

The Great Sioux Trail

A Story of Mountain and Plain

Joseph A. Altsheler



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THE GREAT SIOUX TRAIL

A STORY OF MOUNTAIN AND PLAIN

BY

JOSEPH A. ALTSHELER

**AUTHOR OF
"THE RULERS OF THE LAKES,"
"THE SHADOW OF THE NORTH," ETC.**

Publisher's Mark

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CHARLES L. WRENN**

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THE GREAT SIOUX TRAIL

By **JOSEPH A. ALTSHELER**

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[A stroke of a great paw...](#)

A stroke of a great paw and the rifle was dashed from the hands of the old chief. [PAGE 288.][ToList](#)



FOREWORD

"The Great Sioux Trail" is the first of a group of romances concerned with the opening of the Great West just after the Civil War, and having a solid historical basis. They will be connected by the presence of leading characters in all the volumes, but every one will be in itself a complete story.



CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I THE SIOUX WARNING	1
II THE NARROW ESCAPE	25
III THE LITTLE GIANT	53
IV THE FLIGHT	84
V THE WHITE DOME	111
VI THE OUTLAW	134
VII THE BEAVER HUNTER	157
VIII THE MOUNTAIN RAM	177
IX THE BUFFALO MARCH	199
X THE WAR CLUB'S FALL	229
XI THE YOUNG SLAVE	246
XII THE CAPTIVE'S RISE	266
XIII THE REWARD OF MERIT	290
XIV THE DREADFUL NIGHT	315

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

A stroke of a great paw and the rifle was dashed from the hands of the old chief	<i>Frontispiece</i>
	FACING PAGE
The rifle sprang to his shoulder, a jet of flame leaped from the muzzle	48
The body of a warrior shot downward, striking on the ledges	190
"If he ever looks upon a white face again it will be the face of one who is a friend of the Sioux"	256



THE GREAT SIOUX TRAIL



CHAPTER I

THE SIOUX WARNING

The scene cast a singular spell, uncanny and exciting, over young Clarke. The sweep of plains on one side, and on the other the dim outline of mountains behind which a blood-red sun was sinking, gave it a setting at once majestic and full of menace. The horizon, as the twilight spread over its whole surface, suggested the wilderness, the unknown and many dangers.

The drama passing before his eyes deepened and intensified his feeling that he was surrounded by the unusual. The fire burned low, the creeping dusk reached the edge of the thin forest to the right, and soon, with the dying of the flames, it would envelop the figures of both Sioux and soldiers. Will's gaze had roved from one to another, but now it remained fixed upon the chief, who was speaking with all the fire, passion and eloquence so often characteristic of the great Indian leaders. He was too far away to hear the words, as only the officers of the troop were allowed at the conference, but he knew they were heavy with import, and the pulses in his temples beat hard and fast.

"Who is the Indian chief?" he said to Boyd, the scout and hunter, who stood by his side. "He seems to be a man."

"He is," replied Boyd with emphasis. "He's a man, and a great man, too. That's Red Cloud, the war chief of the Ogalala Sioux, Mahpeyalute, they call him in their language, one of the bravest warriors that ever lived, and a thinker, as well. If he'd been born white he'd be governor of a big state by this time, and later on he might become president of 'em all."

"I've heard of him. He's one of our most dangerous enemies."

"So he is, Will. It's because he thinks we're going to spread over the Sioux country—in which he's right—and not because he hates us as men. I've known him in more peaceful times, and we've done each other good turns, but under that black hair of his beats a brain that can look far ahead and plan. He means to close to us the main trail through the Sioux country, and the Sioux range running halfway across the continent, and halfway from Canada to Mexico. Mountain and plain alike are theirs."

"I can't keep from having a certain sympathy with him, Jim. It's but natural

that they should want to keep the forests and the great buffalo ranges."

"I share their feelings, too, though white I am, and to the white people I belong. I hate to think of the continent ploughed into fields everywhere, and with a house always in sight. Anyhow, it won't happen in my time, because in the west here there are so many mountains and the Sioux and Cheyennes are so warlike that the plough will have a hard time getting in."

"And the country is so vast, too. But watch Red Cloud. He points to the west! Now he drops his hand, doubles his fist and stretches his arm across the way. What does it mean, Jim?"

"It's a gesture telling Captain Kenyon that the road is barred to soldiers, settlers, hunters, all of us. Far to the south we may still follow the gold trails to California, but here at the edge of this mighty wilderness we must turn back. The nations of the Dakota, whom we call the Sioux, have said so."

Mahpeyalute lowered his arm, which he had thrust as a barrier across the way, but his fist remained clenched, and raising it he shook it again. The sun had sunk over the dim mountains in the north and the burning red there was fading. All the thin forest was clothed now in dusk, and the figure of the chief himself grew dimmer. Yet the twilight enlarged him and lent to him new aspects of power and menace. As he made his gesture of defiance, young Clarke, despite his courage, felt the blood grow chill in his veins. It seemed at the moment in this dark wilderness that the great Indian leader had the power to make good his threats and close the way forever to the white race.

The other Indians, ten in number, stood with their arms folded, and they neither stirred nor spoke. But they listened with supreme attention to every word of their redoubtable champion, the great Mahpeyalute. Will knew that the Sioux were subdivided into nations or tribes, and he surmised that the silent ones were their leaders, although he knew well enough that Red Cloud was an Ogalala, and that the Ogalalas were merely one of the Tetons who, federated with the others, made up the mighty Sioux nation. But the chief, by the force of courage and intellect, had raised himself from a minor place to the very headship.

Red Cloud was about fifty years old, and, while at times he wore the white man's apparel, at least in part, he was now clothed wholly in Indian attire. A blanket of dark red was looped about his shoulders, and he carried it with as much grace as a Roman patrician ever wore the toga. His leggings and moccasins of fine tanned deerskin were decorated beautifully with beads, and a magnificent war bonnet of feathers, colored brilliantly, surmounted his thick,

black hair.

He was truly a leader of wild and barbaric splendor in surroundings that fitted him. But it was not his tall, powerful figure nor his dress that held Will's gaze. It was his strong face, fierce, proud and menacing, like the sculptured relief of some old Assyrian king, and in very truth, with high cheek bones and broad brow, he might have been the reincarnation of some old Asiatic conqueror.

The young officer seemed nervous and doubtful. He switched the tops of his riding boots with a small whip, and then looked into the fierce eyes of the chief, as if to see that he really meant what he said. Kenyon was fresh from the battlefields of the great civil war, where he had been mentioned specially in orders more than once for courage and intelligence, but here he felt himself in the presence of an alarming puzzle. His mission was to be both diplomat and warrior. He was not sure where the duties of diplomat ceased and those of warrior began.

Meanwhile his protagonist, the Indian chief, had no doubt at all about his own intentions and was stating them with a clearness that could not be mistaken. Captain Kenyon continued to switch his boot uneasily and to take a nervous step back and forth, his figure outlined against the fire. Young Clarke felt a certain sympathy for him, placed without experience in a situation so delicate and so full of peril.

The Ogalala stopped talking and looked straight at the officer, standing erect and waiting, as if he expected a quick answer, and only the kind of answer, too, that he wished. Meanwhile there was silence, save for an occasional crackle of burning wood.

Both young Clarke and the hunter, Boyd, felt with all the intensity of conviction that it was a moment charged with fate. The white people had come from the Atlantic to the great plains, but the mighty Sioux nation now barred the way to the whole Northwest, it was not a barrier to be passed easily. Will, as he said, understood, too, the feelings of Mahpeyalute. Had he been an Ogalala like the chief he would have felt as the Ogalala felt. Yet, whatever happened, he and Boyd meant to go on, because they had a mission that was calling them all the time.

The Captain at last said a few words, and Red Cloud, who had been motionless while he waited, took from under his blanket a pipe with a long curved stem. Will was surprised. He knew something of Indian custom, but he had not thought that the fierce Ogalala chief would propose to smoke a pipe of

peace at a time like the present. Nor was any such thought in the mind of Red Cloud. Instead, he suddenly struck the stem of the pipe across the trunk of a sapling, breaking it in two, and as the bowl fell upon the ground he put his foot upon it, shattering it. Then, raising his hand in a salute to Captain Kenyon, he turned upon his heel and walked away, all the other Indians following him without a word. At the edge of the thin forest they mounted their ponies and rode out of sight in the darkness.

Captain Kenyon stood by the fire, gazing thoughtfully into the dying coals, while the troopers, directed by the sergeants, were spreading the blankets for the night. Toward the north, where the foothills showed dimly, a wolf howled. The lone, sinister note seemed to arouse the officer, who gave some orders to the men and then turned to meet the hunter and the lad.

"I've no doubt you surmised what the Indian meant," he said to Boyd.

"I fancy he was telling you all the trails through the Northwest were closed to the white people," said the hunter.

"Yes, that was it, and his warning applied to hunters, scouts and gold-seekers as well as settlers. He told me that the Sioux would not have their hunting grounds invaded, and the buffalo herds on which they live destroyed."

"What he told you, Captain, is in the heart of every warrior of their nation. The Northern Cheyennes, a numerous and warlike tribe, feel the same way, also. The army detachments are too few and too scattered to hold back the white people, and a great and terrible war is coming."

"At least," said Captain Kenyon, "I must do my duty as far as I may. I can't permit you and your young friend, Mr. Clarke, to go into the Sioux country. The Indian chief, Red Cloud, showed himself to be a fierce and resolute man and you would soon lose your lives."

Will's face fell, but the hunter merely shrugged his great shoulders.

"But you'll permit us to pass the night in your camp, Captain?" he said.

"Of course. Gladly. You're welcome to what we have. I'd not drive anybody away from company and fire."

"We thank you, Captain Kenyon," said Will warmly. "It's a genuine pleasure to us to be the guests of the army when we're surrounded by such a wilderness."

Their horses were tethered nearby with those of the troop, and securing their blankets from their packs they spread them on dead leaves near the fire.

"You'll take breakfast with us in the morning," said Captain Kenyon hospitably, "and then I'll decide which way to go, and what task we're to undertake. I wish you'd join us as scout, hunter and guide, Mr. Boyd. We need wisdom like yours, and Mr. Clarke could help us, too."

"I've been independent too long," replied the hunter lightly. "I've wandered mountain and plain so many years at my own free will that I couldn't let myself be bound now by military rules. But I thank you for the compliment, just the same, Captain Kenyon."

He and Will Clarke lay down side by side with their feet to the fire, their blankets folded about them rather closely, as the air, when the night advanced and the coals died completely, was sure to grow cold. Will was troubled, as he was extremely anxious to go on at once, but he reflected that Jim Boyd was one of the greatest of all frontiersmen and he would be almost sure to find a way. Summoning his will, he dismissed anxiety from his mind and lay quite still, seeking sleep.

The camp was now quiet and the fire was sinking rapidly. Sentinels walked on every side, but Will could not see them from where he lay. A light wind blowing down from the mountains moaned through the thin forest. Clouds came up from the west, blotting out the horizon and making the sky a curving dome of blackness. Young William Clarke felt that it was good to have comrades in the immense desolation, and it strengthened his spirit to see the soldiers rolled in their blankets, their feet to the dying coals.

Yet his trouble about the future came back. He and Boyd were in truth and reality prisoners. Captain Kenyon was friendly and kind, but he would not let them go on, because the Sioux and Cheyennes had barred all the trails and the formidable Red Cloud had given a warning that could not be ignored. Making another effort, he dismissed the thought a second time and just as the last coals were fading into the common blackness he fell asleep.

He was awakened late in the night by a hand pushing gently but insistently against his shoulder. He was about to sit up abruptly, but the voice of Boyd whispered in his ear:

"Be very careful! Make no noise! Release yourself from your blanket and then do what I say!"

The hand fell away from his shoulder, and, moving his head a little, Clarke looked carefully over the camp. The coals where the fire had been were cold and dead, and no light shone there. The figures of the sleeping soldiers were dim in

the dusk, but evidently they slept soundly, as not one of them stirred. He heard the regular breathing of those nearest to him, and the light step of the sentinel just beyond a clump of dwarf pines.

"Sit up now," whispered Boyd, "and when the sentinel passes a little farther away we'll creep from the camp. Be sure you don't step on a stick or trip over anything. Keep close behind me. The night's as black as pitch, and it's our one chance to escape from friends who are too hospitable."

Will saw the hunter slowly rise to a stooping position, and he did likewise. Then when the sound of the sentinel's step was lost at the far end of his beat, Boyd walked swiftly away from the camp and Will followed on his trail. The lad glanced back once, and saw that the dim figures by the dead fire did not stir. Weary and with the soothing wind blowing over them, they slept heavily. It was evident that the two who would go their own way had nothing to fear from them. There was now no bar to their departure, save the unhappy chance of being seen by the sentinel.

A rod from the camp and Boyd lay flat upon the ground, Will, without the need of instruction, imitating him at once. The sentinel was coming back, but like his commander he was a soldier of the civil war, used to open battlefields, and he did not see the two shadows in the dusk. He reached the end of his beat and turning went back again, disappearing once more beyond the stunted pines.

"Now's our time," whispered Boyd, and rising he walked away swiftly but silently, Will close behind him. Three hundred yards, and they stopped by the trunk of a mountain oak.

"We're clear of the soldiers now," said the hunter, "but we must have our horses. Without 'em and the supplies they carry we'd be lost. I don't mean anything against you, Will. You're a likely lad and you learn as fast as the best of 'em, but it's for me to cut out the horses and bring 'em here. Do you think you can wait patiently at this place till I come with 'em?"

"No, Jim, I can't wait patiently, but I can wait impatiently. I'll make myself keep still."

"That's good enough. On occasion I can be as good a horse thief as the best Sioux or Crow or Cheyenne that ever lived, only it's our own horses that I'm going to steal. They've a guard, of course, but I'll slip past him. Now use all your patience, Will."

"I will," said the lad, as he leaned against the trunk of the oak. Then he

became suddenly aware that he no longer either saw or heard Boyd. The hunter had vanished as completely and as silently as if he had melted into the air, but Will knew that he was going toward the thin forest, where the horses grazed or rested at the end of their lariats.

All at once he felt terribly alone. He heard nothing now but the moaning of the wind that came down from the far mountains. The camp was gone, Boyd was gone, the horses were invisible, and he was the only human being in the gigantic and unknown Northwest. The air felt distinctly colder and he shivered a little. It was not fear, it was merely the feeling that he was cut off from the race like a shipwrecked sailor on a desert island. He took himself metaphorically by the shoulders and gave his body a good shake. Boyd would be coming back soon with the horses, and then he would have the best of comradeship.

But the hunter was a long time in returning, a half hour that seemed to Will a full two hours, but at last, when he had almost given him up, he heard a tread approaching. He had experience enough to know that the sound was made by hoofs, and that Boyd was successful. He realized now, so great was his confidence in the hunter's skill, that failure had not entered his mind.

The sound came nearer, and it was made by more than one horse. Then the figure of the hunter appeared in the darkness and behind him came four horses, the two that they rode, and the extra animals for the packs.

"Splendidly done!" exclaimed the lad. "But I knew you could do it!"

"It was about as delicate a job as I ever handled," said Boyd, with a certain amount of pride in his tone, "but by waiting until I had a good chance I was able to cut 'em out. It was patience that did it. I tell you, lad, patience is about the greatest quality a man can have. It's the best of all winners."

"I suppose that's the reason, Jim, it's so hard to exercise it at times. Although I had nothing to do and took none of the risk, it seemed to me you were gone several hours."

Boyd laughed a little.

"It proves what I told you," he said, "but we want to get away from here as quick as we can now. You lead two of the horses, I'll lead the other two, and we won't mount for a while yet. I don't think they can hear us at the camp, but we won't give 'em a chance to do so if we can help it."

He trod a course straight into the west, the ground, fortunately, being soft and the hoofs of the horses making but little sound. Although the darkness hung as

thick and close as ever, the skillful woodsman found the way instinctively, and neither stumbled nor trod upon the fallen brushwood. Young Clarke, just behind him, followed in his tracks, also stepping lightly and he knew enough not to ask any questions, confident that Boyd would take them wherever they wished to go.

It was a full two hours before the hunter stopped and then they stood on a low hill covered but thinly with the dwarfed trees of that region. The night was lightening a little, a pallid moon and sparse stars creeping out in the heavens. By the faint light young Clarke saw only a wild and rugged country, low hills about them and in the north the blur that he knew to be mountains.

"We can stand up straight now and talk in our natural voices," said Boyd, in a clear, full tone, "and right glad I am, too. I hate to steal away from friends, as if you were running from the law. That Captain Kenyon is a fine fellow, though he and his men don't know much about this wild country."

"Isn't this about the same direction that Red Cloud and his warriors took?" asked Will.

"Not far from it, but we won't run into 'em. They're miles and miles ahead. There's a big Sioux village two or three days' journey farther on, and it's a certainty that their ponies are headed straight for it."

"And we won't keep going for the same village?"

The big hunter laughed infectiously.

"Not if we know what is good for us," he replied, "and we think we do. Our trail leads far to the north of the Sioux town, and, when we start again, we'll make an abrupt change in our course. There's enough moonlight now for you to see the face of your watch, and tell me the time, Will."

"Half-past one, Jim."

"And four or five hours until morning. We'll move on again. There's a chance that some pursuing soldier might find us here, one chance in a thousand, so to speak, but slim as it is it is well to guard against it. Mount your horse. There's no reason now why we shouldn't ride."

Will sprang gladly into the saddle, leading his pack-animal by the lariat, and once more followed Boyd, who rode down the hill into a wide and shallow valley, containing a scattered forest of good growth. Boyd's horse raised his head suddenly and neighed.

"What does that mean?" asked Will, startled. "Sioux?"

"No," replied the hunter. "I know this good and faithful brute so well that he and I can almost talk together. I've learned the meaning of every neigh he utters and the one you have just heard indicates that he has smelled water. In this part of the world water is something that you must have on your mind most of the time, and his announcement is welcome."

"If there's a stream, do we camp by it?"

"We certainly do. We won't turn aside from the luck that fortune puts in our way. We're absolutely safe from the soldiers now. They can't trail us in the night, and we've come many miles."

They descended a long slope and came into the valley, finding the grass there abundant, and, flowing down the centre, a fine brook of clear cold water, from which horses and horsemen drank eagerly. Then they unsaddled and prepared for rest and food.

"Is there no danger here from the Sioux?" asked Will.

"I think not," replied the hunter. "I've failed to find a pony track, and I'm quite sure I saw a buck among the trees over there. If the Indians had passed this way there would have been no deer to meet our eyes, and you and I, Will, my lad, will take without fear the rest we need so much."

"I see that the brook widens and deepens into a pool a little farther on, and as I'm caked with dust and dirt I think I'll take a bath."

"Go ahead. I've never heard that a man was less brave or less enduring because he liked to keep clean. You'll feel a lot better when it's done."

Will took off his clothes and sprang into the pool which had a fine, sandy bottom. The chill at once struck into his marrow. He had not dreamed that it was so cold. The hunter laughed when he saw him shivering.

"That water comes down from the high mountains," he said, "and a few degrees more of cold would turn it into ice. But splash, Will! Splash! and you'll feel fine!"

Young Clarke obeyed and leaped and splashed with great energy, until his circulation grew vigorous and warm. When he emerged upon the bank his whole body was glowing and he felt a wonderful exhilaration, both physical and mental. He ran up and down the bank until he was dry, and then resumed his clothing.

"You look so happy now that I'll try it myself," said Boyd, and he was soon in

the water, puffing and blowing like a big boy. When he had resumed his deerskins it was almost day. A faint line of silver showed in the east, and above them the sky was gray with the coming dawn.

"I'll light a little fire and make coffee," said Boyd, "but the rest of the breakfast must be cold. Still, a cup of coffee on a chill morning puts life into a man."

Will, with the zeal characteristic of him, was already gathering dead brushwood, and Boyd soon boiled the grateful brown liquid, of which they drank not one cup but two each, helping out the breakfast with crackers and strips of dried beef. Then the pot and the cups were returned to the packs and the hunter carefully put out the fire.

"It's a good thing we loaded those horses well," he said, "because we'll need everything we have. Now you roll up in your blanket, Will, and get the rest of your sleep."

"And you feel sure there is no danger? I don't want to leave all the responsibility to you. I'd like to do what I can."

"Don't bother yourself about it. The range of the Sioux is farther west mostly, and it's not likely we could find a better place than this for our own little private camp."

The coming of a bright, crisp day removed from Will the feeling of desolation that the wilderness had created in his mind. Apprehension and loneliness disappeared with the blackness of the night. He was with one of the best scouts and hunters in the West, and the sun was rising upon a valley of uncommon beauty. All about him the trees grew tall and large, without undergrowth, the effect being that of a great park, with grass thick and green, upon which the horses were grazing in deep content. The waters of the brook sang a little song as they hurried over the gravel, and the note of everything was so strongly of peace that the lad, wearied by their flight and mental strain, fell asleep in a few minutes.

It was full noon when he awoke, and, somewhat ashamed of himself, he sprang up, ready to apologize, but the hunter waved a deprecatory hand.

"You didn't rest too long," said Boyd. "You needed it. As for me, I'm seasoned and hard, adapted by years of practice to the life I lead. It's nothing to me to pass a night without sleep, and to catch up later on. While you were lying there in your blanket I scouted the valley thoroughly, leaving the horses to watch over

you. It's about two miles long and a mile broad. At the lower end the brook flows into a narrow chasm."

"What did you find in the valley itself, Jim?"

"Track of bear, deer, wolf and panther, but no sign of human being, white or red. It's certain that we're the only people in it, but if we need game we can find it. It's a good sign, showing that this part of the country has not been hunted over by the Indians."

"Before long we'll have to replenish our food supply with game."

"Yes, that's certain. We want to draw as little on our flour and coffee as we can. We can do without 'em, but when you don't have 'em you miss 'em terribly."

The stores had been heaped at the foot of a tree, while the pack horses, selected for their size and strength, nibbled at the rich grass. Will contemplated the little mound of supplies with much satisfaction. They had not started upon the path of peril without due preparation.

Each carried a breech-loading, repeating rifle of the very latest make, a weapon yet but little known on the border. In the packs were two more rifles of the same kind, two double-barreled, breech-loading shotguns, thousands of cartridges, several revolvers, two strong axes, medicines, extra blankets, and, in truth, everything needed by a little army of two on the march. Boyd, a man of vast experience in the wilderness, had selected the outfit and he was proud of its completeness.

"Don't you think, Jim," said young Clarke, "that you might take a little sleep this afternoon? You've just said that we've nothing to dread in the valley, and I can watch while you build yourself up."

Boyd gave him a quick but keen glance. He saw that the lad's pride was at stake, and that he was anxious to be trusted with an important task. Looking at his alert face, and knowing his active intellect, the hunter knew that he would learn swiftly the ways of the wilderness.

"A good idea," he said in tones seemingly careless. "I'll change my mind and take a nap. Wake me up if you see strange signs or think anything is going to happen."

Without further word he spread his blanket on the leaves and in a minute or two was off to slumberland. Will, full of pride, put his fine breech-loader over his shoulder and began his watch. The horses, having eaten their fill, were lying

down in the grass, and his own nuzzled his hand as he stroked their noses.

He walked some distance among the trees, and he was impressed more and more by the resemblance of the valley to a great park, a park hitherto untrodden by man. Although he was not lonely or depressed now he felt very remote from civilization. The cities of the East, so far as his mind was concerned, were now on the other side of the world. The unknown, vast and interminable, had closed about him.

Yet he felt a momentary exultation. Boyd and he would find a path through every peril. His walk brought him back to the edge of the brook, where for a little space thick bushes grew, and he heard a snarling growl, followed by a rush that could be made only by a heavy body. He started violently, the pulses beat hard in his temples and he promptly presented his rifle. Then he laughed at himself. He caught a glimpse of a long, yellowish body and he knew it was a mountain lion, much more alarmed than he, and fleeing with all speed to the hills.

He must be steadier of nerve and he gave himself a stern rebuke. Farther down the valley the brook widened again into a deep pool, and in the water, as clear as silver, he saw fine mountain trout, darting here and there. If they stayed a day or two in the valley he would come and catch several of the big fellows, as they were well provided with fishing tackle, which Boyd said would be a great resource, saving much ammunition.

He went farther, and then climbed the hill which enclosed the valley on that side, obtaining from its crest a northern view of rolling plains, with the dim blue outline of the high mountains far beyond. He surmised that the group of hills in which they now lay was of limited area, and that when they continued their journey they must take once more to the plains, where they would be exposed to the view of roving Sioux. His heart throbbed as he looked over that great open expanse, and realized anew the danger. The pocket in the hills in which they lay was surely a safe and comfortable place, and one need be in no hurry to abandon it.

When he went back to the camp Boyd was just awakening, and as he looked at Will his eyes twinkled.

"Well, what did you find?" he asked. "Anything besides tracks of animals?"

"I found an animal himself," replied the lad. "I scared him up in the bushes at the brook's edge. It was a mountain lion and he ran away, just as I felt like doing at first."

The hunter laughed with genuine pleasure.

"I'm glad you kept down the feeling and didn't run," he said. "You'll get over such tremors in time. Everybody feels 'em, no matter how brave, unless he has a lot of experience. Now, since you've been scouting about, what do you think we ought to do?"

"I looked from a hill and saw open plains, extending maybe forty or fifty miles. Red Cloud and his men may have gone that way and I'm in favor of giving 'em a good start. Suppose we stay here another night and day and let 'em reach the mountains."

"Seems a good plan to me."

"Besides, there's some fish in a pool farther down that I want to catch."

"That settles it. We stay. Everything else must stand aside when a real fisherman wants to show what he can do."

Will took the fishing tackle from his pack, and returned in a short time with three splendid trout. It was now nearly sunset and Boyd thought it safe to build a fire after dark and cook the catch.

"I think there's no doubt that Red Cloud and his warriors are now a full day's journey ahead," he said, "but, as a wandering Indian might come into the valley, we'll take no more chances than we can help."

A low fire of dead sticks was lighted in a gulch, well screened by bushes, and the fish were broiled, proving very welcome, as they were the first warm food Will and Boyd had tasted since their flight from the troops. The hunter made coffee again, and they were well satisfied with their supper.

"It's a good idea to help ourselves out with as much fish and game as we can," he said, "and it's likely that we can find plenty of it up here. The horses, too, have had all the grass they want and we'll tether 'em for the night, though there's not one chance in a thousand that they'll wander from the valley. Animals have instinct, and if there's no powerful enemy near they always stay where food and water are to be had. I tell you what, Will, if a man could only have all his own senses coupled with those of a deer or a wolf, what a mighty scout and hunter he could be. Suppose you could smell a trail like a wolf, and then think about it like a man! Maybe men did have those powers a hundred thousand years ago."

"Maybe they did, Jim, but they didn't have rifles and all the modern weapons and tools that help us so much."

"You're right, Will. You can't have everything, all at the same time, and just now you and me are not so bad off, lying here comfortable and easy in our own particular valley, having just finished some fine trout that would have cost us four or five dollars in a fine New York restaurant, but for which we paid nothing."

"You don't have any fear that the troops will come after us and make us go back?"

"You can clear your mind of that trouble and keep it cleared. We're in the Indian country, and Captain Kenyon has orders to make no invasion. So he can't pursue. Missing us he'll just have to give us up as a bad job."

"Then we'll have only the Indians to guard against, and your opinion, Jim, that they're far ahead, seems mighty good to me. Perhaps we ought to stay three or four days here."

The hunter laughed.

"I see you're falling in love with the valley," he said, "but maybe you're right. It will depend on circumstances. To-morrow we'll get out those big field glasses of yours, go to the highest hill, and examine all the country."

"Suppose it should rain, Jim. Then we wouldn't think so much of our fine valley."

"Right you are, Will. But lucky for us, it doesn't rain much up here at this time of the year, and we can call ourselves safe on that score. Full night is at hand, and there isn't a cloud in the heavens. We'll both sleep, and build up our nerves and strength."

"Don't we need to keep a watch?"

"Not now, I think, at least not either of our two selves. That horse of mine, that I ride, Selim, is a sentinel of the first class. He's been with me so much and I've trained him so long that he's sure to give an alarm if anything alarming comes, though he'll pay no attention to small game, or even to a deer."

Selim was at the end of a long lariat about fifty feet away, and having eaten for a long time and having rested fully he had taken position as if he realized thoroughly his duties as watcher of the little camp. He was a powerful bay with brilliant, alert eyes that young Clarke saw shining through the dusk, and he walked slowly back and forth within the range allowed by his tether.

"Didn't I tell you?" said Boyd, with delight. "Look at him now, taking up his

duties as a man. That horse can do everything but talk, and for that reason, while he does many wise things, he never says a foolish one. Doesn't he fill you chock full of confidence, Will?"

"He certainly does, Jim. I know he'll be a much better sentinel than I could make of myself. I'll go to sleep, sure that we'll be well protected."

Although the hunter found sleep soon, Will, who did not need it so badly, lay awake long and he was interested in watching Selim, who was justifying his master's praise. The horse, for all the world like a vigilant sentinel, walked back and forth, and whenever his head was turned toward the little camp the lad saw the great eyes shining.

"Good Selim!" he said to himself. "Good and watchful Selim!"

In all the immensity and loneliness of the wilderness he felt himself drawn to the animals, at least to those that were not beasts of prey. It was true not only of Selim but of the other horses that they could do everything but talk, and they were the best friends of Boyd and himself.

His trust in the sentinel now absolute, he followed Boyd into peaceful oblivion, and he did not come out of it until dawn.



CHAPTER II

THE NARROW ESCAPE

When he awoke a sun of great brilliancy was shining, and over him arched the high skies of the great west. The air was thin and cool, easy to breathe and uplifting, and in the bracing morning he did not feel the loneliness and immensity of the wilderness. Boyd had already built a little fire among the bushes, and was warming some strips of dried beef over the flames.

"Here's your breakfast, Will," he said. "Beef, a few crackers, and water. Coffee would taste mighty good, but we can't afford to be taking it every morning, or we'd soon use up all we have. This is one of the mornings we skip it."

"I can stand it if you can," said Will cheerfully, "and it seems to me we ought to be saving our other stores, too. You'll have to kill a deer or a buffalo soon, Jim."

"Not until we leave the valley. Now fall on, and when we finish the beef we'll take another look at that map of yours."

They ate quickly and when they were done Will produced from an inside pocket of his waistcoat, where he always carried it, the map which was his most precious possession. It was on parchment, with all the lines very distinct, and the two bent over it and studied it, as they had done so often before.

It showed the Mississippi, flowing almost due south from Minnesota, and the Missouri, which was in reality the upper Mississippi, thrusting its mighty arm far out into the unknown wilderness of the Northwest. It showed its formation by the meeting of the Jefferson, the Madison and the Gallatin, but these three rivers themselves were indicated by vague and faint traces. Extensive dark spaces meant high mountains.

"My father served in the northwest before the great Civil War," said Will, telling it for the fiftieth time, "and he was a man of inquiring mind. If he was in a country he always wished to know all about it that was to be known, particularly if it happened to be a wild region. He had the mind of a geographer and explorer, and the vast plains and huge mountains up here fascinated him. If there was a chance to make a great journey to treat with the Indians or to fight them he always took it."

"And he'd been in California in '49," said Boyd, saying, like Will, what he had said fifty times before. "It was there I first met him, and a fine, upstanding young officer he was."

The lad sighed, and for a moment or two his sorrow was so deep that it gave him an actual thrill of physical pain.

"That's so, Jim. I've often heard him speak of the first time he saw you," he resumed. "He was tempted to resign and hunt gold in California with the crowd, and he did have some experience in the mines and workings there, but he concluded, at last, to remain in the army, and was finally sent into the Northwest with his command to deal with the Indians."

"And it was on the longest of his journeys into the mountains that he found it!"

"Yes. He noticed in a wild place among the ridges that the earth and rock formations were like those of California where the richest gold finds were made. He was alone at the time, though the rest of his command was only a few miles away, but he picked among the rocks and saw enough to prove that it was a mother lode, a great gold seam that would make many men millionaires. It was his intention to resign from the army, get permission from the Sioux to come in, organize a company, and work what he meant to be the Clarke mine. But you know what happened, Jim."

"Aye, Will, I do. By the time he got back to civilization the Civil War broke like a storm, and he went east to fight for his country."

"He could do no less, and he never thought of doing anything else. Bearing in mind the risks of war, he drew this map which he carried on his person and which when he was dying he sent by you to me."

"Aye, Will, he died in my arms at the Wilderness before the Bloody Angle. It was a glorious death. He was one of the bravest men I ever saw. He gave me the map, told me to be sure to reach you when the war was over, and then help you to find the great mine."

Water came again into Will's eyes. Though the wounds of youth heal fast, the hurt made by the death of his heroic father had not yet healed. The hunter respected his emotion and was silent while he waited.

"If we find the great mother lode and take out the treasure, part of it is to be yours, of course," said the boy.

"You can pay me for my work and let it go at that. Your father found the lode and the map telling the way to it, drawn by him, is yours now."

"But we are partners. I could never get through these mountains and past the Indian tribes without you. We're partners and there'll be plenty for all, if we ever get it. Say right now, Jim, that you share and share alike with me, or I won't be easy in my mind."

"Well, then, if you will have it that way. I suppose from all your brave father, the Captain, said, there's so much of it we needn't trouble ourselves about the shares if we ever get there. It would be better if we had another trusty friend or two."

"Maybe we'll pick 'em up before we're through with this job, which is going to last a long time. I think we're still on the right trail, Jim. This line leads straight west by north from the Mississippi river far into western Montana, where it strikes a narrow but deep mountain stream, which it crosses. Then it goes over a ridge, leads by a lake which must be several miles long, goes over another ridge, crosses another stream, and then winding many ways, as if penetrating a maze, comes to a creek, with high mountains rising on either side of it. But the mine is there, Jim, and we've got to follow all these lines, if we ever reach it."

"We'll follow 'em, Will, don't you worry about that. Gold draws men anywhere. Through blizzards, over mountains, across deserts, right into the face of the warlike Indian tribes, and the danger of death can't break the spell. Haven't I seen 'em going to California, men, women and children pressing on in the face of every peril that any army ever faced, and it's not likely, Will, that you and me will turn back, when women and children wouldn't."

"No, Jim, we couldn't do that. We're in this hunt to stay, and I for one have the best of reasons for risking everything to carry it to a successful end."

"And I'm with you because the Northwest is my natural stamping ground, because I wouldn't mind being rich either, and because I like you, Will. You're a good and brave boy, and if you can have the advantage of my teaching and training for about fifty years you'll make a first rate man."

"Thanks for the endorsement," laughed Will, "and so we stick together 'till everything is over."

"That's it."

The boy continued to look at the map.

"We've got a long journey over plains," he said, "but it seems to me that when we pass 'em we'll enter mountains without ending. All the west side of the map is covered with the black outlines that mean ridges and peaks."

"It's right, too. I've been in that region. There are mountains, mountains everywhere, and then more mountains, not the puny mountains they have east of the Missip, a mile, or at best, a mile and a half high, but crests shooting up so far that they hit right against the stars, and dozens and dozens of 'em, with snow fields and glaciers, and ice cold lakes here and there in the valleys. It's a grand country, a wonderful country, Will, and there's no end to it. The old fur hunters knew about it, but they've always kept it as secret as they could, because they didn't want other people to learn about the beaver in there."

"But we're going to visit it," exclaimed young Clarke with enthusiasm, "and we're going to find something the fur hunters have never found. I feel, Jim, that we're going to stand where my father stood and get out the gold."

"I've feelings of that kind, too, but we've got to prop up feeling with a power of work and patience and danger, and it's likely too, Will, that it will be a long time before we reach the end of the line on that map."

Young Clarke folded up the parchment again and put it back in the inside pocket of his waistcoat, the hunter watching him and remarking:

"Be sure it's in your pocket tight and fast, Will. We couldn't afford to lose it. Maybe it would be a good idea to make a copy of it."

"I could draw every line on it from memory."

"That being the case we don't exactly need a duplicate, and, as you're a young fellow, Will, and ought to work, you can take the horses down to the brook and let 'em drink."

The lad was willing enough to do the task and the horses drank eagerly and long of the pure stream that had its source in melting snows. All four had been selected for size, power and endurance, and they were in splendid condition, the rich and abundant grass of the valley restoring promptly the waste of travel.

Boyd's great horse, Selim, rubbed his nose in the most friendly manner against Will's arm, and the lad returned his advances by stroking it.

"I've heard the truth about you," he said. "You can do everything but talk, and you'll be a most valuable ally of ours on this expedition."

The horse whinnied gently as if he understood and Will, leading the four back

to the rich grass, tethered them at the ends of their long lariats.

"Now, suppose you get out your big glasses," said the hunter, "and we'll go to the top of the hill for a look. The day is well advanced, the sky is brilliant and in the thin, clear atmosphere of the great plateau we'll be able to see a tremendous distance."

Will was proud of his glasses, an unusually fine and powerful pair, and from the loftiest crest they obtained a splendid view over the rolling plain. The hunter at his request took the first look. Will watched him as he slowly moved the glasses from side to side, until they finally rested on a point at the right edge of the plain.

"Your gaze is fixed at last," the boy said. "What do you see?"

"I wasn't sure at first, but I've made 'em out now."

"Something living then?"

