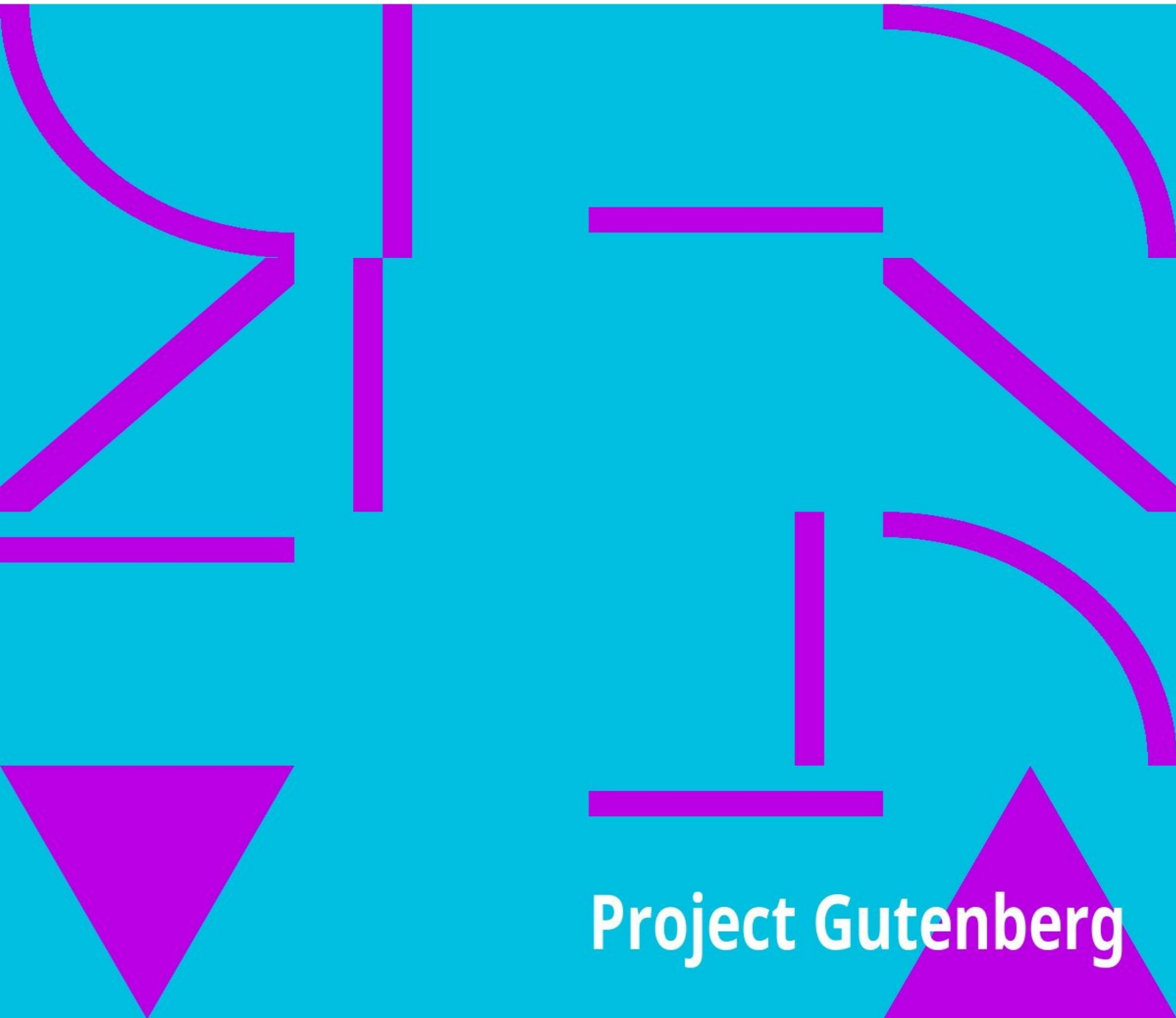
"Bring Me His Ears"

Clarence Edward Mulford



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frontispiece

Tom pushed on ahead to reconnoiter the Upper Spring
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"Bring Me His Ears"

By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

AUTHOR OF

"Bar 20," "Bar 20 Days," "Bar 20-Three," "Buck Peters, Ranchman," "The Coming of Cassidy," "Hopalong Cassidy," "Johnny Nelson," "The Man from Bar 20," "Tex," etc.

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"Bring Me His Ears"

CHAPTER I

HAWKENS' GUN STORE

The tall, lanky Missourian leaning against the corner of a ramshackle saloon on Locust Street, St. Louis, Missouri—the St. Louis of the early forties—turned his whiskey-marked face toward his companion, a short and slender Mexican trader, sullenly listening to the latter's torrent of words, which was accompanied by many and excitable gesticulations. The Missourian shook his head in reply to the accusations of his companion.

"But he was on thee boat weeth us!" exclaimed the other. "An' you lose heem—lak theese!" the sharp snap of his fingers denoted magic.

"Thar ain't no use o' gittin' riled," replied Schoolcraft. "How in tarnation kin a man keep th' trail o' a slippery critter like him in these yere crowds? I'll git sight o' him, right yere."

"That ees w'at you say," rejoined the Mexican, shrugging his shoulders. "But w'at weel *I* say to *le Gobernador*? Theese *hombre* Tomaz Boyd—he know vera many t'eengs—too vera many t'eengs—an' he ensult *le Gobernador*. *Madre de Dios*—sooch ensult!" He shivered at the thought. "W'en I get thee message, I tr-remble! It say 'Br-ring heem to me—or breeng me his ears!' I am tol' to go to Señor Schoolcr-raft at Eendependence—he ees thee man. I go; an' then you lose heem! Bah! You do not know theese Manuel Armijo, *le Gobernador de Santa Fe*, my fren'—I tr-remble!"

"You need a good swig, that's what *you* need," growled Schoolcraft. "An' if ye warn't a chuckle-head," he said with a flash of anger, "we wouldn't 'a' come yere at all; I told ye he's got th' prairie fever an' shore would come back to Independence, whar I got friends; but no—we had ter foller him!" He spat emphatically. "Thar warn't no sense to it, nohow!"

The other waved his arms. "But w'y we stan' here, lak theese? W'y you do no'teeng?"

"Now you look a-here, Pedro," growled the Missourian, his sullen gaze passing up and down the slender Mexican. "Ye don't want ter use no spurs on *this* critter.

I ain't no greaser! If ye'll hold them arms still fer a minute I'll tell ye somethin'. Thar's three ways o' gittin' a deer: one is trailin'—which we've found ain't no good; another is layin' low near a runway—which is *yer* job; th' third is watchin' th' salt lick—which is *my* job. You go down ter th' levee, git cached among them piles o' freight an' keep a lookout on th' landin' stage o' th' *Belle*. I'll stick right yere on this corner an' watch th' lick, which is Hawkens' gun store. He lost his pistol overboard, comin' down th' river, didn't he? An' th' *Belle* ain't sailin' till arter ten o'clock, is she? One o' us is bound ter git sight o' him, fer he'll shore go back by th' river; an' if thar's any place in this town whar a plainsman'll go, it's that gun store, down th' street. You do what I say, or you an' Armijo kin go plumb ter hell! An' don't ye wave yer fists under my nose no more, Pedro; I might misunderstand ye."

The Mexican's face brightened. "Eet ees good, vera good, Señor Schoolcraft. Hah! You have thee br-rains, my fren'. Armijo, he say: 'Pedro, get heem to Santa Fe, if you can. If you can't, then keel heem, an' breeng me hees ears.' *Bueno!* I go, señor. I go *pronto*. *Buena dia!*"

"Then git," growled Schoolcraft. "Thar's that long-faced clerk o' Hawkens' openin' th' shop. Now remember: this side o' th' junction o' th' Oregon trail I'm only ter watch him. If he goes southwest from th' junction, yer job begins; if he heads up fer th' Platte, my job starts. I ain't got no love fer him, but I'm hopin' he heads fer Oregon an' gets killed quick! I hate ter think o' a white man in Armijo's paws. An' if he hangs 'round th' settlements, we toss up fer th' job. If that's right, *vamoose*."

"Eet ees r-right to thee vera letter," whispered the Mexican, rubbing his hands. "Eef only I can get heem to Santa Fe—ah, my fren'!"

"Yer wuss nor a weasel," grunted the Missourian, slight prickles playing up and down his spine. "Better git down to them freight piles!"

Schoolcraft watched his scurrying friend until he slipped around a corner and was lost to sight; then he turned and looked up the street at the gun shop of Jake and Samuel Hawken, whose weapons were renowned all over that far-stretching western wilderness. Shrugging his shoulders, he glanced in disgust at the heavy, patented repeating rifle in his hand and, letting his personal affairs take precedence over those of the distant Mexican tyrant, he swung down the street, crossed it, and entered the famous gun shop. He risked nothing by the move, for the store was the Mecca of frontiersmen, and a trip to St. Louis was hardly

complete without a visit to the shop.

The Hawkens were established, so much so that they were to be singled out by one of the famous Colt family with a partnership proposition. The fame of their rifles had rolled westward to the Rockies and beyond. They were to be found across the Canadian and Mexican boundaries and wherever hunters and trappers congregated, who scorned the Northwest fusil as fit only for trading purposes, laughed in their sleeves at the preposterous length and general inefficiency of the Hudson Bay muskets, and contentedly patted the stocks of their Hawkens'. There is a tradition that the length of the Hudson Bay muskets, which often rose over the head of a tall man while the butt rested on the ground, was due to the fact that the ignorant Indians could obtain a white man's gun only by stacking up beaver skins until the pile was as high as the musket. Even worse than the flintlock trade guns were the *escopetas* of the south, matchlocks of prodigious bore and no accuracy or power, which were used by many of the Mexicans. That swarthy-skinned race which suffered under the tyranny of Armijo seemed to believe that anything which used powder was a weapon. The rank and file of the Mexicans were courageous and usually fought bravely until deserted by their officers, or until they were fully convinced that the miscellaneous junk with which they were armed was worse than useless. It can hardly be expected that men shooting pebbles, nails, and what-not out of nearly useless blunderbusses; or using bows, arrows, and lances will stand up very long against straight-shooting troops armed with the best rifles; add to this the great difference in morale, and the ever-present distrust of the officers, and a fair and honest understanding may be arrived at.

Hawkens' clerk took down one of the great rifles to go over it with an oiled rag, which was another example of painting the lily. The weapon was stocked to the muzzle and shot a bullet weighing thirty-two to the pound, each thus being an honest half-ounce of lead. It was brass mounted and had a poorly done engraving of a buffalo on the trap in its stock. He turned to replace it and take down another when the sound of the opening door made him pause and face the incoming customer.

The newcomer was neither hunter nor trapper, gambler nor merchant, to judge from his nondescript and mixed attire. His left hand had an ugly welt running across the base of the palm and it had not been healed long enough to have lost its distinctive color. In his right hand he carried a rifle which was new to that part of the country, and he slid it onto the counter.

"Swap ye," he gruffly said, stepping back and leering at the clerk. "Too ak'ard fer me. Can't git used ter it, nohow. I like a stock with a big drop—this un makes me hump my head down like a bull buffaler. That's th' wuss o' havin' a long neck."

The clerk glanced at the repeating Colt and then at the injured hand. The faintest possible suggestion of a knowing smile flitted across his face, and he shook his head.

"Those are too dangerous," he replied. "We don't handle them."

"W'y, that's a fine rifle!" growled the customer, a heavy frown settling on his coarse face. "Six shots, with them newfangled caps, without re-loadin'. She's a plumb fine weapon!"

"Looks good," laughed the clerk; "but we don't care to handle them."

"They've sorta put yer nose outer j'int, ain't they?" sneered the customer. "Wall, ye kin bet yer peltries I wouldn't be givin' ye th' chanct to handle *this* un," he angrily declared, "if it had a bigger drop an' warn't so ak'ard fer a man like me. Ye can't find a rifle in yer danged store as kin hold a candle ter it. I bet ye ain't never seen one afore!"

"It's our business to keep informed," responded the clerk, still smiling. "We heard all about that rifle as soon as it was patented."

"But ye allus could sell a gun like this un," persisted the scowling owner. "Ye must have a hull passel o' tenderfeet a-comin' in yere."

The clerk frowned and his voice became slightly edged. "The reputation of Hawkens' is a valuable asset. It was acquired in two ways: honest goods and fair dealing. Most tenderfeet ask us for a gun that we can recommend; we cannot recommend that rifle. Do you care to look at one that will not shoot through the palm of your extended hand after it gets hot from rapid shooting?"

"I got ye thar, pardner!" retorted the customer. "I done that with a poker. Ye don't seem anxious ter do no business."

"Our stock and my time are at your disposal," replied the clerk; "but we cannot take that Colt in part payment."

"Wall, ye don't have ter: I know a man as will; an' he ain't all swelled up, neither. You an' yer rifles kin go ter h—l together!" He jerked the Colt from the counter

and stamped out, cursing at every step, and slammed the door behind him so hard that it shook the shop. Thoroughly angered, he strode down the street and had gone a block before he remembered that he was to keep watch on the shop. Cursing anew, he wheeled and went back on the other side of the street and stopped at the corner of a ramshackle saloon.

The clerk was taking down another rifle when the door opened again and he wheeled aggressively, but his frown was swiftly wiped out by a smile.

The newcomer was somewhere in the twenties, stood six feet two in his moccasins, and had the broad, sloping shoulders that tell of great strength. He was narrow waisted and sinewy and walked with a step light and springy. Dressed in buckskin from the soles of his feet to the top of his head, he had around his waist a broad belt, from which hung powder horn, bullet pouch, a container for caps, a buckskin bag for spare patches, a bullet mold, and a heavy, honest skinning knife. Slung from a strap over one shoulder hung his "possible" bag, containing various small articles necessary to his calling. In his hand was a double-barreled rifle which he seemed to be excited about.

"Mr. Jarvis!" he exclaimed, offering the weapon for inspection. "Tell me what you think of this?"

The clerk chuckled and his eyes lighted with pleasure. "I've seen it, or its twin, before. English, fine sights, shooting about thirty-six balls to the pound. They're pointed, aren't they? Ah-ha! I thought so." He took the gun and examined it carefully. "Just what I've been trying to tell Mr. Jacob Hawken. Look at those nipples: large diameter across the threaded end, making it much easier to worry out wet powder by removing them and working with a bent wire from that end. We have to work at the ball with a screw, and that is no easy task after the patch paper becomes swollen. With this rifle you can replace the wet powder with dry and fire the ball out in much less time. Where did you get it, Mr. Boyd?"

The plainsman laughed exultingly. "Won it on the boat coming down, from an English sportsman who was returning home. He said it was a fine weapon, and I thought so; but I wanted your opinion."

"Take it out on the Grand Prairie and try it out. From what I can see here it is a remarkably fine rifle; but handsome is, you know."

"I've tried it out already," laughed the other. "It's the best rifle in this country, always excepting, of course, the Hawken!"

"As long as you put it that way I shall have to agree with you. Did you see the man who left a few moments before you came in?"

Boyd nodded shortly. "Yes; but I don't care to discuss him beyond warning you to look out for him. He deals in draft animals in Independence, has the name of being slippery, and is known as Ephriam Schoolcraft. However, I'm not an unprejudiced critic, for there is not the best of feelings between us, due to an unprincipled trick he tried to play on my partner." His face clouded for a moment. His partner had joined the ill-fated Texan Santa Fe Expedition and had lost his life at the hands of one of Armijo's brutal officers, for whom Tom Boyd had an abiding hatred. On his last visit to Santa Fe he had shown it so actively that only his wits and forthright courage had let him get out of the city with his life. "Well, to change the subject, I lost my pistol in the river, and I've heard a great deal about a revolving Colt pistol from some Texans I met. It shoots six times without re-loading and is fitted for caps. Got one?"

"Two," chuckled Jarvis. "A large bore and a smaller. They are fine weapons, but never rest the barrel on your other hand when you shoot."

"I'll remember that. Which size would you recommend for me?"

"The larger, by all means. We are expecting a shipment by express down the Ohio and it should reach us almost any day now. It took the Texans to prove their worth and give them their reputation."

"Fit it with caps, mold and whatever it needs. I need caps and powder for the rifle, too. First quality Kentucky, or Dupont, of course."

The purchase completed Jarvis watched his friend and customer distribute them over his person and then asked a question.

"Where to now, Mr. Boyd?"

"Independence and westward," answered the other. "Spring is upon us, the prairie grass is getting longer all the time, and Independence is as busy and crowded as an ant hill. All kinds of people are coming in by train and river, bound for the trade to Santa Fe and Chihuahua, and for far away Oregon." His eyes shone with enthusiasm. "The homesteaders interest me the most, for it is to them that we will owe our western empire. The trappers, hunters, and traders have prepared the way, but they are only a passing phase. The first two will vanish and in their places the homesteaders will take root and multiply. Think of

it, Mr. Jarvis, now our frontiers are only halfway across the continent; what an empire that will some day become!"

Jarvis nodded thoughtfully and looked up. "What does your father say to all this, especially after the news last fall about your narrow escape in Santa Fe?"

Boyd shrugged his shoulders. "Father set his heart on me becoming his junior partner, and to passing his work over to me when he was ready to retire. Two generations of surgeons, is his boast; and in me he hoped to make it three. Against that, the West needs men! Those Oregon-bound wagons bring tears to my eyes. They have cast my die for me. I am on my way to Fort Bridger and Fort Hall and the valley of the Columbia, to lend my strength and little knowledge of the open to those who need it most."

Jarvis nodded his head in sympathy, for he had heard many speak nearly the same thoughts; indeed, at times, the yearning to leave behind him the dim old shop and the noisy, bustling city beset him strongly, despite his years of a life unfitting him for the hardships of the prairies and mountains. Being able to read Greek and Latin was no asset on the open trail; although schoolmasters would be needed in that new country.

"I know how you feel, Mr. Boyd. Have you seen your father since you landed?"

Tom reluctantly shook his head. "It would only reopen the old bitterness and lead to further estrangement. No man shall ever speak to me again as he did—not even him. If you should see him, Jarvis, tell him I asked you to assure him of my affection."

"I shall be glad to do that," replied the clerk. "You missed him by only two days. He asked for you and wished you success, and said your home was open to you when you returned to resume your studies. I think, in his heart, he is proud of you, but too stubborn to admit it." As he spoke he chanced to glance through the window of the store. "Don't look around," he warned. "I want to tell you that Schoolcraft and a Mexican just passed the shop, peered in at you with more than passing interest and went on. I suppose it's nothing, though."

"It's enough to make me keep my eyes open," replied Tom, sighting his new rifle at the great clock on the wall, which seemed to move a little faster under the threat. "I thought they were watching me on the boat. Armijo's vindictive enough to go to almost any length. He isn't accustomed to having his beast face slapped."

Jarvis' jaw dropped in sheer amazement. "You mean—do I understand—eh, you mean—you slapped *his* face?"

"So hard that it hurt my hand; I'll wager his teeth are loose," replied Tom, his interest on his new weapon.

"Er—slapped *Governor* Armijo's face?" persisted Jarvis from the momentum of his amazement.

"The Governor of the Department of New Mexico," replied the hunter.

Jarvis drew a sleeve across his forehead and carefully felt for the high stool behind him. Automatically climbing upon it he seated himself with great care and then, remembering that his customer was standing, slid off it apologetically. He was gazing at his companion as though he were some strange, curious animal.

"Eh—would you mind telling me *why*?" he asked.

"He offended me; and if I'd known then what I found out later I would have broken every bone in his pompous carcass and thrown him to the dogs!" His face had reddened a little and the veins on his forehead were beginning to stand out.

Jarvis examined the clock with almost hypnotic interest. "And how did he offend you, Mr. Boyd, if I may inquire?"

"Oh, the beast came swaggering along the street, followed at a respectful distance by a crowd of his boot-lickers, and pushed me out of his way. I asked him who in hell he thought he was, in choice Spanish, and the conceited turkey-gobbler reached for his saber. The more I see of this gun, Jarvis, the more I like it."

"Yes, indeed; and then what, Mr. Boyd?"

"Huh?"

"He reached for his saber—and then?"

"Oh," laughed Tom. "I helped him draw it, and broke it across his own knee. He called me a choice name and I slapped his face. You should have seen the boot-lickers! Before they could get their senses back and make up their minds about rushing my pistol I had slipped through a store, out of the back and into a place I know well, where I waited till dark. I understand there was quite a lot of

excitement for a day or so."

"I dare say—I dare say there might have been," admitted Jarvis. "In fact, I am sure there would be. *Damn it,* Tom, would you mind shaking hands with me?"

CHAPTER II

ABOARD THE *MISSOURI BELLE*

Tom wended his way to the levee and as he passed the last line of buildings and faced the great slope leading to the water's edge his eyes kindled. Two graceful stern-wheel packets were moving on the river, the smaller close to the nearer bank on her way home from the treacherous Missouri; the larger, curving well over toward the Illinois shore, was heading downstream for New Orleans. Their graceful lines, open bow decks with the great derricks supporting the huge landing stages, and the thick, powerful masts on each edge of the lower deck toward the bow, each holding up the great spar so necessary for Mississippi river navigation; the tall stacks with the initials of the boat against a lattice work between; the regular spacing of windows and doors in the cabins, and the clean white of their hulls and superstructure, rendered more vivid by contrast with the tawny flood on all sides of them, made a striking and picturesque sight. Each had a curving tail of boiling brown water behind, and a bone in its teeth. These river boats were modeled on trim and beautiful lines and were far from being crude, frontier makeshifts.

Several Mackinaw boats moved anglingly across the current from the other shore, and a keelboat glided down the river for New Orleans, or to turn up the Ohio for Pittsburg, helped in the current by a dirty, square sail. The little twin-hulled ferry was just coming in from the Illinois shore, its catamaran construction giving it a safety which a casual observation would have withheld. The passengers clung to its rails as it pitched and bobbed in the rolling wake of the south-bound packet, a wake dreaded by all small craft unfortunate enough to pass the slapping paddle at too close a distance, for the following billows were high, sharp, and close together.

On the great levee wagons and carts rattled and rumbled; drivers shouted and swore as they picked their impatient and erratic way through the traffic; lazy negroes, momentarily spurred into energetic activity, moved all kinds of merchandise between the boats and the great piles on the sloping river bank, two long lines of them passing each other on the bridging gangplanks reaching far ashore. Opposed to this scene of labor and turmoil was a canoe well offshore, whose two occupants, drifting with the current, lazily fished for the great

channel catfish which the negro population loved so much.

On a packet, which we will call the *Missouri Belle*, a whistle blew sharply and as the sound died away several groups of passengers hurried across the levee, scurrying about like panicky bugs when a log is rolled over, darting this way and that amid the careless bustle of the traffic, as eager to reach a place of safety as are chickens affrighted by the shadow of a drifting hawk. The crowd was cosmopolitan enough to suit the most exacting critic. Freighters, merchants, hunters, trappers, and Indians returning to the upper trading posts or to their own country; gamblers; a frock-coated minister who suspiciously regarded every box and barrel and bale that he saw rolled up the freight gangplank, and who was a person of great interest to many pairs of eyes on and off the boat; a priest; a voluble, chattering group of *coureurs des bois*; a small crowd of soldiers going up to Fort Leavenworth; emigrants, boatmen, and travelers made up the hurrying procession or stood at the rails and watched the confusion on the levee.

Tom joined the animated stream, swinging in behind an elderly gentleman who escorted a young lady of unflurried demeanor through the maelstrom of wagons, carts, mules, horses, passengers, and heavily laden negroes. Caught in a jam and forced to make a quick decision and to follow it instantly, the young lady dropped her glove in picking up her skirts and a nervous horse was about to stamp it into the dirt and dust when Tom leaped forward. Grasping the bridle with one hand, he bent swiftly and reached for the glove with the other. As he was about to grasp it, a man dressed in nondescript clothes left his Mexican companion and bent forward on the other side of the horse, his lean, brown fingers eagerly outstretched.

Tom's surprise at this unexpected interference acted galvanically and his hand, turning up from the glove, grasped the thrusting fingers of the other in a grip which not only was powerful but doubly effective by its unexpectedness. He swiftly straightened the wrist and forearm of his rival into perfect alignment with the rest of the arm and then, with a sudden dropping of his own elbow, he turned the other's arm throwing all his strength and weight into the motion. The result was ludicrous. The rival, bent forward, his other hand on the ground, had to give way in a hurry or have his arm dislocated. His right foot arose swiftly into the air and described a short arc as his whole body followed it; and quicker than it takes to tell it he was bridged much the same as a wrestler, his arched back to the ground. Tom grinned sardonically and with a swift jerk yanked his adversary off his balance, and as the other sprawled grotesquely in the dust, the victor of the little tilt picked up the glove, leaped nimbly aside and looked eagerly around for

its owner. He no sooner stood erect than he saw her with a handkerchief stuffed in her mouth and, bowing stiffly and with sober face he gravely presented the glove to her. She had waited, despite all her escort could do, somewhat breathlessly watching the rescue and the short, quick comedy incidental to it; and now, with reddened cheeks and mischievous eyes, she took the glove and murmured her thanks. The elderly gentleman, grinning from ear to ear, raised his high beaver, thanked the plainsman, and then hurried his charge onto the boat, fearful of the time lost.

Tom stood in his tracks staring after them, hypnotized by the beauty of the face and the timbre of the voice of the woman whose eyes had challenged him as she had turned away.

The profane remarks of the wagon driver, the more picturesque remarks of other drivers, and the vociferous, white-toothed delight of the negroes did not soothe Ephriam Schoolcraft's outraged dignity nor help to cool his anger, and he arose from his dust bath seeking whom he might devour. He did not have to seek far, for a negro's shouted warning reached Tom in time to spin him around to await his adversary. The plainsman was cool, imperturbable, and smiling slightly with amusement.

Schoolcraft leaped for him and was sent spinning against a pile of freight. As he recovered his balance his hand streaked for his belt, but stopped in the air as he gazed down the barrel of the new Colt snuggling against the hip of the younger man. It must have looked especially vicious to a man accustomed to a single-shot pistol, or a double-barreled Derringer, at best.

"That was no killing matter," said Tom quietly. "Don't make it so, and don't make us both miss that packet, and get locked up in a St. Louis jail. I'll get out again quicker than you, but that hardly matters. If you're going aboard, go ahead; I'm in no great hurry." Out of the corner of his eye he was watching the Mexican, but found nothing threatening.

Schoolcraft glared at him, allowed a hypocritical smile to mask his feelings, bowed politely, and walked down the levee, the Mexican following him, and Tom bringing up the rear. They were quickly separated by the bustle on the boat, each giving his immediate attention to the preparations necessary for his comfort during the voyage.

A second blast of the whistle was followed by the groaning of the great derrick as it lifted the landing stage and swung it aboard; lines were hauled in and the

passengers along the rails waved their adieus and called last minute messages to those they were leaving behind. It would be many years before some of them saw their friends again, and for a few the reunion would not be on this earth. A bell rang aft and the great stern paddle slapped and thrashed noisily as it bit and tore at the yellow water beneath it. Showers of sparks, incandescent as they left the towering stacks, fell in gray flakes on the decks and the river, the bluish smoke of the wood fires trailing straighter and straighter astern as the packet rounded into the boiling current and pushed upstream at a constantly increasing speed, leaving behind her the western metropolis on the left-hand bank and a straggling hamlet on the other.

Here the Mississippi is a mighty river, approaching half a mile in width between its limestone banks; deep, swift, its current boiling up the muddy contribution of the great Missouri, as if eager to expose the infamy of its pollution to the world. But whatever it lost in purity by the addition of the muddy water, pouring in eighteen miles above the city, it gained in greatness. Other large rivers have been tamed and rendered nearly harmless, but these two have baffled man's labors and ingenuity, and finally the contributing stream has been given up as incorrigible.

The confusion of the passengers attending to their baggage, places at table and their sleeping quarters grew constantly less as mile followed mile, and by the time the *Belle* swung in a great, westward curve to leave the Father of Waters for the more turbid and treacherous bosom of the Big Muddy, many were eagerly looking for the line marking the joining of the two great streams. It was plain to the eye, for the jutting brown flood of the Missouri, dotted with great masses of drift, was treated with proper suspicion by the clearer flood of the nobler stream, and curved far out into the latter without losing the identity of its outer edge for some distance below.

CHAPTER III

ARMIJO'S STRONG ARM

Piloting on the Mississippi was tricky enough, with the shifting bars and the deadly, submerged logs, stumps, and trees; but the Missouri was in a class by itself; indeed, at various stages of high water it seemed hardly to know its own channels or, in some places, even its own bed. It threw up an island today to remove it next week or ten years later, and cut a new channel to close up an old one whenever the mood suited. Gnawing off soft clay promontories or cutting in behind them was a favorite pastime; and the sand and clay of its banks and the vast expanses of its bottoms coaxed it into capricious excursions afield. More than one innocent and unsuspecting settler, locating what he considered to be a reasonable distance from its shores on some rich bottom, found his particular portion of the earth's surface under the river or on its further bank when he returned from a precipitate and entirely willing flight.

There were two tricks used on the river to get out of sandbar difficulties that deserve mention. During certain stages of the river it for some reason would cross over from one side of its bed to the other, and between the old and the new deep channels would be a space of considerable distance crossed by the water where there was no channel, but only a number of shallow washes, none of which perhaps would be deep enough to let a steamboat through. The deepest would be selected, and if only two or three more inches of water were needed, the boat would be run up as far as it could go, the crew would fix the two great spars with their shoes against the bottom, slanting downstream, set the steam capstans drawing on their ropes, and then reverse the paddle wheel. The turning of the great wheel would force water under the hull while the spars pushed backward and, raising a platform of water around her and taking it with her, she would slide over the shallow place and go on about her business.

In case of a bar where there were no submerged banks to hold a platform of water, and only a few more inches needed, the spars would be used as before, but the paddle wheel would remain idle. The backward thrust of the spars would force the boat ahead, while their lifting motion would raise it a little. This being repeated again and again would eventually "walk" the boat across and into deeper water on the other side. It was a slow and laborious operation and

sometimes took a day or two, but it was preferable to lying tied to the bank and waiting for a rise, often a matter of a week or more.

All this was an old story to Tom, who now was on his fifth trip up the river, for he was an observant young man and one who easily became acquainted with persons he wished to know. These included the officers and pilots, who took to the upstanding young plainsman at first sight and gave painstaking answers to his many but sensible questions. In consequence his knowledge of the river was wide and deep, although not founded on practical experience.

Long before the packet turned into the Missouri he had his affairs attended to and was leaning against the rail enjoying the shifting panorama. But the scenery did not take all of his attention, for he was keeping a watch for a certain Mexican trader and for the young lady of the glove; and after the boat had rounded into the Big Muddy, he caught sight of the more interesting of the two as she walked forward on the port side in the company of her escort. Waiting a few moments to see if they would discover him, he soon gave it up and went in search of the purser, who seemed to know about everyone of note in St. Louis.

"Hello, Tom," called that officer, having recovered his breath after the rush. "Yo're goin' back purty quick, ain't you?"

"Reckon not. One night an' one day in th' city was enough. But this cussed packet is near as lonesome. I don't know a passenger on board."

"I can fix that," laughed the purser. "I know about three-quarters of 'em, an' can guess at th' rest. I counted seven professional gamblers comin' up th' plank. They'll be in each other's way. You feelin' like some excitement?"

"Not with any of them," answered Tom, grinning. "I can count seven times seven of them fellers in Independence; an' I hear some of 'em are plannin' to join up with th' next outgoing train."

"Well," mused the purser. His face cleared. "There's that sneakin' minister. Havin' looked in everythin' but our mouths, he'll mebby have time to convert a sinner. How 'bout him?"

"Don't hardly think he can do much with me," muttered Tom. He considered a moment and tried to hide his grin. "Now I noticed an elderly old gentleman with a young lady, gettin' aboard jest before I did. They was leavin' you when I showed up. Happen to know 'em?"

"You shouldn't 'a' give back th' glove when you did," laughed the officer. "You should 'a' had yore quarrel with Schoolcraft first, so you could 'a' waited till we was under way before you handed it back to her. That would 'a' give you a better chance to get acquainted. I've heard that frontierin' sharpens a man's wits, but I dunno. Want to meet 'em? Th' old sport's interesting when he ain't tryin' to beat th' gamblers at their own game. An' he's plumb successful at it, too, if there ain't too many ag'in him."

Tom had the grace to flush under his tan, but he thankfully accepted the bantering and the suggestion. "What you suppose I've risked wastin' my time talkin' to you for?" he demanded.

"You know cussed well you wasn't wastin' it," retorted the purser. "Come on, an' meet one of th' finest young ladies in St. Louis. She won't care if you pay more attention to her uncle."

A few minutes later Tom had been made acquainted with the couple and they soon discovered that they had mutual friends in the city. Time passed rapidly and Patience Cooper and her uncle, Joseph, took a keen interest in their companion's account of life on the prairies. He found that the uncle was engaged in the overland trade and was going out to Independence to complete arrangements for the starting of his wagons with the Santa Fe caravan. Finding that they were to be seated at different tables they had the obliging steward change their places so they could be together, and after the meal the uncle begged to be excused and headed for the card room, which brought a fleeting frown to the face of his niece. Tom observed it without appearing to and led the way to some chairs on deck near the rail.

The blast of the whistle apprised them of a landing in sight and soon they picked it out, as much by the great piles of firewood as by any other sign. This was the little hamlet of St. Charles, and here came on board several plainsmen and voyageurs who, having missed the packet at St. Louis, had hastened across the neck of land to board it here. As soon as the gangplank touched the bank a hurrying line of men depleted the great wood pile, and in a few minutes the landing stage swung aboard again and the *Missouri Belle* circled out into mid-channel, a stream of sparks falling astern.

An annoying wind had been blowing when they left the parent stream, annoying in a way a stranger to the river never would have dreamed. There being no permanence to the channels, no fixity to the numerous bars, no accurate

knowledge covering the additions to the terrible, destroying snags lurking under the surface, the pilot literally had to read his way every yard and to read it anew every trip. All he had to go by was the surface of the water, and it told him a true tale as long as it was reasonably placid. From his high elevation he looked down into the river and learned from it where the channel lay; and from arrow-head ripples and little, rolling wavelets, where the snags were, for every one close enough to the surface to merit attention was revealed by the telltale "break" on the water. Let a moderate wind blow and his task became harder and more of a gamble; but even then, knowing that the waves run higher over deeper water, he still could go ahead; but above a certain strength the wind not only baffled his reading, but gave such a sidewise drift to the shallow-draft, high-riding vessel that he could not hope to take it safely through some of the narrower channels. Rain or hail, which turned the surface into a uniform area of disturbance, instantly closed his book; and in this event he had no recourse except to lie snugly moored to the south bank and wait until the weather conditions changed. Sometimes these waits were for a few hours, sometimes for a day or more; and when the persistent southwest prairie gales blew day and night, moving great clouds of sand with them, the boat remained a prisoner until they ceased or abated.

There was good reason for choosing that south bank, for the stronger winds almost invariably came from that direction during the navigation season, and the bank gave a pleasing protection. While lying moored, idleness in progress did not mean idleness all around, for the boilers ate up great quantities of wood, and in many cases the fuel yards were the growing trees and windfalls on the banks. Once the boat was moored the crew leaped ashore and became wood-choppers, filling the fuel boxes and stacking the remainder on shore for future use. In a pinch green cottonwood sometimes had to be used, but it could be burned only by adding pitch or resin.

Nowhere on the river was a navigation mark, for nowhere was the channel permanent enough to allow one to be placed. It was primitive, pioneer navigation with a vengeance, requiring intelligent, sober, quickwitted and courageous men to handle the boats. On the Missouri the word "pilot" was a term of distinction.

The river was high at this time of the year, caused less by the excessive rains and melting snows in the mountains, being a little early for them, than by the rains along the immediate valley; bottom lands were flooded, giving the stream a width remarkable in places and adding greatly to the amount of drift going down with the current.

The afternoon waned and the wind died, the latter responsible for the pilot's good nature, and the shadows of evening grew longer and longer until they died, seeming to expand into a tenuity which automatically effaced them. But sundown was not mooring time, for the twilight along the river often lasted until nine o'clock, and not a minute was wasted.

When St. Charles had been left astern Tom had led his companion up onto the hurricane deck and placed two chairs against the pilot house just forward of the texas, where the officers had their quarters. The water was now smooth, barring the myriads of whirling, boiling eddies, and from their elevated position they could see the configuration of the submerged bars. The afterglow in the sky turned the mud-colored water into a golden sheen, and the wind-distorted trees on the higher banks and ridges were weirdly silhouetted against the colored sky. Gone was the drab ugliness. The finely lined branches of the distant trees, the full bulks of the pines and cedars and the towering cottonwoods, standing out against the greenery of grass covered hills, provided a soft beauty; while closer to the boat and astern where sky reflections were not seen, the great, tawny river slipped past with a powerful, compelling, and yet furtive suggestion of mystery, as well it might.

Tom was telling of the characteristics of the river when the boat veered sharply and caused him to glance ahead. A great, tumultuous ripple tore the surface of the water, subsided somewhat and boiled anew, the wavelets gold and crimson and steel blue against the uniform lavender shade around them. The many-fanged snag barely had been avoided as it reached the upward limit of its rhythmic rising and falling.

Soon a bell rang below and the boat slowed as it headed in toward a high, wooded bank. Nudging gently against it the packet stopped, men hurried lines ashore, made them fast to the trees and then set a spring line, which ran from the stern forward to the bank ahead of the bow, so as to hold the boat offshore far enough to keep it afloat in case the river should fall appreciably during the night. The pilot emerged behind them, glanced down at the captain overseeing the mooring operations, and then spoke to Tom, who made him acquainted with Patience and invited him to join them. He gladly accepted the invitation and soon had interested listeners to his store of knowledge about the river. Darkness now had descended and he pointed at the stream.

"There's somethin' peculiar to th' Missouri," he said. "Notice th' glow of th' water, several shades lighter than th' darkness on th' bank? On the Mississippi,

now, th' water after dark only makes th' night all th' blacker; but on this stream th' surface can be seen pretty plain, though not far ahead. We take full advantage of that when we have to sail after dark. We would be goin' on now, except that we got news of a new and very bad place a little further on, an' we'd rather tackle it when we can see good."

"Oh," murmured Patience. "A ghost road leading through a void."

A long, dark shape appeared on the "ghost road" and bore silently and swiftly down upon the boat, struck the hull a glancing blow, scraped noisily, ducked under, turned partly and scurried off astern. It was a trimmed tree trunk, and by its lowness in the water it told of a journey nearly ended. Before long one end would sink deeper and deeper, finally fastening in the alluvial bottom and, anchoring securely, lie in wait to play battering ram against some ill-fated craft surging boldly against the current.

The lanterns on shore began to move boatward as the last of the wooding was finished and the fuel boxes again were full. Farther back among the trees some trappers had started a fire and were enjoying themselves around it, their growing hilarity and noise suggesting a bottle being passed too often. Gradually the boat became quiet and after another smoke the pilot arose and excused himself, saying that it was expected that the journey would be resumed between three and four o'clock in the morning.

"How long will it take us to reach Independence Landing?" asked Patience.

The pilot shook his head. "That depends on wind, water, and th' strength of th' current, though th' last don't make very much difference sometimes."

Tom looked up inquiringly. "I don't just understand th' last part," he confessed. "Mebby I didn't hear it right."

"Yes, you did," replied the pilot, grinning in the darkness. "When she's high she's swift; but she's also a hull lot straighter. Th' bends of this river are famous, an' they add a lot of miles to her length. They also cut down th' slant of her surface, which cuts down th' strength of th' current. At lower water we'd have a longer distance to sail, but a gentler current. When she rises like she is now she cuts off, over or behind a lot of th' bends an' makes herself a straighter road. An' th' shorter she gits, th' steeper her pitch grows, which makes a stronger current. She jest reg'lates herself accordin' to her needs, an' she gits shet of her floods about as quick as any river on earth. Oh, I tell you, she's a cute one; an' a mean one,

too!"

"She's shore movin' fast enough now," observed Tom, watching the hurtling driftwood going spectrally down the almost luminous surface. "How long will this high water last, anyhow?"

"Considerable less than th' June rise," answered the pilot. "She's fallin' now, which is one of th' reasons we're tied to th' bank instid of goin' on all night. This here rise is short, but meaner than sin. Th' June rise is slower an' not so bad, though it lasts longer. It comes from th' rains an' meltin' snow in th' mountains up above. Down here th' current ain't as swift as it is further up, for this slope is somethin' less than a foot to th' mile; but if it warn't for th' big bottoms, that let some of th' water wander around awhile instid of crowdin' along all at once, we'd have a current that'd surprise you. Jest now I figger she's steppin' along about seven miles an hour. Durin' low water it's some'rs around two; but I've seen it nearer ten on some rises. There are places where steamboats can't beat th' current an' have to kedge up or wait for lower water. About gittin' to Independence Landin', or what's left of it, I'll tell you that when we pass Liberty Landin'. Miles through th' water ain't miles over th' bottom, an' it's th' last that counts. Besides, th' weather has got a lot to say about our business. I hope you ain't gittin' chilled, Miss Cooper, this spring air cuts in amazin' after sundown."

"I *am* beginning to feel it," she replied, arising, "I'll say good night, I believe, and 'turn in.'"

Tom escorted her to the lower deck and watched her cross the cabin and enter her room, for he had no illusions about some of the men on board. As her door closed he wheeled and went to look at the engines, which were connected directly to the huge paddle wheel. The engineer was getting ready to climb into his bunk, but he smoked a pipe with his visitor and chatted for a few minutes. Tom knew what it meant to be an engineer on a Missouri river packet and he did not stay long. He knew that his host scarcely took his hand from the throttle for a moment while the boat was moving, for he had to be ready to check her instantly and send her full speed astern. The over-worked system of communication between the pilot house and the engine room had received its share of his attention during his runs on the river.

He next went forward along the main deck and looked at the boilers, the heat from them distinctly pleasing. As he turned away he heard and felt the impact from another great, trimmed log slipping along the faint, gray highway. Some

careless woodcutter upstream had worked in vain. He stopped against the rail and looked at the scurrying water only a few feet below him, listening to its swishing, burbling complaints as it eddied along the hull, seeming in the darkness to have a speed incredible. A huge cottonwood with its upflung branches and sunken roots paused momentarily as it struck a shallow spot, shivered, lost a snapping dead limb, collected a surprising amount of débris as it swung slowly around and tore free from the clutching mud of the bottom and, once more acquiring momentum, shot out of sight into the night, its slowly rising branches telling of the heavy roots sinking to their proper depth. Next came a tree stump like some huge squid, which must have been well dried out and not in the water for very long, else it would have found the bottom before this. Then a broken and waterlogged keelboat, fully twenty-five feet long, scurried past, a great menace to every boat afloat. Planks, rails from some pasture fence, a lean-to outhouse, badly smashed, and a great mass of reeds and brush came along like a floating island. The constantly changing procession and the gray water fascinated him and he fairly had to tear himself away from it. Strange splashings along the bank told him of undermined portions of it tumbling into the river, and a louder splash marked the falling of some tree not far above.

"She's talkin' a-plenty tonight," said a rough voice behind him and he turned, barely able to make out a figure dressed much the same as he was; but he did not see another figure, in Mexican garb, standing in the blackness against a partition and watching him. The speaker continued. "More gentle, this hyar trip; ye should 'a' heard her pow-wowin' th' last run up. I say she's wicked an' cruel as airy Injun; an' nothin' stops her."

"I can't hardly keep away from her," replied Tom, easily dropping into the language of the other; "but I ain't likin' her a hull lot. A hard trail suits me better."

"Now yer plumb shoutin'," agreed the other. "If 'twarn't fer goin' ashore every night, up in th' game country, I don't reckon I'd want ter see another steamboat fer th' rest o' my days. Everythin' about 'em is too onsartin."

Tom nodded, understanding that his companion was a hunter employed by the steamboat company to supply the boat's table with fresh meat. After the game country, which really meant the buffalo range, was reached this man went ashore almost every night and hunted until dawn or later, always keeping ahead of the boat's mooring and within sight of the river after daybreak. Whatever he shot he dragged to some easily seen spot on the bank for the yawl to pick up, and when

the steamboat finally overtook him he went aboard by the same means. His occupation was hazardous at all times because of the hostility of the Indians, some few of which, even when their tribes were quiet and inclined to be friendly for trade purposes, would not refuse a safe opportunity to add a white man's scalp to their collection. The tribes along the lower sections of the river were safer, but once in the country of the Pawnees and Sioux, where his hunting really began, it was a far different matter. He did not have much of the dangerous country to hunt in because the *Belle* did not go far enough up the river; but the hunters on the fur company's boats went through the worst of it.

"Goin' out this spring?" asked the hunter.

"Yep; Oregon, this time," answered Tom. "My scalp ain't safe in Santa Fe no more. Been thar?"

"Santa Fe, yep; Oregon, no. Went to N'Mexico in '31, an' we got our fust buffaler jest tother side o' Cottonwood Creek. It war a tough ol' bull. Bet ye won't git one thar no more. We forded th' Arkansas at th' lower crossin' an' follered th' dry route. Hear thar's a track acrost it now, but thar warn't any then. Don't like that stretch, nohow. Longest way 'round is th' best fer *this* critter. Ye got Bent's Fort handy ter bust up th' trip, git supplies an' likker; an' I'd ruther tackle Raton Pass, mean as it is, than cross that cussed dry plain atween th' Crossin' an' th' Cimarron. I'd ruther have water than empty casks, airy time; an' fur's th' Injuns air consarned, 'twon't be long afore ye'll have ter fight 'em all th' way from th' frontier ter th' Mexican settlements. They'll be gittin' wuss every year."

"Yer talkin' good medicine," replied Tom, thoughtfully. "'Twon't be safe fer any caravan ter run inter one o' them war parties. Thar cussin' th' whites a'ready, an' thar bound ter jine han's ag'in us when th' buffaler git scarce."

The hunter slapped his thigh and laughed uproariously. "Cussed if that ain't a good un! Why, th' man ain't alive that'll live ter see that day. They won't git scarce till Kansas is settled solid, an' *then* there'll have ter be a bounty put on 'em ter save th' settlers' crops. Why, thar's *miles* o' 'em, pardner!"

"I've *seen* miles o' 'em," admitted Tom; "but they'll go, an' when they once start ter, they'll go so fast that a few years will see 'em plumb wiped out."

"Shucks!" replied the hunter, "Why, th' wust enemies they got is th' Injuns an' th' wolves. Both o' them will go fust, an' th' buffalers'll git thicker an' thicker."

"*We* are thar worst enemies!" retorted Tom with spirit. "Th' few th' Injuns kill don't matter—if it did they'd 'a' been gone long ago. They only kill fer food an' clothin'; but we kill fer sport an' profit. Every year that passes sees more whites on th' buffaler ranges an' more hides comin' in ter th' settlements; an' most of them hides come from th' cows. Look at th' beaver, man! Thar goin' so fast that in a few years thar won't be none left. Thar's only one thing that'll save 'em, an' that's a change in hats. Killin' fer sport is bad enough, but when th' killin' is fer profit th' end's shore in sight. What do we do? We cut out th' buffaler tongues an' a few choice bits an' leave th' rest for th' wolves. Th' Injuns leave nothin' but th' bones. Why, last trip acrost I saw one man come inter camp with sixteen tongues. He never even bothered with th' hump ribs! I told him if he done it ag'in an' I saw him, I'd bust his back; an' th' hull caravan roared at th' *joke*!"

"Danged if it warn't a good un," admitted the hunter, chuckling. "Have ter spring that on th' boys." He turned and looked around. "Them fellers on th' bank air shore havin' a good time. They got likker enough, anyhow. Cussed if it don't sound like a rendezvous! Come on, friend: what ye say we jine 'em? It's too early to roll up, an' thar's only card buzzards in th' cabin a-try-in' ter pick th' bones o' a merchant."

"We might do wuss nor that," replied Tom; "but I don't reckon I'll go ashore tonight."

"Wall, if ye change yer mind ye know th' trail. I'm leavin' ye now, afore th' bottles air all empty," and the hunter crossed the deck and strode down the gangplank.

Tom watched the hurrying, complaining water for a few moments and then turned to go to the cabin. As he did so something whizzed past him and struck the water with a hiss. Whirling, he leaped into the shadows under the second deck, the new Colt in his hand; but after a hot, eager search he had to give it up, and hasten to the cabin, to peer searchingly around it from the door. The only enemy he had on board to his knowledge was Schoolcraft—and then another thought came to him: was Armijo reaching out his arm across the prairies?

Joe Cooper was intent on his game; Schoolcraft and the Mexican trader were taking things easy at a table in a corner, and both had their knives at their belts. They did not give him more than a passing glance, although a frown crept across the Independence horse-dealer's evil face. Seating himself where he could watch all the doors, Tom tried to solve the riddle while he waited to scrutinize anyone

entering the cabin. At last he gave up the attempt to unravel the mystery and turned his attention to the card game, and was surprised to see that it was being played with all the safeguards of an established gambling house. Having a friend in the game he watched the dealer and the case-keeper, but discovered nothing to repay him for his scrutiny. An hour later the game broke up and Joe Cooper, cashing in his moderate winnings, arose and joined Tom and suggested a turn about the deck before retiring. Tom caught a furtive exchange of fleeting and ironical glances between the case-keeper and the dealer, but thought little of it. He shrugged his shoulders and followed his new friend toward the door.

Ephriam Schoolcraft, somewhat the worse for liquor, made a slighting remark as the two left the cabin, but it was so well disguised that it provided no real peg on which to hang a quarrel; and Tom kept on toward the deck, the horse-dealer's nasty laugh ringing in his ears. He could see where he was going to have trouble, but he hoped it would wait until Independence was reached, for always there were the makings of numerous quarrels on board under even the best of conditions, and he determined to overlook a great deal before starting one on his own account. It was his wish that nothing should mar the pleasure of the trip up the river for Patience Cooper.

He and his companion stopped in the bow and looked at the merry camp on shore, both sensing an undertone of trouble. Give the vile, frontier liquor time to work in such men and anything might be the outcome.

He put his lips close to his companion's ear: "Mr. Cooper, did you notice anyone hurry into the cabin just before I came in? Anyone who seemed excited and in a hurry?"

Cooper considered a moment: "No," he replied. "I would have seen any such person. Something wrong?"

"Schoolcraft, now; and that Mexican friend of his," prompted Tom. "Did they leave the cabin before you saw me come in?"

"No; they both were where you saw them for an hour or two before you showed up. I'm dead certain of that because of the interest Schoolcraft seemed to be taking in me. I don't know why he should single me out for his attentions, for he don't look like a gambler. I never saw him before that little fracas you had with him on the levee. Something up?"

"No," slowly answered Tom. "I was just wondering about something."

"Nope; he was there all the time," the merchant assured him. "Seems to me I heard about some trouble you had in Santa Fe last year. Anything serious?"

"Nothing more than a personal quarrel. I happened to get there after they had started McLeod's Texans on the way to Mexico City, and learned that they had been captured." He clenched his fists and scowled into the night. "One of the pleasant things I learned from a man who saw it, was the execution of Baker and Howland. Both shot in the back. Baker was not killed, so a Mexican stepped up and shot him through the heart as he lay writhing on the ground. The dogs tore their bodies to pieces that night." He gripped the railing until the blood threatened to burst from his finger tips. "I learned the rest of it, and the worst, a long time later."

Cooper turned and stared at him. "Why, man, that was in October! Late in October! How could you have been there at that time, and here, in this part of the country, now? You couldn't cross the prairies that late in the year!"

"No; I wintered at Bent's Fort," replied Tom. "I hadn't been in Independence a week before I took the boat down to St Louis, where you first saw me. There were four of us in the party and we had quite a time making it. Well, reckon I'll be turning in. See you tomorrow."

He walked rapidly toward the cabin, glanced in and then went to his quarters. Neither Schoolcraft nor the Mexican were to be seen, for they were in the former's stateroom with a third man, holding a tense and whispered conversation. The horse-dealer apparently did not agree with his two companions, for he kept doggedly shaking his head and reiterating his contentions in drunken stubbornness that, no matter what had been overheard, Tom Boyd was not going to Oregon, but back to Santa Fe. He mentioned Patience Cooper several times and insisted that he was right. While his companions were not convinced that they were wrong they, nevertheless, agreed that there should be no more knife throwing until they knew for certain that the young hunter was not going over the southwest trail.

Schoolcraft leered into the faces of his friends. "You jest wait an' see!" He wagged a finger at them. "Th' young fool is head over heels in love with her; an' he'll find it out afore she jines th' Santa Fe waggin train. Whar she goes, *he'll* go. I'm drunk; but I ain't so drunk I don't know that!"

CHAPTER IV.

TOM CHANGES HIS PLANS

Dawn broke dull and cold, but without much wind, and when Tom awakened he heard the churning of the great paddle wheel, the almost ceaseless jangling of the engine room bell and the complaining squeaks of the hard-worked steering gear. A faint whistle sounded from up river, was answered by the *Missouri Belle*, and soon the latter lost headway while the two pilots exchanged their information concerning the river. Again the paddles thumped and thrashed and the boat shook as it gathered momentum.

On deck he found a few early risers, wrapped in coats and blankets against the chill of the morning hour. The overcast sky was cold and forbidding; the boiling, scurrying surface of the river, sullen and threatening. Going up to the hurricane deck he poked his head in the pilot house.

"Come on in," said the pilot "We won't go fur today. See that?"

Tom nodded. The small clouds of sand were easily seen by eyes such as his and as he nodded a sudden gust tore the surface of the river into a speeding army of wavelets.

"Peterson jest hollered over an' said Clay Point's an island now, an' that th' cut-off is bilin' like a rapids. Told me to look out for th' whirlpool. They're bad, sometimes."

"To a boat like this?" asked Tom in surprise.

"Yep. We give 'em all a wide berth." The wheel rolled over quickly and the V-shaped, tormented ripple ahead swung away from the bow. "That's purty nigh to th' surface," commented the pilot. "Jest happened to swing up an' show its break in time. Hope we kin git past Clay before th' wind drives us to th' bank. Look there!"

A great, low-lying cloud of sand suddenly rose high into the air like some stricken thing, its base riven and torn into long streamers that whipped and writhed. The gliding water leaped into short, angry waves, which bore down on the boat with remarkable speed. As the blast struck the *Missouri Belle* she

quivered, heeled a bit, slowed momentarily, and then bore into it doggedly, but her side drift was plain to the pilot's experienced eyes.

"We got plenty o' room out here fer sidin'," he observed; "but 'twon't be long afore th' water'll look th' same all over. We're in fer a bad day." As he spoke gust after gust struck the water, and he headed the boat into the heavier waves. "Got to keep to th' deepest water now," he explained. "Th' snags' telltales are plumb wiped out. I shore wish we war past Clay. There ain't a decent bank ter lie ag'in this side o' it."

For the next hour he used his utmost knowledge of the river, which had been developed almost into an instinct; and then he rounded one of the endless bends and straightened out the course with Clay Point half a mile ahead.

"Great Jehovah!" he muttered. "Look at Clay!"

The jutting point, stripped bare of trees, was cut as clean as though some great knife had sliced it. Under its new front the river had cut in until, as they looked, the whole face of the bluff slid down into the stream, a slice twenty feet thick damming the current and turning it into a raging fury. Some hundreds of yards behind the doomed point the muddy torrent boiled and seethed through its new channel, vomiting trees, stumps, brush and miscellaneous rubbish in an endless stream. Off the point, and also where the two great currents came together again behind it two great whirlpools revolved with sloping surfaces smooth as ice, around which swept driftwood with a speed not unlike the horses of some great merry-go-round. The vortex of the one off the point was easily ten feet below the rim of its circumference, and the width of the entire affair was greater than the length of the boat. A peeled log, not quite water-soaked, reached the center and arose as vertical as a plumb line, swayed in short, quick circles and then dove from sight. A moment later it leaped from the water well away from the pool and fell back with a smack which the noise of the wind did not drown. To starboard was a rhythmic splashing of bare limbs, where a great cottonwood, partly submerged, bared its fangs. To the right of that was a towhead, a newly formed island of mud and sand partly awash.

