling of water sounded faintly in their ears. Smith found himself ever admiring the silence and rapidity with which Rivers glided through the tangled foliage. Time and again he himself came in brushing contact with branches and tangled vines and continuously his step sounded plainly on a dry stick or other unseen obstacle. Once his hat went flying from his head and as he thrust forth a hand to recover it, he nearly tripped and fell.

The sudden reflection of water told them they had gained the stream. Heavy, tangled underbrush skirted both banks. The bank on which they stood was elevated at least three feet about the water and greatly weathered by the agents of erosion. After a hasty glance about him Rivers clutched a bush firmly and and carefully let himself down to the sand at the foot of the bank next to the water. Did he intend to cross over? But why retreat so far?

Smith soon perceived his error, however, for without hesitation the other directed his footsteps silently up the creek. Hastily climbing down with the least noise possible he followed. It was easy to proceed in silence now in the soft sand. So narrow and shallow was the small stream that he could have cleared it at a leap or in places easily step across it. Then he noted Rivers' dark figure, crouched low to avoid being detected above the high bank at their left, and he quickly followed suit, condemning himself for his

ignorance and dependence. He cursed himself. Never before this had he proven himself so utterly incapable of looking out for himself and for his own ends. But then Smith had not been his real self since that owl's scream had pierced his ears and soul, with which he had already seen fit to couple his strange dream he now had no doubt but what would come true.

Rivers paused at a place where the bank was a little above the level of their heads. At this point the elements had weathered away mother earth at the base, undermining the bank and forming a sort of cave with a ledge of rock overhanging. Under this ledge would be as good a place for concealment as could be hoped for. The leader was not long in perceiving this fact.

"Keep in closer to the bank, kid. Your reflection shows up in the water," he cautioned the other in a strong whisper, pulling Smith into the dark shadow of the ledge.

"Are they close then?"

"Reckon they are that. Hug the bank as close as yu' can. This ledge of rock will prove well in our favor."

"Will this be our hiding place?"

"Sure—it's as good a place as we'll find, if the red devils don't only scent our tracks. I wish I could give Bill another of them coyote yells, to give him an idea where we're at, but it's too damn risky a business among this pack of devilish blood hounds. It'll

be wisest to wait with our work until Bill gets hyeh though. He knows a good deal more about this canyon than I do, an' besides Bill's a dead shot. Then, too, we can have a better chance of boxin' 'em in if there's three of us acomin' in on 'em in several directions at once, for I'm afraid they may make an attempt to escape with their prize. With three of us we can take in the whole canyon an' head 'em off if they try to make a dash for the outlet, for they shore can't escape from the other end without scalin' a cliff that's close to a thousand feet to the top an' steep as a brick wall. The only thing we'll have to watch out for is that they don't get by us too far, an' I shore don't reckon they'll be in a hurry to scurry out of their den 'till they've at least brushed forces with us. But lay low, kid, for if I'm not bad mistaken one of the red devils is prowlin' above the ledge right now. Keep your gun in shadow but have her ready."

The youth gave a sudden start and held his breath. Somehow the fighting blood rushed hotly through his veins. His fingers played nervously with the hammer of his Winchester. Like one that feels death is about to seal his doom forever, do what he would, in his heart Smith secretly wished the battle would at once begin, and if the inevitable must come let it come at once and end all while he had the courage to put forth his greatest efforts for the cause he fought for with all his might. No coward, still all the strange

happenings that seemed to toy with fate he had so recently witnessed—the blood-curdling scream of the fowl of evil foreboding, the dream, and that final proof that something was *real* in all these, the dark face of his most deadly enemy of old, Penelope, that corresponded exactly with the strange apparition of his dream, although until he had beheld that face before his eyes he could not see the resemblance—all preyed on his nerves and he labored under a strain. Like the athlete who is about to enter a hard pitched battle of football, fearful that he will be unable to put forth his greatest abilities to win the day, only ten times the more so, he waited in awful suspense for the game to begin.

For some time the pair strained their ears to catch the slightest sound from above. Then as they were about to assume an easier attitude, the dark form of a savage suddenly appeared on the ledge of rock a few feet to their left and almost directly above them. For a short elapse of time the form stood quite distinctly silhouetted against the sea of darkness that veiled the space above the ledge. Then it was seen to suddenly drop out of sight as suddenly and silently as it had appeared, but slowly and with extreme caution the head of the savage protruded over the ledge and peered down into the dark, black shadow!