"Buffaloes. They're miles and miles away, but they've been lying down and rolling and scratching themselves until they make the wallows you see all over the plains. It's not a big band, two or three hundred, perhaps. Well, they don't mean anything to us, except a possible supply of provisions later on. No wonder the Indians hate to see the buffaloes driven back, because the big beasts are breakfast, dinner and supper on the hoof to them."

"And maybe to us, too, Jim. I've an idea that we'll live a lot on the buffalo."

"More'n likely. Well, we could do worse."

"What are you looking at now, Jim? I see that you've shifted your objective."

"Yes, I've caught some moving black dots to the left of the herd. They're obscured a little by a swell, but they look to me like horsemen, Sioux probably."

"If so then they must be hunters, taking advantage of the swell to attack the buffalo herd."

"Good, sound reasoning. You're learning to think as a scout and hunter. Yes, they're Sioux, and they're aiming for the herd. Now they've thrown out flankers, and they're galloping their ponies to the attack. There'll be plenty of good buffalo meat in some Sioux village before long."

"That means little to us, because after the hunt the warriors will pass on. What do you see elsewhere on the plain, Jim?"

"I can make out a trace of water. It's one of the little, shallow, sandy rivers, a

long distance from here, but the presence of water is probably the reason why game is grazing in the neighborhood."

"You don't see any more Indians?"

"No, Will. To the west the horizon comes plumb in that direction are a long way off, which agrees with your map. But in the north the glasses have brought the ridges and peaks a sight nearer. They're all covered with forest, except the crests of some of the higher peaks, which are white with snow. I'm thinking, too, that in the woods at the bottom of one of the slopes I can see a trace of smoke rising. Here you, Will, you've uncommon keen eyes of your own. Take the glasses and look! There, where the mountains seem to part and make a pass! Is that smoke or is it just mist?"

Young Clarke looked a long time. He had already learned from Boyd not to advance an opinion until he had something with which to buttress it, and he kept his glasses glued upon the great cleft in the mountains, where the trees grew so thick and high. At last he saw a column of grayish vapor rising against the green leaves, and, following it with the glasses to its base, he thought he was able to trace the outlines of tepees. Another and longer look and, being quite sure, he said:

"There's an Indian village in the pass, Jim."

"That's what I thought, but I wanted you to say so, too. Now my last doubt is taken away. They're mountain Sioux, of course. I had an idea that we could go through that way and then curve to the west, but since the village is there, maybe it will be better to strike out straight across the plains."

"Perhaps those buffalo hunters will come in here to jerk their meat. They know of the valley, of course. Have you thought of that, Jim?"

"Yes, I have, and it troubles me. It seems to me that dangers we didn't expect are gathering, and that we're about to be surrounded. Maybe we'd better put the packs on the horses, and be ready to start to-night. What do you think?"

"You know what's best, Jim."

"Not always. We're full partners, now, and in all councils of war, though there are but two of us, both must speak."

"Then I'm for getting ready to leave to-night, as soon as it's dark. I suppose it's just chance, but enemies are converging on us. It's a fine valley, one that I could stay in a long time, but we'd better leave it."

"As the two who make up the council are agreed that settles it. When the full dark comes we'll go."

Boyd, who resumed the glasses, turned them back on the buffalo hunters, saw them chase the game toward the valley, and then bring down a half-dozen.

"They're nearer now to us than they are to the mountains," he said, "and they're sure to bring the meat in here, where they can hang it on the trees, or find plenty of firewood. If we had any doubts before, Will, we've got an order now to go and not be slow about our going."

They watched the Indians a long time, and saw them cleaning and cutting up the slain buffaloes. Then they retreated to the depths of the valley, put the packs on the horses, and made ready for flight at the first coming of dusk. Luckily the night gave promise of being dark, and, when the sun had set and its last afterglow was gone they mounted, and, each followed by his packhorse, rode for the western edge of the rim. There they halted and took a last glance at a retreat in which their stay had been so brief but so welcome.

"A fine little valley," said Boyd. "It must have been hunted out years ago, but if it's left alone a few years longer the beaver will return and build along that brook. Those pools will just suit 'em. If we don't find the gold we may turn to looking for beaver skins. There are worse trades."

"At least it provides a lot of fresh air," said Will.

"And you see heaps and heaps of splendid country, all kinds, mountains, rivers, lakes, valleys, plains. Fur hunters can't complain of the lack of scenery."

"Which course will we take, Jim?"

"I think we'd better ride due west. That Indian village shuts us off from the mountains. It's true we may meet 'em on the plains, but likely we can escape 'em, and then when we've gone far enough we'll turn north and seek the ranges, where the cover is good. Now, hark to that, will you!"

From a point to the northward rose a long, quavering shout, shrill in its texture, and piercing the night like a call. A quiver ran along the lad's spine.

"A Sioux made that cry!" he exclaimed.

"Beyond a doubt," replied Boyd, "but why he did so I can't tell. Wait."

They sat, silent, on their horses, and in a minute or two the cry was repeated, but farther toward the east. Will could have mistaken the note for the howl of a

wolf, it contained so much animal quality, but since the nature of the first had been told to him he knew that the second was a reply to it.

"It's signals," said Boyd with conviction. "They're talking to one another, though I don't know what they're saying. But it means the sooner we get out of the valley the better for this white army of two."

"There's nothing to keep us from starting now."

"That's true. Because, if they find us here, all knowledge of the mine for which we are looking is likely to perish with us. I don't suppose the Sioux have made any formal declaration of war, but the warning of Red Cloud is enough. They wouldn't hesitate to put out of the way two wandering fellows like ourselves."

As they talked they rode slowly toward the west, the sound of their horses' hoofs deadened on the turf, and both watching among the trees for any hostile appearance. Young Clarke was rapidly learning the ways of the wilderness, from experience, and also because he had in Boyd a teacher not excelled anywhere in the West. The calls, the long, dying cries, came again and again, showing the Sioux were steadily approaching the valley, but the two were leaving it at an equal pace.

Will clutched the reins in his left hand and held the splendid repeating rifle across the saddle bow with the other. The pack horse, unled, but obedient to his training, followed close after. Boyd, just ahead of him, proceeded in the same manner, and now they began to descend the slope that ended in the open plain. In ten more minutes they would leave the cover of the last tree. Before them rolled the bare country, swell on swell, touched but faintly by the moon, yet keen eyes such as those of the Sioux could trace the figures of horses and men on it for a considerable distance.

Will felt little shivers as they were about to leave the final row of trees. He could not help it, knowing that they were going to give up shelter for those open spaces which, dusky though they were, were yet revealing.

"It's likely, in any event, that we'll be followed, isn't it?" he said. "If the Sioux search the valley, and they will, they're sure to find our traces. Then they'll come over the rim of the hills on our tracks."

"Well reasoned, Will," said the hunter. "You'll learn to be a great scout and trailer, if you live long enough. That's just what they'll do, and they'll hang on to our trail with a patience that a white man seldom shows, because time means

little to the Indian. As I said before, when we're far out on the plains we must make an abrupt turn toward the north, and lose ourselves among the ranges. For a long time to come the mountains will be our best friends. I love mountains anyway, Will. They mean shelter in a wild country. They mean trees, for which the eyes often ache. They mean grass on the slopes, and cool running water. The great plains are fine, and they lift you up, but you can have too much of 'em."

They rode now into the open country and in its dusky moonlight Will could not at first restrain the feeling that in reality it was as bright as day. A few hundred yards and both gazed back at the circle of hills enclosing the valley, hills and forest alike looking like a great black blur upon the face of the earth. But from the depths of that circling island came a long, piercing note, instinct with anger and menace.

"Now that was plain talk," said Boyd. "It said that they had found our trail, that they knew we were white, that they wanted our scalps, and that they meant to follow us until they got 'em."

"Which being the case," said Will defiantly, "we have to say to them in reply, though our syllables are unuttered, that we're not afraid, that they may follow, but they will not take us, that our scalps are the only scalps we have and we like 'em, that we mean to keep 'em squarely on top of our heads, where they belong, and, numerous and powerful though the Sioux nation may be, and brave and skillful though its warriors are, they won't be able to keep us from finding our mine."

"That's the talk, Will, my boy. It sounds like Red Cloud, the great Ogalala, Mahpeyalute himself. Fling 'em your glove, as the knights did in the old time, but while you're flinging it we'll have to do something besides talking. We must act. Trailers like the Sioux can follow us even in the night over the plains, and the more ground we gain in the beginning the better."

He urged his horses into a long, easy gallop and Will promptly followed at the same gait. The night darkened somewhat, at which they rejoiced, and then lightened again, at which they were sad, but they continued the long, swinging pace, which the horses could maintain for hours.

"Try your glasses again, Will," said the hunter. "They will cut through the dark a long way, and maybe they can tell if the Sioux are now in the plain."

Young Clarke slowed his pace, and bending in the saddle took a long look.

"I see nothing," he said. "Do you want to try 'em too, Jim?"

"No. Your eyes are of the best, and your news is good. It's likely that we've got a lead of seven or eight miles at least. Two or three miles more and we'd better turn for the mountains. Our horses are a lot bigger than those of the Sioux, but their ponies, though not much to look at, are made out of steel. They'd follow for days, and if we stuck to the plains they'd be sure to run us down at last."

"And we'd have little chance against a big Sioux band?"

"That's the ugly truth, and it's bound to be the mountains for us. I see a line on the prairie, Will. What do your glasses tell us about it?"

Young Clarke turned his gaze to the front, and after a single glance said:

"Water. It's one of those shallow prairie streams, I suppose, a foot of sand, and an inch of water on top."

"If there's not too much alkali in it it'll be mighty welcome to the horses. Ah, Selim smells it now!"

His great mount raised his head and neighed. Boyd smoothed his long, silky mane.

"Yes, old friend," he said, as if he were talking to a man, "I'm quite sure it won't have much alkali, you're going to have a nice, big drink, so are your friends, and then, ho! for the mountains!"

The stream was just what Will predicted it would be, a foot of sand and an inch of water, but it was only slightly brackish, and both horses and horsemen drank freely from it, took a rest and then drank as freely again. Another half hour and the two remounted.

"Now, Will," said Boyd, "the ridges are our target, and we'll shoot as straight at 'em as our horses can go, though we'll make the pace slow for the present. Nothing to be gained by tiring out our mounts before the race begins."

"And so you look for a real chase?"

"Surely. Those Sioux on their ponies will hang on like grim death and might be glad I'll be when the trees on the first slopes reach out their boughs to hide us. About midnight now, isn't it, Will?"

The lad was able to see the face of his watch and announced that it was midnight and a half hour more.

"That's good," said Boyd, "because the darkest part of the night is now coming, and maybe some clouds floating up from the south will help us. Yes, I think I notice a change already. Three stars that I counted a little while ago have gone away."

"And about five million are left."

"Still, every little counts. Maybe in an hour or so two or three more will go away."

"You're certainly an optimist, Jim. You draw hope from very little things."

"It pays. Hope not only makes you stronger, it also makes you happier. There, didn't I tell you? I said that two or three stars might go away, but it's far better than two or three. All the skirmishers have left and now troops and battalions are departing, too. Maybe whole armies will leave before long, and give us an entirely black sky."

It grew visibly darker, although many of the stars remained twinkling in their places, but they were much encouraged, nevertheless, and trusting in the aid of the night, still saved the strength of their horses.

"It will make it a little harder for the Sioux to trail us," said Boyd, "and if, by

any chance they should get near enough for a shot, the odds are about twenty to one they can't hit us. Suppose we stop here, give the horses another short rest, and you search the blackness back there with your glasses again."

Will was able to discern nothing but the sombre crests of the swells, and Boyd, dismounting, put his ear to the ground.

"I hear something moving," he said at last, and then, after a short pause, "it's the beat of hoofs."

"Can they be so near as that?" asked Will in alarm.

"At first I thought it was the Sioux, but now I'm sure it's running buffalo. I wonder why they're stampeding at this time of the night. Maybe a hunting party of Northern Cheyennes has wandered in here and knows nothing about the presence of the Sioux."

"That won't help us, since the Sioux and Northern Cheyennes are allies."

"No, it won't. If the Cheyennes meet the Sioux they'll join 'em in the pursuit of us. It's a new danger and I don't like it."

Boyd remounted and they rode on slowly. Presently he stopped, and Will, of course, stopped too.

"Listen, boy," he said, "and you'll hear the thunder of the buffalo. It's a big herd and they're running our way. I'm as sure as I sit here in this saddle that they're being driven by hunters."

Will heard a low, rolling sound like that of distant thunder. It was approaching rapidly, too, and it seemed to his heightened imagination that it was bearing straight down upon them.

"If they are Cheyennes we may be in the middle of 'em soon," he said.

"If we sit still here," said Boyd, "but that's just what we won't do. We'll gallop ahead until we come to a deep dip between the swells."

"And then?"

"Dismount, keep low, and let the storm drive by."

They did not have much time to spare, as the rumbling sound was growing fast beneath the tread of the flying herd, and they urged their horses into a gallop until they came to a dip, which they thought was deep enough to hide them. Here they dismounted and holding the lariats, watched as the thunder of the running herd increased, until they saw its van of lowered heads, short, curved horns and

great, shaggy manes, and then the dark mass stretching back out of sight.

"There are tens of thousands of 'em," said the hunter. "They'll be some time in going by, and then, I think, we'll see the Indians hanging on the rear."

The multitude drove on for a period somewhat longer than Boyd had predicted, and then Will saw naked horsemen crouched low on ponies, some firing with rifles and others with bows and arrows.

"They're Cheyennes, as I thought," said Boyd, "and they're enjoying a mighty killing. There'll be huge feasts for days and days in their lodges. They're so intent on it, too, that there isn't one chance in a thousand they'll see us."

"But I'm glad I see them," said Will. "It's a wonderful sight. I never thought I'd look upon its like, the chase of the buffalo herd under a midnight moon. It makes my blood leap."

"And mine, too, though I've seen it before. This wild country with its vast plains and its high mountains takes hold of you, Will. It grips you with fetters of steel. Maybe, when you find the gold you won't want to go back to civilization."

"If we find it, it will be easy enough to decide what we wish to do. But the whole herd is disappearing in the moonlight in the west, and I can barely make out the last of the Indian hunters who are following 'em. I can see, though, a lot of beasts running low."

"The wolves. They're always hanging on the rear of a herd, hoping to cut out calves or buffaloes weak from old age. Now they're expecting to reap a little from the harvest made by the hunters. There, they've gone too, though for a long time you'll hear the herd thundering away to the west. But we don't mind the sound of a danger when the danger itself has passed. We'll mount and start again on our particular little excursion to the mountains, where we hope the fresh, cool air will help two fellows like ourselves, in failing health, no strength, no appetite, no anything."

The big hunter laughed aloud in pleasure.

"That herd was a help to us," he said. "It passed to the south of us, and so cut across our trail. If the Sioux are pursuing, as we think they are, it'll take 'em a long time to find our traces again. We'll take advantage of it, as our horses are thoroughly rested, and make some speed."

They swung into an easy gallop, and went on without further talk for a long time. When two or three hours had passed Will raised his glasses and gazed into

the north.

"I think I see there a blur which is not of the night itself," he announced. "It may be the loom of the mountains that we're so anxious to reach."

"But a long way off yet," said the hunter. "Day will come hours before we can strike the first slopes, and we may have the Sioux hanging on our trail."

As a faint, gray light in the east told of the coming dawn, they came to another of the shallow streams of the plains and both horses and horsemen drank again. Will and Boyd also ate a little food.

"Now turn your glasses to the south and tell me what you see," said the hunter.

Will gazed and then lowered the glasses, a look of alarm on his face.

"I know from your eyes what you've seen without your telling me," said Boyd. "The Sioux are there. In some way they've picked up our trail and are coming. It's a mighty good thing that we've saved our horses. They're in splendid trim now for a long run, and we'll need every ounce of their speed and courage."

He did not seek to disguise the full measure of the danger from Will, who, he knew, would summon his utmost courage to meet it. The lad looked again through the glasses, and was able now to see a full score of men coming on their ponies. The dawn had just spread to the south and against its red and gold they were shown sharply, a long line of black figures on the crest of a swell.

"Take a look, Jim," said young Clarke, handing him the glasses. "You'll be able to tell more about 'em than I can."

Boyd studied the picture carefully—it was in reality a picture to him—and after due deliberation, said:

"They are thirty-two, because I've counted 'em. They're comparatively fresh, because their ponies are running straight and true. They're Sioux, as I know from the style of their war bonnets, and they're after us, as I know from the way they're riding."

"But look the other way, Jim, and see how much nearer the mountains have come!"

"Aye, lad! They stand up like a fort, and if we reach 'em in time we may stave off our pursuers. They're coming fast, and they're spreading out in a long line now. That helps 'em, because it's impossible for fugitives to run exactly straight, and every time we deviate from the true course some part of their line gains on

us."

"I see a huge, rocky outcrop on the mountain side. Suppose we always ride for that."

"Something to steer by, so to speak. A good idea. We won't push the horses hard at first, because it will be a long time before they come within rifle shot of us. Then maybe we'll show 'em a spurt that'll count."

But it was hard for Will not to use the utmost speed at once, as every time he looked back he saw that the Sioux were gaining, their figures and those of their horses, horse and rider seemingly one, always standing out black and clear against the rosy dawn. But he knew that Boyd was right, and he tried hard to calm the heavy beating of his pulses.

The whole horizon was now lighted by a brilliant sun and the earth was bathed in its beams. Flight and pursuit went on, unabated, and the hunter and the boy began to increase the speed of their horses, as they saw that the Sioux were gaining. They had been riding straight as they could toward the stony outcrop, but in spite of everything they curved a little now and then, and some portion of the following line drew closer. But they were yet a full two miles away, and the mountains were drawing much nearer. Trees on the slopes detached themselves from the general mass, and became separate and individual. Once Will thought he caught a flash of water from a mountain torrent, and it increased the desirability of those slopes and ridges. How sheltered and protecting they looked! Surely Boyd and he could evade the Sioux in there!

"We'll make it easily," said Boyd, and then he added with sudden violence. "No, we won't! Look, there on your right, Will!"

Four warriors on swift ponies suddenly emerged from a swell scarcely a quarter of a mile away, and uttered a shout of triumph. Perhaps they were stray hunters drawn by the spectacle of the pursuit, but it was obvious that, in any event, they meant to co-operate with the pursuers.

"They're Sioux, too," said Boyd. "Now, steady, Will. It's a new and pressing danger, of course, but it may help us, too."

"How so?"

"I think I can give 'em a healthy lesson. We all learn by experience, and they'll take notice, if I make a good example. They're bearing down on our flank. You lead, Will, and keep straight for our rock. The four will soon be within range, as this repeating rifle of mine is a beauty, and it carries mighty far. The old muzzle

loader is just a pistol by the side of it. Come on, my fine fellows! The nearer you are the better! I learned long ago to shoot from a running horse, and that's more than many Sioux can do."

The four Sioux on the right, bent low, were urging their ponies forward at their utmost speed. From the band behind came a tremendous yell, which, despite the distance, reached Boyd and young Clarke, and, apparently, they had full warrant in thus giving utterance to their feeling of triumph. The sudden appearance of the warriors coming down the dip was like the closing of a trap and it seemed that all chance of escape was cut off from the two who rode so desperately for the mountains.

The hunter shut his teeth tightly and smiled in ironic fashion. Whenever he was highly pleased he grew rather talkative, and now he had much to say for a man whose life was about to turn on a hair.

"If the four on the ponies off there knew the peril into which they were riding they wouldn't ride so hard," he said. "But the Sioux are not yet acquainted with the full merits of a long range repeating rifle, nor do they understand how well I can shoot. I'm as good a marksman as there is in the West, if I do say it myself, and lest you may think me a boaster, Will, I'll soon prove it."

He dropped the reins on the neck of Selim, who, though unguided, ran on straight and true, and grasped the splendid rifle with both hands. Will ceased to think of the band behind them and began to watch the hunter, who, though still smiling, had become one of the most dangerous of human beings.

"Yes, my four friends, you're overhauling us fast," murmured the hunter, "and I'm glad of it, because then I don't have to do so much waiting, and, when there's ugly work at hand, one likes to get it over. Ah, I think they're near enough now!"

The rifle sprang to his shoulder, a jet of flame leaped from the muzzle, and, with the sharp crack, the foremost Sioux rolled to the ground and lay still, his frightened pony galloping off at an angle. The hunter quickly pulled the trigger again and the second Sioux also was smitten by sudden death. The other two turned, but one of them was wounded by the terrible marksman, and the pony of the fourth was slain, his rider hiding behind the body. A dismal wail came from the Sioux far back. The hunter lowered his great weapon, and one hand resumed the bridle rein.

[The rifle sprang to his shoulder...](#)

The rifle sprang to his shoulder, a jet of flame leaped from the muzzle.[ToList](#)

"A rifle like mine is worth more than its weight in gold," he said. "It's worth its weight in diamonds, rubies, emeralds and all the other precious jewels at a time like this. I can say, too, that's about the best shooting I ever did, and I think it'll save us. Even the band behind, thirty or so in number, won't want to ride full tilt into rifles like ours."

"The first slopes are not more than three or four miles away now," said young Clarke, "and no matter how hard they push they can't overtake us before we reach the trees. But Jim, how are we to ride through those high mountains, and, if we abandon the horses, we might as well give up our quest."

"I chose these horses myself, Will," said Boyd, "and I knew what I was about. I trained Selim, and, of course, he's the best, but the others are real prize packages, too. Why, they can walk up the side of a cliff. They can climb trees, and they can jump chasms fifty feet wide."

"Come down to earth, Jim. Stay somewhere in the neighborhood of truth."

"Well, maybe I do draw a rather long bow, but horses learn to be mountain climbers, and ours are the very best of that kind. They'll take us up through the ridges, never fear. The Sioux will follow, for a while, at least, but in the deep forest you see up there we'll shake 'em off."

"Hear 'em shouting now! What are they up to?"

"Making a last rush to overtake us, while we're yet in the plain. But it is too late, my gay scalp hunters!"

The mountains were now drawing near very fast, and with the heavy forest along their slopes they seemed to Will to come forward of themselves to welcome them. He became suddenly aware that his body ached from the long gallop, and that the dust raised by the beating hoofs was caked thickly on his face. His lips were dry and burning, and he longed for water.

"In five more minutes we'll be on the first slope," said Boyd, "and as we'll soon be hidden in the forest I think I'll say farewell to our pursuers."

"I don't understand you, Jim."

"I'm going to say only one word, and it'll be short and sharp."

He turned suddenly in his saddle, raised the repeating rifle and fired once at the band.

He had elevated the sight for a very long shot, regarding it as a mere chance, but the bullet struck a pony and a few moments of confusion in the band followed. Now Boyd and young Clarke made their horses use the reserves of strength they had saved so prudently, and with a fine spurt soon gained the shelter of the woods, in which they disappeared from the sight of the pursuing horde.

They found themselves among oaks, aspens, pines, cedars, and birch, and they rode on a turf that was thick, soft and springy. But Selim neighed his approval and Boyd pulled down to a walk. A little farther on both dismounted at his suggestion.

"It'll limber us up and at the same time help the horses," he said. "Knowing what kind of rifles we carry and how we can shoot, the Sioux won't be in any hurry to ride into the forest directly after us. We've a big advantage now in being able to see without being seen. As we needn't hurry, suppose we stop and take another look with those glasses of yours, Will. I never thought they'd prove so useful when you insisted on bringing 'em."

Will obeyed at once.

"They're a mile or so away," he said, "and they've stopped. They're gathered in a semi-circle around one man who seems to be a chief, and I suppose he's talking to 'em."

"Likely! Most likely. I can read their minds. They're a little bit bashful about riding on our trail, when we have the cover of the forest. Repeating rifles don't encourage you to get acquainted with those who don't want to know you. I can tell you what they'll do."

"What, Jim?"

"The band will split into about two equal parts. One will ride to the right and the other to the left. Then, knowing that we can't meet both with the rifles, they'll cautiously enter the mountains and try to pick up our trail. Am I right or am I wrong?"

"Right, O, true prophet! They've divided and already they're riding off in opposite directions. And what's the best thing for us to do?"

"We'll lead the horses up this valley. I see through leaves a little mountain stream, and we'll drink there all the water we want. Then we'll push on deeper and deeper into the mountains, and when we think we're clear out of their reach we'll push on."

They drank plentifully at the brook, and even took the time to bathe their hands and faces. Then they mounted and rode up the slopes, the pack horses following.

"Didn't I tell you they were first class mountain climbers?" said Boyd with pride. "Why, mules themselves couldn't beat 'em at it."

When twilight came they were high on the slopes under the cover of the forest, pushing forward with unabated zeal.



III

THE LITTLE GIANT

Boyd rode in front, Will was just behind, and then came the two heavily laden pack horses, following their masters with a faith that nothing could shake. The hunter seemed to have an instinct for choosing the right way, or else his eyes, like those of an owl, were able to pierce the dark. He avoided chasms and cliffs, chose the best places on the slopes, and wherever he wound he always led deeper and deeper into the vast maze of high mountains.

Will looked back toward the plains, but he could see no trace of them now, and he did not believe that the Sioux, however skilled they might be, could follow their trail up the ridges in the dark. Meanwhile the stars came out, and a half moon rode in a medium sky. The boy's eyes, grown used to the night, were now able to see quite clearly, and he noticed that the region into which they were riding was steadily growing wilder. Now and then they passed so close to the edge of chasms that he shivered a little, as he looked down into the dark wells. Then they passed up ravines where the lofty cliffs, clothed in stunted pine and cedar, rose high above them, and far in the north he caught the occasional glimpses of white crests on which the snow lay deep.

Boyd became quite cheerful, and, for a while, hummed a little air under his breath. When he ceased singing he said:

"I don't know where we're going, Will, but I do know that we're going away from the Sioux. They'll try to trail us tomorrow when the light comes, and they may be able to do it, but we'll be moving on again, and, however patient trailers may be, a trail that lengthens forever will wear out the most patient trailer of them all."

"Isn't that a creek down there?" asked Will, pointing to a silver flash in the dusk.

"So it is, and while these mountain streams usually have rough beds, scattered with boulders, we'll ride up it as far as we can. It may be a great help in hiding our trail."

They rode down the slope and urged the horses into the water, although the good beasts showed reluctance, fearful of the boulders and the rough footing,

but, when they were in, the two riders allowed them to pick the way, and thus they advanced slowly and with extreme caution a distance of five full miles. They heard a roaring and approached a fine fall of about thirty feet, over which the creek tumbled, sending up much white foam.

"This watery road is now blocked, that's quite sure," said Boyd. "But we've been able to use it a much greater distance than I thought, and it may throw off the Sioux entirely."

They emerged from the water and the horses climbed a steep slope to the crest of a ridge, where they stood panting. Boyd and young Clarke slipped from the saddles and stood by. The half moon and clusters of stars still made in the sky a partial light, enabling them to see that they stood upon a sort of broad shelf, sprinkled with large trees without undergrowth, but well covered with long grass. The only way of approach from the south was the rocky brook, along the bed of which they had come. What lay to the north they did not know, but the shelf seemed to narrow there.

"A large part of the night is spent," said Boyd, "and as it's not possible for the Sioux to overtake us before dawn I vote we camp here, because we're pretty well worn out, and the horses are dead tired. What does the other half of the army say?"

"It says this place was just made for us," replied Will, "and we shouldn't go forward another inch tonight."

"Then we'll unsaddle, tether the horses and take to our blankets, though, if you say so, we will first draw a little on the commissariat."

"No. I'm too tired to eat. I'd rather go to sleep."

"The two halves of the army are in agreement. So will I."

The horses fell to cropping the rich grass, but their riders, seeking the softest place they could find, folded themselves in their blankets and soon slumbered as soundly as if they were in the softest beds civilization could furnish.

Will awoke before dawn, and instantly remembered where he was. But while all had been strife and strain and anxiety before he slept, he felt now an immense peace, the great peace of the mountains. The horses having eaten their fill were lying down. The murmurs of the swift brook below came up to his ears, and with it the sound of a faint breeze playing in just a whisper among the leaves. Far above him soared peaks and ridges, so many and high that they seemed to prop up the eternal blue.

Will realized that he loved the mountains. Why shouldn't he? They had given him refuge when he needed it most, saving him and Boyd from dreadful torture and certain death. Somewhere in the heart of them lay the great treasure that he meant to find, and they possessed a majesty that appealed not merely to his sense of beauty, but to a spiritual feeling that was in truth an uplift to the soul.

He was awake scarcely a minute, but all the events of the last few days passed in a swift panorama before his mind—the warning of Red Cloud, the silent departure by night from the camp of the troops, the pursuit by the Sioux, and the escape into the high ranges. Rapidly as it passed it was almost as vivid as if it were happening again, and then he was asleep once more.

When he awoke the dawn was an hour old, and Boyd was kindling a low fire down by the edge of the stream.

"We'll draw on the coffee once more this morning," he said. "After all that we've passed through we're entitled to two cups of it apiece. I'll make bread and warm some of the dried beef, too. Suppose, while I'm doing it you climb to the crest over there, and use those glasses of yours for all they're worth."

It was a stiff climb to the summit, but once there Will had a tremendous view in all directions. Far to the south he was able to catch through the powerful lenses the dim line of the plains, but on all other sides were mountains, and yet more mountains. In the north they seemed very high, but far to the west was a mighty rounded peak, robed at the top in white, towering over every other. The narrow valley and the ridges were heavy with forest, but the glasses could find no sign of human life.

He descended with his report, and found the coffee, the bread and the meat ready, and while he had been too tired to eat the night before he had a tremendous appetite now. When breakfast was over they sat by the stream and considered the future. Boyd was quite sure the Sioux were still following, and that they would eventually strike the trail, though they might be two or three days in doing so. He was of the opinion that they should go farther into the high ranges.

"And what becomes of our quest?" asked Will.

"You know, lad," responded the hunter, whimsically, "that the longest way round is sometimes the shortest way through, and those that are in too great a hurry often fall over their own feet. If you are careful about your health and don't get shot you ought to live sixty or seventy years yet, because you are surely a robust youngster, and so you're richer in time than in anything else. I am, too,

and for these reasons we can afford to go into the very heart of the high mountains, where we'll be well hidden, and bide until the danger of the Sioux pursuit has passed."

"A long speech, Jim, but probably a true one. Do we start right away?"

"Aye, lad, the sooner the better. Both the horses and ourselves are fed and refreshed. We don't know what this shelf leads to, but we can soon find out."

They resaddled, but did not mount, letting the well-trained horses follow, and proceeded along the shelf, until they entered a narrow pass, where they were compelled to go in single file, the hunter leading the way. Far below him Will heard the creek roaring as it foamed forward in rapids, and he was glad that the horses were, what Boyd had declared them to be, trained mountain climbers, walking on with even step, although he felt an instinctive desire to keep as far as he could from the cliff's edge, and lean against the slope on the other side. But Boyd, made familiar with such trails by his years of experience in the mountains, whistled gaily.

"Everything comes our way," he said. "If we were at the head of a trail like this we could hold it against the entire Sioux nation, if we had cartridges enough."

"I hope it won't go on forever," said Will. "It makes me feel a little dizzy."

"It won't. It's opening out now. The level land is widening on either side of the creek and that means another valley not much farther on."

But it was a good four miles before they emerged into a dip, covering perhaps two square miles, covered heavily with forest and with a beautiful little blue lake at the corner. Will uttered a cry of pleasure at the sight of the level land, the great trees green with foliage, and the gem of a lake.

"We couldn't have found a finer place for a camp," he said. "We're the children of luck."

But the wise hunter shook his head.

"When the morning's cold we hate to pull ourselves out of comfortable beds," he said, "and for mountaineers such as we've become I'll admit that this valley looks like the Garden of Eden, but here we do not bide."

"Why not?"

"Because it's too good for us to live in. The Sioux, of course, know of it, and

what draws us draws them, too. For a long time the finer a spot becomes the more dangerous it is for us. No, we'll ride on past this happy valley straight into the mountains."

"But at least let me take a little swim in that blue lake."

"Well, there's no harm in that, provided you're quick about it. When you come out I'll take one myself."

Will undressed in a couple of minutes and sprang into the water, which he found extremely cold, but he swam joyously for five minutes or so, when he emerged and was followed by Boyd. When they were in the saddle again both felt that their strength had been renewed and Will waved one hand in farewell to the little blue lake.

"Good-bye, Friend Lake," he said. "You're not large, but you're very beautiful, and some day I hope to come back and bathe in you again."

"The great ranges of mountains which run all about over the western part of the continent are full of such pleasant valleys and cool little lakes," said the hunter. "Often the lakes are far up the slopes, many thousands of feet above the sea, and sometimes you don't see 'em until you break right through the trees and bushes and come square up against the water. If we keep on, as I intend we shall, it's likely that we'll see a lot of 'em."

The lad's eyes kindled.

"That being so," he said, "I don't mind turning aside a while from our real hunt, because then we'll be explorers. It will be glorious to find new lakes and streams."

"Yes, it'll make the waiting easier, provided, of course, that we don't have rain and storms. Rain can turn a wilderness paradise in fifteen minutes into a regular place for the condemned. We've almost as much to fear now from the sky as we have from the Indians on the ground. When you see a little cloud up there you can begin to worry."

"But I don't see any, and so I refuse to worry yet."

They reached the farther edge of the valley and began to climb a slope, which, easier at first, soon became rather stiff. But the horses once more justified the hunter's praise and pressed forward nobly. He and Will dismounted again, and they let Selim lead where he would.

"All horses have wilderness sense," said Boyd, "and Selim, having both an

educated sense and a wild sense, is sure to pick out the best way."

His confidence was not misplaced, as the horse instinctively chose the easiest path, and, before the twilight came, they reached the crest of a lofty ridge, from which they saw a sea of mountains in all directions, a scene so majestic that it made Will draw a sharp breath.

"I think we'd better go down the slope until it becomes too dark for us to see a way," said Boyd, "because we're up so high now that the night is sure to be biting cold here on the very top of the ridge."

In an hour they found a glen sheltered well by high trees all about and with a pool of icy cold water at the edge. It was a replica on a small scale of the valley and lake they had left behind, and glad enough they were to find it. They drank of the pool, and the horses followed them there with eagerness. Then, eating only cold food, they made ready for the night.

"Get an extra pair of blankets from your pack, Will," said Boyd. "You don't yet know how cold the night can be on these mountains, at any time of the year."

The hunter's advice was good, as Will the next morning, despite two blankets beneath him and two above him, felt cold, and when he sprang up he pounded his chest vigorously to make the circulation brisk. Boyd laughed.

"I'm about as cold as you are," he said, "and, in view of the winter into which we've suddenly dropped, we'll have hot coffee and hot food for breakfast. I don't think we risk anything by building a fire here. What's the matter with our horses?"

They had tethered the horses in the night, and all four of them suddenly began to rear and stamp in terror.

"There's a scout watching us!" exclaimed Will.

"A scout?" said Boyd, startled.

"Yes! See him standing on the big rock, far off there to the right."

The hunter looked and then drew a breath of relief.

"Old Ephraim!" he said.

A gigantic grizzly bear was upreared on a great rocky outcrop about three hundred yards away, and the opalescent light of the morning magnified him in the boy's eyes, until he was the largest beast in the world. Monstrous and sinister he stood there, unmoving, gazing at the strange creatures in the little camp. He

seemed to Will a symbol of this vast and primeval new world into which he had come. Remembering his glasses he took them and brought the great grizzly almost before his eyes.

"He appears to be showing anger and a certain curiosity because we're here," he said. "I don't think he understands us, but he resents our invasion of his territory."

"Well, we're not going to explain who we are. If he don't meddle with us we won't meddle with him."

The grizzly did not stay long, retreating from the rock, then disappearing in the underbrush. Will had qualms now and then lest he should break through the bushes and appear in their little glen, but Boyd knew him better. He was content to leave alone those who left him alone.

The breakfast with its hot coffee and hot food was very grateful, and continuing the descent of the slope they passed through other narrow passes and over other ridges, but all the while ascending gradually, the world about them growing in majesty and beauty. Four days and a large part of four nights they traveled thus after leaving the little valley with the blue lake, and the bright air was growing steadily colder as they rose. Boyd talked a little now of stopping, but he did not yet see a place that fulfilled all his ideas of a good and safe camp, though he said they would soon find it.

"How far do you think we've come into the mountains?" asked Will.

"About a hundred miles, more or less," replied the hunter.

"Seems to me more like a thousand, chiefly more. If the Sioux find us here they'll have to be the finest mountain climbers and ravine crossers the world has ever seen. Just what are you looking for, Jim?"

"Four things, wood, water, grass and shelter. We've got to have 'em, both for ourselves and the horses, and we've got to find 'em soon, because, d'you see, Will, we've been wonderfully favored by Providence. The rains and storms have held off longer than they usually do in the high mountains, but we can't expect 'em to hold off forever just for our sakes. Besides, the hoofs of the horses are getting sore, and it's time to give 'em a long rest."

They were now far up the high slopes, but not beyond the timber range. The air was thin and cold, and at night they always used two pairs of blankets, spreading the under pair on thick beds of dry leaves. In the morning the pools would be frozen over, but toward noon the ice under the slanting rays of the sun

would melt. The march itself, and the air laden with odors of pine and spruce, and cedar and balsam, was healthful and invigorating. Will felt his chest expand. He knew that his lung power, already good, was increasing remarkably and that his muscles were both growing and hardening.