The pilot cursed softly and jerked on the bell handle, the boat instantly falling into half speed. He did not dare to cut across the whirlpool, the snag barred him dead ahead, and it was doubtful if there was room to pass between it and the towhead; but he had no choice in the matter and he rang again, the boat falling into bare steerageway. If he ran aground he would do so gently and no harm

would be done. So swift was the current that the moment he put the wheel over a few spokes and shifted the angle between the keel-line and the current direction, the river sent the craft sideways so quickly that before he had stopped turning the wheel in the first direction he had to spin it part way back again. The snag now lay to port, the towhead to starboard, and holding a straight course the *Missouri Belle* crept slowly between them. There came a slight tremor, a gentle lifting to port, and he met it by a quick turn of the wheel. For a moment the boat hung pivoted, its bow caught by a thrusting side current and slowly swinging to port and the snag. A hard yank on the bell handle was followed by a sudden forward surge, a perceptible side-slip, a gentle rocking, and the bow swung back as the boat, entirely free again, surged past both dangers.

The pilot heaved a sigh of relief. "Peterson didn't say nothin' about th' snag or th' towhead," he growled. Then he grinned. "I bet he rounded inter th' edge o' th' whirler afore he knowed it was thar! Now that I recollect it he did seem a mite excited."

"Somethin' like a boy explorin' a cave, an' comin' face to face with a b'ar," laughed Tom. "I recken you fellers don't find pilotin' monotonous."

"Thar ain't no two trips alike; might say no two miles, up or down, trip after trip. Here comes th' rain, an' by buckets; an' thar's th' place I been a-lookin' fer. Th' bank's so high th' wind won't hardly tech us."

He signaled for half speed and then for quarter and the boat no sooner had fallen into the latter than her bow lifted and she came to a grating stop. The crew, which had kept to shelter, sprang forward without a word and as the captain crossed the bow deck the great spars were being hauled forward. After the reversed paddles had shown the *Belle* to be aground beyond their help, the spars were put to work and it was not long before they pushed her off again, and a few minutes later she nosed against the bank.

The pilot sighed and packed his pipe. "Thar!" he said, explosively. "Hyar we air, an' we ain't a-goin' on ag'in till we kin see th' channel. No, sir, not if we has ter stay hyar a week!"

Tom led the way below and paused at the foot of the companionway as he caught sight of Patience. He glowed slightly as he thought that she had been waiting for him; and when he found that she had not yet entered the cabin for breakfast, the glow became quite pronounced. He had seen many pretty girls and had grown up with them, but the fact that she was pretty was not the thing which made her so

attractive to him. There was a softness in her speaking voice, a quiet dignity and a certain reserve, so honest that it needed no affectations to make it sensed; and under it all he felt that there was a latent power of will that would make panicky fears and actions impossible in her. And he never had perceived such superb defenses against undue familiarity, superb in their unobtrusiveness, which to him was proof of their sincerity and that they were innate characteristics. He felt that she could repel much more effectively without showing any tangible signs of it than could any woman he ever had met. He promised himself that the study of her nature would not be neglected, and he looked forward to it with eagerness. There was, to him, a charm about her so complex, so subtle that it almost completed the circle and became simple and apparent.

She smiled slightly and acknowledged his bow as he approached her.

"Good morning, Miss Cooper. Have you and your uncle breakfasted?"

"Not yet," she answered, turning toward the cabin. "I think he is waiting for us. Shall we go in?"

The plural form of the personal pronoun sent a slight thrill through him as he opened the door for her, showed her to the table, and seated her so that she faced the wide expanse of the river.

"I imagined that I felt bumps against the boat sometime during the night," she remarked. She looked inquiringly at Tom and her uncle. "Did we strike anything?"

"Why," Tom answered in simulated surprise, "no one said anything about it to me, and I've been with the pilot almost since dawn. The whole fact of the matter is that this river's dangers are much over-estimated, considering that boats of thirty feet and under have been navigating it since before the beginning of this century. And they had no steam to help them, neither."

Uncle Joe appeared to be very preoccupied and took no part in the conversation.

"I have heard uncle and father speak many times about the great dangers attending the navigation of the Missouri," she responded, smiling enigmatically, and flashing her uncle a keen, swift glance. "They used to dwell on it a great deal before father went out to Santa Fe. So many of their friends were engaged in steamboat navigation that it was a subject of deep interest to them both, and they seemed to be very well informed about it." She laughed lightly and again

glanced at her uncle. "Since uncle learned that I might have to make the trip he has talked in quite a different strain; but he did suggest, somewhat hopefully, that we put up with the discomforts of the overland route and make the trip in a wagon. Don't you believe, Mr. Boyd, that knowledge of possible dangers might be a good thing?"

Uncle Joe gulped the last of his watery coffee, pushed back, and arose. "Want to see the captain," he said. "Meet you two later on deck," and he lost no time in getting out of the cabin.

"Well," came the slow and careful answer from Tom, "so many of us pass numerous dangers in our daily lives, unknown, unsuspected, that we might have a much less pleasant existence if we knew of them. If they are dangers that we could guard against, knowledge of them certainly would be a good thing."

She nodded understandingly and looked out over the tawny, turbulent flood, then leaned forward quickly; and her companion did not lose this opportunity to admire her profile. Coming down the stream like an arrow, with a small square sail set well forward, was a keelboat, its hide-protected cargo rising a foot or more above the gunwale amidships. Standing near the mast was a lookout, holding fast to it, and crouched on top of the cargo, the long, extemporized addition to the tiller grasped firmly in both hands, was the *patron*, or captain. Sitting against the rear bulkhead of the hold and facing astern were several figures covered with canvas and hides, the best shift the crew could make against the weather. The French-Canadian at the mast waved his hand, stopping his exultant song long enough to shout a bon voyage to the steamboat as he shot past, and the little boat darted from their sight into the rain and the rolling vapor of the river like a hunted rabbit into a tangle of briars.

"That's splendid!" she exclaimed, an exultant lilt in her voice. "That's the spirit of this western country: direct, courageous, steadfast! Can't you feel it, Mr. Boyd?"

His eyes shone and he leaned forward over the table with a fierce eagerness. In that one moment he had caught a glimpse into the heart and soul of Patience Cooper that fanned fiercely the flame already lighted in his heart. His own feelings about the West, the almost tearful reverence which had possessed him at the sight of those pioneer women, many with babes at their breasts, that he daily had seen come into Independence from the East to leave it on the West, the hardships past great enough to give pause to men of strength, but not shaking their calm, quiet determination to face greater to the end of that testing trail, and suffer privations in a vast wilderness; his feelings, his hopes, his faith, had come back to him in those few words almost as though from some spirit mirror. He choked as he fought to master himself and to speak with a level voice.

"Feel it?" he answered, his voice shaking. "I feel it sometimes until the sheer joy

of it hurts me! Wait until you stand on the outskirts of Independence facing the sunset, and see those wagons, great and small, plodding with the insistent determination of a wolverine to the distant rendezvous! Close your eyes and picture that rendezvous, the caravan slowly growing by the addition of straggling wagons from many feeding roads. Wait until you stand on the edge of that trail, facing the west, with rainbows in the mist of your eyes! Oh, Miss Cooper, I can't —but perhaps we'd better go on deck and see what the weather promises."

She did not look at him, but as she arose her hand for one brief instant rested lightly on his outflung arm, and set him aquiver with an ecstatic agony that hurt even while it glorified him. He shook his head savagely, rose and led the way to the door; and only the moral fiber and training passed on to him through generations of gentlemen kept him from taking her in his arms and smothering her with kisses; and in his tense struggle to hold himself in check he did not realize that such an indiscretion might have served him well and that such a moment might never come again. Holding open the door until she had passed through, he closed it behind them and stumbled into a whirling gust of rain that stung and chilled him to a better mastery of himself. Opportunity had knocked in vain.

"Our friends, the pilots, will not be good company on a day like this," he said, gripping the rail and interposing his body between her and the gusts. "The gangplank's out, but there seems to be a lack of warmth in its invitation. Suppose we go around on the other side?"

On the river side of the boat they found shelter against the slanting rain and were soon comfortably seated against the cabin wall, wrapped in the blankets he had coaxed from his friend, the purser.

"Just look at that fury of wind and water!" exclaimed Patience. "I wonder where that little keelboat is by now?"

"Oh, it's scooting along like a sled down an icy slope," he answered, hoping that it had escaped the hungry maw of the great whirlpool off Clay Point. "They must have urgent reasons for driving ahead like that. It must be an express from the upper Missouri posts to St. Louis. McKenzie probably wants to get word to Chouteau before the fur company's steamboat starts up the river. Or it may be the urging of the thrill that comes with gambling with death."

Behind them Uncle Joe poked his head out of the cabin door and regarded them curiously. Satisfied that troublesome topics no longer were being discussed he

moved forward slowly.

"Oh, here you are," he said, as though making a discovery. "I thought I might find you out here. Captain Newell ain't fit company for a savage wolf this morning. Have you heard how long we're going to be tied up?"

Tom drew a chair toward him and looked up invitingly. "Sit down, Mr. Cooper. Why, I understand we will stay here all day and night." He understood the other man's restlessness and anxiety about the wait, but did not sympathize with him. The longer they were in making the river-run the better he would be suited.

Uncle Joe glanced out over the wild water. "Oh, well," he sighed. "If we must, then we must. That river's quite a sight; looks a lot worse than it is. Hello! What's our reverend friend doing down there? Living in the hold?" He chuckled. "If he is, it's a poor day to come up for air."

They followed his glance and beheld a tall, austere, long-faced clergyman emerging from the forward hatch, and behind him came the pilot with whom they had talked the evening before. When both had reached the deck and stepped out of the rain the clergyman shook his head stubbornly and continued his argument.

"I was told to come up on this packet and examine her carefully on the way," he asserted, doggedly. "Liquor in vast quantities has been getting past both Fort Leavenworth and Bellevue; and while the military inspectors may be lax, or worse, that is an accusation which cannot truthfully be brought against us at the upper agency. If I am not given honest assistance in the prosecution of my search, your captain may experience a delay at our levee that will not be to his liking. It's all the same to me, for if it isn't found on our way up, it *will* be found after we reach the agency."

"But, my reverend sir!" replied the pilot, in poorly hidden anger, "you've been from one end of th' hold to th' other! You've crawled 'round like a worm, stuck yore nose an' fingers inter everythin' thar war to stick 'em in; you've sounded th' flour barrels with a wipin'-stick, an' jabbed it inter bags an' bales. Bein' a government inspector we've had ter let ye do it, whether we liked it or not. I've got no doubts th' captain will be glad ter take down th' engines, rip open th' bilers, slit th' stacks an' mebby remove th' plankin' of th' hull; but—air ye listenin' close, my reverend sir? If ye try ter git me ter guide ye around in that thar hold ag'in, I'll prove ter ye that th' life o' a perfect Christian leads ter martyrdom. Jest ram that down yore skinny neck, an' be damned ter ye!"

"I will not tolerate such language!" exclaimed the indignant shepherd. "I shall report you, sir!"

"You kin report an' be damned!" retorted the angry pilot. "Yo're too cussed pious to be real. What's that a-stickin' outer yer pocket?"

The inspector felt quickly of the pocket indicated and pulled out a half-pint flask of liquor, and stared at it in stupefaction. "Why—I——"

"Yer a better actor than ye air a preacher," sneered the pilot, glancing knowingly from the planted bottle around the faces of the crowd which had quickly assembled. "O' course, you deal in precepts; but they'd be a cussed sight more convincin' fer a few examples along with 'em. Good day, my reverend sir!"

The frocked inspector, tearing his eyes from the accusing bottle and trying to close his mouth, gazed after the swaggering pilot and then around the circle of grinning faces. A soft laugh from above made him glance up to where Patience and her companions were thoroughly enjoying the episode.

"Parson, I'll have a snorter with ye," said a bewhiskered bullwhacker, striding eagerly forward, his hand outstretched. "Go good on a mornin' like this."

"Save some fer me, brother," called a trapper, his keen eyes twinkling. "Allus reckoned you fellers war sort o' baby-like; but thar's th' makin' o' a man in you." He grinned. "'Sides, we dassn't let all that likker git up ter th' Injuns."

"Shucks!" exclaimed a raw-boned Missourian. "That's only a sample he's takin' up ter Bellevue. He ain't worryin' none about a little bottle like that, not with th' bar'ls they got up thar. What you boys up thar do with all th' likker ye take off'n th' boats? Nobody ever saw none o' it go back down th' river."

The baited inspector hurled the bottle far out into the stream and tried to find a way out of the circle, but he was not allowed to break through.

"You said somethin' about Leavenworth bein' careless, or wuss," said a soldier who was going up to that post. "We use common sense, up thar. Thar's as much likker gits past th' agencies on th' land side as ever tried ter git past on th' river. Every man up-bound totes as much o' it as he kin carry. Th' fur company uses judgment in passin' it out, fer it don't want no drunken Injuns; but th' free traders don't care a rip. If th' company ain't got it, then th' Injuns trade whar they kin git it; an' that means they'll git robbed blind, an' bilin' drunk in th' bargain. If I had my way, they'd throw th' hull kit of ye in th' river."

"That's right," endorsed a trapper, chuckling, and slapping the inspector on the back with hearty strength. "You hold this hyar boat to th' bank at Bellevue jest as long as ye kin, parson. It makes better time than th' boys goin' over th' land, an' 'tain't fair ter th' boys. Think ye kin hold her a hull week, an' give my pardners a chanct ter beat her ter th' Mandan villages?" He looked around, grinning. "Them Injuns must have a hull passel o' furs a-waitin' fer th' first trader."

"What's th' trouble here?" demanded the captain, pushing roughly through the crowd. "What's th' trouble?"

"Nothing but the baiting of a government inspector and a wearer of the cloth," bitterly answered the encircled minister.

"Oh," said the captain, relieved. "Wall, ye git as ye give. Are ye through with th' hold?"

The inspector sullenly regarded him. "I think so," he answered.

The captain wheeled to one of the crew. "Joe, throw on that hatch, lock it, and keep it locked until we get to Bellevue," he snapped. "We're ready to comply with government regulations, at the proper time and place. You and your friends can root around all you want after we get to Bellevue. The next time I find you in the hold with a lighted candle I'll take it away from you and lock you in there." He turned, ordered the crowd to disperse and went back to the texas.

It was an old story, this struggle to get liquor past the posts to the upper Missouri, and there were tricks as yet untried. From the unexpected passage of this up-bound inspector, going out to his station at the agency, and his officious nosings, it was believed by many that any liquor on board would not have a chance to get through. And why should the *Belle* be carrying it, since her destination and turning point was Bellevue?

"Is it true that liquor is smuggled up the river?" asked Patience as the inspector became lost to sight below.

Her companions laughed in unison.

"They not only try to get it up," answered Tom, "but they succeed. I've been watching that sour-faced parson on his restless ramblings about the boat, and I knew at once that there must be a game on. Sometimes their information is correct. However, I'll back the officers of this packet against him, any time."

"I'm afraid you'd win your bet, Mr. Boyd," choked the uncle.

"Uncle Joe! What do you know about it?" asked his niece accusingly.

"Nothing, my dear; not a single thing!" he expostulated, raising his hands in mock horror, his eyes resting on three new yawls turned bottomside up on the deck near the bow. He mentally pictured the half-dozen bullboats stowed on the main deck near the stern, each capable of carrying two tons if handled right, and he shook with laughter. This year the fur company's boat carried no liquor and its captain would insist on a most thorough inspection at Bellevue; but the fur posts on the upper river would be overjoyed by what she would bring to them. After the inspection she would proceed on her calm way, and tie against the bank at a proper distance above the agency; just as the *Belle* would spend a night against the bank at a proper distance below Bellevue; and what the latter would run ashore after midnight, when the inquisitive minister was deep in sleep, would be smuggled upstream in the smaller boats during the dark of the night following, and be put aboard the fur boat above.

"Uncle Joe!" said his niece. "You know something!"

"God help the man that don't!" snorted her uncle. "Look there!"

A heavily loaded Mackinaw boat had shot around the next bend. It was of large size, nearly fifty feet long and a dozen wide. In the bow were four men at the great oars and in the stern at the tiller was the *patron*, singing in lusty and not unpleasant voice and in mixed French and English, a song of his own composing.

Patience put a finger to her lips and enjoined silence, leaning forward to catch the words floating across the turbulent water, and to her they sounded thus:

"Mon père Baptiste for Pierre Chouteau
He work lak dam in le ol' bateau;
From Union down le ol' Missou
Lak chased, by gar, by carcajou.

"Le coureurs des bois, le voyageur, too,
He nevaire work so hard, mon Dieu,
Lak Baptiste père an' Baptiste fils,
Coureurs avant on le ol' Missou.

"McKenzie say: 'Baptiste Ladeaux,
Thees lettaire you mus' geeve Chouteau;
Vous are one dam fine voyageur—
So hurry down le ol' Missou.

"Go get vous fils an' vous chapeau,
You mebby lak Mackinaw bateau'—
Lak that he say, lak one dam day
Le voyage weel tak to ol' St. Lou!"

As the square stern of the fur-laden boat came opposite the packet the mercurial *patron* stopped his song and shouted: "*Levez les perches!*" and the four oars rose from the water and shot into the air, vertical and rigid. The pilot of the steamboat, chancing to be in the pilot house, blew a series of short blasts in recognition, causing the engineer to growl something about wasting his steam. The crew of the Mackinaw boat arose and cheered, the *patron* firing his pistol into the air. Gay vocal exchanges took place between the two boats, and the patron, catching sight of Patience, placed a hand over his heart and bowed, rattling off habitant French. She waved in reply and watched the boat forge ahead under the thrust of the perfectly timed oars.

"Mackinaw boat," said Tom, "and in a hurry. *There's* the express. There is a belief on the river that the square stern of those boats gives them a speed in rapids greater than that of the current. They are very safe and handy for this kind of navigation, and well built by skilled artisans at the boat yards of the principal trading posts up the river. They are a great advance over the bullboat, which preceded them."

"And which are still in use, makeshifts though they are," said Captain Newell as he stopped beside them. "But you can't beat the bullboat for the purpose for which it was first made; that of navigating the shallower streams. I thought you would be glad to know that we expect to be under way again early in the morning. But, speaking of bullboats, did you ever see one, Miss Cooper?"

"I've had them pointed out to me at St. Louis, but at a distance," she answered. "Somehow they did not impress me enough to cause me to remember what they looked like."

"Why, I'll show you some," offered Tom eagerly. "There's half a dozen on the main deck."

Uncle Joe squirmed as he glanced around, and arose to leave for the card room, but the captain smiled and nodded.

"Yes, that's so, Mr. Boyd. Take a look at them when the rain lets up. We're always glad to carry a few of them back up the river, for we find them very handy in lightering cargo in case we have mean shallows that can be crossed in no other way. You'd be surprised how little water this boat draws after its cargo is taken ashore."

"But why do they call them bullboats?" asked Patience.

"They're named after the hides of the bull buffalo, which are used for the covering," explained the captain. "First a bundle of rather heavy willow poles are fashioned into a bottom and bound together with rawhide. To this other and more slender willow poles are fastened by their smaller ends and curved up and out to make the ribs. Then two heavy poles are bent on each side from stem to stern and lashed to the ends of the ribs, forming the gunwale. Everything is lashed with rawhide and not a bolt or screw or nail is used. Hides of buffalo bulls, usually prepared by the Indians, although the hunters and trappers can do the work as well, are sewn together with sinew after being well soaked. They are stretched tightly over the frame and lashed securely to the gun'le, and they dry tight as drumheads and show every rib. Then a pitch of buffalo tallow and ashes is worked into the seams and over every suspicious spot on the hides and the boat is ready. Usually a false flooring of loosely laid willow poles, three or four inches deep, is placed in the bottom to prevent the water, which is sure to leak in, from wetting the cargo. In the morning the boat rides high and draws only a few inches of water; but often at night there may be six or eight inches slopping around inside. I doubt if any other kind of a boat can be used very far up on the Platte, and sometimes even bullboats can't go up."

"How was it that the fur company's boat was tied at the levee at St. Louis, after we left?" asked Tom. "Rather late for her, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," answered the captain. "The great event on this river has always been the annual upstream fur packet. She is coming along somewhere behind us, and very likely will pass us before we reach the mouth of the Kaw. They take bigger chances with the river than we do because they've got to get up to Fort Union and away again while there's water enough." He looked at Patience. "Are you going far, Miss Cooper?" he asked, anxious to get the conversation into channels more to his liking.

"Santa Fe, captain," she answered as placidly as though it were a shopping trip from her home to the downtown stores of St. Louis.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed, as if he had not known it. "That will be quite an undertaking!"

Tom Boyd was staring at her aghast, doubting his ears. The slowly changing expression on his face caught her attention and she smiled at him.

"You look as if you had seen a ghost, Mr. Boyd," she laughed.

"I'm going to do my very best not to see one, Miss Cooper; or let anyone else see one," he answered mysteriously. "I am glad that I, too, am bound for Santa Fe. It is a great surprise and pleasure to learn that you are going over the same trail."

"Why, didn't you say that you were going over the Oregon Trail this year?" she quickly asked. "At least, I understood you that way."

"I often let my enthusiasm run away with me," he answered. "Much as I would like to go out to Oregon I will have to wait until my affairs will permit me to follow my inclination. You see, I've made two trips to Santa Fe, it has got into my blood, and there are reasons why I must go over that trail again. And then, knowing the trail so well, it is possible that I can make very good arrangements this year. But isn't it a most remarkable coincidence?"

"Very," drily answered the captain. "By the way, Mr. Boyd: you and Mr. Cooper seem to be quite friendly, and neither of you waste much time in the company of your present roommates. Seeing that you are both bunked with strangers, how would it suit you if I put you together in the same room? Good: then I'll speak to Mr. Cooper, and if it's agreeable to him I'll have the change made. Sorry to tear myself away from you two, but I must be leaving now." He bowed and stepped into the cabin, smiling to himself. He distinctly remembered his conversation with the young man, only the day before, when Tom had assured him with great earnestness that he no longer could resist the call of the emigrant trail and that he was going to follow it with the first outgoing caravan. The captain was well pleased by the change in the young man's plans, for he knew that the niece of his old friend would be safer on her long journey across the plains if Tom Boyd was a member of the caravan. He turned his steps toward the gaming tables to find her uncle, whom he expected would be surrounded by the members of a profession which Joe Cooper had forsaken many years before for a more reputable means of earning a living.

The reputation of "St. Louis Joe" was known to almost everyone but his niece; and the ex-gambler was none too sure that she did not know it. While his name was well-known, there were large numbers of gamblers on both rivers, newcomers to the streams, who did not know him by sight; and it was his delight to play the part of an innocent and unsuspecting merchant and watch them try to fleece him. Not one of the professionals on the *Missouri Belle* knew he was playing against a man who could tutor him in the finer points of his chosen art; but by this time they had held a conference or two in a vain attempt to figure why their concerted efforts had borne bitter fruit. One of them, smarting over his moderate, but annoyingly persistent losses, was beginning to get ugly. While his pocketbook was lightly touched, his pride was raw and bleeding. Elias Stevens was known as a quick-tempered man whom it were well not to prod; and Joseph Cooper was prodding him again and again, and appearing to take a quiet but deep satisfaction in the operation. At first Stevens had hungered only for the large sum of money his older adversary had shown openly and carelessly; but now it was becoming secondary, and the desire for revenge burning in Stevens was making him more and more reckless in his play.

The careless way in which Joe Cooper had shown his money to arouse the avarice of the gamblers had awakened quick interest in others outside the fraternity, and other heads were planning other ways of getting possession of it. Two men in particular, believing that the best chance of stealing it was while the owner of it was on the boat, decided to make the attempt on this night. If the boat should remain tied to the bank their escape would be easy; and if it started before daylight they could make use of the yawl, which was towed most of the time, and always during a run after dark.

Captain Newell looked in at the gambling tables and did not see his friend, but as he turned to look about the upper end of the cabin he caught sight of him coming along the deck, and stepped out to wait for him.

"Looking for me?" asked Uncle Joe, smiling.

"Yes; want to tell you that your young friend Boyd has changed his mind and is going out to Santa Fe to look after his numerous interests there. Ordinarily I would keep my mouth shut, but I know his father and the whole family, and no finer people live in St. Louis. Who have you in mind to go in charge of your wagons?"

Uncle Joe scratched his chin reflectively. "Well, I'd thought of Boyd and was

kinda sorry he was going out over the other trail. I'll keep my eyes on the scamp. Strikes me he'd take *my* wagons through for his keep, under the circumstances! He-he-he! Changed his mind, has he? D——d if I blame him; I'd 'a' gone farther'n that, at his age, for a girl like Patience. How about a little nip, for good luck?"

"Not now. How would you like to change sleeping partners?" asked the captain, quickly explaining the matter.

"First rate idea; th' partner I got now spends most of his nights scratching. Better shift me instead of him, or Boyd'll get cussed little sleep in that bunk."

Captain Newell leaned against the cabin and laughed. "All right, Joe; I'll have your things taken out and the change made by supper time, at the latest. Look out those gamblers in there don't skin you."

True to his word the captain shifted Joe Cooper to the room of his new friend, and sent the bull-necked, bullwhacking bully who had shared Tom's cabin to take the ex-gambler's former berth. This arrangement was suitable both ways, for not only were the two friends put together, but the two loud-voiced, cursing, frontier toughs found each other very agreeable. They had made each other's acquaintance at the camp-fire on the bank the night previous and like many new and hastily made friendships, it had not had time to show its weaknesses. One of them had stolen a bottle of liquor at the camp-fire carousal and upon learning of the change shortly after supper, had led his new roommate to their joint quarters to celebrate the event; where they both remained.

The early part of the night was passed as usual, Uncle Joe at the card tables, Tom Boyd with Patience and later mingling with the hunters and trappers in the cabin until his eyes became heavy and threatened to close. Leaving his friend at the table, he went to their room and in a few moments was so fast asleep that he did not hear the merchant come in. It seemed to him that he had barely closed his eyes when he awakened with a start, sitting up in the berth so suddenly that he soundly whacked his head against the ceiling. He rolled out and landed on the floor like a cat, pistol in hand, just as his roommate groped under the pillow for his own pistol and asked what the trouble was all about.

The sound of it seemed to fill the boat. Shouts, curses, crashes against the thin

partition located it for them as being in the next room, and lighting a candle, the two friends, pistols in hands, cautiously opened the door just as one of the boat's officers came running down the passage-way with a lantern in his hand. There was a terrific crash in the stateroom and they saw him put down the light and leap into a dark shadow, and roll out into sight again in a tangle of legs and arms. Other doors opened and night-shirted men poured out and filled the passage.

The battle in the stateroom had taken an unexpected turn the moment the officer appeared, for the door sagged suddenly, burst from its hinges and flew across the narrow way, followed by a soaring figure, to one leg of which Ebenezer Whittaker, bully bullwhacker of the Santa Fe trail, was firmly fastened. After him dived his new friend, who once had ruled a winter-bound party of his kind in Brown's hole with a high and mighty hand. The trapper went head first into the growling pair rolling over the floor, his liquor-stimulated zeal not permitting him to waste valuable time in so small a matter as the identity of the combatants. He knew that one of them was his new roommate, the other a prowling thief, and being uncertain in the poor light as to which was which, he let the Goddess of Chance direct his energies.

At the other end of the passage-way the boat's officer, now reinforced by so many willing helpers that the affair was fast taking on the air of a riot, at last managed to drag the thief's lookout from the human tangle and hustle him into the eager hands of three of the crew, leaving the rescuers to fight it out among themselves, which they were doing with praiseworthy energy and impartial and indefinite aims. Considering that they did not know whom they were fighting, nor why, they were doing so well that Tom wondered what force could withstand them if they should become united in a compelling cause and concerted in their attack.

At the inner end of the passage, having beaten, choked, and gouged the thief into an inert and senseless mass, the bullwhacker turned his overflowing energies against his new and too enthusiastic friend, and they rolled into the stateroom, out again, and toward the heaving pile at the upper end of the hall. Striking it in a careless, haphazard but solid manner, just as it was beginning to disintegrate into its bruised and angry units, the fighting pair acted upon it like a galvanic current on a reflex center; and forthwith the scramble became scrambled anew.

Finally, by the aid of capstan-bars, boat hooks, axe handles, and cordwood, the boat's officers and crew managed to pry the mass apart and drag out one belligerent at a time. They lined them up just as Captain Newell galloped down

the passage-way, dressed in a pair of trousers, reversed; one rubber boot and one red sock and a night shirt partly thrust inside the waistband of the trousers; but he was carefully and precisely hatted with a high-crowned beaver. He looked as if he were coming from a wake and going to a masquerade. Notwithstanding the very recent and exciting events he received a great amount of attention.

"What-in-hell's-th'-matter?" he angrily demanded, glaring around him, a pistol upraised in one hand, the other gripping a seasoned piece of ash. "Answer-me-I-say-what-in-hell's-th'-matter-down-here?"

"There was a fight," carefully explained the weary officer.

"Hell's-bells-I-thought-it-was-a-prayer-meetin'!" yelped the captain. "Who-was-fightin'?"

"*They* was," answered the officer, waving both hands in all directions.

"What-about?"

The officer looked blank and scratched his head, carefully avoiding the twin knobs rising over one ear. "Damned if *I* know, sir!"

"Were *you* fightin', Flynn?" demanded the captain aggressively and with raging suspicion. "Come, up with it, were you?"

"No, sir; I was a-stoppin' it."

"My G-d! Then don't you never dare start one!" snapped the captain, staring around. "You look like the British at N'Orleans," he told the line-up. "What was it all about? Hell's bells! It *must* 'a' had a beginning!"

"Yessir," replied the officer. "It sorta begun all at once, right after th' explosion."

"What explosion?"

"I dunno. I heard it, 'way up on th' hurricane deck, an' hustled right down here fast as I could run. Just as I got right over there," and he stepped forward and with his foot touched the exact spot, "that there stateroom door come bustin' out right at me. I sorta ducked to one side, an' plumb inter somebody that hit me on th' eye. I reckon th' fightin' was from then on. Excuse me, sir; but you got yore pants on upside-down—I means stern-foremost, sir."

"What's my pants got to do with this disgraceful riot, or mebby mutiny?" blazed

the reddening captain. He couldn't resist a downward glance over his person, and hastily slipped the red-socked foot behind its booted mate.

Somebody snickered and the sound ran along the line, gathering volume. Glaring at the battle-scarred line-up, Captain Newell waved the pistol and seemed at a loss for words.

Uncle Joe stepped forward with the bullwhacker. "Captain, this man says he woke up an' found a thief reachin' under his pillow, where he keeps his bottle. I think the thief is against the wall, there; and his partner, who doubtless acted as his lookout, is in the hands of those two men. The rest of th' fightin' was promiscuous, but well meant. I reckon if you put those two thieves in irons an' let th' rest of us go back to our berths it'll be th' right thing to do. As for Flynn, he deserves credit for his part in it."

"That's my understanding of it, captain," said Tom, and again burst out laughing. "Evidently they were after Mr. Cooper's money, which he has shown recklessly, and they did not know that he had changed staterooms."

"Reckon that's it, captain!" shouted someone, laughingly. "Anyhow, it's good enough. Come on, captain; it's time for a drink all 'round!"

In another moment a shirt-tailed picnic was in full swing, the bottles passing rapidly.

CHAPTER V

THE INSULT

Shortly after dawn Tom awakened and became conscious of a steady vibration and the rhythmical splash of the paddle wheel. Hurriedly dressing he went out on deck and glanced shoreward. The cream-and-chocolate colored water, of an opacity dense enough to hide a piece of shell only a quarter of an inch below its surface, rioted past; to port was a low-lying island covered with an amazing mass of piled-up trees, logs and débris, deposited there by the racing current of the rapidly-falling stream; and the distant shore was covered with dense forests of walnut and cottonwood, interspersed with rich bottoms masked by tangles of brush. Farther up he knew the sight would change into an almost treeless expanse of green prairies, gashed by scored bluffs of clay. The surface of the river was not smooth and the wind already had reached disturbing strength, while an occasional gust of chilling rain peppered the water and assaulted the boat. From the beat of the paddles and the high frequency of the vibrations he knew the *Belle* was going ahead under full steam, but his momentary frown was effaced by the thought that the pilot was competent and knew what he was doing. Still, he felt a little uneasy, and went forward to pay the pilot a visit.

Reaching the hurricane deck he saw both pilots at the wheel and also a lookout on the roof of the little house, while in the very point of the bow, on the main deck, another lookout was scrutinizing the river ahead.

"We're makin' good time," said Tom pleasantly as he poked his head in the pilot house.

"Yes," came an answering grunt; "too good, mebby."

His words and manner were not calculated to encourage conversation and the visitor went down to see about breakfast. Fortified by a cup of coffee he felt able to wait until the meal was ready and went out on deck again, standing in the shelter of an angle of the cabin, pretending to be interested in the slowly shifting panorama, but really impatiently waiting for the appearance of Patience Cooper. He had waited for about an hour, hardly stirring from his post near the door which she had used the morning before, when he caught sight of her crossing the cabin. Turning from the window and stepping forward he opened the door for

her and after a short, cheerful talk about being under way again, led her to the breakfast table, ignoring the scowling horse-dealer who sat at a table in a corner talking to Elias Stevens.

Their breakfast did not take as long as it had on the previous morning, one reason being that while they ate they sensed the boat turn toward the shore and before they had finished it stopped along the bank and moored again.

"I do believe the rain has ceased for the day," Patience observed, peering out of the window by her side. "It is growing brighter every minute. I wonder why the boat has stopped?"

"Too much wind," answered her companion, nodding at the waves running past the boat.

"If that is all, I'm going ashore," she declared.

"You may find it disagreeable," warned Tom, delighted by the prospect of a tramp with her. "It is bound to be wet under foot and the wind will be cold and penetrating; but if you don't mind it, I'm sure *I* don't." He finished his coffee and smiled. "It will be a great relief to get off this boat."

"Come on, then; I'll meet you at the landing stage in ten minutes," she exclaimed. "This will be a good opportunity to get accustomed to the heavy boots Uncle Joe had made for me. They smell like tallow candles with leather wicks, if you can imagine the combination."

He saw her enter her stateroom and then went to his own, got his rifle and stood at the gangplank like a sentry. In less than the allotted time she joined him, waved gaily at her uncle and the captain, who were talking together near the pilot house, and went down the sloping plank, eager to explore the river bank. As they reached the top of the terrace-like bank and turned to wave again, the sun broke through the clouds and turned the moisture-laden trees and brush into a jeweled fairyland. They did not go far south since they were restricted to the more open spaces where they could walk without rubbing against wet foliage, but they found comparatively open lanes along the top of the bank, from where they could keep watch over the packet and get back without undue haste at the sound of her warning whistle.

They crossed the trails of several animals and she listened with interest to her companion's description of their makers, wondering at his intimate knowledge of

animal habits. Finally, coming to a great cottonwood log, stripped of its bark and shining in the sunlight, he helped her upon it and sat down by her side.

"You surprised me, Miss Cooper, when you mentioned you were going to Santa Fe," he said, turning to one of the subjects uppermost in his mind. "It is a long, tedious, trying journey to men, and it might prove infinitely more so to a woman."

"I suppose so," she replied reflectively. "But you know, Mr. Boyd, I haven't seen my father in five years, and his letter, sent back by the eastbound caravan from Santa Fe last year, told us how he missed me and how dissatisfied he was with his housekeeping arrangements and how he dreaded to spend another winter away from us. It was too late then, of course, to make the trip, but I determined to go to him with the first caravan leaving Independence this spring. Uncle Joe fumed and fussed about it and collected all the stories of privation, loss of sanity and sudden death, and everything else of a deterring nature and brought them home to me to serve as warnings. I can do anything I want with him except keep him from gambling, and when he really understood that nothing could stop me, he gave in and I soon had him so busy explaining away the woeful tales he had brought me, and hunting up new ones of a bright and cheerful aspect that he half believed them himself. I learned that all the Indians were pets, that there were miles of flowers all the way, that people near death from all kinds of causes miraculously recovered their health by the end of the first two days, and that the caravan had to watch closely to keep its members from leaving it and settling all along the trail."

They burst out laughing together. He could easily picture her uncle frantically reversing himself. He had taken a great liking to Joseph Cooper, who was a humorous, warm-hearted old fox among his friends, delighting in their pleasures and sunning himself complacently in their approbation. No trouble was too great for him to go through if it would bring happiness to those he cared for.

They laughed and chatted and enjoyed themselves greatly, and were very much surprised when his lean figure appeared beside the pilot house and they saw him wave his hat and motion toward his mouth with animation and great exaggeration.

"Good heavens! Is it dinner time already?" exclaimed Tom, sliding from the log, and becoming aware for the first time that the log had been far from as dry as he thought.

Laughing and scampering, they hurried back toward the landing, racing down the hill that led to the little opening in the grove not far from the water's edge. As they started down it Tom caught sight of several figures sprawled on the sand, which had dried quickly under the combined attacks of sun and wind. Among them he saw the lank form of Ephriam Schoolcraft slowly arising to one elbow as the horse-dealer turned and watched them come down the incline.

Patience stumbled, her heavy boots bothering her, and her companion checked himself and caught her as she pitched forward. Swinging her through the air, he put her down again on the other side of him and laughingly offered his arm.

"Thar ain't nothin' like 'lasses fer to draw flies," came the drawling, unpleasant voice of the sneering figure on the ground. "Blow flies air included. Wrap it in skirts an' young fellers make plumb fools o' theirselves. Any flirt kin pull th' wool over thar eyes like it war a loose skin cap." His raucous laugh was doubly disagreeable because of the sneer envenoming it, and Tom stiffened.

"I seed an example o' that right yere on this hyar packet; an' most likely I'll see a hull lot more o' it if I has patience. He-he-he!"

Tom checked his stride, but the quick, reassuring pressure on his arm made him keep on, his burning face held rigidly toward the boat. He dared not look at his companion. They walked silently up the landing stage and into the cabin, Tom waiting with ill concealed impatience until his companion should join her uncle at the table. But he was surprised, for she spoke in a pleasant, soft tone and ordered him to remain where he was for a few minutes. Before he could make up his mind what she meant he saw her lean over her uncle's table and say something. The ex-gambler pushed suddenly back, patted her on the head and walked briskly but nonchalantly toward the curious onlooker.

"You young folks never have any regard for an old man's comfort," he chuckled as he took hold of Tom's arm. "Now, sir, I'll take great pleasure in stretching my legs in any direction you may select, and in stretching the neck of any officious meddler. I am at your service, Tom; and, damn it, I'm not too old to become a principal!"

Tom stared at him for a moment as the words sunk in. "By G-d!" he murmured. "There ain't another like her in th' whole, wide world! Thank you, Mr. Cooper: if you'll be kind enough to stand on one side and keep the affair strictly between myself and that polecat, I'll try not to keep you from your dinner very long. He might have been decent enough to have picked his quarrel in some other way!"

Schoolcraft arose alertly as they entered the little clearing, and watched Tom hand the double-barreled rifle to his companion, slip off his belt and throw his coat over it. The horse-dealer grinned with savage elation as he discarded his own weapons and coat, hardly believing in his good fortune. Not many men along the border cared to meet him unarmed.

Tom stepped forward. "Every time I look at that terbaccer juice a-dribblin' down yer chin, Schoolcraft, it riles me," he said evenly. "I'm a-goin' ter wipe it off," and his open hand struck his enemy's jaw with a resounding whack as he stepped swiftly to one side. "You've allus had a sneakin' grudge ag'in me," he asserted, giving ground before the infuriated horse-dealer, "since I caught ye cheatin' at Independence. You've been tryin' ter work it off ever since we left th' levee. I reckon this belongs to you!"

He stepped in quickly and drove his right fist into Schoolcraft's mouth, avoiding the flailing blows. "If ye'll stand up ter it an' make it a fight," he jeered, "I'll be much obliged to ye, fer I've promised my friend not ter keep him from his dinner." Again he stepped in and struck the bleeding lips. He boxed correctly according to the times, except that he used his feet to good advantage. His education at an eastern university had been well rounded and he never allowed himself to get out of condition.

Schoolcraft, stung to fury, leaped forward to grapple, hoping to make it a rough-and-tumble affair, at which style of fighting he had but few equals. Instead of his adversary stepping to one side, he now stood solidly planted in one spot, his left foot a little advanced, and drove in a series of straight-arm blows that sent the horse-dealer staggering back. The younger man pressed his advantage, moving forward with unswerving determination, his straight punches invariably beating the ill-timed and terrific swings of his bleeding opponent, who showed a vitality and an ability to take punishment not unusual among the men of his breed. The horse-dealer knew that if the fight remained an open affair he would not last long, and he got command over his rage and began to use his head.

Suddenly he dropped to hands and knees under a right-hand blow that was a little short of hurting him, and sprang up under his enemy's guard, and brought exultant ejaculations from his little group of friends. But for the warning conveyed to Tom by the knowledge that he barely had touched the horse-dealer's jaw with that blow, and could not have knocked him down, the trick might have worked; and as it was it succeeded in bringing the two men to close grips. Schoolcraft's right arm slid around his enemy's waist and hugged him close,

while the left slipped up between them until the hand went under the younger man's chin and began to push it up and back. It was the horse-dealer's favorite and most deadly trick and he exulted as he arched his back and threw his full strength into the task. Never had it failed to win, for the victim of that hold must either quit or have his neck broken; and the choice did not rest with the victim.

The muscles of Tom's neck stood out as though they would burst, the veins of his forehead and throat swelling into tiny serpents, and his crimson face grew darker and darker, a purplish tint creeping into it. But Schoolcraft found that he was dealing with a man who had studied wrestling as eagerly as its sister science. He also found that there was a counter to his favorite hold, always providing that it had been robbed of its greatest factor: surprise. For it to be deadly effective his whole strength had to be thrown into it instantly and meet no ready, rigid opposition; and in this he had failed because of the subtle warning conveyed to his adversary when he fell before a harmless blow. Almost before he knew it Tom's left arm, circling high in air, jammed in between their heads and forced its way down to Schoolcraft's cheek. At the same instant the right hand dashed down and got a hold inside his left thigh, close up against the crotch; and as the left arm thrust his head sidewise with a power not to be withstood, the right hand lifted suddenly to the right and he struck the ground on his head and shoulder with a shock which rendered him senseless.

The winner staggered back, braced himself and swayed a little on his feet as he sucked in great gulps of air. He wheeled savagely as he heard a shuffling step to one side and slightly behind him, but the precaution was not necessary, for simultaneously with the shuffling came Joe Cooper's snapped warning, cold and deadly.

"Better stop, Stevens! I'm only lookin' for an excuse to blow you open!"

Elias Stevens obeyed, standing irresolute and scowling. "You talk d——d big behind a gun!" he sneered.

"Only half as big as I might, seeing it's a double gun," retorted the older man. "If it don't suit you we can turn, step off ten paces an' fire when we're ready. Might as well make a good job of it while we're about it. I ain't no Mike Fink; but you ain't no Carpenter, so I reckon it's purty even."

"I'll take care of any objectors, in any fashion," said Tom, facing Stevens and the others. "I'll be ready fer you, Stevens, by th' time you get your weapons an' coat off, if you choose that way. Pickin' on an old man don't go while there's a

younger one around; an', besides, it's my quarrel. There it is, in your teeth; take it, and eat it!"

"It war a fair fight," said an onlooker in grudging admiration. He expressed the ethics of the fighting current at that time in that part of the country. Any kind of fighting, be it with hands, feet, nails, teeth or other weapons was fair as long as no outsider took a hand in it. It had been the rule of the keelboatmen and they had carried it up and down the waterways, from New Orleans to the upper Mississippi and from Pittsburg to the Rockies.

Tom nodded. "All right. You can tell him that he won't get in close, next time," he said, glancing at the stirring loser. "Come on, Uncle Joe; your dinner's plumb cold an' ruined."

"I'm hot enough to warm it as I chaw!" snapped his friend. "I was scared for a moment, though; fighting out in this country don't get you nothin' but a tombstone, generally, an' you'll be cussed lucky if you get that. But you did what you started out to do; I couldn't see no tobacco juice on his chin th' last time I looked." He followed his companion down the bank and as they crossed the gangplank he chuckled. "I won't eat no liver for a long time, I reckon: his face near made me sick!"

"I shouldn't 'a' cut him up so," admitted Tom; "but I was forking off a grudge. Next time, I'll kill him." Then he thought of Patience and glowed all over. "There ain't another like her, nowhere!" he muttered.

Uncle Joe glanced sideways at the slightly marked face of his companion, shrewdly noting the expression of reverent awe and adoration.

"Young man," he said, "you're a little mite hasty, but I like 'em that way. I reckon if you took my waggins inter Santa Fe you'd get patience."

At this second play on her name within the last half hour Tom whirled in his tracks and held out his hand. "Uncle Joe, if you think I'm able to handle 'em, I'll take 'em through h—l if I have to, without a blister—" then he faltered and his face grew hard as he shook his head in regret. "I can't do it," he growled. "It wouldn't be fair to bring down Armijo's wrath on your niece and brother. He'd hound them like the savage brute he is. No; you'll have to keep to whatever arrangements you had in mind."

Uncle Joe shook his head. "That's too bad, Tom. I was counting on you keeping

an eye on Patience and seeing her through. It's too cussed bad."

Tom's laugh rang out across the water. "Oh I'm going to do that! I'm bound for Santa Fe, either as a free lance or with trade goods of my own; but I am not going with your wagons. I got it pretty well figured out."

"I'm allus gettin' into places where I've got to back out," grumbled Uncle Joe. "Now I reckon I'll have to tell Patience you're too young an' giddy to handle my outfit. An' *then* mebby I'll have to back out ag'in! Tell you one thing, this here Santa Fe trip may be fine for invalids, but it ain't done *my* health no good!" While Tom laughed at him he considered. "Huh! I don't reckon it'll be a good thing to let her know that you an' Armijo are as friendly as a Cheyenne an' a Comanche. Cuss it! Oh, well; put away this gun an' come on in an' eat, if there's anything left."

CHAPTER VI

INDIANS AND GAMBLERS

Shortly after noon the wind died down enough to let the packet resume her upstream labors, and expectations ran high that she would make a long, peaceful run. They were not to be realized.

The first unpleasant incident occurred when the boat had been run against a bank at a woodpile to replenish her fuel. The lines were made fast and the first of the wood-carriers had reached the stacked cordwood when from behind it arose a dozen renegade Indians, willing to turn momentarily from their horse-stealing expedition long enough to levy a tribute of firewater on the boat. They refused to allow a stick to be removed without either a fight or a supply of liquor and trade goods, and the leader of the band grappled with the foremost member of the crew and tried to drag him behind the shelter of the pile and so gain a hostage to give additional weight to their demands and to save them from being fired on.

Goaded by despair and fright from the unexpectedness of the attack and what might be in store for him the white man struggled desperately and, with the return of a measure of calmness, worked a neat cross-buttock on his red adversary and threw him sprawling out in plain sight of the boat. Half a dozen plainsmen on board had leaped for their rifles and shouted the alarm; a four pound carronade was wheeled swiftly into position and a charge of canister sent crashing over the woodpile into the brush and trees. The roar of the gun and the racket caused by the charge as it rattled through the branches and brush filled the savages with dismay and, not daring to run from the pile and up the bank under the cannon and the rapidly augmented rifles on the decks of the boat, they raised their hands and slowly emerged from their worthless breastwork.

Captain Newell shouted frantic instructions to his grim and accurate volunteers, ordering and begging in one breath for them not to fire, for he knew that bloodshed would start a remorseless sniping warfare along the river that might last for several seasons. At such a game the snipers on the banks, concealed as they would be, could reasonably be expected to run up quite a list of casualties on the boat. This was no new experience for him and he knew that nothing serious would grow out of it as long as none of the Indians were injured. This

little party was composed of the renegade scourings of the frontier tribes which had been debauched by their contact with the liquor-selling whites and they were more fitted for petty thievery than the rôle of warriors. He shouted and argued and cursed and pleaded with the eager riflemen, most of whom burned with the remembrance of stolen packs of furs and equipment at the hands of such Indians as these.

The growling plainsmen, knowing that he was right and understanding his position, reluctantly kept their trigger fingers extended and finally lowered their pieces, hoping that the Indians would lose their heads and do some overt act; but the Indians were not fools, whatever else they might have been. With eager alertness on one side and sullen acquiescence on the other the wooding was finished, ropes cast off and the *Missouri Belle* pushed quickly out into the stream, her grim faced defenders manning the stern decks and praying for an excuse to open fire.

No sooner had a reasonable distance been opened between the boat and the bank than the Indians, at a signal from their leader, leaped behind the woodpile and opened fire on the boat with muskets and bows and arrows, the latter weapons far more accurate than the miserable trade guns which a few of the braves carried. With them dropping an arrow is an instinct and they have developed it to a degree that is remarkable, to say the least; while with the smooth-bore trade guns, with varying charges of trade powder and sizes of balls, they were poor shots at any distance. Instantly two score rifles replied from the boat, pouring their leaden hail into the stacked wood, but without any noticeable result; and before a second round could be fired the distance had been increased to such an extent that only one or two excitable tenderfeet tried a second shot. The chief result of the incident was the breaking of the monotony of the trip and the starting of chains of reminiscences among the hunters and trappers to which the tenderfeet listened with eager ears.

After this flurry of excitement interest slowly swung far astern, where the American Fur Company's boat was supposed to be breasting the current on her long voyage to Fort Union and beyond, and many eyes were on the lookout for a glimpse of her smoke. A sight of the boat itself, except at close range, was almost hopeless because the bends in the river were so numerous and close together that the stream seemed like a narrow lake.

The surface of the water was becoming different from what it had been, for the great masses of floating débris had thinned and no longer came down in raft-like

formations. This was due to the rapid falling of the water, which had stranded more and more of the bulkier drift and piled it up at the head of every island, emerging bar and jutting point. At the height of the freshets, especially the April rise, often the logs and trees came down so thick and solid that they resembled floating islands. This was in large measure due to the simultaneous floating of the vast accumulations piled up all along the banks, and it aroused disgust and anxiety in the hearts of the boatmen, who feared for hulls and paddle wheels.

The harmless brush with the Indians and the stories the affair had started quickened interest in firearms, and during the rest of the afternoon there was considerable target practice against the ducks, geese, and débris, and an occasional long shot at some animal on the distant bank.

Tom Boyd did his share of this, glad of the opportunity to try out his new and strange weapons, and to put off meeting Patience Cooper as long as he could, fearing her attitude concerning his fight with Schoolcraft. He found that the newly marketed Colt six-shooter was accurate and powerful at all reasonable ranges, beautifully balanced and well behaving. It attracted a great deal of attention from fellow travelers, for it was not as well-known in Missouri as it was in other parts of the country. The English rifle, not much heavier than the great Hawken weapons of his companions, despite its two barrels, shot true and strong, and the two ready shots at his command easily recompensed him for the additional weight. At this time, in the country into which he was going, an instantly available second shot had an importance not to be overlooked. To the Indians, especially, was it disconcerting, and its moral effect partook of the nature of magic and made a white man's "medicine" that demanded and received a wholesome respect. He found that it followed the rough and ready rule of the frontier that up to a hundred yards the proper charge was as much powder as would cover the bullet in the palm of the hand. In the long range shots the weapon was surprisingly accurate, and one thoughtful and intelligent hunter, who had guided several English sporting parties, gave the credit to the pointed bullets.

"Thar ain't no doubt about it, pardner," he confided to Tom as he slyly produced his own bullet mold, and showed it to his companion. "I've tried 'em out in my own rifle, an' they shore do shoot straighter an' further. This hyar mold war give ter me by a city hunter I had in my party when we found it would fit my rifle. I ain't usin' th' old un no more. Rub a leetle b'ar grease or buffaler tallow on th' patch paper, young man, ter make 'em go down easier. Thar good beaver."

The sun set in a gold and crimson glory, working its magic metamorphosis on river, banks, and bottoms, painting the colored cliffs and setting afire the crystals in which their clay was rich. Though usually the scenery along this river at this time of the year was nothing to boast of, there were certain conditions under which it resembled a fairyland. The rolling wavelets bore their changing colors across the glowing water and set dancing myriad flashes of sunlight; streaks of sunlight reached in under the trees along the bank and made fairy paths among the trunks, while the imbedded crystals in the clay bluffs glittered in thousands of pin-points of iridescent flame.

When supper time came around Tom still felt a little reluctant to meet Patience, worried by how she might greet him, although her actions preceding the fight should have told him that his fears were groundless. To his great relief she met him as graciously as she had before, and as a matter of fact he thought he detected a little more warmth and interest, but discounted this because he feared that his judgment might be biased in his favor by his hopes.

Uncle Joe apparently had forgotten all about the affair and did not refer to it in any way, confining himself to subjects connected with the great southwest highway, its trade, outfitting, the organization of the caravans, the merchandising at Santa Fe and bits of historical and personal incidents, not forgetting to comment on the personality of Armijo and his arbitrary impost of five hundred dollars on each wagon to cross the boundary, regardless of what its contents might be. He chuckled over the impost, for the goods which he had sent up to Independence by an earlier boat had been selected with that tax in mind. He had his own ideas about the payment of the impost, and although he could not entirely avoid it, he intended to take a great deal of the sting out of it.

He contended that the beating of unlawful duties was not cheating, since it was purely a game of one individual outwitting another, one being an arbitrary tyrant who was strongly suspected of pocketing the wagon tax for his own uses. The only trouble with his philosophy was what it set going, for having proved one evasion of tax to be honest it tended to go farther and justify other evasions which fairly crossed the ethical boundaries. One of these was the rumored prohibition of Mackinaw blankets and the export tax on specie. This last would be something of a hardship, for coin was the best and most easily carried of all mediums of payment, and the Mexican government, in levying this tax, would tend to force the traders to barter rather than sell their goods. If payment were had in specie, the wagons could be disposed of at a fair profit and mules used to pack it back to Missouri. When sewed tightly in rawhide bags it became an

unshifting mass by the shrinking of the leather under the rays of the sun. Some of the traders took mules in exchange for their goods which, if they could be safely delivered in the Missouri settlements, would give an additional profit of no mean per centum; but losses in mules were necessarily suffered on the long return trip, and the driving, corralling, and guarding of a herd was a task to try the patience of a saint and the ingenuity of the devil. The Indians would take almost any kind of chances to stampede a herd of mules, and they were adepts at the game.

Uncle Joe had been over the trail, having gone out with that band of Missourians who took the first wagons across from Franklin in 1824, and he had kept in close touch with the New Mexican and Chihuahuan trade ever since. He knew the tricks, and had invented some of his own, which he guarded well. For the despotic Armijo he had a vast contempt, which was universal among the great majority of the men who knew anything at all about the cruel, conceited, and dishonest Governor of the Department of New Mexico. The unfortunate Texan Santa Fe Expedition had aroused bitter feelings among Americans and Texans against the Mexican, many of them having had friends and relatives in that terrible winter march of two thousand miles on foot from Santa Fe to the City of Mexico, which followed so close upon the heart-breaking and disastrous northward march from Texas to a vile betrayal and barbarous treatment. Anything American or Texas plainsmen could do to hurt or discredit the inhuman pomposity whose rise to power had been through black treachery and coldly planned murder, would be done with enthusiastic zeal.

At the close of the leisurely eaten meal they went on deck in time to see the *John Auld* round the next upstream bend and forge forward, soon stopping, however, to drift past the slowed *Missouri Belle* while their pilots exchanged terse information about the channels and snags. The *John Auld* carried a small cargo of fur packs on her main deck and a few free hunters and trappers on their way to St. Louis to dispose of their goods and to outfit anew. By this time the fur of the pelts slipped and the fur taking season was over, but there was always the buffalo to lure them afield again.

The evening was delightful and hopes ran high for an uninterrupted voyage. Uncle Joe expressed the belief that the boat would run all night in view of the favorable weather; Tom demurring on the grounds of the rapidly falling river and the blackness of the nights. The boat curved sharply to avoid a jutting bar and straightened out again. Prompted by sight of some of the passengers who promenaded past them the talk swung to the fur trade in general and to the end of

it, which was rapidly being brought nearer by the great tide of emigration setting in. Discussions regarding the emigrants and the great Oregon Trail followed as a matter of course and almost before they knew it it was time for Patience to retire, and her companions soon followed her example, Uncle Joe foregoing his usual night game.

When morning broke they found that they had sailed nearly all the night, and the boat kept on all day, stopping only at a few landings and to take on wood, of which she burned an amazing quantity. Another night's run brought them well up the river, but the following day found them tied to a bank, because of adverse weather. In the afternoon, the wind dying out, they were on the way again and another night's sail was looked for. Patience retired earlier than usual and when Tom returned from seeing her safely into her room he found Uncle Joe impatiently waiting for him.

"Come on, Tom," said the merchant. "I've still got a lot to learn about gamblin' an' there ain't much time left to do it in. Let's go back an' see if there's a game runnin'. I might as well let somebody else pay th' expenses of this trip."