The men held their breath, stirring not a muscle. They might well have been a part of the crumbling

old bank wrapped in dense shadow. Then as all the head and shoulders of the warrior appeared over the ledge fully exposed to them Smith saw the Texan slowly cock his Winchester. Now was the time for a sure shot, Smith thought. But it did not come. The rifle remained motionless in the steady hands that held it. Then as the Texan did not act in accordance with his own thoughts, he perceived how the very eagerness of the thing had completely carried away his reason, for the discharge of a rifle while all these Comanche warriors and their wily leader must be close at hand, would bring their enemies down upon them at a rush.

For a moment the savage peered down into space, training his eagle eyes to the dark shadow of the cave beneath the ledge. Their hearts beat quickly. Surely they would be discovered now, both thought. Save once, when Rivers raised his long rifle a trifle as if to level it at the warrior's head and then changed his mind, they might have been statues of bronze glued to the dark wall below the ledge of overhanging rock, so motionless were they. Smith clutched his rifle so firmly he could feel the hot blood rush to his finger tips. As for the Texan, he was thinking and thinking rapidly. How could they settle this warrior without drawing the attention of his friends? He might creep forward a few steps, keeping as close as possible to the bank, and deal the unsuspecting warrior a blow on the head with the butt of his

Winchester. But that would be very risky business. If the savage did not detect his movement and drop back under cover, even the sound of the blow might reach the keen ears of the Comanches. Rivers bent forward a little as if to act on the impulse of the moment and attempt this, then stopped. Their best policy would be to take no chances and wait.

Finally the intruder withdrew from the ledge as silently as he had bent over. They drew a breath of relief as they heard him direct his light moccasined footsteps away from the ledge that had hidden them even from the Comanche's keen sight. Their place of concealment was secure now, or at least secure from this one particular warrior. Rivers slowly let down the hammer of his rifle.

"Some close shave, eh kid?" he whispered in relief.

"It sure was. Wouldn't a shot have lifted that fellow off the rock though?"

"Yu' bet; an' it would of brought them howling imps out of the thicket an' down on us in a heap too. I shore hated to let the red go, but I guess mebbe his right time to die hadn't come yet. Kid, sometimes it shore seems that us humans have all our lives mapped out for us beforehand. Don't it now Take this red for instance. He came mighty close to gettin' his medicine a little bit ago, for I was on the point of landin' him one with my gun, but something kept me from it. What was wrong? Why his

time hadn't quite come—it wasn't his minute or hour to go. Same way with me once. Guy pointed a gun at me an' fired point blank. What happened? The cartridge didn't go off. Reason? It wasn't my time to die. I never did believe very much in that dope they call predestination, but yu' shore can't get around it sometimes, for it's there."

"I never believed much in predestination either—but—but here lately it—it seems I must change my mind."

"How's that?"

Smith hesitated. He had proceeded too far now to escape an explanation, still he was reluctant to launch out on a subject that would require so many words. Could he gain by making known to his comrade the things that haunted his mind?—the things that were bringing a sad melancholy over his heart now? No, he thought, it was best that only he should be worried by the knowledge his bosom contained, for while it surely could not be of any value to the Texan to know the burden of his heart, on the contrary it might bring unnecessary pain and care to him. That would be selfish too, for Rivers' longing for his helpless sister and the burning malice he must nurse in his breast toward Penelope weighed down heavily enough on *him*. And then Rivers might think he was weakening to the cause—proving a coward at the critical moment. But before he replied his thoughts flew back over hundreds of miles of prairie

and blue sky and settled in a distant land with which his early boyhood memories linked in fond embrace, to that same dear old land he often longed for in the lonely hours of golden twilight, when the darkness slowly settled over the earth after the sun had bidden adieu to hide itself beyond yon western encircling hills, the land that contained the dearest treasure of his lonely heart—Virginia—and a new motive formed in his mind. Honest, trusty Tom Rivers was the very man to pour out the deep secrets of his heart to. No one else on earth, save possibly Wade, could help him in the new and sudden task his mind had conceived, the task that would mean everything to him, the task which if he could be certain it would be accomplished faithfully, would make death for him very, very much easier. The very eagerness of this new motive prompted Smith and even before he realized it he had launched out into a detailed narrative of the work of fate that hung over him like an appalling, enshrouding cloud, to which strange narrative Rivers listened in bewilderment.