Another day and crossing a ridge so sharp that they were barely able to pull the horses over it, they came to a valley set close around by high mountains, a valley about three miles long and a mile wide, one-third of its surface covered by a lake, usually silver in color, but varying with the sky above it. Another third of the valley was open and heavy in grass, the remainder being in forest with little undergrowth.

"Here," said Boyd, "we'll find the four things we need, wood, water, grass and shelter, and since it's practically impossible for the original band of Sioux to trail us into this cleft, here we will stay until such time as we wish to resume our great hunt. What say you?"

"Seems to me, Jim, that we're coming home. This valley has been waiting for us a great many years, but the true tenants have arrived at last."

"That's the right spirit. Hark to Selim, now! He, too, approves."

The great horse, probably moved by the sight of grass and water, raised his head and neighed.

"If we had felt any doubts the horses would have settled it for us," said Will. "I understand their language and they say in the most correct English that here we are to bide and rest, as long as we wish. The presence of the lake indicates a running stream, an entrance and exit, so to speak. I think, Jim, it's about the most beautiful valley I ever saw."

They descended the last slope, and came to the creek that drained the lake, a fine, clear, cold current, flowing swiftly over a rocky bottom. After letting the horses drink they forded it, and rode on into the valley. Will noticed something white on the opposite slope, and examining it through his glasses saw that it was a foaming cascade.

"It's the stream that feeds the lake," he said. "It rushes down from the higher mountains, and here we have a beautiful waterfall. Nature has neglected nothing in preparing our happy valley, providing not only comfort and security but scenic beauty as well."

The hunter looked a moment or two at the waterfall, and the tremendous mountains about them with a careful eye.

"What is it, Jim?" asked Will.

"I'm looking for tracks."

"What tracks? You said we wouldn't find any Sioux in here."

"Not the footprints of the Sioux."

"It's not in the range of the Crows, Blackfeet or Assiniboines. Surely you don't expect them."

"I don't expect Crows, Blackfeet or Assiniboines."

"Then what do you expect?"

"Wild animals."

"Why bother about wild animals? Armed as we are we've nothing to fear from them."

"Nothing to fear, but a lot to hope. I think we're likely to stay here quite a spell, and we'll need 'em in our business. Remember that for the present, Will, we're wild men, and we'll have to live as wild men have lived since the world began. We want their meat and their skins."

"The meat I understand, because I'd like to bite into a juicy piece of it now, but we're not fur hunters."

"No, but we need the skins of big animals, and we need 'em right away. This weather can't last forever. We're bound to have a storm sometime soon. We must first make a wickiup. It's quite simple. The Sioux always do it. A Sioux warrior never sleeps in the open if he can help it, and as they've lived this sort of life for more hundreds of years than anybody knows they ought to know something about it."

"But I don't see that cloud you told me several days ago to watch for."

"It will come. It's bound to come. Now here's the lake ahead of us. Isn't it a beauty? I told you we'd find a lot of these fine little lakes all along the slopes of the ridges, but this seems to be the gem of them all. See how the water breaks into waves and looks like melted silver! And the banks sloping and firm, covered with thick green turf, run right down to the water's edge, like a gentleman's park."

"It's all that you claim for it," said Will, making a wide, sweeping gesture, "and, bright new lake, I christen thee Lake Boyd!"

"The lake accepts the name," said the hunter with a pleased smile, and then he added, also making a wide, sweeping gesture:

"Green and sheltered valley, I christen thee Clarke Valley."

"I, too, accept the compliment," said Will.

"The far side of the valley is much the steeper," said the hunter, "and I think it would be a good idea for us to build the wickiup over there. It would be sheltered thoroughly on one side at least by the lofty cliffs."

"Going back a moment to the search you were making a little while ago, have you noticed the footprints of any wild animals?"

"Aye, Will, my lad, so I have. I've seen tracks of elk, buffalo and bear, and of many smaller beasts."

"Then, that burden off your mind, we might as well locate the site of our house."

"Correct. I think I see it now in an open space under the shelter of the cliff."

They had ridden across the valley, and both marked a slight elevation under the shadow of the cliff, a glen forty or fifty yards across, protected by thick forest both to east and west, and by thin forest on the south, from which point they were approaching.

"It's the building site that's been reserved for us five hundred years, maybe," said the hunter. "The mountain and the trees will shelter us from most of the big winds, and if any of the trees should blow down their falling bodies would not reach us here in the center of the open space. There is grass everywhere for the horses, and water, both lake and running, for all of us."

They unsaddled the riding horses, took the packs off the others and turned them loose. All four neighed gratefully, and set to work on the grass.

"They've done a tremendous lot of mountain climbing, and they've carried heavy burdens," said Boyd, "and they're entitled to a long rest, long enough to heal up their sore feet and fill out their sides again. Now, Will, you'll make a great hunter some day, but suppose, for the present, you guard the packs while I look for an elk and maybe a bear. Two of them would furnish more meat than we could use in a long time, but we need their skins."

"I'm content to wait," said Will, who was saddle-tired.

He sat down on the thick, soft grass by the side of the packs, and his physical

system, keyed up so long, suffered a collapse, complete but not unpleasant. Every nerve relaxed and he sank back against his pack, content to be idle as long as Boyd was away. But while his body was weak then, his mind was content. Clarke Valley, which had been named after him, was surely wonderful. It was green and fresh everywhere and Boyd Lake was molten silver. Not far away the cataract showed white against the mountainside, and its roar came in a pleasant murmur to his ears.

He heard a distant shot, but it did not disturb him. He knew it was Boyd, shooting something, probably the elk he wished. After a while he heard another report, and he put that down as the bear. His surmise was correct in both instances.

Boyd, with his help, skinned both the bear and the elk, and they hung great quantities of the flesh of both in the trees to dry. Boyd carefully scraped the skins with his hunting knife, and they, too, were hung out to dry. While they were hanging there Will also shot a bear, and his hairy covering was added to the others.

A few days later Boyd built the wickiup, called by the Sioux *tipiowinja*. Taking one of the sharp axes he quickly cut a number of slender, green poles, the larger ends of which he sharpened well and thrust deep into the ground, until he had made with them a complete circle. The smaller ends were bent toward a common center and fastened tightly with withes of skin. The space between was thatched with brush, and the whole was covered with the skins of elk and bear, which Boyd stitched together closely and firmly. Then they cut out a small doorway, which they could enter by stooping. The floor was of poles, made smooth and soft with a covering of dead leaves.

It was rude and primitive, but Will saw at once that in need it would protect both their stores and themselves.

"I learned that from the Sioux long ago," said Boyd, not without some admiration of his handiwork. "It's close and hot, and after we've put the stores in we'll have to tuck ourselves away in the last space left. But it will feel mighty good in a storm."

The second night after the wickiup was finished his words came true. A great storm gathered in the southwest, the first that Will had seen in the high mountains, and it was a tremendous and terrifying manifestation of nature.

The mountains fairly shook with the explosions of thunder, and the play of lightning was dazzling on the ridges. When thunder and lightning subsided

somewhat, the hunter and the lad crept into the wickiup and listened to the roaring of the rain as it came. Will, curled against the side upon his pack, heard the fierce wind moaning as if the gods themselves were in pain, and the rain beating in gust after gust. The stout poles bent a little before both wind and rain, but their elasticity merely added to their power of resistance, as the wickiup, so simple in its structure and yet so serviceable, stood fast, and Boyd had put on its skin covering so well that not a single drop of water entered.

In civilization he might have found the wickiup too close to be supportable, but in that raging wilderness, raging then at least, it was snug beyond compare. He had a thought or two for the horses, but he knew they would find shelter in the forest. Boyd, who was curled on the other side of the wickiup, was already asleep, but the lad's sense of safety and shelter was so great that he lay awake, and listened to the shrieking of the elements, separated from him only by poles and a bearskin. The power of contrast was so great that he had never felt more comfortable in his life, and after listening awhile he, too, fell asleep, sleeping soundly until day, when the storm had passed, leaving the air crisper and fresher, and the earth washed afresh and clean.

They found the horses already grazing, and their bear and elk steaks, which they had fastened securely, safe on the boughs. The valley itself, so keen and penetrating was the odor of balsam and pine, seemed redolent with perfume, and the lake itself had taken on a new and brighter tint of silver.

"Boyd Lake and Clarke Valley are putting on their best in our honor," said Will.

Then they ate a huge breakfast, mostly of elk and bear meat, and afterward considered the situation. Will had the natural impatience of youth, but Boyd was all for staying on a couple of weeks at least. They might not find another such secure place, one that furnished its own food, and nothing would be lost while much could be gained by waiting. It was easy enough to persuade the lad, who was, on the whole, rather glad to be convinced, and then they turned their thoughts toward the improvement of a camp which had some of the elements of permanency.

"We could, of course, build a good, strong cabin," said Boyd, "and with our stout axes it would not take long to do it, but I don't think we'll need the protection of logs. The wickiup ought to serve. We may not have another storm while we're here, but showers are pretty sure to come."

To provide against contingencies they strengthened the wickiup with another

layer of poles, and Boyd spread over the leaves on the floor the skin of a huge grizzly bear that he killed on one of the slopes. They felt now that it was secure against any blizzard that might sweep through the mountains, and that within its shelter they could keep warm and dry in the very worst of times. But they did not sleep in it again for a full week, no rain falling at night during that period. Instead they spread their blankets under the trees.

"It's odd, and I don't pretend to account for it," said Boyd, "but it's only progressive white men who understand the value of fresh air. As I told you, the Sioux never sleep outside, when they can help it. Neither do the other Indians. In the day they live outdoors, but at night they like to seal themselves up in a box, so to speak."

"Rushing from extreme to extreme."

"Maybe, but as for me, I want no better bed than the soft boughs of balsam, with blankets and the unlimited blue sky, provided, of course, that it isn't raining or hailing or sleeting or snowing. It's powerful healthy. Since we've come into Clarke Valley I can see, Will, that you've grown about two inches in height and that you're at least six inches bigger around the chest."

"You're a pretty big exaggerator!" laughed Will, "but I certainly do feel bigger and stronger than I was when I arrived here. If the Sioux will only let us bide in peace awhile I think I may keep on growing. Tell me more about the Sioux, Jim. They're a tremendous league, and I suppose you know as much about 'em as any white man in this part of the world."

"I've been in their country long enough to learn a lot, and there's a lot to learn. The Sioux are to the West what the Iroquois were to the East, that is, so far as their power is concerned, though their range of territory is far larger than that of the Iroquois ever was. They roam over an extent of mountain and plain, hundreds and hundreds of miles either way. I've heard that they can put thirty thousand warriors in the field, though I don't know whether it's true or not, but I do know that they are more numerous and warlike than any other Indian nation in the West, and that they have leaders who are really big men, men who think as well as fight. There's Mahpeyalute, whom you saw and whom we call Red Cloud, and Tatanka Yotanka, whom we call Sitting Bull, and Gray Wolf and War Eagle and lots of others.

"Besides, the Sioux, or, in their own language, the Dakotas, are a great nation made up of smaller nations, all of the same warlike stock. There is the tribe of the Mendewakaton, which means Spirit Lake Village, then you have the

Wahpekute or Leaf Shooters; the Wahpeton, the Leaf Village; the Sisseton, the Swamp Village; the Yankton, the End Village, the Yanktonnais, the Upper End Village, and the Teton, the Prairie Village. The Teton tribe, which is very formidable, is subdivided into the Ogalala, the Brule, and the Hunkpapa. Red Cloud, as I've told you before, is an Ogalala. And that's a long enough lesson for you for one day. Now, like a good boy, go catch some fish."

Will had discovered very early that Lake Boyd, which was quite deep, contained fine lake trout and also other fish almost as good to the taste. As their packs included strong fishing tackle it was not difficult to obtain all the fish they wanted, and the task generally fell to the lad. Now, at Boyd's suggestion, he fulfilled it once more with the usual success.

Game of all kinds, large and small, was abundant, the valley being fairly overrun with it. Boyd said that it had come in through the narrow passes, and its numbers indicated that no hunters had been there in a long time. Will even found a small herd of about a dozen buffaloes grazing at the south end of the valley, but the next day they disappeared, evidently alarmed by the invasion of human beings. But the deer continued numerous and there were both bears and mountain lions along the slopes.

Will, who had a certain turn for solitude, being of a thoughtful, serious nature, ceased to find the waiting in the valley irksome. He began to think less of the treasure for which he had come so far and through such dangers. They *had* found a happy valley, and he did not care how long they stayed in it, all nature being so propitious. He had never before breathed an air so fine, and always it was redolent with the odor of pine and balsam. He began to feel that Boyd had not exaggerated much when he talked about his increase in height and chest expansion.

Both he and the hunter bathed every morning in Lake Boyd. At first Will could not endure its cold water more than five minutes, but at the end of ten days he was able to splash and swim in it as long as he liked.

Their days were not all passed in idleness, as they replenished their stores by jerking the meat of both bear and deer. At the end of two weeks the hunter began to talk of departure, and he and Will walked toward the western end of the valley, where the creek issued in a narrow pass, the only road by which they could leave.

"It's likely to be a mighty rough path," said Boyd, "but our horses are still mountain climbers and we'll be sure to make it."

They went a little nearer and listened to the music of the singing waters, as the creek rushed through the cleft. It was a fine, soothing note, but presently another rose above it, clear and melodious.

It was a whistle, and it had such a penetrating quality that Will, at first, thought it was a bird. Then he knew it sprang from the throat of a man, hidden by the bushes and coming up the pass. Nearer and nearer it came and mellower and mellower it grew. He had never before heard anyone whistle so beautifully. It was like a song, but it was evident that someone was entering their happy valley, and in that wilderness who could come but an enemy? Nearer and nearer the whistler drew and the musical note of the whistling and its echoes filled all the pass.

"Wouldn't it be better for us to draw back a little where we can remain hidden among the brakes?" said Will.

"Yes, do it," replied the hunter, "just for precaution against any possible mistake, but I don't think we really need to do so. In all the world there's not another such whistler! It's bound to be Giant Tom, Giant Tom his very self, and none other!"

"Giant Tom! Giant Tom! Whom do you mean?" exclaimed Will.

"Just wait a minute and you'll see."

The whistler was now very near, though hidden from sight by the bushes, and he was trilling forth old airs of home that made the pulses in the lad's throat beat hard.

"It's Giant Tom. There's no other such in the world," repeated Boyd more to himself than to Will. "In another minute you'll see him. You can hear him now brushing past the bushes. Ah, there he is! God bless him!"

The figure of an extraordinary man now came into view. He was not more than five feet tall, nor was he particularly broad for his height. He was just the opposite of a giant in size, but there was something about him that suggested the power of a giant. He had a wonderfully quick and light step, and it was Will's first impression that he was made of steel, instead of flesh and blood. His face, shaven smoothly, told little of his age. He was dressed in weather-beaten brown, rifle on shoulder, and two mules, loaded with the usual packs and miner's tools, followed him in single file and with sure step.

Will's heart warmed at once to the little man who continued to whistle forth a volume of clear song, and whose face was perhaps the happiest he had ever seen.

Boyd stepped suddenly from the shielding brushwood and extended his hand.

"Tom Bent," he said, "put 'er there!"

"Thar she is," said Giant Tom, placing his palm squarely in Boyd's.

"My young friend, Mr. William Clarke," said the hunter, nodding at the lad, "and this is Mr. Thomas Bent, better known to me and others as Giant Tom."

"Glad to meet you, William," said the little man, and ever afterward he called the boy William. "Anybody that I find with Jim, here, has got on 'im the stamp an' seal o' high approval. I don't ask your name, whar you come from or why you're here, or whar you're goin', but I take you fur a frien' o' Jim's, an' so just 'bout all right. Now put 'er thar."

He grinned a wide grin and extended a wide palm, into which Will put his to have it enclosed at once in a grasp so mighty that he was convinced his first impression about the man being made of steel was correct. He uttered an exclamation and Giant Tom dropped his hand at once.

"I never do that to a feller more than once," he said, "an' it's always the first time I meet him. Even then I don't do it 'less I'm sure he's all right, an' I'm goin' to like 'im. It's jest my way o' puttin' a stamp on 'im to show that he's passed Tom Bent's ordeal, an' is good fur the best the world has to offer. Now, William, you're one o' us."

He smiled so engagingly that Will was compelled to laugh, and he felt, too, that he had a new and powerful friend.

"That's right, laugh," said Giant Tom. "You take it the way a feller orter, an' you an' me are goin' to be mighty good pards. An' that bein' settled I want to know from you, Jim Boyd, what are you doin' in my valley."

"Your valley, Giant! Why, you never saw it before," said the hunter.

"What's that got to do with it? I wuz comin' here an' any place that I'm goin' to come to out here in the wilderness is mine, o' course."

"Coming here, I suppose, to hunt for gold! And you've been hunting for it for fifteen years, you've trod along thousands and thousands of miles and never found a speck of it yet."

The little man laughed joyously.

"That's true," he said. "I've worked years an' years an' I never yet had a particle o' luck. But a dry spell, no matter how long, is always broke some time

or other by a rain, an' when my luck does come, it's goin' to bust all over my face. Gold will just rain on me. I'll stand in it knee-deep an' then shoulder deep, an' then right up to my mouth."

"You haven't changed a bit," said Boyd, grinning also. "You're the same Giant Tom, a real giant in strength and courage, that I've met off and on through the years. It's been a long time since I first saw you."

"It was in Californy in '49. I was only fourteen then, but I went out with my uncle in the first rush. Seventeen years I've hunted the yellow stuff, in the streams, in the mountains, all up an' down the coast, in the British territories, an' way back in the Rockies, but I've yet to see its color. Uncle Pete found some, and when he died he left what money he had to me. 'Jest you take it an' keep on huntin', Tom, my boy,' he said. 'Now an' then I think I've seen traces o' impatience in you. When you'd been lookin' only six or seven years, an' found nothin', I heard you speak in a tone of disapp'intment, once. Don't you do it ag'in. That ain't the way things are won. It takes sperrit an' patience to be victor'us. Hang on to the job you've set fur yourse'f, an' thirty or forty years from now you'll be shore to reap a full reward, though it might come sooner.' An' here I am, fresh, strong, only a little past thirty, and I kin afford to hunt an' wait for my pay 'bout thirty years more. I've never forgot what Uncle Pete told me just afore he died. A mighty smart man was Uncle Pete, an' he had my future in mind. Don't you think so, young William?"

"Of course," replied Will, looking at him in wonder and admiration. "I don't think a man of your cheerful and patient temperament could possibly fail."

"And maybe his reward will come much sooner than he thinks," said the hunter, glancing at the lad.

Will understood what Boyd meant, and he was much taken with the idea. The Little Giant seemed to be sent by Providence, but he said nothing, waiting until such time as the hunter thought fit to broach the subject.

"How long have you been here?" asked the Little Giant, looking at the valley with approving eyes.

"Quite a little while," replied Boyd. "It belonged to us two until a few minutes ago, but now it belongs to us three. We've been needing a third man badly, and while I didn't know it, you must have been in my mind all the time."

"An' what do you happen to need me fur, Jim Boyd?"

"We'll let that wait awhile, at least, until we introduce you to our home."

"All right. Patience is my strong suit. Do you mean to say you've got a home here?"

"Certainly."

"Then I'll be your guest until you take me into the partnership you're talkin' 'bout. Do you know that you two are the first faces o' human bein's that I've seen in two months, an' it gives me a kind o' pleasure to look at you, Jim Boyd, an' young William."

"Come on then to our camp."

He whistled to his two mules, strong, patient animals, and then he whistled on his own account the gayest and most extraordinary variation that Will had ever heard, a medley of airs, clear, pure and birdlike, that would have made the feet of any young man dance to the music. It expressed cheerfulness, hope and the sheer joy of living.

"You could go on the stage and earn fine pay with that whistling of yours," said Will, when he finished.

"Others have told me so, too," said the Little Giant, "but I'll never do it. Do you think I'd forget what Uncle Pete said to me on his dyin' bed, an' get out o' patience? What's a matter o' twenty or thirty years? I'll keep on lookin' an' in the end I'll find plenty o' gold as a matter o' course. Then I won't have to whistle fur a livin'. I'll hire others to whistle fur me."

"He's got another accomplishment, Will, one that he never brags about," said the hunter.

"What is it?"

"I told you once that I was as good a rifle shot as there was in the West, over a range of a million and a half square miles of mountain and plain, but I forgot, for a moment, about one exception. That exception is Giant Tom, here. He has one of the fine repeating rifles like ours, and whether with that or a muzzle loader he's quicker and surer than any other."

The face of Giant Tom turned red through his tan.

"See here, Jim Boyd, I'm a modest man, I'm no boaster, don't be telling wild tales about me to young William. I don't know him yet so well as I do you, an' I vally his good opinion."

"What I say is true every word of it. If his bullet would only carry that far he'd

pick off a deer at five miles every time, and you needn't deny it, Giant Tom."

"Well, mebbe thar is some truth in what you say. When the Lord sawed me off a foot, so I'd hev to look up in the faces o' men whenever I talked to 'em, He looked at me an' He felt sorry fur the little feller He'd created. I'll have to make it up to him somehow, He said to Hissself, an' to he'p me along He give me muscles o' steel, not your cast steel, but your wrought steel that never breaks, then He put a mockin' bird in my throat, an' give me eyes like an eagle's an' nerves o' the steadiest. Last, He give me patience, the knowin' how to wait years an' years fur what I want, an' lookin' back to it now I think He more than made up fur the foot He sawed off. Leastways I ain't seen yet the man I want to change with, not even with you, Jim Boyd, tall as you think you are, nor with you, young William, for all your red cheeks an' your youth an' your heart full o' hope, though it ain't any fuller than mine."

"Long but mighty interesting," said Boyd. "Now, you can see our wickiup, over there in the open. We use it only when it rains. We'll help you take the packs off your mules and they can go grazing for themselves with our horses. You are not saying much about it, but I imagine that you and the mules, too, are pretty nearly worn out."

"Them's good mules, mighty good mules, but them an' me, I don't mind tellin' it to you, Jim Boyd, won't fight ag'inst restin' an' eatin' awhile."

"I'll light the fire and warm food for you," said Will. "It's a pleasure for me to do it. Sit down on the log and before you know it I'll have ready for you the finest lake trout into which you ever put your teeth."

"Young William, I accept your invite."

Will quickly had his fire going, and he served not only trout, but bear steaks and hot coffee to the Little Giant, who ate with a tremendous appetite.

"I've got provisions of my own in my packs," he said, "but sometimes the other feller's feed tastes a heap better than your own, an' this that you're offerin' me is, I take it, the cream o' the mountains, young William. A couple more o' them trout, if you don't mind, four or five more pounds o' that bear meat, an' a gallon o' coffee, if you've got it to spare. With them I think I kin make out. How are my mules gettin' on, Jim?"

"First rate. They've already introduced themselves to the horses, which have given their names, pedigrees and the stories of their lives. The mules also have furnished their histories, and, everybody being satisfied with everybody else's

social station and past, they're now grazing together in perfect friendship, all six of 'em, just beyond that belt of woodland. And that being the case, I'll now give you the history of Will and myself, and I'll tell you about the biggest thing that we expect from the future."

"Go ahead," said the Little Giant, settling himself into a comfortable position.



CHAPTER IV

THE FLIGHT

Boyd had no mean powers as a narrator. He did not speak at first of their own immediate search, but alluded to the great belief that gold was scattered all through the West, although it seldom had a trace or trail leading to it. Then he spoke of Clarke's father, and what he had discovered, returning soon afterward to the civil war, in which he had fallen.

The Little Giant's eyes brightened with the flame of pursuit as the hunter talked. He who had sought gold for so many years without finding a particle of it was seeing it now, in pockets, and in almost solid ledges, beyond anything he had ever dreamed. But when Boyd told of the officer's death on the battlefield he sighed deeply and his face clouded.

"That's always the way," he said. "Jest when you've got it, it slips through your fingers, though I will say to you, young William, that it's not the lost gold only I'm mournin' 'bout. I'm sorry, too, for the death of your brave father."

"But, knowing the uncertainties of war, he took thought for the future," said Boyd. "He drew a map showing where his great mine is, and it's now in the possession of his son, Will, who sits before you."

The shadow left the face of the Little Giant, and his eyes glistened as Will produced the precious map, spreading it before him. After examining it carefully, he said:

"Ef you fight off many thousand Sioux, run through fifty or a hundred mountain blizzards, starve a dozen times, freeze twenty times an' stick to it three or four years you'll git that thar gold."

Then the Little Giant sighed, and his face clouded again—it had perhaps been years since his face had clouded twice in one day.

"You fellers are in great luck. I wish you well."

"We wish ourselves well," said Boyd, watching him closely.

A sudden thought seemed to occur to the Little Giant and his face brightened greatly.

"Do you two fellers want a hired man?" he asked.

"What kind of a hired man?" said Boyd.

"A likely feller, not very tall, but strong an' with a willin' heart, handy with spade an' shovel, understandin' hosses an' mules, an' able to whistle fur you gay an' lively tunes in the evenin', when you're all tired out from the day's work in the richest mine in the world."

"No, we don't want any hired man."

"Not even the kind I'm tellin' you 'bout?"

"Not even that, nor any other."

"An' both o' you hev got your minds plum' made up 'bout it?"

"Plumb made up."

The Little Giant's face fell for the third time in one day, an absolute record for him.

"I reckon thar ain't no more to say," he said.

Boyd was still watching him closely, but now his look was one of sympathy.

"We don't want any hired man," he said. "We've no use for hired men, but we do want something."

"What's that, Jim Boyd?"

"We want a partner."

"Why, each of you has got one. You hev young William and young William hez you."

"Well, young William and me have talked about this some, not much, but we came straight to the point. For such a big hunt as ours, through dangers piled on dangers, we need a third man, one that's got a strong heart and a cheerful soul, one that can shoot straighter than anybody else in the world, one whose picture, if I could take it, would be the exact picture of you, Tom Bent."

"But I ain't done nothin' to come in as a pardner."

"Neither did I, but Will took me in as a guide, hunter and fighting man. Don't you understand, Giant, that to get the Clarke gold we'll have to pay the price? We'll have to fight and fight, and we'll have to risk our lives a thousand times apiece. Why, in a case like this, you're worth a cool hundred thousand dollars."

"Then I come in fur a tenth—ef we git it."

"You come in for the same share as the rest, share and share alike, but I will say this to you, Little Giant, that we expect you to do the most tremendous fighting the world has ever seen, we expect you to wipe out whole bands of Sioux and Blackfeet by yourself while Will and me stand by and rest, and, after it's all over, we expect you to sit down and whistle an hour or two, until you soothe us to sleep."

"Then, on them conditions I come in as a full pardner," said Giant Tom, and he grinned with pleasure, the most amazing grin that Will had ever seen. It spread slowly across his face, until the great crack seemed to reach almost to each ear, revealing a splendid set of powerful white teeth, without a flaw. Above the chasm two large blue eyes glistened and glowed with delight. It was all so infectious, so contagious that both Will and Boyd grinned in return. They were not only securing for a perilous quest a man who was beyond compare, but they were also giving the most exquisite mental pleasure to a likable human being.

"It shorely does look," said the Little Giant, "ez ef my luck wuz goin' to hev a turn. At any rate, I'll be with you boys, in the best company I've had fur years."

"You and the mules rest a day," said Boyd, "and then we'll be off. We'll keep to the mountains for a while, and then we'll curve back to the plains, where we'll take up the line laid down on the map, and where the going is easier. Maybe we can dodge the Sioux."

The Little Giant made his bed under one of the trees, and he slept very soundly that night, eating prodigiously in the morning. The three were discussing the advisability of leaving at once or of waiting until the dusk for departure, when Will, happening to look toward the east, saw what he took at first to be a tiny cloud in the clear blue sky. He carried his glasses over his shoulders, and he raised them at once. The hunter and the Little Giant had noticed his act.

"What is it, Will?" asked Boyd anxiously.

"Smoke! A big puff of it!"

"And it came from the top of that mountain to the east of the valley."

"It rose straight and fast, as if it had been sent up by some human agency."

"And so it was. It's a signal!"

"Indians!"

"Yes, Will."

"What does it mean?"

"It means 'Attention, watch!' They've got a code almost as complete as that of our armies when they use the signal flags. Look at that other crest off to the north. Maybe an answer will come from it."

"There *is* an answer. I can see it rising now from the very place you indicate, Jim. What does the answer signify?"

"I can see it now with the naked eye. It merely says to the first, 'I've seen you, I'm waiting. Go ahead.' Look back to the other crest."

"Two smokes are now going up there."

"They say 'Come.' It's two bands wanting to meet. Now, the other place."

"Three smokes there."

"Three means, 'We come.'"

"Now back to the other."

"Four smokes."

"Which says in good, plain English, 'We are following the enemy.' That settles it. They've found out, some way or other, that we're here, and the two bands mean to meet and capture or destroy us. They never suspected that we could read their writing against the sky. We don't wait until tonight. We leave as soon as we can get our packs on our horses and mules."

"I'd like to make a suggestion first," said the Little Giant with some diffidence.

"What is it?" asked Boyd.

"Suppose we stay an' have a crack at 'em before we go, jest kinder to temper their zeal a little. I'd like to show young William that I kin really shoot, an' sorter live up to the braggin' you've been doin'."

"No, you ferocious little man-killer. We can't think of it. We'd have a hundred Sioux warriors on our heels in no time. Now hustle, you two! Pack faster than you ever packed before, and we'll start inside of two hours. Do you see any more smokes, Will?"

"No, the sky is now without a blemish."

"Which means they've talked enough and now they're traveling straight

toward our valley. It's lucky they've got such rough country to cross before they reach us."

Inside the two hours they were headed for the western end of the valley, the Little Giant riding one of his mules, the other following. The wickiup was abandoned, but they brought much of the jerked meat with them, thinking wisely of their commissariat.

It was with genuine regret that Will looked back from his saddle upon Clarke Valley and Boyd Lake, shimmering and beautiful now in the opalescent sunshine. They had found peace and plenty there. It was a good place in which to live, if wild men would let one alone, and, loving solitude at times, he could have stayed there several weeks longer in perfect content. He caught the last gleam of the lake as they entered the pass. It had the deep sheen of melted silver, as the waters moved before the slow wind, and he sighed a little when a curve of the cliff cut it wholly from view.

"Never mind, young William," said the Little Giant, "you'll see other lakes and other valleys as fine, an' this wouldn't look so beautiful, after all, tomorrow, filled with ragin' Sioux huntin' our ha'r right whar it grows, squar' on top o' our heads."

Young Clarke laughed and threw off his melancholy.

"You're right," he said briskly. "The lake wouldn't look very beautiful if a half dozen Sioux were shooting at me. You came through this pass, now tell us what kind of a place it is."

"We ride along by the creek, an' sometimes the ledge is jest wide enough fur the horses an' mules. We go on that way four or five miles, provided we don't fall down the cliff into the creek an' bust ourselves apart. Then, ag'in, purvided we're still livin', we come out into a valley, narrow but steep, the water rushin' down it in rapids like somethin' mad. Then we keep on down the valley with our hosses lookin' ez ef they wuz walkin' on their heads, an' in four or five miles more, purvided, o' course, once more that we ain't been busted apart by falls, we come out into some woods. These woods are cut by gulleys an' ravines an' they have stony outcrops, but they'll look good by the side o' what you hev passed through."

"Encouraging, Giant!" laughed Will. "But hard as all this will be for us to pass over, it will be just as hard for the Sioux, our pursuers."

"Young William," said the Little Giant approvingly, "I like to hear you talk

that way. It shows that you hev all the makin's o' them opty-mists, the bunch o' people to which I belong. I never heard that word till three or four years ago, when I wuz listenin' to a preacher in a minin' camp, an' it kinder appealed to me. So I reckoned I would try to live up to it an' make o' myself a real opty-mist. I been workin' hard at it ever sence, an' I think I'm qualifyin'."

"You're right at the head of the class, that's where you are, Giant," said Boyd heartily. "You've already earned a thousand dollars out of the mine that we're going to find, you with your whistling and cheerfulness bracing us up so that we're ready to meet anything."

"What's the use o' bein' an opty-mist ef you don't optymize?" asked the Little Giant, coining a word for himself. "Now, ain't this a nice, narrow pass? You kin see the water in the creek down thar, 'bout two hundred feet below, a-rushin' an' a-roarin' over the stones, an' then you look up an' see the cliff risin' five or six hundred feet over your head, an' here you are betwixt an' between, on a shelf less'n three feet broad, jest givin' room enough fur the horses an' mules an' ourselves, all so trim an' cosy, everythin' fittin' close an' tight in its place."

"It's a lot too close and tight for me, Giant!" exclaimed Will. "I've a terrible fear that I'll go tumbling off the path and into the creek two hundred feet below."

"Oh, no, you won't, young William. The people who fall off cliffs are mighty few compared with them that git skeered 'bout it. Ef you feel a-tall dizzy, jest ketch holt o' the tail o' that rear mule o' mine. He won't kick, an' he won't mind it, a-tall, a-tall. Instead o' that it'll give him a kind o' home-like feelin', bein' ez I've hung on to his tail myself so many times when we wuz goin' along paths not more'n three inches wide in the mountain side. You won't bother or upset him. The biggest cannon that wuz ever forged couldn't blast him out o' the path."

Thus encouraged, young Clarke seized the tail of the mule, which plodded unconcernedly on, and for the rest of the distance along the dizzying heights he felt secure. Nevertheless his relief was great when they emerged into the rough valley of which the Little Giant had spoken, and yet more when, still pressing on, they came to the rocky and hilly forest. Here they were all exhausted, animals and human beings alike, and they stopped a long time in the shade of the trees.

At that point there was no sign of the valley from which they had fled, unless one could infer its existence from the creek that flowed by. Looking back, Will saw nothing but a mass of forest and mountain, and then looking back a second time he saw rings of smoke rising from points which he knew must be in their

valley. He examined and counted them through his glasses and described them to the hunter and the Little Giant.

"The Sioux have come down and invaded our pleasant home," said Boyd. "There's no doubt about it, and I can make a good guess that they're mad clean through, because they found us gone. They may be signaling now to another band to come up, and then they'll give chase. You've got to know, Will, that nothing will make the Sioux pursue like the prospect of scalps, white scalps. A Sioux warrior would be perfectly willing to go on a month's trail if he found a white scalp at the end of it."

"They'll naturally think that we'll turn off toward the south so as to hit the plains ez soon ez we kin," said the Little Giant.

"And for that reason, you think we should turn to the north instead, and go deeper into the mountains?" said Boyd.

"'Pears sound reasonin' to me."

"Then we'll do it."

"But we don't go fur, leastways not today. It wouldn't be more'n two or three hours till night anyhow, an' see them clouds in thar to the south, all thickenin' up. We're going to hev rain on the mountains, an' I think we'd better make another wickiup, ez one o' them terrible slets may come on."

Boyd and Will agreed with him and a mile farther they found a place that they considered suitable, an opening in which they would not be exposed to any tree blown down by a blizzard, but with a heavy growth of short pines near by, among which the horses and mules might find shelter. Then the three worked with amazing speed, and by the time the full dark had come the wickiup was done, the skins that they had brought with them being stretched tightly over the poles. Then, munching their cold food, they crawled in and coiled themselves about the walls, wrapped deep in their blankets. Contrary to the Indian custom, they left the low door open for air, and just when Will felt himself well disposed for the night he heard the first patter of the sleet.

It was almost pitch dark in the wickiup, but, through the opening, he could see the hail beating upon the earth in streams of white. The old feeling of comfort and security in face of the wildest that the wilderness had to offer returned to him. When they reached Clarke Valley and built their wickiup he had one powerful friend, but now when the Sioux were once more in pursuit, he had two. The Little Giant had made upon him an ineffaceable impression of courage, skill

and loyalty that would stand any test.

"The hail's goin' to drive all through the night," Giant Tom called out in the darkness.

"Right you are," said the hunter, "and the Sioux won't think of trying that pass on such a night. They're back in the valley, in wickiups of their own."

"Might it not stop them entirely?" asked Will.

"No, young William, it won't," said the Little Giant. "They'll come through the pass tomorrow, knowin' thar's only one way by which we kin go, an' then try to pick up our trail when the sleet melts. But tonight, at least, nobody's goin' to find us."

They slept late the next morning, and when they crawled out of the wickiup they found the sleet packed about an inch deep on the ground. The horses and mules, protected by the pines, had not suffered much, and, in order that their trail might be hidden by the melting sleet, they packed and departed before breakfast, choosing a northwesterly direction. They picked the best ground, but it was all rough. Nevertheless the three were cheerful, and the Little Giant whistled like a nightingale.

"Ef I remember right," he said, "we'll soon be descendin', droppin' down fast so to speak, an' then the weather will grow a heap warmer. The sun's out now, though, an' by noon anyway all the sleet will be gone, which will help us a lot."

They had been walking most of the time, allowing their animals to follow, which both horses and mules did, not only through long training but because they had become used to the companionship of men. The three might have abandoned them, escaping pursuit in the almost inaccessible mazes of the mountains, but no such thought entered their minds. The horses and mules not only carried their supplies, chief among which being the ammunition, but also the tools with which to work the mine, and then, in Will's mind at least, they and more of them would be needed to bring back to civilization the tons of gold.

They were now in a fairly level, though narrow, valley, and all three of them were riding. Once more they saw far behind them smoke signals rising, and Boyd felt sure that the Sioux somehow had blundered upon the trail anew. Then he and the Little Giant spoke together earnestly.