Tom nodded and followed his companion into the cabin set apart for men and sat down at a table with two trappers, from where he could watch the game at close range, for he realized that the time for the gamblers to get the merchant's money also was getting short. Under the conditions almost anything might occur and he felt that he owed a debt to his friend for the part he had played during the fight with Schoolcraft.

Uncle Joe joined Stevens and a companion, who were idly playing and who seemed to be impatiently and nervously waiting for his appearance; soon a tense game was in progress. At a table in a corner from where the players could be closely watched Ephriam Schoolcraft, his face still badly bruised, was talking in sullen undertones to the little Mexican and another companion, while hunters, traders, trappers, and men of various other callings kept up a low hum of conversation throughout the cabin.

From one group came fragments of fur trade gossip: "Th' American Fur Company's talkin' about abandonin' Fort Van Buren. Thar's been a lot o' posts let go to grass th' last two years. Th' business ain't what it was ten year ago."

"On th' other hand," replied a companion, "Fox an' Livingston air goin' fer to put up a post at th' mouth o' th' Little Bighorn, which evens up fer Van Buren; an' Chardon's aimin' fer to put one up at th' mouth o' th' Judith. Th' trade's all right,

only th' American's got more buckin' agin' it."

"'Tain't what it onct was, though," said a third trader. "Thar's too many posts an' private parties. Ye can't go nowhere hardly in th' Injun country without comin' slap up ag'in a post o' some kind. Thar's Zack: hey, Zack! Come over hyar!"

Zack, a mountain hunter and a free one, swung over and joined the group.

"Jest been palaverin' with some Canucks," he said. "Fur's I could git th' hang o' thar parley-vouz thar goin' up ter help open Fort William, at th' mouth o' th' Yallerstun, fer Fox an' Livingston. They sez Pratte an' Cabanne had took over Fort Platte, up nigh th' Laramie. How fur ye goin' on this packet, Smith?"

"Bellevue," answered Smith. "I'm headin' up th' Platte a-ways, if th' danged Pawnees let me git past. Pardner's waitin' near th' mouth with a bullboat. Reckon we kin count on enough water, this time o' year, fer ter float *that*; 'though I shore ain't bettin' on it," he chuckled.

Zack laughed. "Th' Platte shore comes close ter bein' all shadder an' no substance. Dangest stream *I* ever seen, an' I've seen a-plenty."

"Don't think a hull lot o' that country, nohow," said a third. "Them Pawnees air th' worst thieves an' murderers this side o' th' Comanchees. They kin steal yer shirt without techin' yer coat, danged if they can't. Blast 'em, I *know* 'em!"

Zack laughed shortly. "They ain't no-whar with th' Crows when it comes ter stealin'," he averred.

Smith chuckled again. "Yer right, Zack. He's pizen set ag'in 'em ever sence they stole his packs an' everythin' that wasn't a-hangin' ter him. 'Twarn't much o' a walk he had, though, only a couple hundred miles."

"Ye kin bet I'm pizen ag'in 'em sence then," retorted the Pawnee-hater vehemently. "If I tuk scalps I could show ye somethin'. They've paid a lot fer what they stole that time."

From another group came the mention of a name which took Tom's instant attention.

"I hears Ol' Jim Bridger's quit tradin' in furs as a reg'lar thing," said the voice. "They say he's gone in fer tinkerin' an' outfittin' up nigh Teton Pass. Got a fust rate post too, they say."

"Tinkerin' what?" demanded a listener. "What kin he outfit 'way up thar?"

"Emigrants!" snorted the first speaker. "Figgers on sellin' 'em supplies an' sich, an' repairin' fer 'em at his smithy. I shore reckon they'll need him a hull lot more'n he'll need them. That's a long haul fer wagons, tenderfeet's 'spacially—Independence ter th' Divide—'though it ain't what it was when Hunt an' Crooks went out thirty year ago."

"No, 'tain't," replied a third man. "An' it's a lucky thing fer th' tenderfeet that Nat Wyeth went an' built Fort Hall whar he did, even if 'twas fer th' Hudson Bay. I'm tellin' ye these hyar emigrants would be stayin' ter home from Oregon an' Californy if 'twarn't fer what us trappers has did fer th' country. Thar ain't nary a trail that we didn't locate fer 'em."

The first man nodded. "Not mentionin' th' Injuns afore us, we found thar roads, passes, an' drinkin' water fer 'em; an' now thar flockin' in ter spile our business. One thing, though, thar goin' straight acrost, most on 'em. It could be a hull lot worse."

While Tom's ears caught bits of the conversation roundabout his eyes paid attention to the gambling table and on two occasions he half arose from his chair to object profanely to the way Stevens played; but each time he was not quite sure. On the third occasion one of the trappers glanced at him, smiled grimly, and nodded at the hard-pressed gambler.

"Th' fur trade ain't th' only skin game, young feller," he softly said. "Ol' man a friend o' yourn?"

Tom nodded and watched more closely, and a moment later he stiffened again.

"Why, h—l!" growled the trapper, sympathizing with one of his own calling. "Go fur him, young feller, an' chuck him inter th' river! I'll hold off his pardner fer ye!"

An older trapper sauntered over and seated himself at Tom's side. "Been watchin' them fer quite a spell," he said in a low voice. "Ain't that ol' feller St Louis Joe?"

Tom shrugged his shoulders, and saw a great light. Who hadn't heard of St. Louis Joe? His new friend's love of gambling, and his success against Stevens and his crowd would be accounted for if the trapper was right. He glanced at the speaker and replied: "Don't know. I never saw him till I crossed th' levee at St. Louis jest afore we sailed."

"Looks a heap like him, anyhow," muttered the newcomer. "Fair an' squar, *he* war. I seen him play when I war goin' down to N'Orleans, ten year ago. Never fergit a face, an' I shore remember *his*, fer he war playin' that time fer 'most all th' money in th' Mississippi Valley, I reckon. Consarn it, I *know* it's him! Fer ol' times' sake, if he gits inter trouble with that skunk, I'm with him ter th' hilt." He started to leave the table, thought better of it and slid forward to the edge of his chair. "He's bein' cheated blind. I saw that skunk palm a card!"

Tom nodded, his hand resting on his belt, but he did not take his eyes from the game. He suspected that Uncle Joe was pretty well informed about what was going on and would object when it suited him.

The first trapper leaned over the table and whispered to his friend. "This young feller is watchin' the cheat, an' I'm watchin' th' pardner. You might keep an eye on that Independence hoss-thief over thar—that feller with th' raw meat face, that *this* youngster gave him. From th' way he's lookin' thar ain't no tellin' how this hyar party is goin' ter bust up."

The second plainsman nodded and after a moment dropped his pipe on the floor. He shifted in his chair as he reached down for it and when he sat up again he was in a little different position, and not a thing at Schoolcraft's table escaped his eyes.

"I'll take th' greaser 'longside him," muttered the third plainsman. "W'ich is a plain duty an' a pleasure. Bet ye a plew I nail him atween his eyes, fust crack, if he gits hostile."

Suddenly there came a loud smack as Uncle Joe's left hand smashed down on the cards in Stevens' hand, holding them against the table while his right hand flashed under the partly buttoned edge of his long frock coat. It hung there, struggling with something in the inside pocket. Stevens had jerked his own hand loose, relinquishing the cards, and with the sharp motion a small, compact percussion pistol slid out of his sleeve and into his grasp as his hand stopped. He was continuing the motion, swinging the weapon up and forward when Tom, leaning suddenly forward in his chair, sent his heavy skinning knife flashing through the air. The first trapper had thrown a pistol down on the gambler's partner, the second stopped Ephriam Schoolcraft's attempted draw against Tom, and the third plainsman was peering eagerly along the barrel of his pistol at a spot between the Mexican's eyes. Had it been a well rehearsed act things could not have happened quicker or smoother.

Not five other persons in the cabin had any intimation of what was coming until Tom's knife, flying butt first through the air, knocked the pistol from Stevens' hand. The weapon struck the floor and exploded, the bullet passing through a cabin window. As the knife left his hand the thrower had leaped after it and he grabbed the desperate gambler in a grip against which it was useless to struggle. Uncle Joe, loosening his hold on the pocket pistol tangled in the lining of his coat, leaped around the table and quickly passed his hands over the clothing of the prisoner.

"What's th' trouble here?" demanded the quick, authoritative voice of the captain as he ran in from the deck. "Who fired that shot, an' why?"

He soon was made familiar with the whole affair and stepped to the table, picked up the cards and spread them for everyone to see. Asking a few questions of disinterested eye-witnesses, he looked about the cabin and spoke.

"I've nothing to say about gambling on this boat as long as gentlemen play," he said sharply. "When the play is crooked, *I* take a hand. I can't overlook this." He motioned to the group of boat hands crowding about the door and they took hold of Stevens and his partner. "Take these men and get their effects, and then put them ashore in the yawl. I'll have provisions put aboard while you're gone. Stevens, due south not many miles is the St. Louis-Independence wagon road. It

is heavily traveled this time of the year. You can't miss it. Besides that there are numerous cabins scattered about the bottoms, and not far upstream is a settlement. Take 'em away." Glancing over the cabin again and letting his eyes rest for a moment on Ephriam Schoolcraft, he wheeled and started for the door, but paused as he reached it. "If there's any further trouble I'll be on the hurricane deck, for'rd. We're going to run all night if we can. I don't want any more disturbance on this packet."

As the captain left, Uncle Joe thanked Tom and the trappers and joined them at their table, providing the refreshment most liked by the plainsmen, and the reminiscences became so interesting that the little group scarcely noticed Tom arise and leave it. He was too restless to stay indoors and soon found a place to his liking on the deck below, near the bow, where he paced to and fro in the darkness, wrestling with a tumult of hopes and fears. Reaching one end of his beat, he wheeled and started back again, and as he passed the cabin door he suddenly stopped and peered at the figure framed in the opening, and tore off his hat, too surprised to speak.

"Mr. Boyd?" came a soft, inquiring, and anxious voice.

"Yes, Miss Cooper; but I thought you were fast asleep long ago!"

"I was," she replied; "but something that sounded like a shot awakened me, and thinking that it seemed to come from the card tables, I became fearful and dressed as hurriedly as I could in the dark. Is—is Uncle Joe—all right?"

"In good health, good company, and in the best of spirits," replied Tom, smiling at how the last word might be interpreted. "I left him only a moment ago, swapping tales with some trappers."

"But the shot. Surely it *was* a shot that awakened me?"

Tom chuckled. "Sleeve pistol fell to the floor and went off accidentally," he explained. "Luckily no one was hurt, for the ball passed out of a window and went over the river. Are you warm enough? This wind is cutting." At her assent he took a step forward. "I'll see you to your room if you wish."

"I'm too wide awake now to sleep for awhile," she replied, joining him. "Didn't the boat stop?"

"Yes; two passengers went ashore in the yawl," he answered. "These packets are certainly accommodating and deserve patronage. Why, Miss Cooper, you're

shivering! Are you sure you are warm enough?"

"Yes," she answered. "Something is bothering me. I don't know what it is. I wish we were at Independence though. Day and night this river fascinates me and almost frightens me. It is so swift, so treacherous, so changeful. It reminds me of some great cat, slipping through a jungle; and I can't throw the feeling off. If you don't mind, I'll join you in your sentry-go, you seem to give me the assurance I lack; but perhaps I'll interfere with your thoughts?"

"Hardly that," he laughed, thrilling as she took his arm for safety against stumbles in the dark. "You stimulate them, instead. I really was pacing off a fit of restlessness; but it's gone now. Look here; I wonder if you fully realize the certain hardships and probable dangers of the overland journey you are about to make?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Boyd," she answered, quietly. "You'll find me a different person on land. I underestimate nothing, but hope for the best. From little things I've picked up here and there I really believe that the dangers of the trail will be incidental when compared with those at the other end—at Santa Fe. I have reason to believe that father has had a great deal of trouble, along with other Americans, with Governor Armijo. Why is it that American citizens are insulted with impunity by Mexican officials? I understand that an Englishman may safely travel from one end of Mexico to the other, secure from annoyance, unless it be at the hands of Indians over whom the government exercises but little control."

"It's a universal complaint along the frontier," he replied. "It seems to be the policy of this country to avoid hurting the sensibilities of any vicious officialdom or ignorant populace. We seem to prefer to have our citizens harassed, insulted, and denied justice, rather than assert unequivocally that the flag goes in spirit with every one of us so long as we obey the laws of any country we are in. If it were not for the banding together of the American traders and merchants in Santa Fe, it would be very hazardous for an American to remain there. Armijo has had a few clashes with our people and is beginning to have a little respect for their determination and ability to defend their rights. Since the sufferings of the Texans have become known, there are any number of Americans in frontier garb who would cheerfully choke him to death. It would be a godsend to the New Mexican people if——"

There came a terrific crash, the boat stopped suddenly and the deck arose under their feet as a huge log smashed up through it. They were torn apart and thrown

down, and as Tom scrambled to his feet, calling his companion's name, he felt a great relief surge through him as he heard her answer.

CHAPTER VII

THE WRECKING OF THE MISSOURI BELLE

Tom grasped his companion's arm and hurried her toward the place where the yawl was tied as shouts, curses, tearing wood and a panic-stricken crowd of passengers pouring out of the cabins and rooms turned the night into a pandemonium, over which the hysterical blasts of the whistle bellowed its raucous calls for help far and wide across water and land. There came a rush of feet and several groups of passengers dashed toward the yawl, but stopped abruptly and hesitated as the Colt in Tom's hand glinted coldly in the soft light of a cabin window.

"Women first!" he snarled, savage as an animal at bay. "I'll kill th' first man that comes any closer! Get those bullboats overside, an' somebody round up th' other women an' bring 'em here! Keep cool, an' everybody'll be saved—lose yore heads an' we'll all die, *some* quicker'n others! Not another step forward!"

"Right ye air, friend," said a voice, and Zack, pistol in hand, dropped from the deck above and alighted at Tom's side like a fighting bobcat. "Put over them bullboats—an' be shore ye get hold o' th' ropes when ye do. *Lady!*" he shouted, catching sight of an emigrant and his wife. "Come hyar! An' you," he commanded her husband, "stan' by us—shoot ter kill if ye pulls trigger. Fine bunch o' cattle!" he sneered, and the rapidly growing crowd, finding that the guns facing them did not waver, turned and stampeded for the bullboats, every man of it bellowing orders and getting in the way of everyone else. There came a splash, a chorus of curses as a bullboat, thrown overboard upside down, slipped away in the darkness.

"Right side up, ye tarnation fools!" roared a voice, accompanied by a solid smash as a hunter near the boats knocked down a frantic freighter and took charge of the mob. "I'm fixin' fer to kill somebody!" he yelled. "Hang onter that rope or I'll spatter yer brains all over creation! Right side up, damn ye! Hold her! Thar! Now then, put over another—if ye git in that boat till I says so ye won't have no need fer it!"

Friends coming to his aid helped him hold the milling mob, and their coolness and determination, tried in many ticklish situations, stood them in good stead.

"Ask th' captain how bad she is!" shouted Tom as he caught sight of Joe Cooper tearing through the crowd like a madman. "I got Patience an' another woman here!"

"I might 'a' known it," yelled Uncle Joe, fighting back the way he had come. In a moment he returned and shouted until the frantic crowd gave him heed. "Cap'n says she can't sink! Cap'n says she can't sink! Listen, damn ye! Cap'n says she can't sink. He's groundin' her on a bar! Keep 'em out of them boats, boys! *Don't* let them fools get in th' boats! Not till th' very last thing! They'll only swamp 'em."

"Good fer you, St. Louis!" roared a mountaineer, playing with a skinning knife in most suggestive manner.

"Th' boilers'll blow up! Th' boilers'll blow up! Look out for th' boilers!" yelled a tenderfoot, fighting to get to the boats. "They'll blow up! They'll blow——"

Zack took one swift step sideways and brought the butt of his pistol down on the jumping jack's head. "Let 'em blow, sister!" he shouted. "*You* won't hear 'em! Any more scared o' th' boilers?" he yelled, facing the crowd menacingly. "They won't blow up till th' water gits to 'em, an' when it does we'll all be knee-deep in it. Thar on this hyar deck, ye sheep!"

One man was running around in a circle not five feet across, moaning and blubbering. Tom glanced at him as he came around and stepped quickly forward, his foot streaking out and up. It caught the human pinwheel on the chest and he turned a beautiful back flip into the crowd. Zack's booming laugh roared out over the water and he slapped Tom resoundingly on the shoulder.

"More fun right hyar than in a free-fer-all at a winter rendyvoo, pardner. You kick wuss nor a mule. An' whar *you* goin'?" he asked a tin-horn gambler who took advantage of his lapse of alertness to dart past him. Zack swung his stiff arm and the gambler bounced back as though he had been struck with a club. "Thar's plenty o' it hyar if yer lookin' fer it," he shouted, raising his pistol.

Uncle Joe clawed his way back again, Tom's double-barreled rifle in his hands, and grimly took his place at his friend's side. Suddenly he cocked his head and then heard Tom's voice bellow past his ear.

"Listen, you fools! Th' fur boat! Th' fur boat!" he yelled at the top of his lungs. His companions and the other little group of resolute men took up the cry, and as

the furor of the crowd died down, the answering blasts rolled up the river. Suddenly a light, and then an orderly series of them pushed out from behind the last bend downstream, and showers of sparks from the belching stacks of the oncoming fur company boat danced and whirled high into the night, the splashing tattoo of her churning paddles sounding like music between the reassuring blasts of her whistle. The two stokers hanging from the levers of her safety valves kicked their feet in time with her whistle, not knowing which kick would usher them on an upward journey ending at St. Peter's eager gate. Their skins were as black as the rods they swung from, but their souls were as white as their rolling eyes.

"Thank God!" screamed a woman who was fighting her way through the crowd toward Tom's post, her clothing nearly torn from her; and at the words she sagged to the deck, inert, unresisting. Tom leaped forward and hauled her back with him, passed her on to Patience and resumed his grim guard.

A great shout, still tinged with horror and edged with fear, arose from the decks of the *Belle* and thundered across the river, the answering roar chopped up by the insistent whistle. Several red, stringy, rapier-like flashes pierced the night and the heavy reports barked across the hurrying water, to be juggled by a great cliff on the north bank.

Captain Newell had been busy. Learning that cool minds were dominating the panicky crowd, and that the bullboats were being properly launched and were ready for use if the worst came, he gave his undivided attention to the saving of the *Belle*. Her paddle still thrashed, but at a speed just great enough to overcome the current and to hold the snag in the wound it had made. Experience told him that once she drew back from that slimy assassin blade and fully opened the rent in her hull her sinking would follow swiftly. Already men had sounded the river on both sides and reported a steep slant to the bottom, twenty feet of water on the port side and fifteen on the starboard. One of the spare yawls, manned by two officers and a deck hand, shot away from the boat and made hurried soundings to starboard, the called depths bringing a look of hope to the captain's face. Forty yards to the right lay a nearly flat bar; but could he make that forty yards? There remained no choice but to try, for while the *Missouri Belle*, if she sank in her present position, would not be entirely submerged, she would be even less so every foot she made toward the shallows.

Part of the crew already had weighted one edge of a buffalo hide and stood in the bow, directly over the snag, which luckily had pierced the hull more above than

below the water line. The captain signalled and the great paddle wheel turned swiftly full speed astern. The grating, splitting sound of the snag leaving the hull was followed by a shouted order and the hide was lowered overside and instantly sucked against the rent; and the paddle wheel, quickly reversing, pushed the boat ahead at an angle to the current until, low in the water, she grounded solidly on the edge of the flat bar. Anchors were set and cables made taut while the *Belle* settled firmly on the sandy bottom and rested almost on an even keel. There she would stay if the river continued to fall, until the rent was fully exposed and repaired; and there she would stay, repaired, until another rise floated her. The captain signalled for the paddles to stop and then drew a heavy arm across his forehead, sighed, and turned to face the fur company packet.

The passengers were becoming calm by stages, but the calm was largely the reaction of hysteria for a few moments until common sense walled up the breach. Every eye now watched the oncoming steamboat, which had sailed doggedly ahead for the past two nights and days while the *Belle* had loitered against the banks. Even the most timid were now calmed by the sight of her lighted cabins as she ploughed toward her stricken sister. Fearful of the snag, she came to a stop when nearly abreast of the *Belle* and the two captains held a short and shouted conversation. Her yawl soon returned and reported the water safe, but shoaling rapidly; and at this information she turned slightly oblique to the current and, sounding every few feet, crept up to within two gangplanks' reach of the *Belle* and anchored bow and stern. Her own great landing stage swung out over the cheated waters and hung poised while that of the *Belle* circled out to meet it, waveringly, as though it had lost a valuable sense. They soon touched, were made to coincide and then lashed securely together. At once, women first, the passengers of the *Belle* began to cross the arched span a few at a time, and sighed with relief as they reached the deck of the uninjured vessel. On the main deck of the *Belle* the crew already was piling up such freight as could be taken from the hold and the sound of hammering at her bow told of temporary repairs being made.

Among the last to leave the *Belle* were Uncle Joe and Tom and as they started toward the gangplank, Captain Newell hurriedly passed them, stopped, retraced his steps, and gripped their hands tightly as he wished them a safe arrival at Independence. Then he plunged out of sight toward the engine room.

The transfer completed, the fur company boat cast free, raised her anchors, and sidled cautiously back into the channel. Blowing a hoarse salute, she straightened out into the current and surged ahead, apparently in no way daunted

by the fate of her sister. Captain Graves had commanded a heavily loaded boat when he left St. Louis and the addition of over a hundred passengers and their personal belongings, for whom some sort of provision must be made in sleeping arrangements and food, urged him to get to Independence Landing as quickly as he could. Turning from his supervision of the housing of the gangplank, he bumped into Uncle Joe, was about to apologize, and then peered into the face of his new passenger. The few lights which had been placed on deck to help in the transfer of the passengers, enabled him to recognize the next to the last man across the plank and his greeting was sharp and friendly.

"Joe Cooper, or I'm blind!" he exclaimed. "Alone, Joe?"

"Got my niece with me, and my friend, Tom Boyd, here."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Boyd—seems to me I've heard something about a Tom Boyd fouling the official craft of the Government of New Mexico," said the captain, shaking hands with the young plainsman. "We'll do our best for you-all the rest of the night, and we'll put Miss Cooper in my cabin. We ought to reach Independence early in the morning. I suppose that's your destination? Take you on to Westport just as easily."

"Independence is where I started for," said Uncle Joe.

"Then we'll put you ashore there, no matter what the condition of the landing is. It's easier to land passengers than cargo. But let me tell you that if you are aiming to go in business there, that Westport is the coming town since the river ruined the lower landing. Let's see if the cook's got any hot coffee ready, and a bite to eat: he's had time enough, anyhow. Come on. First we'll find Miss Cooper and the other women. I had them all taken to one place. Come on."

Shortly after dawn Tom awakened, rose on one elbow on the blanket he had thrown on the deck and looked around. Uncle Joe snored softly and rhythmically on his hard bed, having refused to rob any man of his berth. He had accepted one concession, however, by throwing his blanket on the floor of the texas, where he not only would be close to his niece, but removed from the other men of the *Belle*, many of whom were not at all reassuring in the matter of personal cleanliness. Arising, Tom went to a window and looked out, seeing a clear sky and green, rolling hills and patches of timber bathed in the slanting sunlight. A close scrutiny of the bank apprised him that they were not far from Independence Landing and he stepped to the rail to look up the river. Far upstream on a sharp bend on the south bank were the remains of Old Fort Clark,

as it was often called. About twenty miles farther on the same side of the river was his destination. He turned to call Uncle Joe and met the captain at the door of the texas; and he thought he caught a glimpse of a head bobbing back behind the corner of the cabin. As he hesitated as to whether to go and verify his eyes, the captain accosted him, and he stood where he was.

"Fine day, Mr. Boyd," said the officer. "Sleep well on the soft side of the deck?"

Tom laughed. "I can sleep well any place, captain. If I could have scooped out a hollow for my hips I wouldn't feel quite so stiff."

"Let me know as soon as Miss Cooper appears and I'll have some breakfast sent up to her. If you'd like a bite now, come with me."

"Thank you; you are very considerate. I'll call Uncle Joe and bring him with me."

"You will, hey?" said a voice from the texas. "Uncle Joe is ready right now, barring the aches of his old bones; and I've just been interrupted by Patience. She says she can chew chunks out of the cups, she's so hungry. What's that? You didn't? All right; all right; I'm backing up again! Have it your own way; you will, anyhow, in the end."

"You stay right where you are, Miss Cooper," called the captain. "I'll send up breakfast enough for six, and if you keep an eye on this pair perhaps you can get a bit of it. And let me tell you that it's lucky that you're real hungry, for the fare on this boat is even worse than it was on the *Belle*. I'll go right down and look to it."

Breakfast over, the three went out to explore the boat, Patience taking interest in its human cargo, especially its original passengers, and she had a good chance to observe them during the absence of the rescued passengers of the *Belle*, to whom had been given the courtesy of the first use of the dining-room.

Almost all of the original list on this boat were connected in some way with the fur trade, the exceptions being a few travelers bound for the upper Missouri, and two noncommissioned officers going out to Fort Leavenworth, who had missed the *Belle* at St Louis, missed her again at St. Charles, and had been taken aboard by Captain Graves, who would have to stop at the Fort for inspection.

The others covered all the human phases of the fur business and included one *bourgeois*, or factor; two partisans, or heads of expeditions; several clerks,

numerous hunters and trappers, both free and under contract to the company; half a dozen "pork-eaters," who were green hands engaged for long periods of service by the company and bound to it almost as tightly and securely as though they were slaves. Some of them found this to be true, when they tried to desert, later on. They were called "pork-eaters" because the term now meant about the same as the word "tenderfeet," and its use came from the habit of the company to import green hands from Canada under contracts which not only made them slaves for five years, but almost always left them in the company's debt at the expiration of their term of service. On the way from Canada they had been fed on a simple and monotonous diet, its chief article being pork; and gradually the expression came to be used among the more experienced voyageurs to express the abstract idea of greenness. There were camp-keepers, voyageurs, a crew of keelboatmen going up to the "navy yard" above Fort Union and two skilled boat-builders bound for the same place; artisans, and several Indians returning either to one of the posts or to their own country. They made a picturesque assemblage, and their language, being Indian, English, and French, or rather, combinations of all three, was not less so than their appearance. Over them all the bully of the boat, who had reached his semi-official position through elimination by consent and by combat, exercised a more or less orderly supervision as to their bickerings and general behavior, and relieved the boat's officers of much responsibility.

The boat stopped a few minutes at Liberty Landing and then went on, rounding the nearly circular bend, and as the last turn was made and the steamboat headed westward again there was a pause in the flurry which had been going on among the rescued passengers ever since Liberty Landing had been left. Independence Landing was now close at hand and the eager crowd marked time until the bank should be reached.

Soon the boat headed in toward what was left of the once fine landing, its slowly growing ruin being responsible for the rising importance of the little hamlet of Westport not far above, and for the later and pretentious Kansas City which was to arise on the bluff behind the little frontier village. Independence was losing its importance as a starting point for the overland traffic in the same way that she had gained it. First it had been Franklin, then Fort Osage, then Blue Mills, and then Independence; but now, despite its commanding position on one of the highest bluffs along the river and its prestige from being the county seat, the latter was slowly settling in the background and giving way to Westport; but it was not to give up at once, nor entirely, for the newer terminals had to share their

prominence with it, and until the end of the overland traffic Independence played its part.

The landing was a busy place. Piles of cordwood and freight, the latter in boxes, barrels, and crates, flanked the landing on three sides; several kinds of new wagons in various stages of assembling were scenes of great activity. Most of these were from Pittsburg and had come all the way by water. A few were of the size first used on the great trail, with a capacity of about a ton and a half; but most were much larger and could carry nearly twice as much as the others. Great bales of Osnaburg sheets, or wagon covers, were in a pile by themselves, glistening white in their newness. It appeared that the cargo of the *John Auld* had not yet been transported up the bluff to the village on the summit.

The landing became very much alive as the fur company's boat swung in toward it, the workers who hourly expected the *Missouri Belle* crowding to the water's edge to welcome the rounding boat, whose whistle early had apprised them that she was stopping. Free negroes romped and sang, awaiting their hurried tasks under exacting masters, the bosses of the gangs; but this time there was to be no work for them. Vehicles of all kinds, drawn by oxen, mules, and horses, made a solid phalanx around the freight piles, among them the wagons of Aull and Company, general outfitters for all kinds of overland journeys. The narrow, winding road from the water front up to and onto the great bluff well back from the river was sticky with mud and lined with struggling teams pulling heavy loads.

When the fur company boat drew near enough for those on shore to see its unusual human cargo, both as to numbers and kinds, conjecture ran high. This hardy traveler of the whole navigable river was no common packet, stopping almost any place to pick up any person who waved a hat, but a supercilious thoroughbred which forged doggedly into the vast wilderness of the upper river. Even her curving swing in toward the bank was made with a swagger and hinted at contempt for any landing under a thousand miles from her starting point.

Shouts rang across the water and were followed by great excitement on the bank. Because of the poor condition of the landing she worked her way inshore with unusual care and when the great gangplank finally bridged the gap her captain nodded with relief. In a few moments, her extra passengers ashore, she backed out into the hurrying stream and with a final blast of her whistle, pushed on up the river.

Friends met friends, strangers advised strangers, and the accident to the *Belle* was discussed with great gusto. Impatiently pushing out of the vociferous crowd, Joe Cooper and his two companions swiftly found a Dearborn carriage which awaited them and, leaving their baggage to follow in the wagon of a friend, started along the deeply rutted, prairie road for the town; Schoolcraft, his partner, and his Mexican friend sloping along behind them on saddle horses through the lane of mud. The trip across the bottoms and up the great bluff was wearisome and tiring. They no sooner lurched out of one rut than they dropped into another, with the mud and water often to the axles, and they continually were forced to climb out of the depressed road and risk upsettings on the steep, muddy banks to pass great wagons hopelessly mired, notwithstanding their teams of from six to a dozen mules or oxen. Mud-covered drivers shouted and swore from their narrow seats, or waded about their wagons up to the middle in the cold ooze. If there was anything worse than a prairie road in the spring, these wagoners had yet to learn of it.

CHAPTER VIII

THE NEW SIX-GUN

Independence was alive all over, humming with business, its muddy streets filled with all kinds of vehicles drawn by various kinds and numbers of animals. Here a three-yoke ox team pulled stolidly, there a four-mule team balked on a turn, and around them skittish or dispirited horses carried riders or drew high-seated carriages. The motley crowd on foot picked its way as best it could. Indians in savage garb passed Indians in civilization's clothes, or mixtures of both; gamblers rubbed elbows with emigrants and made overtures to buckskin-covered trappers and hunters just in from the prairies and mountains, many of whom were going up to Westport, their main rendezvous. Traders came into and went from Aull and Company's big store, wherein was everything the frontier needed. Behind it were corrals filled with draft animals and sheds full of carts and wagons.

Boisterous traders and trappers, in all stages of drunkenness, who thought nothing of spending their season's profits in a single week if the mood struck them, were still coming in from the western foothills, valleys, and mountains, their loud conversations replete with rough phrases and such names as the South Park, Bent's Fort, The Pueblo, Fort Laramie, Bayou Salade, Brown's Hole, and others. Many of them so much resembled Indians as to leave a careless observer in doubt. Some were driving mules almost buried under their two packs, each pack weighing about one hundred pounds and containing eighty-odd beaver skins, sixty-odd otter pelts or the equivalent number in other skins. Usually they arrived in small parties, but here and there was a solitary trapper. The skins would be sold to the outfitting merchants and would establish a credit on which the trapper could draw until time to outfit and go off on the fall hunt. Had he sold them to some far, outlying post he would have received considerably less for them and have paid from two hundred to six hundred per cent more for the articles he bought. As long as there was nothing for him to do in his line until fall set in, he might just as well spend some of the time on the long march to the frontier, risking the loss of his goods, animals, and perhaps his life in order to get better prices and enjoy a change of scene.

The county seat looked good to him after his long stay in the solitudes. Pack and

wagon trains were coming and going, some of the wagons drawn by as many as a dozen or fifteen yokes of oxen. All was noise, confusion, life at high pressure, and made a fit surrounding for his coming carousal; and here was all the liquor he could hope to drink, of better quality and at better prices, guarantees of which, in the persons of numerous passers-by, he saw on many sides.

Rumors of all kinds were afloat, most of them concerning hostile Indians lying in wait at certain known danger spots along the trails, and of the hostile acts of the Mormons; but the Mormons were behind and the trail was ahead, and the rumors of its dangers easily took precedence. It was reported that the first caravan, already on the trail and pressing hard on the heels of spring, was being escorted by a force of two hundred United States dragoons, the third time in the history of the Santa Fe trade that a United States military escort had been provided. Dangers were magnified, dangers were scorned, dangers were courted, depending upon the nature of the men relating them. There were many noisy fire-eaters who took their innings now, in the security of the town, who would become as wordless, later on, as some of the tight-lipped and taciturn frontiersmen were now. Greenhorns from the far-distant East were proving their greenness by buying all kinds of useless articles, which later they would throw away one by one, and were armed in a manner befitting buccaneers of the Spanish Main. To them, easiest of all, were old and heavy oxen sold, animals certain to grow footsore and useless by the time they had covered a few hundred miles. They bought anything and everything that any wag suggested, and there were plenty of wags on hand. The less they knew the more they talked; and experienced caravan travelers shook their heads at sight of them, recognizing in them the most prolific and hardest working trouble-makers in the whole, long wagon train. Here and there an invalid was seen, hoping that the long trip in the open would restore health, and in many cases the hopes became realizations.

Joseph Cooper installed his niece in the best hotel the town afforded and went off to see about his wagons and goods, while Tom Boyd hurried to a trapper's retreat to find his partner and his friends. The retreat was crowded with frontiersmen and traders, among whom he recognized many acquaintances. He no sooner had entered the place than he was soundly slapped on the shoulder and turned to exchange grins with his best friend, Hank Marshall, who forthwith led him to a corner where a small group was seated around a table, and where he found Jim Ogden and Zeb Houghton, two trapper friends of his who were going out to Bent's trading post on the Arkansas; Enoch Birdsall and Alonzo Webb, two veteran traders, and several others who would be identified with the next

caravan to leave.

"Thar's one of them danged contraptions, now!" exclaimed Birdsall, pointing to the holster swinging from Tom's broad belt. "I don't think much o' these hyar newfangled weapons we're seein' more an' more every year. An' cussed if he ain't got a double-bar'l rifle, too! Dang it, Tom, don't put all yer aigs in one basket; ain't ye keepin' no weapons ye kin be shore on?"

"Thar both good, Enoch," replied Tom, smiling broadly.

"Shore they air," grunted Birdsall's partner. "Enoch don't reckon nothin's no good less'n it war foaled in th' Revolutionary War, an' has got whiskers like a Mormon bishop. Fust he war dead sot ag'in steamboats; said they war flyin' in th' face o' Providence an' wouldn't work, nohow. Then he said it war plumb foolish ter try ter take waggins inter Santer Fe. Next he war dead sot ag'in mules fer anythin' but packin'. Now he's cold ter caps an' says flints war made 'special by th' Lord fer ter strike fire with—*but*, he rides on th' steamboats when he gits th' chanct; he's taken waggins clean ter Chihuahua, drivin' mules ter 'em; an' he's sorter hankerin' fer ter use caps, though he won't admit it open. Let him alone an' watch him try ter borrer yer new pistol when th' Injuns try ter stampede th' animals. He's a danged old fool in his talk, but you jest keep an eye on him. Thar, I've said my say."

"An' a danged long say it war!" snorted Enoch, belligerently. "It stands ter reason that thar pistol can't shoot 'em out o' one bar'l plumb down the dead center of another *every* time! An' suppose ye want ter use a double charge o' powder, whar ye goin' ter put it in them danged little holes? Suppose yer caps hang fire—what then, I want ter know?"

"S'posin' th' wind blows th' primin' out o' yer pan?" queried Zeb. "S'posin' ye lose your flint? S'posin' yer powder ain't no good? S'posin' ye ram down th' ball fust, like ye did that time them Crows tried ter lift our cache. Fine mess ye nigh made o' that! Onct ye start thar ain't no end o' s'posin', nohow. Caps is all right, *I* use 'em!"

"*He* uses 'em!" chuckled Enoch. "Ain't that a sensible answer? Caps is all right, if *he* uses 'em! Danged if he don't make me laugh: but he's a good ol' beaver, at that, Zeb is. As fur rammin' down th' ball fust, that time; he never told ye about how he swallered a hull mouthful o' balls when Singin' Fox sent a arrer through his cap, did he?"

Zeb looked a little self-conscious. "Beaver's shore gittin' scarce," he said.

"Thar's a passel o' Oregoners rendyvouin' out ter Round Grove," said Hank. "If we're goin' with 'em we better jine 'em purty quick."

Tom shook his head. "I'm aimin' fer th' Arkansas this trip. Goin' ter try it onct more."

Hank's jaw dropped. "Thar!" he snorted. "Kin ye beat that?"

"Glad ter hear it," said Jim Ogden. "We'll be with ye fur's th' Crossin'; but ain't ye gamblin', Tom?"

"Armijo shore will run up th' flags an' order out his barefoot army," said Hank, grimly, "if he larns o' it. An' he'll mebby need th' army, too."

"He'll larn o' it," declared Birdsall. "Thar's a passel o' greasers goin' over th' trail with us—an' shore as shootin' some o' 'em will go ahead with th' news arter we reach th' Cimarron. Don't be a danged fool, Tom; you better go 'long th' Platte with th' emigrants."

"Can't do it," replied Tom. "I've give my word an' I'm goin' through ter Santa Fe. Armijo'll larn o' it, all right. I've seen signs o' that already. Some greaser fanned a knife at me on th' boat; but I couldn't larn nothin' more about it."

"Dang my hide if I ain't got a good notion ter let ye go alone!" snorted Hank, whereat a roar of laughter arose. It seemed that he was very well known.

"I'll see how things bust," said Ogden. "I war aimin' fer Bent's, but thar ain't no use o' gittin' thar much afore fall." He thought a moment, and then slammed his hand on the table. "I'm goin' with ye, Tom!"

"Talkin' like a blind fool!" growled Zeb Houghton, his inseparable companion. "I'm startin' fer th' fort, an' I'm goin' thar! If you ain't got no sense, *I* has!"

Hank laughed and winked at the others. "I'll go with ye, Zeb. Me an' you'll go thar together an' let these two fools git stood up ag'in a wall. Sarve 'em right if he cuts 'em up alive. We'll ask him ter send us thar ears, fer ter remember 'em by."

Zeb's remarks about the Governor of New Mexico caused every head in the room to turn his way, and called forth a running fire of sympathetic endorsements. He banged the table with his fists. "Hank Marshall, ye got more brains nor I has, but I got ter go 'long an' keep that pore critter out o' trouble. If I

don't he'll lose hoss *an'* beaver!"

A stranger sauntered over, grinned at them and slid a revolving Colt pistol on the table. "Thar, boys," he said. "Thar's what ye need if yer goin' ter Santer Fe. I'm headin' fer home, back east. What'll ye give me fer it, tradin' in yer old pistol? Had a run o' cussed bad luck last night, an' I need boat fare. Who wants it?"

Enoch Birdsall and Hank Marshall both reached for it, but Hank was the quicker. He looked it over carefully and then passed it to his partner. "What ye think o' her, Tom?" he asked.

After a moment's scrutiny Tom nodded and gave it back. "Looks brand new, Hank. Good pistol. I tried mine out on th' boat comin' up. They shoot hard an' straight."

Hank looked up at the stranger and shook his head deprecatingly, starting the preliminary to a long, hard-driven barter; but he hadn't reckoned on Birdsall, the skeptic.

"Ten dollars an' this hyar pistol," said Enoch quickly.

"Wall!" exclaimed Hank, staring at him. "Dang ye! Eleven dollars an' *this* pistol!"

"Twelve," placidly said Enoch.

"Twelve an' a half!" snapped Hank.

"An' three quarters."

"Thirteen!" growled Hank, trying to hide his misery.

Enoch raised again and, a quarter at a time, they ran the price up to sixteen dollars, Enoch bidding with Yankee caution and reluctance, Hank with a stubborn determination not to let his friend get ahead of him. One was a trader, shrewd and thrifty; the other, a trapper, which made it a game between a canny barterer on one side and a reckless spender on the other. At twenty-three dollars Birdsall quit, spat angrily at a box, and scowled at his excited companion, who was counting the money onto the table. Hank glared at Enoch, jammed the Colt in his belt and bit savagely into a plug of tobacco, while the stranger, hiding his smile, bowed ironically and left them; and in a moment he was back again with another Colt.

"I knowed it!" mourned Hank. "Dang ye, Enoch!"

"Boys," said the stranger, sadly, "my friend is in th' same fix that I am. He is willin' ter part with his Colt for th' same money an' another old fashioned pistol. His mother's dyin' in St. Louie an' he's got ter git back ter her."

"Too danged bad it ain't him, an' you," snorted Hank.

Jim Ogden held out his hand, took the weapon and studied it. Quietly handing over his own pistol and the money, he held out his other hand, empty. "Whar's th' mold; an' some caps?"

"Wall," drawled the stranger, rubbing his chin. "They don't go with th' weapons —they're separate. Cost ye three dollars fer th' mold; an' th' caps air two dollars a box o' two hundred."

"Then hand her back ag'in an' take th' Colt," said Ogden, slowly arising. "Think I'm goin' ter whittle, or chew bullets fer it? Neither one of them guns has even been used. Thar bran' new, an' with 'em goes th' mold. Jest because I've spent a lot o' my days up on Green River ain't sayin' I'm green. They named it that because I left my greenness thar."

"Th' caps air extry," said the vendor of Colt pistols.

"Ain't said nothin' about no caps, yit," retorted Ogden. "I'm talkin' molds. Gimme one, an' give Hank one; or ye'll both shore as hell miss his mother's funeral."

The stranger complied, sold some caps and left the saloon in good humor; but he had not been gone two minutes before Enoch hastily arose and pleaded that he had to meet a man; and when they saw him again he had a newfangled contraption in a holster at his belt.

Hank carelessly opened his mold and glanced at it. "Pinted!" he exclaimed.

Tom explained swiftly and reassured his friends, and then suggested that they go down to a smithy owned by a mutual friend, and run some bullets. "We better do it while we're thinkin' about it, an' have th' time," he added.

"Got lots o' time," said Ogden. "Be three weeks afore th' second caravan starts. Thar's two goin' out this year. If 'twarn't fer th' early warm weather on th' prairies th' fust wouldn't 'a' left yet. Th' grass is comin' up fast."

"Thar's some waggins o' th' second game out ter Council Grove already," said Alonzo Webb. "They wanted me an' Enoch ter go 'long with 'em, but we couldn't see th' sense o' leavin' town so fur ahead o' time, an' totin' that much more grub. 'Sides, th' roads'll be better, mebby, later on."

The smith welcomed them and they used his fire during the lulls in his business.

"Hear Zachary Woodson's goin' out with eight waggins this year," he told them. "Missed th' fust caravan. Says he'll be tetotally cussed if he's goin' ter be captain ag'in this year."

"That's what he says every year," grunted Alonzo.

"He'll be captain if we has th' say-so," replied Hank. "Only thing, he's a mite too easy with th' fools; but thar's goin' ter be less squabblin' about obeyin' orders this trip than ever afore. We'll see ter that."

While they discussed matters pertaining to the caravan, and ran bullets, listening to the gossip of the smith's customers, they saw Uncle Joe and his two wagoners driving his mules toward the shop to have them re-shod. They shook hands all around and soon Uncle Joe, grinning from ear to ear, told them that he was going out with the caravan. He was as tickled as a boy with a new knife.

"Just as I feared," he said in explanation. "I couldn't find any trader that was takin' any of his women folks along; so there was only one way out of it. I got to go. An' I don't mind tellin' you boys that it suits me clean down to th' ground. Anyhow, all I wanted was an excuse. I got a light wagon for Patience an' me an' our personal belongings, an' I'm goin' to drive it myself. Bein' th' only woman in th' caravan, fur as I know, it'll mebby be a little mite hard on her. Reckon she'll git lonesome, 'specially since she's so danged purty."

When the laughter died down Hank Marshall, shifting his cud to the other cheek, looked from Uncle Joe to Tom and back again.

"Wall," he drawled, "I war puzzled a little at fust, but now I reckon I'm gittin' th' hang o' this hyar thing. Tom war shore hell-bent fer ter go out ter Oregon this year." He paused, scratched his head, and grinned. "Reckon I kin drive them mules all by myself. 'Twon't be as though it war th' fust time I've done it."

After a little good-natured banter Tom and Hank left the smithy to look after their affairs, for there was quite a lot to be done. The next few days would be busy ones for them both, but especially so for Tom, who was expected to share

his company between Patience, Hank, and Uncle Joe.

As they swung up the street Hank edged to cross it, pointing to Schoolcraft's corral. "Might as well be gittin' th' mules afore thar all run over an' th' best took. If he kin skin me in a mule deal I'm willin' ter abide by it."

"Not there," objected Tom. "I've had some trouble with him. I'll play pack animal myself before I'll buy a single critter from him."

Hank shook with silent laughter. "*That's* whar he got it, huh?" he exulted. "Cussed if he warn't trimmed proper. I might 'a' knowed it war you as done it by th' way it looked." He shook again and then became alert "Thar he is now; an' his friends air with him. Keep yer primin' dry, boy."

"I reckoned I could shake a laig," said a voice behind them, and they looked over their shoulders to see Jim Ogden at their heels, and close behind him came his partner; "but you two kiyotes plumb made me hoof it. What's yer hurry, anyhow?"

The little group in front of the corral gate shifted in indecision and looked inquiringly at the horse-dealer. There was a difference between stirring up trouble between themselves and Tom Boyd for the purpose of manhandling *him*, and stirring it up between themselves and the four trappers.

Schoolcraft said something out of the corner of his mouth and the group melted away into the little shack at the corral gate. He remained where he was, scowling frankly at his enemy.

"Looks like they war a-fixin' ter try it on us," growled Hank, returning the scowl with interest. "Let's go over an' say how-de-do ter 'em. This here town's been too peaceable, *anyhow*."

"What's th' trouble?" asked Ogden, curiously, his partner pressing against him to hear the answer.

"Ain't none," answered Tom. "Thar might 'a' been, but it's blowed over."

"Wall," drawled Ogden. "Ye never kin tell about these hyar frontier winds. Yer th' partisan o' this hyar expedition, Tom. We'll foller yer lead. It's all one ter us whar ye go; we're with ye."

Schoolcraft, knowing that trouble with these plainsmen would almost certainly

end in serious bloodshed, shrugged his shoulders and entered the shack; and after him, from behind the corral wall darted the slender Mexican.

"Thar!" exclaimed Tom, pointing. "See that greaser? Keep yer eyes skinned fer him. He's bad medicine."

"Looks like he war fixin' fer ambushin' us, hidin' behind that wall," growled Hank.

"He's got a fine head o' hair ter peel," snorted Zeb Houghton, whose reputation in regard to scalp lifting was anything but to his credit. The fingers of his left hand closed involuntarily with a curling motion and the wrist turned suggestively; and the Mexican, well back from the dirty window of the shack, felt a rising of his stomach and was poor company for the rest of the day.

The four swung on again, Ogden and his partner soon leaving the party to go to their quarters, while Tom and Hank went on along the street and stopped at another horse-dealer's, where they bought two riding horses and eight broken-in mules, the latter covered with scars. The horses were broken to saddle and would carry them over the trail; two of the mules were to carry their necessaries and the other six their small stock of merchandise, which they now set out to obtain. In procuring the latter they were very fortunate, for they found a greenhorn who had paid too much attention to rumors and had decided at the last moment that trail life and trading in the far west did not impress him very favorably; and he sold his stock to them almost at their own terms, glad to get out of his venture so easily. They took what they wanted of it and then sold the remainder at a price which nearly paid for their own goods. Leaving their purchases at Uncle Joe's wagons under the care of his teamsters, they went to his hotel to spend the night.

After supper Hank, who had shown a restlessness very foreign to him, said that he was going out to take a walk and would return soon. When Tom offered to go with him he shook his head, grinned, and departed.

The evening passed very pleasantly for Tom, who needed nothing more than Patience's presence to make him content, and after she had said good night he accompanied her uncle to the bar for a night-cap. As he entered the room he thought he saw a movement outside the window, down in one corner of the sash, and he slipped to the door and peered out. As he cogitated about scouting around outside he heard Uncle Joe's voice calling to him over the noise of the crowd and he made his way back to the bar, drank to the success of the coming expedition, and engaged in small talk with his companion and those around them. But his

thoughts were elsewhere, for Hank had been gone a long time.

"Uncle Joe, how long have you known your wagoners?" he asked.

"Long enough to know 'em well." The trader regarded him quizzically. "Not worryin' about your merchandise, are you?"

"I'm wondering where Hank is."

"In some trapper's rendezvous; he'll show up in th' mornin' with nothin' worse than a headache."

"I'm not treating him right," soliloquized Tom. "A man shouldn't forget his friends, especially when they're as close as Hank is. I'm goin' lookin' for him. Good night."

Uncle Joe watched him push his way directly through the crowd, leaving a few scowls in his wake, and pop out of the door; and the older man nodded with satisfaction. "A man shouldn't, Tom, my boy," he muttered. "Stick to them that's stuck to you—always—forever—in spite of hell. That's good medicine."

A tour of the places where trappers congregated was barren of results until he had reached the last of such resorts that he knew, and here he found Enoch Birdsall and Alonzo Webb, who welcomed him with such vociferous greetings that he knew they had nearly reached the quarrelsome stage. To his inquiries as to the whereabouts of his partner they made boisterous replies, their laughter rattling the windows.

"Ol' beaver's settin' a-top his house—no, 'tain't no house. Settin' a-top yer pile o' goods cached with Cooper's—you tell 'im," yelled Alonzo, slapping Enoch across the back and nearly knocking him out of the chair. "You tell 'im, Ol' Buff'ler!"

"Prairie hen on his nest is more like *him*," shouted Enoch, returning his friend's love tap with interest, whereupon Alonzo missed twice and fell to the floor.

"Prairie hen on yer nose!" yelled the prostrate trader, trying to swim toward his partner. "Thar ain't no prairie beaver as kin knock me down an' *keep* me thar! Stan' up like a man, ye polecat! An' I kin lick *you*, too!" he yelled, as Tom avoided his sweeping arm and hastened toward the door. "Better run! Better run! Git 'im Enoch, ye fool!"

Tom did not reach the front door, for with astonishing speed and agility for one so far in his cups Enoch, taking up the quarrel of his friend, whom he presently would be fighting, leaped from the table, vaulted over a chair, and by some miracle of drunken equilibrium landed on his feet with his back to the door and swung both fists at the surprised plainsman. Tom's eyes glinted, and then twinkled. He had few better friends than these two quarrelsome traders and, stepping back, he leaped over the prostrate and anything but silent Alonzo and darted out through the back door, laughing at the furious squabbling he left behind. Reaching the corner of the building, he fell into his habitual softness of tread and slipped along the rear of the shacks on a direct course for the place where his and Cooper's merchandise was stored. Schoolcraft's corral loomed up in front of him and he skirted it silently. He almost had reached its far corner when a Mexican's voice, raised in altercation inside the inclosure, caught his ear and checked him, balanced on one foot.

"For why he do eet?" demanded the Mexican, excitedly. "I tol' heem that he mus' leeve Tomaz tr-rade goods by themselves. He ees goin' to Santa Fe weethout for-rce; an' now eet ees all spoil! For what he do eet? Bah! For hees revenge he say. What ees hees revenge like Armijo's?"

"Oh, shut yer mouth an' stop yer yowlin'," growled a gruff voice. "Eph allus knows what he's a-doin'."

The poised listener outside the corral paused to hear no more but was off like a shadow, his stride a long, swinging lope, for he was too wise to dash at full speed and waste fighting breath for the sake of gaining a few seconds. He made his devious way across a plain studded with wagons, piles of freight and heaps of débris, and before he reached his objective the sounds of conflict singled it out for him had he been in any doubt.

The open wagon-shed loomed suddenly before him and he made out a struggling mass on the ground before it, his partner's grunted curses and the growls of Cooper's wagoner saving them from his attack. He went into the mass feet first, landing with all his weight and the momentum of his run on a crouched man whose upraised arm was only waiting for a sure opening. The knife user grunted as he went down, and his head struck the edge of a wagon-wheel with such force that he no longer was a combatant. Tom had fallen to his knees after his catapulting impact and when he arose he held a squirming halfbreed over his head at the height of his upraised arms. One heave of his powerful body and the human missile flew through the air and struck two of the halfreed's friends as

they sprang to their feet in sudden alarm. They went down like tenpins and before they could gain their feet again Tom dropped on one of them, his knees squarely in the pit of the man's stomach, his right hand on the throat of the other, while his left gripped his adversary's knife hand and bent it steadily and inexorably back toward the wrist.

"Th' little bobcat's j'ined us," panted Hank, crawling onto the man he now rolled under him. "Tom Boyd, Armijo's pet, with his fangs bared an' his claws out. Take *this*, you——!" he grunted as his shoulder set itself behind the smashing blow. "How ye makin' out with yer friend, Abe?" he asked of the other rolling pair.

It seemed that Abe was not making out according to Hank's specifications, so he crawled over to help him, and reached out a hand. It fastened onto a skinny neck and clamped shut, whereupon Abe rolled victoriously free and paused to glower at his victim. His surprise, while genuine, was of short duration, and he shook his head at the cheerful Hank and then pounced onto the man who had been used as a missile, and pinned him to the ground. In a few moments the fight was over, and the victors grinned sheepishly at each other in the semi-darkness and re-arranged various parts of their clothing.

"I saw somethin' smash inter th' waggin wheel an' sorta reckoned you war some'rs 'round," panted Hank. "Then I saw somethin' else sail inter th' air an' knock over two o' th' thieves. Then I knowed ye war hyar. Me an' Abe war doin' our best, but we war beginnin' ter slip, like fur at th' end o' winter."

"Ye mebbe war sheddin' a little," laughed Tom, "but you'd 'a' shed them thieves afore ye petered out. Tell me about it."

"Thar ain't nothin' ter tell," replied Hank. "I'm nat'rally suspicious by bein' up in th' Crow country so much o' my time, an' I got ter thinkin' 'bout Schoolcraft. I'm mostly stronger on hindsight than I am on foresight, but this hyar's onct I sorta lined 'em both up an' got a good bead. I snuk up ter his shanty an' heard him an' that thar greaser chawin' tough meat with each other. So I come down hyar, expectin' ter lay fer 'em with Abe; but danged if him an' them warn't at it already! I only got two feet, two han's an' one mouth, an' I had ter waste one foot a-standin' on it; but th' rest o' me jined th' dance. Then you come. That's all."

"How long war you two holdin' off th' six o' 'em?" demanded Tom of Abe with great interest, and thinking that Cooper's trust was well placed.

"'Twarn't long; two comets an' about six hundred stars, I reckon," mumbled the

shrinking hero between swollen lips. "I war jest gittin' mad enough to go fur my knife when Hank gits in step with th' music, an' jines han's with us. What we goin' ter do with 'em?"

"Oh, give 'em a kick apiece an' turn 'em loose without thar weapons," suggested Hank.

Tom shook his head. "They come from Schoolcraft; let's take 'em back to him," he suggested.

"Go ahead!" enthused Abe. Then he scratched his head. "But who's goin' ter watch th' goods while we're gone? Jake ain't due fer couple o' hours yet."

"You air!" snorted Hank. "You need a rest, an' us two is shore enough." He prodded the figures on the ground with the toe of his moccasin. "Git up, you squaw dogs!" he ordered.

In a moment five thoroughly cowed men were plodding before their guards. The sixth, who was still wandering about on the far side of the boundary of consciousness, was across Tom's shoulder. Reaching the horse-dealer's shanty, the prisoners opened the door by the simple expedient of surging against it as they shrunk from the pricks of Hank's skinning knife. The two men inside escaped the crashing door by vaulting over a small table, and before they could recover their wits in the face of this amazing return of their friends they were looking down the barrels of two six-shooters.

Tom dumped his burden onto the table, kicked a chair through a closed window, swept an open ink bottle onto Schoolcraft's manly stomach, and made a horrible face at the pop-eyed Mexican. "Hyar they air, polecat," he growled. "Any more raids on our goods an' I trail ye an' shoot on sight. Don't give a cuss who does it, or why; *I'll git you*. If I miss, Hank won't; an' we both got good friends. Come on, Hank, it stinks in here."