“I am going under,” came Smith’s conclusion. “I fully realize that. My very soul tells me. But before I go I have something to tell you. I am going to ask a favor of you as my best friend in this new country that, while it may seem small, merely a trifle to you, yet to me it will mean all the world. You must recall the girl I told you of on my first

night in camp—the girl I left back in old Virginia and the only girl I have ever cared for. I left her without one word of parting after I had killed her only remaining brother. To-night I am about to die in a far land, far from home and my childhood friends, and I don't even know if my Lillie is still at her old home yet. Never since I ran away have I heard of her. But now I want you to write to her—tell her all—of my death and that I remembered and cared for her to the very last, but I could not come back to her. Explain her brother's death at my hands and my fear of returning after the horrible deed was done. Tell her my only ideal in life was to right myself with her and her family but death came too soon. Won't you do that for me, Tom?"

"There'll be no need of it, Dave. You've—you've got yourself all worked up over that dream. Dreams, although at times they do seem awful real like, are but a shadow that passes over the mind when the senses are dulled by sleep. Brace up, Dave, an' forget all that dope."

"I wish I could, Tom. I wish I could. But there's no use. The sight of my old enemy, the very image of that demon of my dream, nearly drove me wild. I am going for sure this time. My time is close at hand. It will be the knife. And why should I care? It is for a righteous cause and what could I gain by living? Perhaps a pauper's grave, or at the most, the grave of a loafer and a tramp. I told you

fellows I was about to turn over a new leaf. And I have tried to live up to that word. God knows how I have tried. But it cannot be. My longing for Lillie will not let me rest. The spirit of the wanderer is luring me on over a dim trail that can end only in poverty and misery. Somehow my wandering, the continual change of scene, my associations with men of my own type—shiftless, homeless, worthless, wandering humans—have always given me some comfort. But it never lasted. Already I feel I am an old man. If I can feel certain that all will be explained to my Lillie and made right with her—but no, for I never could right myself with her even if I lived. But if I can trust she will understand and forgive me, I will feel that all that can be done has been done and that I am ready to go. It is well.”

“I’ll do anythin’ for yu’. But I can’t have yu’ feelin’ that way. Just forget this an’ make up your mind you’re goin’ to make half a dozen of them reds find the Happy Hunting Grounds before the sun rises again an’ they won’t bother yu’ none. As for that damn dog of a half-breed, leave him to me. I will settle all accounts with him, big an’ small.”

“Just the same fate will have it’s way. But let’s say no more about it. I will try and forget. I can thank my lucky stars that I have you here to bear witness of my fate and let Lillie know. This will make it a hundred times easier, to know that my last wishes will be carried out. Here’s a little note

book with Lillie's name and address in it. You can use it in writing to her."

Smith had reached into his coat pocket and drew out a small book which, viewed in daylight, would have presented a sorry spectacle. Old and worn with age and constant carrying in his pocket, the covers were tattered and torn. The hand that received the simple little volume was not steady.

"All right. I'll give it back to yu' after—after the fight—"

There was no time for more words. At this juncture something stirred directly at their feet and Wade quietly rose to his feet and sat down beside them. It all happened so suddenly, so unexpectedly that Smith and Rivers both sat speechlessly dumb.

"Well?" finally the intruder broke the silence, with a smile.

"Yu' shore made a hell of a quick journey is all I've got to say. How did yu' find us so quick though?"

"Why a ways back I just took a notion to follow the creek to keep under cover in the shadow of the bank as much as I could. I was as surprised as you two when I made yu' out in the shadow there, whisperin' as if yu' was makin' love to each other."

"Kid was talkin' life insurance to me when yu' broke in an' interrupted us."

At this Smith forced a smile.

"Come," said Wade, "let's get at our work or we'll all need our life insured, settin' an' talkin' hyeh while the reds are sneakin' about just above them rocks up there. I nearly brushed with three of the devils a ways back, but the shadow of the bank hid me. We'll have to take in the whole canyon at a sweep or they're goin' to give us the slip, for they're scattered an' if they scent any danger ahead they'll hit for the openin' of the canyon an' try to beat us there. But where's your sister? Have yu' got any traces of her "

Rivers told him the story of the log cabin.

"So that's their den, is it?" exclaimed Wade. "How far are we from it?"

"Not very far. Some thicket between here an' there though. Yours is the same plan we've been thinkin' of, the kid an' me. Come on, let's get up the bank again an' then we scatter an' work our way towards the log house."

CHAPTER XXV.

AN UNTIMELY END.

Fifty yards from the ledge, in a direction he knew not which, Smith found himself in a dark little arroyo of the canyon that seemed to run in a direction nearly parallel with that taken by the creek. His senses keenly alert, his Winchester at a position where it could be brought into action at an instant's notice, he proceeded with as much silence and vigilance as he was master of.