"The longest way 'roun' is sometimes the shortest way through," said Giant Tom. "It's no plains for us, not fur many days to come. I'm thinkin' that what we've got to do is to keep on goin' deeper an' deeper into the mountains, an'

higher an' higher, too, plum' up among them glaciers, whar the Sioux won't keer to foller. Then, when we winter a while thar we kin turn back toward the plains an' our search."

"Looks like good reasoning to me," said Boyd. "As I told the boy here, once, we're richer in time than anything else. We must make for the heights. What say you, Will?"

"I'm learning patience," replied the lad. "It's better to wait than to spill all the beans at once. Let's head straight for the glaciers."

Will felt that there was something terrible about the Sioux pursuit. He was beginning to realize to the full the power of Indian tenacity, and he was anxious to shake off the warriors, no matter how high they had to go. He knew nothing of the region about them, but he had heard that mountains in many portions of the West rose to a height of nearly three miles. He could well believe it, as he looked north and south to tremendous peaks with white domes, standing like vast, silent sentinels in the sky. They were majestic to him, but not terrifying, because they held out the promise of safety.

"If the worst came to the worst, could we live up there on one of those slopes, a while?" he asked.

"Do you mean by that could we find game enough?" said Boyd.

"Game and shelter both."

"We could. Like as not the mountain deer are plentiful. And there's a kind of buffalo called the wood bison, even bigger than the regular buffalo of the plains, not often found south of Canada, but to be met with now and then in our country. We might run across one of them, and he'd supply meat enough to feed an army. Besides, there are bears and deer and smaller game. Oh, we'd make out, wouldn't we, Tom?"

"We shorely would," replied the Little Giant, "but between you an' me an' the gate post, Jim, I think I see somethin' movin' on the slope acrost thar to the right. Young William, take your glasses an' study that spot whar the bushes are so thick."

"I can just barely make out the figures of men among the bushes," announced Will, after a good look.

"Then they're Indians," said Boyd with emphasis. "You wouldn't find white men lurking here in the undergrowth. It's a fresh band, hunters maybe, but

dangerous just the same. We'd better push on for all we're worth."

They urged forward the horses and mules, seeking cover in the deep forest along the slope, but without success, as a faint yell soon told them. At the suggestion of Boyd, they stopped and examined the ground. The way was steadily growing steeper and more difficult, and the warriors, who were on foot could make greater speed than the fugitives.

"Lend me your glasses a minute, young William," said the Little Giant.

But he did not turn the lenses upon the Indians. Instead, he looked upward.

"Thar's a narrow pass not fur ahead," he said. "I think we'd better draw into it an' make a stand. The pass is deep, an' they can't assail us on either flank. It will have to be a straight-away attack."

"That's lucky, mighty lucky," said Boyd with heartfelt thankfulness. "Will, you push on with the animals, and maybe if you look back you'll see that what I told you about Giant Tom's sharpshooting is true."

Will hurried the horses and mules ahead, following a shallow dip that was the outlet of the deep pass they were seeking. Behind them he heard again the yells of the Indian warriors, hopeful now of an unexpected triumph. He saw their figures emerging from cover and he judged that they were at least twenty in number. He saw also that the Little Giant had stopped and was looking at the pursuers with a speculative eye, while his repeating rifle lay easily in the hollow of his arm. Then he urged the animals on and presently he looked back a second time.

He was just in time to see the breech of the rifle leap to the Little Giant's shoulder. "Leap" was the only word to describe it, his action was so swift and so little time did he waste in taking aim. It all passed in an instant, as he pulled the trigger, and the foremost Indian far down the slope threw up his arms, falling backward without a cry. In another instant he pulled the trigger again and another Indian fell beside the first. The whole band stopped, uttered a tremendous cry of rage, and then darted into the undergrowth for cover.

"Two," said Boyd. "Didn't I tell you, Will, that he was a wonder with the rifle?"

"I had to do it. I call you both to witness that I had to do it," said the Little Giant in a melancholy voice. "I'm a hunter o' gold an' not properly a killer o' men, even o' savage men. An' yet I find no gold, but I do kill. Sometimes I'm sorry that I happened to be born jest a natcherly good shot. I reckon we'd better

whoop up our speed ez much ez we kin now, 'cause after that lesson they'll hang back a while afore follerin'."

"That's good generalship," said Boyd.

Will was already urging forward the animals, which, frightened by the shots, were making speed of their own accord toward the pass. The hunter and the Little Giant followed at a more leisurely gait, with their rifles ready to beat off pursuit. Some shots were fired from the bushes, but they fell short, and the two laughed in disdain.

"They'll have to do a lot better than that, won't they, Giant?" said the hunter.

"A powerful sight better, but they'll hope to slip up on us in the dark. It hurts my feelin's to hev to shoot any more of 'em, or to shoot anybody, but I'm afeard I'll hev to do it, Jim Boyd, afore we git through with this here piece o' business."

"In that case, Giant, just let your feelings go and shoot your best."

Will still led on, and, though his heart beat as hard as ever, it was more from the exertion of climbing than from apprehension. He had seen the two wonderful shots of the Little Giant, he knew what a wonderful marksman Boyd was also, and he felt since they were within the shelter of the pass, their three rifles might keep off any number of Sioux.

The shallow gully up which they were travelling now narrowed rapidly, and soon they were deep in the looming shadow of the pass, which seemed to end blindly farther on. But for the present it was a Heaven-sent refuge. At one point, where it widened somewhat, the horses and mules could stand, and there was even a little grass for them. A rill of water from the high rocks was a protection against what they had to fear most of all, thirst, and the three human beings in turn drank freely from it, letting the animals follow.

Boyd deftly tethered the horses and mules to bushes that grew at the foot of the cliff in the wide space, and then he joined the other two, who, lying almost flat, were watching at the entrance to the pass. The rocks there also gave them fine protection, and they felt they had reached a fort which would test all the ingenuity, patience and courage of the Sioux.

Will drew back behind a stony upthrust, sat up and used his glasses, searching everywhere among the rocks and bushes down the pass.

"What do you see, Young William?" asked the Little Giant.

"Nothing yet, Tom, except the bushes, the stones and the slopes of the

mountains far across the valley."

"Nor you won't see nothin' fur some time. Took to cover, they hev. An' I don't blame 'em, either. We wouldn't be anxious ourselves to walk up ag'inst the mouths o' rifles that don't miss, an' Indians, bein' smart people, don't risk their lives when thar's nothin' to be gained."

"Then how are they going to get at us?"

"Not straight-away, but by means o' tricks."

"What tricks?"

"I don't know. Ef they wuz so plain ez all that they wouldn't be tricks. We'll hev to be patient."

All three of them drew back into the mouth of the pass, where they found abundant shelter behind the stony outcrops, while the Sioux, who lay hidden in the undergrowth farther down the slope, would be compelled to advance over open ground, if they made a rush. Young Clarke's confidence grew. That wonderful sharpshooting feat of the Little Giant was still in his mind. In such a position and with such marksmen as Boyd and Bent, they could not be overwhelmed.

"Take them glasses o' yourn, young William," said the Little Giant, "an' see ef you can pick out any o' the Sioux down the slope."

Will was able to trace three or four warriors lying down among the short cedars, apparently waiting with illimitable patience for any good idea that might suggest itself. The others, though out of sight, were certainly near and he was wondering what plan might occur to them.

"Do you think it likely that they know the pass?" he asked Boyd.

"Hardly," replied the hunter. "They are mountain Sioux, but on the whole they prefer the plains."

"Maybe they think then that they can wait, or at least hold us until we are overcome by thirst!"

"No, the little stream of water breaks a way down the slope somewhere, and when they find it they'll know that it comes from the pass. I think they'll attack, but just how and when is more'n I can say. Now, Will, will you go back where the animals are and cook us a good supper, including coffee? When you're besieged it's best to keep yourself well fed and strong. I saw plenty of dead wood

there, tumbled from the cliffs above."

Young Clarke, knowing that he was not needed now at the mouth of the pass, was more than glad to undertake the task, since waiting was hard work.

He found the horses and mules lying down, and they regarded him with large, contemplative eyes as he lighted the fire and began to cook supper. The animals were on the best of terms, constituting a happy family, and the eyes with which they regarded Will seemed to him to be the eyes of wisdom.

"Shall we get safely out of this?" he asked, addressing himself to the animal circle.

Either it was fact, or his imagination was uncommonly lively, as he saw six large heads nod slowly and with dignity, but with emphasis.

"All of us?"

The six heads again moved slowly and with dignity.

"And with you, our faithful four-footed friends, and with the packs that are so needful to us?"

The six heads nodded a little faster, but with the same dignity. Will was just putting the coffee on to boil when he asked the last question and received the last answer, and he stopped for a moment to stare at the six animals, which were still regarding him with their large, contemplative eyes. Could he refuse to believe what he thought he saw? If fancy were not fact it often became fact a little later. Those were certainly honest beasts and he knew by experience that they were truthful, too, because he had never yet caught them in a lie. Animals did not know how to lie, wherein they were different from human beings, and while human beings were not prophets, at least in modern times, animals, for all he knew, might be, and he certainly intended to believe that the six, for the present, enjoyed the prophetic afflatus.

"I accept the omens as you give them," he said aloud. "From this moment I dismiss from my mind all doubt concerning the present affair."

Then he found himself believing his own words. The omens continued to be favorable. The coffee boiled with uncommon readiness and the strips of venison that he fried over the coals gave forth an aroma of unparalleled richness. Filling two large tin cups with the brown fluid he carried them to the watchers at the mouth of the pass, who drained them, each at a single draught.

"Best you ever made, Will," said Boyd.

"Ez good ez anybody ever made, young William," said the Little Giant.

"Now I'll bring you strips of venison and crackers," said Will, much pleased, "and after you've eaten them you can have another cup of coffee apiece."

His little task, his success at it, and the praise of his comrades cheered him wonderfully. When he had taken them the second cups of coffee and had also served himself, he put out the coals, picked up his rifle and rejoined the others. The first faint breath of the twilight was appearing over the mountains. The great ridges and peaks were growing dim and afar the wind of night was moaning.

"It'll be dark soon," said the Little Giant, "an' then we'll hev to watch with all our eyes an' all our ears. Onless the Sioux attack under kiver o' the night they won't attack at all."

"They'll come. Don't you worry about that, Tom," said Boyd. "The Sioux are as brave fighters as any that tread the earth, and they want our scalps bad, particularly yours. If I was an Indian and loved scalps as they do, I'd never rest until I got yours. The hair is so thick and it stands up so much, I'd give it a place of honor in my tepee, and whenever my warrior friends came in for a sociable evening's talk I'd tell 'em how I defeated you in battle and took your scalp, which is the king scalp."

"It's a comply-ment you make me to call my scalp the king scalp, but no Indian will ever take it. Do you see something stirring down thar 'mong the little cedars? Young William, them glasses o' yourn a minute or two."

He made a careful study with the glasses, and, when he handed them back, he announced:

"They're movin' 'mong the cedars. I made out at least a half dozen thar. Ez soon ez it's good an' dark they're goin' to try to creep up on us. Well, let 'em. We kin see pretty nigh ez good in the dark ez in the light, can't we, Jim Boyd?"

"I reckon we can see good enough, Giant, to draw a bead on anything that comes creeping, creeping after our hair."

Again Will felt pride that he was associated with two such formidable champions of the wild, but he did not let pride keep him from selecting a good high stony outcrop behind which he lay with his rifle ready and his revolver loose in his belt. Now and then, however, he held his rifle in only one hand and used the glasses so valuable to him, and which he was beginning to prize so highly.

Much time passed, however, and it passed slowly. Young Clarke realized that the other name for the Sioux was patience, but it was hard on his nerves, nevertheless. He wanted to talk, he longed to ask questions of the two borderers, but his will kept him from doing so. He was resolved not to appear nervous or garrulous at such a time.

The night deepened. The twilight had passed long since. Many of the stars did not come out and heavy waves of dusk rolled up the valley. The slopes of the opposite mountain became invisible, nor did Will see the dwarf cedars in which his glasses told him a portion of the Sioux band had lain hidden.

The time was so long that his muscles felt stiff and sore, and he stretched arms and legs vigorously to restore the circulation. Moreover the elevation was so great that it was growing quite cold in the pass, and he became eager for the warriors to attack if they were going to attack at all. But he remembered the saying that patience was only another name for Sioux and steeled his heart to endure.

The three were lying close together, all behind rocky upthrusts, and after a space that seemed a thousand years or so to Will the Little Giant edged toward him and whispered:

"Young William, you wouldn't mind lendin' me them glasses o' yourn once more?"

"As often as you like, Giant."

"Hand 'em over, then. Even ef it's night they've got a way o' cuttin' through the dark, an' I feel it's 'bout time now fur the Sioux to be comin'. They like to jump on an unsuspectin' foe 'bout midnight."

He took an unusually long look and handed the glasses back to Will. Then he whispered to both the lad and the hunter:

"I could make 'em out snakin' theirselves up the pass nigh flat on the rock."

"They hope to get so near in the dark that they can spring up and rush us."

"I reckon that's jest 'bout thar game, but them glasses o' young William's hev done give them away already. The Sioux hev fixed everythin' mighty careful, an' jest one thing that chance hez give us, young William's glasses, is goin' to upset 'em. Take a look, Jim."

"I can see 'em, so many dark spots moving, always moving up the pass and making no noise at all. Now, Will, you look, and after that we'll make ready with

the rifles."

Will through the glasses saw them quite plainly now, more than a score of dark figures, advancing slowly but quite steadily. He threw the glasses over his shoulder and took up his rifle with both hands.

"Not yet, young William," said the Little Giant. "We don't want to waste any bullets, and so we'll wait until Jim gives the word. Ev'ry army needs a leader. Thar ain't but three in this army, but it hez to hev a leader jest the same and Jim Boyd is the man."

Will waited motionless, but he could not keep his heart from beating hard, as the Sioux, ruthless and bold, came forward silently to the attack. He did not have the infinite wilderness experience of the older two which had hardened them to every form of danger, and his imagination was alive and leaping. The dusky forms which he could now faintly see with the naked eye were increased by fancy threefold and four, and his eager finger slipped to the trigger of his rifle. He was sure they ought to fire now. The Sioux were certainly near enough! If they came any closer before meeting the bullets of the defense they would have a good chance to spring up and make a victorious rush. But the word to fire did not come. He glanced at their leader, and Boyd was still calmly watching.

The three lay very close together, and Will heard the hunter whisper to the Little Giant:

"How much nearer do you think I ought to let 'em come, Tom?"

"'Bout ten feet more, I reckon, Jim. Then though it's night, thar would be no chance fur a feller to miss, onless he shet his eyes, an' we want all our bullets to hit. Indians, even the bravest, don't like to rush riflemen that are ez good ez a batt'ry. Ef we strike 'em mighty hard the first time they'll fall back on tricks an' waitin'."

"Good sound reasoning, Tom. You hear, Will. Be sure you don't miss."

"I won't," replied the lad. Nevertheless those ten minutes, every one of them, had a way of spinning themselves out in such an extraordinary manner that his nerves began to jump again, and it required a great effort of the will to keep them quiet. The black shadows were approaching. They had passed over a stretch of rough ground that he had marked four or five minutes before, and the outlines of the figures were growing more distinct. He chose one on the extreme right for his aim. He could not yet see his features, of course, but he was quite certain that they were ugly and that the man was a warrior wicked beyond belief. Before he

could fire upon anyone from ambush it was necessary for him to believe the man at whom he aimed to be utterly depraved, and the situation created at once such a belief in his mind.

He kept his eye steadily upon the ugly and wicked warrior, and as he watched for his chance and awaited the word from Boyd all scruples about firing disappeared from his mind. It was that warrior's life or his, and the law of self-preservation controlled. Nearer and yet nearer they came and the time had grown interminable when the hunter suddenly said in a low voice:

"Fire!"

Young Clarke pulled the trigger with a sure aim. He saw the hideous warrior draw himself into a bunch that sprang convulsively upward, but which, when it fell, lay back, outspread and quiet. Then he fired at a second figure, but he was not sure that he hit. The hunter and the Little Giant were already sending in their third and fourth bullets, with deadly aim, Will was sure, and the Sioux, after one mighty yell, wrenched from them by rage, surprise and fear, were fleeing down the pass under the fierce hail from the repeating rifles.

In a half minute all the shadows, save those outlined darkly on the ground, were gone, and there was complete and utter silence, while the light smoke from the rifles drifted about aimlessly, there being no wind. The three did not speak, but slipping in fresh cartridges continued to gaze down the pass. Then Will heard a wild, shrill scream behind him that made him leap a foot from the ground, and that set all his nerves trembling. The next moment he was laughing at himself. One of the horses had neighed in terror at the firing, and there are few things more terrifying than the terrified shriek of a horse.

"Maybe you'd better go back and see 'em, Will," said Boyd. "They may need quieting. I've noticed that you've a gentle hand with horses, and that they like you."

"And mules too," said the Little Giant. "Mine hev already taken a fancy for young William. But mules are much abused critters. You treat 'em well an' they'll treat you well, which is true of all tame animals."

Young Clarke suspected that they were sending him back to steady his own nerves as well as those of the animals after such a fierce encounter, but if so he was glad they had the thought. He was willing enough to go.

"Nothing will happen while you're gone," said Boyd cheerfully. "The Sioux, of course, would try to rush us again if they knew you were away, but they won't

know it."

Will crawled until he came to a curve of the cliff that would hide him from any hidden Indian marksman, and then he rose to his feet, glad that he was able to stand upright. He found the horses and mules walking about uneasily at the ends of their lariats, but a few consoling strokes from him upon their manes quieted all of them, and, if they found comfort in his presence, he also found comfort in theirs.

Then he kneeled and drank at the rill, as if he had been parching in a desert for days.



CHAPTER V

THE WHITE DOME

The tide of cool water restored Will's nerves. After drinking he bathed his face in it, and then poured it over his neck. Good as he knew water to be he had never known that it could be so very good. It was in truth the wine of life. He shook out his thick hair, wet from the rill, and said triumphantly and aloud to the animals:

"We beat 'em back, Jim Boyd, the Little Giant and me, and we can do it again. We beat back a whole band of the Sioux nation, and we defy 'em to come on again. And you predicted it, all six of you! And you predict that we'll do it a second time, don't you?"

He was in a state of great spiritual exaltation, seeing things that others might not have seen, and he distinctly saw the six wise heads of the brutes, dumb but knowing so much, nod in affirmation.

"I accept the omen!" he said, some old scrap of Latin translation coming into his mind, "and await the future with absolute confidence!"

The horses and mules, stirred at first by the shots, and then not caring, perhaps, to rest, began to graze. All sign of alarm was gone from them and Will's heart resumed its normal beat. He listened attentively, but no sound came from the pass where his comrades, those deadly sharpshooters, watched. Far overhead the cliffs towered, and over them a sky darkly blue. He looked at it a little while, and then went back to the pass.

He had left his glasses with them, and they had not been able to discover anything suspicious.

"They won't come again into the mouth of the pass," said Boyd with confidence. "That rush cost 'em too much. They'll spend a long time thinking up some sort of trick, and that being the case you go now, Giant, and have a drink at the stream, and pour water over your head and face as Will has done."

"So I will, Jim. I'm noticing that young William has a lot o' sense, an' after I've 'tended to myself fine I'll come back, an' you kin do ez much fur yourself. A good bathin' o' your face won't hurt your beauty, Jim."

He was gone a half hour, not hurrying back, because he felt there was no need to do so. Meanwhile Will lay behind his rock and watched the dusky pass. Wisps of vapor and thin clouds were floating across the heavens, hiding some of the stars, and the light was not as good as it had been earlier in the night, but constant use and habit enable one to see through the shadows, and he also had the glasses to fall back upon. But even with their aid he could discern nothing save the stony steep.

"They won't come again, not that way, as I told you before," said Boyd, when young Clarke put down his glasses after the tenth searching look. "When they made the rush they expected to have a warrior or two hit, but they didn't know the greatest marksman in all the world, the Little Giant, was here waiting for 'em, and if I do say it myself, I'm as good with the rifle as anybody in the west, except Tom, and you're 'way above the average too, Will. No, they've had enough of charging, but I wish to heaven I knew what wicked trick they're thinking out now."

The Little Giant returned, bathed, refreshed and joyous.

"Your turn now, Jim," he said, "an' you soak your head an' face good in the water. Don't dodge it because you think thar ain't plenty o' water, 'cause thar is. It keeps on a-runnin' an' a-runnin', an' it never runs out. Stay ez long ez you want to, 'cause young William an' me kin hold the pass ag'inst all the confederated tribes o' the Sioux nation, an' the Crows an' the Cheyennes an' the Blackfeet throwed in."

Boyd departed and presently he too returned, strengthened anew for any task.

"Now, Will," he said, "you being the youngest, and it's only because you're the youngest, you'd better go back there where the horses and mules are. They've got over their fright and are taking their rest again. They appear to like you, to look upon you as a kind of comrade, and I think it's about time you took a bit of rest with them."

"But don't hev a nightmare an' kick one o' my mules," said the Little Giant, "'cause the best tempered mule in the world is likely to kick back ag'in."

Will smiled. He knew their raillery was meant to cheer him up, because of his inexperience, and their desperate situation. He recognized, too, that it would be better for him to sleep if he could, as they were more than sufficient to guard the pass.

"All right," he said. "I obey orders."

"Good night to you," said the hunter.

"Good night," said the Little Giant, "an' remember not to kick one o' my mules in your sleep."

"I won't," replied Will, cheerfully, as he went around the curve of the wall.

He found the horses and mules at rest, and everything very quiet and peaceful in the alcove. The rill murmured a little in its stony bed, and, far overhead, he heard the wind sighing among the trees on the mountain. He chose a place close to the wall, spread two blankets there, on which he expected to lie, and prepared to cover himself with two more. He realized now that he was tired to the bone, but it was not a nervous weariness and sleep would cure it almost at once.

He was arranging the two blankets that were to cover him, when he heard a rumbling noise far over his head. At first he thought it was distant thunder echoing along the ridges, but the wisps of cloud were too light and thin to indicate any storm. He saw the horses and mules rise in alarm, and then not one but several of them gave out shrill and terrible neighs of terror, a volume of frightened sound that made young Clarke's heart stand still for a moment.

The sound which was not that of thunder, but of something rolling and crashing, increased with terrific rapidity, stopped abruptly for a moment or two and then a huge dark object shooting down in front of his eyes, struck the ground with mighty impact. It seemed to him that the earth trembled. He sprang back several feet and all the horses and mules, rearing in alarm, crouched against the cliff.

A great boulder lay partly buried. It had rolled from the edge of the cliff high above, and he divined at once that the Sioux had made it roll. They had climbed the stony mountains enclosing the defile, and were opening a bombardment, necessarily at random, but nevertheless terrible in its nature. While he hesitated, not knowing what to do, a second boulder thundered, bounded and crashed into the chasm. But it struck much farther away.

The Little Giant came running at the sound, leaving Boyd on guard at the mouth of the pass, and as he arrived a third rock struck, though, like the second, at a distance, and he knew without any words from Will, what the Sioux were now trying to do. As he looked up, a fourth crashed down, and it fell very near.

"So that's thar trick?" exclaimed the Little Giant. "Simple ez you please, but ez dang'rous ez a batt'ry o' cannon. Look out, young William, thar's another."

It struck so close to Will that he felt the shock and ran back to the shelter of

the overhanging cliff, where, driven by instinct, the horses and mules were already crowding. Nor did the Little Giant, brave as he was, hesitate to follow him.

"When you're shot at out o' the sky," he said, "the best thing to do is to go into hidin'. One ain't wholly under cover here, but it ud be a long chance ef any o' them rocks got us."

"What about Jim, watching at the mouth of the pass?"

"He won't stir until he hears from me. He'll set thar, unmoved, with his rifle ready, waitin' fur the Sioux jest ez ef he expected them to come. I'll slip back an' tell him to keep on waitin', also what's goin' on in here."

"Skip fast then! Look out! That barely missed you! They're sending the rocks down in showers now."

The Little Giant, as agile as a greyhound, vanished around the curve, and Will instinctively crowded himself closely and more closely against the stone wall while the dangerous bombardment went on. The animals, their instinct still guiding them, were doing the same, and Boyd's brave Selim, which was next to him, reached out his head and nuzzled Will's hand, as if he found strength and protection in the presence of the human being, who knew so much more about some things than he or his comrades did. Will responded at once.

"I don't think they can get us here, Selim, old boy," he said. "The projection of the wall is slight, but it sends every rock out toward the center. Now, if you and your comrades will only be intelligent you'll keep safe."

He arranged them in a row along the wall, where none would interfere with the protection of another, and standing with Selim's nose in his hand, watched the great rocks strike. Luckily at that particular point the bottom of the defile was soft earth and they sank into it, but farther up they fell with a crash on a stony floor, and when they did not split to pieces they bounded and rebounded like ricocheting cannon balls.

The Little Giant returned presently, but as yet no damage had been done, although the bombardment was going on as furiously as ever.

"They'll keep it up awhile," he said, as he huddled against the wall by the side of Will. "I knowed they would be up to some trick, but I didn't think 'bout them boulders that lay thick on the mounting. They hev got 'nuff ammunition o' that kind to last a year, but arter a while thar arms will grow tired, an' then they'll grow tired too, o' not knowin' whether they hit or not. It wears out the best man

in the world to keep on workin' forever an' forever without knowin' whether he's accomplishin' anything or not. All we've got to do is to hug the wall an' set tight."

"Wouldn't it be well, Giant, when the bombardment lets up, to gather together our own little army and take to flight up the pass?"

"An' whar would we fetch up?"

"It's not likely to be a box canyon. I've read that they abound more in the southern mountains, and are not met with very often here. And even if the pass itself didn't take us out we might find a cross canyon or a slope that we could climb."

"Sounds good, young William. We'll git the hosses an' mules ready, packs on 'em, and bridles in thar mouths, an' ez soon ez the arms an' sperrits o' the Sioux git tired, I'll hot foot after Jim, an' then we'll gallop up the pass."

The Little Giant's psychology was correct. In a half hour the bombardment began to decrease in violence, and in ten more minutes it ceased entirely. Then, according to plan, he ran to the mouth of the pass and returned with the hunter, who had promptly accepted their plan. Coaxing forth the reluctant animals, which were still in fear, they set off up the great defile, passing among the boulders, some of great size, which had been tumbled down in search of their heads.

"Thar's one consolation," said the Little Giant, philosophically, "ef any o' them big rocks had hit our heads we wouldn't hev been troubled with wounds. My skull's hard, but it would hev been shattered like an eggshell."

"They may begin again," said Boyd, "but by then we ought to be far away."

It was a venture largely at random, but the three were agreed that it must be made. The Sioux undoubtedly would resume the bombardment later on, and they might also receive reinforcements sufficient to resume the attack at the mouth of the pass, or at least to keep up there a distant fire that would prove troublesome. Every motive prompted to farther flight, and they pushed on as fast as they could, although the bottom of the defile became rough, sown with boulders and dangerous to the fugitives.

They made no attempt to ride, but led the horses and mules at the ends of their lariats, all the animals becoming exceedingly wary at the bad footing.

"It's a blind canyon after all!" suddenly exclaimed the Little Giant in deep

disgust. "The stream comes down that mountain wall thar, droppin' from ledge to ledge, an' here we are headed off."

"Then there's nothing to do," said the hunter, "but choose a good place among the rocks and fight for our lives when they come."

Will looked up at the steep and lofty slopes on either side. The one on the right seemed less steep and lofty than the other, and upon it hung a short growth of pine and cedar, characteristic of the region. His spirit, which danger had made bold and venturesome, seized upon an idea.

"Why not go up the slope on the right?" he asked.

"It's like the side of a house, only many times as high," said Boyd in amazement.

"But it isn't," said the lad. "It merely looks so in the dark. We can climb it."

"Of course we could, but we'd have to abandon the horses and mules and all our packs and stores, and then where would we be?"

"But we won't have to leave 'em. They can climb too. You know how you boasted of our horses, and the Giant's horses are mules which can go anywhere."

"I believe the boy's right," said the Little Giant. "By our pullin' on the lariats an' thar takin' advantage o' ev'ry footgrip, they might do it. Leastways we kin try it."

"It's a desperate chance," said the hunter, "but I think with you, Tom, that it's worth trying. Now, boys, make fast the packs to the last strap, and up we go."

"Bein' as my hosses are mules," said the Little Giant, "I'll lead the way, an' you foller, each feller pullin' on two lariats."

He started up the slope, whistling gayly but low to his mules, and, after some hesitation, they attacked the ascent, Tom still whistling to them in his most cheerful and engaging manner. There was a sound of scrambling feet, and small stones rolled down, but not the mules, which disappeared from sight among the cedars.

"Thunderation! I wouldn't have thought it!" exclaimed the hunter, "but I believe you're right, Will! The mules are climbing the wall. Now, we'll see if the horses can do it!"

"Let me start with 'em!"

"All right! But pull hard on the lariat, whenever you feel one of 'em slipping."

Will attacked the steep wall with vigor, but he had to pull very hard indeed on the lariats before he could make the horses try it. Finally they made the effort, and, though slipping and sliding at times, they crept up the slope. Behind him he heard Boyd, coming with the last two and speaking in encouraging tones to Selim.

The lariats were a great help, and if Will had not hung on to them so hard his horses would have fallen. But he was right in his judgment that the face of the wall was not so steep as it looked. Moreover there were little shelves and gullies, and the tough clumps of cedar were a wonderful aid. The horses justified their reputation as climbers, and, although Will's heart was in his mouth more than once, and his hands and wrists were cut and bleeding by the pull on the lariats, they did not fall. Always he heard in front of him the low and cheerful whistling of the Little Giant, to his mules, which, sure-footed, went on almost without a slip.

At last they drew out upon the crest of the slope and the three human beings and the six animals stood there trembling violently from exertion, the perspiration pouring from them.

"My legs are shaking under me," said the hunter. "I'd never have believed that it could have been done, and I know it couldn't, but here we are, anyhow."

"It wuz young William who thought of it, and who dared to speak of it," said the Little Giant, "an' so it's his win."

"Right you are, Giant," said the hunter heartily. "When I looked at that cliff it stood up straight as a wall to me. It was like most other things, it wasn't as hard when you attacked it as you thought it was, but I still don't see how we ever got the animals up, and if I didn't see 'em standing here I wouldn't believe it."

Will, holding to a cedar, looked into the gulf from which they had climbed. As more of the stars had gone away he could not now see the bottom. The great defile had all the aspects of a vast and bottomless abyss, and he felt that their emergence from it was a marvel, a miracle in which they had been assisted by some greater power. He was assailed by a weakness and, trembling, he drew back from the ledge. But neither the hunter nor the Little Giant had seen his momentary collapse and he was glad, pardonable though it was.

"The ground back o' the cliff seems to be pretty well covered with forest," said the Little Giant, "an' I reckon we'd better stay here a spell 'til everybody, men an' animals, git rested up a bit."

"You never spoke truer words, Tom Bent," said Boyd. "I can make out a fairly level stretch of ground just ahead, and I'll lead the way to it."

They crouched there. "Crouch" is the only word that describes it, as the horses and mules themselves sank down through weariness, and their masters, too, were glad enough to lie on the earth and wait for their strength to come back. Will's senses, despite his exhaustion, were nevertheless acute. He heard a heavy, lumbering form shuffling through a thicket, and he knew that it was an alarmed bear moving from the vicinity of the intruders. He heard also the light tread of small animals.

"I judge from these sounds," said Boyd, "that we must be on a sort of plateau of some extent. If it was just a knife edge ridge between two chasms you wouldn't find so many animals here. Maybe we'd better lay by until day, or until it's light enough to see. In the dark we might tumble into some place a thousand feet deep."

"What about the Sioux who were on the heights throwing down the rocks?" asked Will. "Mightn't they come along the cliff and find us here?"

"No. The way may be so cut by dips and ravines that it's all but impassable. The chances are a thousand to one in favor of it, as this is one of the roughest countries in the world."

"A thousand to one is good enough for me," said Will, stretching himself luxuriously on the ground. Presently he saw Boyd and Bent wrapping themselves in the blankets and he promptly imitated them, as a cold wind was beginning to blow down from the northwest, a wind that cut, and, at such a time, a lack of protection from the weather might be fatal.

The warmth from the blankets pervaded his frame, and with the heat came the restoration of his nerves. There was also a buoyancy caused by the escape from the Sioux, and, for the time being at least, he felt a certain freedom from care. His comrades and the animals did not stir, and, while not thinking of sleep, he fell asleep just the same.

He was awakened by a long, fierce shout, much like the howl of hungry wolves, and full of rage and disappointment. He sat up on his blankets, and was amazed to hear the two men laughing softly.

"It's them thar Sioux, Will," said the Little Giant. "They've found out at last that thar was no outlet at the end o' the pass, an' they've come up it to the end, jest to run ag'inst a blank wall, an' to find that we've plum' vanished, flew away,

hosses an' mules an' all."

"But won't they find our trail up the cliff?"

"No, they won't dream o' sech a thing, but in case they do dream o' it we'll all three creep to the edge an' set thar with our repeatin' rifles. A fine time they'd hev climbin' up thar in the face o' three sharpshooters armed with sech weapons ez ours."

Will saw at once that their position was well nigh impregnable, at least against foes in the defile, and he crept with the others to the edge, not forgetting his invaluable glasses. A lot of the stars had come back and with the aid of the powerful lenses, he was able to penetrate the depths of the pass, seeing there at least a score of Sioux in a group, apparently taking counsel with one another. He could not discern their faces, and, of course, their words were inaudible at the distance, but their gestures expressed perplexity. Their savage minds might well believe that witchcraft had been at work, and he hoped that they had some such idea. The climbing of the cliff by the animals was an achievement bordering so closely upon the impossible that even if they saw traces of the hoofs on the lower slopes they would think the spirits of the air had come down to help the fugitives.

"What are they doing, young William?" asked the Little Giant.

"Nothing that I can see except to talk as if puzzled."

"I almost wish they would strike our trail and start up the cliff. We could pick off every one of 'em before they reached the top."

"I'd rather they went back."

"That's what they're likely to do, young William. Even if they saw our trail going up the cliff, they won't follow it. They've had a taste of our marksmanship, an' they know it would be certain death. It looks to me ez if they wuz goin' to drift back down the trail."

"You judge right, Tom. There they go. I wish I could read the expression on their faces. They must be wild with rage. They're moving a little faster now, and the sooner they disappear from my sight the better."

He handed the glasses to the Little Giant, who, after taking a look, passed them to Boyd. The hunter had the last glimpse of them as they turned a curve and were hidden by the rocky wall.

"That settles 'em, for the time, anyway," he said, "and now I think we'd better

see what kind of a country we've come into. You stay here with the animals, Will, they like you and it's easy for you to keep 'em quiet, while Giant and me scout about and see the lay of the land."

Will promptly accepted his part of the task. The horses and mules, alarmed perhaps by such a wild and lonely situation, and tremulous, too, from memories of that frightful climb up the cliff, crowded close about him, while he stroked their noses and manes, and felt himself their protector.

The hunter and the Little Giant vanished without noise, and Will waited a full hour before either returned. But he was not lonesome. The horses and mules rubbed their noses against him, and in the dark and the wilderness they made evident their feeling that he was the one who would guard them.

The noise of a light footstep sounded and the hunter, who had gone south, stood before him.

"It's good news I bring," said Boyd. "We're cut off to the south by a cliff that no one can climb, and it seems to run away toward the west for countless miles. The Sioux can't reach us from that direction. Ah, here is Tom! What has he to say?"

"What I hev to say is always important," replied the Little Giant, "but this time its importance is speshul. A couple o' miles to the north a great transverse pass runs out o' the main one, an' cuts off toward the west. It's deep an' steep an' I reckon it bars the way thar."

"That being the case, we're on a peninsula," said Boyd, "and this peninsula rises in the west toward very high mountains. I can see a white dome off in that direction."

"All these facts now bein' diskivered," said the Little Giant, "I think we've shook off them Sioux fur good, though thar ain't no tellin' when we'll run afoul another bunch. But we'll take the good things the moment hez give us, an' look fur what we need, wood, water an' grass."

"Wood we have all about us," said Will. "Water is bound to be plentiful in these forested mountains, and we may strike grass by daylight."

They began an advance, making it very cautious, owing to the extremely rough nature of the country, and all their caution was needed, as they had to cross several ravines, and the ground was so broken that a misstep at any time might have proved serious. In this manner they made several miles and the general trend of the ground was a rapid ascent. Toward dawn they came to a

brook flowing very fast, and they found its waters almost as cold as ice. Will judged it to be a glacial stream issuing from the great white dome, now plainly visible, though far ahead.

A short distance beyond the stream they found an open space with grass for the animals, and very glad, too, they were to reach it, as they were shaken by their immense exertions and the hard trail in the dark.

"This valley jest had to be here," said the Little Giant, "'cause we couldn't hev stood goin' on any more. The hosses an' mules theirselves are too tired to eat, but they will begin croppin' afore long."

"And it's so cold up here I think we'd better light a fire and have warm food," said Boyd. "We can smother the smoke, and anyway it will pay us to run the risk."

It was a task soon done, and long before breakfast was finished the horses and mules were peacefully grazing. Will then took his rifle and examined the country himself in some detail, going as far as the great precipice on the south. It was not a gulch or ravine, but the ground dropped down suddenly three or four hundred feet. Beyond that the forest extended as before.