Tom turned and stalked out, but not so Hank. He backed out behind his newfangled weapon, pleasantly thinking of its six ready shots, slid along the outside of the shack and then waited with great hope for a head to pop out of the door. Having had no chance to try out the Colt he was curious regarding its accuracy. No head popped, however, and after a moment he sighed, slipped along the corral wall and crossed the street when far enough away to be covered by the darkness. Hank had no faith in hostile humans and did not believe in showing off. The thieving, treacherous Crows agreed that the brave who took

Hank Marshall's scalp would be entitled to high honors; with the mournful reflection that by the time it was taken, if ever, the tribe would have paid a very high price for it.

CHAPTER IX

THE CARAVAN

At last came the day, and the dawn of it showed a cloudless sky, a sleeping town and a little caravan winding, with rattle of chains and squeak of harness, past the silent, straggling houses, bound westward for the "prairie ocean." Despite the mud and the slowness of the going high spirits ruled the little train. Youth was about to do and dare, eager for the gamble with fate; and age looked forward to the lure of the well-known trail even as it looked backward in memory for faces and experiences of the years gone by. The occasion was auspicious, for the start was prompt to the minute and earlier than any they would make later. They were on the luxuriant and better wooded eastern rim of the great plains, and would be on it for several days.

Joe Cooper, driving the small wagon with Patience seated at his side, led the way, eager and exultant. Following him closely came his two great Pittsburg wagons with their still spotless new sheets, each loaded with nearly three tons of selected merchandise, their immense wheels grumbling a little as they slid a fraction of an inch along their well-greased axles, their broad, new tires squashing out twin canyons in the mud. Next came two emigrant wagons, their proprietors fearing that they would not reach the Oregon-bound train at its rendezvous in time to leave with it. Under their stained and patched canvases two women slept as though in a steady bed, their children at their sides. Weeks of this traveling had given to them the boon of being able to fall asleep almost at will. Then came Enoch Birdsall and Alonzo Webb, sober and gay, abusing each other humorously, each in his own wagon, handling their strung-out teams with nonchalant ease. Close to the rear of the last wagon came the eight mules of Tom Boyd and Hank Marshall, four to a string, followed by their horse-mounted owners; and behind them were Jim Ogden and Zeb Houghton, each driving two mules before them.

The road was in execrable condition, its deep ruts masked by a mud as miry as it appeared to be bottomless, and several times the great wagons were mired so hard and fast that it took the great ox teams of Alonzo and Enoch, hooked on in addition to the original mule teams, to pull them out; and the emigrant wagons, drawn by over-worked oxen, gave nearly as much trouble. The story of their

progress to Council Grove would be tiring, since it would be but little more than a recital of the same things over and over again—the problems presented by the roads.

At Round Grove they said good-bye to the emigrants, who joined the rear guard of their own caravan at this point. Along the so-called Narrows, the little ridge forming the watershed between the Kansas and Osage rivers, for a stretch extending quite some distance westward from Round Grove, the roads were hardly more than a series of mudholes filmed over and masked by apparently firm ground. In some of these treacherous traps the wagons often sank to the hubs, and on two occasions the bottom of the wagon-box rested on the mud. It was hopeless to try to pull them out with the animals so deep in mud, and only by finding more firm ground along the side of the trail, the use of long chains and the aid of every draft animal in the train were the huge wagons dragged out. The men themselves waded into the traps, buried at times almost to the waist, and put their shoulders to wheels and wagon-boxes and pushed and heaved and floundered; and they kept their spirits high despite the penetrating cold of the mire. Under these conditions stops were frequent to rest both teams and men, the "noonings" were prolonged, camp made earlier in the evening than was usual and left later in the morning. The tally of miles was disheartening, and to make matters worse a heavy downpour of chilling rain fell half a day before they reached 110 Mile Creek which, besides making everyone miserable and spoiling the cooking, swelled the stream so much that it was crossed only with the greatest difficulty.

One of the few things they were grateful for was the fact that they did not have to keep regular guard watches at night, for while the Kaws and Osages might steal an animal or two in hope of receiving a little whiskey, powder, or tobacco for its return, there was no danger of wholesale stampeding, and a man or two was sufficient to watch the camp.

One pleasant incident occurred when they pulled in sight of Switzler's Creek, where they found another section of the caravan in camp. The augmented train now numbered about twenty-six wagons and formed a rear guard worthy of the name. The weather had cleared again and the sun shone brightly all the way to Council Grove. To offset the pleasant effect of joining the other train, it was at Switzler's Creek that a hard-pushed mule train overtook them. With it came the little Mexican and half a dozen of his compatriots, and several of Ephriam Schoolcraft's chosen bullies. At their appearance Hank Marshall found a new interest in life, and there was very little occurring in the new mule train that he

missed. His habits now became a little similar to those of the cat tribe, for he resorted to his old trick of dozing while riding, catching naps at the noonings, before dark and after dawn. With him awake at night and Tom awake during the day, and with Jim Ogden's and Zeb Houghton's nocturnal prowlings thrown in the balance, it looked as though Hank's remark about "nobody ketchin' these beavers asleep" would be fully justified.

Council Grove was reached one noon, and they learned that they would have plenty of time to do the many little things neglected on the way, for they would stay here two days. This was welcome news, as it gave them an opportunity to let the draft animals rest and feed well in preparation for the long prairie haul ahead.

Council Grove of the caravan days is worthy of notice. It was the meeting place as well as the council place for those who were to cross the prairies together. To it ran the feeding roads, gradually growing as strands feed a rope, the loose and frayed ends starting from the Missouri River points and converging as they neared the grove. Named from a council and a treaty which took place there between a government commission sent out to survey a wagon road to the Arkansas River, and a tribe of Osages, in which safety for the traders was obtained from these savages, it was doubly well named because of the yearly councils which were held between the traders themselves to perfect the organization of the caravan.

The grove itself, of oak, ash, hickory, elm, and many other kinds of trees, was about half a mile wide and extended along the sides of the little valley of Council Grove Creek, a large tributary of the Neosho River. With its dense timber, its rich bottom pastures, and fine, high prairies it made an ideal spot for a rendezvous; and it was about the last of the really fine and productive country seen from Independence. Here were hard woods in plenty, the last to be found on the long trip, from which to obtain replacements for broken axles and other wagon parts. This also was the farthest point reached by the trains without real organization, for from here on every important movement was officially ordered.

Scattered about the beautiful, green little valley were wagons great and small, and piles of mule packs, each camp somewhat by itself. There was much calling and getting acquainted, fun and frolic, much hewing of trees, mending of gear, and, in general, busy preparation for the journey over the land of the short buffalo grass. Tenderfeet wasted their time and ammunition at target practice or in hunting for small game, and loafed to their hearts' content; but the experienced

traveler put off his loafing and play until he knew that he had done everything there was to be done. There were horse races and mule races and even ox-team races; tugs of war, running, jumping, and, in fact, everything anyone could think of to help pass the time.

After a good night's sleep the Cooper party found there was little to do except to get timber for "spares," and notwithstanding that a spare axle was slung from under each of the huge freighters, Uncle Joe insisted that each wagon carry another, and he personally superintended the cutting. They had been obtained and slung in place beside the others when a bugle was heard and criers passed among the little camps calling everyone for roll call. Nearly two hundred persons answered, all but one of them being men, and then the electioneering began for the choice of captain. To be a success a caravan must have one head, and the more experienced he was the better it would be for the caravan.

Now came the real excitement of the day, for party spirit was strong and insistent, and the electioneering was carried on with such gusto that several fights grew out of it. There were four parties at first, among which was Mike Wardell's, comprising the rougher, more lawless frontier element. He was a close friend of Ephriam Schoolcraft and he had his admirers outside of his own class, for a group of tenderfeet which was impressed by his swaggering, devil-may-care manners backed him in a body; and another group which was solidly behind him was composed of the poorer Mexican traders. The second of the larger parties with a candidate in the field, who had been nominated by a series of caucuses, was made up of the more experienced and more responsible traders, veterans of the trail who put safety and order above all other considerations. This party nominated Zachary Woodson, who had more wagons in the caravan than any other one man, therefore having more at stake, and who had not missed his round trip over the route for a dozen years. His nomination split the Mexicans, for half of them had wagons and valuable freights, and were in favor of the best leadership.

At first Woodson flatly refused to run, sneeringly reminding his friends of the lack of cooperation he could expect from the very men who needed law and order and leadership most. He knew by bitter experience that the captain of a Santa Fe caravan had no real authority and that his orders were looked upon as mere requests, to be obeyed or not, as the mood suited. He was obdurate in his refusal until a split occurred in the other strong party and resulted in a disgraceful fight among its members, which was kept from having disastrous results only by the determined interposition of the more resolute members of his

own party. This caused the two smaller factions to abandon their own candidates and throw themselves against Wardell, and resulted in the overwhelming election of the man best suited for the position.

His first act after grudgingly accepting the thankless leadership was to ask for a list of the men, wagons, and pack animals, and he so engineered the division of them that each section had as its lieutenant a man whom he could trust and who did not lack in physical courage so much needed to get some kind of order and to keep it. The great train was divided into four divisions, at the present to join so as to march in two columns; but later to spread out and travel in divisional order of four straight columns abreast, far enough apart so that the width of the whole front roughly would equal the length of a column.

Next came the arrangement of the watches, the most cordially hated of all caravan duties. In this train of nearly ninety wagons there were nearly one hundred and eighty men physically able to stand a guard, and no one who was able to stand his trick was let off. The captain preferred the regular and generally accepted system of two watches, each of four squads, which put one squad on duty for three hours each alternate night; but there were so many men for this disagreeable task that he allowed himself to be over-ruled and consented to a three watch system, six squads to the watch, which put one watch of nine men and a corporal on duty for two hours every third night. Almost any concession was worth making if it would arouse a little interest and a sense of duty in this very important matter of guarding the camp. The corporal of each squad arranged to shift up one tour each time their squad went on, which would give no one squad the same hours for its successive tours of duty. Nothing could have been fairer than this, but there were objectors in plenty. Each one of the kickers had his own, perfect plan. Some wanted smaller squads with the same number of watches so that each tour of duty would be less; some wanted two watches and smaller squads, to the same end, both of which would have caused endless changing of the guard, endless awakenings all night long, with practically continuous noise and confusion. Captain Woodson, having abandoned the regular and tried system so as to let the men feel a sense of cooperation, flatly refused to allow any further changes, and in consequence earned the smoldering grudges of no small number, which would persist until the end of the trail and provide an undercurrent of dissatisfaction quick to seize on any pretext to make trouble.

For the division officers he chose the four men he had in mind, after over-ruling a demand for a vote on them. As long as he was responsible for the safety of the

caravan he declared that it was his right to appoint lieutenants whom he knew and could trust. The bickering had fresh fuel and continued strong all day, and it would last out the journey.

Arranging the divisions so far as possible to put friends together, with the exception of some of the tenderfoot parties, they were numbered, from left to right, as they would travel, and he was careful to put the more experienced plainsmen on the two outside ranks and, where possible, the better drivers in the two inner columns. These latter had a little more complex course to follow in case of sudden need to corral the caravan. For corralling while traveling in two columns, he instructed the drivers to follow the wagon ahead and to stop when his own wagon tongue came even with the rim of the rear wheel of the wagon he was following. In case of corralling in face of danger, they were to swing their teams to the inside of the leading wagon, so as to have all the animals on the inside of the corral; in ordinary camping they were to swing their teams in the other direction, so the animals would be ready to graze outside of the corralled wagons. They were to pay no attention to direction or to sudden inspirations, but were blindly to follow the wagon in front of them and to close up the gaps. The leading driver of each column would set the curving track which would bring the wagons into a great ellipse or a circle while moving in the two column formation.

The first and fourth columns were commanded by Jim Ogden and Tom Boyd, while the two inner columns were under a trader named Haviland and a sullen, mean-tempered trader of Independence and a warm friend of Schoolcraft. His name was Franklin, and while his personal attributes were unpleasant and he was a leader of the Schoolcraft element, he was a first class caravan man and had proved his coolness and resourcefulness in many a tight place. His appointment also served in a measure to placate the rebellious element, which nursed the thought that it could do about as it pleased in its own column. Whether they were right or wrong in this remained to be seen. While the two column formation was in use the first and second divisions made up one of them; the third and fourth, the other. To Tom's delight he found that the Cooper wagons had been assigned to his own division; but as an offset to this two wagons belonging to gallivanting tenderfeet had been placed directly behind them. It was not pleasant to think of these dandified city sports being so close to Patience Cooper all the way to Santa Fe. Like many men in love, he was prone to discount the intelligence and affections of the loved one and to let his fears threaten his common sense.

The first great watch went on duty at seven o'clock that night, more for the

purpose of breaking the men in to their work than for any need of defense, for no Indian troubles, despite the rumors afloat in Independence, were to be looked for so far east. There was a great deal of joking and needless challenging that night and very little attempt to follow instructions. An Indian likes nothing better than a noisy, standing sentry; but this savage preference hardly would be shown in the vicinity of Council Grove. Woodson knew that discipline could not be obtained and that every man would do as he pleased until the encampment received a good scare, but his own sense of responsibility impelled him to make an effort to get it.

The next day was passed in resting, in placing the wagons in their order of march, and in drilling the drivers in caravan tactics; and that night the guard was as noisy as it had been the night before. The squad which went on duty at one o'clock contained two tenderfeet and between them they succeeded in shattering the monotony.

A quarter of an hour after the guard had been changed tenderfoot Number One thought he heard a sound and saw a movement. He promptly challenged and fired in the same instant. His weapon was a double-barreled fowling piece charged with buckshot, and there was no doubt about the deadly efficiency of such a combination when the corporal found the carcass of a mule with a hole in it nearly as big as a hat. The camp was thrown into an uproar, guns flashed from the wagons to the imminent peril of the rest of the sentries, and only the timely and rough interference of a cool-headed trapper kept the two four-pounders from being fired. They were loaded with musket balls and pebbles and trained on three wagons not fifty yards from them. Orders, counter orders, suggestions, shouts for balls, powder, flints, caps, patches, ramrods, and for about everything human minds could think of kept the encampment in a pandemonium until sense was driven into the panicky men and the camp allowed to resume its silence.

Tenderfoot Number Two heard and saw an Indian approaching him and fired his pistol at the savage. This took place near the end of the same guard tour. Only his fright and the poor light which made his wobbling aim all the more uncertain saved the life of his best friend who, restless and lonely, was going out to share the remainder of the watch with him. Again pandemonium reigned and weapons exploded, but this time the cattle stampeded in the darkness, doing the best they could with their handicap of hobbles.

At dawn the caravan was astir, the blast from the bugle not needed this time, for almost every man had animals to hunt for and drive in, and as a result of this

breakfasts were late and the whole day's operations were thrown out of step. Finally after all the stampeded animals had been rounded up and the morning meal was out of the way, and things done at the last minute which should have been done the day before, preparations were started to get under way. Mules and horses broke loose and had to be chased and brought back; animals balked and kicked and helped to turn the camp into a scene of noisy confusion. Several parties found that they had neglected to cut spare axles and forthwith sallied off to get them. Others frantically looked for articles they had misplaced or loaned, one wagon being entirely unpacked to find a coffee pot and a frying pan which someone else later discovered at the edge of the creek where they had been dropped after they had been washed, their owner having left them to get a shot at a squirrel he thought he saw. The forehanded and wiser members of the caravan took advantage of the delay and turmoil to cut an extra supply of firewood against a future need, add to their store of picket stakes and also to fill their water casks to keep them swelled tight beyond question, against the time when the much dreaded dry stretch should be reached.

At last from the captain's camp the well-known summons of "Catch up!" was heard, and passed on from group to group along the creek. Those who had not yet hitched up their teams, almost at every case old hands at the game who were wise enough to let their animals graze until the last minute, now exultantly drove in their teams and filled the little valley with the rattle of chains, the clicking of yokes, the braying of indignant mules, and their own vociferations. Soon a teamster yelled "All's set!" and answering shouts rolled up and down the divisions. At the shouted command of "Stretch out!" whips cracked, harness creaked, chains rattled and wagons squeaked as the shouting drivers straightened out their teams. "Fall in!" came next, and the teams were urged into the agreed-upon order, the noses of the leaders of one team close to the tailboard of the wagon ahead. The second and third divisions, falling in behind the first and fourth, made two strings rolling up the long western slope of the valley toward the high prairie at its crest.

Songs, jokes, exultant shouts ran along the trains as the valley was left behind, for now the caravan truly was embarked on the journey, and every mile covered put civilization that much farther in the rear. Straight ahead lay the trail, beaten into a plain, broad track leading toward the sunset, a mark which could not be mistaken and which rendered the many compasses valueless so far as the trail itself was concerned.

The first day's travel was a comparatively short one, and during the drive the

officers rode back along the lines and again explained the formation which would be used at the next stopping place. This point was so near that the caravan kept on past the noon hour and did not stop until it reached Diamond Spring, a large, crystal spring emptying into a small brook close to a very good camping ground. The former camp no sooner had been left than the tenderfeet began to show their predilection to do as they pleased and to ride madly over the prairie in search of game which was not there, finally gravitating to a common body a mile or more ahead of the wagons, a place to which they stuck with a determination worthy of better things.

At Diamond Spring came the first clash against authority, for the captain had told each lieutenant to get his division across all streams before stopping. The word had been passed along the twin lines and seemed to have been tacitly accepted, yet when the wagons reached the brook many of the last two divisions, thinking the farther bank too crowded and ignoring the formation of the night encampment, pulled up and stopped on the near side. After some argument most of them crossed over and took up their proper places in the corral, but there were some who expressed themselves as being entirely satisfied to remain where they were, since there was no danger from Indians at this point. The animals were turned loose to graze, restrained only by hobbles until nightfall, the oxen in most cases yoked together to save trouble with the stubborn beasts until they should become trained and more docile. They were the most senseless of the draft animals, often stampeding for no apparent cause; the sudden rattle of a chain or a yoke often being all that was needed to turn them into a fleshy avalanche; and while the Indians did not want oxen, they seemed to be aware of the excitable natures of the beasts and made use of their knowledge to start stampedes among the other animals with them, much the same as fulminate of mercury is used to detonate a charge of a more stable explosive.

The first two watches of the night were pleasant, but when Tom Boyd's squad went on duty an hour before midnight there was a change in the weather, and before half an hour had passed the rain fell in sheets and sent some of the guards to seek shelter in the wagons. Two of them were tenderfeet, one of Schoolcraft's friends and a trader. Tom was the so-called corporal of this watch and he was standing his trick as vigilantly as if they were in the heart of the Kiowa or Comanche country. He carefully had instructed his men and had posted them in the best places, and he knew where each of them should be found. After half an hour of the downpour he made the rounds, called the roll and then slipped back into the encampment in search of the missing men. Not knowing them well

enough at this time he did not know the wagons to which they belonged, and he had to wait until later to hunt them out.

Dawn found a wet and dispirited camp as the last guard returned to the wagons an hour before they should have left their posts. Not a fire would burn properly and not a breakfast was thoroughly cooked. Everyone seemed to have a chip on his shoulder, and the animals were mean and rebellious when driven in for the hobbles to be removed and picket ropes substituted to hold them. Breakfast at last over, the caravan was about to start when Tom went along his own division and called four men together.

"Last night you fellers quit yer posts an' slunk back ter yer wagons," he said, ominously. "Two of ye air tenderfeet, an' green ter this life; one is a trader an' th' other is an old hand on th' trail. You all ought ter know better. I'm lettin' ye off easy *this* time, but th' next man that breaks guard is goin' ter git a cussed fine lickin'. If it's necessary I'll make an invalid out o' any man in my squad that sneaks off his post. Git back ter yer wagons, an' don't fergit what I've said."

The tenderfeet were pugnacious, but doubtful of their ground; the trader was abashed by the keen knowledge of his guilt and the enormity of his offense. He was a just man and had no retort to make. The teamster, a bully and a rough, with a reputation to maintain, scowled around the closely packed circle, looking for sympathy, and found plenty of it because the crowd was anxious to see the corporal, as personifying authority, soundly thrashed. They felt that no one had any right to expect a man to stand guard in such a rain out in the cheerless dark for two hours, especially when it was admitted that there was no danger to be feared. Finding encouragement to justify his attitude, and eager to wipe out the sting of the lecture, the bully grinned nastily and took a step forward.

"Reg'lar pit-cock, ain't ye?" he sneered. "High an' mighty with yer mouth, ain't ye? Goin' ter boss things right up ter th' hilt, *you* air! Wall, ye—I'm wettin' yer primin', hyar an'——"

Tom stopped the words with a left on the mouth, and while the fight lasted it was fast and furious; but clumsy brute strength, misdirected by a blind rage, could not cope with a greater strength, trained, agile, and cool; neither could a liquor soaked carcass for long take the heavy punishment that Tom methodically was giving it and come back for more. As the bullwhacker went down in the mud for the fifth time, there was a finality about the fall that caused his conqueror to wheel abruptly from him and face the ring of eager and disappointed faces.

"I warn't too busy ter hear some o' th' remarks," he snarled. "Now's th' time ter back 'em up! If ye don't it makes a double liar out o' ye! Come on—step out, an' git it over quick!" He glanced at the two pugnacious tenderfeet. "You two make about one man, th' way we rate 'em out hyar; come on, both o' ye!"

While they hesitated, Captain Woodson pushed through the crowd into the ring, closely followed by Tom's grim and silent friends, and a slender Mexican, the latter obviously solicitous about Tom's welfare. In a few moments the excitement died down and the crowd dispersed to its various wagons and pack animals. As Tom went toward his mules he saw Franklin, the tough officer of the third division, facing a small group of his own friends, and suddenly placing his hand against the face of one of them, pushed the man off his balance.

"I'll cut yer spurs," Franklin declared. "Fust man sneaks off guard in *my* gang will wish ter G-d he didn't!" He turned away and met Tom face to face. "We'll larn 'em, Boyd," he growled. "I'm aimin' ter bust th' back o' th' first kiyote of *my* gang that leaves his post unwatched. If one o' them gits laid up fer th' rest o' th' trip th' others'll stand ter it, rain or no rain. Ye should 'a' kicked in his ribs while ye had 'im down!"

After a confused and dilatory start the two trains strung out over the prairie and went on again; but the rebellious wagon-owners on the east side of the creek were not with the caravan. They were learning their lesson.

The heavy rain had swollen the waters of the stream, stirred up its soft bed and turned its banks into treacherous inclines slippery with mud. When the mean-spirited teams had been hooked to the wagons and sullenly obeyed the commands to move, they balked in mid-stream and would not cross it in their "cold collars;" and there they remained, halfway over. In vain the drivers shouted and swore and whipped; in vain they pleaded and in vain they called for help. The main part of the caravan, for once united in spirit, perhaps because it was a mean one, went on without them, knowing that the recalcitrant rear guard was in no danger; the sullen spirit of meanness in every heart rejoicing in the lesson being learned by their stubborn fellow travelers. The captain would have held up the whole train to give necessary assistance to any unfortunate wagoner; but there was no necessary assistance required here, for they could extricate themselves if they went about it right; and there was a much-needed lesson to be assimilated. Their predicament secretly pleased every member of the main body, which was somewhat humorous, when it is considered that the great majority of the men in the main body had no scruples against disobeying any order that did

not suit their mood.

Finally, enraged by being left behind, the stubborn wagoners remembered one of the reasons advanced by the captain the day before when he had urged them to cross over and complete the corral. He had spoken of the difficulty of getting the animals to attempt a hard pull in "cold collars," when they would do the work without pausing while they were "warmed up." So after considerable eloquence and persistent urging had availed them naught, the disgruntled wagoners jumped into the cold water, waded to the head of the teams and, turning them around, got them back onto the bank they had left after vainly trying to lead them across. Once out of the creek, the teams were driven over a circle a mile in circumference to get their "collars warm." Approaching the creek at a good pace, the teams crossed it without pausing and slipped and floundered up the muddy bank at the imminent risk of overturning the wagons. Reaching the top, they started after the plodding caravan and in due time overtook it and found their allotted places in the lines, to some little sarcastic laughter. Never after that did those wagoners refuse to cross any stream at camp time, while their teams were warmed up and willing to pull; but instead of giving the captain any credit for his urging and his arguments, wasted the day before, they blamed him for going on without them, and nursed a grudge against him and his officers that showed itself at times until the end of the long journey. They would not let themselves believe that he would have refused really to desert them.

The caravan made only fifteen miles and camped on a rise of the open prairie, where practice was obtained in forming a circular corral, with the two cannons on the crest of the rise. The evolution was performed with snap and precision, the sun having appeared in mid-forenoon and restored the sullen spirits to natural buoyancy. The first squad of the watch went on duty with military promptness, much to the surprise of the more experienced travelers. Here for the first time was adopted a system of grazing which was a hobby with the captain, who believed that hobbled animals wasted too much time in picking and choosing the best grass and in wandering around. He maintained that picketed animals would eat more in the same time, and so each wagoner was given a stretch of prairie as wide as the space occupied by his wagon and reaching out about one hundred yards, fan-wise, from the corral. Picket ropes of from twenty to thirty feet in length let each animal of his team graze over a circle of that radius, the center being a stake of hardwood two inches thick and about two feet long. Some of the pickets were pointed with iron and had a band of the same metal shrunk around the upper and near the top to keep them from splitting under repeated axe blows.

Many of the others had their points hardened by fire, and a pointed hickory or ash picket so treated will stand a lot of abuse. Before dark the pickets were shifted to new places and the animals left to graze all night, for Indian visits still were a matter of the future.

After they had finished their supper and washed and put away the few utensils, Tom as usual drifted off to spend an hour or two with Uncle Joe and Patience. He had not been gone long before Hank got up to loosen a pack to get a fresh plug of smoking tobacco, and caught sight of Pedro, the Mexican, sauntering toward him. The visitor grinned cheerfully and sat down by the dying fire, acting as though he had every reason to be accorded a cordial welcome.

"Hah!" exclaimed the self-invited guest in rare good humor. "Eet ess good to get out on thee gr-reat pr-rairie; but eet would haf been better eef we had went weeth thee fir-rst tr-rain. Weeth that tr-rain was thee tr-roops. We would be better pr-rotect."

Hank was undecided whether he should turn his back on the visitor and walk away, or grab him by the collar and the slack of his trousers and throw him from the fire, when habitual cunning made him grunt his endorsement of the other's remarks. He never was above acquiring what information he could get, no matter how trivial it might be.

"Yeah," he replied, passing the plug to his guest. "Fill yer pipe, or make a cigarette," he invited. "Them danged settlements air all right fer a change, but this hyar is a hull lot better; an' th' mountings air better'n this. As fer th' dragoons with th' fust train, it's plumb welcome to 'em. Thar more trouble than thar worth; an' they allus will be till they larn ter fight Injuns in th' Injun way. Th' idear o' usin' th' right hand fer a sword an' th' left fer a pistol! I'd ruther be with a passel o' mounting boys, fur's fightin' Injuns air consarned. Anyhow, jest when they git whar they're needed most, down on th' edge o' th' Kiowa an' Comanche country, th' danged dragoons has ter stop."

"But señor; they must not tr-read on Mexican soil," protested Pedro.

Hank grinned and choked down the retort he was about to make, nodding his head instead. "Shore; that's th' trouble. Now, if that danged Governor o' yourn would meet th' train at Cimarron Crossin' an' go th' rest o' th' way with it, thar'd be some sense ter troop escorts. Thar ain't a sojer along th' worst stretch o' th' whole trail. I'll bet ye we won't see hide ner hair o' 'em this side o' Cold Spring, when th' danger from raidin' Injuns is 'most over."

Pedro spread his hands helplessly. "That ees but too tr-rue, señor. Theese time we weel not see thee br-rave tr-roops of Mexico befor-re we r-reach thee Wagon Mound."

"Thar!" triumphantly exclaimed Hank. "What did I tell ye? They used ter git as fur as Cold Spring, anyhow; but now thar waitin' at th' Wagon Mound. Next thing we know they'll be waitin' at San Miguel fer ter see us safe th' last fifty miles through th' settlements!"

"Eet ees thee Apaches that ar-re to blame theese time," explained Pedro with oily smoothness. "They ar-re ver' bad theese year along thee Rio Gr-rande del Norte. Ver' bad!"

"Yeah," grunted Hank, puffing reflectively on his pipe. "Mexico an' Texas both claim all that country east o' th' Grande, but th' Apaches shore own it, an' run it ter suit theirselves. Bad Injuns, they air."

"Thee customs they ar-re ver' str-rict theese year," commented Pedro, closely watching his companion. "They ar-re ver' har-rd on my poor countrymen. They keep thee pr-rices so high on all theese goods."

"Tarnation bother," grunted Hank, beginning to get the reason for the Mexican's interest in him. "Too bad we don't know somebody that kin git us past 'em," he suggested, hopefully.

Pedro rubbed his hands complacently and helped to maintain a prolonged silence; which at last was broken by small talk concerning the caravan and its various members. After half an hour of this aimless conversation he arose to leave.

"Thee customs, as you haf so tr-ruly said, ar-re ver' gr-reat bother, Señor Hank. I know thees ver' much, for I haf a br-rother in thee custom house. We ar-re ver' close, my br-rother an' me. I weel see you again, señor. Eet ees good that we get acquaint, weeth so ver' many *milla* yet to tr-ravel together. *Buenos noches*, señor."

"Good night," replied Hank, carefully pulling the unburned wood out of the fire to serve for the cooking of the breakfast. He glanced after the dapper Mexican and grinned, re-roped the pack, and wandered off to join his trapper friends at their fire.

"Grease is slippery; an' so is greasers," he chuckled. "Wall, thar's plenty o' time

to figger *jest* what he's arter. Might be cheatin' th' customs, an' then ag'in it might not."

CHAPTER X

EN ROUTE

Tom's duties as a lieutenant were to supervise his column, ride ahead of the train on lookout for possible obstructions or dangers, go on ahead to creeks and see that the banks sloped enough to permit the wagons to take them safely, to hunt out and bridge morasses and quagmires that could not be avoided. If the banks were too steep he and others of the caravan were to ride ahead with axes, shovels, and mattocks and cut a sloping road through them; if a morass or a treacherous creek bed had to be crossed they had to cut great numbers of saplings, branches, and brush and build up a causeway of alternate layers of wood and dirt. This would not take long and if properly done, every wagon could cross in safety.

The caravan in movement should have presented a formation of wagons in orderly array, preceded by the captain and officers, flanked at a good distance on both sides by well-armed riders, and followed by a fairly strong rear-guard; but no such ideal formation could be maintained except under the discipline of a military or paid force. The flankers rode far and wide searching endlessly for game and usually wound up with the advance guard, a mile or more ahead. The rear guard dwindled rapidly and soon joined the others far in advance, leaving the crawling wagons entirely unprotected from any sudden attack by Indians who might have lain concealed in one of the numerous prairie hollows.

There were four conditions every twenty-four hours especially liked by the savages. One was during the night, between midnight and dawn; another as the caravan got under way, when there was more or less confusion and the wagons had broken the corral formation enough so it could not be re-formed quickly; a third was during the day when every man who did not have to drive was galivanting a mile or more away, blazing at rattlesnakes or prairie dogs and making a fool of himself generally, his thoughts on everything except the safety of the train he had deserted; and the fourth was in the evening just as the animals were being staked outside, when most of the men were busy with them and some distance outside the wagon ramparts, many of the more careless being unarmed. To offset these conditions so favorable to surprise attacks on the caravan was one of the captain's most important duties, and the urgent consideration of water and

good grass many times complicated his problems.

Captain Woodson at one time had been a trapper, and his early experiences with the fur expeditions here stood him in good stead, especially his knowledge about Indians. He continually hammered at the men to flank properly and to scour the country on each side of the caravan for a mile or more and to investigate every hollow and rise capable of hiding horses. Before he called the halt for the "noonings" or the encampments in the evenings, he urged that the surrounding country be well scouted over and everything suspicious reported. For the crews of the two cannons, which had been changed the morning following the narrowly averted calamity of a few days back, he had picked men who appeared to be calm and resourceful, and these weapons trundled along on their wheeled carriages in a strategic position, their crews ordered not to leave them unattended at any time during the day's march—but who cared for orders?

The trail here being easy and plain, the banks of the streams cut by the previous caravan, Tom dropped back after a brief exploration along the flanks, which he made because the flankers would not, to join his partner and their pack train, plodding along on the left-hand side of Joe Cooper's wagons.

Hank was a placid, easy-going individual and cared little whether or not he had company. For the last few days he had been highly amused by watching several pack animals owned and led by tenderfeet, who had learned neither to follow them nor to load them right. These green travelers were continually in trouble. If they were not arguing with mules gone balky because of unevenly distributed loads, or chasing some running and kicking animal that scattered the contents of its pack far and wide over the plain, they were collecting their possessions piece-meal from a score of acres of prairie and hurriedly re-packing somewhere behind the caravan, cursing, perspiring, out of breath, and murderously savage. Some of them re-packed more than a dozen times a day and were hard put even to keep the caravan in sight. Their natural anger at their misfortunes was turned into a simmering or a coruscating rage, that ever and anon burst out with volcanic force as they realized the utter hopelessness of their position. This was for the first few days, for the wiser ones used their eyes and ears and mouths to good advantage, and soon got the knack of packing; but there were some who seemingly were too dumb to learn.

Hank never obtruded any advice, but cheerfully explained the art of packing to any man who sought him. He and his partner's animals never shifted a pack on this smooth going, and this fact began to sink into some of the tenderfeet, and

they eagerly took lessons from the veteran. It was not long before a spilled pack in that column of the train was an uncommon occurrence. These eight mules behaved in an admirable manner and there was a good reason for it. When they had been selected, only those showing the unmistakable signs of the veteran pack mule were chosen. The marks of the crupper, *aparejo* and girth never would disappear. Tenderfeet scornfully would have passed them by and chosen sleek, smooth-haired animals of far better appearance; but Hank and Tom did not make this mistake, realizing that here, indeed, beauty was only skin deep.

Hank judged that it was about time to take full advantage of the mules' early training and the results were regarded as downright miracles by the greenhorns, who attempted to duplicate the system, but with disastrous endings. One of the mules was an old mare, and her actions, even in the corral at Independence, told Hank all about her. He now took from a pack a bell and, riding up to the plodding, sedate pack animal, fastened it around her neck. Then he tied her to the rear of the second of Cooper's big wagons, until she should learn that this was to be her place under all conditions, and dropped back farther and farther while he watched the other seven. At the sound of the tinkling bell they had pricked up their long ears and rolled them forward; a certain important dignity came over each one and they went ahead with an air of satisfaction that was so apparent that it was ludicrous. Hank grinned and rode off to play rear guard all by himself, well knowing that his seven animals would follow the old bell-mare wherever she led, whether he was there or not. Later he rewarded her by changing her pack and substituting that of the dwindling food supply, which grew lighter after every camp. When he finally freed her from the wagon she moved up alongside the off-wheel mule, for whom she seemed to have an abiding affection, and from then on she would not stray from his side, nor her seven followers from her.

On this occasion when Tom returned and found his partner absent, he surmised that the trapper was off looking for an antelope to vary the monotony of their fare and to save their bacon and flour. Until the buffalo country was reached the caravan had to live on flour, bacon, and perhaps beans, of which each traveler had a limited supply. The chief reliance for food was the buffalo, and their range was still well ahead. Tom and Hank, however, not knowing what contingency awaited them on the Mexican end of the trail, had far exceeded the regular allowance per man, of fifty pounds of flour, same of bacon, dozen pounds of coffee, twenty-five pounds of sugar, and a goodly amount of salt. Topping one of the packs, and dwarfing the patient mule nearly hidden under the load, were two

ten-gallon water casks, each with a few quarts sloshing around inside. At every stop these kegs were shifted a little so as to give each portion of them a soaking in turn. The powder, two twenty-five pound kegs covered with oiled cloth and over that with a heavy, greased bull-buffalo leather, were in the same packs with the bar lead and a reserve supply of caps and patches. The bullet molds, nipple wrenches, and other small necessaries were carried in their "possible" sacks, each being a beautifully beaded and quilled bag obtained in their trade with the Indians. Along with the ammunition each had packed a buffalo-hide bag, fitted with shoulder, breast, and head lines; and should it become necessary for them to disappear, without a mule, they were equipped to remain in the mountains and hills for a long time. Later on they would pack the big bags and keep them ready for instant use.

Tom found not only that his partner had gone, but that the city sports, tiring of aimless riding ahead, had fallen back to the train and were now riding leg to leg on both sides of Joe Cooper's small wagon, vying with each other in their endeavors to be entertaining to Patience. They were laughing uproariously when the plainsman appeared and one of them, Dr. Whiting, acknowledged his introduction to Tom with an ironical grin. Here, he thought, was a mountain yokel all ripe to play target for his shafts of satire. He would shine out resplendently against this ignorant plainsman and have a lot of fun in the bargain.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, his mouth open in pretended admiration. "Regular Daniel Boone! I suppose you know how to bark squirrels; and barking buffaloes must be an old trick with you by this time."

Tom regarded him thoughtfully. He did not mind the words, but the tone in which they were spoken was distinctly offensive. He smiled pleasantly. "Thar ain't no squirrels ter bark on th' prairies; but thar air some barkin' prairie dogs, though they mostly chatter 'stead o' bark. They set up an' make a lot o' noise, but don't amount to nothin'. Th' funny part o' it is, th' dumber they air th' more they chatter. As fer bein' Dan'l Boone, tenderfeet mostly find it a boon ter have a Dan'l handy afore this air trail is left." He gravely acknowledged the introduction to the others and looked at Patience again, and from her back to the saddled horse tied to the rear of the wagon. "Feel like a little ride, Miss Cooper" he asked. "Must be tirin' settin' up thar mile arter mile listenin' to th' chatterin'."

She nodded, holding back her laughter, and Tom led up the horse.

"But, Miss Cooper!" expostulated the doctor. "What are we going to do without you? We are desolate! Might I offer you a noble escort, six trusty, knightly blades to flash in your defense?"

She smiled sweetly but shook her head. "When we reach the Indian country I will be very glad to accept such an escort; but out here I would not think of imposing on your generosity. This seems to be Mr. Boyd's expedition; perhaps he may invite you."

Tom shook his head sadly. "Reckon I'll have all I kin do to look arter Miss Cooper in case we meets airy Injuns, without botherin' with six *flashes*. See you-all later, mebby."

They drew rein and waited for the crawling column to pass them, smiling and nodding in reply to the cheerful salutations of the wagoners and traders. Pedro, the slender Mexican, who took such a deep interest in the doings of Tom Boyd, removed his wide hat and bowed, in true cavalier fashion, showing his gleaming teeth in a pearly smile. The interest the plainsman was showing in his pretty companion was an assurance that Tom Boyd would need no further persuasion to enter the Mexican settlements. Franklin, the leader of the third division, temporarily the second section of Tom's column, allowed himself the luxury of a sullen smile. He knew his part in the scheme of Pedro and Schoolcraft perfectly and had no thought of deviating from it, but he could not help admiring the upstanding plainsman, who was a man after his own heart. They were bound together by a common interest, the safety of the caravan, and until they were met by the escort of Mexican cavalry, somewhere near Rock Creek or the Canadian River, Franklin gave little heed to personal grudges. All he was supposed to do was to see that the plainsman did not leave the caravan for good before the escort met it.

The two four-pounders trundled along their rumbling way, only one man to each gun, the rest of their crews off with the advance guard. Tom glanced at the all but deserted weapons and frowned. Franklin, noticing it, frowned in reply. It was not because full cannon crews were needed on this part of the trail, but because both men knew that it would be the same all the way.

After the last wagon had passed, Tom and his companion rode forth and turned when half a mile from the column, riding ahead on a course parallel with it. The prairie was studded with the earlier flowers of spring, in some places a rich carpet of delicate colors. Suddenly Tom pointed to a gray object nearly covered

with earth, dried grass of the year before, and the fresh greenery of this season's slender blades pushing up through it.

"Buffalo skull," he explained. "Let's look at it; it may tell us something interesting."

They rode close to it and the plainsman nodded in quick understanding.

"That bull was killed by an Indian," he said. "Notice that it faces the west? They place them that way to propitiate their gods. A skull hardly lasts more than three years on the prairie, which means that this animal was killed about that long ago. It is more than likely that he was an old, renegade bull, wandering far from the herd to die alone. The significant fact is, however, that not more than three years ago he grazed here and was here killed by an Indian; coupled to that is another significant fact, about one hundred thousand buffalo skins are taken to the settlements every year. Remembering both those facts and adding another, that it will be some days before we see even such a bull on the very outskirts of the buffalo range, what does it mean? And here is a fact I nearly overlooked; those hundred thousand skins taken each year are from cow buffalo." He shook his head sadly. "The day of the buffalo, countless as their numbers still are, is fast setting. Their range is shrinking hour by hour, almost; and a comparatively few years more will see them gone. Wait till you witness the brainless slaughter when the herds are met with. Ah, well, we are a prodigal race, Miss Cooper, spending our natural heritage with almost a drunken recklessness. If it were drunken there might be found some excuse for us; but we are doing it in our sober senses. Excuse me, when I get to thinking along those lines I'm afraid I get a little fanatical. There's something more interesting," he said, pointing to the north. "See it?"

After a moment's intense scrutiny she shook her head, and looked up at him inquiringly.

"I forget that you haven't a plainsman's eyes," he laughed, "accustomed to focussing for long distances. Why, over there, well beyond that series of flat-topped prairie swells, is a red handkerchief waving lazily in the air. It is fastened to a ramrod, and I'm willing to bet that it belongs to Hank Marshall. He has been grumbling about a steady diet of bacon. Now that we are getting into antelope country, his disappearance from his trained mules is easily explained. I can promise you and Uncle Joe antelope meat tonight. He never would have planted that flag if he hadn't seen his victim; and while we are a long way off, let's ride

on so he won't be able to blame us if he fails to get his shot."

Patience was laughing heartily, and hurriedly explained the cause of her mirth.

"I saw him tie the bell to that old mule's neck. The sudden pride she showed, the quick alertness of the other seven, and the satisfaction shared equally by the mules and your partner was one of the most ludicrous sights I've ever seen. When Uncle Joe, who was in his best vein, explained the whole affair, I laughed until I cried. Is it true that the seven worshipers won't leave her?"

Tom, laughing in sympathy with her mirth, nodded. "Picket her, with her bell on, and we can let the others graze without hobbles or ropes. They won't leave her. Don't ask me why, for if you do I can only answer by saying that they have been trained that way; why it is possible for them to be trained in such a way, and so easily, is beyond me. When we left Independence Hank and I caught many a scornful glance directed at our *atejo*, for I must confess that it was made up of eight scarecrows; but handsome is as handsome does, and now our pack train troubles are confined solely to packing and unpacking the animals. We don't even have to remember what pack or *aparejo* belongs to each mule; they know their own unerringly, and will shower kicks on any careless or stupid companion who blunders up to the wrong pack. Perhaps you've heard that mules are stupid; that's something that you can discount heavily. They are stupid only when it serves their purpose." He laughed again. "We have one mule that takes a thrashing every morning, regular as a clock. Hank calls him 'Dummy,' but I am not sure that he is well named. I can't decide whether he is dumb or perverse. But the fact remains that he never selects his own pack, and gets kicked along the line until he reaches it by elimination. I shall enjoy studying him as we go along."

As they jogged on, a strip of timber running almost at right angles to their course and thinning out to the north in about the same proportion that it thickened to the south, came in sight and Tom knew it to be Cottonwood Creek, and their last glimpse of the waters of the Neosho. He well remembered the somewhat sharp bend formed by it on the farther side, which was taken advantage of by some caravans and the corral formation ignored. A line of closely spaced wagons across the neck of the bend made corral enough.

"Well, we better get back to the caravan," he said. "While the creek is all right there are many who are only waiting for a chance to cry that the officers are remiss in their duties. I'll leave you with your uncle, well guarded by six trusty

knights, and go ahead with the advance guard."

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and the repression of her smile did not seriously affect the witchery of the dimples.

"I was a little afraid that I might become lonesome on this long journey; but things have turned out splendidly. Don't you think Dr. Whiting has a very distinguished air?"

"Very; it would distinguish him out of hundreds," replied Tom, scowling at the timber fringe ahead. "He is quite impressive when he is silent. It's a pity he doesn't realize it."

He turned in the saddle and looked behind. "What did I say? There comes Hank, with an antelope slung before his saddle. I doubt if the doctor would need the red handkerchief; antelope are notoriously affected by anything curious."

She turned away and regarded the caravan studiously. "Isn't every man expected to do his share in the general duties?" she asked.

"Yes; but most of them dodge obligations. When we left Council Grove more than half of the members of the train were friendly to Woodson. By the time we leave Cimarron his friends will be counted on the fingers of your two hands. That is only what he expects, so it won't come as an unpleasant surprise."

"What is the doctor's party supposed to do?"

"Two of them have been assigned to the rear guard; the other four, to our right flank. They can be excused somewhat because of their greenness. Besides, they only came along for the fun of it. In the college of life they are only freshmen. Its seriousness hasn't sunk in yet. The majority of the shirkers should know better, and have their fortunes, meagre as they may be, at stake. Well, here we are. You don't know how much I've enjoyed our ride. Uncle Joe," he said as Patience settled into the wagon seat, "here she is, safe and sound. I'll drop around with some antelope meat by the time you have your fire going."

"It's been ten years since I've broiled game over a fire," chuckled the driver. "I'm anxious to get my hand in again. Thank you, Tom."

Tom fastened the horse to the rear of the wagon, waved to his friends, and loped ahead toward the nearing creek.

CHAPTER XI

INDIAN COUNTRY

After an enjoyable supper of antelope meat, Hank Marshall drifted over to visit Zeb Houghton and Jim Ogden, and judging from the hilarity resulting from his call, it was very successful. The caravan was now approaching the Indian country and was not very far from the easternmost point where traders had experienced Indian deviltry. Neither he nor his friends were satisfied with the way guard was kept at night, and he believed that a little example was worth a deal of precept. On his way back to his own part of the encampment he dropped over to pay a short visit to some tenderfeet, two of whom were to mount guard that night. Jim Ogden, sauntering past, discovered him and wandered over to borrow a pipeful of tobacco.

"Wall," said Ogden, seating himself before the cheerful fire, "'twon't be long now afore we git inter buffaler country, an' kin eat food as is food. Arter ye sink yer teeth inter fat cow an' chaw a tongue or two, ye'll shore forgit what settlement beef tastes like. That right, Hank?"

"It's shore amazin' how much roast hump ribs a man kin store away without feelin' it," replied Hank. "But thar's allus one drawback ter gittin' inter th' buffaler range; whar ye find buffaler ye find Injuns, an' nobody kin tell what an Injun's goin' ter do. If they only try ter stampede yer critters yer gittin' off easy. Take a Pawnee war-party, headin' fer th' Comanche or Kiowa country, fer instance. Thar off fer ter steal hosses; but thar primed ter fight. If thar strong enough a caravan'll look good ter 'em. One thing ye want ter remember: if th' Injuns ain't strong, don't ye pull trigger too quick; as long as yer rifle's loaded thar'll be plumb respectful, but soon's she's empty, look out."

"I've been expecting to see them before this," said one of the hosts.

"Wall, from now on mebby ye won't have ter strain yer eyes," Hank remarked. "They like these hyar timber fringes, whar they kin sneak right up under yer nose. They got one thing in thar favor, in attackin' at night; th' twang o' a bowstring ain't heard very fur; but onct ye hear it ye'll never fergit th' sound. Ain't that so, Jim?"

Jim nodded. "Fer one, I'm keepin' an eye open from now on. Wall, reckon I'll be movin' on."

"Where do you expect to run into Indians?" asked one of the men near the fire.

Jim paused, half turned and seemed to be reflecting. "'Most any time, now. Shore ter git signs o' 'em at th' little Arkansas, couple o' days from now. May run inter 'em at Turkey Creek, tomorrow night."

Hank arose, emptied his pipe, and looked at Jim. "Jine ye, fur's our fire," he said, and the two friends strolled away. They had not been gone long when two shadowy figures met and stopped not far from the tenderfeet's fire, and held a low-voiced conversation, none of which, however, was too low to be overheard at the fire.

"How'd'y, Tom."

"How'd'y, Zeb."

"On watch ter night?"

"No; you?"

"No. Glad of it."

"Me, too."

"This is whar Taos Bill war sculped, ain't it?"

"They killed 'im but didn't git his ha'r."

"How'd it happen?"

"Owl screeched an' a wolf howled. Bill snuk off ter find out about it."

"Arrer pizened?"

"Yes; usually air."

"Whar ye goin'?"

"Ter th' crick fer water."

"I'm goin' ter see th' capting. Good night."

"Good night; wish it war good mornin', Zeb."

"Me, too. Good night."

At that instant an owl screeched, the quavering, eerie sound softened by distance.

"Hear that?"

The mournful sound of a wolf floated through the little valley.

"An' that? Wolves don't generally answer owls, do they?"

"Come along ter th' crick, Zeb. Thar ain't no tellin'."

"I'm with ye," and the two figures moved silently away.

The silence around the camp-fire was profound and reflective, but there was some squirming and surreptitious examination of caps and flints. The questioning call of the hoot owl was answered by a weird, uncanny, succession of sharp barks growing closer and faster, ending in a mournful, high-pitched, long-drawn, quavering howl. The noisy activity of the encampment became momentarily slowed and then went on again.

The first guard came off duty with an apparent sense of relief and grew very loquacious. One of them joined the silent circle of tenderfeet around the blazing fire.

"Phew!" he grunted as he sat down. "Hear those calls?" His question remained unanswered, but he did not seem surprised. "When you go on, Doc?" he asked.

"One o'clock," answered Dr. Whiting. He looked around pityingly. "Calls?" he sneered. "Don't you know an owl or a wolf when you hear one?" There was a lack of sincerity in his voice which could not be disguised. The doctor was like the boy who whistled when going through the woods.

Midnight came and went, and half an hour later the corporal of the next watch rooted out his men and led them off to relieve the present guard. He cautioned them again against standing up.

"To a Injun's eyes a man standin' up on th' prairie is as plain as Chimbly Rock," he asserted. "Besides, ye kin see a hull lot better if yer eyes air clost ter th' ground, lookin' agin' th' horizon. Don't git narvous, an' don't throw th' camp inter

a scare about nothin'."

An hour later an owl hooted very close to Dr. Whiting and he sprang to his feet. As he did so he heard the remarkably well imitated twang of a bowstring, and his imagination supplied his own interpretation to the sound passing his ear. Before he could collect his panic-stricken senses he was seized from behind and a moment later, bound with rawhide and gagged with buckskin, he lay on his back. A rough hand seized his hair at the same instant that something cold touched his scalp. At that moment his attacker sneezed, and a rough, tense voice growled a challenge from the darkness behind him.

"Who's thar?" called Tom Boyd, the clicking of his rifle hammers sharp and ominous.

The hand clutching the doctor's hair released it and the action was followed by a soft and hurried movement through the woods.

"Who's thar?" came the low growl again, as Tom crept into the bound man's range of vision and peered into the blackness of the woods. Waiting a moment, the plainsman muttered something about being mistaken, and departed silently.

After an agony of suspense, the bound man heard the approach of another figure, and soon the corporal of his guard stopped near him and swore vengefully under his breath as his soft query brought no answer.

"Cuss him," growled Ogden, angrily. "He's snuk back ter camp. I'll peg his pelt out ter dry, come daylight." He moved forward to continue his round of inspection and stumbled over the doctor's prostrate form. In a flash the corporal's knife was at the doctor's throat. "Who air ye?" he demanded fiercely. The throaty, jumbled growls and gurgles which answered him apprised him of the situation, and he lost no time in removing the gag and cutting the thongs which bound the sentry. "Thar, now," he said in a whisper. "Tell me about it."

The doctor's account was vivid and earnest and one of his hands was pressed convulsively against his scalp as if he feared it would leave him.

Ogden heard him through patiently, grunting affirmatively from time to time. "Jest what I told th' boys," he commented. "Wall, I reckon they war scared away. Couldn't 'a' been many, or they'd 'a' rushed us. It war a scatterin' bunch o' bucks, lookin' fer a easy sculp, or a chanct ter stampede th' animals. Thievin' Pawnees, I reckon. Mebby they'll come back ag'in: we'll wait right hyar fer 'em, dang thar

eyes."

"Ain't you going to alarm the camp?" incredulously demanded the doctor, having hard work to keep his teeth from chattering.

"What in tarnation fer? Jest 'cause a couple o' young bucks nigh got yer h'ar? Hell, no; we'll wait right hyar an' git 'em if they come back."

"Do you think they will?" asked the doctor, trying to sound fierce and eager.

"Can't never tell what a Injun'll do. They left ye tied up, an' mebby want yer h'ar plumb bad. Reckon mebby I ought ter go 'round an' warn th' rest o' th' boys ter keep thar eyes peeled an' look sharp fer 'em; 'specially them nigh th' animals. Bet ye stood up when ye heard 'em?"

"Yes, I did; but I'll never do it again!"

"Thought so. Now you lay low out hyar till I tells th' others. Be back soon," and before any reply could be made the corporal had become swallowed up in the night. The weather was not warm, yet Doctor Whiting sweat copiously, and after he had been relieved and sent back to the encampment he had great trouble in falling asleep.

Hank Marshall slipped up behind Jim Ogden as that person came in, and imitated the significant twang. Jim jumped a foot in the air and then bent over, convulsed with silent laughter.

"Dang ye, Hank; I don't know how ye do it!" he exclaimed. "I never heard th' like. Thar'll be one bunch o' greenhorns lyin' flat, an' all eyes an' ears from now on. I war weak from laughin' afore I went out to stumble over him. When th' guard war changed they couldn't hardly find him, he war spread out so flat. Jest like a new born buffaler calf that its maw has cached in a bunch o' grass. Bet ye could fool an Injun with that thar twang."

"I've did it," said Hank, chuckling.

The next morning Dr. Whiting was quite a hero, and as the caravan left the creek he rode by the side of Patience, talking until he had thoroughly exhausted the subject. After he had left her to go helter-skeltering over the prairie a mile ahead in eager and hopeful search of buffalo, Hank Marshall rode up to the wagon and took his place.

He listened to Patience's excited comment about the doctor's narrow escape, and then, picking up the reins, twanged sharply, winked at her, and rode off to the flanking line. She stared after him for a moment and then stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth. When she had command over herself again she turned indignantly toward her chuckling uncle.

"Just the same, it was a mean trick!" she declared.

"Giddap," said Uncle Joe, and chuckled all the more.

"But it was!"

"It learned 'em all a lesson," he replied. "May save their fool lives, and ours, too. Giddap!"

It was a long haul to Turkey Creek, but the caravan made it and was corralled before dark. Buffalo signs had been seen shortly before the creek was reached, and when old Indian signs were found near the camp site, the day's excitement took on new life. A broken lodge-pole, some odds and ends of tanned hides and a discarded moccasin, somehow overlooked by the Indians' dogs, were discovered near the blackened spots on the prairie where camp-fires had burned. The night passed quietly, every sentry flat against the earth and trying to rob the senses of smell and touch to enrich those of sight and hearing.

In leaving the creek, the two column formation was abandoned and the wagons rolled up the little divide in four evenly spaced divisions. There was some semblance of flankers and a rear guard now, and even the cannons were not forsaken. Then came the great moment.

Two hours after the creek had been left the first herd of buffalo was sighted. That it was a small one and more likely to provide tough bull rather than fat cow, made no difference; rear guard, flankers, and cannon were forgotten in one mad, frantic, and ridiculous rush. Men dashed off toward the herd without even their pistols. In ten minutes a moderate sized war-party could have swept down on the caravan and had things nearly their own way. There would have been no buffalo meat in camp that night except that the experienced hunters with the advance guard managed to down two cows and three bulls before the yelling, excitement-maddened crowd stampeded the little herd and drove it all over the prairie.

One tenderfoot, better mounted than his fellows, managed to keep up with a running bull, firing ball after ball into it as fast as he could re-load. He was

learning that a bull-buffalo was a hard animal to kill, and when it finally wheeled and charged him, he also learned that it was willing to fight when goaded and made desperate with wounds. Another greenhorn, to get better aim, dismounted and knelt on the earth. With the roar of his gun his horse, with all its trappings, gave one snort and ran away, joining the herd and running with it. It was an hour before anyone had time to listen to his entreaties, and then it was too late to go after the runaway animal. He hoofed it back to the caravan, an angry but wiser man, and was promptly robbed by the man from whom he bought a horse.