Somewhere to the east in the dark canyon depths Smith was conscious that Wade was picking his way in the same manner, hard by the stream, while Rivers held a course some thirty or forty rods to the west. The storm center would not strike Hell's Blowout, Smith now was perceiving. Already he noted that the distant thunder had grown less deafening as the distance gradually lengthened between the southern extremity of the canyon and the dark, heavy, threatening thunder clouds which loomed as menacing giants of the universe in the dark sky. But still flash after flash of sharp lightning shot across the scene and at regular intervals exposed the wild, rough nature of his surroundings.

Smith fully realized the dangers to which he was exposed. But the pulse stirring the owl's scream had created in him had vanished, leaving him more like natural, calm Smith. For himself he no longer cared. He defied Penelope and all his Comanche warriors. And the task he had left to Rivers took a load off his haunted mind. Now he was free to take his own course, less bound over to a world he felt he owed a debt.

Something stirred ahead of him and the blood stood cold in his veins. The rifle involuntarily shot to a readier position in the hands that tightly clenched it. Only a lone rabbit scurrying from the shelter of some bushes. The rifle fell back to a trail and Smith smiled for the mere satisfaction he derived from smiling.

A shot burst out to his left and rang from one extremity of the canyon to the other. Smith stopped in his tracks. The signal for the combat had sounded. Crouching low he crept forward with more caution. A couple more shots from the same direction and the loud yell of a Comanche told him that already the battle raged with Wade.

A sudden change came over Smith. A slight drop in the valley floor and the atmosphere of his surroundings seemed suddenly to entirely change. Why now the timber, the day of the land—everything seemed perfectly natural to him—just as he had witnessed in his dream. And the mysterious rustling

of those towering giant branches above his head as the wind tossed and pitched them about, struck a wierd, unearthly murmur to his ears—a rustling that closely resembled the low roar of waters. An owl shot by Smith so close it's wing brushed his face. The thicket had suddenly grown enchanted. Dark shadows danced and flitted about across his path. Why even the trees had ceased to remain stationary, but seemed to come and go vividly before his very eyes. Was he again dreaming only a dream?

Suddenly more shots burst out, first to his left and then to his right, intermingled with shrieking yells from the Comanche warriors. Even as the shots echoed and resounded from one end of the canyon to the other, the dark form of a human suddenly loomed up before Smith. As if a mighty spell had suddenly been cast over him he stopped short and the blood froze cold in his veins. Like one in a trance Smith stood powerless to move as the figure sprang towards him with the quickness of motion.

And now Smith detected something cut the air above the intruder's head—a knife. Smith's senses reeled. The dream! The demon of his dream!

Smith's hesitation was instantaneous. A quick flash of lightning, the gleam of the hunting knife, the awful malicious shine of battle in Penelope's deadly flashing eyes, and the hot blood of anger shot to Smith's surface as his face grew ashen pale. Mad-dened at the sight of the base cur he despised, thirst-

ing for revenge, driven to close quarters, he dropped his rifle and his revolver came out. But even as he essayed to discharge the weapon an arm that seemed to have acquired Herculean strength shot out and knocked the gun to the ground.

Deprived of his last weapon of defense Smith waxed desperate. His trusty rifle he had thrown aside. He dared not leave his guard for a single instant to regain it. Oh if he could only regain it and scatter this foul murderer's brains to the four winds. He struck out his arms desperately. Vainly he tried to reach his adversary's throat. The knife slashed his right arm and it fell limp at his side. Then as he struck out, Penelope buried the wicked knife in his breast. Reeling, blood spurting out in an awful stream, Smith stumbled and sank to the ground at the murderer's feet. But summoning his ebbing strength he was on his feet again. In that final blow with his good left fist he nearly leveled the murderer to the earth. But the impetus of that blow sent Smith forward upon his knees, and as he struggled to rise the knife again buried itself to the hilt, this time in his back. The coward had committed his dastardly deed. With a sharp cry of pain Smith sank back upon the ground.

But even as Penelope again sought to pierce his helpless victim's body mercilessly with the bloody knife, Wade suddenly leaped a ditch close to the left

and appeared on the scene. Smith half rose and sank back.

"Shoot him—For God's sake shoot him for me!" he gasped as he sank back into darkness.