The view to the west was magnificent and majestic beyond description. Up, up rose the slope, cliff on cliff and the imperial white dome beyond! That way, too, apparently, they had to go, as they were cut off by the precipices on all other sides, and at the moment Will felt no particular sorrow because of it. The gold had taken a second place in his mind, and with these two wise and brave comrades of his he would penetrate the great mysteries of the west. The southward turn into the plains, following the diagram of the map, could wait.

When he returned to the camp he found the animals still grazing and his comrades sitting by the fire, which had now burned down to a bed of coals.

"I don't see anything for us to do except to go straight on toward the great snow mountain," he said.

"That's about the same conclusion that Tom and I have come to," said Boyd. "We're likely to get up pretty high, where it's winter all the year 'round, but it's better than running into the hands of the Sioux, or any of the mountain tribes. I vote, though, that this army of three spend the rest of the day here, and since storms gather at any time on these uplands, we'd better build another wickiup."

"An' make brush shelters for the animals, too," said the Little Giant.

The wickiup was built and they arranged crude, but nevertheless excellent, protection for the horses, a precaution that was soon justified, as it began to rain the following night, and they had alternating rain, snow and sleet for two days and two nights. The animals were able to dig enough grass from under the snow for sustenance, but most of the time they spent in the shelter devised for them. When the fair weather returned and the snow melted, they left the second wickiup, resuming the ascent of the mighty slopes. They were all restored by their rest, and despite the elevation and the wildness they were able to find plenty of forage for the animals.

"We've got to be mighty partic'ler with them hosses an' mules," said the Little Giant, "'cause even ef we should reach the mine without 'em we're bound to hev 'em to pack out the gold fur us. I expect we'll hev to ketch an' train 'bout twenty wild hosses, too, ez we'll need 'em fur all the gold that I'm countin' on findin'. Didn't you say thar was that much, young William?"

"I didn't give the exact amount," replied the lad, "nor do I suppose anyone can tell from surface indications how much gold there is in a mine, but from the word my father brought we'll need the twenty wild horses and more."

"O' course we will. I knowed it afore you said it. I've hunted gold fifteen to twenty years without findin' a speck, an' so it stands to reason that when I do find it I'll find a mountain of it."

Although the slope rose steadily, the ground, for the present, was not much cut up, and they were able to ride in comfort. Much of the country was beautiful and parklike. While far below there were endless brown plains, here were great forests, without much undergrowth, and cold, clear streams, running down from the vast snowy dome that always loomed ahead, and that never seemed to come any nearer.

"How high would you say that peak wuz, young William?" asked the Little Giant. "You're an eddicated lad, an' I reckon you know 'bout these things."

"You give me too much credit," laughed Will in reply. "One has to have instruments with which to calculate the height of mountains, and I couldn't do it even if I had the instruments, but I should say from what I've heard about the country and the tales of explorers that the peak we're looking at is about 14,000 feet high."

"I've seen it once before, though from the south," said Boyd, "and I've also met an exploring geographer kind of fellow who had seen it and who told me it rose close on to three miles above the sea. Different Indian tribes have different names for it, but I don't remember any of 'em."

"I think I'll call it the White Dome," said Will, examining it for the hundredth time through his glasses. "From here it looks like a round mountain, though it may have another shape, of course, on the other three sides. It's a fine mountain and as it's the first time I ever saw it I'm going to call it my peak. The forest is heavy and green clear up to the snow line, and beyond that I think I see a vast glacier."

Two days later they made another stop in a sheltered valley through which ran a mountain torrent. The hunter and the Little Giant shot two mule deer and a mountain sheep, and they considered the addition to their larder very welcome, as they had been making large inroads on their stores. The weather, too, had grown so cold that they kept a fire burning both day and night. Far over their heads they heard a bitter wind of the mountains blowing, and when Will climbed

out of the valley and turned his glasses toward the White Dome he could not see the peak, it was wrapped around so thoroughly by mists and vapors and falling snow.

They built the fire large and high on the second night, and as they sat around it they held a serious consultation. They feared incessant storms and blizzards if they rose to still higher levels, and attempted to pass around on the lofty slopes of the peak. It would, perhaps, be wiser to follow the torrent, and enter the plains below, braving the dangers of the Sioux.

"What good will the gold be to us if we're all froze to death under fifty feet o' snow?" asked the Little Giant.

"None at all," replied the hunter, "and it wouldn't be any good to us, either, if we was to slip down a precipice a thousand feet and fall on the rocks below."

Will shivered.

"I believe I'd rather be frozen to death in Tom's way," he said.

"Then I vote that in the morning, if the wind dies, we turn down the gorge and hunt the plains. What say you, Will?"

"It seems the wise thing to do."

"And you, Giant?"

"Me votin' last, the vote is unany-mous, an' I reckon ef we wuz to put it to the four hosses an' two mules they'd vote jest ez we're votin'. Tomorrow mornin', bright an' early, we start on our farewell journey from the mountings."

They had saved and tanned the skins of three black bears they had slain, and with big needles and pack thread they had turned them into crude overcoats with the hair inside. Now when they put them on they found them serviceable but heavy. At any rate, wrapped in furs they ceased to shiver, though the wind of the mountains was still exceedingly bitter.

Fortunately the gorge down which the stream flowed was wide, and, the descent not being too rapid, they were able to follow it a long time, though the pace was very slow. At points where the gorge narrowed, they took to the water, and were compelled to lead the animals with great care, lest they slip on the boulders that were thick in the bed of the stream.

When night came they were far down the mountain and there had been no accident, but they were wet to the waist, and as quickly as they could they

kindled a big and roaring fire in the lee of a cliff, careless whether or not it was seen by enemies. Then they roasted themselves before it, until every thread of clothing they wore was dry, ate heavily of their food and drank two or three cups of coffee apiece.

Only then did Will feel warmed thoroughly. The older men found a fairly level place with sparse grass for the horses, and then they put out their fire. They told the lad there was no need to keep a watch, and, wrapped in his bear overcoat and blankets, he slept in the shadow of the cliff. But the hunter had seen a trace which he believed to be a human footprint. When the Little Giant knelt in the dusk and looked at it he was of the same opinion.

"It's too faint, Jim," he said, "fur us to tell whether it wuz made by a white man or a red man."

"We don't care to meet either. If it's a white man it may be an outlaw, horse thief or murderer, and that's not the kind of people we want to join us on this gold hunt. If it's Indians, they're enemies, no matter to what tribe they belong."

"An' then, whichever it is, our repeatin' rifles are our best friends."



CHAPTER VI

THE OUTLAW

When Will awoke the next morning he did not open his eyes at once. The air was very cold, but he felt so snug in his bearskin and blankets that he had an immense temptation to turn on his other side and sleep a little more. Then, hearing the hum of voices he opened his eyes wide and sat up, seeing, to his great surprise, that the little party in the camp now numbered four instead of three.

He stared at the addition, who proved to be a man about thirty, tall and well built, with dark hair and dark eyes. He, too, carried a fine repeating rifle, but his dress was incongruous and striking. He wore a felt hat, broad of brim, with a heavy gilt cord around the crown. A jacket of dark red velvet with broad brass buttons enclosed his strong shoulders and body, but his costume was finished off with trousers, leggings and moccasins of tanned deerskin. Will saw the butt of a pistol and the hilt of a knife peeping from under the velvet jacket.

A strange costume, he thought, and, when he looked at the man more closely, his face also looked strange. It was that of a civilized human being, of a man who had come from the old, settled eastern regions, and yet it was not. The eyes, set rather close together, now and then showed green in the early dawn. Will judged that he was one who had become habituated to the wilderness, and, as he sat in a graceful attitude on a great stone, he certainly showed no signs that his surroundings oppressed him.

"Mr. Martin Felton, Will," said the hunter. "Mr. Felton, this is Mr. William Clarke, who is traveling with us."

Will stood up, the last trace of sleep gone from his eyes, and gazed at Felton. Perhaps this was a new comrade, turning their band to four, and strengthening it greatly. But when he glanced at the hunter and the Little Giant he did not see any great warmth of welcome in their eyes.

"Traveling, young sir!" said Felton in a lightly ironic tone. "You seem to prefer paths of peril. I would not say that this is exactly a safe region for tourists."

Now Will was quite sure he would be no addition to their party. He liked

neither his tone nor his manner.

"It's true there is plenty of danger," he replied. "But, as I take it, there is no more for me than there is for you."

"The lad has put it very well, Mr. Felton," said the hunter. "However much we may be seeing the sights in these regions, our risks are no greater than yours are."

Felton, seeming not to notice him, continued, looking directly at Will:

"You're right to ask the question, but I can say in answer that your dangers are greater than mine. I have no trouble with the Sioux. I don't think any Indian warrior within a thousand miles of us wants my scalp."

"It was our information that they had declared war upon all white people who entered this country. How does it happen that you're immune?"

Felton smiled, and, in the lad's opinion, it was not a pleasant smile.

"I've been among the Sioux when they were not at war with us," he replied. "I've done them some good deeds. I've set a broken bone or two for them—I've a little surgical skill—and Mahpeyalute, whom we call Red Cloud, has assured me that no harm will ever be done to me. For that reason I'm wandering among these mountains and on the plains. I noticed on one of your horses picks, shovels and other mining implements, and I thought you might combine gold hunting with sight seeing. I'm something of a gold hunter myself and it occurred to me that we could combine forces. I've heard vaguely about a huge gold lead much farther west, and we four might make a strong party, able to reach it despite the Indian troubles."

The lad's heart beat the note of alarm and of hostility. Was it possible that this man knew anything of his father's great mine? He had to exchange only a few sentences with him to understand that he was not wanted as a fourth partner in the venture.

"Mr. Bent looks for gold casually," he replied, "but our main object is hunting and exploration. I doubt whether we'd want to take on anything else, though we thank you for your offer, Mr. Felton."

Felton did not seem at all disconcerted. He made upon Will the impression of persistency and of great strength, although the strength might be for evil.

"And so you don't think four are better than three," he said.

"That was not what I implied," replied Will. "What I meant to say was that our party was made up. Isn't that the way you feel about it, Mr. Boyd?"

"My feelings to a T," replied the hunter.

"And yours, Mr. Bent?"

"You express my state o' mind to perfection, young William. Mr. Felton is the finest gentleman we hev met in the mountings since we met that band o' Sioux, but when a band is made up it's made up."

"Very well, gentlemen," said Felton, no anger showing in his tone. "I will not force myself upon anybody, but I'm no egotist, even if I do say you're the losers. My knowledge of the region and my friendship with the Sioux would be of great advantage to you, would be of so much advantage, in fact, that it would make me worth more than a fourth share in all the gold we might find. But, as I said, I will not stay where I'm not wanted. Good day!"

He strode away among the bushes, and for some distance they saw him descending the side of the mountain, to disappear at last in a forest of ash. Then the hunter and the Little Giant looked at each other significantly.

"We saw a footprint of his last night, Will," said Boyd, "but he came himself this morning, just at dawn. We can't quite make him out. Why does he talk of a great mine for which we're looking? Do you think your father ever mentioned it to anyone else?"

"Not that I ever heard. It must be only a guess, based on the sight of the Little Giant's tools. Did you ever see or hear of this man before?"

"No, but I know he's no friend of ours. There are renegades and desperadoes in these mountains, who make friends with the Indians, and I judge he's one of that kind. I'm mighty sorry we've run across him. He may have a band of his own somewhere, or he may go straight to the Sioux with news of us."

"He suspects us of a great gold hunt, so great that we are ready to risk anything for it. He showed it."

"So he did, and in my opinion the band, that he almost certainly has, will undertake to follow us."

"I didn't like him the first minute I saw him," said the Little Giant. "The reason why I cannot tell, but I do not like thee, Mr. Felton. Haven't I heard a rhyme like that somewhere, young William?"

"Almost like it, Giant, and just like you, the first moment I laid eyes on him, I disliked him. I think he's a danger, a big danger, and so do both of you. I can tell it by the way you act. Now, what do you think we ought to do?"

"We're not to go down into the plains, that's sure," replied Boyd, "because then we'd run into Felton and his gang and maybe a band of Sioux also. There's only one thing open to us."

"Go back up the mountain?"

"That and nothing else. Felton will expect us to come on down, but we'll fool him by going the other way. There's always hiding in rough country and under the cover of great forests. In my opinion, we've both Indians and white men now to fight. We must meet their cunning united, and the nearer we get to Will's White Dome the safer we'll be."

"An' it's not so bad, after all!" exclaimed the Little Giant. "We'll go back and climb and climb till neither reds nor whites kin foller us."

"We'll have to go well above the snow line, and camp there awhile," said Boyd. "And if we were snowed in for a few weeks it wouldn't hurt, provided we find a well protected hollow. Then we'd be sure to shake off all pursuit."

"Come on, then," said Will, with enthusiasm. "It's the White Dome that offers us safety."

"The White Dome it is!" said the Little Giant, with energy.

They put back the packs and saddles and turned once more into the depths of the mountains, riding whenever it was possible, but when the way grew steep, leading the animals at the ends of the lariats. Will was rather glad, for many reasons, that they had abandoned the journey into the plains, as the gold mine, for the present at least, seemed scarcely a reality, and the vast peaks and ridges were far more interesting than the brown swells below, besides being safer. Moreover, the great White Dome loomed before him continually, and he had a certain pride in the thought that they would pass over its towering shoulder.

"I've been thinkin' mighty hard," said the Little Giant.

"Does it make your head ache much?" asked the hunter.

"Not in this case. It hurts sometimes, when I try to think forward, but not when I try to think back an' remember things. Then I've got somethin' to go on. I'm tryin' to rec'lect whether I ever met a feller who wuz ez unpleasant to my feelin's ez that thar Felton."

"I know I never did," said Will, with emphasis.

"Me neither," said the hunter. "I don't like men who wear velvet jackets with big brass buttons on 'em. Now I think the way is going to be pretty steep for a long distance, and I guess we'll have to walk. Lucky these horses and mules of ours are having so much experience in climbing mountains. They go up 'em like goats now."

Despite the skill of men and beasts as climbers they could not ascend at any great rate, although Will noticed that both his comrades were eager to get on. He fancied that the image of Felton was in their minds, just as it was in his, and the farther they advanced the more sinister became the memory of the velvet-coated intruder.

They passed out upon a great projecting, bald rock, where they paused for many long breaths, and Will, through his glasses, was able to see the brown plains far below, sweeping away in swell on swell until they died under a dim horizon. But the distance was so great that he could make out nothing on their surface.

Night found them on a ridge, where there was enough grass for the horses, and trees still grew, though much dwarfed and stunted. They kept close in the lee of the trees and did not build any fire, although it was very cold, so cold that the bearskin coats again formed a welcome addition to the blankets. Boyd said it would be best for them to keep watch, although little danger was anticipated. Still, they could not be too cautious, and Will, who insisted on mounting guard in his turn, was permitted to do so. The Little Giant kept the first watch and Will the second, beginning about midnight. Giant Tom, who awakened him for it, went almost instantly to sleep himself, and the lad was left alone.

He lay upon a rather wide shelf, with his two comrades only a few feet away, while the horses and mules were back of them, having withdrawn as much as they could into the stubbly pines and cedars in order to protect themselves from the cold wind. Will heard one of them stir now and then, or draw a deep breath like a sigh, but it merely formed an under note in the steady whistling of the wind, which at that height seemed to have an edge of ice, making him shiver in all his wrappings. Nevertheless, he watched as well as one might under such circumstances, feeling himself but a mote on the side of a great mountain in all the immensity of the wilderness.

Surely the hunter was right when he said there was little danger. He did not know from what point in so much blackness and loneliness could danger be

apprehended, but he believed, nevertheless, that danger was near. The whistling of the bitter wind seemed to him sinister and threatening, and yet a wind was only a wind. It must be circumstances going before that had given it that threat. He knew the mind could be so prepared by events that it became a sensitive plate, receiving upon its surface impressions that were, in reality, warnings.

Stronger and shriller grew the wind, and stronger and shriller was its warning. He had been lying upon his side with his rifle thrust forward, and now he sat up. Some unknown sense within him had taken cognizance of a threatening note. Listening intently he heard only the wind, but the wind itself seemed always to bear a menace on its front.

He rose to his knees, and used all his powers of eye and ear. The animals did not stir, and the hunter and the Little Giant slept in deep peace. Yet Will's own pulses were beating hard. He began to denounce himself as one who took alarm because of the darkness and desolation, but it did not make his pulses grow quiet.

Still keeping his rifle ready for instant use, he crawled noiselessly toward the edge of the ledge, which was not more than twenty feet away. Half the distance, and he stopped suddenly, because his ears had distinctly brought to him a light sound, as if a pebble had fallen. Will was not a son of the wilderness by birth, but he was fast becoming one of its adopted children, making its ways second nature, and, when the light note of the falling pebble was registered upon his ear, he flattened himself upon the ground, thrusting forward a little the muzzle of his rifle. It is doubtful if the keen eyes of a trailing Indian could have seen him there in the dark as he waited patiently until such time as a second pebble might fall.

The second sound did not come, but the sensitive plate that was his mind registered an impression. Something new and strange appeared upon its surface, and he felt that it was a hostile figure. At last it detached itself from the general dusk, darker and almost formless, and resolved itself into a head, that is a part of a head, from the eyes up. The eyes, set a little near together, were staring intently at the camp, trying to separate it into details, and Will, unseen himself, was able to recognize the eyes and forehead of Felton. He could also trace the glittering gold band around the crown of the wide-brimmed hat that surmounted the head, and, if he had felt any doubts before, the yellow cord would have convinced him that it was the sinister intruder of the morning.

He saw one hand steal up over the ledge. The other, holding a revolver, followed in an instant, and then the lad, knowing in his heart that treacherous

and black murder was intended, threw up his own rifle and pulled the trigger. He fired practically at random, doubting that the bullet would hit, but there was the sound of an oath, of scraping feet and a thud, while the gorges and ravines of the mountain sent back the crack of the rifle in many echoes.

The hunter and the Little Giant were awake in a flash, but they did not spring to their feet. They were far too alert and experienced to expose themselves in such a manner, but they crawled forward, fully armed, and lay beside Will.

"What was it?" whispered Boyd.

"It was the man of the morning, Felton. He was about to pull himself up on the cliff. He had a pistol in one hand and he meant to murder us."

"I didn't see him, but I haven't the slightest doubt you are right. And of course he had men as black-hearted as himself with him. He wouldn't have dared such a thing alone. Don't you see it that way, Giant?"

"Thar's no other way to see it, Jim. Felton is the leader of a band, a heap wuss than the Sioux, but young William, here, has been smart 'nough to block his game."

"That is, it's blocked for the time. He's down there with his band, waiting for another chance at us. Now, Will, you slip back and see that the horses and mules are secure, that they can't break their lariats, when they get scared at the shooting that's going to happen mighty soon. Keep down on your hands and knees. Don't give 'em a chance to send a bullet at you in the dark."

The lad obeyed orders and found the animals now fairly quiet. They had stamped and reared somewhat at the sound of his shot, but their alarm had soon subsided. He went among them, stroking their noses and manes, showing all the power over animals that the hunter and the Little Giant had soon detected in him, and they signified their gladness at his presence. While he stroked them he whispered to them gently, speaking words of courage in their ears, but at the same time, he did not neglect to see that the lariats were fastened securely.

Then, confident that the animals would not fall into a panic no matter what happened, he went back and found that Boyd and Bent were creeping toward the edge of the cliff. Lying almost flat, he joined them, and the hunter explained their plan of battle.

"I take it that they're all on foot," he said, "and even so they can come only by the path we followed. It's too steep everywhere else for them to make a rush upon men armed as we are."

"An' we, hid here on the ledge, may get a chance to pick 'em off," said the Little Giant. "Look, the night's beginnin' to favor us. More stars are comin' out, an' it's lighter all along the mountain. Lend me them glasses o' yourn, young William."

Will passed them to him, and the man, who was now at the edge of the ledge, made a very minute examination of the slopes. Then he handed the glasses back to the lad, and pushed his rifle a little farther forward. Will, in the increasing light, caught a glimpse of his face, and he was startled by its look of deadly hate.

"You've seen one of them?" he said.

"Yes," replied the Little Giant. "He's a-layin' among the rocks on the other side o' that deep ravine, too fur away fur any ordinary bullet, but ef thar's one thing I'm proud of it's my rifle shootin'. I hate to do it, but they've come here to murder us an' we've got to teach 'em it's dang'rous business."

Will, putting the glasses to his own eyes, was able to pick out the man whom the Little Giant had seen. It was not Felton, but a fellow in deerskins who crouched in fancied security in a sort of shallow alcove of the cliff. Will regarded him as one already dead, and his opinion was only a moment or two before fact, as the Little Giant pulled the trigger of his great repeating rifle, the mountain burst into many echoes, and the brigand, rolling from his alcove, fell like a stone into the depths of the chasm. Will, listening in awe, heard his body strike far below. Then came a terrible silence, in which his heart beat heavily.

"It was a great shot, Giant," whispered Boyd, at length, "but you make no other kind. It wasn't Felton, was it?"

"No."

"I didn't think it would be. After Will gave the alarm I knew he'd keep well out of sight. His kind when they're leaders always do. You've given 'em a hint, Giant, that they can't pass this way, the kind of hint that means most with brigands."

"But two hints will be better than one, Jim," said Tom. "I'm thinkin' they're still down thar 'mong the rocks, hopin' to pick us off when we ain't watchin'. But we'll be watchin' all the time. In an hour mebbe we'll get a chance to tell 'em a second time they can't pass, an' then I think we'd better light out afore day."

"So do I. Will, take your glasses and keep searching among the rocks."

The lad, who saw that he could now serve best as the eyes of the little army of

three, picked out every crag and hollow with the glasses, but he did not find any human beings. A half hour later several shots were fired from distant points by concealed marksmen, and Will heard the bullets chipping on the stones, although none of them struck near. Evidently the rifles had been discharged almost at random. Meanwhile, the number of stars in the heavens increased and new peaks and ridges swam into the light.

Will began another minute examination with the glasses, and he finally became convinced that he saw a human figure outstretched on a small shelf. As he looked longer the details became more clear. It was undoubtedly a man seeking a shot at them. He called the attention of the Little Giant, who took the glasses himself, gazed a while and then resumed his rifle. Will saw that look of menace come over his face again and he also regarded the man on the shelf as already dead.

The Little Giant pulled the trigger and Will, watching through the glasses, saw the outlaw quiver convulsively and then lie quite still. The shelf had become his grave. The lad shivered a little. His lot truly was cast among wild and terrible scenes.

"I'm thinking the double hint will be enough," said Boyd. "If Felton is the man I took him to be when I saw him in the morning, he won't care to risk his skin too much. Nor can any leader of desperadoes keep on bringing up his men against shooting like yours, Giant. And I want to say again, Tom, that you're certainly the greatest marksman in the world. You're so great that there's no occasion to be modest about it. It's evident to anybody that you're the best on all this round globe."

The Little Giant said nothing, but in the dim light Will saw his face flush with gratification.

"The stars are still gathering," said the lad, "and every minute there is more light on the mountains. Suppose we take advantage of Tom's double hint and make at once for the higher ridges."

"We can do so," said Boyd. "It's not so dark now that we can't see the way, and if they still have any notion of besieging us we may be hours ahead before they discover our absence. Will, you talk a little to the animals and loose the lariats, while Giant and I watch here. Then we'll join you and make the start."

Will was among the horses and mules in an instant, stroking them, whispering to them, and soothing them. He was also half through with the task of replacing the packs when Boyd and Bent came. The rest done, they started up the steep

natural trail, fortunately hidden at that point from any watchers below. Boyd led, picking the way, Will was among the animals and the Little Giant, with the rifle that never missed, covered the rear.

Higher and higher they went, and, when day broke, they were once more in the scrub pines and cedars, with a cold wind blowing and nipping at their ears and noses. But Boyd, who went far back on the trail, could discover no sign of Felton's band, and they concluded to make camp.

"We've all been tried enough for one night," said Boyd. "Men, horses and mules alike need fresh breath and new nerves."

But before they could find a suitable place it began to rain, not a sweeping storm, but the cold, penetrating drizzle of great heights. Now their bearskin coats protected them in part, but the animals shivered, and the way became so slippery that they had to advance on those heights with exceeding caution and slowness. The rain soon turned to snow, and then back to rain again, but the happy temperament of the Little Giant was able to extract consolation from it.

"Snow and rain together will hide what trace of a trail we may leave," he said. "Ef this keeps up, Felton and his gang will never be able to find us again."

Despite the great dangers of the advance they pushed on upward until they came to a region that Will believed must be above the clouds. At least, it was free there from both rain and snow, and below him he saw such vast areas of mists and vapors that the top of the ridge seemed to swim in the air. It was now about noon, and, at last, finding a nearly level place, they sank down upon it, exhausted.

Nevertheless, the Little Giant was cheerful.

"I'm clean furgittin' all 'bout that gold," he said, "my time now bein' devoted mostly to foot races, tryin' to beat out Indians, outlaws an' all sorts o' desprit characters, in which I hev been successful so fur. My real trade jest now is that o' runner an' mounting climber, an' I expect to git a gold medal fur the same."

He began to whistle in the most wonderful, birdlike fashion, a clear, sweet volume of sound, one popular air of the time following another, every one delivered in such perfect fashion that Will forgot the wet and the cold in the pleasure of listening.

"Now," said Boyd, "there's nothing for it but to start a fire, even though it may show where we are. But we have an advantage in being above the clouds and mists. Then, if the outlaws come we can see 'em coming, though I think our trail

is wholly lost to 'em."

Skilled as the two men were in building fires, they had a hard task now, as the wood, besides being scarce, was thoroughly soaked with wet, but they persisted, using flint and steel in order to save their matches. Just when a little blaze began to show signs of living and growing, Will, in his search for fallen and dead wood, turned into a narrow way that led among lofty rocks. It was wet and slippery and he followed it a full hundred yards, but seeing that it was going to end in a deep recess or cavern he turned back. He had just started the other way when he heard a fierce growling sound behind him and the beat of heavy feet. Whirling about he saw an enormous beast charging down upon him. It would scarcely be correct to say that he saw, instead he had a blurred vision of a huge, shaggy form, red eyes, a vast red mouth, armed with teeth of amazing length and thickness, and claws of glistening steel, huge and formidable. Everything was magnified, exaggerated and infinitely terrible.

The lad knew that it was a grizzly bear, roused from its lair, and charging directly upon him. He shouted an alarm, fired once, twice and thrice with the repeating rifle, but the bear came on as fiercely as ever. He felt, or imagined he felt, its hot breath upon him, and leaping aside he scrambled up the rocks for dear life. The bear ran on, and settling himself in place he fired at it twice more. The hunter and the Little Giant, who appeared at the head of the pass, also gave it two bullets apiece, and then the monster toppled over not far from their fire, and after panting a little, lay still.

The Little Giant surveyed the great beast with wonder.

"The biggest I ever saw," he said, "an' it took nine bullets to bring him down, provided you hit him ev'ry time you fired, young William. Ef this is what you're goin' to bring on us whenever you leave the camp I 'low you'd better stick close to the fire."

"He came out of a cavern at the end of the little ravine," said the lad. "Of course, when I went visiting up that way I didn't know he had a home there."

"It 'pears that he did have a home thar, an' that he was at home, too. Now, I 'low you'd better talk a little to your friends, the hosses and mules. They're pow-ful stirred up over the stranger you've brought 'mong us. Hear 'em neighin' an' chargin'."

Will went among the animals, but it took him a long time to soothe them. To them the grizzly bear smell was so strong and it was so strongly suffused with danger that they still panted and moved uneasily after he left them.

"Now, what are you goin' to do with him?" asked the Little Giant, looking at the huge form. "We ain't b'ar huntin' on this trip, but it 'pears a shame to leave a skin like that fur the wolves to t'ar to pieces. We may need it later."

"We don't have to leave it," said Boyd. "A big bearskin weighs a lot, but one of the horses will be able to carry it."

He and the Little Giant, using their strong hunting knives, took off the great skin with amazing dexterity, and then hung it on a stout bough to dry. As they turned away from their task and left the body of the bear, they heard the rush of feet and long, slinking forms appeared in the narrow pass where the denuded body of the monster lay.

"The mountain wolves," said the Little Giant. "It's not likely that they've had such a feast in a long time. I'd like to send a bullet among 'em, but it's no use. Besides, they're actin' 'cordin' to their lights. The Lord made 'em eaters o' other creeturs, an' eat they must to live."

Will heard the fierce snarling and growling as the wolves fought for places at the body of the bear, and, although he knew as the Little Giant had said, that they were only obeying the call of nature, he could not repress a shudder at the eagerness and ferocity in their voices. Once, he climbed a high rock and looked down at them. They were mountain wolves of the largest and most dangerous kind, some reaching a length of seven feet. He watched them with a sort of fascinated awe, and long after he left the rock he still heard the growling. When it ceased he went back to his perch again and saw only the great skeleton of the bear, picked clean, and the last wolf gone.

That afternoon the two men took down the vast skin of the grizzly and scraped it with their hunting knives, working on it a long time, and also admiring the length and luxuriance of the hair.

"It shows that this big fellow lived high upon the mountains where there's lots of cold," said Boyd. "Why, this is really fur, not hair. Maybe he never saw a human being before, and being king of all his range he couldn't have dreamed that he would have been killed by something flying through the air, and that his body would find a scattered grave in the stomachs of wolves."

"Ef the worst comes to the worst, an' it grows too awful cold," said the Little Giant, "this will make a splendid sleeping robe, big enough fur all three of us at the same time."

They kept their fire going all day and all night, and they also maintained a

continuous watch, the three taking turns. More snow fell and then melted, and they were glad that it was so, as they felt that the trail was now hidden completely. They also kept down the blaze from their fire, a great bed of coals now having formed, and, as they were in a bowl, the glow from it could not be seen more than ten or fifteen yards away.

At dawn they set out again under cloudy skies with a raw, cold wind always blowing, and advanced slowly, owing to the steep and dangerous nature of the way. Once more they replenished their larder with mountain sheep and mule deer, and packed upon the horses all they could carry. The hunter and the Little Giant agreed now that the sky was ominous, and they had more to fear from it than from pursuit by either Indians or Felton's outlaws.

"I tell you, Jim, an' you too, young William," said the Little Giant, "that we'd better do what would have been done by the big grizzly that's now runnin' in the stomachs o' mounting wolves."

"What's that?" asked Will.

"Hole up! When you can't do anythin' else hole up an' wait 'til the skies clear."

"That would be simple," said Boyd, "if only we three human beings had to hole up, but while we might drive the horses and mules into a cave shelter they'd have nothing to eat."

"What you want to do, Jim Boyd, is to cultivate hope. I won't say you're a grouchy man, 'cause you ain't, but mighty few men are hopeful enough. Now, I want you to hope that we'll not only find a cave shelter for the beasts, but water an' grass fur 'em."

"Well, I hope it."

"That bein' the case, I want to tell you that I've been ahead a little, an' the ground begins to slope off fast. I think we'll soon strike a canyon or valley a few miles deep, more or less. That canyon or valley will hev water in it, an' bein' so sheltered it's bound to hev grass, too. What more could you ask? Thar we'll stay till times grow better."

"You've arranged it all mighty well in your mind."

"An' that bein' the case, let's go on, an' see ef I hev'n't arranged it right."

The Little Giant soon proved that he had read the mountain signs aright, as they came to a great descent, the steep walls enclosing a valley of vast depth. Far down Will was able to see the glimmer of a little lake and the green of grass.

"It's our home for a spell," said Boyd. "You were right, Giant. You're the only prophet I've ever known."

"You'd do a heap better, Jim Boyd, ef you'd pay more attention. I told you awhile ago to cheer up an' you cheered, then I told you we'd find a nice home-like valley, an' here it is, a couple o' thousan' feet deep, an' with water an' grass, ez young William's glasses tell us, an' with cave shelter, too, ez my feelin's ez a prophet tell me."

The hunter laughed, and the Little Giant burst into a flood of cheerful, whistling song. In his optimistic mind all affairs were already arranged to the satisfaction of everybody. Nevertheless, it took them a long time to find a way by which the horses could descend, and it required their utmost skill to prevent falls. When they finally stood upon the floor of the valley, animals and human beings alike were weak from nervous strain, and the Little Giant, wiping his perspiring brow, said:

"We're here, but lookin' back I kin hardly see how we ever got here."

"But being here," said Boyd, "we'll now scout around and find the fine house that you as a prophet have promised to us."

The three, agreeing, began at once the task.



CHAPTER VII

THE BEAVER HUNTER

It was perhaps fortunate for the explorers and fur hunters that the great mountains of northwestern America abounded in swift, clear streams and little lakes, many of the lakes being set at a great height in tiny valleys, enclosed by forests and lofty cliffs. There was no dying of thirst, and about the water they always found the beaver. Wood, too, was sure to be plentiful and, in the fierce cold of the northwestern winters they needed much of it. If the valleys were not visited for a long period, and often the Indians themselves did not come to them in years, elk and other game, large and small, made a home there.

It was into one of these most striking nooks that the three had now come. They had been in a valley of the same type before, but this was far deeper and far bolder. There were several acres of good grass, on which the horses and mules might find forage, even under the snow, and the lake, two or three acres in extent, was sure to contain fish good for eating.

But the two men examined with the most care the rocky, western cliff, weathered and honeycombed by the storms of a thousand centuries. As they had expected, they found great cave-like openings at its base, and after much hunting they decided upon one running back about fifty feet, with a width half as great, and a roof varying from seven to twenty feet in height. The floor, fairly level, sloped rather sharply toward the doorway, which would protect them against floods from melting snows. The interior could be fitted up in a considerable degree of comfort with the material from their packs and furs they might take.

They found about fifty yards away another, though shallower, cavern which Will, with his gift for dealing with animals, could induce the horses and mules to use in bad weather. He proved his competency for the task a few hours after their arrival by leading them into it, tolling them on with wisps of fresh grass.

"That settles it so far as they are concerned," said Boyd, "and we had to think of them first. If we're snowed in here it's of the last importance to us to save our animals."

"An' we're goin' to be snowed in, I think," said the Little Giant, looking at the sombre heavens. "How high up did you say we wuz here, young William, ten

miles above the level o' the sea?"

"Not ten miles, but we're certainly high, high enough for it to be winter here any time it feels like it. Now I'm going to rake and scrape as many old dead leaves as I can find into the new stone stable. The floor is pretty rough in places, and we don't want any of our beasts to break a leg there."

"All right, you set to work on it," said Boyd, "and Giant and me will labor on our own house."

Will toiled all the day on the new stable, and he enjoyed the homely work. Sometimes he filled in the deeper places in the floor with chunks of dead wood and then heaped the leaves on top. When it was finished it was all in such condition that the animals could occupy it without danger, and he also set up a thick hedge of boughs about the entrance, allowing only four or five feet for the doorway. Even if the snow should be driving hard in that direction the animals would yet be protected. Then he led them inside and barred them there for the night.

He was so much absorbed in his own task that he paid small heed to that of the men, but he was enthusiastic when he took a little rest. They had unpacked everything, and had put all the extra weapons and ammunition on shelves in the stone. They had made three wooden stools and they had smoothed a good place for cooking near the entrance, whence the smoke could pass out. They had also cut great quantities of firewood which they had stored along the sides of the cavern.

About nightfall the hunter shot an elk on the northern slope, and all three worked far into the night at the task of cleaning and cutting up the body, resolving to save every edible part for needs which might be long. All of it was stored in the cavern or on the boughs of trees, and leaving the horses to graze at their leisure on the grassy acres they lay down on their blankets in the cavern and slept the sleep of the little death, that is the sleep of exhaustion, without a dream or a waking moment.

Will did not awake until the sun of dawn was shining in the cavern, although it was at its best a somewhat obscure sun, and the dawn itself was full of chill. When he went outside he found that heavy clouds were floating above the mountains and masses of vapor hung low over the valley, almost hiding the forest, which was thickest at the northern end and the lake which cuddled against the western side.

"I look for a mighty storm, maybe a great snow," said Boyd. "All the signs are

here, but it may hang about for several days before coming, and the more time is left before it hits the better for us. It was big luck for us to find so deep a valley just when we did. Now, Will, suppose you take the beasts out to pasture and by the time you get back Giant and me will have breakfast ready."

Will found the horses and mules quite comfortable in the new stable and they welcomed him with neighs and whinnies and other sounds, the best of which their vocal cords were capable. The friendship that he had established with them was wonderful. As the Little Giant truly said, he could have been a brilliant success as an animal trainer. Perhaps they divined the great sympathy and kindness he felt for them, or he had a way of showing it given to only a few mortals. Whatever it may have been, they began to rub their noses against him, the big horse, Selim, finally thrusting his head under his arm, while the mules proudly marched on either side of him as he led the way down to the pasture.

"Ain't it wonderful," said the Little Giant, who saw them from the mouth of the cavern where he and Boyd were cooking, "the way the boy has with animals? My mules like me, but I know they'd leave me any minute at a whistle from young William, an' follow him wherever he went."

"Same way with that horse of mine, Selim. He'd throw me over right away for Will. He's a good lad, with a clean soul and a pure heart, and maybe the animals, having gifts that we don't have, to make up for gifts that we have and they haven't, can look straight into 'em. Do you think, Giant, that Felton could have had a line on our mine?"

"What's your drift, Jim?"