It was an open question whether buffalo tongue or beaver tail was the better eating, but no one in the caravan had any fault to find with the portions of buffalo meat which fell to their lot. Despite the toughness and tastelessness of the old bull meat, it was the first fresh meat they had enjoyed since leaving Independence, with the exception of the few who had shared in Hank's antelope, and its poor qualities were overlooked. No one had a chance to gorge himself and to learn that overeating of buffalo flesh causes no distress. They found the meat with the fat and lean more intermixed, juicier, and of a coarser grain than beef. The choice bits were from the tongue, the udder came next in merit, followed by the hump-ribs, tenderloins, and marrow bones. They were fortunate in the selection of the bulls which had been killed, for they were quite fat and in this condition ran the cow meat a close race; all but one old bull, which was tough and stringy beyond belief. Despite the fact that the next camp spot was not very far ahead, the caravan nooned on the open prairie for the cooking of the fresh meat.

The captain signalled for the four-square corral and the evolution was creditably performed. The animals were unhitched and staked outside the enclosure and soon many fires were burning around the encampment and the savory odors of broiling buffalo meat arose on all sides. Coffee pots steeped or boiled at every fire, for coffee was the one unstinted drink of the caravan. It was not long before the encampment was surrounded by groups seated around the fires, most of the men eating with their fingers, Indian fashion, and from the universal satisfaction shown it was evident that buffalo meat had been given a high place by every palate. In contrast to a steady diet of bacon it was a feast fit for epicures. The travelers cared little about their good fortune in finding cows with the first small herd, instead of the usual vanguard or outpost of bulls, for the cows had been there and they had obtained two of them. Two hours later the caravan was moving again, and late that afternoon reached the Little Arkansas, where the first trouble with a treacherous river bed was experienced.

Knowing what was in store for them, the captain and his lieutenants went ahead with a force of workers to cut a way through the steep banks and to bridge the muddy bed. They found that the banks had been cut by the preceding caravan, but the causeway by now was useless, except as a foundation for a new one. The stream was not very wide, but made up for that by the meanness of its bottom. The trees and brush along the banks provided material for the temporary causeway and it did not take long to build up a "bridge."

The more or less easy-going manner of the captain changed here and his commands had a snap to them that should have given them an unquestioned weight. Because of the restricted space chosen for the camp, the circular corral was formed, and as the divisions reached and crossed the causeway they fell in behind the last wagon of the one ahead and crawled around until the circle was complete and compact. All animals were to be staked outside the circle until twilight and then driven inside and hobbled for the night. Care was taken to see that there were but few gaps between the wagons and that those were securely closed by chains.

The length of the first tour of guard duty was increased considerably, for the first watch went on as soon as the wagons stopped. They were getting fairly into the Indian country now. Directly north of them lay the range of the Pawnees; to the west of that the home of the Cheyennes; directly west of the Little Arkansas roamed the Arapahoes, and to the southwest were the Kiowas and Comanches, both of the latter superb cavalrymen. The last three tribes were being stirred by

jealous New Mexicans to harass the caravans. And the interest of all these tribes, and of others beyond them in several directions, was centered on the prairie between the Little Arkansas and the valley of the Arkansas, eastward from where the latter river left the mountains. This was the great range of the buffalo, and the buffalo was food, clothing, habitation, and figured very largely in other necessaries of the savage tribes.

The peculiar, curving, and ever-shifting migration of the great herds was followed by hunting parties, which became war-parties in a wink. Many were the bloody battles fought between the tribes on that stretch of prairie between the Little Arkansas and the two Coon Creeks. The Pawnees claimed sovereignty over that part of the country around Pawnee Rock, but it was one that the tribe did not dare to enjoy with any degree of permanence. Raiding parties from the south, west, and north constantly challenged their title, and because of these collisions hardly a hunting party dared show itself unless in strength. There were, it is true, small bands roaming the plains, especially after dark, which traveled on foot; but these were out with the avowed and set purpose of stealing horses, on which, if successful, they made their escape and rode home. This especially was a Pawnee trick, and especially adept were the Pawnees in creeping up to a herd of draft animals and stampeding the whole bunch. More than one party of traders had thus been left afoot in mid-prairie and forced to abandon what they could not carry on their backs. While the Pawnee country was supposed to be north of the Platte, up around the Loup Fork, they often raided in force well into the Comanche and Apache country and were as much at home on the south side of the Arkansas River as on any other part of the plains.

When the orders came to drive the animals inside the corral and hobble them, there was a great deal of complaint. It was contended that they could not get food enough in such a restricted space, crowded as it would be with horses, oxen, and mules; that they would injure each other; that there would be great trouble in each man getting his own in the morning; that they would burst through some weak spot and wander away during the night. To all these objections the captain remained obdurate. Any man who left his animals outside the corral and lost them would not be given replacements at the expense of other teams, and could make what shift he thought best for the transportation of his merchandise.

Tom and his trapper friends, with some of the more experienced traders, went among the grumblers and labored with them, preaching that from now on the utmost, unremitting vigilance would be necessary day and night, for the danger

of losing the animals would grow with every mile and would not cease until the Mexican settlements were nearly in sight. And the worse the weather was, the greater would be the need to be alert; for with tumultuous Nature to arouse the excitability of the animals and to mask the movements of the Indians, a savage raid would scarcely fail to cause a wholesale stampede unless the strictest watch was maintained. To make up for the poor grazing inside the corralled wagons, the picketing outside the circle in the evening would be supplemented by more grazing on the outside before leaving in the morning. This would necessitate later starts, but it could not be avoided.

Tom and Hank were not quite through eating their evening meal when Pedro paid them a visit.

"Ah, señores," he beamed, "I haf laughed thees day! Just like my Mexico eet was to see thee *atejo* that you haf! Thee *mulera* weeth her seven childr-ren mar-rching behind her like *soldats*!" He leaned back and laughed heartily, his teeth gleaming like old ivory.

Hank grinned and glanced at Tom. "If she'd only lead 'em 'round th' customs we'd think a hull lot more o' her. It riles me ter have ter pay ter git our goods inter a town arter such hard work gittin' 'em *to* it."

"Ah," replied Pedro, smiling broadly. "That ees thee law," he reproved them. "But I deed not know you were going to Santa Fe, señores. Eet was said somewhere, by somebody, I do not remember who, that you were going to thee Señor Bent on thee Arkansas. To hunt and to tr-rap, was eet not?"

Tom emptied his pipe and blew through the stem. "No," he said. "We're goin' ter Santa Fe. After we sell th' goods we aim ter go up ter Bent's for th' fall an' winter huntin' an' trappin'. Takes a lot o' money ter outfit two men th' way they should be, fer a hull season in the mountains." He grinned. "That's why we're packin' goods ter Santa Fe. Got to raise some money." Arising he nodded to his guest. "Now, if ye'll excuse me, friend, I'll leave ye with Hank. See ye later, mebby?"

Pedro nodded and laughed heartily, wagging an accusing finger at the young plainsman. "Ah, what should keep a br-rave *caballero* from sooch a señorita! Pedro has eyes, señor; an' Pedro, he weesh you ver' *mucho* luck. He weesh you so ver' *mucho* luck that per-rhaps he can get you past those customs. Of thees we weel talk more, eh?"

Hank slapped his leg and pushed his plug of tobacco into the visitor's hands.

"Smoke some of that thar Virginny, friend," he urged. "Ye'll find it some better than that thar husk, or willer bark you people smoke." He looked at his partner and chuckled. "These hyar young fellers, now; thar jest ain't no holdin' 'em."

Pedro thought that this particular young "feller" was going to be held very securely before he saw Santa Fe, but he grinned and waved his hand, and after Tom had disappeared among the wagons he turned toward the hunter.

"Has Señor Boyd ever been een our Santa Fe?" he asked in polite curiosity.

Hank nodded carelessly. "He war thar some years back."

"Perhaps then I can show heem a new way to thee city," said Pedro, significantly. "One that my br-rother knows ver' good. Thee knowledge of thees tr-rail ees of *mucho* less cost than thee customs that you an' me like so leetle. But of thees we weel talk more some other time. I must leeve you, señor. *Adios.*"

"*Adios*, señor," beamed Hank, again offering the plug.

After a quiet night and a somewhat later start than usual, the day's run to Cow Creek began, and not five miles from the camp site a sizable herd of buffalo was sighted. The same thing took place again, the same confusion, the same senseless chasing without weapons, but this time there was added the total abandonment of several wagons while the drivers, unhitching one animal, grabbed guns and joined in the attack, not realizing that mules hardly were suited for chasing an animal which, clumsy as it appeared, nearly equalled a horse in speed when once started on its awkward gallop. But in the results of the chase there was one noticeable difference between this and the previous hunt, for the green nimrods had asked questions of the hunters since their first try at the prairie cattle, and they had cherished the answers. They no longer fired blindly, after the first flush of their excitement died down, for now they ranged up alongside their lumbering victims from the rear and aimed a little behind the short ribs, or a few inches above the brisket and behind the shoulder. And this hunt was a great success from the standpoint of the plainsmen who had bought Colt's newfangled repeating pistols, for they proved their deadliness in such capable hands, and speeded up the kill.

A group of tenderfeet watched an old hunter butcher a fat cow in almost the time it takes to tell of it, slitting the skin along the spine from the shoulder to the tail, and down in front of the shoulder and around the neck. He removed it as far down as the brisket and laid the freed skin on the ground to receive the fleece

from along the spine, the protruding hump ribs, which he severed with a tomahawk; and then he added the liver, tongue, kidneys, certain parts of the intestine, and one shoulder. Severing the other shoulder and cutting the skin free on both sides of the body, he bundled up the choice cuts in it, carried it to his horse and returned to camp. In a few moments the butchering became general, and soon the triumphant hunters returned to the wagons with fresh meat enough to provide an unstinted feast for the entire caravan.

The journey was resumed and the twenty miles to Cow Creek was made in good time. Here the difficulties of the Little Arkansas were again met and conquered and the wagons corralled before dark.

It was at this camp that Tom and Hank became certain that they were being spied upon by Pedro and his companions. Seated around their fire, smoking with deep content after a heavy meal of fresh buffalo meat, Hank began to push his foot back and forth on the ground, making deeper and deeper, longer and longer, the groove his moccasin heel was slowly wearing in the soft earth. Finally his foot touched his companion's knee but, without pausing, kept wearing down the groove.

"Th' geese went over early this year," he said, looking up at the starry sky. "Reckon we'll have th' hot weather a leetle ahead o' time on th' Dry Route."

Tom did not change a muscle as the familiar, warning sentence struck his ears. "Yes," he replied. "Be glad when I gits inter Santa Fe, with th' cool mountains all around. Reckon you'll spend most o' your time playin' *monte*, an' be clean busted when it's time ter hit th' trail fer Bent's."

Hank laughed softly. "Did I hear ye say Jim Ogden had some good likker?" he asked.

"That's what I said."

"'Tain't none o' that thar Taos lightnin'?" skeptically inquired Hank.

"How could it be, him jest a-comin' from Missouri?"

"Wall," chuckled Hank, slowly rising. "Reckon I'll wander over an' see fer myself. Jim must be considerable lonesome, 'bout now."

"Must be, with only Zeb, Alonzo, Enoch, and a passel o' them fool tenderfeet a-settin' 'round his fire," snorted Tom. "Go ahead an' git yer likker; I'll wait fer ye

hyar."

It was only a few minutes later when Hank returned, shaking his head. "All gone," he mourned, and sat down again, regarding the dying embers. "Jest my luck."

Tom laughed. "Yer better off without it," he replied, and communed with his thoughts.

Minutes passed in reflective silence and then Jim Ogden loomed up beside them. "Come on over," he invited, grinning. "Thar warn't no use showin' a bottle with them thirsty greenhorns settin' 'round ter lick it up. Now that thar gone, we'll pass it 'round."

Hank looked knowingly at his partner as he hastily arose, and the three went off together. When half way to the other fire Jim spoke in a low voice.

"He war thar, Hank; layin' in that little gully, watchin' ye like ye war pizen." He turned to Tom. "Shall we go an' drag him out?"

"No," answered Tom. "Let him think we don't know nothin' about it. Him an' his trail inter Santa Fe! Reckons mebby that if them barefoot soldiers try ter take us in front o' th' caravan they'll get a good lickin'; but if he can coax us off from th' rest, he kin run us inter an ambush. If thar's airy way inter Santa Fe that we don't know, I'm danged if *he* knows it! Let him spy on us, now that we know he's doin' it. Thankee, Jim."

By the time they had reached Jim's little fire a figure was wriggling down the gully, and at an opportune time arose to hands and knees and scurried to the shelter of Franklin's wagons, a smile on its face. Now it was certain that Tom Boyd was going through to Santa Fe, and all would be well. He chuckled as he recalled what he had said about the Mexican troops not meeting the caravan until Point of Rocks was reached; they would meet the train at any point his messenger told them to.

At Cow Creek another quiet night was followed by another delayed start and shortly after noon the vanguard raised a shout of elation, which sent every mounted man racing ahead; and the sight repaid them for their haste.

Under their eyes lay the Arkansas River, dotted with green islands, its channel four or five hundred yards wide, and so shallow that at normal stage it was formidable at many points. While its low, barren banks, only occasionally tinted

with the green of cottonwoods, were desolate in appearance, they had a beauty peculiar and striking. As far as the eye could see spread the sand-hills and hillocks, like waves of some pale sea, here white and there yellow, accordingly as to how the light was reflected from them. Its appearance had been abrupt, the prairie floor rising slightly to the crumbling edge, below which and at some distance flowed the river, here forming the international boundary between Texas and the United States. While territorially Texas lay across the river, according to Texan claims, actually, so far as supervision was concerned, it was Mexico, for the Texan arm was yet too short to dominate it and the ordinary traveler let it keep its original name.

While its northern bank was almost destitute of timber, the southern one showed scattered clumps of cottonwood, protected from the devastating prairie fires from the North not only by the river itself, but also by the barren stretch of sand, over which the fires died from starvation. To the right of the caravan lay the grassy, green rolls of the prairie, to an imaginative eye resembling the long swells of some great sea; on the left a ribbon of pale tints, from gleaming whites to light golds which varied with the depths of the water and the height and position of the sun. Massive sand dunes, glittering in the sunlight made a rampart which stretched for miles up and down the river and struck the eye with the actinic power of pure, drifted snow. Here the nature of the prairie changed, losing its rich, luxuriant verdure, for here the short buffalo grass began to dominate to a noticeable extent.

The excitement spread. Eager couriers raced back to the plodding caravan to tell the news. Some of the more impressionable forthwith rode toward the river, only a few yards away, hot to be the first to splash in its waters; but they found that prairie air was deceptive and that the journey over the rolling hillocks was a great deal longer than they had thought. But a few miles meant nothing to them and they pushed on, careless of Comanche, Kiowa, or Pawnee Picts, some with their guns empty from the salute they had fired at sight of the stream. The caravan kept stolidly on, following a course roughly paralleling the river and not stopping until evening found it on the far side of Walnut Creek after they had crossed a belt of such poor grass that they had grave doubts about the pasturage at the encampment; and the flinty, uncompromising nature of the ground down the slope of the little divide, in which seemingly for eternity was graven the strands of the mighty trail, seemed to justify their fears. But then, while they were worrying the most, the grass improved and when they had crossed the creek not far from its mouth they found themselves in a little, timber-fringed

valley thick with tall grass. And they now had entered one of the great danger spots of the long trail.

Hank Marshall got his fire started in a hurry while his partner looked after the pack mules; and when Tom came back to attend to the fire and prepare the supper, Hank dug into his "possible" sack and produced some line and a fish hook. Making a paste of flour, he mixed it with some dried moss he had put away and saved for this use. Rolling the little doughballs and hardening them over the fire he soon strode off up the creek, looking wise but saying nothing; and a quarter of an hour later he returned with three big catfish, one of which he ate after he had consumed a generous portion of buffalo hump-ribs; and he followed the fish by a large tongue raked out of the ashes of the fire. To judge from his expression he had enjoyed a successful and highly gratifying day, and since he was heavy and drowsy with his gorging and had to go on watch that night, he rolled up in his blanket under a wagon and despite the noise on all sides of him, fell instantly asleep. He had "set hisself" to awaken at eleven o'clock, which he would do almost on the minute and be thoroughly wide awake.

Fearing for the alertness of the sentries that night, a number of plainsmen and older traders agreed upon doing duty out of their turns and followed Hank's example, "settin'" themselves to awaken at different hours; and despite these precautions had a band of Pawnees discovered the camp that night they most certainly would have been blessed with success; and no one understood why the camp had not been discovered, for the crawling train made a mark on the prairie that could not be missed by savage eyes miles away.

Because of the height and the luxuriance of the grass within the corral the morning feeding, beyond the time needed for getting ready to leave, was dispensed with and the train got off to an early start, fairly embarked on the eastern part of the great buffalo range and a section of the trail where Indians could be looked for in formidable numbers.

This great plain fairly was crowded with bison and was dark with them as far as the eye could see. They could be numbered by the tens of thousands and actually impeded the progress of the caravan and threatened constant danger from their blind, unreasoning stampedes which the draft animals seemed anxious to join. Because of the matted hair in front of their eyes their vision was impaired; and the keenness of their scent often hurled them into dangers which a clearer eyesight would have avoided. So great did this danger become shortly after the train had left the valley of the Walnut that the rear guard, which had grown

slightly as the days passed, now was sent out to protect the flanks and to strengthen the vanguard, which had fallen back within a few hundred feet of the leading wagons. Time after time the stupid beasts barely were kept from crashing blindly into the train, and the wagoners had the most trying and tiring day of the whole journey.

Several bands of Indians at times were seen in the distance pursuing their fleeing game, but all were apparently too busy to bother with the caravan, which they knew would stop somewhere for the night. No longer was there any need to freight buffalo meat to the wagons; for so many of the animals were killed directly ahead that the wagoners only had to check their teams and help each other butcher and load. This constant stopping, now one wagon and now another, threw the train out of all semblance of order and it wandered along the trail with its divisions mixed, which caused the sweat to stand out on the worried captain's forehead. His lieutenants threatened and swore and pleaded and at last, after the wagons had all they could carry of the meat, managed to get four passable divisions in somewhat presentable order.

While the caravan shuffled itself, chased buffalo out of the way, turned aside thundering ranks of the formidable-looking beasts, and had a time hectic enough to suit the most irrational, Pawnee Rock loomed steadily higher, steadily nearer, and the great sand-hills of the Arkansas stretched interminably into the West, each fantastic top a glare of dazzling light.

Well to the North, rising by degrees out of the prairie floor, and gradually growing higher and bolder as they neared the trail and the river, were a series of hills which terminated abruptly in a rocky cliff frowning down upon the rutted wagon road. From the distance the mirage magnified the ascending hills until they looked like some detached mountain range, which instead of growing higher as it was approached, shrunk instead. It was a famous landmark, silent witness of many bloody struggles, as famous on this trail as was Chimney Rock and Courthouse Rock along the great emigrant trail going up the Platte; but compared to them in height it was a dwarf. Here was a lofty perch from which the eagle eyes of Indian sentries could descry crawling caravans and pack trains, in either direction, hours before they reached the shadow of the rocky pile; and from where their calling smoke signals could be seen for miles around.

Two trails passed it, one east and west; the other, north and south. The former, cut deep, honest in its purpose and plainness, here crossed the latter, which was an evanescent, furtive trail, as befits a pathway to theft and bloodshed, and one

made by shadowy raiders as they flitted to and from the Kiowa-Comanche country and the Pawnee-Cheyenne; only marked at intervals by the dragging ends of the lodgepoles of peacefully migrating Indian villages, and even then pregnant with danger. Other eyes than those of the prairie tribes had looked upon it, other blood had been spilled there, for distant as it was from the Apaches, and still more distant from the country of the Utes, war parties of both these tribes had accepted the gage of battle there flung down. On the rugged face of the rock itself human conceit had graven human names, and to be precise as to the date of their foolishness, had added day, month, and year.

While speaking of days, months, and years it may not be amiss to say that regarding the latter division of time the caravan was fortunate. Troubles between Indians and whites developed slowly during the history of the Trail, from the earlier days of the fur trains and the first of the traders' caravans, when Indian troubles were hardly more than an occasional attempted theft, in many cases successful, but seemingly without that lust for blood on both sides which was to come later. After the wagon period begun there was a slight increase, due to the need which certain white men found for shooting game. If game were scarce, what could be more interesting when secure from retaliation by the number of armed and resolute men in the caravans, than to pot-shoot some curious and friendly savage, or gallantly put to flight a handful of them? The ungrateful savages remembered these pleasantries and were prone to retaliate, which caused the death of quite a few honest and innocent whites who followed later. The natural cupidity of the Indian for horses, his standard of wealth, received a secondary urge, which later became the principal one, in the days when theft was regarded as a material reward for killing. While they may have grudged these periodic crossings of the plains as a trespass, and the wanton slaughter of their main food supply as a constantly-growing calamity, they still were keener to steal quietly and get away without bloodshed, and to barter their dried meat, their dressed hides, their beadwork, and other manufactures of their busy squaws than to engage in pitched battle at sight. Had Captain Woodson led a caravan along that same trail twenty or thirty years later, he would have had good reason to sweat copiously at the sight of so many dashing savages.

The captain knew the Indian of his day as well as a white man could. He knew that they still depended upon trading with the fur companies, with free trappers and free traders, and needed the white man's goods and good will; they wanted his trinkets, his tobacco to mix with their inner bark of the red willow; his powder, muskets, and lead, and, most of all, his watered alcohol. He knew that a

white man could stumble into the average Indian camp and receive food and shelter, especially among those tribes not yet prostituted by contact with the frontier; that such a man's goods would be safe and, if he minded his own business, that he would be sent on his way again unharmed. But he also knew their lust for horses and mules; he felt their slowly growing feeling of contempt for men who would trade them wonderful things for worthless beaver, mink, and otter skins; and a fortune in trade goods for the pelt of a single silver fox, which neither was warmer nor more durable than the pelt of other foxes. And he knew the panicky feeling of self-preservation which might cause some greenhorn of the caravan to shoot true at the wrong time. So, without worrying about any "deadly circles" or about any period of time a score or more years away, he sweat right heartily. And when at last he drew near to Ash Creek, the later history of which mercifully was spared him, he sighed with relief but worked with the energy befitting a man who believed that God helped those who helped themselves; he hustled the caravan down the slope and across the stream with a speed not to be lightly scorned when the disorganized arrangement of the train is considered; and he halted the divisions in a circular formation with great dispatch, making it the most compact and solid wall of wagons seen so far on the journey.

CHAPTER XII

PAWNEES

At this Ash Creek camp before the wagoners had unhitched their teams there was a cordon around the corral made up of every man who could be spared, and the cannon crews stood silently around their freshly primed guns. The air of tenseness and expectancy pleased Woodson, for it was an assurance that there would be no laxity about this night's watch. With the animals staked as close to the wagons as practicable, which caused some encroachments and several fist fights between jealous wagoners, the fires soon were cooking supper for squads of men from the sentry line; and as soon as all had eaten and the camp was not distracted by too many duties, the cordon thinned until it was composed of a double watch. Before dusk the animals were driven inside, secured by side-line hobbles, which are much more effective than hobbling the forelegs, and all gaps were closed as tightly as possible.

The evening shadows darkened and ran into blackness; the night wind crept among the branches of the thin line of trees on both banks of the creek and made soft soughings in the tall, thick grass; overhead the sky first darkened and then grew lighter, shot with myriads of stars, which gleamed as only prairie stars can; and among them, luminous and bright, lay the Milky Way. The creek murmured in musical tones as it fretted at some slight obstruction and all nature seemed to be at peace. Then sounded the howl of a buffalo wolf, the gray killer of the plains, deep, throaty, full, and followed by a quick slide up the scale with a ringing note that the bluffs and mountains love to toss back and forth. Yet it was somehow different. Woodson and his trapper aides, seated together against a wagon, stirred and glanced sidewise at each other. Not one of them had felt the reflex answer of his spine and hair; not one of them had thrilled. A simple lack; but a most enlightening one.

Franklin bit into a plug of tobacco, pushed the mouthful into his cheek with deft tongue, and crossed his legs the other way. "Hell!" he growled. "Reckon we're in fer it."

"They jest can't git it *all* in, kin they?" commented Zeb Houghton, coming up.

"No," answered Tom Boyd. "They leave out th' best part o' it." He glanced in the

direction of the nearest fringe of trees, noisy cottonwoods all, and shook his head. "We been havin' too fine a stretch o' weather. Hear them trees? In two hours it'll be blowin' hard; an' I kin feel th' rain already."

From the blackness of the creek there arose a series of short, sharp barks, faster and faster, higher and higher, the lost-soul howl climbing to a pitch that was sheer torture to some ears.

"Kiyote sassin' a gray," chuckled Zeb, ironically.

"'Upon what meat hath—'" began Tom, and checked the quotation. "He oughter be tuckin' his tail atween his laigs an' streakin' fer th' Platte; or mebby *he* missed somethin', too," he said. "Everythin' else shuts up when th' gray wolf howls."

"Doubled watches air not enough fer tonight," growled Woodson, as a tremulous, high-pitched, chromatic, and descending run in a minor key floated through the little valley. If it were an imitation of a screech-owl it was so perfectly done that no man in the caravan could detect the difference.

"Us boys will be scoutin' 'round all night," replied Tom. "Hank an' th' others air gittin' some winks now. I don't look fer no fight afore daylight; but they'll shore try ter stampede us afore then. Reckon I'll take a good listen out yonder," he said, and arose. He went to Joe Cooper's little wagon and was promptly challenged.

"It's Boyd," he answered. "Stick to the wagon, Uncle Joe. We ain't looking for any rush before daylight. If one comes Hank and I will get here quick. Where is Miss Cooper?"

"In th' wagon, of course!"

"That's no place for her," retorted Tom. "Those sheets won't stop arrows. Put her under the wagon, an' hang blankets down th' sides, loose at th' bottoms. Tight blankets or canvas are little better than paper; but a loose Mackinaw yields to th' impact somewhat. I've seen a loose blanket stop a musket ball."

"Can I do anything useful, Mr. Boyd?" came Patience's voice from the wagon. "I can load and cap, anyhow."

Tom's chuckle came straight from his heart. "Not yet, God bless you. Despite their reputation in some quarters, Pawnees are not the most daring fighters. Any of the tribes east of the Mississippi are paragons of courage when compared to these prairie Indians. Pawnees would rather steal than fight; and they know that

this is no helpless caravan, but one with nearly two hundred armed men. If they were Comanches or Kiowas, Utes or Apaches, I'd be bothered a lot more than I am now. And they know that there are two cannons pointing somewhere into the night. All we have to worry about is our animals."

The mournful, hair-raising screech of an owl sounded again, and then all the demons of hell seemed to have broken loose around the camp. The corralled animals, restless before, now surged one way and now another, largely cancelling their own efforts because wave met wave; but all the while they were getting wilder and more frantic and the blood-chilling yells on all sides finally set them into a sort of rhythm which more and more became uniform. They surged from one side to the other, striking the wagons harder and harder. Then the yelling ceased and the Pawnee whistle was heard. There ensued a few minutes of silence and then the whistle sounded again. It set off a hellish uproar on one side of the encampment and the frantic animals whirled and charged in the other direction. The shock rocked some of the wagons and would have overturned them but for the great weight of their loads. Anticipating this surge of the animals some of the traders, told off by the captain, had bound bundles of twigs and dried grass to long cottonwood sticks and now set them afire and crawled under the wagons, thrusting the torches into the faces of the charging mass. This started the animals milling and soon the whole herd was running in a circle. The stampede had failed.

Here and there from under the wagons on the threatened side of the encampment guns stabbed into the night, showing where tenderfeet were gallantly engaged in guessing matches. Arrows curved over the wagon tops and some of the torch wavers on the other side of the camp had narrow escapes before their purpose was accomplished and the torches burned out.

A cricket chirped twice and then twice again not far from Joe Cooper's little wagon, and the alert plainsman crouched behind an outer wheel answered by three short trills. "Don't shoot, Uncle Joe," Tom softly called. "That's Hank."

Hank seemed to be having a hard time of it and made more noise than was his wont. Alarmed, Tom was about to crawl out and help his friend to the corral when Hank's querulous complaint barely reached him.

"Danged if ye ain't so plumb full o' buffaler meat ye nigh weigh a ton," growled the hunter. "Yourn as heavy as mine, Jim?"

"Wuss," complacently answered Ogden.

"Huh!" snorted another voice, crowding so much meaning into the grunt that he had the best of the little exchange and the last word.

"If I could twang like you, Hank," said Ogden, pausing a moment to rest, "I'd have a hull dozen, danged if I wouldn't. Mine's got nigh ter six feet o' feathers a-hangin' ter him."

Tom rocked back and forth, laughing silently. "Then he makes up fer th' rest o' yer dozen!" he gasped. "Hostages, by th' Great Horned Spoon!" He made some funny noises in his throat and gasped again. "A *chief*, too!"

"An' a plumb waste o' good ha'r," growled Hank. "But jest now it's wuth more on thar heads than fastened ter our belts. Hyar, haul this hyar warrior o' mine under th' waggin. I'm all tuckered out."

"Hank kin shoot more arrers with his mouth than some Injuns kin with thar bows," panted Jim, grasping a spoke and yanking his captive roughly against the wheel. "All I kin imitate is a lance." He chuckled at his joke and rested.

"When Hank twanged, Big Polecat, hyar, got right up an' stumbled plumb over me," said Zeb's weary voice. "I near busted his skull with that newfangled pistol. It's heftier than I'm used ter. Wonder is I didn't bash his brains out. Hyar, gimme a hand, I can't hardly wiggle no more."

"Wonder what them danged fools air firin' at?" queried Hank, as several shots rang out in quick succession from the other side of the encampment. "Don't they know th' dance is over till mornin'?"

"Oh, them greenhorns'll be shootin' all night," growled Ogden. "If thar's a rush at daylight they won't have no more powder an' ball. When they hadn't oughter shoot, they shoot; when they oughter shoot, thar too danged scared to pull trigger."

CHAPTER XIII

HURRAH FOR TEXAS

At daylight the only Indians in sight were several rifle shots from the caravan, but encircling it. Hostilities of every nature apparently had ceased, but without causing the travelers to relax in their vigilance. Breakfast was over before the savages made any move and then a sizable body of them came charging over the prairie, brandishing their weapons and yelling at the top of their voices. While not the equals of the Comanches in horsemanship they were good riders and as they raced toward the encampment, showing every trick they knew, the spectacle was well worth watching.

"Showin' off," said Jim Ogden. "Want ter talk with us. Now we got ter stop them fool greenhorns from shootin'!"

At his warning his companions ran along the line of wagons and begged that not a shot be fired until the captain gave the word. If the Indians wanted a parley the best thing would be to give it to them.

Meanwhile the captain and two experienced men rode slowly forward, stopping while still within rifle shot of their friends. The charging savages pulled up suddenly and stopped, three of their number riding ahead with the same unconcern and calm dignity as the white men had shown. One of them raised a hand, palm out, and when well outside of the range of the rifles of the encampment, stopped and waited. Captain Woodson, raising his hand, led his two companions at a slow walk toward the waiting Indians and when he stopped, the two little parties were within easy speaking distance of each other. Each group was careful to show neither distrust nor fear, and apparently neither was armed. Erect in their saddles, each waited for the other to speak.

"My young men are angry because the white men and their wagons have crossed the Pawnee country and have frightened away the buffalo," said the leader of the warriors, a chief, through an interpreter.

"The buffalo are like the grass of the prairies," replied Woodson. "They are all around us and are bold enough to charge our wagons on the march and frighten our animals."

"From the Loup Fork to the Arkansas, from the Big Muddy to the great mountains, is Pawnee country, which none dare enter."

"The Cheyennes, the Arapahoes, the Osages, and other brave tribes tell us the same thing. We do not know what tribe owns this prairie; but we do know that friends are always welcome in the Pawnee country, and we bring presents for our brave brothers, presents of beads and colored cloth and glasses that show a man his spirit."

"The white chief speaks well; but my braves are angry."

"And my young men are angry because they could not sleep and their animals were frightened like the Comanches are frightened by the Pawnees," replied Woodson. "They are hot-headed and are angry at me because I would not let them make war on our friends, the Pawnees."

"The young men of the Pawnees have not the wisdom of years and did not know the white men were friends, and had brought them presents of horses and powder and whiskey."

"I have told my young men that the Pawnees are friends. We did not think we would meet our red brothers and have horses only for ourselves. Our whiskey and powder are for the great Pawnee chiefs; our beads and cloth for their young men."

"It is well," replied the chief. After a moment's silence he looked keenly into Woodson's eyes. "The Pawnees are sad. White Bear and two of our young men have not returned to their people." His eyes flashed and a tenseness seized him and his companions. "Great Eagle wants to know if his white friends have seen them?"

"Great Eagle's friends found three brave Pawnees in front of their thunder guns and they feared our young men would fire the great medicine rifles and hurt the Pawnees. We sent out and brought White Bear and his warriors to our camp and treated them as welcome guests. Each of them shall have a horse and a musket, with powder and ball, that they will not misunderstand our roughness."

At that moment yells broke out on all sides of the encampment and warriors were seen dashing west along the trail. A well-armed caravan of twenty-two wagons crawled toward the creek, and Woodson secretly exulted. It was the annual fur caravan from Bent's Fort to the Missouri settlements and every

member of it was an experienced man.

The fur train did not seem to be greatly excited by the charging horde, for it only interposed a line of mounted men between the wagons and the savages. The two leaders wheeled and rode slowly off to meet the Indians and soon a second parley was taking place. After a little time the fur caravan, which had moved steadily ahead, reached the encampment and swiftly formed on one side of it. With the coming of this re-enforcement of picked men all danger of war ceased.

Before noon the Pawnee chiefs and some of the elder warriors had paid their visit, received their presents, sold a few horses to wagoners who had jaded animals and then returned to their camp, pitched along the banks of the creek a short distance away. The afternoon was spent in visiting between the two encampments and the night in alert vigilance. At dawn the animals were turned out to graze under a strong guard and before noon the caravan was on its way again, its rear guard and flankers doubled in strength.

Shortly after leaving Ash Creek they came to great sections of the prairie where the buffalo grass was cropped as short as though a herd of sheep had crossed it. It marked the grazing ground of the more compact buffalo herds. The next creek was Pawnee Fork, but since it lay only six miles from the last stopping place, and because it was wise to put a greater distance between them and the Pawnees, the caravan crossed it close to where it emptied into the Arkansas, the trail circling at the double bend of the creek and crossing it twice. Great care was needed to keep the wagons from upsetting here, but it was put behind without accident and the night was spent on the open prairie not far from Little Coon Creek.

The fuel question was now solved and while the buffalo chips, plentiful all around them, made execrable, smudgy fires in wet weather if they would burn at all, in dry weather they gave a quick, hot fire excellent to cook on and one which threw out more heat, with equal amounts of fuel, than one of wood; and after an amusing activity in collecting the chips the entire camp was soon girdled by glowing fires.

The next day saw them nooning at the last named creek, and before nightfall they had crossed Big Coon Creek. For the last score of miles they had found such numbers of rattlesnakes that the reptiles became a nuisance; but notwithstanding this they camped here for the night, which was made more or less exciting because several snakes sought warmth in the blankets of some of

the travelers. It is not a pleasant feeling to wake up and find a three-foot prairie rattlesnake coiled up against one's stomach. Fortunately there were no casualties among the travelers but, needless to say, there was very little sleep.

Next came the lower crossing of the Arkansas, where there was some wrangling about the choice of fords; many, fearing the seasonal rise of the river, which they thought was due almost any minute, urged that it be crossed here, despite the scarcity of water, and the heavy pulling among the sand-hills on the other side.

Woodson and the more experienced traders and hunters preferred to chance the rise, even at the cost of a few days' delay, and to cross at the upper ford. This would give them better roads, plenty of water and grass, a safer ford and a shorter drive across the desert-like plain between the Arkansas and the Cimarron. Eventually he had his way and after spending the night at the older ford the caravan went on again along the north bank of the river, and reached The Caches in time to camp near them. The grass-covered pits were a curiosity and the story of how Baird and Chambers had been forced to dig them to cache their goods twenty years before, found many interested listeners.

All this day a heavy rain had poured down, letting up only for a few minutes in the late afternoon, and again falling all night with increased volume. With it came one of those prairie windstorms which have made the weather of the plains famous. Tents and wagon covers were whipped into fringes, several of them being torn loose and blown away; two lightly loaded wagons were overturned, and altogether the night was the most miserable of any experienced so far. While the inexperienced grumbled and swore, Woodson was pleased, for in spite of the delayed crossing of the river, he knew that the dreaded Dry Route beyond Cimarron Crossing would be a pleasant stretch in comparison to what it usually was.

Morning found a dispirited camp, and no effort was made to get under way until it was too late to cover the twenty miles to the Cimarron Crossing that day, and rather than camp without water it was decided to lose a day here. It would be necessary to wait for the river to fall again before they would dare to attempt the crossing and the time might as well be spent here as farther on. The rain fell again that night and all the following day, but the wind was moderate. The river was being watched closely and it was found that it had risen four feet since they reached The Caches; but this was nothing unusual, for, like most prairie streams, the Arkansas rose quickly until its low banks were overflowed, when the loss of volume by the flooding of so much country checked it appreciably; and its fall,

once the rains ceased, would be as rapid. High water was not the only consideration in regard to the fording of the river, for the soft bottom, disturbed by the strong current, soon lost what little firmness it had along this part of the great bend, and became treacherous with quicksand. That it was not true quicksand made but little difference so long as it mired teams and wagons.

Another argument now was begun. There were several fords of the Arkansas between this point and the mountains; and there were two routes from here on, the shorter way across the dry plain of the Cimarron, as direct as any unsurveyed trail could be, and the longer, more roundabout way leading another hundred miles farther up the river and crossing it not far from Bent's Fort, over a pebbly and splendid ford. From here it turned south along the divide between Apishara Creek and the Purgatoire River, climbed over the mountain range through Raton Pass, and joined the more direct trail near Santa Clara Spring under the shadow of the Wagon Mound. Beside the ford above Bent's Fort there was another, about thirty miles above The Caches, which crossed the river near Chouteau's Island.

Each ford and each way had its adherents, but after great argument and wrangling the Dry Route was decided upon, its friends not only proving the wisdom of taking the shorter route, but also claimed that the unpleasantness of the miles of dry traveling was no worse than the rough and perilous road over Raton Pass, where almost any kind of an accident could happen to a wagon and where, if the caravan were attacked by Utes or Apaches before it reached the mountain pasture near the top, they would be caught in a strung-out condition and corralling would be impossible. The danger from a possible ambush and from rocks rolled down from above, in themselves, were worse than the desert stretch of the shorter route.

At last dawn broke with a clear sky, and with praiseworthy speed the routine of the camp was rushed and the wagons were heading westward again. Late that afternoon the four divisions became two and rolled down the slope toward the Cimarron Crossing, going into camp within a short distance of the rushing river. The sun had shone all day and the night promised to be clear, and some of the traders whose goods had been wetted by the storm at The Caches when their wagon covers had been damaged or blown away, took quick advantage of the good weather to spread their merchandise over several acres of sand and stubby brush to dry out thoroughly; and the four days spent here, waiting for the river to fall, accomplished the work satisfactorily, although at times the sky was overcast and threatened rain, while the nights were damp.

Some of the more impetuous travelers urged that time would be saved if bullboats were made by stretching buffalo hides over the wagon boxes and floating them across. This had been done more than once, but with only a day or so to wait, and no pressing need for speed, the time saved would not be worth the hard work and the risk of such ferrying. At last the repeated soundings of the bottom began to look favorable and word was passed around that the crossing would take place as soon as the camp was ready to be left the next morning, providing that no rain fell during the night.

Daylight showed a bright sky and a little lower level of the river and it was not long before the first wagon drawn by four full teams, after a warming-up drive, rumbled down the bank and hit the water with a splash. The bottom was still too soft to take things easy in crossing and the teams were not allowed to pause after once they had entered the water. A moment's stop might mire both teams and wagons and cause no end of trouble, hard work, and delay. All day long the wagons crossed and at night they were safely corralled on the farther bank, on the edge of the Dry Route and no longer on United States soil.

That evening the leaders of the divisions went among their followers and urged that in the morning every water cask and container available for holding water be filled. This flat, monotonous, dry plain might require three days to cross and every drop of water would be precious. Should any be found after the recent rains it would be in buffalo wallows and more fit for animals than for human beings. Again in the morning the warning was carried to every person in the camp and the need for heeding it gravely emphasized; and when the caravan started on the laborious and treacherous journey across the fringe of sand-hills and hillocks which extended for five or six miles beyond the river, where upsetting of wagons was by no means an exception, half a dozen wagons had empty water casks. Their owners had been too busy doing inconsequential things to think of obeying the orders for a "water scrape," given for their own good.

The outlying hilly fringe of sand was not as bad as had been expected for the heavy rains had wetted it well and packed the sand somewhat; but when the great flat plain was reached and the rough belt left behind, two wagons had been overturned and held up the whole caravan while they were unloaded, righted, and re-packed. Since no one had been injured the misfortunes had been taken lightly and the columns went on again in good spirits.

It was not yet noon when the advance guard came upon an unusual sight. The plain was torn and scored and covered with sheepskin saddle-pads, broken riding

gear, battered and discarded firelocks of so ancient a vintage that it were doubtful whether they would be as dangerous to an enemy as they might be to their owners; broken lances, bows and arrows, torn clothing, a two-wheeled cart overturned and partly burned, and half a score dead mules and horses.

Captain Woodson looked from the strewed ground, around the faces of his companions.

"Injuns an' greasers?" he asked, glancing at the remains of the *carreta* in explanation of the "greaser" end of the couplet. The replies were affirmative in nature until Tom Boyd, looking fixedly at one remnant of clothing, swept it from the ground and regarded it in amazement. Without a word he passed it on to Hank, who eyed it knowingly and sent it along.

"I'm bettin' th' Texans licked 'em good," growled Tom. "It's about time somebody paid 'em fer that damnable, two thousand mile trail o' sufferin' an' death! Wish I'd had a hand in this fight!"

Assenting murmurs came from the hunters and trappers, all of whom would have been happy to have pulled trigger with the wearers of the coats with the Lone Star buttons.

Tom shook his head after a moment's reflection. "Hope it war reg'lar greaser troops an' not poor devils pressed inter service. That's th' worst o' takin' revenge; ye likely take it out o' th' hides of them that ain't to blame, an' th' *guilty* dogs ain't hurt."

"Mebby Salezar war leadin' 'em!" growled Hank. "Hope so!"

"Hope not!" snapped Tom, his eyes glinting. "*I* want Salezar! I want him in my two hands, with plenty o' time an' nobody around! I'd as soon have *him* as Armijo!"

"Who's he?" asked a tenderfoot. "And what about the Texans, and this fight here?"

"He's the greaser cur that had charge o' th' Texan prisoners from Santa Fe to El Paso, where they war turned over to a gentleman an' a Christian," answered Tom, his face tense. "I owe him fer th' death, by starvation an' abuse, of as good a friend as any man ever had: an' if I git my hands on him he'll pay fer it! *That's* who he is!"

The first day's travel across the dry stretch, notwithstanding the start had been later than was hoped for, rolled off more than twenty miles of the flat, monotonous plain. Even here the grama grass was not entirely missing, and a nooning of two hours was taken to let the animals crop as much of it as they could find. While the caravan was now getting onto the fringe of the Kiowa and Comanche country, trouble with these tribes, at this time of the year, was not expected until the Cimarron was reached and for this reason the urging for mileage was allowed to keep the wagons moving until dark. During the night the wagoners arose several times to change the picket stakes of their animals, hoping by this and by lengthened ropes to make up for the scantiness of the grass. In one other way was the sparsity of the grazing partly made up, for the grama grass was a concentrated food, its small seed capsules reputed to contain a nourishment approaching that of oats of the same size.

The heat of the day had been oppressive and the contents of the water casks were showing the effects of it. The feather-headed or stubborn know-it-alls who had ignored the call of "water scrape" back on the bank of the Arkansas now were humble pilgrims begging for drinks from their more provident companions. Tom and Hank had filled their ten-gallon casks and put them in Joe Cooper's wagons for the use of his and their animals which, being mules, found a dry journey less trying than the heavy-footed oxen of other teams. The mules also showed an ability far beyond their horned draft fellows in picking up sufficient food; they also were free from the foot troubles which now began to be shown by the oxen. The triumphant wagoners of the muddier portions of the trail, whose oxen had caused them to exult by the way they had out-pulled the mules in every mire, now became thoughtful and lost their levity.

Breakfast was cooked and eaten before daylight and the wagons were strung out in the four column formation before dawn streaked the sky. A few buffalo wallows, half full of water from the recent rains, relieved the situation, and the thirsty animals emptied their slightly alkaline contents to the last obtainable drop. This second day found the plain more barren, more desolate, its flat floor apparently interminable, and the second night camp was not made until after dark, the wagons corralling by the aid of candle lanterns slung from their rear axles. It was a silent camp, lacking laughter and high-pitched voices; and the begging water seekers, while not denied their drinks, were received with a sullenness which was eloquent. One of them was moved to complain querulously to Tom Boyd of the treatment he had received at one wagon, and forthwith learned a few facts about himself and his kind.

"Look hyar," drawled Tom in his best frontier dialect. "If I war runnin' this caravan yer tongue would be hangin' out fer th' want o' a drink. You war warned, fair an' squar, back on th' Arkansas, ter carry all th' water ye could. But ye knew it all, jest like ye know it all every time a better man gives ye an order. If it warn't fer yer kind th' Injuns along th' trail would be friendly. Hyar, let me tell ye somethin':

"We been follerin', day after day, a plain trail, so plain that even *you* could foller it. But thar was a time when thar warn't no trail, but jest an unmarked plain, without a landmark, level as it is now, all 'round fur's th' eye could reach. Thar warn't much knowed about it years ago, an' sometimes a caravan wandered 'round out hyar, its water gone an' th' men an' animals slowly dyin' fer a drink. Some said go *this* way, some said to go *that* way; others, *other* ways. Nobody knowed which war right, an' so they went every-which way, addin' mile to mile in thar wanderin'. Then they blindly stumbled onter th' Cimarron, which they had ter do if they follered thar compasses an' kept on goin' south; an' when they got thar they found it dry! Do ye understand that? They found th' river *dry*! Jest a river bed o' sand, mile after mile, dry as a bone.

"Which way should they go? It warn't a question *then*, o' headin' fer Santa Fe; but o' headin' *any* way a-tall ter git ter th' nearest water. If they went down they was as bad off as if they went up, fer th' bed war dry fer miles either way in a dry season. Sufferin'? Hell! you don't know what sufferin' is! A few o' you fools air thirsty, but yer beggin' gits ye water. Suppose thar warn't no water a-tall in th' hull caravan, fer men, wimmin, children, or animals? Suppose ye war so thirsty that you'd drink what ye found in th' innards o' some ol' buffalo yer war lucky enough ter kill, an' near commit murder ter git furst chanct at it? That war done onct. Don't ye let me hear ye bellerin' about bein' thirsty! Suppose we all had done like you, back thar on th' Arkansas? An' don't ye come ter *us* fer water! If we had bar'ls o' it, we'd pour it out under yer nose afore we'd give ye a mouthful! Yer larnin' some lessons this hyar trip, but yer larnin' 'em too late. Go 'bout yer business an' think things over. We're comin' ter bad Injun country. If ye got airy sense a-tall in yer chuckle head ye'll mebby have a chanct ter show it."

Before noon on the third day, after crossing more broken country which was cut up with many dry washes through which the wagons wallowed in imminent danger of being wrecked, the caravan came to the Cimarron, and found it dry. Cries of consternation broke out on all sides, and were followed by dogmatic denials that it was the Cimarron. The arguments waged hotly between those who were making their first trip and the more experienced traders. Who ever heard of

a dry river? This was only another dry wash, wider and longer, but only a wash. The Cimarron lay beyond.

Here ensued the most serious of all the disagreements, for a large number of the members of the caravans scoffed when told that by following the plain wagon tracks they would soon reach the lower spring of the Cimarron. How could the spring be found when this was not the Cimarron River at all? They knew that when Woodson had been elected at Council Grove that he was not fitted to take charge of the caravan; that his officers were incompetent, and now they were sure of it. Anyone with sense could see that this was no river. If it were a river, then the prairie-dog mounds they had just passed were mountains. Here was a situation which needed more than tact, for if the doubting minority was allowed to follow their inclinations they might find a terrible death at the end of their wanderings. Dogmatic and pugnacious, almost hysterical in their repeated determination to go on and find the river, they must be saved, by force if necessary, from themselves. They would not listen to the plea that they go on a few miles and let the spring prove them to be wrong; there was no spring to be found in a few miles if it was located on the Cimarron. Woodson and others argued, begged, and at last threatened. They pointed out that they were familiar with every foot of the trail from one end to the other; that they had made the journey year after year, spring and fall; that here was the deeply cut trail, pointing out the way to water, where other wagons had rolled before them, following the plain and unequivocal tracks. The debate was growing noisier and more heated when Tom stepped forward and raised his hand.

"Listen!" he shouted again and again, and at last was given a grudged hearing. "Let's prove this question, for it's a mighty serious one," he cried. "Last year, where th' trail hit th' Cimarron, which had some water in it then, a team of mules, frantic from thirst, ran away with a Dearborn carriage as the driver was getting out. When we came up with them we found one of them with a broken leg, struggling in the wreckage of the carriage. I have not been out of your sight all morning, and if I tell you where to find that wrecked carriage, and you *do* find it, you'll know that I'm tellin' th' truth, an' that this is th' Cimarron. Go along this bank, about four hundred yards, an' you'll find a steep-walled ravine some thirty feet higher than th' bed of th' river. At th' bottom of it, a hundred yards from th' river bank, you'll find what's left of th' Dearborn. When you come back we'll show you how to relieve your thirst and to get enough water to let you risk goin' on to th' spring."

Sneers and ridicule replied to him, but a skeptical crowd, led by the man he had

lectured the night before, followed his suggestion and soon returned with the word that the wrecked carriage had been found just where Tom had said it would be. The contentious became softened and made up in sullenness what they lacked in pugnacity; for there are some who, proven wrong, find cause for anger in the correction, their stubbornness of such a quality that it seems to prefer to hold to an error and take the penalties than to accept safety by admitting that they are wrong.

In the meanwhile the experienced travelers had gone down into the river bed and dug holes in the sand which, thanks to the recent rains, was a masked reservoir and yielded all the water needed at a depth of two or three feet. After a hard struggle with the thirsty animals to keep them from stampeding for the water their nostrils scented, at last all had been watered and the wagons formed for the noon camp. Humbled greenhorns who had neglected the "water scrape" at the Arkansas were silently digging holes along the river bed and filling every vessel they could spare. They were making the acquaintance of a river of a kind they never had seen before.

Here they found a dry stretch, despite the heavy rains; had they now gone down or up its bed they would have found alternating sections of water and dry sand, and in the water sections they would have found a current. Some of the traders maintained that its real bed was solid, unfractured rock, many feet below the sand which covered it, which held the water as in a pipe and let it follow its tendency to seek its level. The deep sand blotted and hid the meager stream where the bottom was farther below the sand's surface; but where the porous layer was not so thick, the volume of water, being larger than that of the sand, submerged the filling and flowed in plain sight. Some of the more uncritical held that the water flowed with the periodicity of tides, which like many other irrational suppositions, seemed to give the required explanation of the river's peculiarities. There was no doubt, however, about the porosity of its sandy bed, nor the amount of sand in it, for even after the most severe and prolonged summer rainstorms, which filled the river to overflowing, a few days sufficed to dry it up again and restore its characteristics.

Having full water casks again the hysteria had subsided and the caravan set out toward the lower spring, which was reached just before nightfall. Here they found two men comfortably camped, despite the fact that they were in the country of their implacable foes. At first they showed a poorly hidden alarm at the appearance of the wagons but, finding that they aroused no especial interest, they made themselves a part of the camp and began to get acquainted; but it was

noticeable that they chose the hunters and trappers in preference to the traders, and carefully ignored the many Mexicans with the train. But no matter how careful they were in their speech they could not hide their identity, for the buttons on their torn and soiled clothing all showed the Lone Star of Texas, and to certain of the plainsmen this insignia made them cordially welcome. Among the Mexicans it made them just as cordially hated.

Tom Boyd espied them when the corral had been formed and invited them to join him and Hank at supper. A few words between the Texans and the two plainsmen established a close bond between them, and they became friends the instant Tom mentioned the partner he had lost on the march of the First Texan Expedition. Hank's careless reference to the treatment his partner had given Armijo on the streets of Santa Fe caused them to look carefully around and then, in low voices, tell the two plainsmen about the events which recently had transpired between the Cimarron and the Arkansas.

"Th' greasers in this hyar train air plumb lucky," said one of the Texans, who called himself Jed Burch. "Ain't that so, Buck?"

Buck Flint nodded sourly. "They kin thank them d——d dragoons o' yourn, friend," he answered.

"How's that?" asked Tom. "An' what about th' fight we saw signs of, a couple o' days back?"

"It's all part of a long story," replied Jed, gloomily. "Reckon ye might as well have th' hull of it, so ye'll know what's up, out hyar." He looked around cautiously. "Don't want no d——d greasers larnin' it, though. Who air these fellers comin' now?"

"Good friends o' ourn," said Hank. "Couple o' hunters that hang out, most o' th' time, at Bent's Fort."

Jim and Zeb arrived, were introduced and vouched for, and the little circle sat bunched together as the strangers explained some recent history.

"Ye see, boys," began Burch, "us Texans air pizen ag'in greasers, 'specially since Armijo treated McLeod's boys wuss nor dogs. So a passel o' us got together this spring an' come up hyar ter git in a crack they wouldn't fergit. Me an' Buck, hyar, was with th' first crowd, under Warfield, an' we larned 'em a lesson up on th' Mora. Thar warn't more'n a score of us, an' we raided that village, nigh under th'

nose o' Santer Fe, killed some o' th' greasers, didn't lose a man, an' run off every hoss they had, ter keep 'em from follerin' us. But we got careless an' one night th' danged greasers an' settlement Injuns come up ter us an' stampeded all thar own hosses an' ourn, too, an' didn't give us a lick at 'em. That put us afoot with all our stuff. Thar warn't nothin' we could do, then, but burn our saddles an' what we couldn't carry, an' hoof it straight fer Bent's. We was on U.S. soil thar, so Warfield disbanded us an' turned us loose; but we knowed whar ter go, an' we went.

"Colonel Snively war ter be at a sartin place on th' Arkansas, an' he war thar. We jined up with him an' went along this hyar trail, larnin' that Armijo war a-lookin' fer us somewhar on it. Hell! He warn't a-lookin' fer us: he had a powerful advance guard out feelin' th' way, but *he* warn't with it. We come up ter that party and cleaned it up, nobody on our side gittin' more'n a scratch. But we couldn't git no news about th' caravan that war due ter come along 'most any day, an' some o' th' boys got discouraged an' went home. Th' rest o' us went back ter th' Arkansas, campin' half a day's ride below th' Caches, whar we could keep our eyes on th' old crossin' an' th' main trail at th' same time. An' we hadn't been thar very long afore 'long comes th' caravan, full o' greasers. But, hell: it war guarded by a couple hundred dragoons under yer Captain Cook which kept us from hittin' it till it got acrost th' river an' past th' sand-hills, whar U.S. troops dassn't go, seein' it's Texas soil.

"Everythin' would 'a' been all right if Snively hadn't got polite an' went over ter visit Cook. They had a red-hot palaver, Cook sayin' he warn't goin' ter escort a caravan till it was plumb inter danger an' then stand by an' let it go on ter git wiped out. Snively told him we warn't aimin' ter wipe it out, but only ter get th' greasers with it. They had it powerful hard, I heard, an' Cook up an' says he's goin' ter take our guns away from us if it cost him every man he had. Danged if he didn't do it, too!"

Flint was laughing heartily and broke in. "Wonder what he thought o' our weapons?" he exulted. "Not one o' 'em that he got from *our* bunch war worth a dang."

Burch grinned in turn. "Ye see, we had took th' guns belongin' ter Armijo's scoutin' party, an' when Cook took up his collection, a lot o' th' boys, hidin' thar own good weapons, sorrerfully hands over th' danged *escopetas* an' blunderbusses an' bows an' arrers o' th' greasers. However, he disarmed us an' kept us thar till th' caravan got such a big start thar warn't no earthly use o' goin'

after it, thar not bein' more'n sixty or seventy o' us that had good weapons. Some o' th' boys struck out fer home, an' a couple o' score went with th' dragoons back ter Missouri. Us that war left, about as many as went home, made Warfield captain ag'in an' went after th' danged caravan, anyhow. We follered it near ter Point o' Rocks before we gave it up. Nobody reckoned thar war two caravans on th' trail this year, so Warfield an' most o' th' boys went back ter Texas; but thar's considerable few o' us roamin' 'round up hyar, dodgin' th' Comanches on a gamble o' gittin' in a crack at some o' Armijo's sojers that might come scoutin' 'round ter see if we has all went back. Anyhow, bein' so fur from home, an' hankerin' fer a little huntin', we figgered that we might stay up hyar till fall, or mebby all winter if we hung out at Bent's."