Wade's rifle went up as Penelope fumbled for his revolver. For one instant the rifle played nervously in the wind. Then a practiced eye glinted across the dark barrel, the arms that trembled in their eagerness grew steady, and in that second that the long barrel ceased its swaying motion, a strong finger tightened on the trigger and the Winchester spurted forth its fatal contents. One step forward, the bloody knife dropped harmlessly, and Penelope pitched forward with a bullet through his heart.

So ended Penelope's wild career.

Without a second look to see that he had done his work well, Wade turned to Smith. Life was still in him but his feeble voice and faltering breath announced that he was expiring rapidly. Hastily removing his coat Wade propped Smith's head up to a higher level and placed the coat under him. Then he loosened the collar of Smith's flannel shirt, giving him a better freedom of breathing. Now he was conscious of a fluttering, bloody froth on the youth's lips, proving that already the air in Smith's lungs was mixing with blood. His time would not be long. Wade's voice was not steady when he spoke:

"Did—did he git yu'—bad?"

At first Smith's bloody lips moved but not a sound escaped them. Then speech seemed to return.

"Yes, he got me," he finally muttered in a low voice that had lost all its huskiness. "That last stab in the back finished me. Oh I am burning like fire! Is—is this you, Will? Did—did—you kill Penelope? It's all dark. I knew it would be so all along. Where are the others—the Indians? Leave me an' go help Tom. Look out or they'll get you like *he* got me."

"Yes, kid, I got the breed an' it's all up with the rest I reckon. I got two a ways back an' I reckon Tom is onto his business with the rest. Here he is now an' a d——n good thing, for he'll know what to do for yu'. I'm awkward myself."

Rivers advanced hurriedly and without a word to Wade knelt down beside the prostrate form of Smith. His keen ears caught the faltering, gasping breath, his cold hand felt the blood reeking shirt and he started back with a terrible shock.

"Oh God! Who did this?" Rivers gasped.

"That half-breed dog. I came half a minute too late. We must do somethin' for him an' mighty sudden too. He's bleedin' awful."

"Fellows, there's no use in wasting time on me," again Smith's low voice broke the still air before Rivers could reply. "My time has come. I said it was at hand. . . . No human help can be of any good now. . . . I leave myself in the care of Him who is merciful and just to all. I still trust in Him.

You have done all humans can do for me. . . .If you would do more, pray for me. I have been a tramp and a wanderer far from His fold, but even in my darkest hours I have not entirely forgotten Him and I have always tried to follow His teaching the best I knew how. There is some hope in that. . . . Are—are you both here yet? . . . It's so—so dark I can see nothing. But don't waste more time with me. I won't last much longer. Leave me and—and go where you're needed—to the cabin. Go where—where—”

“Listen, Dave,” said Wade. “All the Comanches are dead—past doin' harm. Brace up an' try to live an'—an' then all will be well. Won't—won't yu' try?”

No reply came from the form huddled on the ground. Smith's strength had failed him and he had sank limply back. Rivers involuntarily gazed at Wade and even though darkness was present to hide any traces of weakness the eyes of both men fell. Then came a moment, it seemed an age to the Texans, of the most awkward, painful, awful silence. Words came not to either. For a moment neither of these bronzed riders of the sage dared raise their glance from the ground. Their eyes seemed magnetized to the ground by some unseen power. In awful suspense both waited for the faltering voice that came not. Then Rivers seemed to awaken and he felt the dying man's pulse. He thought he felt a slight flutter there but he was not sure. Then stoop-

ing low he placed an ear on Smith's breast and listened. He still lived, thank God. Reaching into his coat pocket Rivers drew out his flask. But before he could press it to the lad's lips, Smith seemed to come back and he waved it weakly aside.

"There's no—no use," again the weak, faltering voice broke the silence of death that hovered over. "I'm dying. I thought I was going a few seconds ago. Tom, remember what I left for you to do. I am going to leave you something—just a little trinket to you, but to me a fortune—to remember me by. Do you recall the little picture I showed you fellows, of her—of Lillie? It is the only one I ever had. You will find it in my inside coat pocket. Keep it for me, will you? It will always help to remind you of the kind frindship you showed a poor, lonely wanderer with few friends and far from home. I have no other token for you, Will, but you know how I appreciated your staunch friendship in this new land. Oh I'm—I'm smothering. Raise me—a little. I can hardly get my breath. Bury me here, fellows—in the canyon. Oh God—I'm sinking! Pray—pray for me—Say—say—a—prayer. Pray—for—Lillie."