"Could he have been out here somewhere when the Captain, Will's father, found it, and have got some hint about its discovery? Maybe he guesses that Will's got a map, and that's what he's after. He wouldn't have followed us at such terrible risks, unless he had a mighty big motive."

"That's good reasonin', Jim, an' I think thar's somethin' in your notion. Ef it's so, Felton will hang on to the chase o' us ez long ez he's livin', an' fur the present, with Sioux on one side o' us an' outlaws on the other, I'm mighty glad we're hid away here in so deep a cut in the mountings."

"So am I, Giant. I think that coffee is boiling now. Call the lad."

"Young William! Young William!" cried the Little Giant. "Don't you dare to keep breakfus' waitin' the fust mornin' we've moved into our new home."

After breakfast Will and Bent worked on the cavern, while Boyd went hunting

on the slopes. They cut many poles and made a palisade at the entrance to the great hollow, leaving a doorway only about two feet wide, over which they could hang the big bearskin in case heavy wind, rain or snow came. Then they packed the whole floor of the cavern with dry leaves, making a kind of matting, over which they intended to spread furs or skins as they obtained them.

"Caves are cold when left to theirselves," said the Little Giant, "an' it's lucky thar's a good nateral place fur our fire jest beside the door. We'll have lots o' meat in here, too, 'cause Jim's a fine hunter an' the valley is full o' game. Thar must be a lot o' grizzly bears roun' in these mountings, too, Young William. Wouldn't it be funny ef we went out some day an' come back to find our new house occupied by a whole family o' fightin' grizzlies, every one o' them with iron claws, ten inches long?"

"No, it wouldn't be funny, Giant, it would be tragic."

"Ef you jest knew it, Young William, we're mighty well off. Many a trappin' outfit hez been froze in in the mountings, in quarters not half so good ez ours."

Boyd shot another elk and smaller deer, and on the next day secured more game, which they cured, concluding now that they had enough to last them indefinitely. Will and the Little Giant, meanwhile, had been working on the house, and Boyd, his hunting over, joined them. The cured skins of the animals were put over the leaf thatch of the floor as they had planned, and as they procured them they intended to hang more on the walls, for the sake of dryness and warmth.

Although the clouds threatened continuously the storm still held off. They expected every morning to wake up and find the snow drifting, but the sun always showed, although dim and obscured by vapors. Will still led the horses and mules down to the grass every morning, and, every night, led them back to the new stone stable. The valley began to wear the aspect of home, of a home by no means uncomfortable, but on the sixth night there Will was awakened by something cold and wet striking upon his face. He went to the door, looked out and saw that the snow they had been expecting so long had come at last. It was thick, driving hard, and for the first time he hung in place the great bearskin, securing it tightly with the fastenings they had arranged and then went back to sleep.

He was the first to awake the next morning, and pushing aside the bearskin, he looked out to see snow still falling and apparently a good six inches in depth already.

"Wake up, Jim, and you, too, Giant!" he called. "Here's our storm at last, and lucky it is that we're holed up so well."

Boyd joined him. The snow was so dense that they could not see across the valley, but it was not driving now, merely floating down lazily and persistently.

"That means it will come for a long time," said Boyd. "Snow clouds are like men. If they begin to pour out their energy in vast quantities they're soon exhausted, but if they work in deliberate fashion they do much more. I take it that this snow won't stop today, nor maybe tonight, nor the next day either."

"We can stand it," said Will. "We're well housed up and we're safe from invasion. If you and Tom will get breakfast I'll feed the horses and mules."

They had employed a large part of the time cutting the thick grass with their hunting knives, and it was now stored in the stable in a considerable quantity, out of the reach of the longest neck among the horses and mules. They were responsive as usual when he came among them, and nuzzled him, because they liked him and because they knew he was the provider of food, that is, he was in effect a god to them.

Will talked to the animals and gave to every one his portion of hay, watching them with pleasure as they ate it, and returned thanks in their own way. When he made his way back through the snow, breakfast was ready and, although they were sparing with the coffee and bread, every one could have all the meat he wished.

"Now, there'll be nothing for us to do but sit around the house," said Boyd, the breakfast over.

"Which means that I kin put in a lot o' my spare time readin'," said the Little Giant. "Young William, bring me my Shakespeare! What, you say I furgot to put it in my pack! Well, then bring me my copy o' the Declaration o' Independence. I always like them words in it, 'Give me lib'ty or give me death!' '*Sic semper tyrannis!*'"

"'Give me liberty or give me death' is not in the Declaration of Independence, Giant. Those words were used by Patrick Henry in an address."

"Well, they ought to hev been thar, an' ef Patrick Henry hadn't been so fresh an' used 'em first they would a-been. But you can't go back on '*sic semper tyrannis!*'"

"They couldn't possibly be in the declaration, Giant, because they're Latin."

"I reckon the signers o' the Declaration wuz good enough to write Latin an' talk it, too, ef they wanted to."

"They were used eighteen or nineteen hundred years ago by a Roman."

"I guess that's one advantage o' livin' early. You kin git the fust chance at what's best. Anyway, they did say a lot o' rousin' things in the Declaration, though I don't remember exactly what they wuz. But I see I won't hev no chance to git on with my lit'ry pursuits, so I think I'll jest do chores about the house inside."

He went to work in the best of spirits. Will had seldom seen a happier man. He fixed shelves in the stone, arranged the materials from their packs, and all the time he whistled airs, until the cavern seemed to be filled with the singing of nightingales, mocking birds and skylarks. Will and Boyd began to help him, though Will stopped at times to look out.

On every occasion he reported that the snow was still drifting down in a steady, thick, white stream, and that he could not see more than thirty or forty yards from the door. About eleven o'clock in the morning, when he pulled the bearskin aside for perhaps the sixth time, he heard a sound which at first he took to be the distant moan of the wind through a gorge. But he had not heard it on his previous visits, although the wind had been blowing all the morning, and he stood there a little while, listening. As he did not hear it again just yet, he thought his fancy had deceived him, but in a minute or so the sound came once more. It was a weird note, carrying far, but he seemed to detect a human quality in it. And yet what human being could be out there in that lone mountain valley in the wild snow storm? It seemed impossible, but when he heard it a third time the human quality seemed stronger. He beckoned to the hunter and Little Giant.

"Come here," he said, "and tell me if my imagination is playing tricks with me. It seems to me that I've heard a human voice in the storm."

The two came to the doorway and, standing beside him, listened. Once more Will discerned that note and he turned an inquiring face to them.

"There!" he exclaimed. "Did you hear it? It sounded to me like a man's voice!"

Neither Boyd nor Bent replied until the call came once more and then Boyd said:

"It's not your imagination, Will. It's a man out there in the snow, and he's shouting for help. Why he should expect anybody to come to his aid in a place like this is more'n I can understand."

"He's drawin' nearer," said the Little Giant. "I kin make out the word 'hello' said over an' over ag'in. Maybe Felton's band has wandered on a long chase into our valley, an' it's some o' them lost from the others in the storm, callin' to em."

"Like as not," said the hunter. "The snow has covered up most of the traces and trails we've left, and anyway they couldn't rush this cavern in the face of our rifles."

"It's no member of Felton's gang," said Will, with great emphasis.

"How do you know that?" asked Boyd in surprise.

"I can scarcely tell. Instinct, I suppose. It doesn't sound like the voice of an outlaw, though I don't know how I know that, either. Hark, he's coming much nearer! I've an idea the man's alone."

"In the storm," said the Little Giant, "he's likely to pass by the cavern, same ez ef it wuzn't here."

"But we mustn't let him do that," exclaimed Will. "I tell you it's a friend coming! a man we want! Besides, it's no Indian! It's a white man's voice, and we couldn't let him wander around and perish in a wilderness storm!"

The hunter and the Little Giant glanced at each other.

"A feller that kin talk with hosses an' mules, an' hev the toughest mule eat out o' his hand the fust time he ever saw him may be able to tell more about a voice in the wilderness than we kin," said the Little Giant.

"I don't believe you're wrong," said the hunter with equal conviction.

Will threw aside the bearskin and dashed out. The two men followed, their rifles under their fur coats, where they were protected from the storm. The voice could now be heard very plainly calling, and Boyd and Bent were quite sure also that it was not one of Felton's band. It truly sounded like the voice of an honest man crying aloud in the wilderness.

Will still led the way and, as he approached, he gave a long, clear shout, to which the owner of the voice replied instantly, not a hundred yards away. Then the three pressed forward and they saw the figure of a man, exaggerated and gigantic in the falling snow. Behind him stood three horses, loaded heavily but drooping and apparently almost frozen. He gave a cry of joy when the three drew near, and said:

"I called upon the Lord when all seemed lost, but I did not call in vain."

He was tall, clothed wholly in deerskin, and with a fur cap upon his head. His figure was one of great strength, but it was bent somewhat now with weariness. The Little Giant uttered an exclamation.

"By all that's wonderful, it's Steve Brady!" he said. "Steve Brady, the seeker after the lost beaver horde!"

The man extended a hand, clothed in a deerskin gauntlet.

"And it's you, Tom Bent, the Little Giant," he said. "I surely did not dream that when you and I met again it would be in such a place as this. Providence moves in a mysterious way its wonders to perform, and it's a good thing for us it does, or I'd have frozen or starved to death in this valley. That quotation may not be strictly correct, but I mean well."

The Little Giant seized his hand and shook it violently. It was evident that the stranger was one whom he admired and liked.

"Ef we'd knowed it wuz you callin', Steve Brady," he said, "we'd hev come sooner. But hev you found that huge beaver colony you say is somewhar in the northwestern mountings, the biggest colony the world hez ever knowed?"

"I have not, Tom Bent. 'Search and ye shall find' says the Book, and I have searched years and years, but I have never found. If I had found, you would not see me here in this valley, a frozen man with three frozen horses, and I ask you, Tom Bent, if you have ever yet discovered a particle of the gold for which you've been looking all the years since you were a boy."

"Not a speck, Steve, not a speck of it. If I had I wouldn't be here. I'd be in old St. Looey, the grandest city in the world, stoppin' in the finest room at the Planters' House, an' tilted back in a rockin' chair pickin' my teeth with a gold tooth pick, after hevin' et a dinner that cost a hull five dollars. But you come into our house, Steve, an' warm up an' eat hot food, while Young William, here, takes your hosses to the stable, an' quite a good hoss boy is young William, too."

"House! Fire! Food! Stable! What do you mean?"

"Jest what I say. These are my friends, Thomas Boyd and William Clarke, young William. Boys, this is Stephen Brady, who has been a fur hunter all his life but who hasn't been findin' much o' late. Come on, Steve."

Will took the three horses and led them to the stable, into which he pushed them without much trouble, and where they received a fair welcome. He also threw them a quantity of the hay, and then he ran back to the house, where Boyd

and Bent were rapidly fanning the coals into a blaze and were warming food. Brady's outer garments were steaming before the fire, and he was sitting on a stone outcrop, a look of solemn satisfaction on his face.

"It is truly a habitation in the wilderness," he said, "and friends the best and bravest in the world. It is more, far more, than I, a lone fur hunter, had a right to expect. Truly it is more than any humble mortal such as I had a right to hope for. But as the sun stood still over Gibeon, and as the moon stood still over the vale of Ajalon at the command of Joshua, so the wilderness and the storm opened at the command of the Lord, and disclosed to me those who would save me."

There was nothing of the unctuously pious about his tone and manner, instead it was sternly enthusiastic, full of courage and devotion. He made to Will a mental picture of one of Cromwell's Ironsides, or of the early New England Puritans, and his Biblical language and allusions heightened the impression. The lad felt instinctively that he was a strong man, great in the strength of body, mind and spirit.

"Take another slice o' the elk steak, Steve," said the hospitable Little Giant, who was broiling them over coals. "You've et only six, an' a man o' your build an' hunger ought to eat at least twelve. We've got plenty of it, you won't exhaust the supply, never fear. An' take another cup o' coffee; it will warm your insides right down to your toes. I'm mighty glad to see you, an' young William's mighty glad to see you."

"You couldn't have been as glad to see me as I was to see you," said Brady with a solemn smile. "Truly it seems that one may be saved when apparently his last hour has come, if he will only hope and persist. It may be that you will yet find your gold, Thomas Bent, that you, James Boyd and William Clarke, will find whatever you seek, though I know not what it is, nor ask to know, and that I, too, will find some day the great beaver colony of which I have dreamed, a colony ten times as large as any other ever seen even in these mountains."

Boyd and Bent exchanged glances, but said nothing. It was evident that they had the same thought and Will's quick and active mind leaped up too. In their great quest they needed at least another man, a man honest, brave and resourceful, and such a man in the emergency was beyond price. But for the present they said nothing.

"Thar's one thing I'd like fur you to explain to me, Steve," said the Little Giant, who was enjoying the hospitality he gave, "why wuz you callin' so much through the storm? Wuz it jest a faint hope, one chance in a million that trappers

might be here in the valley?"

"No, Thomas, it was not a hope. A sign was vouchsafed to me. When I knew the storm was coming I started for this valley, which I visited once, years ago, and, although the snow caught me before I could reach it, I managed, owing to my former knowledge, to get down the slope without losing any of my horses. Then in the valley I saw saplings cut freshly by the axe, cut so recently in truth that I knew the wielders of the steel must still be here, and in all likelihood were white men. Strong in that faith I called aloud and you answered, but I did not dream that one whom I knew long ago, and one, moreover, whom I knew to be honest and true, was here. It is a lesson to us that hope should never be wholly lost."

All were silent for a little space, feeling deeply the truth of the man's words and manner, and then, when Brady finished his last elk steak and his last cup of coffee, Boyd said:

"I think, Mr. Brady, that you've had a terrible time and that you need sleep. You can roll in dry blankets in the corner there, and we'll arrange your packs for you. Will reports that your animals have made friends with ours, as you and we have surely made friends, and there's nothing left for you now but to take a big sleep."

"That I'll surely do," said Brady, smiling a solemn smile, "but first promise me one thing."

"What is that?"

"Don't call me Mr. Brady. It doesn't sound right coming from men of my own age. To you I'm Steve, just as I am to our friend Thomas."

"All right, Steve, but into the blankets with you. Even a fur hunter can catch pneumonia, if he's just bent on doing it."

Brady rolled himself in the blankets and soon slept. The hunter, the Little Giant and Will drew to the other side of the cavern, and before a word was spoken every one of the three was conscious of what was in the minds of the others. Will was the first to speak.

"He's the man," he said.

"We shorely need him," said the Little Giant.

"I don't think we could do better," said Boyd.

"It's luck, big luck, that we found him or he found us," continued the Little Giant. "When these solemn, prayin' men are real, they're real all over. He's as brave as a lion, he'll hang on like a grizzly bear, an' he's as honest as they ever make 'em. He's a fightin' man from start to finish. From what you say thar must be more'n a million in that mine, an' in huntin' fur it an' keepin' it after we find it, Steve Brady is wuth at least a quarter o' a million to us."

"All of that," said the hunter. "But the mine really belongs to Will, here, and it's for him to bring in a new partner."

"It belongs to us all now," said the lad, "though I'll admit I was the original owner. I think Mr. Brady will just round out our band. I'm for offering him a full partnership."

"Then you do the talkin'," said the Little Giant. "It's right that it should come from you."

When Brady awoke many hours later three very serious faces confronted him, and his acute mind saw at once that he was about to receive a communication of weight.

"It looks like a committee," he said with solemn importance. "Who is the spokesman?"

"I am," replied Will, "and what we have to say to you is really of importance, of vast importance. Mr. Bent has been looking many years for gold, but has never yet found a grain of it. Now he has given up his independent search, and is joining with Mr. Boyd and me in a far bigger hunt. You've been looking eight or ten years, you say, for the gigantic beaver colony, but have never found it. Now we want you to give up that hunt for the time, and join us, because we need you much."

"Your words have an earnest sound, young man, and I know that you and your comrades are honest, but I do not take your full meaning."

"It is this," said Will, and he produced from his secret pocket the precious map. "My father, who was a captain in the army, found a great mine of gold, but before he could work it, or even make any preparations to do so, he was called for the Civil War, in which he fell. But he left this map that tells me how to reach it somewhere in the vast northwestern mountains. To locate it and get out the treasure I need fighting men, the best fighting men the world can furnish, wilderness fighters, patient, enduring and full of knowledge. I have two such in Mr. Boyd and Mr. Bent, but we need just one more, and we have agreed that you

should be the fourth, if you will favor us by entering into the partnership. It is full of danger, as you know. We have already had a fight with the Sioux, and another with a band of outlaws, led by Martin Felton."

A spark leaped up in the stern eye of Stephen Brady.

"I am a fur hunter," he said, "though there is little prospect of success for me now, owing to the Indian wars, but I have spent all my manhood years among dangers. Perhaps I should feel lonely if they were absent, and you may dismiss that idea."

"I thought so. Will you enter into full partnership with us in this great enterprise? Mr. Bent has appraised your full value as a fighting man in this crisis at a quarter of a million dollars, and we know that the mine contains at least a million. I beg you not to refuse. We need your strong arm and great heart. You will be conferring the favor upon us."

"And the vast beaver colony that I'm going to find some day?"

"It can wait. It will be there after we get out the gold."

"And you are in full agreement with this, James Boyd?"

"I am."

"And you are in full agreement with this, too, Thomas Bent?"

"I am."

"Then I accept. A quarter of a million dollars is a great sum. I scarcely thought there was so much money in the world, but one may do much with it. I am already forming certain plans in my mind. Will you let me take another and thorough look at your map, William?"

He studied it long and attentively, and then as he handed it back to the owner, he said:

"It will be a long journey, as you have said, full of dangers, but I think I am not boasting when I say we be four who know how to meet hardship and peril. I make the prediction that after unparalleled dangers we will find the mine. Yet a quarter of a million is too vast a sum for my services. I could not accept such an amount. Make it about ten thousand dollars."

Will laughed.

"You must bear in mind, Mr. Brady," he said, "that we haven't all this gold yet, and it will be a long time before we do get it. We're all to be comrades and full

partners, and you must be on exactly the same terms as the others. We've probably saved your life, and we demand, therefore, that you accept. Standing squarely on our rights, we'll take no refusal."

The stern eyes of Brady gleamed.

"Since you give me no choice, I accept," he said.



CHAPTER VIII

THE MOUNTAIN RAM

It snowed for two days and two nights without ceasing, and then turned so cold that the snow froze over, a covering like glass forming upon it. Will broke a way to the stable, where he talked to the animals and fed them with the hay which had been cut with forethought. With the help of the others he also opened a path down to a little stream flowing into the lake, where the horses and mules were able to obtain water, spending the rest of the time in the cavern.

The men usually had a small fire and they passed the time while they were snowed in in jerking more meat, repairing their clothes and doing a hundred other things that would be of service later on. Brady stored his traps in a remote corner of the cavern, hiding them so artfully that it was not likely anyone save the four would ever find them.

"I shall have no further use for them for a long time," he said, "but after we reach our gold I mean to return here and get them."

Will, who noticed his grammatical and good English, rather unusual on the border, asked him how he came to be a fur hunter.

"Drift," he replied. "You would not think it, but it was my original intention to become a schoolmaster. An excursion into the west made me fall in love with the forest, the mountains, solitude and independence. I've always taken enough furs for a good living, and I'm absolutely my own master. Moreover, I'm an explorer and it gives me a keen pleasure to find a new river or a new mountain. And this northwest is filled with wonders. After we find the gold and my beaver colony, I'm going to write a book of a thousand pages about the wonders I've seen."

"I never saw anybody that wrote a book," said the Little Giant with the respect of the unlettered for the lettered, "an' I confess I ain't much of a hand at readin' 'em, but when I'm rich ez I expect to be a year or two from now, an' I build my fine house in St. Looey, I mean to have a room full of 'em, in fine leather an' morocco bindin's."

"Will you read them?" asked Will.

"Me read 'em! O' course not!" replied the Little Giant. "I'll hire a man to read

'em, an' he kin keep busy on them books while I'm away on my long huntin' trips."

"But that won't be you reading 'em."

"What diff'unce does that make? All a book asks is to be read by somebody, en' ef it's read by my reader 'stead o' me it's jest the same."

The days confirmed them in their choice of Brady as the fourth partner in the great hunt. Despite his rather stern and solemn manner he was at heart a man of most cheerful and optimistic temperament. He had, too, a vast fund of experience and he knew much of the wilderness that was unknown to others.

"What do you think of our plan of going straight ahead as soon as we can travel, and passing over the left shoulder of the White Dome?" asked Boyd.

"It's wisest," replied Brady thoughtfully. "I've heard something of this Felton, with whom you had such a sanguinary encounter, and I'm inclined to think from all you tell me that he has had a hint about the mine. He has affiliated with the Indians and he can command a large band of his own, white men, mostly murderous refugees from the border, and the worst type of half breeds. It's better for us to keep as long as we can in the depths of the mountains despite all the difficulties of travel there."

On the fifth day it turned much warmer and rained heavily, and so violent were the changes in the high mountains that there was a tremendous manifestation of thunder and lightning. They watched the display of electricity with awe from the door of the cavern, and Will saw the great sword blades of light strike more than once on the rocks of the topmost peaks.

"I think," said Brady devoutly, "that we have been watched over. Where else in the mountains could we have found such a refuge for our animals and ourselves?"

"Nowhere," said the Little Giant, cheerfully, "an' I want to say that I'm enjoyin' myself right here. We four hev got more o' time than anythin' else, an' I ain't goin' to stir from our nice, comf'table home 'til the travelin's good."

The others were in full agreement with him, and, in truth, delay was absolutely necessary as a march now would have been accompanied by new and great dangers, snow slides, avalanches, and the best of the paths slippery with mud and water. When the rain ceased, although a warm sun that followed it hastened the melting of the snow, Will released the animals from the stable and with pleasure saw them run about among the trees, where the snow had melted

and sprigs of hardy grass were again showing green against the earth. After they had drunk at the lake and galloped up and down awhile, they began to nibble the grass, while Will walked among them and stroked their manes or noses, and was as pleased as they were. Brady's three horses were already as firm friends of his as the earlier animals.

"Did you ever notice that boy's ways with hosses an' mules?" said the Little Giant to Brady. "He's shorely a wonder. I think he's got some kind o' talk that we don't understand but which they do. My critters and Boyd's would quit us at any time fur him, an' so will yours."

"I perceive it is true, my friend, and so far as my horses are concerned I don't grudge him his power. Now that the snow has gone and the greenness is returning this valley truly looks like the land of Canaan. And it is well for us to be outside again. People who live the lives that we do flourish best in the open air."

The warm days lasted and all the snow melted, save where it lay perpetually on the crest of the White Dome. Often they heard it thundering in masses down the slopes. The whole earth was soaked with water, and swift streams ran in every gulch and ravine and canyon. Will, although he was impatient to be up and away, recognized now how thoroughly necessary it was to wait. The mountains in such a condition were impassable, and the valley was safe, too, because for the time nobody could come there either.

Big game wandered down again and Brady shot another large grizzly bear, the skin of which they saved and tanned, thinking it might prove in time as useful as the first. Another deer was added to their larder, and they also shot a number of wild fowl. But as the hills began to dry their minds returned with increasing strength to the great mine, hidden among far-away peaks. All were eager to be off, and it was only the patience coming from experience that delayed the start.

The valley dried out rapidly. The snow, deep as it had been, did not seem to have done any harm to the grass, which reappeared fresher and stronger than ever, forming a perfect harvest for the horses and mules. Then the time for departure came and they began to pack, having added considerably to their stores of skins and cured meats.

Brady also had been exceedingly well equipped for a long journey, and the temporary abandonment of his traps gave them a chance to add further to their food supplies. All four of them, in addition to their food, carried extra weapons, including revolvers, rifles, and a fine double-barreled shotgun for every one. The

two caverns, the one for the men and the other for the horses, they left almost as they had fitted them up.

"We may come here ag'in," said the Little Giant. "It's true that Felton's men an' the Sioux also may come, but I don't think it's ez likely, 'cause the Sioux are mostly plains warriors, an' them that ain't are goin' down thar anyhow to fight, while the outlaws likely are ridin' to the west huntin' fur us."

"Anyway," said Stephen Brady, in his deep, bass voice, "we'll trust to Providence. It's amazing how events happen in your favor when you really trust."

Although eager to be on their way, they felt regret at leaving the valley. It had given them a snug home and shelter during the storm, and the melting of the snow had acted like a gigantic irrigation scheme, making it greener and fresher than before. As they climbed the western slope it looked more than ever a gem in its mountain setting. Will saw far beneath him the blue of lake and the green of grass, and he waved his hand in a good-bye, but not a good-bye forever.

"I expect to sleep there again some day," he said.

"It's a fine home," said Brady, "but we'll find other lakes and other valleys. As I have told you before, I have trapped for years through these regions, and they contain many such places."

They pressed forward three more days and three more nights toward the left shoulder of the White Dome, which now rose before them clear and dazzlingly bright against the shining blue of the sky. The air was steadily growing colder, owing to their increasing elevation, but they had no more storms of rain, sleet or snow. They were not above the timber line, and the vegetation, although dwarfed, was abundant. There was also plenty of game, and in order to save their supplies they shot a deer or two. On the third day Will through his glasses saw a smoke, much lower down on their left, and he and the Little Giant, descending a considerable distance to discover what it meant, were able to discern a deep valley, perhaps ten miles long and two miles broad, filled with fine pastures and noble forest, and with a large Indian village in the centre. Smoke was rising from at least a hundred tall tepees, and several hundred horses were grazing on the meadows.

"Tell me what you can about them," said the lad, handing the glasses to the Little Giant.

"I think they're Teton Sioux," said Bent, "an' ez well ez I kin make out they're

livin' a life o' plenty. I kin see game hangin' up everywhar to be cured. Sometimes, young William, I envy the Indians. When the weather's right, an' the village is in a good place an' thar's plenty to eat you never see any happier fellers. The day's work an' huntin' over, they skylark 'roun' like boys havin' fun with all sorts o' little things. You wouldn't think they wuz the same men who could enjoy roastin' an enemy alive. Then, they ain't troubled a bit 'bout the future, either. Termorrer kin take care o' itself. I s'pose that's what downs 'em, an' gives all the land some day to the white man. Though I hev to fight the Indian, I've a lot o' sympathy with him, too."

"I feel the same way about it," said Will. "Maybe we won't have any more trouble with them."

The Little Giant shook his head.

"We may dodge 'em in the mountains, though that ain't shore," he said, "but when we go down into the plains, ez we've got to do sooner or later, the fur will fly. I'm mighty glad we picked up Steve Brady, 'cause fur all his solemn ways he's a pow'ful good fightin' man. Now, I think we'd better git back up the slope, 'cause warriors from that village may be huntin' 'long here an', however much we may sympathize with the Indians we're boun' to lose a hull lot o' that sympathy when they come at us, burnin' fur our scalps."

"Correct," laughed Will, and as fast as they could climb they rejoined the others, telling what they had seen. Brady showed some apprehension over their report.

"I've noticed that mountain sheep and goats are numerous through here, and while Indians live mostly on the buffalo, yet they have many daring hunters in the mountains, looking for goats and sheep, and maybe in the ravines for the smaller bears, the meat of which they love."

"And you think we may be seen by some such hunters?" said Will.

"Perhaps so, and in order to avoid such bad luck I suggest that we seek still greater height."

They agreed upon it, though the Little Giant grumbled at the hard luck that compelled them to scale the tops of high mountains, and they began at once a perilous ascent, which would not have been possible for the horses had they not been trained by long experience. They also entered a domain of bad weather, being troubled much by rain, heavy winds and occasional snows, and at night it was so cold that they invariably built a fire in some ravine or deep gully.

Will calculated that they were at least ten thousand feet above the sea level, and that the White Dome, which was now straight ahead, must be between three and four thousand feet higher. They reckoned that they could circle the peak on the left at their present height, and they made good progress, as there seemed to be fewer ravines and canyons close to the dome.

Nevertheless, as they approached they came to a dip much deeper than usual, but it was worth the descent into it, as they found there in the sheltered spaces plenty of grass for the horses, and they were quite willing to rest also, as every nerve and muscle was racked by the mountain climbing. Still holding that time was their most abundant possession, the hunter suggested that they spend a full day and night in the dip, and all the others welcomed the idea.

Will, being younger than the others, had more physical elasticity, and a few hours restored him perfectly. Then he decided to take his rifle and go up the dip looking for a mountain sheep, and the others being quite willing, he was soon making his way through the short bushes toward the north. He prided himself on having become a good hunter and trapper, and even here in the heart of the high mountains he neglected no precaution.

The dip extended about two miles into the north and then it began to rise rapidly, ending at last in huge, craggy rocks, towering a thousand feet overhead, and Will considered himself in great luck when he saw a splendid ram standing upon one of these stony pinnacles.

The sheep, sharply outlined against the rock and the clear sky, looked at least double his real size, and Will, anxious to procure fresh game, and feeling some of the hunter's ambition, resolved to stalk him. The animal reminded him of a lookout, and perhaps he was, as he stood on his dizzy perch, gazing over the vast range of valley, and the White Dome that now seemed so near.

The lad reached the first rocky slope and began slowly to creep in a diagonal line that took him upward and also toward the sheep. It was difficult work to keep one's footing and carry one's rifle also, but his pride was up and he clung to his task, until his muscles began to ache and the perspiration came out on his face. He was in fear lest the sheep would go away, but the great ram stood there, immovable, his head haughtily erect, a monarch of his tribe, and Will became thoroughly convinced that he was a watchman.

His repeating rifle carried a long distance, but he did not want to make an uncertain shot, and he continued his laborious task of climbing which yielded such slow results. The sheep took no notice of him, still gazing over valley and

ranges and at the White Dome. If he saw him, the lad was evidently in his eyes a speck in a vast world and not worth notice. Will felt a sort of chagrin that he was not considered more dangerous, and, patting his rifle, he resolved to make the ram realize that a real hunter was after him.

He crawled painfully and cautiously around a big rock and something whirring by his ear rang sharply on the stone. He saw to his amazement a long feathered arrow dropping away from the target on which it had struck in vain, and then roll down the side of the mountain.

He knew, too, that the arrow had passed within a few inches of his ear, aimed with deadly purpose, and for a moment or two his blood was cold within his veins. Instantly he turned aside and flattened himself against a stony upthrust. As he did so he heard the ring on the rock again and a second feathered arrow tumbled into the void.

His first emotion was thankfulness. He lay in a shallow hollow now and it was not easy for any arrow to reach him there. He was unharmed as yet, and he had the great repeating rifle which should be a competent answer to arrows. Some loose stones were lying in the hollow, and he cautiously built them into a low parapet, which increased his protection. Then, peeping over the stones, he tried to discover the location of his enemy or enemies, if they should be plural, but he saw only the valley below with its touch of sheltered green, the vast rocky sides about it, and over all the towering summit of the White Dome. There was nothing, save the flight of the feathered arrows, to indicate that a human being was near. Far out on the jutting crag the mountain sheep still stood, a magnificent ram, showing no consciousness of danger or, if conscious of it, defying it. Will suddenly lost all desire to take his life, due, perhaps, to his own resentment at the effort of somebody to take his own.

He believed that the arrows had come from above, but whether from a point directly overhead or to the right or to the left he had no way of telling. It was a hidden foe that he had to combat, and this ignorance was the worst feature of his position. He did not know which way to turn, he did not know which road led to escape, but must lie in his narrow groove until the enemy attacked.

He had learned from his comrades, experienced in the wilderness and in Indian warfare, that perhaps the greatest of all qualities in such surroundings was patience, and if it had not been for such knowledge he might have risked a third arrow long ago, but, as it was, he kept perfectly still, flattening himself against the cliff, sheltered by the edge of the natural bowl and the little terrace of stones

he had built. He might have fired his rifle to attract the attention of his comrades, but he judged that they were at the camp and would not hear his shot. He would fight it out himself, especially as he believed that he was menaced by but a single Indian, a warrior who perhaps had been stalking the mountain sheep also, when he had beheld the creeping lad.

Great as was the strength of the youth's will and patience, he began to twist his body a little in the stony bowl and seek here and there for a sight of his besieger. He could make out stony outcrops and projections above him, every one of which might shelter a warrior, and he was about to give up the quest when a third arrow whistled, struck upon the ledge that he had built and, instead of falling into the chasm, rebounded into the bowl wherein he lay.

The barb had been broken by the rock against which it struck so hard, though the shaft, long, polished and feathered, showed that it had been made by an artist. But he did not know enough about arrows to tell whether it was that of a Sioux or of a warrior belonging to some other tribe. Looking at it a little while, he threw it into the chasm, and settled back to more waiting.

The day was now well advanced and a brilliant sun in the slope of the heavens began to pour fiery shafts upon the side of the cliff. Will had usually found it cold at such a height, but now the beams struck directly upon him and his face was soon covered with perspiration. He was assailed also by a fierce, burning thirst, and a great anger lay hold of him. It was a terrible joke that he should be held there in the hole of the cliff by an invisible warrior who used only arrows against him, perhaps because he feared a shot from a rifle would bring the white lad's comrades.

If the Indian would not use a rifle because of the report, then the case was the reverse with Will. He had thought that the men were too far away to hear, but perhaps the warrior was right, and raising the repeating rifle he sent a bullet into the void. The sharp report came back in many echoes, but he heard no reply from the valley. A second shot, and still no answer. It was evident that the three were too distant to hear, and, for the present, he thought it wise to waste no more bullets.

The power of the sun increased, seeming to concentrate its rays in the little hollow in which Will lay. His face was scorched and his burning thirst was almost intolerable. Yet he reflected that the heat must be at the zenith. Soon the sun would decline, and then would come night, under the cover of which he might escape.

He heard a heavy, rolling sound and a great rock crashed into the valley below. Will shuddered and crowded himself back for every inch of shelter he could obtain. A second rock rolled down, but did not come so near, then a third bounded directly over his head, followed quickly by another in almost the same place.

It was a hideous bombardment, but he realized that so long as he kept close in his little den he was safe. It also told him that his opponent was directly above him, and when the volleys of rocks ceased he might get a shot.

The missiles poured down for several minutes and then ceased abruptly. Evidently the warrior had realized the futility of his avalanche and must now be seeking some other mode of attack. It caused Will chagrin that he had not seen him once during all the long attack, but he noticed with relief that the sun would soon set beyond the great White Dome. The snow on the Dome itself was tinged now with fire, but it looked cool even at the distance, and assuaged a little his heat and thirst. He knew that by and by the long shadows would fall, and then the grateful cold of the night would come.

The body of a warrior shot downward...

The body of a warrior shot downward, striking on the ledges.[ToList](#)

He moved a little, flexed his muscles, grown stiff by his cramped position, and as he did so he caught a glimpse of a figure on the south face of the wall. But it was so fleeting he was not sure. If he had only brought his glasses with him he might have decided, but he was without them, and he concluded finally that it was merely an optical illusion. He and the Indian had the mountain walls to themselves, and the warrior could not have moved around to that point.

In spite of his decision his eyes at length wandered again to that side of the wall, and a second time he thought he caught a glimpse of a human figure creeping among the rocks, but much nearer now. Then he realized that it was no illusion. He had, in very truth, seen a man, and as he still looked a rifle was thrust over a ledge, a puff of fire leaping from its muzzle. From a point above him came a cry that he knew to be a death yell, and the body of a warrior shot downward, striking on the ledges until it bounded clear of them and crashed into the valley below.

Then the figure of the man who had fired the shot stepped upon a rocky shelf, held aloft the weapon with which he had dealt sudden and terrible death, and

cried in a tremendous voice:

"Come forth, young William! Your besieger will besiege no more! Ef I do say it myself, I've never made a better shot."

It was the Little Giant. Never had the sight of him been more welcome, and raising himself stiffly to his feet and moving his own rifle about his head, Will shouted in reply:

"It was not only your greatest shot, but the greatest shot ever made by anybody."

"Stay whar you are," cried Bent. "You're too stiff an' sore to risk climbin' jest yet. I'll be with you soon."

But it was almost dark before the Little Giant crept around the face of the cliff and reached the hollow in which the lad lay. Then he told him that he had seen some of the rocks falling and as he was carrying Will's glasses he was able to pick out the warrior at the top of the cliff. The successful shot followed and the siege was over.

Night had now come and it was an extremely delicate task to find their way back to the valley, but they made the trip at last without mishap. Once again on level ground Will was forced to sit down and rest until a sudden faintness passed. The Little Giant regarded him with sympathy.

"You had a pretty tough time, young William, thar's no denyin' that," he said. "It's hard to be cooped up in a hole in a mountainside, with an enemy shootin' at you an' sendin' avalanches down on you, an' you never seein' him a-tall."

"I never saw him once until he plunged from the cliff with your bullet through him."

"Wa'al, it's all over now, an' we'll go back to the camp. The boys had been worryin' 'bout you some, and I concluded I'd come out an' look fur you, an' ef it hadn't been fur my concludin' so I guess you'd been settin' thar in that holler a month from now, an' the Indian would hev been settin' in a holler above you. At least I hev saved you from a long waitin' spell."

"You have," said Will with heartfelt emphasis, "and again I thank you."

"Come on, then. I kin see the fire shinin' through the trees an' Jim an' Steve cookin' our supper."

Will hurried along, but his knees grew weak again and objects swam before

his eyes. He had not yet recovered his strength fully after passing through the tremendous test of mental and physical endurance, when he lay so long in that little hollow in the side of the mountain. The Little Giant was about to thrust out a hand and help sustain him, but he did not do so, remembering that it would hurt the lad's pride. The gold hunter, uneducated, spending his life in the wilds, had nevertheless a delicacy of feeling worthy of the finest flower of civilization.