"We made a big mistake, though," confessed Flint. "Ye see, a greaser must 'a' got away from that fight an' took th' news ter Armijo. When we passed Cold Spring, follerin' th' caravan, we come on his camp, an' it war plumb covered with ridin' gear an' belongin's that none o' his brave army had time ter collect proper. Some o' us that had ter burn our saddles war ridin' bareback, but we got saddles thar. He must 'a' lit out *pronto* when he larned Texans war a-rampagin' along th' trail. From th' signs he didn't even wait fer th' caravan he war goin' ter protect, but jest went a-kiyotin' fer home."

"He knew th' difference between starved an' betrayed Texans, an' Texans that war fixed ter fight," growled Tom. "Go on: what was th' mistake?"

"Wall, Warfield said that if we had made that vanguard surrender peaceful, which they would 'a' done, we could 'a' captured every man, kept th' news from Armijo, an' larned jest whar ter find him. He would 'a' been waitin' fer his scoutin' party, an' some mornin' about daylight he would 'a' found a scoutin' party —from Texas, an' mad an' mean as rattlers. It don't allus pay ter let yer tempers git th' best o' ye, an' make ye jump afore ye look. We'd 'a' ruther got Armijo than th' whole cussed advance guard, an' th' rest o' his army, too."

"With Salezar," muttered Tom.

Burch jumped. "Aye!" he snarled. "With Salezar! Fer them two I'd 'a' been in favor o' lettin' all th' rest go!"

"What you boys goin' ter do now?" asked Hank.

"Fool 'round up hyar, dodgin' war-parties that air too big ter lick," answered Flint. "We been scoutin' up th' river, an' our friends air on a scout back in th' hills, tryin' ter locate th' nearest Comanche village. We cleaned out one on th' way up, back on th' Washita. We're aimin' ter run a big buffaler hunt as soon as we locates th' hostiles."

"How many are there of you?" asked Tom, thoughtfully.

"'Bout a dozen or fifteen: why?" asked Burch.

"Not a very big party to be playin' tag with th' Comanches in thar own country," Tom replied.

With his foot Burch pushed a stick back into the fire and then glanced around the little circle. "Wonder what th' *white* men o' this wagon train would do if we rode up an' asked fer th' greasers in it ter be turned over ter us?" he asked.

Tom smiled. "Fight as long as we could pull trigger," he answered. "We ain't betrayin' no members o' th' caravan. Lord knows we don't like greasers, an' we *do* feel strong for Texas; but we'd be plain skunks if we didn't stick with our feller travelers."

"An' what could we say when we got inter Santer Fe, if we dared go thar?" asked Hank.

Burch nodded, shrugged his shoulders, and changed the subject to that of the unfortunate First Texan Expedition and the terrible sufferings it underwent, a subject at that time very prominent in all Texan hearts. It did not take them long to judge accurately the real feelings of their hosts and to learn that their sympathies were all for Texas; but even with this knowledge they did not again refer to anything connected with their presence along the trail; instead, they were careful to create the impression that their little party intended to start almost immediately northwest across the Cimarron desert for Bent's Fort, and from there to scour the plains for buffalo skins. They even asked about the Bayou Salade and its contiguous mountain "parks" as a place to hunt and trap during the coming winter. After dark they said their good-byes and left the encampment, to

the vast relief of the Mexicans with the train. And that night and the next, the Mexicans who chanced to be on watch were the most alert of all the guards.

After their guests had gone the four friends sat in silence for awhile, reviewing what they had learned, and then Hank spoke up.

"Reckon we better tell Woodson that thar won't be no greaser troops waitin' fer us this trip?" he asked.

Tom was about to nod, but changed his mind and quickly placed his hand on his partner's shoulder. "No," he said slowly. "I'm beginnin' ter see through th' holes in th' ladder! Not a word, boys, ter *anybody*! Pedro's lie about thar bein' no guard ter meet us this year ain't a lie no more; but he don't know it, an' he ain't goin' ter know it! Meantime, we'll keep our ears an' eyes open, an' be ready ter jump like cats. I got a suspicion!"

"I got a bran' new one," chuckled Hank. "Hurrah for Texas!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE VALLEY OF THE CIMARRON

Because of the next stretch to certain water, a matter of about thirty-five miles, another very early start was made after the surrounding country had been searched by the plainsmen for signs of Indians. Although later in the season than usual for a caravan to cover this part of the route, the dreaded dry stretch along the usually empty river bed was found broken here and there by shallow pools and advantage was taken of these to soak the wooden rims of some of the older and more faulty wagon wheels. One trader with a wagon which never should have left Missouri had been put to great trouble to keep the tires on his two front wheels and had "borrowed" about all the wire and hoop-iron his friends felt disposed to give him. He had driven so many pieces of iron between the felloes and the tires that daylight could be seen between the two; and on topping a little hill between two ravines near the river bank one of the tires slipped off and went rolling and bounding down the slope onto the dry river bed. Amid roars of laughter the column stopped until he had recovered it and re-wedged it onto the wheel, and at the next nooning stop he drove the wagon into a trickle of water running down the middle of the river bed and spent most of his time backing and pulling to get every part of the wheels soaked.

A strong body of scouts which had pushed on ahead of the column returned shortly after the noon camp had been left, and reported that about ten miles farther on a section of the river several hundred yards long was full of water. Not being able to make the Middle Spring that day, this wet section of the river was decided upon for the night camp. A score of mounted men were sent on ahead to scour the country for signs of Indians, but became so hungry for the numerous kinds of wild fruits and berries along the sides of the ravines, that they did their work poorly and did not reach the proposed camp site much before the caravan got there.

The country was cut by a maze of ravines and gullies and studded with small hills, little pastures of excellent grass nestling between them. As the wagons filed down a narrow road onto a pasture fronting on the Cimarron a plainsman, who had pushed on ahead of the caravan because he doubted the seriousness and intelligence of the scouting party, was seen dashing down to the farther bank of

the river and splashing across it without checking the speed of his horse.

One look at him was enough for Woodson, and the sharp blast of the bugle cut the air. Wagoners whipped their tired teams into the best speed they could give and the clatter and screeching of the rumbling wagons filled the air as they raced around into the circular formation. The scout barely had left the river and the wagons still were forming when over the crest of a hill across the stream appeared a mass of horsemen, their lances standing like drunken pickets against the sky. No need to ask what tribe they belonged to, for the hint conveyed by their lances soon was endorsed by their fantastic two-color blankets, one half red and the other half blue. Most of them wore, in addition to the regular attire of the plains Indians, a leather jacket, and from the heels of their moccasins trailed tassels, another mark of their tribe.

These warriors, magnificent specimens of manhood and superb horsemen, appeared to be gigantic as they paused and spread out along the crest of the hill, boldly outlined against the bright sky behind them. They watched the running circle of wagons stop by jerks as vehicle after vehicle crowded against the one ahead of it and came to a stand, the teams inside the corral. They rode slowly down the hill, their numbers constantly growing, as a line of defenders moved out from the encampment to interpose itself between the camp and the Comanche warriors; and as the line stopped to wait for the cannons to get into position the red enemy charged with a bedlam of whoops and yells. The two quick roars of the cannons and the hurtling solid shot, which raised dust-puffs high up on the hill, checked them and they spread out into two thin lines of racing horsemen running toward both sides of the encampment.

Woodson, glad that the cannoneers had missed in their panicky aim, ordered the defenders to fall back to the wagons, which they were only too glad to do; but they did not obey his command to cease firing, and sent their hastily aimed balls in the general direction of the enemy. No harm was done by these, not only because of the poor aim but also because the racing Indians were as yet well out of rifle shot and were hanging over on the far side of their mounts.

Tom ran to the frantically working cannoneers and threw himself among them without regard to how he handled them, shouting for them not to fire until Woodson gave the word, and then to load with musket balls and fire as fast and true as they could. Franklin joined him, his face as black as a thunder cloud, and made threats they knew he would carry out if the instructions were not obeyed.

The racing line drew nearer and nearer, those of the warriors who had guns discharging them into the air. It looked like a desperate fight was only a few seconds away when Hank yelled his discovery. Over the crest of the same hill appeared the women and children of the tribe, their dogs dragging burdens on their small travoises and the horses pulling the dragging lodgepoles loaded down with the possessions of their owners. This meant peace, for if war was intended, all but the warriors would have been sent away. Some of the more quickwitted of the plainsmen and traders waved their hats at the debouching village across the river, and Woodson, with Tom and Franklin at his side, held up his hand and walked toward the slowing line. An arrow suddenly quivered in the ground almost under his feet and he stopped, raising both hands. An Indian dashed back across the river, where he berated a group of non-combatants and waved them toward the top of the hill. The traveling village instantly became a confusion of quick movement and climbed the hill and dipped over its crest much quicker than it had appeared.

Woodson swore under his breath. "Reckon we got ter fight, boys. Look sharp an' fall back ter th' caravan. Drop th' first brave that lifts bow an' arrer!" He glanced back to see how far they had to go and glimpsed a dozen men under Hank and Zeb coming to their aid. He raised his hand to them and they instantly dropped to their knees, their rifles leaping to their shoulders. "Now," he grated. "We're bein' covered; turn an' run!" As the three men reached the covering party they checked themselves, joined it, faced the savages, and the entire party fell slowly back to the wagons.

"Funny they didn't send in more'n that one arrer," growled Woodson, thoroughly puzzled. "These hyar ain't Pawnee hoss-stealers; thar fightin' men. *Knock down that gun!*" he snapped as a tenderfoot rested a powerful rifle across a wagon wheel. The man beside the ambitious Indian fighter struck it aside and the ball went into the ground. "Th' next man as pulls trigger till I says fer him to is goin' to be d——d sorry!" cried the captain, drawing his pistol.

The running line, moving back farther under the threat of the two cannons, gradually stopped, facing the waiting defenders. It seemed like the calm that precedes a storm. Then down the hill across the river came a small group of savages more outrageously decked out than any seen so far.

"Th' chiefs," growled Woodson. "Hope we git out o' this without a fight. Even th' Comanches ain't usually anxious ter git inter a clawin' match with Americans, though they air th' best o' th' prairie tribes."

"They do about what they please with th' Mexicans," replied Tom; "but they've larned that Americans air a different breed, an' have better guns. But some o' thar raids inter Texas have puffed 'em up. I don't like thar village climbin' back over that hill."

"If it's ter be peace, I'd a cussed sight ruther have it over th' hill than planted somewhar close ter us; they'd over-run th' camp an' friction would be shore ter grow. While mebby they can't steal as slick as th' Pawnees, they kin do it good enough ter make us cross-eyed watchin' 'em. Some tenderfoot shore will ketch one of 'em stealin' his belongin's an' start a fight thar an' then, with a hull passel o' 'em inside th' corral. Wall, we'll soon find out what's goin' ter come of it; they've jined th' line."

The white defenders eagerly watched the pow-wow being held to the southwest of the encampment, their rifles balanced for quick handling; then they slowly relaxed and some rested their weapons on the ground. The consulting group of warriors split and from it, riding with slow dignity toward the wagons, came two chiefs and two lesser warriors. They held up their hands when within rifle shot and stopped. Woodson, Tom, Franklin, and Haviland, mounted this time, rode with the same slow dignity out to meet them. Franklin could speak their tongue well enough to make himself understood, and Woodson and Tom knew the universal sign language well enough to express themselves in it. As they left the camp they caught a glimpse of another band of warriors riding around the upper end of the hill and roughly estimated the combined force to be close to five hundred. Here was good reason to be as tactful as possible. When within speaking distance of the Comanche envoys they drew up and the two groups eyed each other in silence for several minutes.

"Our village on the Washita is no more," said a chief who had enough long hair to supply any hirsute deficiency of a dozen men and not suffer by it. "Its ashes are blown by the winds and its smoke brings tears to the eyes of our squaws and children. Our winter maize is gone and our storehouses lie about the ground. White Buffalo and his braves were hunting the buffalo beyond the Cimarron. Their old men and their squaws and children were with them. Some of my young men have just returned and brought us this news. What have the white men to say of this?"

"Our hearts are heavy for our friends the Comanches," answered Woodson. "There are many tribes of white men, as there are many tribes of Indians. There are the Americanos, the Mexicanos, the Englise, and the Tejanos. The Americans

come from the North and the East along their great trail, with goods to trade and with friendship for the Comanches. The Mexicanos would not dare to burn a Comanche village; but with the Tejanos are not the Comanches at war? And we have seen Tejanos near the trail. We have seen where they defeated Armijo's soldiers, almost within sight of the Arkansas River. Cannot White Buffalo read the signs on the earth? Our trail is plain for many days to the east, for all to see. Has he seen our wagon tracks to the Washita? Are his young men blind? We are many and strong and have thunder guns, but we do not fight except to protect ourselves and our goods. We are traders."

"We are warriors!" exclaimed the chief. "We also are many and strong, and our lances are short that our courage may be long. White Buffalo has listened. He believes that the white chief speaks with a single tongue. His warriors want the white man's guns and powder; medicine guns that shoot like the clapping of hands. Such have the Tejanos. He has skins and meat and *mulos*."

"The medicine guns are Tejano medicine," replied Woodson. "We have only such as I see in the hands of some of our friends, the Comanches. Powder and lead we have little, for we have come far and killed much game; blue and red cloth we have, medicine glasses, beads, awls, knives, tobacco, and firewater we have much of. Our mules are strong and we need no more." He looked shrewdly at a much-bedecked Indian at the chief's side. "We have presents for the Comanche Medicine Man that only his eyes may see."

The medicine man's face did not change a muscle but there came a gleam to his eyes that Woodson noted.

"The Comanches are not like the Pawnees or Cheyennes to kill their eyes and ears with firewater," retorted the chief. "We are not Pawnee dogs that we must hide from ourselves and see things that are not. Our hair is long, that those may take it who can. I have spoken."

There was some further talk in which was arranged a visit from the Comanche chief; the bartering price of mules, skins, and meat, as was the custom of this tribe; a long-winded exchange of compliments and assurances of love and good will, in the latter both sides making plenty of reservations.

When Woodson and his companions returned to the encampment they went among the members of the caravan with explicit instructions, hoping by the use of tact and common sense to avert friction with their expected visitors. Small articles were put away and the wagon covers tightly drawn to minimize the

opportunities of the Indians for theft.

The night passed quietly and the doubled guard apparently was wasted. Shortly after daylight the opposite hill suddenly swarmed with dashing warriors, whose horsemanship was a revelation to some of the tenderfeet. Following the warriors came the non-combatants of the tribe, pouring down the slope in noisy confusion. Woodson swore under his breath as he saw the moving village enter the shallow waters of the river to camp on the same side with the caravan, for it seemed that his flowery assurances of love and esteem had been taken at their face value; but he was too wise to credit this, knowing that Indians were quick to take advantage of any excuse that furthered their ends. The closer together the two camps were the more easily could the Indians over-run the corralled traders.

Reaching the encampment's side of the stream the lodges were erected with most praiseworthy speed, laid out in rows, and the work finished in a remarkably short time. The conical lodges averaged more than a dozen feet in diameter and some of them, notably that of the chief, were somewhere near twice that size.

In the middle of the morning the chiefs and the more important warriors paid their visit to the corral and were at once put in good spirits by a salute from the cannons, a passing of the red-stone pipes, and by receiving presents of tobacco and trade goods. While they sat on the ground before Woodson's wagon and smoked, the medicine man seemed restless and finally arose to wander about. He bumped into Tom Boyd, who had been waiting to see him alone, and was quickly led to Franklin's wagon where the owner, hiding his laughter, was waiting. It is well to have the good will of the chiefs, but it is better also to have that of the medicine man; and wily Hank Marshall never overlooked that end of it when on a trading expedition among the Indians. He had let Woodson into his secret before the parley of the day before, and now his scheme was about to bear fruit.

Franklin made some mysterious passes over a little pile of goods which was covered with a gaudy red cloth on which had been fastened some beads and tinsel; and as he did so, both Tom and Hank knelt and bowed their heads. Franklin stepped back as if fearful of instant destruction, and then turned to the medicine man, who had overlooked nothing, with an expression of reverent awe on his face.

For the next few minutes Franklin did very well, considering that he knew very little of what he was talking about, but he managed to convey the information

that under the red cloth was great medicine, found near the "Thunderer's Nest," not far from the great and sacred red pipestone quarry of the far north. The mention of this Mecca of the Indians, sacred in almost every system of Indian mythology, made a great impression on the medicine man and it was all he could do to keep his avaricious fingers off the cloth and wait until Franklin's discourse was finished. The orator wound up almost in a whisper.

"Here is a sour water that has the power to foretell peace or war," he declaimed, tragically. "There are two powders, found by the chief of the Hurons, under the very nest of the Thunder Bird. They look alike, yet they are different. One has no taste and if it is put into some of the sour water the water sleeps and tells of peace; but if the other, which has a taste, is put in the medicine water, the water boils and cries for war. It is powerful medicine and always works."

The eyes of the red fakir gleamed, for with him often lay the decision as to peace or war, and in this respect his power was greater even than that of a chief. After a short demonstration with the water, to which had been added a few drops of acid, the two powders, one of which was soda, were tested out. The medicine man slipped his presents under his robe, placed his fingers on his lips and strode away. When the next Comanche war-council was held he would be a dominating figure, and the fame of his medicine would spread far and wide over the Indian country.

"Got him, body an' soul!" chuckled Franklin, rubbing his hands. "Did ye see his mean ol' eyes near pop out when she fizzed? He saw all th' rest o' th' stuff an' he won't rest till he gits it all; an' he won't git it all till his tribe or us has left. He plumb likes th' fizz combination, an' mebby would want to try it out hyar an' now. Thar won't be no trouble with *these* Injuns this trip."

"An' that thar black sand ye gave him," laughed Hank, leaning back against a wagon wheel, "that looks like powder, so he kin make his spell over real powder, slip th' sand in its place, an' show how his medicine will fix th' powder of thar enemies so it won't touch off! Did ye see th' grin on his leather face, when he savvied that? He's a wise ol' fakir, *he* is!"

Tom grinned at Franklin. "Hank, here, has got th' medicine men o' th' Piegan Blackfeet eatin' out o' his hand. Every time th' Crows git after him too danged hot he heads fer th' Blackfoot country. They only follered him thar onct. What all did ye give 'em, Hank?"

"Oh, lots o' little things," chuckled Hank, reminiscently. "Th' medicine men o' th'

Blackfeet air th' greatest in th' world; thar ain't no others kin come within a mile o' 'em, thanks ter me an' a chemist I know back in St. Louie. Th' other traders allus git what I leave."

When the important Indian visitors left there was quite a little ceremony, and the camp was quiet until after the noon meal. Early in the afternoon, according to the agreement with the chief and the medicine man, the Indians visited the encampment in squads, and at no time was there more than thirty or forty savages in the encampment at once. Instead of the usual attempted stampede of the animals at night all was peaceful; and instead of having to remain for two or three days in camp, at all times in danger of a change in the mood of the savages, the caravan was permitted to leave on the following morning, which miracle threw Woodson into more or less of a daze. As the last wagon rounded a hillock several miles from the camp site a mounted Comanche rode out of the brush and went along the column until he espied Franklin; and a few moments later he rode into the brush again, a bulging red cloth bundle stowed under his highly ornamented robe.

But there was more than the desire to trade, the professed friendship and the bribery of the medicine man that operated for peace in the minds of the Comanches. Never so early in the history of the trail had they attacked any caravan as large as this one and got the best of the fight. In all the early years of the trail the white men killed in such encounters under such conditions, could be counted on the fingers of one hand; while the Indian losses had been considerable. With all their vaunted courage the Comanches early had learned the difference between Americans and Mexicans, and most of their attempts against large caravans had been more for the purpose of stampeding the animals than for fighting, and their efforts mostly had been "full of sound and fury," like Macbeth's idiot's tale, and signified nothing. Still, the caravan breathed easier as mile after mile took it away from that encampment; but their escape was not regarded so seriously as to make them pass Middle Spring, where good water always could be found, and here they corralled.

Tom and his friends had grown more alert since leaving the Arkansas, and without showing it had kept a close watch over Pedro and his companions. The actions of these and of a few Americans, Franklin among the latter, seemed to merit scrutiny. A subtle change was taking place in them. Franklin spent more of his time near Tom and Hank, and Pedro and some of the Mexicans were showing a veiled elation tinged with anxiety. Wherever Tom went he was watched, and if he joined the advance guard, or the rear guard, or the flanking parties, Franklin

was certain to show up. He seemed to have taken a belated but strong fancy to the young plainsman. When Hank and Tom took the packs from the backs of their mules at night not a move they made was missed; and they soon learned that quite a few of the Mexicans were sleeping in the wagons of friends during the morning traveling.

It was here at Middle Spring where Tom and Jim Ogden staged a serious disagreement, which spread to one between Hank Marshall and Zeb Houghton, and resulted in the two sets of partners becoming estranged. When questioned about it in indirect ways by Franklin, Ogden sullenly said that he could handle his troubles without the aid of others, and *would* handle them "danged quick" if a certain plainsman didn't look out. Zeb was not so cautious and his remarks, vague as they were, were plain enough to bring fleeting smiles to the faces of Pedro and his friends.

The grass was better here than at any place since the Arkansas had been left and as some of the animals were beginning to show unmistakable signs of the long journey, it was decided to remain here another night and give them a chance to recuperate a little. The news was hailed joyfully and numerous hunting parties were arranged at the fires the first night. Woodson called for volunteers to form a strong day guard for the animals, which he wanted driven from the camp to graze over the best grass, and he asked for another strong guard to watch the corral, since Comanches, Pawnee Picts, Kiowas, and even more northern tribes out on horse-stealing expeditions could be looked for without unduly straining the imagination. Arapahoes, Utes, and even Cheyennes were not strangers to the valley of the Cimarron, and once in a while Apache raiders paid it flying visits.

Woodson made the round of the fires, trying to discourage the formation of so many small hunting parties while the caravan was corralled in such broken and dangerous country, and succeeded in reducing the numbers of the hunters about half and in consolidating them into two large parties, capable of offering some sort of resistance to an Indian attack. One of these he put under the command of Hank, to that person's great disgust, for Hank had planned to go on a hunt with his partner, and to join Ogden and Houghton when well away from the camp. Tom was to remain with the wagons; Ogden was to have charge of the other hunting party, and Houghton and Franklin were to stay near the grazing herd.

The fires dimmed here and there as their builders forsook them for blankets; others glowed brilliantly, among them the fire of Tom and Hank. The former had said good night to Joe Cooper and Patience and was walking toward his fire

when Pedro silently joined him and went along with him. Hank was off entertaining a party of tenderfeet with tales of miraculous adventures in the mountains, and after lying to the best of his ability for two hours, and hardly being questioned, he described a wonderful country lying east of Henry's Fork of the Snake River; south of the Snow Mountains; north of Jackson's Lake and west of the Shoshones Mountains. It lay along the Yellowstone River and the headwaters of the Stinking Water, and it contained all manner of natural wonders, which he described earnestly and graphically, to bursts of laughter. The more earnest he became the more his auditors roared and finally he got to his feet, glared around the circle, declared he was not going to "eddicate airy passel o' danged fools," and stalked away in high dudgeon, muttering fiercely. Reaching his own fire he threw himself down by it and glared at the glowing embers as if he held them responsible.

Tom nudged Pedro. "Somebody ask ye fer a left-hand wipin' stick, Hank?" he asked.

"Thar a passel o' fools!" snorted Hank. "If hoss sense war ten paces wide an' ten miles long in every man, ye couldn't collect enough o' it in th' whole danged party fer ter make an ear tab fer a buffaler gnat!"

"Tellin' 'em about that thar river ye saw that couldn't find no way outer th' valley, an' finally had ter flow up over a mounting?"

"Ye mean them up-side-down water falls?" queried Hank, grinning. "Yes, an' some o' 'em come clost ter swallerin' it. Why, I sot thar an' filled 'em plumb ter th' ears with lies an' they didn't hardly wink an eye. Then I told 'em o' that valley on th' Yallerstun, whar th' Injuns won't go because they figger it's th' home o' th' Devil. An' th' more I told 'em about it, th' more th' danged fools laughed! I'd like ter hold 'em over one o' them thar water-squirts, or push 'em down into th' bilin' mud pots! Swallered th' lies, dang 'em, an' spit out th' truth!"

Tom roared and after a moment looked curiously at his partner. "I thought ye said you'd never tell nobody about that country ag'in?"

"Oh, I felt so danged sorry fer thar ignorance that I reckoned I'd eddicate 'em, th' dumb fools! If I had a ox an' it didn't know more'n them all put together, danged if I wouldn't shoot it!" He sliced off a pipeful of tobacco and pulled an ember from the fire. "What you an' Pedro been hatchin' out?"

"Nothin', yit," answered Tom; "but I would like ter hear a little more 'bout that

thar roundabout trail inter Santa Fe." He looked at Pedro. "How fur away from hyar does it begin?"

"Not so ver' far, señor," answered the Mexican. "Thees way from thee Upper Spr-ring, where thee soldats are used to meet thee car-ravan. We come to eet soon. We should leeve thees camp tomor-row night."

"What's th' use o' that when ye said th' soldiers ain't goin' ter meet us this year?" demanded Tom.

"Why don't they meet th' trains whar they oughter, 'stead o' waitin' till they git past th' Injun dangers?" demanded Hank with some feeling.

"Does not thee señor know?" chuckled Pedro. "Eet ees not for protec' thee car-ravan that they meet eet. Eet ees that no man may leave thee tr-rail an' smuggle hees goods past thee customs. For what does Manuel Armijo care for protec' thee traders? Eef he deed, would he not meet them at thee Arkansas? Eet ees only for thee customs that he sends thee soldats. To get away fr-rom theese we mus' tak thee other tr-rail befo' eet ees too late."

"That's all right fer other years," growled Tom; "but if they ain't goin' ter meet us *this* time we kin stick ter th' trail an' leave it a lot closer ter Santer Fe."

Pedro was doing his best to play safe from all angles. If the troops tried to take Tom Boyd from the caravan, or show that he was a prisoner, a great deal of trouble might come out of it, for these Americans were devils for sticking together. If that fear were groundless, then Tom Boyd and his trapper friends, on sight of the troops, might cut and run; and if forced to stand and fight they could be counted on to give a good account of themselves against the poorer arms of their Mexican enemies; and somewhere in the hills he thought there were Texans and he knew them well enough to know that they would only be too glad to take a hand in any fight against Mexicans if they learned of it in time. At first he had been content to get Tom Boyd to the Upper Spring or to Cold Spring, only a few miles farther on, and there turn his responsibility over to the commander of the troops. If he could get them to slip away from their friends and be captured out of sight and hearing of the caravan it would suit him much better; and if he could coax them to take their goods with them, he and his friends could divide the spoils and slip the plunder past the customs officers. The caravan was now within fifty miles of Cold Spring and he must make up his mind and act quickly.

"Eet ees then you weesh to pay thee char-rges?" the Mexican asked, raising his

eyebrows.

"No!" growled Hank. "They air a robbery, plain an' simple."

"No!" said Tom, who was giving but little thought to the customs duties, but a great deal to his own personal freedom. He did not want to meet any kind of officers, customs or otherwise. He would have jumped at a secret trail into the settlements had he not known so much about Pedro. "At th' same time I ain't hankerin' fer ter leave th' caravan so soon. We're nigh three hundred miles from Sante Fe, an' thar ain't no way we kin go that'll cut off ten miles. This wagon road runs nigh as straight as th' crow flies. What about grass fer th' mules, an' water?"

"Ah," breathed Pedro. "We weel not go to Santa Fe, señor; we go near Taos, less than two hundred mile away from here. Along thee Ocate Cr-reek I haf fr-riends who know ver' well thee mountains. They weel tak us over them. How can thee señores sell their goods onless by ways that ar-re made? Weeth us we haf men that know that tr-rail. We weel send one befor-re to thee Ocate, an' follow heem fast."

Tom studied the fire for a few moments and then looked up at his guest. "We want ter think this over, Pedro," he said. "You figger what per cent o' th' customs savings you want fer yer share, an' we'll decide tomorrow night. Hank, here, wants ter go ter Bent's an' reckons we kin git a good price thar fer our goods. Let you know then. Good night."

After Pedro had painted the picture of the innocent-looking loads of faggots and sheepskins, hay and produce, towering over the backs of the nearly hidden pack mules as they toiled through the canon and over the rough trail leading from the Valley of Taos into Santa Fe, their loads passing the customs house without drawing even a careless glance and then, by many turnings, safely arriving at various destinations with their smuggled goods; after he had described the care and foresight of his friends and their trustworthiness, and made many knowing bows and grimaces, he smilingly departed and left the partners to themselves.

Knowing that they were being watched they idled before the fire, careless now of their store of wood, of which plenty was at hand, and talked at random; but through the droning of their careless words many times there could be heard the name "Bent's Fort," which Hank mentioned with affectionate inflections. It seemed that he very strongly preferred to go to that great trading post and rendezvous of hunters and trappers, where old friends would be met and new

ones made. Tom held out for Santa Fe, but did not show much enthusiasm. Finally they rolled up in their blankets, feet toward the fire and heads close together and simulated sleep. Half an hour later they were holding a whispered conversation which was pitched so low they barely could hear each other.

CHAPTER XV

TEXAN SCOUTS

The day broke clear and the usual excitement and bustle of the camp was increased by the eager activities of the two hunting parties. After the morning meal the animals were driven some distance from the camp and the herd guards began their day's vigil. Tom placed the outposts and returned to report to the captain, and then added that he had something of a very confidential nature to tell him, but did not want to be seen talking too long with him.

Woodson reflected a moment. "All right; I'll come after ye in a few minutes an' ask ye ter go huntin' with me. 'Twon't be onusual if we ketch th' fever, too."

Tom nodded and went over to Cooper's wagons to pay his morning's respects, and to his chagrin found that Patience had gone for a short ride with Doctor Whiting and his friends.

"Sorry to miss her, Uncle Joe," he said. "Things are going to happen fast for me from now on. I may leave the caravan tonight. About two days' more travel and we'll be south of Bent's. Hank and I don't want to lose our merchandise, we can't take it with us, and we need to turn it into money. How much can you carry from here on?"

Uncle Joe scratched his head. "The two big wagons can take five hundred-weight more apiece, and this wagon can stand near eight hundred, seein' that it ain't carryin' much more than our personal belongings. Don't worry, Tom; if I can't handle it all, Alonzo and Enoch can take th' balance. Them greasers showing their cards?"

"It's like this: According to those Texans we met, no troops are going to meet us this trip. Their advance guard got thrashed and Armijo and the main body turned tail at Cold Spring and fled back to Santa Fe. I could go with the caravan miles farther and probably be safe; but if Pedro gets a messenger away secretly there is no telling what may happen. If I stay with the caravan and put up a fight it might end in embroiling a lot of the boys and certainly would make trouble for them if the train pushed on to Santa Fe, and it's got to push on. I won't surrender meekly. So, you see, I'll have to strike out."

Uncle Joe nodded. "If it wasn't for Patience, and my brother in Santa Fe, I'd strike out with you. Goin' to Bent's?"

"Bent's nothing!" retorted Tom. "I'm going to Santa Fe, but I'm going a way of my own."

"It's suicide, Tom," warned his friend. "Better let me take in your stuff, an' meet us here on the way back. Patience won't spoil; an' when she learns how much you're wanted by Armijo she'll worry herself sick if she knows you are in th' city. Don't you do it!"

Tom scowled at a break in the hills and in his mind's eye he could see her riding gaily with his tenderfoot rivals. "Reckon she won't fall away," he growled. "Anyhow, there's no telling; an' there's no reason why she should know anything. I told her I was goin' to Santa Fe, an' I'm going!"

Uncle Joe was about to retort but thought better of it and smiled instead. "Oh, these jealous lovers!" he chuckled. "Blind as bats! Who do you know there, in case I want to get word to you?"

Tom swiftly named three men and told where they could be found, his companion nodding sharply at the mention of two of them.

"Good!" exclaimed the trader. "Throw your packs into my wagons an' I'll see to stowin' 'em."

"No," replied Tom. "That's got to be done when th' camp's asleep. I'm supposed to be takin' 'em with me.

"But these Mexicans'll trail you, an' get you when you're asleep," objected Uncle Joe.

Tom laughed and shook his head, and turned to face Woodson, who was walking toward them. "Th' captain an' I am goin' huntin'. See you later."

"Git yer hoss, Boyd," called the captain. "I'm goin' fer mine now. How air ye, Mr. Cooper?"

"Never felt better in my life, captain. We all owe you a vote of thanks, an' I'll see that you get it."

"Thar ain't a man livin' as kin git a vote o' thanks fer me out o' this caravan," laughed Woodson, his eyes twinkling. "But I ain't got no call ter kick: I ain't had

nigh th' trouble I figgered on. Jest th' same, I'll be glad when we meet up with th' greaser troops at Cold Spring. I aim to leave ye thar an' go on ahead an' fix things in th' city."

Uncle Joe caught himself in time. "That's where we bust up?"

Woodson nodded. "Thar ain't no organization from thar in. Don't need it, with th' sojers. All us proprietors that ain't got reg'lar connections in th' city will be leavin' from Cold Spring on."

"Any danger from th' Injuns, leavin' that way?"

"Oh, we slip out at night," answered Woodson. "Thar ain't much danger from any big bands. Got ter do it; customs officers air like axles; they work better arter they air greased. I aim ter leave two waggins behind th' noon arter we git to th' Upper Spring, an' save five hundred apiece on 'em. Th' other six kin make it from thar with th' extry loads, an' th' extry animals to help pull 'em." He looked toward the wagons of Alonzo and Enoch, where Tom had tarried on his way back. "Thar's a fine, upstandin' young man; I've had my eye on him ever since we left th' Grove."

"He is; an' anythin' he tells you is gospel," said Uncle Joe.

They saw the two traders waving their arms and soon Tom hurried up.

"Alonzo an' Enoch would like to go with us, only thar hosses air with th' herd," he said.

"Then we'll go afoot," declared Woodson. "I ain't hankerin' so much fer a hunt as I air ter git away from these danged waggins fer a spell. I'm sick o' th' sight o' 'em. Better come along, Mr. Cooper."

"That depends on how fur yer goin'; this young scamp will walk me off my feet."

"Oh, jest a-ways around th' hills; dassn't go too fur, on account of airy Injuns that may be hangin' 'round."

In a few moments the little group had left the encampment behind and out of sight and Woodson, waving the others ahead, fell back to Tom's side.

"Hyar we air, with nobody ter listen. What ye want ter tell me?"

To the captain's growing astonishment Tom rapidly sketched his conversation

with the two Texans, his affair with the despotic New Mexican governor and what it now meant to him. Then he told of his determination to leave the caravan some night soon, perhaps on this night.

"Wall, dang my eyes!" exclaimed Woodson at the conclusion of the narrative. "Good fer them Texans! Young man, which hand did ye hit him with? That un? Wall, I'll jest shake it, fer luck." He thought a moment. "Ye air lucky, Boyd; north o' here, acrost th' headwaters o' this river, an' a couple more streams, which might be dry now, ye'll hit th' Picketwire, that's allus wet. If ye find th' little cricks dry, head more westward an' ye'll strike th' Picketwire quicker. It'll take ye nigh inter sight o' Bent's; an' thar ain't no finer men walkin' than William an' Charles Bent. Hate ter lose ye, Boyd; but thar ain't no two ways 'bout it; ye got ter go, or get skinned alive."

"I'm not goin' ter Bent's, captain," said Tom quietly. "I'll be in Santa Fe soon after you git thar. Hank knows them mountains like you know this trail. When I'm missed if ye'll throw 'em off my track I'll not fergit it." He smiled grimly. "If I war goin' ter Bent's they could foller, an' be damned to 'em. I'd like nothin' better than have 'em chase us through this kind o' country."

Woodson chuckled and then grew thoughtful. "Boyd, them Texans air goin' ter make trouble fer us, shore as shootin'. It'll be bad fer you, fer every American in these settlements is goin' ter be watched purty clost. Better go ter Bent's."

"Nope; Hank an' me air headin' fer Turley's, up on Arroyo Hondo. Hank knows him well. Hyar come th' others. I've told you an' Cooper, an' that's enough. You fellers ain't turnin' back so soon, air ye?" he called. "Ye don't call this a hunt? Whar's yer meat?"

"Whar's yourn?" countered Alonzo, grinning. "I ate so many berries I got cramps."

"Us, too," laughed Uncle Joe. "My feet air tender, ridin' so long. We're goin' back."

"Might as well jine ye, then," said Woodson. "Comin', Boyd?"

"Not fer awhile," answered Tom, pushing on.

He made his way along the lower levels, reveling in the solitude and the surroundings, and his keen eyes missed nothing. A mile from camp he suddenly stopped and carefully parted the thick berry bushes. In the soft soil were the

prints of many horses, most of them shod. Cautiously he followed the tracks and in a few moments came to the edge of a small, heavily grassed clearing, so well hidden by the brush and the thick growth of the trees along the encircling, steep-faced hills that its presence hardly would be suspected. Closely cropped circles, each centered by the hole made by a picket pin, told him the story; and when he had located the sand-covered site of the fire, whose ashes and sticks carefully had been removed, an imprint in the soft clay brought a smile to his face.

"Following us close," he muttered. "Lord help any Mexicans that wander away from the wagons. Nearer twenty than what they said." He slipped along the edge of the pasture and found where the party had left the little ravine. Following the trail he soon came to another matted growth of underbrush, and then he heard the barely audible stamp of a horse. Creeping forward he wormed his way through the greener brush and finally peered through an opening among the stems and branches. A dozen Texans were lolling on the floor of the ravine, and he knew that the others were doing sentry duty.

A shadow passed him and he froze, and then relaxed as Burch came into sight. It was needful that he make no mistake in how he made his presence known, for a careless hail might draw a volley.

Burch passed him treading softly and when the man's back was turned to him Tom called out in a low voice. "Burch! Don't shoot!"

"Boyd!" exclaimed the sentry. "Cussed if ye ain't a good un, gittin' whar ye air an' me not knowin' it. What ye doin' hyar?"

"Scoutin' fer Injuns. Glad ter see ye."

Burch stepped to the edge of the ravine. "Friend o' mine comin' down, name o' Boyd." He turned. "Go down an' meet th' boys; thar honin' fer to shake han's with th' kiyote that hit Armijo. Be with ye soon."

Tom descended and shook hands with the smiling Texans and in a few moments was at home in the camp. He noticed that they all had the Colt revolving rifles which his friend Jarvis, back in St. Louis, had condemned. Each man wore two pistols of the same make, and most of them carried heavy skinning knives inside their boot legs.

"I heard tell them rifles warn't o' much account," he observed.

"Wall, they ain't as good as they might be," confessed a lanky Texan, "if thar

used careless an' git too hot. A Hawken will out-shoot 'em; but we mostly fight on hossback, an' like ter git purty clost. Take them greasers we run inter; we didn't pull trigger till we war a hundred paces away, an' by th' time we'd emptied th' rifles an' pulled pistols th' danged fight war over. Th' Injuns don't like 'em worth a cuss. That's a right smart rifle ye got thar, friend."

Tom passed it around and it was duly admired. Then the guard was changed and Burch and Flint appeared.

"You fellers air stickin' purty clost ter us," observed Tom.

"But not as clost as th' greasers air," laughed Flint. "Danged if we kin ketch one o' 'em away from th' waggins."

"That's jest as well," replied Tom. "More'n half of 'em hate Armijo as much as we do. If ye pick 'em off careless yer bound ter make mistakes. Thar's one gang that's fer him strong, an' 'twon't be long before they split from th' others an' stand out so thar won't be no mistakin' 'em. They'll be trailin' me an' Hank in a bunch. We're aimin' ter slip away an' head fer Bent's some place between hyar an' the Upper Spring."

"Thought ye was goin' ter Santa Fe," said Burch in surprise. "If yer goin' ter Bent's ye should 'a' left th' train at th' Crossin'."

"I'm goin' ter Santa Fe," replied Tom, "but thar's some folks that air anxious ter see me. If they larn I'm thar I'll likely be stood ag'in a wall; an' Armijo'll add my ears ter his c'llection. We got ter throw 'em off our trail." He smiled grimly around the circle. "I don't want Salezar ter larn I'm in this part o' the country, fer I want ter git my paws on him."

At the mention of that name the eyes of the leader flamed with flickering fires and he leaned slightly forward, unable to conceal his eagerness. "Whar ye aimin' ter leave th' caravan, friend?" he asked.

"Don't know jest yet," answered Tom, "but I know th' way we'll head. Ye know whar th' waggin road crossed McNees Crick? Wall, plumb north o' that a crick empties inter th' Cimarron. Thar's a dry gully jines th' crick at its mouth, makin' a V. Th' gully war made by th' buffalers wearin' away th' top soil, which let the rains cut inter th' sand beneath an' wash it away. That buffaler trail is th' biggest ye ever saw, an' it's worn down so deep that every rain pours a stream along it. It's cut a gully back fer a hundred paces to whar th' buffaler wallers have turned a

little pasture inter a swamp when it rains. Clost to its upper end is a hill, whar my partner built a cache about ten years back. He says th' pit could be easy seen when he war thar last."

"We're aimin' ter head fer Bent's as soon as th' caravan gits too fur along," said the leader, who not long since had returned from the lepers' hospital, used as a prison in his case, in Mexico City. His bitterness had seared him to the soul and Tom thought it strange that he so easily would forego the desire for revenge, the flames of which intermittently flickered in his eyes. "I've been wonderin' about th' best an' straightest way to Bent's, with water on it. Yer pardner says that's th' best trail?"

"Yes," replied Tom. "An' it's th' best fer us in another way. Thar's springs in th' river bed up thar an' fer near a mile th' river's allus wet. Ye see, we got ter throw th' greasers off our trail, which will be too danged plain, with two hosses an' eight mules. I'd swap th' eight mules fer two hosses, seein' as how we're fixed, but I dassn't make th' play, fer everybody in th' caravan would larn of it. Come ter think of it, thar'll be more hosses an' mules; couple o' friends air goin' with us. We change our packs tonight, buildin' 'em up with buffaler rugs we traded th' Comanches fer, in case we part with our goods an' leave th' caravan afterward. Th' two extra hosses would be enough ter carry our grub an' supplies, an' they'd let us make better time than th' mules would."

The Texans nodded and one of them glanced at his leader while he spoke to Tom. "Reckon if ye got them mules ter Bent's ye could sell 'em, or trade 'em fer a couple o' hosses?" He hesitated and then said: "We're runnin' powerful short o' powder an' lead."

"Th' caravan bein' so clost ter Santa Fe, it's got more o' both than it needs," replied Tom. "If we kin git ye some we'll leave it behind th' hill at that old cache o' Hanks. If ye go that way, look fer it." He grinned. "Hank an' me air aimin' ter carry some in one of th' buffaler rug packs. Thar's two fifty-pound pigs o' lead fastened to each o' th' cannon carriages, an' they won't have no use fer more than one ter each gun.

"Wish I war goin' with ye," growled the Texan leader, his eyes flaming again. "I'm hankerin' ter git Salezar's ears, fer I saw th' polecat c'llect Texan ears on th' road from San Miguel ter 'Paso, ter keep th' tally o' his prisoners straight. He strung 'em on a wire, d—n him!" His face became livid with passion, and murder raised its grisly visage in his eyes.

Tom paled. "Yes," he said. "He took th' ears o' a friend o' mine that war sick an' weak with hunger an' cold an' exhaustion, an' couldn't keep up. He had traded most o' his clothes fer short rides on th' mules o' th' guards. They killed him near Valencia, an' his ears war took ter account fer him."

"Valencia!" muttered the leader, pacing back and forth like a panther. "I remember him! Oh, Christ!" he cried, and then got hold of himself. "Boyd, I'd give everythin' I own ter git my han's on that Salezar; an' go ter hell with a smile on my face!" Then he stiffened and reached convulsively toward his holster, for the unmistakable twang of a bowstring sounded from the bushes above his head. The Texans leaped to their arms, but Tom stopped them with a cry.

"Wait, boys! That's Hank—my pardner!" He looked up toward the bushes. "Ye damned fool! Show yerself!"

"Didn't hardly know if 'twar safe," chuckled Hank, his head slowly arising above the tangle of leaves and vines, a dozen paces from the place where the bowstring had twanged.

"Whar's that huntin' party ye war nursin'?" quickly demanded Tom.

"Took 'em 'round on t'other side o' th' camp, ast 'em ter hold my hoss, an' left 'em thar," chuckled the plainsman, making his way down the hillside with caution and silence that had become habitual.

"Boys," said Tom, "hyar's a 'dopted son o' th' Piegan tribe o' th' Blackfeet, name o' Hank Marshall, an' he's more Injun than any brave in th' tribe. Anyhow, I'd ruther have a Injun on my trail than him. He's goin' with me ter Santa Fe; an' Salezar's shore goin' ter need all his friends!"

"Put her thar!" said the Texan leader. "If yer lookin' fer help I'll jine ye, cussed if I won't!"

"Don't want no help that's strange ter Taos an' Santer Fe," laughed Hank. "We got two Green River boys, an' don't need no more; don't hardly need them, but Zeb wants his ha'r, an' I wants his ears, ears bein' his pet joke." He looked at the leader. "You boys run inter some 'Rapahoes? Thar's nigh onter a dozen projectin' 'round these hills. Stumbled acrost thar camp a-ways back. If I'd had one o' them newfangled rifles ye got so many of, danged if I wouldn't 'a' trailed 'em." He grinned expansively. "They cleaned out a cache o' mine, three year back, up on Big Sandy Crick, an' I ain't paid 'em fer it yit."

"We shore do need powder an' lead," said the leader thoughtfully. He turned to one of his men. "Sam, reckon we kin part with pore Williams' rifle?"

"Seein' as we got three more extrys, reckon we kin," answered Sam. "It oughter be worth a keg o' powder an' a couple o' pigs o' lead." He walked over to where their supplies were piled and returned with a heavy Colt repeating rifle. "Hyar, Hank," he said, handing it to the hunter. "Be keerful ter keep th' powder from spillin' down 'round th' cap end; an' don't empty her too fast after th' first few shots. Hyar's th' mold, an' some caps. Git a Injun ter pay fer pore Williams. She's full loaded, so look out."

The rifle was sheathed in a saddle scabbard and Hank took it, looked from it to his own, weighing them both. "Heavy as all git out," he remarked. "Wall, 'twon't weigh nothin' when it's slung ter a saddle. Might be handy purty soon. Much obliged, friends. How we goin' ter git th' powder an' lead ter ye?"

"I've arranged fer that," said Tom, picking up his rifle. "Wall, good luck, boys. Remember us at Bent's if ye git thar."

"Reckon it's you boys that need th' good luck," grimly replied the leader. He watched the two visitors until they were lost to sight in the brush and then turned to his men, his eyes flaming again. "Break camp, boys; we're crossin' th' river close by, ter circle back ag'in farther up."

Tom and Hank, moving silently back toward the encampment, had covered about half of the distance when they heard a sudden burst of shots, yells, and the thunder of hoofs. Running up the side of a little hill they peered over the top and flung themselves down. Less than two hundred paces away a little party of tenderfeet, with Patience Cooper in the center, fought frightened horses as a band of nearly a dozen Indians came charging straight for them across the little clearing. As they looked one of the tenderfeet's horse went down, spilling its rider, and throwing the group into still greater confusion.

"'Rapahoes!" snorted Hank, and his rifle spoke. "*One* fer my cache!"

The double-barreled rifle of his companion roared twice and another warrior plunged from his horse, while the third fought madly to keep his seat, but his weakening grasp loosened and he rolled over and over across the grass. Tom dropped the empty rifle and started to rise, his hand leaping to the Colt revolver at his belt; but Hank, who had slipped the newly-acquired repeating rifle from its sheath, poked it into his friend's hand and fell to re-loading his Hawken. "She's

yore gal. Give 'em hell!" he grunted.

The deadly and unexpected attack from the little hilltop created a diversion which for the moment turned the thoughts of the savages from the tenderfeet in the open, and the charging line split to pass the forlorn group and give its full attention to the real menace; but as it hesitated the heavy, regular crashes of the revolving rifle rolled from the hill, its lead always selecting the warrior nearest to the panic-stricken group. Here an Indian went down, there a horse; and with the cry "*Tejanos!*" the rest of the savage band wheeled and dashed over the route they had come. The last warrior to reach the edge of the pasture was for one instant silhouetted against the sky on the edge of a ravine, and at that moment Hank's rifle cracked. Throwing both arms up over his head, he turned a backward flip from the horse and sprawled inertly in a currant bush. Re-loading as quickly as they could while on the run the two plainsmen hastened to the group, and Tom, pulling Dr. Whiting from his horse, was within an inch of strangling him when Patience's hands on his wrists checked him.

"Six trusty knights!" sneered the enraged plainsman, hurling the doctor from him. "I *said* you were six flashes. Ask a woman to go riding with you in a country as broken as this, and as over-run with Indians!" He took a step forward, seething with rage, and ran his eyes over the speechless tenderfeet. "Git back to camp, all of you! Miss Cooper goes with us!" Poised, tense, and enraged he watched them go and did not know that Hank had run to the little hilltop for the double-barreled rifle until the old hunter returned with it, loaded its two barrels, capped them and threw the weapon under his arm. At that moment a burst of firing sounded from the north and Hank cocked his head.

"Sounds like them Colt rifles," he remarked, and then kicked himself figuratively, for at his words, his two companions, almost in each other's arms, started, stiffened, and stepped apart. Seeing that the damage already was done, Hank placidly continued. "Is thar another passel o' Texans loose 'round hyar, or has our friends hit th' trail already?"

"Yes," said Tom, quivering like a leaf.

Patience closed her eyes. "Yes," she sighed.

Hank scratched his head and frowned, very much puzzled. "Shucks! thar ain't no doubt 'bout it, a-tall. Course it is—an' I'm a danged old fool!"

"You're one of the four best men I ever knew," said Patience, resting her hand on

his arm.

Hank felt of the disgraceful, stubby beard on his face, scowled at his blackened hands, and furtively brushed at a bloodstain on his shirt. Then he wheeled abruptly and strode off to look over the victims of the little affray. When he turned again he saw Patience and Tom going toward camp, Patience on her horse and Tom striding at her side. Fixing the strap to his own rifle he slung the weapon over his shoulder and, with the double-barreled weapon balanced expertly in his hands, slowly followed after to act as a badly needed protector to them both.

Back in camp Tom handed Patience into her uncle's care, looked at her in a way she would remember to the end of her days, and hastened on to report to the captain of the caravan. When he reached Woodson he found Hank there before him, laughingly recounting the fight. As Tom came up Hank stepped back and slipped away, heading straight for the excited group of tenderfeet at the other end of the encampment, and roughly pushed in among them.

"Look hyar, ye sick pups," he blurted. "My pardner dassn't thrash any o' ye, or he'll mebby lose his gal. Anybody hyar wantin' ter take advantage o' an old man? Huh! Then open yer dumb ears ter this: If I ketch airy one o' ye hangin' 'round Cooper's waggins, or even sayin' 'how-de-do' to that gal, I'll git ye if I has ter chase ye all the way back ter Missoury!" He spat at the doctor's feet, turned his back and rambled over to where his trade goods were piled. On the way he met Zeb, who scowled at him.

Hank pulled some black mops out of his pocket, showed them, and shoved them back again.

"Hell!" said Zeb, enviously. "Whar ye git 'em?"

"Found one on a currant bush," chuckled Hank, and went on again.

Zeb placed his fists on his hips and scowled in earnest. "I didn't know what that shootin' war, with all th' hunters runnin' 'round. Dang him! He allus *did* have more luck ner brains!"

Up at the captain's wagon Woodson nodded as his companion finished speaking. "I reckon ye kin have 'most anythin' in this hyar camp, Boyd. Two bars o' lead off'n th' cannon carriages, an' a keg o' powder? Shore, I'll put th' powder in Cooper's little waggin, an' ye kin help yerself ter th' lead when ye git th' time."

CHAPTER XVI

THE PASSING OF PEDRO

After supper that night Hank and Tom sat around their fire and soon were joined by Pedro, who paid them effusive compliments about their defeat of the Arapahoes. They squirmed under his heavy flattery and finally, in desperation, spoke of the secret trail to Taos. His face beamed in the firelight and he leaned eagerly forward.

"You have decide?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Tom. "Whar we goin' ter meet, and what time?"

"Ah?" breathed Pedro. "To that have I geeve *mucho* thought. Eet should be ear-rly, so we be far away by thee coming of thee sun. Ees eet not so?"

"Naw," growled Hank. "Folks air not sleepin' sound enough then. Nobody's goin' ter foller us. Thar'll be lots o' 'em leavin' camp at night from now on, tryin' ter beat each other ter th' customs fellers. Two hours afore dawn is time enough. But we got lots o' time ter figger that; we won't be ter th' Upper Spring fer two more days. Time enough then ter talk about it."

"But, eet ees tonight!" exclaimed Pedro. "*Madre de Dios!* You teenk I mean near thee Upper Spreeng? No! No!"

"Mebby not; but that's whar *we* mean," said Tom. "Think we're goin' pokin' along through this Injun country fer two nights an' a day by ourselves? Th' caravan gits ter Willer Bar tomorrow night, an' camps at th' Upper Spring, or Cold Spring, th' next night. That puts us near fifty miles further on in th' protection of th' caravan."

"No! No!" argued Pedro in despair. "Eet ees too *mucho* reesk!"

"Of what?" demanded Tom, in surprise.

"Eet may be that Armijo send *soldats* to meet thee tr-rain, lak other times. Señores, eet mus' be tonight! Tonight eet mus' be!" He looked around suddenly. "But where ar-re thee *cargas*, thee packs? I do not see them. What ees eet you

do?"

"We put 'em outside th' corral," chuckled Tom knowingly, "so folks will git used ter seeing 'em thar. Tomorrow night we'll do th' same, an' do it ag'in at th' Upper Spring. Somebody shore would see us if we had ter pack 'em here an' sneak 'em through th' camp. Ye should tell yer friends ter put thar packs outside th' waggins, too. How we goin' ter git through th' guards around th' camp?"

"By my fr-riends," answered Pedro. "But eet may be too late at Cold Spreeng!" he expostulated. "Eef thee *soldats* ar-re there—ah, señores! Eet ees ver' bad, Cold Spreeng!"

"We ain't botherin' 'bout that," said Tom reassuringly. "Hank kin scout on ahead o' us, an' if thar camped up thar we kin drop out o' th' train behind any bend on th' way, an' take ter th' brush."

Pedro begged and pleaded, but to no avail. He still was arguing when his two companions rolled up in their blankets and settled down to go to sleep. Sadly he walked away, hiding his anger until well out of their sight, and then hastened to his own fire and sent three of his compatriots to watch the sleeping pair. They had their watch for nothing, and while they doggedly kept their eyes on the two plainsmen, Uncle Joe and his two wagoners were busy on the other side of the camp, stowing merchandise in the wagons and making false packs. This they found easy to do without calling upon many buffalo rugs, for the goods had been packed in light boxes, over which had been thrown skins and canvas. By taking out the contents of the boxes and putting the containers back into their original wrappings the shapes of the packs did not change. The pigs of lead, a keg of powder and bundles of stones were wrapped in pieces of old skins to give weight to the packs to keep them from flopping at every step of the mules. They did not start to work until Zeb Houghton and Jim Ogden returned from their tour of guard duty and took up another kind of guard duty near the wagons; and long before daylight awakened the encampment the work was done and no one the wiser. Alonzo Webb and Enoch Birdsall had taken care of the packs belonging to Ogden and Houghton and everything was in shape for quick action.

On the march again after an early breakfast the caravan plodded along the trail to reach Willow Bar in good time for the next night camp. As the wagons rolled along the road following the course of the Cimarron, Uncle Joe and Patience dropped back to the rear guard, where Hank Marshall scowled at Jim Ogden, but refrained from open hostilities. Hank was glad to see them and entertained them

mile after mile with accounts of his life and experiences in the great West. At times his imagination set a hard pace for his vocabulary, but the latter managed to keep up. The men exchanged tobacco off and on and no one gave a second thought to what they were doing. When Uncle Joe and Patience rode forward again as the train drew near to the noon camping place, Uncle Joe was poorer and lighter by the loss of a goodly sum in minted gold, while Hank was richer and heavier. The balance was obtainable in Santa Fe in the warehouse of a mutual friend.