The last words of the dying youth were scarcely audible. A gust of wind howled mournfully through the big oaks above. From far away—far off to the south—came the distant, long-drawn, melancholy hoot of an owl, as if to announce that it's prediction of

fate had been faithfully executed. For a long moment both men sat silent—dumb. They might well have been statues of bronze, so utterly motionless were they. Then slowly Wade's big sombrero came off and while Rivers followed suit, he hesitated, turning the sombrero 'round and 'round in his hand. Then with a mighty effort he rose to his knees, his hands slowly clasped in a grip of iron, and in a voice that was far from steady, he prayed:

"Father, another soul is about to pass on into the deep sleep of the Dead. Remember the sorrows it has borne—be merciful. Amen."

Simple, short in it's expression was the entreaty of this dreamer to his God—in meaning it was divine. With it a peaceful calm seemed to settle over the sad, perturbed spirit of both. In deep silence they turned to the motionless form of Smith. He had breathed his last. Thank God, at last with all his cares and sorrows gone, with life's fitful fever over, he could rest. He slept the sleep of the Dead.

And so died the lonely lad from old Virginia.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CONCLUSION.

"One, 'midst the forest of the West,
By a dark stream is laid.
The Indian knows his place of rest,
Far in the cedar shade."

—Mrs. Hemans.

The sun has long dipped out of sight beyond the high western rim of Hell's Blowout on the day succeeding the tragic scene related in the last chapter of my story. High above, out on the sage, the sun still shines low in the horizon, but in canyon depths shadows have fallen and already the purple, golden tint of twilight has replaced the bright tint of mid-day. All is still within the deep recesses of the canyon, save now and then for the soft notes of some singing bird bursting forth from some thicket. In a little opening in the thicket of spruces and scattered cedars, carefully hidden from view in all directions save at a very close distance, is the chief foreground of our picture; a rounded, shapely little fresh earth mound in the form of an unmarked grave—the last resting place of Dave Smith. Hard by, his head bent low in deep thought and held be-

tween his hands, with his elbows resting wearily upon his bent knees, sits the tall form of a young man of not more than four and twenty years, although his brow is wrinkled with care and every line of him speaks of fatigue. This, with a broad expanse of canyon wilds, an expanse of cloudless blue sky, and a circling, wheeling eagle or two overhead, complete the picture I have been attempting to sketch.

For several moments Wade, for this was he, might have been dead to all fancy, so utterly motionless he sat. His eyes seemed to study the yellowish-green, short-tufted grass that surrounded the simple little grave of Smith. Then suddenly he seemed to shake off his reverie and lifting his head he swung it 'round and bent his gaze to the north, toward the opening of Hell's Blowout. For some time his gaze riveted to that direction and then he slowly shook his head.

After this Wade again fell into gloomy thought, his head again dropping back to its old position. Within his breast a conflict waged and tore at him. He was in terrible torture. What under the sun could have become of Viola? By what strange miracle had she disappeared? Had she suddenly acquired wings and soared over those towering canyon rims that loomed up menacing above his head? The captors had all been slain but of what avail, for where was the fair captive they had held in bondage? Wade and Rivers had searched the canyon far and wide for any traces of her, but all of no avail. Some dark,

strange mystery must be back of it all. She could not have escaped from her captors and made her way on into the next canyon south, for the opening back to the north where they had entered was the only retreat from Hell's Blowout once within. The stream continued on south into another canyon by means of an underground passage, but a towering, steep wall of sandstone, worn and cut away by the elements of erosion so that at any moment an avalanche might be started, rose as an inevitable barrier to intercourse with the next canyon and closed the pass. And how could Viola have retreated to the one opening of the canyon without them having encountered her, or at least found some traces of her trail leading to the north?

Wade finally got up and began nervously pacing to and fro in the opening, his eyes roving restlessly up and down the canyon and then up the steep walls to the rims where shone pale blue sky. And again he slowly shook his head. No, the sage above these giant cliffs could not hold the treasure of his heart—this was all too incomprehensible to believe. Would Rivers bring back any news of his lost sister? Wade had little hopes. Twice since the first gray of dawn had crept down into the slumbering canyon he and Rivers had made a complete tour of the entire canyon, going in opposite directions, but as many times they had met at the humble little grave in the opening, with not a single clue of the missing girl to be

reported. His third trip Wade had just accomplished a little bit ago, this time going over all the grounds with the most extreme caution, examining into every crag and nook of the canyon in which he was quite well acquainted. But all of no avail. And he had very little, if any, hopes of any enlightenment on the strange mystery that shrouded the mystic disappearance, even upon Rivers' return from the opening into Hell's Blowout.