Will was near to the fire now and the pleasant aroma of broiling venison came to him. Boyd and Brady were moving about the flames, engaged in pleasant homely tasks, and all his strength returned. Once more his head was steady and his muscles strong.

"I made a long stay," he called cheerfully to them, "too long, I fear, nor do I bring a mountain sheep back with me."

The sharp eyes of the hunter and the trapper saw at once in his pallid face and exaggerated manner that something unusual had happened, but they pretended to take no notice.

"Did you see any sheep?" asked Boyd.

"Yes," replied the lad, "I had a splendid view of a grand ram, standing high on a jutting stone over the great valley."

"What became of him?"

"I don't know. I became so busy with something else that I forgot all about him, and he must have gone away in the twilight. An Indian in a niche above me began firing arrows at me, and I had to stick close in a little hollow in the stone so he couldn't reach me. If the Little Giant hadn't come along, and made another of his wonderful shots I suppose I'd be staying there for a week to come."

"Tom can shoot a little," said Boyd, divining the whole story from the lad's few sentences, "and he also has a way of shooting at the right time. Now, you sit down here, Will, and eat these steaks I'm broiling, and I'll give you a cup of coffee, too, just one cup though, because we're sparing our coffee as much as we can now."

Will ate and drank with a great appetite, and then he told more fully of his adventure with the foe whom he had never seen until the Little Giant's bullet sent him spinning into the void.

"He'd have got you," said Brady thoughtfully, "if Tom hadn't come along."

"You know we wuz worried 'bout him stayin' so long," said the Little Giant,

"an' so I went out to look fur him. It wuz lucky that I took his glasses along, or I might never hev seen him or the Sioux. I don't want to brag, but that wuz one o' my happy thoughts."

"You had nothing to do with taking the glasses, Tom Bent," said Brady seriously.

"Why, it wuz my own idee!"

"Not at all. The idea was in your head but it was not put there by your own mind. It was put there by the Infinite, and it was put there because Will's time had not yet come. You were merely an instrument, Tom Bent."

"Mebbe I wuz. I'm not takin' any credit to myself fur deep thinkin' an' I 'low you know more 'bout these things than I do, Steve Brady, since you've had your mind on 'em so much an' so long. An' ef I wuz used ez an instrument to save Will, I'm proud that it wuz so."

Will, who was lying on the turf propped up by his elbow before the fire, looked up at the skies, which were now a clear silver, in which countless stars appeared to hang, lower and larger than he had ever seen them before. It was a beautiful sky, and whether it was merely fate or chance that had sent the Little Giant to his aid he felt with the poet that God was in his heaven, and, for the time at least, all was right with his world.

"You got a good sight of the Indian, did you, Tom?" asked Boyd.

"I saw him plain through the glasses. He wuz a Sioux. I couldn't make no mistake. Like ez not he wuz a hunter from the village we saw on the slope below, an' whar one hunter is another may not be fur away."

"Thinking as you do," said Boyd, "and thinking as I do the same way you do, I think we'd better put out our fire and shift to another part of the valley."

"That's a lot of 'thinks,'" said Brady, "but it seems to me that you're both right, and I've no doubt such thoughts are put into our minds to save our lives. Perhaps it would be best for us to start up the slopes at once, but if our time is coming tonight it will come and no flight of ours will alter it."

Nevertheless they took the precaution to stamp out the last coal, and then moved silently with the animals to another part of the dip. While they were tethering their horses and mules there in a little glade all the animals began to tremble violently and it required Will's utmost efforts to soothe them. The acute ears of Brady detected a low growling on their right, not far from the base of the

cliff.

"Come, Tom," he said to the Little Giant. "You and I will see what it is, and be sure you're ready with that rifle of yours. You ought to shoot beautifully in this clear moonlight."

They disappeared among the bushes, but returned in a few minutes, although the growling had become louder and was continuous. Both men had lost a little of their ruddiness.

"What was it?" asked Will.

"It wuz your friend, the Sioux warrior who held you in the cliff so long," replied the Little Giant, shuddering. "Half a dozen big mountain wolves are quarrelin' 'bout the right place to bury him in. But, anyway, he's bein' buried, an' mighty fast too."

Will shuddered also, and over and over again. In fact, his nervous system had been so shaken that it would not recover its full force for a day, and the others, trained to see all things, noticed it.

"You soothe them animals ag'in, young William," said the Little Giant, "an' we'll spread the blankets fur our beds here in the bushes."

Bent again showed supreme judgment, as in quieting the fears of the horses and mules for the second time Will found that renewed strength flowed back into his own nervous system, and when he returned to the fireless camp his hand and voice were once more quite steady.

"There is your bed, William," said Brady. "You lie on one blanket, put the other over you, and also one of the bearskins. It's likely to be a dry and cold night, but anyway, whether it rains or snows, it will rain or snow on the just and the unjust, and blankets and bearskin should keep you dry. That growling in the bushes, too, has ceased, and our friend, the Sioux, who sought your life, has found a dreadful grave."

Will shuddered once more, but when he crept between the blankets his nerves were soothed rapidly and he soon fell asleep.

The three men kept watch and watch through the night, and they saw no Indian foe. Once Boyd heard a rustling in the bushes, and he made out the figure of a huge mountain wolf that stood staring at them for a moment. The horses and mules began to stir uneasily, and, picking up a stone, the hunter threw it with such good aim that the wolf, struck smartly on the body, ran away.

The animals relapsed into quiet, and nothing more stirred in the bushes, until the leaves began to move under the light breeze that came at dawn.



CHAPTER IX

THE BUFFALO MARCH

Drawn by an impulse that he tried to check but could not, Will went in the morning to the point in the bushes whence the growling had come the night before, finding there nothing but the bones of the Sioux, from which every trace of flesh had been removed. He shuddered once more. He, instead of the warrior, might have been the victim. His eyes, trained now to look upon the earth as a book and to read what might be printed there, saw clearly the tracks of the wolves among the grass and leaves. After finishing what they had come to do they had gone away some distance and had gathered together in a close group, as if they had meditated an attack, possibly upon the horses and mules.

Will knew how great and fierce the mountain wolves of the north were, and he was glad to note that, after their council, they had gone on and perhaps had left the valley. At least, he was able to follow their tracks as far as the lower rocks, where they disappeared. When he returned to the little camp he told what he had seen.

"We're in no danger of a surprise from the big wolves," said Brady. "They'd have killed and eaten some of the horses and mules if we hadn't been here, but wolves are smart, real smart. Like as not they saw Thomas shoot the Sioux, and they knew that the long stick he carried, from which fire spouted, slaying the warrior, was like the long sticks all of us carry, and that to attack us here was death for them. Oh, I know I'm guessing a lot, but I've observed 'em a long time and I'm convinced wolves can reason that far."

"All animals are smarter than we think they are," said the Little Giant. "I've lived among 'em a heap, an' know a lot o' their ways. Only they've a diff'rent set o' intellectooals from ours. What we're smart in they ain't, an' what they're smart in we ain't. Now, ef I had joined to what I am myself the strength o' a grizzly bear, the cunnin' o' a wolf an' the fleetness o' an antelope I reckon I'd be 'bout the best man that ever trod 'roun' on this planet."

"I've one thing to suggest before we start," said Will, "and I think it's important."

"What is it?" asked Boyd.

"That we make copies of the map. We may become separated for long periods—everything indicates that we will—I might fall into the hands of Felton, who seems to have a hint about the mine, and, if I saw such a thing about to occur, I would destroy the map, and then you would have the copies. Each of you faced by a similar misfortune could make away with his copy, and if the worst came to the worst I could re-draw it from memory."

"Good idee! Good idee!" exclaimed the Little Giant with enthusiasm. "I've been tellin' Jim an' Steve that though they mightn't think it, you had the beginnin's o' intelleck in that head o' yours."

"Thank you," said Will, and they all laughed.

"It's a good thought," said Boyd, "and we'd better do it at once."

Will carried in his pack some pens and a small bottle of indelible ink, and with these they drew with the greatest care three more maps on fine deerskin, small but very clear, and then every man stored one in a secure place about his person.

"Now, remember," said Boyd, "if any one of us is in danger of capture he must get rid of his map."

Then, their breakfast over, they began the ascent of the slope, leading toward the White Dome, finding it easier than they had thought. As always, difficulties decreased when they faced them boldly, and even the animals, refreshed by their stay in the valley, showed renewed vigor, climbing like goats. The Little Giant whistled merrily, mostly battle songs of the late war which was still so fresh in the minds of all men.

"I notice that you whistle songs of both sides," said Brady. "Musically, at least, you have no feeling about our great Civil War."

"Nor any other way, either," rejoined the Little Giant. "I may hev hed my feelin's once, though I ain't sayin' now what they wuz, but fur me the war is all over, done fit clean out. They say six or seven hundred thousand men wuz lost in it, an' now that it's over it's got to stop right thar. I'm lookin' to the future, I am, to the quarter of a million in gold that's comin' to me, an' the gorgeous ways in which I'm goin' to spend it. Young William, see that big mountain ram standin' out on the side o' the peak over thar. I believe he's the same feller that you tried to stalk yesterday, an' that he's laughin' at you. He's a good mile away, but I kin see the twinkle in his eye, an' ez shore ez I stan' here he lifted his left foot to his nose an' twisted it 'bout in a gesture which among us boys allers meant fight. Do you stan' his dare, young William, or are you goin' to climb over thar whar he is

an' hev it out with him?"

"I'll let him alone," laughed William, looking at the splendid ram, outlined so sharply in the clear mountain light. "I meant to do him harm, but I'm glad I didn't. Maybe that Indian was engaged in the same task, when he saw me and changed his hunting."

Then he shuddered once more at the growling he had heard and what he had seen in the bushes the next morning, but his feeling of horror did not last long, because they were now climbing well upon the shoulder of the White Dome and the spectacle, magnificent and inspiring, claimed all their attention.

The last bushes and dwarfed vegetation disappeared. Before them rose terrace on terrace, slope on slope of rock, golden or red in the sun, and beyond them the great snow fields and the glaciers. Over it all towered the White Dome, round and pure, the finest mountain Will had ever seen. He never again saw anything that made a more deep and solemn impression upon him. Far above all the strife and trouble of the world swam the white peak.

Meanwhile the Little Giant continued to whistle merrily. He was not awed, and he was not solemn. Prone to see the best in everything, he enjoyed the magnificent panorama outspread before them, and also drew from it arguments most favorable for their quest.

"We're absolutely safe from the warriors," he said. "We're above the timber line, and they'd never come up here huntin'. An Indian doesn't do anythin' more than he has to. He ain't goin' to wear hisself out climbin' to the top o' a mounting ten miles high in order to hev a look at the scenery. We won't be troubled by no warriors 'til we go down the shoulder o' your White Dome on the other side."

He resumed his clear, musical whistling, pouring out in a most wonderful manner the strains of "Dixie," changing impartially to "Yankee Doodle," shifting back to "The Bonnie Blue Flag," and then, with the same lack of prejudice, careering into "Marching Through Georgia."

The horses and mules that they were now leading felt the uplifting influence, raised their heads and marched forward more sturdily.

"What makes you so happy?" asked Will.

"The kindness o' natur' what gave me that kind o' a disposition," replied the Little Giant, "an' added to it the feelin' that all the time I'm drawin' closer to my gold. What did you say my share would be, young William, a matter o' a million or a half million?"

"A quarter of a million."

"Seems to me it wuz a half million, but somehow it grows ez we go 'long. When you git rich, even in the mind, you keep on gittin' richer."

Then he began to whistle a gallant battle stave with extraordinary richness and variety of tone, and when he had finished Will asked:

"What was that song, Tom? It's a new one to me."

"It's new to most people," replied the Little Giant, "but it's old jest the same. It wuz writ 'way back in the last war with England, an' I'll quote you the first two verses, words an' grammar both correct:

Britannia's gallant streamers
Float proudly o'er the tide,
And fairly wave Columbia's stripes
In battle side by side,
And ne'er did bolder seamen meet
Where ocean surges pour
O'er the tide now they ride
While the bell'wing thunders roar
While the cannon's fire is flashing fast
And the bell'wing thunders roar.

When Yankee meets the Briton
Whose blood congenial flows,
By Heaven created to be friends
By fortune reckoned foes:
Hard then must be the battle fray
E'er well the fight is o'er,
Now they ride, side by side,
While the bell'wing thunders roar,
While the cannon's fire is flashing fast
And the bell'wing thunders roar.

"That's a lot more verses, young William, an' it's all 'bout them great naval duels o' the war o' 1812, an' you'll notice that whoever writ 'em had no ill feelin' in his natur', an' give heaps o' credit to the British. It does seem that we an' the British ought to be friends, bein' so close kin, actin' so much alike, an' havin' institutions just the same, 'cept that whar they hev a king we hev a president. Yet

here we are quarrelin' with 'em a lot, though not more than they quarrel with us."

"The trouble lies in the fact that we speak the same language," said Will. "Every word of abuse spoken by one is understood by the other. Now, if the French or the Spanish or the Russians denounce us we never hear anything about it, don't know even that it's been done."

"That's good ez fur ez it goes," said the Little Giant. "I've seen a lot o' English that don't speak any English, a-tall, fellers that come out o' the minin' regions in England an' some from London, too, that talked a lingo soundin' ez much like English ez Sioux does, but it doesn't alter the fact that them an' us ought to be friends. An' I reckon we will be now, 'cause I hear they're claimin' that our Washington wuz an Englishman, the same immortal George that they would hev hung in the Revolution along with his little hatchet, too, ef they could hev caught him."

Will laughed with relish.

"In a way Washington was an Englishman," he said. "That is, he was of pure English stock, transplanted to another land. The Athenians were Greeks, the most famous of the Greeks, but they were not the oldest of the Greeks by any means. They were a colony from Asia Minor, just as we were a colony from England."

"I don't know much 'bout the Greeks, young William, my lad, but ef the English kin lay claim to Washington ez one o' their sons, 'cause he wuz of pure English blood, then me an' most o' the Americans kin lay jest ez good a claim to Shakespeare 'cause, we bein' o' pure British blood, he wuz one o' our ancestors."

"Your claim is perfectly good, Giant. By and by, both Washington and Shakespeare will belong to the whole English-speaking world."

"Its proudest ornyments, so to speak. Now, that bein' settled, I'd like to go back to a p'int that troubles me."

"If I can help call on me."

"It's 'bout that song I wuz jest singin'. At the last line o' each verse it says: 'An' the bell'wing thunders roar.' I've thought it over a heap o' times, but I've never rightly made out what a bell'wing thunder is. Thar ain't nothin' 'bout thunder that reminds me o' bells. Now what is it, young William?"

Will began to laugh.

"What do you find so funny?" asked the Little Giant suspiciously.

"Nothing at all! Nothing at all!" replied Will hastily. "'Bell'wing' is bellowing. The writer meant the bellowing thunders, and it's cut off to bell'wing for the sake of rhyme and metre, a poetical liberty, so to speak. You see, poets have liberties denied to other people."

"Wa'al, I reckon they need a few. All that I ever seed did. But I'm mighty glad the p'int hez been settled. It's been botherin' me fur years. Thank you, young William."

"I think now," said Boyd, "that we'd better be looking for a camp."

"Among all these canyons and valleys," said Will, "it shouldn't be hard to find a suitable place."

Canyons were too abundant for easy traveling, and finding a fairly level though narrow place in one of the deepest, they pitched camp there, building a fire with wood which they had added to their packs for this purpose, and feeding to the animals grass which they had cut on the lower slopes. With the warm food and the fire it was not so bad, although the wind began to whistle fiercely far above their heads. The animals hovered near the fire for warmth, looking to the human beings who guided them for protection.

"I think we shall pass the highest point of our journey tomorrow," said Brady, "and then for the descent along the shoulder of the White Dome. Truly the stars have fought for us and I cannot believe that, after having escaped so many perils, we will succumb to others to come."

"O' course we won't," said the Little Giant cheerfully, "an' all the dangers we've passed through will make our gold all the more to us. Things ain't much to you 'less you earn 'em. When I git my million, which is to be my share o' that mine, I'll feel like I earned it."

"A quarter of a million, Tom," laughed Will. "You're getting avaricious as we go on. You raised it to a half million and now you make it a million."

"It does look ez ef my fancy grew more heated the nearer we come to the gold. I do hev big expectations fur a feller that never found a speck of it. How that wind does howl! Do you think, young William, that a glacier is comin' right squar' down on us?"

"No, Tom. Glaciers, like tortoises, move slowly. We'll have time to get out of the way of any glacier. It's easy to outrun the fastest one on the globe."

"I've heard tell that the earth was mostly covered with 'em once. Is that so?"

"They say there was an Ice Age fifty thousand or so years ago, when everything that lived had to huddle along the equator. I don't vouch for it. I'm merely telling what the scholars tell."

"I'll take your word for it, young William, an' all the same I'm glad I didn't live then. Think o' bein' froze to death all your life. Ez it is I'm ez cold ez I keer to be, layin' here right now in this canyon."

"If we were not hunting for gold," said Brady, "I'd try to climb to the top of this mountain. I take it to be close on to fourteen thousand feet in height and I often feel the ambition of the explorer. Perhaps that's why I've been willing to search so long and in vain for the great beaver horde. I find so many interesting things by the way, lakes, rivers, mountains, valleys, game, hot springs, noble forests and many other things that help to make up a splendid world. It's worth while for a man like me, without any ties, just to wander up and down the face of the earth."

"Do you know anything about the country beyond the White Dome?" asked Will.

"Very little, except that it slopes down rapidly to a much lower range of mountains, mostly forested, then to hills, forested also, and after that we have the great plains again."

"Now you've talked enough, young William," said the Little Giant. "It's time for you to sleep, but ez this is goin' to be a mighty cold night up here, fifteen or twenty miles 'bove the clouds, I reckon we'd better git blankets, an' wrap up the hosses an' mules too."

Having enough to go around they tied one blanket around the body of every animal, and Will was the most proficient in the task.

"It's 'cause they help him an' they don't help us," said the Little Giant. "Seein' that you've got such a touch with animals we're goin' to use you the next time we meet a grizzly bear. 'Stead o' wastin' bullets on him an' runnin' the chance o' some o' us gittin' hurt, we'll jest send you forrard to talk to him an' say, 'Ephraim! Old Eph, kindly move out o' the path. You're obstructin' some good men an' scarin' some good hosses an' mules.' Then he'll go right away."

Despite their jesting they pitched the camp for that critical night with the greatest care, making sure that they had the most sheltered place in the canyon, and ranging the horses and mules almost by the side of them. More clothing was brought from the packs and every man was wrapped up like a mummy, the fur

coats they had made for themselves proving the best protection. Although the manifold wrappings kept Will's blood warm in his veins, the night itself and their situation created upon his mind the effect of intense cold.

The wind rose all the time, as if it were determined to blow away the side of the mountain, and it howled and shrieked over their heads in all the keys of terror. None of them could sleep for a long time.

"It's real skeery," said the Little Giant. "Mebbe nobody hez ever been up here so high before, an' this old giant of a mountain don't like our settin' here on his neck. I've seen a lot o' the big peaks in the Rockies, w'arin' thar white hats o' snow, an' they allers 'pear to me to be alive, lookin' down so solemn an' sometimes so threatenin'. Hark to that, will you! I know it wuz jest the screamin' o' the wind, but it sounded to me like the howlin' o' a thousand demons. Are you shore, young William, that thar ain't imps an' critters o' that kind on the tops o' high mountings, waitin' fur innocent fellers like us?"

Will slept at last, but the mind that can remain troubled and uneasy through sleep awoke him several times in the course of the night, and always he heard the fierce, threatening blasts shrieking and howling over the mountain. His eyes yet heavy with sleep, it seemed to him in spite of himself that there must be something in the Little Giant's suggestion that imps and demons on the great peaks resented their presence. He knew that it could not be true, but he felt as if it were, and once he rose all swathed in many garments and stroked the noses of the horses and mules, which were moving uneasily and showing other signs of alarm.

Dawn came, clear, with the wind not so high, but icily cold. They fed the last of the little store of hay to the animals, ate cold food themselves, and then crept out of the canyon, leading their horses and mules with the most extreme care, a care that nevertheless would have been in vain had not all the beasts been trained to mountain climbing. It was a most perilous day, but the next night found them so far down on the western slope of the White Dome that they had reached the timber line again.

The trees were dwarfed and scraggly, but they were trees just the same, affording shelter from wind and cold, and fuel for a fire, which the travelers built, providing themselves once more with warm food and coffee as sizzling hot as they could stand it. The animals found a little solace for their hunger by chewing on the tenderest parts of the bushes.

After the meal they built the fire higher, deciding that they would watch by

turns and keep it going through the night. As the wind was not so threatening and the glow of the coals was cheerful they slept well, in their turns, and all felt fresh and vigorous when they renewed the journey the next morning. They descended rapidly now among the lower ranges of the mountains and came into heavy forests and grassy openings where the animals ate their fill. Game also was abundant, and they treated themselves to fresh deer meat, the product this time of Brady's rifle. They were all enveloped by a great sense of luxury and rest, and still having the feeling that time was their most abundant commodity, they lingered among the hills and in the timber, where there were clear, cold lakelets and brooks and creeks that later lost themselves on the plains.

It gave Will a great mental stimulus after so many dangers and such tremendous hardships, the survival of which without a wound seemed incredible. He looked back at the vast peak of the White Dome, solemn and majestic, piercing the sky, and it seemed to him at times that it had been a living thing and that it had watched over them in their gigantic flight.

Despite the increased danger there from Indian raids they lingered longer than they had intended among the pleasant hills. The animals, which had been much worn in the passage of the great mountains, and two that became lame in the descent recovered entirely. The Little Giant and the hunter scouted in wide circles, and, seeing no sign of Indian bands, most of their apprehension on that score disappeared, leaving to them a certain sense of luxury as they delayed among the trees, and in the pleasant hills. Will caught some fine trout in one of the larger brooks, and Brady cooked them with extraordinary culinary skill. The lad had never tasted anything finer.

"Come here, young William," said the Little Giant, "an' stand up by the side o' me. No, you haven't grown a foot in height, since I met you, so many days since, but you've grown jest the same. Your chest is bigger, too, an' you eat twice ez much ez you did. I hope that what's inside your head hez done growed too."

"Thomas Bent," said Brady, "you should not talk in such a manner about what's inside his head to the one who is the real leader of this expedition, as the mine is his. He might be insulted, cast you off, and let you go eat corn husks with the prodigal son."

"No, he won't," replied the Little Giant, confidently. "Will, hevin' done tuk me in ez pardner, would never want to put me out ag'in, nor thar ain't no corn husks nor no prodigal son. Besides, he likes fur me to compliment him on his growth. You're older than I am, Steve Brady, but I want to tell you that the man or

woman wuz never born who didn't like a little well-placed flattery now an' then, though what I've been sayin' to young William ain't flattery."

"In that matter I'm agreeing with you, Thomas Bent. You're dipping from a well of truth, when you're saying all men are accessible to flattery—and all women too, though perhaps more so."

"Mebbe women are more so an' mebbe men are more so. I reckon it depends on whether a man or woman is tellin' it."

"Which is as near as we'll ever come to a decision," said Brady, "but of one thing I'm sure."

"What's that, Steve?"

"We've dallied long enough with the flesh pots of Egypt. If William will take his glasses he can see the land of Canaan outspread far below us. It is there that we must go."

"An' that thar land o' Canaan," said the Little Giant, "is rid over by Sioux warriors, ready to shoot us with rifles or stick us through with lances. I'd hate to die hangin' on a Sioux lance. Sech a death makes me shiver. Ef I've got to die a violent death, give me a good, honest bullet ev'ry time. You hev'n't seen the Sioux at work with lances, hev you, young William?"

"No, Tom."

"Well, I hev. They fight with 'em, o' course, an' they hev a whole code o' signals with 'em, too. In battle everybody must obey the head chief, who gives the orders to the sub-chiefs, who then direct their men accordin'. Often thar ain't a chance to tell by words an' then they use the lances fur signallin'. In a Sioux army, an', fur the matter o' that, in any Indian army, the hoss Indians is divided into two columns, the right an' the left. When the battle comes on, the head war chief rides to the top o' a ridge or hill, gen'ally 'bout half a mile 'way from the scrap. The columns on the right an' the left are led by the under chiefs.

"Then the big chief begins to tell 'em things with his lance. He ain't goin' to fight with that lance, an' fur other purposes he hez fastened on it near the blade a big piece o' dressed skin a yard squar' an' painted black. Now he stretches the lance straight out in front o' him an' waves it, which means fur both columns to attack all at once an' right away, lickety-split. Ef he stretches the lance out to his right and waves it forward it means fur the right column alone to jump inter the middle o' things, the same movement on the left applyin' to the left column, an' thar's a lot more which I could tell you 'bout lance signallin' which I hope you

won't hev to see."

"We will not disguise from ourselves," said Brady, in his usual grave tone, "that we must confront peril when we descend into the plains, yet descend we must, because these mountains and hills won't go on with us. It will be a long time before we strike another high range. On the plains we've got to think of Indians, and then we've got to look out for water, too."

"Our march often makes me think of Xenophon, whom I studied in the high school," said Will.

"What's Xenophon?" asked the Little Giant suspiciously. "I ain't heard o' no sich country."

"Xenophon is not a country. Xenophon was a man, and a good deal of a man. He led a lot of Greeks, along with a lot of Persians, to help a Persian overthrow his brother and seize the throne of the Persian empire. In the battle the Greeks were victorious wherever they were fighting, but the Persian whom they were supporting was killed, and having no more business there they concluded to go away."

"Lost their paymaster, eh?"

"Well, I suppose you could put it that way. Anyway they resolved to go back to their homes in Greece, across mountains, rivers and deserts. Xenophon, who led them, wrote the account of it."

"Then I'll bet that Xenophon looms up pretty big in the tellin' o' it."

"No, he was a modest man, Tom. But what I remember best about the story, they were always marching so many parasangs, so many days' journey to a well of water. It gets to be a sort of fascination with you. You are always wondering how many parasangs they'll march before they come to water. And sometimes you've a kind of horrible fear that there won't be any water to come to, and it keeps you keyed up."

"Same ez ef you wuz in that sort o' condition yourself."

"Something like it."

"Well, mebbe we will be, an' jest you remember, young William, since them Greeks allers come to water, else Xenophon who led them never would hev lived fur the tellin' o' it, that we'll allers come to water, too, even of we do hev to wait a week or two fur it. Cur'us how long you kin live after your tongue hez baked, your throat hez turned to an oven, an' your lips hev curled up with the heat."

"I imagine, Tom," said Boyd, "we're not going to suffer like that."

"I jest wanted to let young William know the worst fust an' he kin fortify himself accordin'."

"I'm prepared to suffer what the rest of you suffer," said the lad.

"The right spirit," said Brady, heartily. "We'll be Davids and Jonathans, cleaving the one unto the other, and now, as we're about to emerge from the last bit of forest I suggest that we fill all our water bottles from this brook among the trees. Thomas has talked so feelingly about thirst that I want to provide against it. We will not strike here the deserts that are to be found in the far south, but we may well have long periods without water free from alkali."

They had many leather water bottles, their packs having been prepared with all the skill of experience and sound judgment, and they filled all of them at the brook, which was pure and cold, flowing down from the mountains. At one of the deeper pools which had a fine bottom of gravel they bathed thoroughly, and afterward let the horses and mules wade into the water and take plunges they seemed to enjoy greatly.

"An' now," said the Little Giant, taking off his hat and looking back, "good-bye trees, good-bye hills, good-bye, high mountains, good-bye all clear, cold streams like this, an' good-bye, you grand White Dome. Say them words after me, young William, 'cause when we git out on the great plains we're likely to miss these friends o' ourn."

He spoke with evident feeling, and Will, taking off his hat, said the words after him, though with more regard to grammar.

"And now, after leading them most of the way," said Boyd, "we'll ride on the backs of our horses."

The four mounted, and, while they regretted the woods and the running water they were about to leave behind them, they were glad to ride once more, and they felt the freedom and exhilaration that would come with the swift, easy motion of their horses. The pack animals, knowing the hands that fed and protected them, would follow with certainty close behind them, and Will, in particular, could lead them as if he had been training them for years.

The vast sweep of the plains into which they now emerged showed great natural beauty, that is, to those who loved freedom and space, and the winds came untarnished a thousand miles. Before them stretched the country, not flat, but in swell on swell, tinted a delicate green, and with wild flowers growing in

the tufts of grass.

"I've roamed over 'em for years," said Brady, "and after a while they take a mighty grip on you. It may be all the stronger for me, because I'm somewhat solitary by nature."

"You're shorely not troubled by neighbors out here," said the Little Giant. "I've passed three or four months at a time in the mountings without a soul to speak to but myself. The great West suits a man, who don't want to talk, clean down to the groun'."

Will, the reins lying upon the pommel of his saddle, was surveying the horizon with the powerful glasses which he was so proud to possess, and far in the southeast he noticed a dim blur which did not seem to be a natural part of the plain. It grew as he watched it, assuming the shape of a cloud that moved westward along one side of a triangle, while the four were riding along the other side. If they did not veer from their course they would meet, in time, and the cloud, seemingly of dust, was, therefore, a matter of living interest.

"What are you looking at so long?" asked Boyd.

"A cloud of dust that grows and grows and grows."

"Where?"

"In the southeast."

"I can't see it and I have pretty keen eyes."

"The naked eye won't reach so far, but the dust cloud is there just the same. It's moving in a course almost parallel with us and it grows every second I look at it. It may be the dust kicked up by a band of Sioux horsemen. Take a look, Jim, and tell us what you make of it."

Boyd looked through the glasses, at first with apprehension that soon changed to satisfaction.

"The cloud of dust is growing fast, just as you told us, Will," he said, "and, while it did look for a moment or two like Indian horsemen, it isn't. It's a buffalo herd, and the tail of it runs off into the southeast, clean down under the horizon. Buffaloes move in two kinds of herds, the giant herds, and the little ones. This is a giant, and no mistake. In a few minutes you'll be able to see 'em, plain, with your own eyes."

"I kin see thar dust cloud now," exclaimed the Little Giant. "Looks ez ef they

wuz cuttin' 'cross our right o' way."

They rode forward at ease and gradually a mighty cloud of dust, many miles in length and of great width, emerged from the plain, moving steadily toward the northwest. Will, with his glasses, now saw the myriads of black forms that trampled up the dusty typhoons, and was even able to discern the fierce wolves hanging on the flanks in the hope of pulling down a calf or a decrepit old bull.

"They must number millions," he said.

"Like ez not they do," said the Little Giant. "You kin tell tales 'bout the big herds o' bufflers on the plains that nobody will b'lieve, but they're true jest the same. Once at the Platte I saw a herd crossin' fur five days, an' it stretched up an' down the river ez fur ez the eye could see."

"How do they all live? Where do they find enough grass to eat?" asked Will.

"I dunno, but bunch grass is pow'ful fillin' an' fattenin', an' when a country runs fifteen or eighteen hundred miles each way, thar's a lot o' grass in it. The Sioux, the Cheyennes, the Pawnees an' all the plains Indians live on the buffler."

"And in my opinion," said Brady, "the buffalo must have been increasing until the white man came with firearms. Their increase was greater than the toll taken by Indians with bows and arrows and by the wolves. No wonder the Indians fight so hard to retain the plains and the buffalo. With an unlimited meat supply on the hoof, and with limited needs, they undoubtedly lived a happy, nomadic life. If your health is good and your wants are few it's not hard to be happy. The Biblical people were nomadic for a long time, and some of the world's greatest men and women moved with herds and lived in tents. My mind often reverts to those old days and the simplicity of life."

"I've allers thought thar wuz somethin' o' the old Bible 'bout you, Steve," said the Little Giant. "You ain't no prophet. Nobody is nowadays, but you talk like them fightin' an' prayin' old fellers, an' you wander 'roun' the West jest ez they wandered 'bout the land o' Canaan, but shore that you will git to your journey's end at last. An' I know, too, Steve, that when you come to a fight you're jest ez fierce an' terrible ez old Joshua hisself ever wuz, an' ef I ain't mistook it wuz him that wuz called the sword o' the Lord. Ain't I right, young William?"

"I'm not sure," replied the lad, "but if you'll read the Book of Joshua you'll find his sword was a great and terrible weapon indeed."

"What do you think we'd better do, Boyd," asked Brady. "If we keep going we'll find the herd crossing our path, and it will be no use fur us to try to break

through it."

"We can move on until we come close up," replied the hunter, "and then wait for the herd to go by. Maybe we might strike a clump of trees in which we could camp. Pick out the country with your glasses, Will, and see if you can find any trees on our side of the moving buffalo line."

Will, after much searching, was able to identify the tops of some trees standing in a dip where, sheltered from the winds that blew unceasingly, they had been able to obtain good size.

"We'll ride fur 'em," said Boyd. "There may be a pool of water in the dip, too."

"But won't the buffaloes stop and drink it up?" asked Will.

"No, they're bearing straight ahead, looking neither to the right nor to the left, going I've no idea where."

"Two million hearts that beat as one," said Will.

They reached the dip in due time, finding it a shallow depression of a half acre, well grown with substantial cottonwoods and containing, as they had surmised, a pool of good water, perhaps twenty feet each way, and two feet deep. Here the animals drank freely, enabling them to save the store they carried for more stringent times, and then all rested among the trees, while myriads of buffaloes thundered by.

Hour after hour they marched past, not a single one stopping for the water and deep grass they must have smelled so near. At times, they were half hidden by the vast cloud of dust in which they moved, and which was of their own making, and at other times the wind of the plains blew it away, revealing the lowered heads and huge black forms, pressing on with some sort of instinct to their unknown destination.

Will watched them a long time and the tremendous sight at last laid a spell upon him. Apparently they had no leaders. What power moved them out of a vast and unknown region into another region, alike vast and unknown? Leaderless though they were, they advanced like the columns of an army and with a single purpose. He climbed into a fork of one of the cottonwoods and used his glasses once more.

First he looked into the northwest, where they were going, and he could not now see the head of the shaggy army or of the dust column that hung above it, as both had passed long since under the horizon. And looking into the southeast he

could not see, either, the end of the coming army or of its dust cloud. It emerged continually from under the rim of the horizon, and there was such an effect of steadiness and permanency that it seemed to the lad as if that vast column, black and wide, would be coming on forever.

Then he caught a glimpse of something glinting through the dust and from the other side of the herd a full two miles away. Only good eyes and the most powerful glasses of the time could have detected it at such a moment, but he saw it twice, and then thrice and once more. Then, waiting for the dust to lift a little, he discerned a brilliant ray of sunlight striking on the head of a lance. Looking further and searchingly he was able to note the figures of Indians on their ponies, armed with lances, and cutting out from the herd as many of its choicest members as they wanted, which were always the young and fat cows.

He descended the tree hastily and related what he had seen to the others, who, however, were not stirred greatly by the narration.

"The buffaloes are a river, two miles wide, flowing between us and the savage hunters," said Boyd, "and not having trees to climb and glasses to look through they won't see us."

"Besides, they're taking meat for their village, wherever it may be," said Brady, "and they're not dreaming that white men whose heads can furnish nice scalps are near."

Will shivered a little, and clapped one hand to his hair, which was uncommonly thick and fine.

"Your scalp is thar, right an' tight, young William," said the Little Giant, "but ef the Sioux got up close to you, you'd hev to hold it on with both han's 'stead o' one. Hev any o' you fellers noticed that all of us hev pow'ful thick, strong hair that would make splendid scalps fit to hang in the tepees o' the head chiefs theirselves? It's remarkyble how fine they are, speshully on the heads o' old men like Jim an' Steve."

"Thomas Bent, you irreverent and chunky imp," said Brady, "I, the oldest of this party, am but thirty-eight. I have not yet reached the full prime of my physical powers, and if I should be put to it I could administer to you the thrashing you need."

"And I'm only thirty-six," said Boyd, "and I've licked Tom often and often, though sometimes, when he's feeling right peart, I'd have to use both hands to do it. But I don't have any feeling against him when I do the job. It's just to improve his language and manners. These boys of thirty-two or three are so pesky full of life and friskiness that you have to treat 'em as you would young lions. Before we met you in the mountains, Steve, I generally gave him his thrashing in the morning before breakfast."

He reached a large palm for the Little Giant, who leaped lightly away and laughed.

"Lend me your glasses, young William," he said. "I'd like to climb one o' the cotton woods myself an' take a look at the Indian hunters. O' course you're a bright boy, young William, an' Jim an' Steve are so old they're boun' to hev some intelligence forced upon 'em, but ez fur me brightness an' intelligence come nateral, an' though mighty modest 'bout it, I reckon I'm a kind o' Napoleon o' the West. They say our figgers are tremenjeously alike, though, o' course, I'm thicker an' much stronger than he wuz, an' perhaps a lot brighter in some ways."

"Go on, you supreme egotist," said Brady in his usual solemn tones, "climb the tree, where I cannot hear your voice, and stay there a long time."