The wagons hardly had left the noon camp when a heavy rain storm burst upon them, with a blast of cold air that quickly turned the rain into driving sheets of hail. These storms were common along the Cimarron and at times raged for two or three days. The animals became frantic with fear and pain, and the train was a scene of great confusion from one end to the other. Alternate downpours of rain, sleet, and heavy hailstones continued all the rest of the day and the encampment at Willow Bar was one of sullenness and discontent. The wind rose during the early part of the night and sent the rain driving into the wagons through every crack and crevice, and the flapping and slapping and booming of wagon covers, added to the fury of the wind and the swish of the downpour, filled the night with a tumult of noise. The guards around the camp either crawled under skins or crept back to their wagons, not able to see three feet in the blackness.

Tom and Hank had taken refuge under a great Pittsburg wagon owned by Haviland and had fastened buffalo rugs to its sides to shed some of the rain. As soon as darkness set in and Pedro's spies found that they could not see an arm's length from them and were drenched and half frozen by the steady downpour, they fled from their posts and sought refuge from the storm. It took very little to convince them that the men they were to watch would stay where they were until dawn or later, and they did not let Pedro know of their deflection.

"Nine, ten, eleven," muttered the first of two men leading packmules as they felt their way from wagon to wagon. "This oughter be Haviland's, Zeb. Yep, I kin feel thar skin walls." He bent down and raised the lower edge of a skin. "Hank! Tom!"

"All right, Jim," came the low answer, and the two partners, bundled in skins until they looked like nothing human, crawled from their snug shelter and stood up, their one and constant thought being for the covers of the hammers of their heavy rifles. Hank pushed ahead and the night swallowed up the little party.

Uncle Joe raised himself on one elbow and peered through a small opening in the canvas at the rear end of his first huge wagon, and got a faceful of cold rain before he could close the opening again. He had done this a dozen times since dark. Muttering sleepily he rolled up in his blankets and rugs and dozed again, squirming down into the warm bed as vague thoughts sped through his mind of what his friends were going to face.

Suddenly the soft whinny of a horse sounded squarely under him, and he bounced from the blankets and crept to a crack where the canvas was nailed to the tailboard of the wagon. "Hello!" he called. "Hello!"

A low voice answered him and he shivered as a trickle of cold rain rolled down his face. "Thought you had given it up till tomorrow night. This is a hell of a night, boys, to go wandering off from the camp. Sure you won't get lost among th' hills?" He chuckled at the reply and shivered again. "Sure I'll tell her Bent's. Yes. No, she won't. What? Look here, young man; she's plumb cured of tenderfeet. Yes, I remember everything. All right; good luck, boys. God knows you'll need it!" He listened for a moment, heard no sounds of movement, and called again. "What's th' matter?" There came no answer and he crept back to his blankets, his teeth chattering, and lay awake the rest of the night, worrying.

Between the wagons and the road the little pack train waited, kept together by soft bird calls instead of by sight. A plaintive, disheartened snipe whistled close by and was answered in kind. Hank almost bumped into Ogden before he saw him. They both looked like drowned rats, the water slipping from the buffalo hair and pouring from them in little rills.

"Ain't a guard in sight, or ruther feelin', fifty feet each side o' th' road," Hank reported. "Bet every blasted one o' 'em is back in camp. Mules all tied together? Everybody hyar? All right. Off we go."

All night long the little *atejo* slopped down the streaming road, kept to it by the uncanny instinct and the oft repeated cheeping and twittering of the adopted son of the Blackfeet, who could perfectly imitate any night bird he ever had heard; and he had heard them all. Horses whinnied, mules brayed, wolves and coyotes howled, foxes squalled, chipmunks scolded, squirrels chattered and several other animals performed solos in the dark at the head of the little pack train, to be answered from the rear. Anyone unfortunate enough to be camped at the edge of the trail would have thought himself surrounded by a menagerie.

With the first sullen sign of dawn Tom pushed on ahead, reconnoitered the

Upper Spring, found it deserted and went on, riding some hundreds of yards from, but parallel to, the trail and soon came to Cold Spring. Here he saw quantities of camp and riding gear, abandoned firelocks, personal belongings, and other things "forgotten" by the brave Armijo and his army in their precipitate retreat from the Texans, while the latter were still one hundred and fifty miles away. Scouting in the vicinity for awhile he rode back and met the little *atejo,* which had been plodding steadily on at its pace of three miles an hour; and all the urging of which the men were capable would not increase that speed.

At the Upper Spring, which poured into a ravine and flowed toward the Cimarron a few miles to the north, the wagon road drew farther from the river and ran toward the Canadian; and here the little party left it to turn and twist over and around hills, ravines, pastures and woods, and then slopped down the middle of a storm-swollen rivulet. They turned up one of its small feeders and followed it for half a mile and then, crossing a little divide, struck another small brook and splashed down it until they came to the Cimarron. Here they threw into the river the useless contents of the false packs, distributed the supplies among the mules, and pushed on again upstream along the bank.

They now were well up on the headwaters of the river and its width was negligible, although its storm-fed torrent boiled and seethed and gave to it a false fierceness. Their doubling and the hiding of their trail in the streams had not been done so much for the purpose of throwing the Mexicans off their track, as to make their pursuers think they were trying to throw them off. They knew that the Mexicans, upon losing the tracks, would strike straight for the old and now almost abandoned Indian trail for Bent's Fort.

"We got about a ten-hour start on 'em," growled Tom, "but they'll cut that down quick, once they git goin'. Reckon I'll lay back a-ways an' slow 'em up if they git hyar too soon."

Zeb and Jim wheeled their horses and without a word accompanied him to the rear.

Hank, leading the bell mule, pushed on, looking for the site of his old cache and for a good place to cross the swollen stream, and he soon stopped at the water's edge and howled like a wolf. In a few minutes his companions came up, reported no Mexicans in sight, and unpacked the more perishable supplies. These they carried across to the other bank, their horses swimming strongly and soon the mules were ready to follow. Tom led off, entering the stream with the picket rope of the bell mule fastened to his saddle, and with his weapons, powder horn and "possible" sack high above his head. His horse breasted the current strongly, quartering against it, and the bell mule followed. After her, with a slight show of hesitation, came the others, the three remaining hunters bringing up the rear.

As the *atejo* formed again and started forward Hank hung back, peering into the stunted trees and brush on the other side of the stream.

"Come on, Hank," said Tom. "What ye lookin' fer? They warn't in sight."

"I war sorta hankerin' fer 'em ter show up," growled Hank with deep regret. "That's plumb center range from hyar, over thar. Wouldn't mind takin' a couple o' cracks at 'em, out hyar by ourselves, us four. Allus hate ter turn my tail ter yaller-bellies like them varmints. I hate 'em next ter Crows!" He slowly turned his horse and fell in behind the last mule, glancing back sorrowfully. Then he looked ahead. "Thar's my ol' cache," he chuckled.

Before them on the right was an eroded hill with steep sides, its flat top covered with a thick mass of brush, berry bushes and scrub timber, and on its right was a swamp, filled with pools and rank with vegetation. The dry wash marking the end of the great buffalo trail was dry no longer, but poured out a roiled, yellow-brown stream into the dirty waters of the Cimarron.

Rounding the hill they stopped and exchanged grins, for in a little horseshoe hollow two horses, with pack saddles on their backs, stopped their grazing, pulled to the end of their picket-ropes, and looked inquiringly at the invaders.

"Thar's jest no understandin' th' ways o' Providence," chuckled Hank as he dismounted. "Hyar we been a-wishin' an' a-wishin' fer a couple o' hosses to take th' place o' these cold-'lasses mules, an' danged if hyar they ain't, saddles an' all, right under our noses."

While he went along the back trail on foot to a point from where he could see the river, his companions became busy. They pooled their supplies and packed them securely on the Providence-provided horses, put the rest on their own animals, picketed the mules and removed the bell from the old mare, tossing it aside so its warning tinkle would be stilled. Signalling Hank, in a few minutes they were on their way again along the faint and in many places totally effaced trail leading over the wastes to the distant trading post on the Arkansas. Coming to a rainwater rivulet Hank sent them westward down its middle while he rode splashingly upstream. Soon coming to a tangle of brush he forced his horse to take a few steps around it on the bank, returned to the stream and then, holding squarely to its middle, picked his way through the tangle and rode back to rejoin his friends, having left behind him a sign of his upward passing. In case Providence went to sleep and took no more interest in his affairs, he had the satisfaction of knowing that he had done what he could to hide their trail.

He found his friends waiting for him and he shook his head as he joined them. "Danged if I like this hyar hidin'," he growled, coming back to his pet grievance. "I most gen'rally 'd ruther do it myself."

"But it ain't a question o' fighting," retorted Tom. "We got ter hide our trail from now on in case some greaser gits away, like they did from them Texans back nigh th' Crossin', an' takes th' news in ter th' settlements that we didn't go ter Bent's after we left th' wagon road. Ye'll git all th' danged fightin' yer lookin' fer afore ye puts Santa Fe behind ye—an' I'm bettin' we'll all show our trails a hull lot worse afore we git through ter Bent's. Come on; Turley's ranch is a long ways off. If yer itchin' ter try that repeatin' rifle ye'll shore git th' chance ter, later."

Hank grinned guiltily and while he was not thoroughly convinced of the soundness of their flight, so far as his outward appearances showed, he grunted a little but pushed on and joined his partner. In a few minutes he grinned again.

"I ain't never had th' chanct ter try fer six plumb-centers without takin' th' rifle from my shoulder," he remarked. "Jest wait till I take this hyar Colt up in th' Crow country!" He chuckled with anticipated pleasures and then glanced sidewise at his partner. "Say, Tom," he said, reminiscently; "who air th' three other best men yer gal was thinkin' of, back thar in that little clearin'?"

"What you mean?" demanded Tom, whirling in his saddle, his face flushing under its tan. "An' she ain't my gal, neither."

Hank chirped and twittered a bit. "Then who's is she?"

"Don't know; but she won't like bein' called mine. Ye oughtn't call her that."

"Not even atween us two?"

"Not never, a-tall."

"That so?" muttered Hank, a vague plan presenting itself to his mind, to be considered and used later. "Huh! I must be gittin' old an' worthless," he mourned. "I been readin' signs fer more'n thirty year, an' I ain't never read none that war airy plainer, arter them thievin' 'Rapahoes turned tail an' lit out. Anyhow, I reckon mebby yer safe if ye keep on *thinkin'* that she's yer gal." He scratched his chin. "But who war th' other three?"

"Why, I do remember her saying something like that," confessed Tom slowly, tingling as his memory hurled the whole scene before him. "Reckon she meant Uncle Joe an' her father."

"That accounts fer two o' 'em," said Hank, nodding heavily; "but who in tarnation is th' third?"

"Don't know," grunted Tom.

"Huh! Bet he's that stuck-up, no-'count doctor feller. Yeah; that's who it is." He glanced slyly at his frowning friend. "Told ye I war gettin' old an' worthless. Gosh! an' she's goin' all th' rest o' th' way ter Santer Fe with him!" He slapped his horse and growled in mock anxiety. "We better git a-goin' an' not loaf like we air. Santer Fe's a long ways off!"

Two miles further on they turned up a little branch of the stream and Hank, stopping his horse, threw up his hand. "Listen!" he cried.

Four pairs of keen ears sifted the noises of the intermittent wind and three pairs of eyes turned to regard their companion.

"What ye reckon ye heard?" curiously asked Zeb.

"I'd take my oath I heard rifle shots—a little bust o' 'em," replied Hank. "Thar ain't no questionin' it; I *am* gittin' old. Come along; we'll keep ter th' water fur's we kin, anyhow."

Back at the encampment of the caravan dawn found the animals stampeded, and considerable time elapsed before they were collected and before the absence of Tom and his friends was noticed. Then, with many maledictions, Pedro rallied his friends and set out along the wagon road, following a trail easily seen notwithstanding the rain which had beaten at the telltale tracks all night. Mile after mile unrolled behind them, saturated with Spanish curses; miles covered with all the vengeful ferocity and eagerness of Apaches. The score of Mexicans were well-armed, having spent the winter in the Missouri settlements and procured the best weapons to be had there. The Upper Spring came near and was put behind in a shower of hoof-thrown mud, and without pause they followed the tracks leading into the rough country, like hounds unleashed. They were five to one, and these odds were deemed sufficient in a sudden night attack. There would be satisfaction, glory, and profits for them all. The Governor had demanded Tom Boyd's ears, on him if possible, without him if they could be obtained in no other way; the Governor was powerful and would reward loyal and zealous service. They followed the trail of the *atejo* around hills, through ravines, and past woods, an advance guard of three men feeling the way. Then the tracks ceased at the side of a creek; but they did not pause. Choosing the

straightest practical route to the Cimarron at the beginning of the old Indian trail running northward to the Arkansas, they kept on. At last they saw the muddy flood of the river and as they reached its banks and read them at a glance they sent up an exultant shout. Holding their weapons and powder well above the backs of their swimming horses they reached the further side and took up the trail again.

Pedro dashed forward and flung up an arm and as his followers stopped in answer he cheered them with a Spanish oration, in which Pedro played no minor part. "Pedro never loses!" he boasted. "Before noon we will be on the heels of the gringo dogs and our scouts will find their camp in the night. Before another sun rises in the heavens we will have their ears at our belts and their trade goods on the way to the Valley of Taos! Forward, my braves! Forward, my warriors! Pedro leads you to glory!"

They snapped forward in their saddles as the spurs went home, their rifles at the ready, their advance guard steadily forging ahead, and thundered along the tracks of the fleeing *atejo*. Rounding the little hill with its frowsy cap of brush and scrub timber, they received a stunning surprise; for dropping down the steep bank as if from the sky charged twenty-odd vengeful Texans, their repeating rifles cracking like the roll of a drum. Pedro's exultant face became a sickly yellow, his burning eyes in an instant changed to glass, and his boasting words were slashed across by the death rattle in his throat. Volley after volley crashed and roared as the charging Texans wheeled to charge back again, and as they turned once more on the hillside they pulled up sharply and viewed the havoc of their deadly work. No man was left to carry tales, and Pedro had spoken with prophetic vision, for he had indeed led his warriors to glory—and oblivion.

CHAPTER XVII

"'SPRESS FROM BENT'S"

Circling back to the river so as not to lose its guidance nor stray too far out of the direct course, they reached its desolate banks at nightfall and camped at the base of a low hill on the top of which grew dense masses of greasewood. Zeb had shot a black-tailed deer on their way to the river and their supper that night, so far as the meat was concerned, would have delighted the palate of an epicure. Cooked over the hot, sputtering, short-lived greasewood, which constantly was added, and kept on the windward side of the blaze, the flavor of the meat was very little affected and they gorged, hunter-like, until they could eat no more; and partly smoked some of the remaining meat to have against some pressing need.

As the stream dwindled the nature of its banks and of the surrounding country changed, the vegetation steadily becoming more desert-like. White chalk cliffs arose like painted eyebrows from the tops of the banks, where erosion had revealed them; loose and disintegrating sandstone lay about the broken plain in myriads of shapes. Stunted and dead cottonwoods added their touch to the general scene, leaning this way and that, weird, uncanny, ghostlike. The drab sagebrush and the green fan of the palmetto became steadily more common, the latter figuring largely in the daily life of the Mexicans, for its mashed, saponaceous roots provided them with their pulpy AMOLE, which was an excellent substitute for soap. Prickly pears, Spanish bayonets, masses of greasewood bushes and scattering fringes of short grama grass completed the carpeting of the desolate plain.

Doggedly they pushed on, thankful for the heavy rains of the last two days, which had reached even here and left little pools of bad-tasting water for themselves and their beasts. At noon they stopped and built a fire of stunted cedar, for in daylight its telltale flames told nothing. They cooked another black-tailed deer, smoked some of the meat, and ran bullets until they had all of the latter they could possibly use. On again toward the Canadian until nightfall, lighting no fire, but eating the meat they had cooked at noon. They arranged a four-shift watch and passed a peaceful night. In their range of vision were Raton Peak, Pike's Peak, and the Wet Mountain, that paradise for hunters; the twin

Spanish Peaks with their caps of snow, and behind these towering sentries loomed the sullen bulk of a great mountain range under a thin streak of glittering white.

At any distance their appearance hardly would tell whether they were white hunters or Indians from Bent's, since their garb was a mixture of both and their skins so tanned, their hair so long as to cause grave doubts. More than once in that country two white men have exchanged shots, each taking the other for an Indian. At Bent's Fort on the Arkansas there were stray Indians from far-off tribes, and they dressed in what they could get; and at The Pueblo, that little trading post farther up on the Arkansas, Indians and whites lived together and intermarried. Not one of the four but could speak more than one savage dialect; and Tom's three companions possessed an Indian vocabulary which left little to be desired. If it came to a test which might prove too severe for him he could be dumb, and fall back on the sign language.

At last the Canadian was reached and passed, and Hank led them unerringly up the valley of a little feeding stream which poured its crystal flood down the gorges of a mountain range now almost over their heads. Coming to a rocky bowl scooped out of the sheer, overhanging wall at a bend, he built a fire of dry wood that was safely screened, and from his "possible" sack he took various leaves and stems and roots he had collected on the way. Four white men looking more like Indians had entered that little valley just before dusk. In the morning at dawn two white men, a Blackfoot and a Delaware, a hunting party from Bent's Fort with messages for Bent's little Vermajo ranch, located in a mountain valley, left the ravine and followed a little-used Ute trail that their leader knew well. Hank wore the Blackfoot distinctive double part in his hair just above the forehead, the isolated tuft pulled down to the bridge of his nose, and fastened to his buckskin trousers were thin strips of beadwork made by Blackfoot squaws.

The Mexican herder working for Bent uneasily watched them as they rode up to his makeshift lean-to and demanded a change of horses, a report of his stewardship, and the use of his fire. They were not bad fellows and were generous with their heavenly tobacco, and finally his uneasiness wore away and he gossiped with them while the night more and more shut in his lavish fire and seemed to soften the guttural polyglot of the two Indians. The white men did most of the talking, as was usual, and could make themselves understood in the herder's bastard Spanish and they answered sociably his numerous questions. Had they heard of the great *Tejano* army marching to avenge the terrible defeat inflicted by the brave Armijo on their swaggering vanguard? It was the great

subject from the upper end of the Valley of Taos to the last settlement along the Rio Grande and the Pecos. The ignoble dogs of *Tejanos* had basely murdered the brave Mexican scouting party near the Cimarron Crossing of the Arkansas. What could the *soldats* of Mexico do, attacked in their sleep? Most of the murdered *soldats* had come from the Valley of Taos, which always had been friendly to Texas. Was it true that the *Tejanos* spit fire on dry nights and could kill a full-grown bull buffalo with their bare hands? Ah, they were devils and the sons of devils, those *Tejanos*; and at night all doors were tightly barred in the settlements and strange Americans regarded with suspicion.

Some nights later, down the rough, steep sides of the Arroyo Hondo, through which trickled a ribbon of water from a recent rain, four Indians rode carefully, leading two pack animals. They were two Arapahoes, a Blackfoot, and a Delaware, and they followed the ravine and soon came in sight of the little mountain pasture, dotted with cedar bushes and sparsely covered with grass, which sloped gently down the mountain side. In the fading twilight the so-called ranch stood vaguely outlined, the nature of its log and adobe walls indiscernible, its mill and the still house looming vaguely over the main building against the darker background of the slope. The faint smell of sour mash almost hid the mealy odor of the grist mill; hogs grunted in the little corral by the fenced-in garden, while an occasional bleating of sheep came from the same enclosure. Dark shapes moved over the cedar-brush pasture and the frequent stamping of hoofs told they were either horses or mules. High up near the roof of the composite building were narrow oblongs of faint radiance, where feeble candle light shone through the little squares of gypsum, so much used in that country in place of window glass. As the four newcomers smilingly looked at the comfortable building the foot-compelling strains of a cheap violin squeaked and rasped resinously from the living quarters and a French-Canadian, far from home, burst ecstatically into song. Dreaming chickens cackled briefly and a sleepy rooster complained in restrained indignation, while the rocky mountain side relayed the distant howl of a prowling coyote.

The leader drew the flap over the ultra-modern rifle in its sheath at his leg and glanced back at his companions.

"Wall," he growled, "hyar we air; we're plumb inter it, now."

"Up ter our scalp-locks," came a grunted reply.

"Hell! 'Tain't th' fust time they've been in danger. They'll stand a lot o' takin',"

chuckled another voice. He softly imitated a coyote and the sleepy inmates of the hen house burst into a frightened chorus.

"Hain't ye got no sense?" asked Hank, reprovingly.

"Wouldn't be hyar if I had. I smell sour mash. Let's go on."

Hank kneed his mount, no longer the one which had become so well known to many eyes on the long wagon trail, and led the way down to the door. At the soft confusion of guttural tongues outside the house the door opened and Turley, the proprietor, stood framed in the dim light behind him.

"'Spress from Señor Bent's," said the nearest Indian, walking forward. "It's Hank Marshall," he whispered. "Want ter palaver with ye, Turley."

"Want's more whiskey, I reckon," growled Turley. "Hobble yer hosses on th' pasture. Ye kin roll up 'most anywhar ye like. Fed yit?"

"*Si, señor; muchos gracias,*" answered the Indian. "*Señor! cary mucho aguardiente grano!*"

"Oh, ye do?" sarcastically replied Turley. "Whiskey, huh? Wall, ye'll do better without it. What's Bent want o' me?"

"*Aguardiente de grano, señor!*"

Turley chuckled. "He does, hey? I say he picks damned poor messengers to send fer whiskey! We'll talk about that tomorrow. Roll up some'rs in yer blankets an' don't pester me." He stepped back and the door slammed in the eager, pleading face of the Blackfoot, to a chorus of disappointed grunts. The rebuffed savage timidly knocked on the door and it was flung open, Turley glaring down at him. "Ye heard what I said, an' ye savvied it! Reckon I want four drunk Injuns 'round hyar all night? We ain't a-goin' ter have no damned nonsense. Take yer animals off ter th' pasture an' camp down by th' crick! *Vamoose!*"

The picture of pugnacity, he stood in the door and watched them slowly, sullenly obey him, and then he slammed it again, swearing under his breath. "Quickest way ter git murdered is ter give them Injuns likker!" he growled.

"*Mais, oui,*" said the French-Canadian, placing his fiddle back under his chin, and the stirring air went on again.

Three hours before dawn Hank awoke and without moving his body let his eyes

rove over the dark pasture. Then like a flash of light his heavy pistol jammed into the dark blotch almost at his side, and he growled a throaty inquiry.

"It's me, Hank," came the soft reply. "Take that damned thing away! What's up?"

Three other pairs of eyes were turned on them and then their owners stirred a little and grunted salutations, and made slight rustlings as their hands replaced what they had held.

"Nothin', only a courtin' party," chuckled Hank.

"Wall, I've heard tell o' courtin' parties," ruminated Turley; "but never one made up like Injuns and armed to th' teeth. Might know some damned fool thing war afoot when yer mixed up in it. Who ye courtin', at yer time o' life? Somebody's wife?"

"We're aimin' fer Santer Fe," said Hank. "Got ter have help ter git thar th' way we wants. Them Texans has made it hard fer us, a-stirrin' up everythin' like they has."

"Whar'd ye git yer hosses?" anxiously demanded Turley.

"Inderpendence, Missoury," innocently answered Hank, his grin lost in the darkness.

"Then ye come over th' wagon trail, an' up th' Arkansas?"

"Over th' wagon trail an' up th' Cimarron, with th' second caravan o' traders. Come nigh straight acrost from Cold Spring."

"Wall, I'll be damned!" muttered Turley. Then he snorted. "Ain't ye got no sense, ye Root Digger? Everybody in th' train'll know them hosses!"

"We swapped 'em at Bent's rancho on th' Vermajo—good gosh! Two o' 'em come from them Texans!"

"They didn't have no brands," said Tom. "I heard 'em say somethin' about gettin' some at Bent's. We got ter risk it, anyhow. It'll be like addin' a spoonful o' freight ter a wagon load."

Hank's mind was running in a groove that he had been gouging deeper and longer hour after hour and he refused to be sidetracked by any question concerning the horses they had changed. "We want ter swap hosses ag'in an'

borry some rags fer clothes; an' before daylight, too."

Tom arose on one elbow. "That's all right, fur's it goes; only it don't go no-whar," he declared. "We want ter git rid o' these hosses, an' we want th' clothes; but that ain't all. We want a job, Turley. Need any mule wranglers ter take some freight inter Santer Fe?"

"Day after tomorrow," answered Turley. "We got ter git rid o' these animals afore then, ye got ter git shet o' 'em afore mornin'. I'll send Jacques out ter take 'em away as soon as I go back ter th' house. Arter he leaves with 'em I'll bring ye some ol' clothes so ye'll look a little different from them four fools that swapped hosses at Bent's rancho. Th' peon up thar won't git away, nor mebby see nobody fer weeks; but we better take th' pelt afore th' meat spiles under it. I got some hosses th' Utes stole from th' 'Rapahoes. We stole 'em from th' Utes. They ain't marked, an' they ain't knowed down in th' valley."

"But we'll still be four," commented Tom, thoughtfully.

"That's shore a plain trail," said Jim Ogden. "Here: You an' Hank take a mule apiece an' go back th' way we come, fur a spell. Me an' Zeb kin freight whiskey with Turley's *atejo*, an' meet ye along th' trail some'rs, or in Santer Fe, at th' warehouse. Ye kin load yer mules with faggots ter be sold in town, an' tag onter our mule train fer society an' pertection. Yer rifles kin be hid under th' faggots."

"We'll be unpackin' th' mules noon an' night," replied Tom. "How 'bout our rifles then?"

"Can't be did," grunted Hank.

"We got ter risk that peon seein' anybody ter talk to," said Tom. "Anyhow, 'tain't nothin' unusual fer him ter see fellers from th' fort. We'll go on with th' *atejo*, after we make a few changes in our clothes, an' ride Turley's hosses 'stead o' Bent's. But we can't jine that mule train as no party o' four. We got ter lose that danged number, that's flat."

"You an' Hank," offered Zeb, "bein' Blackfoot an' Delaware, kin be hunters from Bent's; me an' Jim, bein' 'Rapahoes turned friendly, kin come from St. Vrain's post. Th' South Platte, up thar, is th' 'Rapahoe stampin' ground an' we both know it from one end to t'other. That'll count fer all o' us havin' first-class weapons. Somebody's shore goin' ter notice them."

Turley nodded. "Yes; hyar's whar ye lose that cussed four. You two 'Rapahoes git

scarce afore daylight, goin' on foot an' leavin' no trail. Come back from th' way o' th' old Ute trail from th' Bayou Salade. I'm runnin' a little herdin' up o' my hosses on th' side o' th' mounting; they're scatterin' in th' brush too much. Fer that I'll be needin' all my men that ain't goin' as muleteers. I'll hire you boys, two at a time, ter go 'long with th' *atejo* as guards. Thar's thieves atween hyar an' Santer Fe that likes Turley's whiskey an' ground meal. I'll give ye a writin' ter my agent in town to pay ye off, an' ye'll git through, all right. Do ye reckon ye'll have ter git outer Santer Fe on th' jump? Seein' as how yer so danged careful how ye git inter th' town, it may be that ye ain't welcome a hull lot. Knowin' Hank like I do, makes me suspicious."

"We'll mebby git out quicker'n scat," answered Tom, chuckling. "They'll mebby be touchy about strangers, with them Texans prowlin' 'round. If we git ter goin' strong as a Texan raid an' they find out that it's only four no-'count Injuns full o' Taos lightnin', they'll mebby move fast. We may make quite a ruckus afore we git through, if they find out who we air."

"What th' hell ye aimin' ter do? Capture th' town?" demanded Turley, unable to longer hold down his curiosity.

"Aimin' ter git our trade goods money, see a young lady, hang 'round till th' return caravan start back fer th' States, an' mebby squar up fer a few o' them Texans that *didn't* git ter Mexico City," answered Tom.

"This hyar's th' Tom Boyd that slapped Armijo's kiyote face," explained Hank. "We hears th' Governor is lonesome fer his company."

"Great Jehovah yes!" exclaimed Turley. "Boyd, ye better jine that thar caravan from Bent's, meetin' up with it at th' Crossin'. Armijo combed these hyar mountings fer ye, an' watched my rancho fer nigh a week. He'd 'most give his right hand ter git a-holt o' you; an' if he does, you kin guess what'll happen ter you!" He peered curiously at the young American and shook his head. "I'm bettin' ye *do* leave on th' jump, if yer lucky enough ter leave at all. Ye'll need fresh hosses, another change o' clothes an' a cache o' grub. Tell ye what," he said, turning to Hank. "Ye know that little mounting valley whar you an' me stopped fer two days, that time we war helpin' find th' hosses that war run off Bent's Vermajo rancho? Wall, I'll fix it so these hyar hosses will be waitin' fer ye up thar. I got some men I kin trust as long as I'm playin' agin' th' greasers. I'll cache ye some Dupont an' Galena, too," he offered, referring to powder and lead. The latter came from Galena, Illinois, and took its name from that place.

"An' forty pounds o' jerked meat a man," added Hank. "We might have ter go clean up ter th' South Park afore we dast turn fer Bent's. Hang it on that thar dead ash we used afore, or clost by if th' tree's down. We better leave ye some more bullets as will fit our own weapons without no doubt. We kin run more in th' warehouse in Santer Fe if we need 'em. Keep yer Galena, Turley, an' leave some patches, instid, along with our bullets."

"But we'll still be four arter we leave hyar," objected Jim.

"No, ye won't," replied Turley. "Ye'll show up in pairs, ye'll jine in pairs, ye'll ride an' 'sociate in pairs, an' thar'll be a dozen more mixin' up with ye. Wall, talk it over among ye while I gits busy afore it's light," and the friendly rancher was swallowed up in the night.

A few minutes later Jacques, sleepy and grumbling, loomed up out of the darkness, collected the six horses and departed up the slope. Shortly after him came Turley with a miscellaneous collection of odds and ends of worn-out clothing and soon his friends had exchanged a garment or two with him. Tom and Hank parted with their buckskin shirts and now wore coarse garments of Pueblo make; Zeb had a Comanche leather jerkin and Jim wore a blue cotton shirt patched with threadbare red flannel. They bound bands of beadwork or soft tanned skin around their foreheads, and Hank's hair proudly displayed two iridescent bronze feathers from the tail of a rooster. If Joe Cooper, himself, had come face to face with them he would have passed by without a second glance.

Silently Zeb and Jim melted into the night, while Tom and Hank arose and went around to the wall of the still house, rolled up in their newly-acquired blankets against the base of the adobe wall and slept until discovered and awakened after dawn by one of Turley's mill hands, who paid them a timid and genuine respect.

They loafed around all day, watching the still house with eager eyes. Their wordless pleading was in vain, however, for Turley, frankly scowling at their first appearance, totally ignored them thereafter. Just before dusk two half-civilized Arapahoes from St. Vrain's South Platte trading post swung down the mountain side, cast avaricious eyes on some horses in the pasture, sniffed deeply at the still house, and asked for whiskey.

"I'll give ye whiskey," said Turley after a moment's thought, a grin spreading over his face, "but I won't give it ter ye hyar. If ye want likker I'll give ye a writin' ter my agent in Santer Fe, an' he'll give ye all yer porous skins kin hold, an' a jug ter take away with ye."

"*Si, señor! Si, señor! Muchos gracias!*"

"Hold on thar! Hold yer hosses!" growled Turley. "Ye don't reckon I'm makin' ye no present, do ye? Ye got ter earn that likker. If ye want it bad enough ter escort my *atejo* ter th' city, it's yourn. I'm combin' my hosses outer th' brush, an' I'm short-handed. By gosh!" he chuckled, smiling broadly.

"Thar's a couple more thirsty Injuns 'round hyar, some'rs; hey, Jacques! Go find them watch dogs o' th' still house. They won't be fur away, you kin bet. These two an' them shore will scare th' thieves plumb ter death all th' way ter town. I kin feel *my* ha'r move!"

Jacques returned shortly with Bent's thirsty hirelings, and after some negotiations and the promise of horses for them to ride, the Indians accepted his offer. They showed a little reluctance until he had given each of them a drink of his raw, new whiskey, which seemed to serve as fuel to feed a fire already flaming. The bargain struck, he ordered them fed and let them sleep on the softest bit of ground they could find around the rancho.

CHAPTER XVIII

SANTA FE

After an early breakfast the *atejo* of nineteen mules besides the *mulera*, or bell mule, was brought out of the pasture and the *aparejos*, leather bags stuffed with hay, thrown on their backs and cinched fast with wide belts of woven sea-grass, which were drawn so cruelly tight that they seemed almost to cut the animals in two; this cruelty was a necessary one and saved them greater cruelties by holding the packs from slipping and chafing them to the bone. Groaning from the tightness of the cinches they stood trembling while the huge cruppers were put into place and breast straps tightened. Then the *carga* was placed on them, the whiskey carriers loaded with a cask on each side, firmly bound with rawhide ropes; the meal carriers with nearly one hundred fifty pounds in sacks on each side. While the mules winced now, after they had become warmed up and the hay of the *aparejos* packed to a better fit, they could travel longer and carry the heavy burdens with greater ease than if the cinches were slacked. The packing down and shaping of the *aparejo* so loosened the cinch and ropes that frequently it was necessary to stop and tighten them all after a mile or so had been put behind.

The *atejo* was in charge of a major-domo, five *arrieros*, or muleteers and a cook, or the *madre*, who usually went ahead and led the bell mule. All the men rode well-trained horses, and both men and horses from Turley's rancho were sleek, well fed and contented, for the proprietor was known throughout the valley, and beyond, for his kindness, honesty and generosity; and he was repaid in kind, for his employees were faithful, loyal, and courageous in standing up for his rights and in defending his property. Yet the time was to come some years hence when his sterling qualities would be forgotten and he would lose his life at the hands of the inhabitants of the valley.

The *atejo* swiftly and dexterously packed, the two pairs of bloodthirsty looking Indian guards divided into advance and rear guard, the *madre* led the bell mule down the slope and up the trail leading over the low mountainous divide toward Ferdinand de Taos, the grunting mules following in orderly file.

The trail wandered around gorges and bowlders and among pine, cedar, and

dwarf oaks and through patches of service berries with their small, grapelike fruit, and crossed numerous small rivulets carrying off the water of the rainy season. Taos, as it was improperly called, lay twelve miles distant at the foot of the other side of the divide, and it was reached shortly after noon without a stop on the way. The "noonings" observed by the caravans were not allowed in an *atejo*, nor were the mules permitted to stop for even a moment while on the way, for if allowed a moment's rest they promptly would lie down, and in attempting to arise under their heavy loads were likely to strain their loins so badly as to render them forever unfit for work. To remove and replace the packs would take too much time. Because of the steady traveling the day's journey rarely exceeded five or six hours nor covered more than twelve to fifteen miles.

Taos reached, the packs were removed and covered by the *aparejos*, each pile kept separate. Turned out to graze with the bell mule, without picket rope or hobbles, the animals would not leave her and could be counted on, under ordinary circumstances, to be found near camp and all together.

Taos, a miserable village of adobes, and the largest town in the valley, had a population of a few American and Canadian trappers who had married Mexican or Indian women; poor and ignorant Mexicans of all grades except that of pure Spanish blood, and Indians of all grades except, perhaps, those of pure Indian blood. The mixed breed Indians had the more courage of the two, having descended from the Taosas, a tribe still inhabiting the near-by pueblo, whose warlike tendencies were almost entirely displayed in defensive warfare in the holding of their enormous, pyramidal, twin pueblos located on both sides of a clear little stream. In the earlier days marauding bands of Yutaws and an occasional war-party of Cheyennes or Arapahoes had learned at a terrible cost that the Pueblo de Taos was a nut far beyond their cracking, and from these expeditions into the rich and fertile valley but few returned.

Here was a good chance to test the worth of their disguises, for the three older plainsmen were well-known to some of the Americans and Canadians in the village, having been on long trips into the mountains with a few of them. And so, after the meal of *frijoles*, *atole* and jerked meat, the latter a great luxury to Mexicans of the grade of *arrieros*, Hank and his two Arapahoe companions left the little encampment and wandered curiously about the streets, to the edification of uneasy townsfolk, whose conjectures leaned toward the unpleasant. Ceran St. Vrain, on a visit to the town, passed them close by but did not recognize the men he had seen for days at a time at his trading post on the South Platte. Simonds, a hunter from Bent's Fort, passed within a foot of Hank and did not know him; yet

the two had spent a season together in the Middle Park, lying just across the mountain range west of Long's Peak.

Continuing on their way the next morning they camped in the open valley for the night, and the next day crossed a range of mountains. The next village was El Embudo, a miserable collection of mud huts at the end of a wretched trail. The Pueblo de San Juan and the squalid, poverty-stricken village of La Canada followed in turn. Everywhere they found hatred and ill-disguised fear of the Texans roaming beyond the Canadian. Next they reached the Pueblo de Ohuqui and here found snug accommodations for themselves and their animals in the little valley. From the pueblo the trail lay through an arroyo over another mountain and they camped part way down its southeast face with Santa Fe sprawled out below them.

Morning found them going down the sloping trail, the Indian escort surreptitiously examining their rifles, and in the evening they entered the collection of mud houses honored by the name of San Francisco de la Santa Fe, whose population of about three thousand souls was reputed to be the poorest in worldly wealth in the entire province of New Mexico; and, judging from the numbers of openly run gambling houses, rum shops and worse, the town might have deserved the reputation of being the poorest in morals and spiritual wealth.

Sprawled out under the side of the mountain, its mud houses of a single story, its barracks, *calabozo* and even the "palace" of the governor made of mud, with scarcely a pane of glass in the whole town; its narrow streets littered with garbage and rubbish; with more than two-thirds of its population barefooted and unkempt, a mixture of Spaniards and Indians for generations, in which blending the baser parts of their natures seemed singularly fitted to survive; with cringing, starving dogs everywhere; full of beggars, filthy and in most cases disgustingly diseased, with hands outstretched for alms, as ready to curse the tight of purse as to bless the generous, and both to no avail; with its domineering soldiery without a pair of shoes between them, its arrogant officers in shiny, nondescript uniforms and tarnished gilt, with huge swords and massive spurs, to lead the unshod mob of privates into cowardly retreat or leave them to be slaughtered by their Indian foes, whose lances and bows were superior in accuracy and execution to the ancient firelocks so often lacking in necessary parts; reputed to be founded on the ruins of a pueblo which had flourished centuries before the later "city" and no doubt was its superior in everything but shameless immorality. There, under Sante Fe mountain and the pure and almost cloudless blue sky, along the little mountain stream of the same name, lay Santa Fe, the capital of the department of

New Mexico, and the home of her vainglorious, pompous, good-looking, and brutal governor; Santa Fe, the greatest glass jewel in a crown of tin; Santa Fe, the customs gate and the disappointing end of a long, hard trail.

Through the even more filthy streets of the poverty-stricken outskirts of the town went the little *atejo*, disputing right-of-way in the narrow, porch-crowded thoroughfares with *hoja* (corn husk) sellers and huge burro loads of pine and cedar faggots gathered from the near-by mountain; past the square where the mud hovels of the soldiers lay; past a mud church whose tall spire seemed ever to be stretching away from the smells below; past odorous hog stys, crude mule corrals with their scarred and mutilated creatures, and sheep pens, and groups of avid cock-fighters; past open doors through which the halfbreed women, clothed in a simple garment hanging from the shoulders, could be seen cooking *frijoles* or the thin, watery *atole* and hovering around the flat stones which served for stoves; past these and worse plodded the *atejo*, the shrewd mules braying their delight at a hard journey almost ended. Sullen Indians, apologetic Mexicans, swaggering and too often drunken soldiers gave way to them, while a string of disputing, tail-tucking dogs followed at a distance, ever wary, ever ready to wheel and run.

Reaching the *Plaza Publica*, which was so bare of even a blade of grass or a solitary tree, and its ground so scored and beaten and covered with rubbish to suggest that it suffered the last stages of some earthly mange, they came to the real business section of the town, where nearly every shop was owned by foreigners. Around this public plaza stood the architectural triumphs of the city. There was the *palacio* of the governor, with its mud walls and its extended roof supported on rough pine columns to form a great porch; the custom-house, with its greedy, grafting officials; the mud barracks connected to the atrocious and much dreaded *calabozo*, whose inmates had abandoned hope as they crossed its threshold; the mud city hall, the military chapel, fast falling into ruin, and a few dwellings. The interest attending the passing of the *atejo* increased a little as the pack train crossed this square, for the Indian guards were conspicuous by their height and by the breadth of shoulder, and the excellence of their well-kept weapons. Strangers were drawing more critical attention these days, with the Texan threat hanging over the settlements along the Pecos and the Rio Grande. Peon women and Indian squaws regarded the four with apparent approval and as they left the square and plunged into the poorer section again, compliments and invitations reached their ears. Hopeless *mozos*, or ill-paid servants, most of them kept in actual slavery by debts they never could pay off because of the system of

accounting used against them, regarded the four enviously and yearned for their freedom.

Of the four Indians, a tall, strapping Delaware, stooping to be less conspicuous, whose face was the dirtiest in the *atejo*, suddenly stiffened and then forced himself to relax into his former lazy slouch. The rattle of an imported Dearborn, which at all times had to be watched closely to keep its metal parts from being stripped off and stolen, filled the street as the vehicle rocked along the ruts toward them, drawn by two good horses and driven by one Joseph Cooper, of St. Louis, Missouri. At his side sat his niece, looking with wondering and disapproving eyes about her, her pretty face improved by its coat of healthy tan, but marred somewhat by the look of worry it so plainly showed. She appeared sad and wistful, but at times her thoughts leaped far away and brought her fleeting smiles so soft, so tender, as to banish the look of worry and for an instant set a glory there.

Her glance took in the little pack train and its stalwart guards and passed carelessly over the bending Delaware, and then returned to linger on him while one might count five. Then he and the *atejo* passed from sight and she looked ahead again, unseeing, for her memory was racing along a wagon road, and became a blank in a frightful, all-night storm. At her sigh Uncle Joe glanced sidewise at her and took a firmer grip on his vile native cigar, and silently cursed the day she had left St. Louis.

"Load of wheat whiskey from th' rancho, I reckon," he said, and pulled sharply on the reins to keep from running over a hypnotized ring of cock-fighters. "How your paw can live all th' year 'round in this fester of a town is a puzzle to me. I'd rather be in a St. Louis jail. Cigar?" he sneered, yanking it from his mouth and regarding it with palpitant disgust. He savagely hurled it from him. "Hell!"

A tangle of arms and legs rolled out of a rum shop and fought impotently in the dust of the street, and sotted faces grinned down at them from the crowded door. A flaky-skinned beggar slouched from behind the corner of the building and held out an imploring hand, which the driver's contemptuous denial turned into a clenched fist afloat in a sea of Spanish maledictions.

The pack train having reached its destination, the two pairs of guards, clutching their "writin'" from Turley, departed in hot haste to claim their payment, and not long thereafter, rifleless, wandered about on foot to see the sights, gaping and curious. In the hand of each was a whiskey jug, the cynosure of all eyes. The

Plaza Publica seemed to fascinate them, for they spent most of their time there; and when they passed the guard house in the *palacio* they generously replied to the coaxing banter of the guard off watch, and went on again with lightened jugs. Here as elsewhere they sensed a poorly hidden feeling of unrest, and hid their smiles; somewhere north of Texas the *Tejanos* rode with vengeance in their hearts and certain death in their heretic rifles. No one knew how close they might be, or what moment they would storm into the town behind their deadly weapons. But the fear was largely apathetic, for these people, between the Apache and Comanche raids of year after year, had suckled fear from their mothers' breasts.

Finally, apprehensive of the attention they were receiving, the strange Indians left the plaza and sought refuge with the mules of the *atejo*, to remain there until after dark; and at their passing, groups of excited women or quarreling children resumed their gambling in the streets and all was serene again.

Gambling here was no fugitive evader of the law, no crime to be enjoyed in secret, but was an institution legalized and flourishing. There even was a public gaming house, where civil officers, traders, merchants, travelers, and the clergy grouped avidly around the *monte* tables and played at fever heat, momentarily beyond the reach of any other obsession. Regularly the governor and his wife graced the temple of chance with their august persons and held informal levees among the tables, making the place a Mecca for favor-seekers and sycophants, and a golden treasury for the "house." At this time, so soon after the arrival of two great caravans and the collection of so much impost, part of which stuck to every finger that handled it, the play ran high throughout the crowded room.

The round of festivities attending the arrival of the wagon trains were not yet stilled, and fandangoes nightly gave hilarity a safety valve. Great lumbering *carretas*, their wheels cut from solid sections of tree trunks and the whole vehicle devoid of even a single scrap of precious iron, shrieked and rattled through the dark streets, filled with shoddy cavaliers and dazzling women, whose dresses seemed planned to tempt the resolutions of a saint. *Rebosa* or lace *mantilla* over full, rounded, dark and satiny breasts; fans wielded with an inherited art, to coax and repel the victims of great and smouldering eyes of jet, which melted one moment to blaze the next—this was the magic segment of the clock's round. Now the eyesores of the squalid town were hidden from critical sight, and the alluring softness and mystery of an ancient Spanish city made one forget the almost unforgetable. Life and Death danced hand in hand; Love and Hate bowed and curtsied, and the mad green fires of Jealousy flickered or flared;

while the poverty and the sordid tragedies of the day gave place to tingling Romance in the feathery night. Violins and guitars caressed the darkness with throbbing strains, catching the breath, tingling the nerves and turning dull flesh to pulsing ecstasy.

To the fandango came a flower of a far-off French-American metropolis, strangely listless; and here felt her blood slowly transmute to wine and every nerve become a harp-string to make sad music for her soul.

Small wonder that Armijo stood speechless in the sight of such a one as she, and forgot to press his questioning as to four who had somewhere left that wagon train; small wonder that he gave no heed to men in the presence of this exotic flower not yet unfolded, in whose veins the French blood of the mother coursed with the Saxon of the father, and played strange and wondrous pranks in delicate features, vivacious eyes, and hidden whimsicalities now beginning to peek forth.

The coarse sensuality of the governor's face revealed his thoughts to all the room; his eyes never had known the need to mask the sheerness of their greedy passion, and in such a moment could not dissemble. What man like him, in his place and power, with his nature, would glance twice at a lazy, dirty Indian looking in through the open door, or know that the murder beast was tearing at its moral fetters in the Delaware's seething soul? Without again taking his burning eyes from the woman before him the governor tossed, by force of habit, a copper coin through the door, alms to a beggar to bring him luck from heaven to further his plans from hell. Nor did he know the magazine his contemptuous gift had set aflame, nor see the convulsive struggle between the Delaware and three other Indians. The guard laughed sneeringly at the fight they made, three to one, over a single piece of copper: Who was to know that they fought over a hollow piece of steel, charged twice times three with leaden death? Who was to read the desperation in that furious struggle, where a beast-man fought like a fiend against his closest friends? The struggling four reeled and stumbled from the house, leading away a fiery tempest and faded into the crooning night. That open door nearly had been an Open Door, indeed!

Within the room the vivacity died in the woman's eyes, the whimsicalities drew back in sudden panic at the beast look on the governor's face; the swing was gone from the strumming music, the rhythm from the swaying dance. At once the festive room was a pit of slime, the smiling faces but mocking masks, and the dark shadow of a vulture descended like a suffocating gas. Like a flash the wall dissolved to show a long, clean trail, winding from Yesterday into

Tomorrow; restful glades and creeks of shining sands, windswept prairies and a clear, blue sky; verdant glades and miles of flowers—and a tall, dark youth with smiling face, who worshiped reverently with tender eyes. She drew herself up as white streaks crossed her crimson cheeks like some darting rapier blade, and, bowing coldly to the pompous governor, stood rigidly erect and stared for a full half-minute into his astonished eyes, and made them fall. Deliberately and with unutterable scorn and loathing she turned from him to her father and her uncle, who forthwith shattered the absurd rules of pomp by showing him their broad backs and leaving at once. The room hushed as they walked toward the door, but no man stayed them, for on their faces there blazed the sign of Death.

Armijo, still staring after them, waved his hand and three men slipped out by another door, to follow and to learn what sanctuary that flower might choose. As he wheeled about and snapped a profane order the fiddlers and strummers stumbled into their stammering music; the dance went on again, with ragged rhythm, like an automaton out of gear.

Down the dark street rumbled the Dearborn, rocking perilously, the clatter of the running horses filling the narrow way with clamor. Sprinting at top speed behind it came barefoot soldiers: And then a human avalanche burst from a pitch dark passage-way. The Dearborn rocked on and turned a corner; the soldiers groped like blinded, half-stunned swimmers and as the secretive moments passed, they stumbled to their feet and staggered back again with garbled tales of prowling monsters, and crossed themselves continuously. About the time the frightened soldiers reached the house they had set out from, four Indians crept along an adobe wall and knocked a signal on the studded planks of a heavy, warehouse door. There came no creaking from its well-oiled hinges as it slowly opened, stopped, and swiftly shut again, and left the dark and smelly courtyard empty.

CHAPTER XIX

THE RENDEZVOUS

Enoch Birdsall stared in amazement at the four he had admitted, despite the remembrance of the names they had whispered through the crack of the partly opened door, the light from a single candle making gargoyles of their hideously painted faces. Alonzo Webb was peering along the barrel of a newfangled Colt, his eyes mere pin-points of concentration, his breathing nearly suspended.

Hank's low, throaty laughter filled the dim building and he slapped Tom on the shoulder. "Didn't I say I could fix us up so our own mothers wouldn't know us?" he demanded.

"God help us!" said Enoch in hopelessly inadequate accents as he groped behind him for his favorite cask. He seated himself with great deliberation. "When Turley's man Allbright brought aroun' yer rifles in a packload o' hay, I knowed we'd be seein' ye soon; an' he told us plain that four Injuns had left 'em with him. But; h—l!"

Alonzo had cautiously put away the Colt and was readjusting his facial expression to suit the changed conditions. Then he suddenly leaned back against a bale of tobacco leaf, jammed an arm tightly against his mouth, and laughed until he was limp.

Zeb Houghton glared at him in offended dignity, not knowing just what to say, but determined to say something. He felt embarrassed and slightly huffed. "Caravan have airy trouble arter we left it?" he asked.

"Trouble?" queried Enoch, a wise grin wreathing his face. "Some o' us made more profits this year than we ever did afore. Soon's we found thar warn't no custom guard ter meet us at Cold Spring, thanks ter them Texans, we sent some riders ahead from th' ford o' th' Canadian, an' Woodson held th' caravan thar in camp fer a couple o' days. Them greaser *rancheros* air half starved 'most all year 'round an' they jumped at th' chance ter earn some good U.S. gold. Some o' us had quite some visitors one night an' some o' th' waggins, ourn among 'em, shore strayed away from th' encampment an' got lost in th' hills. He had said somethin' 'bout not wantin' to waste so much time, an' o' takin' a short-cut; an' everybody

war so excited about bein' so clost ter Santer Fe, an' by this time used ter folks goin' on ahead, that we warn't hardly missed. Them that did miss us soon forgot it. We're ahead five hundred dollars a waggin, besides th' other imposts an' th' salve money; our waggins air waitin' fer us when we go back, an' our goods air comin' in from th' ranchos in *carretas* an' by pack mule, under hay, hoja an' faggots, an' other stuff. Thar's them two axles o' Joe Cooper's that he war so anxious about back at th' Grove an' at every stream we had ter cross. Thar empty now, but thar war plumb full o' high-class contraband when they got here. Woodson slung 'em under one o' his waggins that come through on th' reg'lar trail, an' brought 'em in. Over thar's what's left o' your stuff."

"Have you fellers looked in a glass yit?" demanded Alonzo, taking a mirror from the wall. "Hyar, Boyd, whichever ye air, see what ye look like."

The passing of the mirror and the candle was the cause of much hilarity, and the room was filled with subdued merriment until there came a peculiar knock on the massive door. The candle flame struggled under a box while voices murmured at the portal, and then there came a cautious shuffling of feet until the box was removed.

Joe Cooper's curious glance became a stare and his jaw dropped. Tearing his eyes from the faces of the villainous four he used them to ask a question of the grinning Enoch which his lips were incapable of framing.

Enoch looked at the four. "One o' ye, who knows who's who, interduce yer friends ter Mr. Cooper, o' St. Louis, Missoury," he suggested.

Hank shoved Jim Ogden a step forward. "This 'Rapahoe is Jim Ogden, o' Bent's Fort an' th' Rockies; this other un is Zeb Houghton, o' th' Louisiana Purchase, Mexico an' Texas; hyar's Tom Boyd, hopin' ter save his ear-tabs; an' I'm—" from his mouth sounded the twang of a bowstring.

Uncle Joe sank down on a pile of smuggled Mackinaw blankets, shoved a cigar in his mouth, lit it and took several puffs before he slammed it on the floor and crushed it with his foot. Then he recovered himself, joyously shook hands all around and started a conversation that scorned the flying minutes. During a lull Alonzo looked shrewdly at the cheerful Indians and put his thoughts into words.

"Boys, anythin' we've got is yourn fer th' askin'," he slowly said; "but I'd hate ter reckon it war through me an' Enoch that ye lost yer lives, an' yer ears. We all war clost friends in Independence an' on th' trail. Clost friends o' yourn air goin' ter

be watched like sin from now on. Tom Boyd an' his friends left th' caravan ter go ter Bent's—an' a passel o' greasers went arter 'em hot foot. Mebby th' first gang didn't git ter Bent's—an' it's shore th' greasers ain't showed up yit—not one o' them. Bad as Armijo is he ain't no fool by a danged sight. Fer yer own sakes ye better stay with Armstrong till ye leave th' city. Now that I've warned ye, I don't give a cuss what ye do; yer welcome ter stay hyar till yer bones rot—an' ye know it."

Tom nodded. "Yer right, Alonzo. I just got a brand new reason fer livin' till th' return caravan gits past th' Arkansas. Patience Cooper has *got* to go with it; she ain't a-goin' ter spend no winter hyar, if I kin help it—an' if she does stay, then I do, too, ears or no ears." His face tensed, his eyes gleaming with hatred through the paint and dirt. "I come nigh ter commitin' murder tonight. 'Twasn't my fault that I didn't."

Hank clapped him on the shoulder and turned to Uncle Joe. "We war all a-lookin' in at th' fandango," he explained. "It war a mighty clost shave fer th' sheep-stealin' shepherd o' Chavez rancho, that growed up ter be governor. If 'twarn't fer th' gal I'd never 'a' grabbed Boyd."

Uncle Joe shook his head. "There'll be trouble comin' out o' that," he declared. "We couldn't do nothin' else, but Armijo'll never rest till he wipes out th' insult o' our turnin' our backs on him an' leavin' like we did. An' did ye see th' look she gave him? D——d if it wasn't worth th' trip from Missouri to see it! Us Americans ain't loved a whole lot out here, an' them blessed Texans has gone an' made things worse. I wish we all were rollin' down to th' Crossin'. Patience is goin' back. I've argued *that* out, anyhow; right up to th' handle!"

"Get her out of town *now*," urged Tom, wriggling forward on his box. "Us four'll whisk her up to Bent's, an' jine ye at th' Crossin'."

"If we do that her father will have to leave, too," replied Uncle Joe; "an' he's stubborn as a mule, Adam is. He says it'll be forgotten, an' if we make a play like that it'll raise th' devil."

"When her safety is at stake?" sharply demanded Tom.

"He says she ain't in no danger. Him an' Armijo is real friendly. Adam is th' one man th' Americans in this town depend on ter git 'em a little justice. I've been arguin' with him tonight, an' I aim to keep on arguin'; but he's set. I know Adam."

Tom cursed and arose to his feet. "An' *I* know *Armijo*! I know his vile history like a book, for I took pains to learn it. His whole career is built on treachery, sheep-stealin', double-dealin' and assassination. He robbed Chavez of thousands of sheep—even stealing them and selling them back to their rightful owner. He sold one little flock back to Chavez over a dozen times, an' had stolen it from him in th' beginnin'. Then he dealt *monte* and made a pile. Then he was made chief custom house officer in this town, got caught at some of his tricks an' kicked out. Governor Perez put another man in his place. The condition of politics in Mexico worked in Armijo's favor and he stirred up a ferment, headed a conspiracy, raised a force of about a thousand Mexicans an' Pueblo Indians up at La Canada, and when Perez moved against him Perez's troops went over to Armijo and the old governor had to flee to this town, and out of it on th' jump. With him went a score or so of his personal friends; but the next day the little party was caught, more than a dozen of them put to death, an' Perez was murdered in the outskirts of this town and his body dragged around through the streets. Armijo had not shown his hand openly and the new governor was one of the active leaders of the insurrection. This did not suit Armijo, who was playing for big stakes, and he started another revolution, adopted Federalism for a cloak, drove the insurgent governor from the city, later shot him and, after declaring himself governor, had his appointment made official by the Federal government at Mexico City, and ever since has played tyrant without a check. That's Adam Cooper's so-called friend. That's the man he trusts. God help Adam; an' God help Armijo if he harms Patience Cooper!"