Wade's dreamy blue eyes were keenly alive to the superb, lofty grandeur and lovely beauty that enveloped the deep recesses of the canyon about him. To right and left a gentle breeze, the breeze of early twilight, cool and refreshing to his tired senses, fanned the silver spruces in a gentle, swaying motion like the rocking of a hammock. All within the cool canyon depths lay wrapped in a dark veil of purple, save far up near the high rim of yon eastern canyon wall, where lingered still the glittering scarlet and deep golden rays of a setting sun sinking majestically in all the glorious splendor of a bright, unclouded evening. If Wade had been free of care he could have divined the cool fragrant air after the day's heat had passed, which was steadily growing colder with that biting sharpness relative to early autumn. The frosts of autumn already had wrought its change in the vegetation about him; the verdure hue of the millions of leaves that decorated the recesses of the canyon had given way in part to the dominant

hue of brown and gold intermingled with scarlet, that seemed to add to, rather than subtract from, the wild beauty of nature's work. An ecstasy of peace and deep melancholy thrilled the silent admirer of nature as he calmly watched the bloom of day fast disappear in the canyon soon destined to be enshrouded in black darkness of night.

Finally again Wade riveted a lingering, steadfast gaze toward the distant opening of Hell's Blowout. But all that met his vision was a wide expanse of spruces and farther on oaks and cottonwoods, sprinkled about on both banks of the stream, with here and there a clearing covered with sage or short tufted grass. The dark veil of intermingling black and purple had grown denser still, enshrouding the canyon in still deeper shadow. What was that tall tree ahead that overtopped the rest by many feet, a cottonwood or an oak? So dim was becoming the light that Wade could scarcely distinguish, although it was not more than twenty rods distant. A dark gloom passed over the face of Wade. Night was falling fast and the lost had not been found. The roving blue eyes swept higher to the pale blue sky line above the distant opening of the pass and lingered there.

Wade's lips tremored as he gazed at that far line of deep blue, perhaps with a half muttered curse or unfathomable emotion, and turning away and retracing his steps, he again threw himself on the soft

grass beside the lonely grave of the wanderer. The sight of the quiet little peaceful grave slumbering in undisturbed quiet reverted his thoughts for the moment from his sweetheart to memories of the wanderer from old Virginia. Memories of the lad's first night with the rough, jesting cowboys entered his vision vividly; the incident with Bud West, but most of all the story of his life. Poor fellow! Little sunshine had cheered the lonely pathway of his life, few pleasures had greeted his childish love of pleasure and amusement—only sorrow had been his and tragedies, twined and engulfed in his young life to smother out the real pleasures of life. His death had been untimely, his resting place would be known to few. The lad's career had ended. Only a few truly beating hearts would continue to even remember the unfortunate wanderer. Here, deep in these canyon wilds, under the blue sky, the birds and the winds would sing their songs over the lonely grave of this martyr to humanity, and he would slumber on and a sinful world would go on as if he had not been. Poor lad! A tremor of emotion now and then shook Wade's tall form as he realized the debt he owed this simple-hearted, humble boy. For Smith had made the supreme sacrifice. For had not Smith given his life for the protection of the girl Wade loved? Oh if he would only rise up from that silent grave that Wade might pay his debt to him!

Ever present thoughts of his Viola would not let Wade dwell long on the situation so sadly painful to himself. He could not help but compare her possible fate with that of Smith. Perhaps her situation was even more painful. Was she, even while he sat in idleness studying before more action, languishing in some hidden, mysterious prison on the point of death of thirst or starvation? What if she were dead, even now! Deep within his inner self Wade feared even this, but outwardly he would not allow himself to believe it. Could she have been hidden after her murder if that was the case? Yes, the stream could not be a better place in which to hide her body. A thousand such awful, terrifying thoughts found their way into his mind. But he must wait in agony for the return of Rivers from his exploring trip.

As the heavy veil of fast approaching darkness thickened and fell, a great hush fell over the valley. In mystic calm dignity the silver spruces spread before Wade as in a fairy dream too inconceivable to be true, in the still air rustling scarcely a leaf. The oaks too, oaks that for years had withstood the destructive elements of wind and lightning, had nodded and gone to sleep to await the coming of the howling gale to once more toss and pitch their weathered old branches about in distracted order. The far cry of some night bird filled the air for a moment and then that too died away on the air. In that cry

Wade recognized a striking familiarity. Why that was the cry of the very same old bird he and Viola had listened to many, many times as darkness had gathered over the everlasting Plains. How awful natural! Yet he could not recall the name Viola had called this bird so familiar to both.