His friends nodded, for they knew that he spoke the truth; and Uncle Joe thoughtlessly lit another cigar before he remembered its make. "Adam's last cent is sunk out here," he remarked. "He says he ain't goin' to turn himself inter a pauper an' flee for his life just because his fool brother is a-scared of shadows. He says th' beast was drunk tonight an' didn't know what he was doin'."

Tom spread out his hands helplessly, and then clenched them. He paced a few turns and stopped again. "All right, Uncle Joe; he's her father and he's backin' his best judgment. I'm an outsider an' have nothin' to say. Boys," he said, looking at his three hunter friends, "we got work ter do. We got ter watch Patience Cooper every minute that she's out o' th' house. Thar's too much at stake fer us to rendezvous hyar, we'll stay at Armstrong's. Enoch, git our rifles over thar as soon as ye kin. I want another repeatin' pistol, in a leather case, to hang under my shirt, below my left arm-pit. Thank th' Lord that Turley's plantin' a relay fer us up in th' mountains; I'm bettin' we'll need it bad." He looked at Hank. "Bet it's

eighty mile to that place, ain't it?"

"Th' way we come it is," replied the hunter. "I know a straighter trail that ain't got so many people livin' along it. It's twenty mile shorter, but harder travelin'."

"If thar's anybody at Bent's ranch on th' Purgatoire, we might pick up a re-mount thar," muttered Tom. "That'd give us fresh hosses fer th' last ninety miles to th' fort; but we'll have ter cross th' wagon road ter git thar."

"We'll use that fer th' second bar'l," said Hank. "I know a better way, over an old Ute trail leadin' toward th' Bayou Salade; but we'll have hosses at Bent's ranch if I kin git word ter Holt, Carson or Bill Bent. We better go 'round an' see Armstrong right away; he may know o' somebody that's goin' up on th' trail through Raton Pass. He'll do anythin' fer me."

"Cover th' candle," said Tom. "Give us our rifles; we kin carry 'em all right at this time o' night, with everybody stayin' indoors on account o' th' Texans. Any time ye have news fer us, Enoch, an' can't git it ter Armstrong's, set a box outside th' door."

"It'll be stole," said Enoch, grinning.

"Then set somethin' else out."

"That'll be stole, too."

"What will?"

"Anythin' we put out."

"God help us!" ejaculated Uncle Joe. "Try a busted bottle."

"Glass?" laughed Alonzo, derisively. "No good. If you kin think o' anythin' that won't be stole, I shore want to larn o' it." He considered a moment. "Hyar! If I git flour on my elbow an' brush ag'in th' door, we got news fer ye. I don't think they kin steal that, not all o' it, anyhow!"

Enoch nodded. "If thar's any news we'll git it. This is th' meetin' place o' most o' th' Americans hyar. Thar banded purty clost together an' have made Armijo change his tune a couple o' times. Onct they war accused o' conspiracy ag'in th' government, which war a danged lie, an' th' scarecrow troops war ordered out ag'in 'em; but we put up such a fierce showin' that Armijo climbed down from his high hoss an' nothin' come o' it except hard feelin's. That's one o' th' reasons,

I reckon, why Adam Cooper ain't worryin' as much as he might about his dater's safety. An' lookin' at it from a reasonable standpoint, I'm figgerin' he's right. Boyd, hyar, would worry powerful if *she* got a splinter in her finger."

After the laughter had subsided and a little more talk the four plainsmen slipped out of the building and cautiously made their way to Armstrong's store and dwelling where, after a whispered palaver at the heavy door, they were admitted by the sleepy owner of the premises and shown where they could spread their blankets. In the faint light of the candle they saw other men lying about on the hard floor, who stirred, grumbled a little, and went back to sleep again.

When they awakened the next morning they recognized two old friends from Bent's Fort, a trader from St. Vrain's, and an American hunter and trapper from the Pueblo near the junction of the Arkansas and Boiling Spring Rivers. The simple breakfast was soon dispatched and gossip and news exchanged, and then Hank led aside a hunter named Hatcher, who stood high at Bent's Fort, and earnestly conversed with him. In a few moments Hank turned, looked reassuringly at Tom and smiled. Bent's little ranch on the Purgatoire was being worked and improved and there would be men and a relay of horses there, providing that the Utes overlooked the valley in the meantime.

All that day they remained indoors and when night came they slipped out, one by one, and drifted back to the corral where the *atejo* still remained. They had lost their rifles, were sullen and taciturn from too much drink, and paid no attention to the knowing grins of the friendly muleteers. Thenceforth they drew only glances of passing interest on the streets, no one giving a second thought to the stolid, dulled and sodden wrecks in their filthy, nondescript apparel; and the guard at the *palacio* gave them cigarettes rolled in corn husks for running errands, and found amusement in playing harmless tricks on them.

At the barracks they were less welcome, Don Jesu and Robideau, both subordinates of Salezar, scarcely tolerating them; while Salezar, himself, kicked them from in front of the door and threatened to cut off their ears if he caught them hanging around the building. They accepted the kicks as a matter of course and thenceforth shrunk from his approach; and he sneered as he thought of their degradation from once proud and vengeful warriors of free and warlike tribes, to fawning beggars with no backbone. But even he, when the need arose, made use of them to fetch and carry for him and to do menial tasks about the mud house he called his home. He had seen many of their kind and wasted no thought on them.

He was the same cruel and brutal tyrant who had herded almost two hundred half-starved and nearly exhausted men over that terrible trail down the valley of the Rio Grande, and his soldiers stood in mortal terror of him and meekly accepted treatment that in any other race would have swiftly resulted in his death. He had played a prominent part in the capture and herding of the Texan prisoners and loved to boast of it at every opportunity, using some of the incidents as threats to his unfortunate soldiers. Tom and his friends witnessed scenes that made their blood boil more than it boiled over the indignities they elected to suffer, and sometimes it was all they could do to refrain from killing him in his tracks. At the barracks he was a roaring lion, but at the *palacio*, in the sight and hearing of the chief jackal, he reminded them of a whipped cur.

CHAPTER XX

TOM RENEGES

As the days passed while waiting for the return of the caravan to Missouri, Patience rode abroad with either her uncle or her father, sometimes in the Dearborn, but more often in the saddle. She explored the ruins of the old church at Pecos, where the Texan prisoners had spent a miserable night; the squalid hamlets of San Miguel, which she had passed through on her way to Santa Fe, and Anton Chico had been visited; the miserable little sheep ranchos had been investigated and other rides had taken her to other outlying districts; but the one she loved best was the trail up over the mountain behind Santa Fe. The almost hidden pack mules and their towering loads of faggots, *hoja*, hay and other commodities were sights she never tired of, although the scars on some of the meek beasts once in awhile brought tears to her eyes. The muleteers, beneficiaries of her generosity, smiled when they saw her and touched their forelocks in friendly salutation.

On the mountain there was one spot of which she was especially fond. It was a little gully-like depression more than halfway up that seemed to be much greener than the rest of the mountain side, and always moist. The trees were taller and more heavily leafed And threw a shade which, with the coolness of the moist little nook, was most pleasant. It lay not far from the rutted, rough and busy trail over the mountain, which turned and passed below it, the *atejos* and occasional picturesque *caballeros* on their caparisoned horses, passing in review before her and close enough to be distinctly seen, yet far enough away to hide disillusioning details. The mud houses of the town at the foot of the long slope, with their flat roofs, looked much better at this distance and awakened trains of thought which nearness would have forbidden. It was also an ideal place to eat a lunch and she and Uncle Joe or her father made it their turning point.

Her daily rides had given her confidence, and the stares which first had followed her soon changed to glances of idle curiosity. Of Armijo she neither had seen nor heard anything more and scarcely gave him a thought, and the Mexican officers she met saluted politely or ignored her altogether. Her uncle still harped about Santa Fe being no place for her, but, having the assurance that she would return to St. Louis with the caravan, was too wise to press the matter. His efforts were

more strongly bent to get his brother to sell out and he had sounded Woodson to see if that trader would take over the merchandise. Adam Cooper seemed to consider closing out his business and returning to Missouri, but he would not sacrifice it, and there the matter hung, swaying first to one side and then to the other. By this time Santa Fe had palled on the American merchant and he had laid by sufficient capital to start in business in St. Louis or one of the frontier towns, and his brother was confident that if the stock could be disposed of for a reasonable sum that Adam would join the returning caravan.

It was in the storehouse of Webb and Birdsall one night, about a week before the wagons were being put in shape for the return trip that the matter was settled. Disturbing rumors were floating up from the south about a possible closing of the ports of entry of the Department of New Mexico, due to the dangers to Mexican traders on the long trail because of the presence of Texan raiding parties. The Texans had embittered the feelings of the Mexicans against the Americans, whom they knew to be universally in favor of the Lone Star Republic, and the Texan raids of this summer were taken as a forecast of greater and more determined raids for the following year.

When Adam and Joe Cooper joined the little group in the warehouse on this night, they met two Missourians who had just returned from Chihuahua with a train of eleven wagons. These traders, finding business so good in the far southern market, and having made arrangements with some Englishmen there, who were high in favor with the Federal authorities, were anxious to make another trip if they could load their wagons at a price that would make the journey worth while. They were certain that the next year would find the Mexican ports closed against the overland traffic, eager to clean up what they could before winter set in and to sell their outfits and return by water. They further declared that a tenseness was developing between the Federal government and the United States, carefully hidden at the present, which would make war between the two countries a matter of a short time. Texas was full of people who were urging annexation to the United States, and their numbers were rapidly growing; and when the Lone Star republic became a state in the American federation, war would inevitably follow. Some in the circle dissented wholly or in part, but all admitted that daily Mexico was growing more hostile to Americans.

"Wall, we ain't forcin' our opinions on nobody," said one of the Chihuahua traders. "We believe 'em ourselves, an' we want ter make another trip south. Adam, we've heard ye ain't settled in yer mind about stayin' through another

winter hyar. We'll give ye a chanct ter clear out; what ye got in goods, an' what ye want fer'em lock, stock an' bar'l?"

"What they cost us here in Santa Fe," said Uncle Joe quickly, determined to force the issue. "We just brought in more'n two wagon loads, an' what we had on hand will go a long way toward helpin' you fill your wagons. Come around tomorrow, look th' goods over, an' if they suit you, we'll add twelve cents a pound for th' freight charge across th' prairies an' close 'em out to you. Ain't that right, Adam?" he demanded so sharply and truculently that his brother almost surrendered at once. Seeing that they had an ally in Uncle Joe the traders pushed the matter and after a long, haggling discussion, they offered an additional five per cent of the purchase price for a quick decision.

Uncle Joe accepted it on the spot and nudged his brother, who grudgingly accepted the terms if the traders would buy the two great wagons and their teams. This they promised to do if they could find enough extra goods to fill them, and they soon left the warehouse for fear of showing their elation. They knew where they could sell the wagons at a profit with a little manipulation on the part of their English friend.

Elated by the outcome of his protracted arguments, Uncle Joe hurried around to Armstrong's store and told the news to Tom and his three friends.

"We can get them goods off our hands in two days," he exulted; "an' th' caravan will be ready to leave inside a week. Don't say a word to nobody, boys. We'll try to sneak Adam and Patience out of town so Armijo won't miss 'em till they're on th' trail. Them Chihuahua traders won't disturb th' goods before we start for home because they got to get a lot more to fill their wagons, an' th' merchandise is safer in th' store than it will be under canvas. I wish th' next week was past!"

To wish the transaction kept a secret and to keep it a secret were two different things. The Chihuahua traders found more merchants who felt that they would be much safer in Missouri than in Santa Fe, and the south-bound wagon train was stocked three days before time for the Missouri caravan to leave. There were certain customs regulations relating to goods going through to El Paso and beyond, certain involved and exacting forms to be obtained and filled out, much red tape to be cut with golden shears and many palms to be crossed with specie. Uncle Joe and his brother found that the matter of transferring their goods to the traders took longer than they expected and were busy in the store for several days, leaving Patience to make the most of the short time remaining of her stay

in the capital of the Department of New Mexico.

At last came the day when the eastbound caravan was all but ready to start, certain last minute needs arising that kept it in the camp outside the city until the following morning. Busily engaged in its organizing and in numerous personal matters, they told her to stay in the city. Uncle Joe and his brother could not accompany Patience on another ride up the mountain and they understood that she would not attempt one; but she changed her mind and left the town in the care and guidance of a Mexican employee of her father, in whom full trust was reposed. She rode out an hour earlier than was her wont, and when a Delaware Indian called at the house to beg alms from the generous señorita he found the building open and empty. Knowing that the last night was to be spent in the encampment and thinking that she had gone there, as he understood was the plan, he gave little thought to this and wandered back to the *Plaza Publica* to look for his companions. They were not in sight and he went over to the barracks to seek them there.

Don Jesu swaggered along the side of the building, caught sight of the disreputable Delaware and contemptuously waved him away. "Out of my sight, you drunken beggar and son of a beggar! If I catch you here once more I'll hang you by your thumbs! *Vamoose!*"

The Delaware stiffened a little and seemed reluctant to obey the command. "I seek my friends," he replied in a guttural polyglot. "I do no harm."

Don Jesu's face flamed and he drew his sword and brought the flat of the blade smartly across the Indian's shoulder. "But once more I tell you to *vamoose*! *Pronto!*" He drew back swiftly and threw the weapon into position for a thrust, for he had seen a look flare up in the Indian's eyes that warned him.

The Delaware cringed, muttered something and slunk back along the wall and as he reached the corner of the building he bumped solidly into Robideau, who at that moment turned it. The foot of the second officer could not travel far enough to deliver the full weight of the kick, but the impact was enough to send the Indian sprawling. As he clawed to hands and knees, Robideau stood over him, sword in hand, threats and curses pouring from him in a burning stream. The Indian paused a moment, got control over his rage, ran off a short distance on hands and knees and, leaping to his feet, dashed around the corner of the building to the hilarious and exultant jeers of the sycophantic soldiers. He barely escaped bumping into a huge, screeching and ungainly *carreta* being driven by a

soldier and escorted by a squad of his fellows under the personal command of Salezar. The lash of a whip fell across his shoulders and cut through blanket and shirt. The second blow was short and before another could be aimed at him, the Delaware had darted into a passage-way between two buildings.

The officer laughed loudly, nodded at the scowling driver and again felt of the canvas cover of the cart: "The city is full of vermin," he chuckled. "There's not much difference between Texans and Americans, and these sotted Indians. Tomorrow we will be well rid of many of the gringo dogs and we will attend to these strange Indians when this present business has been taken care of. But there is one gringo who will remain with us!" He laughed until he shook. "*Captain* Salezar today; *Colonel*, tomorrow; *quien sabe*?"

He looked at two of his soldiers, squat, powerful half-breeds, and laughed again. "Jose is a strong man. Manuel is a strong man. Perhaps tomorrow we will give each one of them two Indians and see which can flog the longest and the hardest; but," he warned, his face growing hard and cruel, "the man who bungles his work today will have no ears tomorrow!"

The Delaware, his right hand thrust into his shirt under the dirty blanket, crouched in the doorway and was making the fight of his life against the murderous rage surging through him. The words of the officer reached him well enough, but in his fury were unintelligible. Wild, mad plans for revenge were crowding through his mind, mixed and jumbled until they were nothing more than a mental kaleidoscope, and constantly thrown back by the frantic struggles of reason. He had nursed the thought of revenge, mile after mile, day after day, across the prairies and the desert; but for the last half month he had fought it back for the safety his freedom might give to the woman he loved.

The grotesque, ungainly cart rumbled and bumped, clacked and screeched down the street, farther and farther away and still he crouched in the doorway. The sounds died out, but still he remained in the sheltering niche. Finally his hand emerged from under the blanket and fell to his side, and a wretched Indian slouched down the street toward the *Plaza Publica*. In command of himself once more he shuffled over to the guard house in the *palacio* and leaned against the wall, the welt on his back burning him to the soul, as Armijo's herald stepped from the main door, blew his trumpet and announced the coming of the governor. Pedestrians stopped short and bowed as the swarthy tyrant stalked out to his horse, mounted and rode away, his small body-guard clattering after him. The Delaware, to hide the expression on his face, bowed lower and longer than

anyone and then slyly produced a plug of smuggled Kentucky tobacco and slipped it to the sergeant of the guard.

"They'll catch you yet, you thief of the North," warned the sergeant, shaking a finger at the stolid Indian. "And when they do you'll hang by the thumbs, or lose your ears." He grinned and shoved the plug into his pocket, not seeming to be frightened by becoming an accessory after the fact. "Our governor is in high spirits today, and our captain's face is like the mid-day sun. He is a devil with the women, is Armijo and his señora doesn't care a snap. Lucky man, the governor." He laughed and then looked curiously at his silent companion. "Where do you come from, and where do you go?"

The Delaware waved lazily toward the North. "Señor Bent. I return soon."

"Look to it that you do, or the *calabozo* will swallow you up in one mouthful. I hear much about the *palacio*." He shook his finger and his head, both earnestly.

The Delaware drew back slightly and glanced around. Drawing his blanket about him he turned and slouched away, leaving the plaza by the first street, and made his slinking and apologetic way to Armstrong's, there to wait until dark. His three friends were there already and were rubbing their pistols and rifles, elated that the morrow would find them on the trail again. The two Arapahoes planned to accompany the caravan as far as the Crossing of the Arkansas and there turn back toward Bent's Fort, following the northern branch of the trail along the north bank of the river.

"Better jine us, Tom," urged Jim Ogden. "You an' Hank an' us will stay at th' fort till frost comes, an' then outfit thar an' spend th' winter up in Middle Park."

"Or we kin work up 'long Green River an' winter in Hank's old place," suggested Zeb Houghton, rubbing his hands. "Thar'll be good company in Brown's Hole; an' mebby a scrimmage with th' thievin' Crows if we go up that way. Yer nose will be outer jint in th' Missouri settlements. I know a couple o' beaver streams that ain't been teched yit." He glanced shrewdly at the young man. "It's good otter an' mink country, too. We'll build a good home camp an' put up some lean-tos at th' fur end o' th' furtherest trap lines. Th' slopes o' th' little divides air thick with timber fer our marten traps, an' th' tops air bare. Fox sets up thar will git plenty o' pelts. I passed through it two year ago an' can't hardly wait ter git back ag'in. It's big enough fer th' hull four o' us."

"Thar's no money in beaver at a dollar a plew," commented Hank, watching his

partner out of the corner of his eye. "Time war when it war worth somethin', I tell ye; but them days air past—an' th' beaver, too, purty nigh. I remember one spring when I got five dollars a pound fer beaver from ol' Whiskey Larkin. Met him on th' headwaters o' th' Platte. He paid me that then an' thar, an' then had ter pack it all th' way ter Independence. But it's different with th' other skins, an' us four shore could have a fine winter together."

"It's allus excitin' ter me ter wait till th' pelts prime, settin' in a good camp with th' traps strung out, smokin' good terbaker an' eatin' good grub," said Ogden, reminiscently. "Then th' frosts set in, snow falls an' th' cold comes ter stay; an' we web it along th' lines settin' traps fer th' winter's work. By gosh! What ye say, Tom?"

Tom was studying the floor, vainly trying to find a way to please his friends and to follow the commands of an urging he could not resist. For him the mating call had come, and his whole nature responded to it with a power which would not be denied. On one hand called the old life, the old friends to whom he owed so much; a winter season with them in a good fur country, with perfect companionship and the work he loved so dearly; on the other the low, sweet voice of love, calling him to the One Woman and to trails untrod. The past was dead, living only in memory; the future stirred with life and was rich in promise. He sighed, slowly shook his head and looked up with moist eyes, glancing from one eager face to another.

"I'm goin' back ter Missoury," he said in a low voice. "Thar's a question I got ter ask, back thar, when th' danger's all behind an' it kin be asked fair. If th' answer is 'no' I promise ter jine ye at Bent's or foller after. Leave word fer me if ye go afore I git thar. But trappin' is on its last legs, an' th' money's slippin' out o' it, like fur from a pelt in th' spring; 'though I won't care a dang about that if I has ter turn my back on th' settlements." His eyes narrowed and his face grew hard. "Jest now I'm worryin' about somethin' else. Here I am in Santer Fe, passin' Armijo an' Salezar every day, an' have ter turn my back on one of th' big reasons fer comin' hyar. Thar's a new welt acrost my back that burns through th' flesh inter my soul like a livin' fire. Thar's an oath I swore on th' memory of a close friend who war beaten an' starved an' murdered; an' now I'm a lyin' dog, an' my spirit's turned ter water!" He leaped up and paced back and forth across the little room like a caged panther.

Hank cleared his throat, his painted face terrible to look upon. "Hell!" he growled, squirming on his box. "Them as know ye, Tom Boyd, know ye ain't

neither dog ner liar! Takes a good man ter stand what ye have, day arter day, feelin' like you do, an' keep from chokin' th' life outer him. We've all took his insults, swallered 'em whole without no salt; ye wouldn't say *all* o' us war dogs an' liars, would ye? Tell ye what; we've been purty clost, you an' me—suppose I slip back from th' Canadian an' git his ears fer ye? 'Twon't be no trouble, an' I won't be gone long. Reckon ye'd feel airy better then?"

Zeb moved forward on his cask. "That's you, Hank Marshall!" he exclaimed eagerly. "I'm with ye! He spit in my face two days ago, an' I want his ha'r. Good fer you, ol' beaver!"

For the next hour the argument waxed hot, one against three, and Armstrong had to come in and caution them twice. It was Jim Ogden who finally changed sides and settled the matter in Tom's favor.

"Hyar! We're nigh fightin' over a dog that ain't worth a cuss!" he exclaimed. "Mebby Tom will be comin' back ter Bent's afore winter sets in. Then we kin go ter Green River by th' way o' this town, stoppin' hyar a day ter git Salezar's ears. Won't do Tom no good if us boys git th' skunk. If ye don't close yer traps, cussed if I won't go out an' git him now, an' then hell shore will pop afore th' caravan gits away. Ain't ye got no sense, ye bloodthirsty Injuns?"

CHAPTER XXI

THE KIDNAPPING

Patience and her Mexican escort rode out of the town along the trail to Taos Valley, the road leading up the mountain and past her favorite retreat. She could not resist the cool of the morning hours and the temptation to pay one more visit to the little niche in the mountain side. The few farewell calls that she had to make could wait until the afternoon. They were duties rather than pleasures and the shorter she could make them the better she would like it. She passed the mud houses of the soldiers and soon left the city behind. At intervals on the wretched road she met and smiled at the friendly muleteers and gave small coins to the toddling Mexican and Indian children before the wretched hovels scattered along the way. Well before noon she reached the little nook and unpacked the lunch she had brought along. Sharing it with her humble escort, who stubbornly insisted on taking his portion to one side and eating by himself, she spread her own lunch under her favorite tree and leisurely enjoyed it as she watched the mules passing below her along the trail. This last view of the distant town and the mountain trail enchanted her and time slipped by with furtive speed. Far down on the road, if it could be called such, bumped and slid a huge *carreta* covered with a soiled canvas cover, its driver laboring with his four-mule team. The four had all they could do to draw the massive cart along the rough trail and she smiled as she wondered how many mules it would take to pull the heavy vehicle if it were well loaded. She tried to picture it with the toiling caravan, and laughed aloud at the absurdity.

While she idly watched the *carreta* and the little *atejo* passing it in the direction of the city, a flash far down the trail caught her eye and she made out a group of mounted soldiers trotting after an officer, whose scabbard dully flashed as it jerked and bobbed about. The *carreta* was more than half way up the slope, seeming every moment to be threatened with destruction by the shaking it was receiving, when the soldiers overtook and passed it. When the squad reached the short section of the trail immediately below her it met an *atejo* of a dozen heavily-laden mules and the arrogant officer waved his sword and ordered them off the trail. Mules are deliberate and take their own good time, and they also have a natural reluctance to forsake a known and comparatively easy trail to climb over rocks under the towering packs. Their owners tried to lead them

aside, although there was plenty of room for the troops to pass, but the little beasts were stubborn and stuck to the trail.

Impatiently waiting for perhaps a full minute that his conceit might be pampered, the officer drew his sword again and peremptorily ordered the trail cleared for his passing. The muleteers did their best, but it was not good enough for the puffed-up captain, and he spurred his horse against a faggot-burdened animal. The load swayed and then toppled, forcing the little burro to its knees and then over on its side, the tight girth gripping it as in a vise. The owner of the animal stepped quickly forward, a black scowl on his face. At his first word of protest the officer struck him on the head with the flat of the blade and broke into a torrent of curses and threats. The muleteer staggered back against a huge bowlder and bowed his head, his arms hanging limply at his sides. The officer considered a moment, laughed contemptuously and rode on, his rag-tag, wooden-faced squad following him closely.

As the soldiers passed from his sight around a bend in the trail the muleteer leaned forward, hand on the knife in his belt, and stared malevolently at the rocks on the bend; and then hastened to help his two companions unpack the load of faggots and let the mule arise. The little animal did not get up. Both its front legs were broken by the rocky crevice into which they had been forced. The unfortunate Pueblo Indian knelt swiftly at the side of the little beast and passed his hands along the slender legs. He shook his head sorrowfully and stroked the burro's flank. Suddenly leaping to his feet, knife in hand, he took two quick steps along the trail, but yielded to his clinging and frightened friends and dejectedly walked back to the suffering animal. For a moment he stood above it and then, changing his grip on the knife, leaned quickly over.

Patience had seen the whole tragedy and her eyes were brimming with tears. As the muleteer bent forward she turned away, sobbing. The throaty muttering of her guide brought him back to her mind and she called him to her.

"Sanchez!" she exclaimed, taking a purse from her bosom. "Take this money to him. It will buy him another burro."

The Mexican's teeth flashed like pearls and he nodded eagerly. In a moment he was clambering down the rocky mountain side and reached the trail as the noisy *carreta* lumbered past the waiting *atejo*. He need not have hastened, for each mule had seized upon the stop as a valuable moment for resting and was lying down under its load. Here was work for the angry muleteers, for every animal

must be unloaded, kicked to its feet and loaded anew.

Sanchez slid down the last rocky wall, flung up his arms and showed the two gold pieces, making a flamboyant speech as he alternately faced the wondering muleteer and turned to bow to the slender figure outlined against the somber greens of the mountain nook. Handing over the money, he slapped the Indian's shoulder, whirled swiftly and clambered back the way he had come.

The Indian seemed dazed at his unexpected good fortune, staring at the money in his hand. He glanced up toward the mountain niche, raised a hand to his forelock, and then pushed swiftly back from his eager, curious, crowding friends. They talked together at top speed and for the moment forgot all about the mules they had so laboriously re-packed; and when they looked behind them they found they had their work to do over again. Again the fortunate muleteer looked up, his hand slowly rising to repeat his thanks; and became a statue in bronze. He saw the ragged troops seize his benefactress and leap for the guide. Sanchez was no coward and he knew what loyalty meant and demanded. He fought like a wild beast until the crash of a pistol in the hands of the officer sent him staggering on bending legs, back, back, back. Reaching the edge of the niche he toppled backward, his quivering arms behind him to break his fall; and plunged and rolled down the rocky slope until stopped by a stunted tree, where he hung like a bag of meal.

Patience's strength, multiplied by terror, availed her nothing and soon, bound, gagged and wrapped up in blankets, she was carried to the trail and placed in the *carreta* which, its canvas cover again tightly drawn, quickly began its jolting way down the trail. As it and its escort passed the *atejo*, now being re-packed, the officer scowled about him for a sight of the impudent muleteer, but could not see him.

Salezar stopped his horse: "Where is that Pueblo dog?" he demanded.

"He is so frightened he is running all the way home," answered a muleteer. "He has left us to do his work for him! Are we slaves that we must serve him? Wait till we see him, Señor Capitan! Just you wait!" He looked at his companion, who nodded sourly. "Always he is like that, Señor Capitan."

Salezar questioned them closely about what they had seen, and found that they had been so busy with the accursed mules that they had had no time for anything else.

"See that you speak the truth!" he threatened. "There is a gringo woman missing from Santa Fe and we are seeking her. Her gringo friends are enemies of the Governor, and those who help them also are his enemies. Then you have not seen this woman?"

"The more gringos that are missing the louder we will sing. We have not seen her, Señor Capitan. We will take care that we do not see her."

"Did you hear any shooting, then?"

"If I did it would be that frightened Pablo, shooting at his shadow. He is like that, Pablo is."

"Listen well!" warned Salezar, his beady eyes aglint. "There are two kinds of men who do not speak; the wise ones, and the ones who have no tongues!" He made a significant gesture in front of his mouth, glared down at the two muleteers and, wheeling, dashed down the trail to overtake the *carreta*, where he gloated aloud that his prisoner might hear, and know where she was going, and why.

The two Pueblos listened until the hoofbeats sounded well down the trail and then scrambled up the mountain side like goats, reaching the little nook as Pablo dragged the seriously wounded Mexican over the edge. They worked over him quickly, silently, listening to his broken, infrequent mutterings and after bandaging him as best they could they put him on a blanket and carried him to the trail and along it until they reached an Indian hovel, where they left him in care of a squaw. Returning to the *atejo* they had to repack every mule, but they worked feverishly and the work was soon done and the little train plodded on down the trail. At the foot of the mountain Pablo said something to his companions, left the trail and soon was lost to their sight.

Meanwhile the *carreta*, after a journey which was a torture, mentally and physically, to its helpless occupant, reached the town and rumbled up to Salezar's house, scraped through the narrow roadway between the house and the building next door and stopped in the windowless, high-walled courtyard. Three soldiers quickly carried a blanket-swathed burden into the house while the others loafed around the entrance to the driveway to guard against spying eyes. In a few moments the captain came out, briskly rubbing his hands, gave a curt order regarding alertness and rode away in the direction of the *palacio*, already a colonel in his stimulated imagination. This had been a great day in the fortunes of Captain Salezar and he was eager for his reward.

The sentry at the door of the *palacio* saluted, told him that he was waited for and urgently wanted, and then stood at attention. Salezar stroked his chin, chuckled, and swaggered through the portal. Ten minutes later he emerged, walking on air and impatient for the coming of darkness, when his task soon would be finished and his promotion assured.

And while the captain paced the floor of his quarters at the barracks and dreamed dreams, an honest, courageous, and loyal Mexican was fighting against death in a little hovel on the mountain side; and a Pueblo Indian, stimulated by a queer and jumbled mixture of rage, gratitude, revenge, and pity, was making his slow way, with infinite caution, through the cover north of town. Sanchez in his babbling had mentioned the caravan, a gringo name, and the urgent need for a warning to be carried. Salezar's name the Pueblo already knew far too well, and hated as he hated nothing else on earth. The mud-walled *pueblos* of the Valley of Taos were regarded by Salezar as rabbit-warrens full of women, provided by Providence that his hunting might be good.

CHAPTER XXII

"LOS TEJANOS!"

The encampment of the returning caravan was in a little pasture well outside the town and it was the scene of bustling activity. Its personnel was different from either of the two trains from the Missouri frontier, for it was made up of traders and travelers from both of the earlier, west-bound caravans. Some of the first and second wagon trains had gone on to El Paso and Chihuahua, a handful of venturesome travelers were to try for the Pacific coast, and others of the first two trains had elected to remain in the New Mexican capital. While in the two west-bound caravans there had been many Mexicans, their number now was negligible. But this returning train was larger than either of the other two, carried much less freight, a large amount of specie, and would drive a large herd of mules across the prairies for sale in the Missouri settlements, which would fan the fires of Indian avarice all along the trail.

Uncle Joe and his brother had been busy all day doing their own work, catching up odds and ends of their Santa Fe connections, and helping friends get ready for the long trip, and they had not given much thought to Patience, whom they believed to be saying her farewells to friends she had made in the city. As the afternoon passed and she and her escort had not appeared, Uncle Joe became a little uneasy; and as the shadows began to reach farther and farther from the wagons he mounted his horse and rode back to Santa Fe to find and join her. It was nearly dark when he galloped back to the encampment and sought his brother, hoping that Patience had made her way to the wagons while he had sought for her in town. He knew that she had not called on any of her friends and that she must have stolen a last ride through the environs of the town. The two men were frankly frightened and hurriedly made the rounds of the wagons and then started for the city. It was dark by then and as they rode by the last camp-fire of the encampment, four villainous Indians loomed up in the light of the little blaze and Uncle Joe recognized them instantly. He drew up quickly.

"Have you seen Patience?" he cried, an agony of fear in his voice. "We can't find her anywhere!"

The Indians motioned for him to go on and they followed him and his brother.

When a few score paces from the fire they stopped and consulted, hungrily fingering the locks of their heavy rifles. While they were sketching a plan a Pueblo Indian, following the trail to the camp like a speeding shadow, came up to them and blurted out his fragmentary tale in a mixture of Spanish and Indian.

"Salezar stole white woman on mountain. Put her in *carreta* and went back to Santa Fe. Tell these people, that her friends will know. Salezar, the son of a pig, stole her on the mountain." He burst into a torrent of words unintelligible and open and shut his hands as he raved.

Finally in reply to their hot, close questioning he told all he knew, his answers interspersed with stark curses for Salezar and pity and anxiety for the angel señorita. His words bore the undeniable stamp of sincerity, fitted in with what the anxious group feared, and he was triply bound by the gold pieces crowded into his hands. After another conference, not pointless now, a plan was hurriedly agreed upon and the several parts well studied. The Pueblo was given a commission and loaned a horse, and after repeating what he was to do, shot away into the darkness. Uncle Joe and his brother grudgingly accepted their parts, after Tom had shown them they could help in no other way, and turned back into the encampment, where their hot and eager efforts met with prompt help from their closest friends. Alonzo Webb and Enoch Birdsall, mounted, led four horses out of the west side of the camp and melted into the darkness; several hundred yards from the wagons they turned the led horses over to four maddened Indians and followed them through the night, to enter Santa Fe from the south. Not far behind them a cavalcade rode along the same route, grim and silent. At the little corral where the *atejo* had put up the Indians got the horses which Turley had loaned them, shook hands with the two traders and listened as the caravan's horses were led off toward the camp.

Armstrong answered the knocks on his door and admitted the Delaware, listened in amazement to the brief, tense statement of fact, strongly endorsed Tom's plans, and eagerly accepted his own part. His caller slipped out, the door closed, and the sounds of walking horses faded out down the street. A few moments later, Armstrong, rifle in hand, slipped out of the house and ran southward.

Captain Salezar, sitting at ease in his adobe house, poured himself another drink of *aguardiente* and rolled another corn-husk cigarette. Lighting it from the candle he fell to pacing to and fro across the small room. As the raw, potent liquor stimulated his imagination he began to bow to imaginary persons, give orders to officers, and to introduce himself as Colonel Salezar. From the barracks

across the corner of the square an occasional burst of laughter rang out, but these were becoming more infrequent and less loud. He heard the grounding gun-butt of the sentry outside his door as the soldier paused before wheeling to retrace his steps over the beat.

The sentry paced along the narrow driveway and stopped at the outer corner of the house to cast an envious glance across at the barracks where he knew that his friends were engaged in a furtive game of *monte*, which had started before he had gone on duty not a quarter of an hour before. He turned slowly to pace back again and then suddenly threw up his arms as his world became black. His falling firelock was caught as it left his hands, and soon lay at the side of its gagged and trussed owner in the blackness along the base of a driveway wall. Two figures slipped toward the courtyard to the rear of the house and one of them, taking the rifle of his companion, stopped at the corner of the wall at the driveway. The other slipped to the door, gently tried the latch and opened it, one hand hidden beneath the folds of a dirty blanket. The door swung silently open and shut and the intruder cast a swift glance around the room.

Captain Salezar grinned into the cracked mirror hanging on the wall, stiffened to attention, and saluted the image in the glass.

"Colonel Salezar's orders, sir," he declaimed and then, staring with unbelieving eyes at the apparition pushing out onto the mirror, crossed himself, whirled and drew his sword almost in one motion.

The Delaware cringed and pulled at a lock of hair straggling down past his eyes and held out a folded paper, swiftly placing a finger on his lips.

"*Por le Capitan despues le Gobernador*," he whispered. "*Pronto!*"

The captain's anger and suspicion at so unceremonious an entry slowly faded, but he did not lower the sword. The Delaware slid forward, abject and fearful, his eyes riveted on the clumsy blade, the paper held out at arm's length. "*Por le Capitan*," he muttered. "*Pronto!*"

"You son of swine!" growled Salezar. "You scum! Is this the way you enter an officer's house? How did you pass the sentry? A score of lashes on both your backs will teach you manners and him his duty. Give me that message and stand aside till I call the guard!"

"*Perdón, Capitan! Perdón, perdón!*" begged the Delaware. "*Le Gobernador*—"

his hands streaked out, one gripping the sword wrist of the captain, the other fastening inexorably on the greasy, swarthy throat well up under the chin. As the grips clamped down the Delaware's knee rose and smashed into the Mexican's stomach. The sword clattered against a wall and the two men fell and rolled and thrashed across the floor.

"Where *is* she?" grated the Indian as he writhed and rolled, now underneath and now uppermost. "Where *is* she, you murdering dog?"

They smashed against the flimsy table and overturned it, candle, liquor and all. The candle flickered out and the struggle went on in the darkness.

"Where *is* she, Salezar? Yore in th' hands of a *Texan*, you taker of ears! Where *is* she?"

Salezar was no weakling and although he had no more real courage than a rat, like a rat he was cornered and fighting for his life; but Captain Salezar had lived well and lazily, as his pampered body was now showing evidence. Try as he might he could not escape those steel-like fingers for more than a moment. With desperate strength he broke their hold time and again as he writhed and bridged and rolled, clawed and bit; but they clamped back again as often. His shouts for help were choked gasps and the strength he had put forth in the beginning of the struggle was waning.

The table was now a wreck and they rolled in and over the débris. Salezar made use of his great spurs at every chance and his opponent's clothing was ripped and torn to shreds wet with blood. His fingers searched for his enemy's eyes and missed them, but left their marks on the painted face. They rolled against one wall and then back to the other; they slammed again at the door and back into the wreckage of the table.

"Where *is* she?" panted the Delaware. "Tell me, Salezar, *where is she*?"

The captain wriggled desperately and almost gained the top, and thought he sensed a weakened opposition. "Where she will remain!" he choked. "Mistress of the *palacio*—until he tires—of her. You—cursed *Tejano* dog!" He drove a spur at his enemy's side, missed, and it became entangled in the rags.

The Delaware, blind with fury, smashed his knee into the soft abdomen and snarled at the answering gasp of pain. "Remember th' prisoners? Near Valencia —Ernest died in the—night. You cut off his ears—and threw his body in a—

ditch!" He got the throat hold again in spite of nails and teeth, blows and spurs. "McAllister was shot because he—could not walk. You stole his clothes—cut off his ears and left—his body at th' side of th'—road for the wolves!" He felt the spurs graze his leg and he threw it across the body of the Mexican. "Golpin was shot—other side of Dead Man's Lake. You took—*his* ears *too*!" He hauled and tugged and managed to roll his enemy onto his other leg. "On th' Dead Man's Journey—Griffin's brains were knocked out with a—gun butt. *His* ears were cut off, *too*!" Hooking his feet together he clamped his powerful thighs in a viselike grip on his enemy. "Gates died in a wagon near—El Paso, of starvation, sickness—an' fright. You got *his*—ears!"

"As—I'll get—*yours*!" hoarsely moaned Salezar, again missing with the spurs. "The señorita will be happy—in Armijo's arms. After that—the soldiers—can have her!"

The Delaware loosened his leg grip, jerked them up toward the captain's stomach as he hauled his victim down toward them, and clamped them tight again over the soft stomach.

"Yore lies stick—in yore throat—Salezar!" he panted. "An' those murders cry—to heaven; but you'll only—hear th' echoes ringin' through hell—for all eternity. *You* called th' roll of th' livin'—on that damnable march; *I*'m—callin' th' roll of th' *dead*! Yore name comes last! There's many a Texan would give his—chance of heaven to change places—with me, *now*!" He raised his head in the darkness. "Oh, Ernest, old pardner; I'm payin' yore debt, *in full*!"

The spurs stabbed in vain, for the Delaware was now well above their flaying range; the nails scoring his face were growing feeble. He shifted the leg hold again and managed to imprison one of Salezar's arms in their grip. Lifting himself from the hips, he released the throat hold and grabbed the Mexican's other arm, thrust it under him and fell back on it as his two hands, free now to work their worst, leaped back under the swarthy chin. The relentless thumbs pressed up and in.

The Blackfoot on guard at the end of the driveway thought he heard the door open and close, but there was no doubt about the labored breathing which wheezed along the dark wall. Stumbling steps faltered and dragged and then the Delaware bumped into him and held to him for a moment.

"Git th' hosses, Hank!" came a mumbled command.

"Thar with Jim an' Zeb," whispered the hunter in surprise. "How'd ye get so wet? Is that blood?"

"Spurred me—I'll be all right—soon's I git breath. He—fought like a—fiend."

"Git his ears?" eagerly demanded the Blackfoot.

"Thar's been ears enough took—already. Come on; *she's* in th' *palacio*—with *Armijo*!"

"Jest what we figgered, *damn him*!" growled the Blackfoot, leading the way.

In the stable at the rear of the courtyard a decrepit dog, white with age, had barked feebly when its breath permitted, while the fight had raged in the house. The Blackfoot had considered stopping the wheezy warnings, but they did not have power enough to lure him from his watch. He had accepted the lesser of the two evils and remained on guard. As the two Indians crept from the courtyard the aged animal burst into a paroxysm of barking, which exhausted it. To those who knew the captain's dog, its barking long since had lost all meaning, for, as the soldiers said, it barked over nothing. They did not know that the animal dreamed day and night of the days of its youth and strength and now, in its dotage, in imagination was living over again stirring incidents of hunts and fights long past. Gradually it recovered its strength from sounding its barked warnings in vain, and pantingly sniffed the air. Its actions became frantic and the decrepit old dog struggled to its feet, swaying on its feeble legs, its grizzled muzzle pointing toward its master's house. The composite body odor it had known for so many years had changed, and ceased abruptly. Whining and whimpering, the dog searched the air currents, but in vain; the scent came no more. Then, sinking back on its haunches, it raised its gray nose to the sky and poured out its grief in one long, quavering howl of surprising volume.

The sleeping square sprang to life, superstitious terror dominated the barracks. Lights gleamed suddenly and the barracks door opened slowly, grudgingly as frightened soldiers hurriedly crossed themselves. Don Jesu and Robideau pushed hesitatingly to the portal and peered fearsomely into the night. They suddenly cried out, drew their ancient pistols, and fired at two vague figures slinking hurriedly along the side of the house opposite. From the darkness there came quick replies. A coruscating poniard of spiteful flame stabbed into the night. Don Jesu whirled on buckling legs and pitched sidewise to the street. A second stab of sparky flame split the darkness and Robideau reeled back into the arms of his panicky soldiers. As the heavy reports rolled through the town they seemed to be

a signal, for on the southern outskirts of Santa Fe gun after gun crashed in a rippling, spasmodic volley. A few stragglers in the all but deserted streets raised a dreaded cry and fled to the nearest shelter. The cry was taken up and sent rioting through the city; doors were doubly barred and the soldiers in the barracks, safer behind the thick mud walls than they would be out in the dark open against such an enemy, slammed shut the ponderous door and frantically built barricades of everything movable.

"*Los Tejanos!*" rolled the panicky cries. "*Los Tejanos! Los Tejanos!*"

The wailing warning of the coming of a plague could not have held more terror. Gone were the vaunted boastings and the sneers; gone was the swaggering bravado of the dashing *caballeros*, who had said what they would do to any Texan force that dared to brave the wrath of the defenders of San Francisco de la Santa Fe. Gone was all faith, never too sincere, in ancient *escopeta* and rusty blunderbuss, now that the occasion was close at hand to measure them against the devil weapons of hardy Texan fighting men, of the breed that had stood off, bloody day after bloody day, four thousand Mexican regulars before a little adobe church, now glorified for all the ages yet to come. To panicky minds came magic words of evil portent; the Alamo and San Jacinto. To evil consciences, bowed with guilt, came burning memories of that sick and starved Texan band that had walked through winter days and shivered through winter nights from Santa Fe to the capital, two thousand miles of suffering, and every step a torture. Texan ears had swung from a piece of rusty wire to feed the cruel conceit of a swarthy tyrant.

"*Los Tejanos! Los Tejanos! Los Tejanos!*"

At the *palacio* a human brute recoiled before a barred door between him and a desperate captive, his honeyed cajolings turning to acid on his lying tongue. No longer did he hear the measured tread of the palace guards, who secretly exulted as they fled and left him defenseless.

"*Los Tejanos! Los Tejanos! Los Tejanos!*"

He dashed through a door to grab his weapons and flee, and in through the open, undefended portal from the square leaped a blood-covered Delaware, an epic of rags and rage, a man so maddened that all thought of weapons save Nature's, had gone from his burning brain. Behind him leaped a Blackfoot, dynamic and deadly as a panther, a Colt pistol in one eager, upraised hand, in the other the cold length of a keen skinning knife. Behind them from a wagon deserted in the

square came the sharp crashes of Hawken and Colt, and a shouted battlecry: "Remember th' Alamo! Remember th' Alamo! Texans to th' fore!"

As the Delaware dashed past an open door he caught a flurry of movement, the flare of a pistol and his laughter pealed out in one mad shout as he stopped like a cat and leaped in through the opening. Another flash, another roar, and a burning welt across a shoulder spurred the bloody Nemesis to a greater speed. The wavering sword he knocked aside and near two hundred pounds of fighting, mountain sinew hurled itself behind a driving fist. The hurtling bulk of Armijo crashed against a wall and dropped like a bag of grain as the plunging Delaware whirled to pounce upon it. As he turned, a scream rang out somewhere behind him, through the door he had just entered, a scream vibrant with desperate hope, and he bellowed a triumphant answer. Here was his mission; Armijo was a side issue. The governor, helpless before him, was forgotten and the Delaware whirled through the door bellowing one name over and over again. "Patience! Patience! *Patience!*"

"*Los Tejanos! Los Tejanos!*" came from the public square.

"*Los Tejanos! Los Tejanos!*" quavered the despairing echo throughout the quaking town, while from the south there came the steady crash of alien rifles, firing harmlessly into the air.

Before him a Blackfoot methodically battered at a door, taking a few quick steps backward and a plunging dive forward. The Delaware shouted again and added the power of his driving weight. There came a splintering crash and the door went in. The Blackfoot whirled and darted to the great portal leading to the square, bouncing on the balls of his feet like a cougar expecting danger at every point. The Delaware scrambled to his feet and gathered a whitefaced woman in his arms, crushing her to his bloody chest. He felt her go suddenly limp and, throwing her across a bare and bleeding shoulder, he drew a Colt repeating pistol and sprang after his Indian ally, not feeling the weight of his precious burden.

Lurid, stabbing rapiers of fire still sprang from the wagon barricade, making death certain to any man who opened the barracks' door. Between their heavy roars the woodwork of the wagon smacked sharply in time to bursts of fire from the barracks' few windows. The Delaware darted from the *palacio* door and held close to the wall, hidden by the portico and the darkness. As he reached the end of the column-supported roof the Blackfoot bulked out of the night on his horse, and leading four others. The lost-soul call of a loon sounded and changed the

deadly wagon into a vehicle of peace and quiet as its Arapahoe defenders slipped away from it. The sudden creaking of saddle leather was followed by the rolling thunder of flying hoofs as the first three horses left the square. A moment's pause and then two more horses galloped through the darkness after the others, the Arapahoe rear guard sitting almost sidewise in their saddles, their long, hot rifles pointing backward to send hotter greetings to whoever might follow.

They raced like gambling fools through the dark night, the Blackfoot leading the way with the instinct of a homing bird. Mile after mile strung out behind them, pastures, gullies, knolls rolling past. While they climbed and dipped and circled they gradually sensed a steady rising of the ground. Suddenly the Blackfoot shouted for them to halt, and the laboring horses welcomed the moment's breathing space. The guide threw himself on the ground and pressed his ear against it. In a moment he was back in the saddle and gave the word to go on again. He had heard no sounds of pursuit and he chuckled as he leaned over close to the Delaware who rode at his flank.

"Nothin' stirrin' behind us, fur's I could make out," he said. "They can only track us by sound in th' dark, at any speed, an' I'm gamblin' they wait fer daylight. Thar scared ter stick thar noses out o' doors *this* night. How's yore gal?"

Tom's rumbling reply could mean anything and they kept on through the night without further words. The trail had been growing steadily rougher and steeper and the horses were permitted to fall into a swinging lope. Another hour passed and then Hank signalled for a stop. From his lips whistled the crowded, hurried, repeated call of a whip-poor-will. Three times the insistent demand rang out, clear and piercing. At the count of ten an echoing whistle sounded and a light flickered on the trail ahead.

"J'get her?" bawled a voice, tremulous with fear and anxiety, and only a breath ahead of another.

"Hell yes!" roared Hank. "Got Salezar, Don Jesu and Robideau, too; only we left *them* behind—with thar ears!"

In another moment Uncle Joe and Adam Cooper took the precious burden from the Delaware's numbed arms, someone uncovered the lighted candle lantern, and saddles were thrown on fresh mounts. The Pueblo pushed forward and peered into Patience's face, and his own face broke into smiles. His torrent of mixed Spanish and Indian brought a grin to Hank's painted countenance.

"This hyar shore is good beaver," he chuckled, clapping the Pueblo on the shoulder, "but thar's more good news fer *you*." He put his mouth close to the Pueblo's ear and whispered: "Yer friend Salezar will be leadin' a percession ter th' buryin' ground. That Delaware thar killed him with his bare hands!"

The Pueblo touched Tom's arm, his hand passing down it caressingly, to be seized in a grip which made him wince; and when Adam Cooper offered him a handful of gold coins the Indian drew himself up proudly and pushed them away.

"For his friends Pablo do what he can," he said in Spanish. "I now take these horses back on the trail to make a puzzle in the sand that will take time to read. Pablo does not forget. *Adios!*" He vaulted onto his horse, took the lead ropes of the tired mounts, and was lost in the darkness, eager to weave a pattern of hoof marks to mock pursuing eyes.

The little cavalcade pushed on, following a trail that wound along the sides of the mountains, passing many places where a handful of resolute men could check scores. The cold mountain air bit shrewdly, and occasional gusts of wind blustered along the timbered slopes and set the pines and cedars whispering. Higher and higher went the narrow trail, skirting sheer walls of rock on one side, and dizzy precipices on the other; higher and higher plodded the little caravan in single file, following the unhesitant leader.

There came a leaden glow high up on the right. It paled swiftly as a streak of silver flared up behind the jagged crests of the mountains, here and there caught by a snow mantle to gleam in virgin white. On the left lay abysmal darkness, like a lake of ink, and slowly out of it pushed ranks of treetops as the dawn rolled downward and the mountain fogs dissolved in dew. Deep canons, sheer precipices; long streaks on mountain sides where resistless avalanches had scraped all greenery from the glistening rock; green amphitheaters, fit for fairy pageants; velvety knolls and jewels of mountain pastures lay below them, with here and there the crystal gleam of ribbon-like mountain brooks, their waters embarked on a long, depressing journey through capricious oceans of billowy sands and the salty leagues of desert wastes. Birds flashed among the branches, chipmunks chattered furiously at these unheeding invaders of their mountain fastness; high up on a beetling crag a bighorn ram was silhouetted in rigid majesty, and over all lazily drifted an eagle against the paling western sky, symbolical of freedom.

There came the musical tinkle of falling water and Hank stopped, raising his

hand. Into the little mountain dell the caravan wound and in a moment muscles tired and cramped from long, hard riding found relief in a score of little duties. While the animals were relieved of saddles and packs and securely picketed, and a fire made of dry wood from a bleached windfall, Hank climbed swiftly up the mountain side for a view of the back trail. Perched on an out-thrust finger of rock high above the dell he knelt motionless, searching with keen and critical eyes every yard of that windswept trail, following it along its sloping length until it shrunk into a hair line across the frowning mountain sides and then faded out entirely. Below him grotesque figures moved about like gnomes performing incantations around a tiny blaze; dwarfed horses cropped the plentiful grass and succulent leaves, and a timid streamer of pale blue smoke arose like a plumb line until the cruising gusts above the treetops tore it into feathery wisps and carried it away. Across the valley the rising sun pushed golden floods of light into crevices, among the rocks, and turned the pines and cedars into glistening cones of green on stems of jet.

"Wall," said a voice below him, "hyar I am. Go down an' feed. See anythin'?"

Hank leaned over and looked down at the climbing figure, whose laborious progress sent a noisy stream of clicking pebbles behind him like sparks from a rocket.

"Nothin' I ain't plumb glad ter see," replied Hank. "This hyar beats th' settlements all ter hell." As Jim's horrible face peered over the edge of the rock balcony Hank eyed it critically and shook his head. "I've seen some plumb awful lookin' 'Rapahoes; but nothin' ter stack up ag'in you. Vermillion mebby is yer favorite color, but it don't improve yer looks a hull lot. Neither does that sorrel juice. How's th' gal?"

"Full o' spunk an' gittin' chipper as a squirrel," answered Jim. "Who's goin' ter git th' blame fer last night's fandango?"

"Four murderin' Injuns, a-plunderin' an' a-kidnappin'," chuckled Hank. "Woodson's goin' ter raise hell about th' hull Cooper fambly bein' stole. Armijo'll keep his mouth shet an' pass th' crime along ter us, an' make a great show o' gittin' us; but," he winked knowingly at his accomplice in the night's activities, "chasin' four desperite Injuns along an open trail, whar his sojers kin spread out an' take advantage o' thar bein' twenty ter one is *one* thing; chasin' 'em along a trail like this, whar they has ter ride Injun fashion, is a hull lot diff'rent. They've had thar bellies full o' chasin' along Injun trails in th' mountings. Th' Apaches,

Utes, an' Comanches has showed 'em it don't pay. Thar's sharpshooters that can't be got at; thar's rollin' rocks, an' ambushes; an' chasin' murderin' Injuns afoot up mounting sides ain't did in this part o' th' country."

"Meanin' we won't be chased?" demanded Jim, incredulously.

"Not meanin' nothin' o' th' kind," growled Hank, spitting into three hundred feet of void. "We killed some of th' military aristo-crazy, as Tom calls 'em, didn't we? We made fools outer th' whole prairie-dog town, didn't we? An' what's worse, we stole th' gal that Armijo war sweet on, an' Tom knocked *him* end over end—oh, Jim, ye should 'a' seen that! Six feet o' greaser gov'ner a-turnin' a cartwheel in his own house! *Chase* us? Hell, yes!"

The Arapahoe rubbed his chin. "Fust ye say one thing, then ye say another. What ye mean, Ol' Buffaler?"

"I'm bettin' thar's a greaser army a-poundin' along th' wagon road fer Raton Pass," replied Hank, spitting again with great gusto. "We're a Delaware from Bent's, a Blackfoot from th' Upper Missoury, an' two ugly 'Rapahoes from 'tother side o' St. Vrains, ain't we? Wall, if ye know a fox's den ye needn't foller him along th' ridges." He chuckled again. "We're goin' another way over some Ute trails I knows of."

"But s'posin' they foller us along this trail?"

Hank looked speculatively back along the narrow pathway, with its numerous bends, and then glanced pityingly at his anxious friend. "I jest told ye why they won't; an' if they do, *let* 'em!"

Ogden looked steadily southward along the trail and suddenly laughed: "Yes; *let* 'em!"

In the great courtyard of Bent's Fort one evening more than a week later, three trappers sat with their backs against the brass cannon that scowled at the heavy doors. They were planning their winter's trip in the mountains, figuring out the supplies and paraphernalia for a party of four, when Hank, glancing up, saw two people slowly walking along the high, wide parapet on the side toward the Arkansas. He raised an arm, pointing, and his companions, following it with

their eyes, saw the two figures suddenly become like one against the moonlit sky.

Hank sighed, bit his lip, and looked down.

"Better figger on a party o' three," he said.

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