What was there about the whole scene, this lovely opening, the enclosing spruces, the steep canyon walls bordering on both sides, the dead stillness broken only by the faint murmuring of the stream as it dashed on over countless stones and pebbles, that appeared so natural like to him in twilight? Had he been in this very spot before, and that while twilight stole over it? He tried to think. He had been through Hell's Blowout several times, but as far as he could recall it had always been in daylight. But when before had he been a witness of these wild beauties of nature wrapt in the splendor of twilight? An instance of some coveted wild, enchanting spot of nature came to him but only vaguely—a place of thickets, splendid spruces, and faint murmuring of soft waters. But in the enchanting old spot he recalled, he recollected experiencing even a greater thrill of the Divine than now throbbed in his breast. What was lacking in this scene of beauty, of grandeur, before Wade? Could it be that the hunger in his heart for his lost sweetheart made the difference? Then suddenly it all came back to Wade and he understood. This was the very canyon in which he and

Viola Rivers were lost long ago. Yes, now Wade recalled it as if it were only yesterday, even though then he was only a mere slip of a boy of thirteen; the beauty of what he felt was the very opening in which he now sat, the gathering dusk falling over, and the little form of his childhood chum nestling close to him came to Wade as plain as daylight. And that very night the first real sensation of love, simple true love for the girl he had known all his life, had thrilled him as she clung close to him in her fear of the dark and their unknown surroundings. Now he understood what was lacking in this scene before him. It was his Viola's soft voice that had broken the silence of the still air in this very hallowed spot on that night of the long ago.

Something stirred suddenly at Wade's left. So suddenly, so unexpectedly, it occurred that the cowboy pulled for his gun. Then his hands dropped to his sides as swiftly as they had raised and he started wildly forward. A slender fleet little dark form leaped out of the deepening gloom towards him.

"Viola!"

One wild glad cry of joy and Wade leaped forward and crushed his sweetheart to his breast.

* * * * *

"But Viola, how on earth did yu' ever get out of that place?"

"Oh it was awful, sickening. I lay for ages it seemed to me, without hardly moving a muscle. I

could not move—only my hands a little. Once I slept, but only a little while. Then when I awoke I ached all over. Oh I could never go through that awful night and day again! I thought I sure was going to die. I had grown desperate. Ever so often I would pull with all my might to free my hands. But it was in one of these exertions that my hand struck the knife that freed me. He must have dropped it in the cave when he dropped his watch. The watch he recovered, but the knife must have escaped his notice. It was the work of God. I had prayed to Him for my deliverance all along. I could just move my hand that held the knife enough to free my hands. Then the rest was easy. But when I was free I was so stiff and weak and numb that I could hardly move. It must have been the hand of God that made me find you so soon after I got out of the cabin. Something seemed to lead me to this place. Oh I am so—so weak from my prison. Here, hold—hold me Billy, or I'll fall. . . . That's better. Isn't this the loveliest place though—in twilight ”

Wade made a low, almost undistinguishable reply. Her strange escape, the cave, the hidden trap door, puzzled him. He could hear his own heart thumping wildly in his breast as he held her close to him. Involuntarily his eyes fell on the dark, rounded little grave. Viola had not seen it yet. He would not tell her of Smith for a while. She had borne enough.

Suddenly the cry of the same night bird he had heard a while ago filled the air, this time with all

the melody, all the softness of times gone by. His heart beat wilder still as the strong arms tightened about the slender waist of his sweetheart.

"Viola, do yu' remember that bird's call?" Wade asked, half timidly.

"Yes, Oh yes! I should say I do! I heard it a while ago. It—it seemed to lead me to you."

Wade stooped in the twilight, now almost darkness, and held his lips close to hers.

"Viola won't—won't yu' forgive me?" he whispered softly.

Wade could feel the girl start in his arms. He could hear the flutter of her heart as she nestled close to him and raised her eyes to his.

"Why Billy, you know I have forgiven you. Oh you must have known it long ago! Forgive me for ever doubting you—won't you Billy? With all my heart I forgive you," Viola cried, almost choking with emotion.

Her words Wade heeded not—only that he was forgiven. Oh happy thought! He looked up over her shoulders, her velvet brown hair pressing softly against his cheek, her little white hands tightly clasped in his, to the eastern rim of the steep canyon wall. He half expected to see the glittering golden rays of the setting sun still lingering there. The scarlet and gold had disappeared, leaving the canyon rim in deep black shadow. Night had fallen. But for the lovers it was the Dawn of a new Day.

THE END.