The Little Giant was more serious than he pretended to be. He was fully aware that they had lost at least seventy-five per cent of their security when they descended from the high mountains. On the plains it was difficult to fortify against attack, and he did not like the appearance of the Indians, even as hunters on the far side of the buffalo herd. Hence, when he had made himself comfortable in one of the highest forks of a cottonwood, his examination through the glasses was long and critical. He saw, just as Will had seen, the herd coming forever from under the southeastern rim of the horizon and disappearing forever under the northwestern rim. Then he caught glimpses of the hunters still pursuing and cutting out the fat young cows, but instead of being parallel with the little party in the dip they had now passed far beyond it. Then he descended the tree and spoke what he thought.

"Jim Boyd, hunter, Steve Brady, trapper, an' young William," he said, "I'm of the opinion that we'd better stay here at least one day an' night. The river o' buffaloes will be flowin' by at least that long, but ef we wuz to go on an' they wuz to pass us, we might meet the warriors with no river in between, an' we ain't looking fur that."

"Good advice," said Brady. "When the conquerors went down into the land of Canaan they used every chance that nature or circumstance offered them, and why shouldn't we, even though three thousand years or so have elapsed? We will build no fire, but repose calmly in our little clump of trees."

"Good judgment," said Boyd.

"Pleases me," said Will.

All day long and all that night the herd, as wide and dense as ever, was

passing. They might have slain enough to feed a great army, but they did not fire a shot. The sight, whether by daylight or moonlight, did not lose its romance and majesty for the lad. It was a black sea, flowing and living, one of the greatest spectacles of the mighty western wilderness, and it was given to him to look upon it.

He grew so used to it by and by that he had no thought of its turning from its course or of its throwing out stragglers like little, diverging currents. It would go on in a vast flood, straight into the unknown, wherever it intended to go.

The horses and mules themselves, though at first uneasy, soon grew used to the passage of the living river, and, since no harm came from it, evidently concluded that none would come. Will walked among them more than once and stroked their manes and then their noses, which they rubbed confidently against him.

The moon shining that night was very bright, and, the heavens being starred in such brilliant splendor, they saw almost as well as by day. Will, to whom the romantic and majestic appealed with supreme force, began to find a certain enjoyment, or rather a mental uplift, in his extraordinary position. Before him was the great, black and living river, flowing steadily from the unknown into the unknown, to north and to south the rolling plains stretched away to infinity, and behind him, piercing the skies, rose the misty White Dome, a vast peak; now friendly, that seemed to watch over these faithful comrades of his and himself.

None of them slept until late, and they divided the remainder of the night into watches of two hours apiece, Will's running from two until four in the morning. It was Brady whom he succeeded and it required some effort of the will for him to leap at once from his warm blankets and take the place of sentinel in the night, which was now cold, as usual on the plains. But, while averse to bloodshed, he had drilled himself into soldiership in action, always prompt, accurate and thorough, and in less than a minute he was walking up and down, rifle on shoulder, eyes open to everything that was to be seen and ears ready for everything that was to be heard. Stephen Brady, the philosopher, looked at him with approval.

"A prompt and obedient lad is sure to be a good and useful man," he said. "You're as big as a man now, but you haven't the years and the experience. I like you, William, and you are entitled to your share of the Land of Canaan, which, in these later days, may be interpreted variously as the treasures of the spirit and the soul. And now, good-night."

He wrapped himself in his blankets and, sound of body and conscience, he slept at once. Will, walking back and forth, alert, eager, found that nothing had changed while he was in slumber. The buffalo herd flowed on, its speed and its flood the same, while the White Dome towered far into the sky, almost above them, serene, majestic and protecting. It seemed to Will that all the omens were good, that, great though the dangers and hardships might be, they would triumph surely in the end. And the feeling of victory and confidence was still strong upon him when his watch of two hours was finished and he, too, in his turn, slept again.



CHAPTER X

THE WAR CLUB'S FALL

When Will awoke in the cold dawn he found the herd still passing, though it showed signs of diminution in both breadth and density. After breakfast he climbed the cottonwood again, and took another long and searching look through the glasses.

"I can't yet see the end of the advancing herd under the rim of the horizon," he announced when he descended, "but, as you can tell from the ground, it's thinning out."

"Which means thar'll no longer be a river cutting us off from the hoss Indians on the south," said the Little Giant, "an' which means, too, that it's time fur us to light out from here an' foller the trail."

Curving considerably toward the north for fear of the Indian hunters, who were likely to be where the buffaloes were, they rode at a good pace over the plain, the pack horses and mules following readily without leading. Their curve finally took them so far toward the north that the swells of the plain hid the buffalo herd—only Will's glasses disclosing traces of the dust cloud—and the thunder of its passage no longer reached their ears.

Near sundown they came to a low ridge covered with bushes, and deciding that it was an excellent place for a camp they rode into the thick of it until sure also from the presence of tree growth that they would find water not far away. Will was the first to dismount and as he went over the crest and down the slope in search of a stream or pool, he uttered a cry of horror.

He had come upon a sight, alas! too familiar at that time upon the plains. Scattered about a little grassy opening were seven or eight human skeletons, picked so clean by the wolves that they were white and glistening. But the lad knew that wolves had not caused their deaths. Bullet, arrow and lance had done the work. He shuddered again and again, but he was too much of the mountain ranger and plainsman now to turn aside because of horror.

He concluded that the skeletons represented perhaps two families, surprised and slaughtered by the Sioux. Several of them were small, evidently those of children, and he arrived at the number two because he saw in the bushes near by

two of the great wagons of the emigrant camp, overturned and sacked. Just beyond was a small, clear stream which obviously had caused the victims to stop there.

Will walked back slowly and gravely to his comrades.

"Did you find water, young William?" asked the Little Giant jovially.

"I did," replied the lad briefly.

"Then why does that gloom set upon your brow?"

"Because I found something else, too."

"What else do we need? Water fur ourselves an' the animals is all we want."

"But I found something else, I tell you, Tom Bent, and it was not a sight pleasant to see."

The Little Giant noticed the shudder in the lad's tones, and he asked more seriously:

"Signs of hostile bands comin', young William?"

"No, not that, but signs where they have passed, skeletons of those whom they have slain, just beyond the bushes there, picked clean, white and glistening. Come with me and see!"

The others, who heard, went also, and the men looked reflectively at the scene.

"I've seen its like often," said Boyd. "The emigrants push on, straight into the Indian country. Neither hardships, nor troops, nor the Indians themselves can stop 'em. Wherever a party is cut off, two come to take its place. I guess this group was surprised, and killed without a chance to fight back."

"How do you know that?" asked Will.

"'Cause the wagons are turned over. That shows that the horses were still hitched to 'em, when the firin' from ambush began, and in their frightened struggles tipped 'em on one side. Suppose we go through 'em."

"What for, Jim?"

"This must have been done at least a couple of months ago. The weather-beaten canvas covers and the general condition of the wagons show that. War not being then an open matter the Indians might have hurried away without making a thorough overhauling. Then, too, it might have been done by wandering

Piegans or Blackfeet or Northern Cheyennes, who, knowing they were on Sioux territory, were anxious to get away with their spoil as quickly as they could."

"Good sound reasonin', Jim," said the Little Giant, "an' we'll shorely take a good look through them wagons."

The wagons, as usual with those crossing the plains, contained many little boxes and lockers and secret places, needful on such long journeys, and they searched minutely through every square inch of the interior space. The Indians had not been so bad at the sack themselves, but they found several things of value, some medicines in a small locker, two saws, several gimlets and other tools, and under a false bottom in one of the wagons, which the sharp eye of the Little Giant detected, a great mat filled with coffee, containing at least one hundred pounds.

They could have discovered nothing that would have pleased them more, since coffee was always precious to the frontiersman, and together they uttered a shout of triumph. Then they divided it among their own sacks and continued the search looking for more false bottoms. They were rewarded in only a single instance and in that they found an excellent pocket compass, which they assigned to Bent.

Their gleanings finished, they made camp and passed a peaceful night, resuming the journey early the next morning. They would have buried the bones of the slain, as they had spades and picks for mining work, but they felt they should not linger, as they were now in country infested by the Sioux and it was not well to remain long in one place. Hence, they rode away under an early sun, and soon the memory of the slaughter by the little stream faded from their minds. Events were too great and pressing for them to dwell long upon anything detached from their own lives.

On the second day afterward they curved back toward the south and struck the great buffalo trail. But the herd, which did have an end after all, had now passed, and they saw only stragglers. As the trail led into the northwest and their own trail must be more nearly west, they crossed it and did not stop until half the night had gone, as they knew the Indians were most to be dreaded near the herd or in its path.

When they camped now Will could no longer see the White Dome, which had followed them so long, watching over them like a great and majestic friend. He missed that lofty white signal in the sky, feeling as if a good omen had gone, and that the signs would not now be so favorable. But the depression was only

momentary. He had cultivated too strong and courageous a will ever to allow himself to be depressed long.

At noon they were far from the hills and out on the open plains, which spread swell on swell before them, seemingly to infinity, with only a lone tree here and there, and at rare intervals a sluggish stream an inch or two deep and dangerous with quicksands. The water of these little creeks was not good, touched at times with alkali, but they made the horses and mules drink it, saving the pure supply they carried for a period of greater need.

Will used his glasses almost continually, watching for a possible enemy or anything else that might appear upon the plain, and he saw occasional groups of the buffalo, a dozen or so, at which he expressed surprise.

"And why are you surprised, young William?" asked Brady. "Don't you know enough of this mighty West not to be surprised at anything?"

"I saw so many millions in that herd going into the northwest," replied the lad, "that I thought it must have included all the buffaloes in the world. Yet here are more, scattered in little groups."

"And there are other herds millions strong far down in the south, and still others just as strong, Montana way. It may be in this great hunt of ours that we can live on the buffalo, just as the Indians do."

They slept that night on the open plain, warm in their blankets and lulled by the eternal winds, and the next morning they were off again at the first upshoot of dawn. It now grew very warm, the sun's rays coming down vertically, while the plain itself seemed to act as a burnished shield, reflecting them and doubling the heat. Careful of their animals, they gave them a long rest at noon, and then resumed the march at a slow pace. Before sundown Will saw through his glasses a long line of trees, apparently cottonwoods, running almost due north and south.

"Means a creek," said the Little Giant, "a creek mebbe a leetle bigger than them make-believe creeks we've crossed. I like the plains. They kinder git hold o' you with thar sweep an' thar freedom, but I ain't braggin' any 'bout thar water courses. I've seen some o' the maps in which the rivers cut big an' black an' bold an' long 'cross the plains, same ez ef they wuz ragin' an' t'arin' Ohios an' Missips, an' then I've seen the rivers tharselves, more sand than water. An' I love fine, clear streams, runnin' fast, but you hev to go into the mountains to git 'em, whar, ez you've seen, Will, thar are lots o' sparklin' leetle ones, clean full o' pure water, silver, or blue, or gold, or gray, 'cordin' to the way the sun shines. But I say ag'in when braggin' o' the great plains I keep dark 'bout the rivers an' lakes."

The cottonwoods were six or seven miles away, and when they reached them they found all of the Little Giant's predictions to be true. The stream, a full foot in depth, flowed between banks higher than usual, and its waters, cold and sweet, were entirely devoid of alkali. Following it some distance, they found sloping banks free from the danger of quicksand, and crossed to the other side, where they made a camp among the cottonwoods.

Will, weary from the long ride, went to sleep as soon as dusk came, but he was awakened somewhere near the middle of the night by the hand of Boyd on his shoulder.

"What is it?" he asked, sitting up and not yet wholly awake.

"Quiet!" whispered Boyd. "Reach for your rifle, and then don't stir. The Sioux are out on the plain to the west, in front of us. Tom, who was on watch, heard 'em, and then he saw 'em. There's a band of at least fifty on their ponies. We think they know we're here. Likely they heard our animals moving about."

The lad's heart contracted. It seemed a hideous irony of fate that, after having escaped so many dangers by their skill and courage, blind chance should bring such a great menace against them here upon the plains. He drew himself from his blankets, and propping himself upon his elbows pushed forward his repeating rifle. Then he changed his mind, put down his rifle again, and brought to his eyes the precious glasses, with which he seldom parted.

He was able to see through the cottonwoods and in the moonlight the Sioux band, about a third of a mile away, gathered in a group on the crest of a swell, strong warriors, heavily painted, nearly all of them wearing splendid war bonnets. They were sitting on their ponies and two, whom Will took to be chiefs, were talking together.

"What do you make out, young William?" asked the Little Giant.

"A conference, I suppose."

"Then they know beyond a doubt that we're here," said Boyd. "They must have heard the stamp of a horse or a mule. It's bad luck, but we've had so much of the good that we've got to look for a little of the bad. What more do you see through those glasses of yours, Will?"

"Ten men from the band have gone to the right, and ten have gone to the left. All are bent low on their ponies, and they are moving slowly. Some carry lances and some rifles."

"That settles it. They're sure we're here and they mean to take us. What about those who are left in the center?"

"They've come a little nearer, but not much."

"Waiting for the two wings to close in before they attack. That's your crafty Indian. They never waste their own lives if they can help it, nor does an Indian consider it any disgrace to run when the running is of profit. I don't know but what they're right. Can you still see the two wings, Will?"

"The one on the left is hid by a swell, but the other on the right is bearing in toward the creek."

"Then we'd better make our field of battle and fortify as fast as we can."

The horses and mules were tethered in the lowest ground they could find among the cottonwoods near the edge of the creek, where the four hoped they would escape the bullets. Then they built in all haste a circular breastwork of fallen wood and of their own packs.

"Thar's one satisfaction 'bout it," said the Little Giant grimly. "Ef we're besieged here a long time we'll hev water only a few feet away. Many a man on the plains could hev held his own ag'inst the painted imps ef he could hev reached water. What do you see now, young William?"

"Both horns of their crescent. They're on top of the swells, but have come almost to the cottonwoods. Do you look for 'em to cross the creek?"

"Sooner or later they will, an' we'll have to guard from all directions, but I reckon the attack jest now will come straight in front an' 'long the stream on the flanks."

"And the hardest push will be on the flanks?"

"Yes, that would be good strategy. They mean, while the warriors in front are keeping us busy, to press in from both sides. What do you see now, young William?"

"The forces on the flanks have passed out of sight among the cottonwoods, and the one in front is still advancing slowly. The warriors there seem to be armed chiefly with bows and arrows."

"Meant mostly to draw our attention. The rifles are carried by the men on the flanks. B'ars out what we said 'bout thar plan. These warriors, like some others we met, hev got to learn a lot 'bout the new an' pow'ful repeatin' rifles. Do you

think, Jim, them in front hev now rid within range?"

"In a minute or two they'll be within your range, Giant."

"Then do you think I'd better?"

"Yes. They've made their semi-circle for attack. Tell 'em in mighty plain language they oughtn't to do such a thing without consulting us."

"Give 'em a hint, so to speak, Jim?"

"That's what I mean."

The Little Giant levelled his rifle at the approaching horsemen. The moonlight was silvery and brilliant, giving him fine chance for aim, and not in vain had his friend, Boyd, called him the greatest shot in the West. The rifle cracked, there was a little spit of fire in the moonlight, and the foremost Indian fell from his pony. The band uttered a single shout of rage, but did not charge. Instead, the warriors drew back hastily.

"That settles it," said Brady. "It's just a feint in front, but they didn't dream we could reach 'em at such long range. We've got to do our main watching now among the cottonwoods, up and down the stream. Of course, they'll dismount there, and try to creep up on us. Will, you keep an eye on those warriors out there and we'll take care of the cottonwoods, but everybody stay down as close as possible. We're only four and we can't afford the loss of a single man."

Will was lying almost flat, and he could put away the glasses, fastening them securely over his shoulder, as the warriors in front were plainly visible now to the naked eye. They were beyond the range of the deadly repeating rifles, but the moonlight was so intense that he saw them distinctly, even imagining that he could discern their features, and his fancy certainly did not diminish the horror and repulsion they inspired.

They rode slowly back and forth, shaking long lances or waving heavy war clubs, and suddenly they burst into a series of yells that made the lad's blood run cold. At length he distinguished the word, "winihinca" shouted over and over again. Boyd, lying beside him, was laughing low.

"What does 'winihinca' mean, and why do you laugh?" asked Will.

"'Winihinca' is the Sioux word for women," replied the hunter, "and they're trying to taunt us because we're lying in hiding. It will take more than a taunt or two to draw us out of these cottonwoods. They can shout 'winihinca' all night if they wish."

But the warriors riding back and forth in the moonlight on the crest of the low swell were good shouters. Yellers, Will would have called them. Their throats and lungs seemed to be as tough as the inside of a bear's hide, and also they threw into their work a zest and flavor that showed they were enjoying it. Presently their yelling changed its key note, and Will discerned the word, "wamdadan." Again the hunter lying by his side laughed low.

"What does 'wamdadan' mean?" he asked. "Just now we were 'winihinca' and now we are 'wamdadan.'"

"We've gone down in the scale," replied Boyd. "In fact, we've sunk pretty far. A little while ago we were women, but now we are worms. 'Wamdadan' means worm. We're 'wamdadans' because we won't come out of our burrows and stand up straight and tall, where the Sioux can shoot us to pieces at their leisure."

"I intend to remain a 'wamdadan' as long as I can," said Will. "If lying close to the earth, burrowing into it in fact, makes you a worm then a worm am I for the present."

"No, you're not. You were for a while, but they've changed their cry now. Listen closely! Can't you make out a new word?"

"Now that you call my attention to it, I do. It sounds like 'canwanka.'"

"'Canwanka' it is. That's the new name they're calling us and it's not complimentary. 'Canwanka' means coward. First we were women, then worms and now cowards, because we won't give up the aid of our fortifications and allow ourselves to be overpowered by the Sioux numbers. Do you hear anything among the cottonwoods on the creek, Giant?"

"Nothing yet, Jim. They keep up such an infernal yelling out thar in front that it will drown out any light sound."

"Doubtless that's what it's for."

"I think so, too. You don't hev to see them imp's among the cottonwoods to know what they're up to. They hev dismounted on both wings, an' they're creepin' forward from the north an' from the south close to the banks o' the creek, hopin' to ketch us nappin'."

The Little Giant was facing the south and suddenly his figure became taut.

"See something?" whispered Boyd.

"I think so, but I ain't quite sure yet. Yes, it's the head o' a warrior, stickin' up

'bout a foot from the ground, an' he'll be the fust to go."

Will was startled by the sharp crack of a rifle almost at his elbow, and he heard the Little Giant's sigh of satisfaction.

"Straight an' true," muttered the terrible marksman.

Then the rifle of Brady, who faced the south, spoke also and his aim was no less deadly. Boyd, meanwhile, held his fire, as the advancing bands among the cottonwoods sank from view. But the band in front in the open uttered a tremendous shout and galloped about wildly. Will, watching them cautiously, thought one of the riders in his curvetings had come within range, and, taking good aim, he fired. The rider fell to the ground, and his pony ran away over the plain.

"Good shot, Will," said Boyd approvingly. "And it speaks all the better for you because you were watching for your chance and were ready when it came."

After such a hint the shouting band drew back and shouted less. Then the four listened with all their ears for any sound that might pass among the cottonwoods, though they felt that the attack would not come again there for a long time, as the first result had been so deadly. Will took advantage of the interlude, and, creeping past the barrier they had built, went among the horses and mules, soothing them with low voice and stroke of hand. They pressed against him, pushed their noses into his palm, and showed a confidence in him that did not fail to move the lad despite the terrible nature of their situation.

"Good lads!" he whispered when he left them and crawled back within the barricade.

"How're they behavin'?" asked the Little Giant.

"Fine," responded Will. "Human beings couldn't do better. They're standing well under fire, when they're not able to fire back."

"Which gives more credit to them than to us, because we can and do fire back."

"Will," said Boyd, "you resume your watch of that band in front while we devote all our attention to the cottonwoods. It's a good thing we've got this creek with the high banks back of us. Now, we're in for a long wait. When warriors are besieging, they always try to wear out the patience of those they besiege and tempt 'em into some rash act."

"Those in front are riding beyond the swell and out of sight," said Will.

The Little Giant laughed with the most intense satisfaction.

"They're skeered o' our rifles," he said. "We've got lightnin' that strikes at pretty long range, an' they ain't so shore that it ain't a lot longer than it is."

Will had learned the philosophy of making himself comfortable whenever he could, and lying with his hand on one arm he watched the cottonwoods, trusting meanwhile more to ear than to eye. Since the Indians in front, disappearing over the swell, had ceased to shout, the night became quiet. The wind was light and the cottonwoods did not catch enough of it to give back a song, while the creek was too sluggish to murmur as it flowed. His comrades also were moveless, although he knew that they were watching.

He looked up at the heavens, and the moon and the stars were so bright that they seemed to be surcharged with silver. The whole world, in such misty glow, was supremely beautiful, and it was hard to realize, as he lay there in silence and peace, that they were surrounded by savage foes, seeking their lives, men who, whatever their primitive virtues, knew little of mercy. He understood and respected the wish of the Sioux and the other tribes to preserve for themselves the great buffalo ranges and the mountains, but he was not able to feel very friendly toward them when they lay in the cottonwoods not far away, seeking his scalp and his life, or, if taken alive, to subject him to all the hideous tortures that primeval man has invented. The distant view of the Indian as a wronged individual often came into violent contact with another view of him near at hand, seeking to inflict a death with hideous pain.

The night did not darken as it wore on, still starred brilliantly and lighted by a full, silver moon, which seemed to Will on these lone plains of the great West to have a size and splendor that he had never noticed in the East. He and the Little Giant now faced the north, while Boyd and Brady, of the Biblical voice and speech, looked toward the south. All of them, when they gazed that way, could see the plain from which the force, intending to attract their attention by shouting and yelling, had retreated. But they knew the danger was still to be apprehended from the cottonwoods, and despite the long stillness they never ceased to watch with every faculty they could bring to bear.

The dip in which the horses and mules stood was only a short distance from the little fortification and unless the Sioux in attacking came very near their bullets were likely to pass over the heads of the animals. The four, resolved not to abandon the horses and mules under any circumstances, nevertheless felt rather easy on that score.

About three o'clock in the morning some shots were fired from the cottonwoods in the south, but they flew wild and the four did not reply.

"They came from a distance," said Boyd. "They're probably intended to provoke our fire and tell just where we're lying."

After a while more shots were fired, now from the north, but as they were obviously intended for the same purpose the four still remained quiet. A little later Will heard a movement, a stamping of hoofs among the animals, indicating alarm, and once more he crawled out of the breastwork to soothe them.

The horses and mules responded as always to his whispered words of encouragement and strokings of manes and noses, and he was about to return when his attention was attracted by a slight noise in the bushes on the farther side of the animals. Every motive of frontier caution and thoroughness inclined him to see what it was. It might be and most probably was a coyote hiding there in fear, but that did not prevent him from stooping low and entering the bushes.

The growth of scrub, watered by seepage from the stream, was rather dense, and he pushed his way in gently, lest a rustling of twigs and leaves reach the Sioux, lurking among the cottonwoods. He did not hear the noise again, and he went a little farther. Then he heard a sound by his side almost as light as that of a leaf that falls, and he whirled about, but it was too late. A war club descended upon his head and he fell unconscious to the ground.



CHAPTER XI

THE YOUNG SLAVE

Will's first sign of returning consciousness was a frightful headache, and he did not open his eyes, but, instead, moved his hand toward the pain as one is tempted to bite down on a sore tooth. It was in the top of his head, and his fingers touched a bandage. Without thinking he pulled at it, and the pain, so far from being confined to one spot, shot through his whole body. Then he lay still, with his eyes yet shut, and the agony decreased until it was confined to a dull throbbing in the original spot.

He tried to gather together his scattered and wandering faculties and coördinate them to such an extent that he could produce thought. It required a severe effort, and made his head ache worse than ever, but he persisted until he remembered that he had been creeping through bushes in search of a sound, or the cause of a sound. But memory stopped there and presently faded quite away. Another effort and he lifted his mind back on the track. Then he remembered the slight sound in the bushes near him, the shadow of a figure and a stunning blow. Beyond that his memory despite all his whipping and driving, would not go, because there was nothing on which to build.

He opened his eyes which were heavy-lidded and painful for the time, and saw the figures of Indians that seemed to be standing far above him. Then he knew that he was lying flat upon his back, and that his sick brain was exaggerating their height, because they truly appeared to him in the guise of giants. He tried to move his feet but found that they were bound tightly together, and the effort gave him much pain. Then he was in truth a captive, the captive of those who cared little for his sufferings. It was true they had bound up his head, but Indians often gave temporary relief to the wounds of their prisoners in order that they might have more strength to make the torture long.

His vision cleared gradually, and he saw that he was lying on a small grassy knoll. A fire was burning a little distance to his left, and besides the warriors who stood up others were lying down, or sitting in Turkish fashion, gnawing the meat off buffalo bones that they roasted at the fire. The whole scene was wild and barbaric to the last degree and Will shuddered at the fate which he was sure awaited him.

Beyond the Indians he saw trees, but they were not cottonwoods. Instead he noted oak and pine and aspen and he knew he was not lying where he had fallen, or in any region very near it. Straining his eyes he saw a dim line of foothills and forest. He must have been brought there on a pony and dreadful thoughts about his comrades assailed him. Since the Sioux had come away with him as a prisoner they might have fallen in a general massacre. In truth, that was the most likely theory, by far, and he shuddered violently again and again.

Those three had been true and loyal friends of his, the finest of comrades, hearts of steel, and yet as gentle and kindly as women. Hardships and dangers in common had bound the four together, and the difference in years did not matter. It seemed that he had known them and been associated with them always. He could hear now the joyous whistling of the Little Giant, the terse, intelligent talk of Boyd, and the firm Biblical allusions of the beaver hunter. They could not be dead! It could not be so! And yet in his heart he believed that it *was* so.

He turned painfully on his side, groaned, shut his eyes, and opened them again to see a tall warrior standing over him, gazing down at him with a cynical look. He was instantly ashamed that he had groaned and said in apology:

"It was pain of the spirit and not of the body that caused me to make lament."

"It must be so," replied the warrior in English, "because you have come back to the world much quicker than we believed possible. The vital forces in you are strong."

He spoke like an educated Indian, but his face, his manner and his whole appearance were those of the typical wild man.

"I see that I'm at least alive," said Will with a faint touch of humor, "though I can scarcely describe my condition as cheerful. Who are you?"

"I am Heraka, a Sioux chief. Heraka in your language means the Elk, and I am proud of the name."

Will looked again at him, and much more closely now, because, despite his condition, he was impressed by the manner and appearance. Heraka was a man of middle years, of uncommon height and of a broad, full countenance, the width between the eyes being great. It was a countenance at once dignified, serene and penetrating. He wore brilliantly embroidered moccasins, leggings and waist band, and a long green blanket, harmonizing with the foliage at that period of the year, hung from his shoulders. He carried a rifle and there were other weapons in his belt.

Will felt with increasing force that he was in the presence of a great Sioux chief. The Sioux, who were to the West what the Iroquois were to the East, sometimes produced men of high intellectual rank, their development being hampered by time and place. The famous chief, Gall, who planned Custer's defeat, and who led the forces upon the field, had the head of a Jupiter, and Will felt now as he stared up at Heraka that he had never beheld a more imposing figure. The gaze of the man that met his own was stern and denunciatory. The lad felt that he was about to be charged with a great crime, and that the charge would be true.

"Why have you come here?" asked the stern warrior.

In spite of himself, in spite of his terrible situation, the youth's sense of humor sparkled up a moment.

"I don't know why I came here," he replied, "nor do I know how, nor do I know where I am."

The chief's gaze flickered a moment, but he replied with little modification of his sternness:

"You were brought here on the back of a pony. You are miles from where you were taken, and you are the prisoner of these warriors of the Dakota whom I lead."

Will knew well enough that the Sioux called themselves in their own language the Dakota, and that the chief would take a pride in so naming them to him.

"The Dakotas are a great nation," he said.

Heraka nodded, not as if it were a compliment, but as a mere statement of fact. Will considered. Would it be wise to ask about his friends? Might he not in doing so give some hint that could be used against them? The fierce gaze of the chief seemed actually to penetrate his physical body and read his mind.

"You are thinking of those who were with you," he said.

"My thoughts had turned to them."

"Call them back. It is a waste."

"Why do you say that, Heraka?"

"Because they are all dead. Their scalps are drying at the belts of the warriors. You alone live as we had to strike you down in silence before we slew the others."

Will shuddered over and over again. He was sick at both heart and brain. Could it be true? Could those men be dead? The wise Boyd, the cheerful Little Giant, and the grave and kindly Brady? Once more he looked Heraka straight in the eye, but the gaze of the chief did not waver.

"I have hope, though but a little hope," he said, "that it pleases the chief to test me. He would see whether I can bear such news."

"If the belief helps you then Heraka will not try again to make you see the truth. What is your name?"

"Clarke, William Clarke."

"Why have you come to the land of the Dakotas?"

"Not to take it. Not to kill the buffalo. Not to drive away any of your people."

"But you are captured upon it. The great chief, Mahpeyalute, warned the American captain and the soldiers that they must not let the white people come any farther."

"That is true. I was there, and I heard Red Cloud give the warning."

"And yet you came against the threat of Mahpeyalute."

"Mine was an errand of a nature almost sacred. I tell you again there was no harm in it to your country and your people."

"Many times have the white people told to the Dakotas things that were lies."

"It is true, but the sins of others are not mine."

Will spoke with all his heart in his words. Despite the terrible disaster that had befallen, even if the chief's words were true, and all his friends were dead, he wished, nevertheless, to live. He was young, strong, of great vitality, and nothing could crush the love of life in him.

"What do you intend to do with me?" he asked.

Heraka smiled, but the smile contained nothing of gentleness or mercy, rather it was amusement at the anxiety of one who was wholly in his power.

"Your fate shall not be known to you until it comes," he said.

Will felt a chill running down his spine. It was the primal instinct to torture and slay the enemy and the Sioux lived up to it. It was keen torture already to hear that his fate would surely come, but not to know how or where or when was worse. But it appeared that it was not to come at once, and with that thought he

felt the thrill of hope. His was unquenchable youth and the vital spark in him flamed up.

"Would you mind untying my ankles?" he said. "You can save your torture for later on."

Heraka signed to a warrior, who cut the thongs and Will, sitting up, rubbed them carefully until the blood flowed back in its natural channels. Meanwhile he observed the band and counted sixteen warriors, all but Heraka seeming to be the wildest of wild Indians, most of them entirely naked save for moccasins and the breech cloth. They carried muzzle-loading rifles, bows and arrows hung from the bushes and lances leaned against the trees. Beyond the bushes he caught glimpses of their ponies grazing, and these glimpses were sufficient to show him that they had many extra animals for the packs. When he saw them better, then he would know whether his friends were really dead, because if they were their packs and the animals would be there, too. But the chief, Heraka, broke in upon the thought—he seemed able to read Will's mind.

"This is but part of the force that besieged you," he said. "There were three bands joined. The others with the spoil have gone west, leaving as our share the prisoner. A living captive is worth more than two scalps."

Will tried to remember all he had ever heard or read about the necessity of stoicism when in the hands of savage races and by a supreme effort of the will he was able to put a little of it into practice. Pretending to indifference, he asked if he might have something to eat, and received roasted meat of the buffalo. He had a good appetite, despite his weakness and headache, and when he had eaten in abundance and had drunk a gourd of water they gave him he felt better.

"I thank you for binding up my wounded head," he said to Heraka. "I don't know your motive in doing so, but I thank you just the same."

The Dakota chief smiled grimly.

"We do not wish you to die yet," he said, speaking his English in the precise, measured manner of one to whom it is a foreign language. "Inmutanka, the Panther, bound it up, and he is one of the best healers we have."

"Then I thank also Inmutanka, or the Panther, whichever he prefers to be called. I can't see the top of my head, but I know he made a good job of it."

Inmutanka proved to be an elderly but robust Sioux warrior, and however he may have been when torture was going forward he wore just then a bland smile, although not much else. With wonderfully light and skilful hands he took off

Will's bandage and replaced it with another. Will never knew what it was made of, but it seemed to be lined with leaves steeped in the juices of herbs.

The Indians had some simple remedies of great power, and he felt the effect of the new bandage at once. His headache began to abate rapidly, and with the departure of pain his views of life became much more cheerful.

"I never saw you before, Dr. Inmutanka," he said, "but I know you're one of the finest physicians in all the West. Whatever school you graduated from should give you all the degrees it has to give. Again, I thank you."

The Indian seemed not to understand a word he said, but no one could mistake the sincerity of the lad's tone. Inmutanka, otherwise the Panther, smiled, and the smile was not cruel, nor yet cynical. He stepped back a little, regarded his handiwork with satisfaction, and then merged himself into the band.

"That's a good Sioux! I know he is!" said Will warmly to Heraka. "Hereafter Dr. Inmutanka shall be my personal and private physician."

Heraka's face was touched by a faint smile. It was the first mild emotion he had shown and Will rejoiced to see it. He found himself wishing to please this wild chief, not in any desire to seek favor, but he felt that, in its way, the approval of Heraka was approval worth having.

"You eat, you drink, you feel strong again," said Heraka.

"Yes, that's it."

"Then we go. We are mountain Sioux. We have a village deep in the high mountains that white men can never find. We will take you there, where you will await your fate, never knowing what it is nor when it will come."

Will was shaken once more by a terrible shudder. This constant harping upon the mysterious but fearful end that was sure to overtake him was having its effect. Heraka had reckoned right when he began the torture of the mind. The chief spoke sharply to the warriors and putting out the fire they gathered up their weapons and the horses. Will was mounted on one of the ponies and his ankles were tied together beneath the animal's body, but loosely only, enough to prevent a sudden flight though not enough to cause pain. There was no saddle, but as he was used to riding bare-backed he could endure it indefinitely.

Then the chief did a surprising thing, binding a piece of soft deerskin over Will's eyes so tightly that not a ray of light entered.

"Why do you do that, Heraka?" asked the lad.

"That you may not see which way you go, nor what is by the path as you ride. Soon, with your eyes covered you will lose the sense of direction and you will not be able to tell whether you go north or south or east or west."

He spoke sharply to the warriors and the group set off. The direction at first was toward the north, as Will well knew, but the band presently made many curves and changes of course, and, as Heraka had truly said, he ceased to have any idea of the course they were taking. He saw nothing, but he heard all around him the footfalls of the ponies, and, now and then, the word of one warrior to another. He might have raised his hands to tear loose the bandage over his eyes, but he knew that the Sioux would interfere at once, and he would only bring upon himself some greater pain.

Will felt that a warrior was riding on either side of him and presently he was aware also that the one on the right had moved up more swiftly, giving way to somebody else. A sort of mental telepathy told him that the first warrior had been replaced by a stronger and more dominant one. Instinct said that it was Heraka, and he was not mistaken. The chief rode on in silence for at least ten minutes and then he asked:

"Which way do you ride, Wayaka (captive)? Is it north, or south, or is it east or west?"

"I don't know," confessed Will. "I tried to keep the sense of direction, but we twisted and turned so much I've lost it."

"I knew that it would be so. Wayaka will ride many hundreds of miles, he knows not whither. And whether he is to die soon or late he will see his own people again never more. If he ever looks upon a white face again it will be the face of one who is a friend of the Sioux and not of his own race, or the face of a captive like himself."

"If he ever looks upon a white face again..."

"If he ever looks upon a white face again it will be the face of one who is a friend of the Sioux."[ToList](#)

Will shuddered. The threat coming from a man like Heraka, who spoke in a tone at once charged with malice and power, was full of evil portent. Had an ordinary Indian threatened him thus he might not have been affected so deeply, but with the decree of Heraka he seemed to vanish completely from the face of the earth, or, at least, from his world and all those that knew him. His will, however, was still strong. He felt instinctively that Heraka was looking at him, and he would show no sign of flinching or of weakness. He straightened himself up on the pony, threw back his shoulders and replied defiantly:

"I have a star that protects me, Heraka. Nearly every man has a star, but mine is a most powerful one, and it will save me. Even now, though I cannot see and I do not know whether it is daylight or twilight, I know that my star, invisible though it may be in the heavens, is watching over me."

He spoke purposely in the lofty and somewhat allegorical style, used sometimes by the higher class of Indians, and he could not see its effect. But Heraka, strong though his mind was, felt a touch of superstitious awe, and looking up at the heavens, all blue though they were, almost believed that he saw in them a star looking down at Wayaka, the prisoner.

"Wayaka may have a star," he said, "but it will be of no avail, because the stars of the Sioux, being so much the stronger, will overcome it."

"We shall see," replied the lad. Yet, despite all his brave bearing, his heart was faint within him. Heraka did not speak to him again, and by the same sort of mental telepathy he felt, after a while, that the chief had dropped away from his side, and had been replaced by the original warrior.

Although eyes were denied to him, for the present, all his other faculties became heightened as a consequence, and he began to use them. He was sure that they were still traveling on the plains, so much dust rose, and now and then he coughed to clear it from his throat. But they were not advancing into the deeps of the great plains, because twice they crossed shallow streams, and on each occasion all the ponies were allowed to stop and drink.

Will knew that his own pony at the second stream drank eagerly, in fact,

gulped down the water. Such zest in drinking showed that the creek was not alkaline, and hence he inferred that they could not be very far from hills, and perhaps from forest. He surmised that they were going either west or north. A growing coolness, by and by, indicated to him that twilight was coming. Upon the vast western plateau the nights were nearly always cold, whatever the day may have been.

Yet they went on another hour, and then he heard the voice of Heraka, raised in a tone of command, followed by a halt. An Indian unbound his feet and said something to him in Sioux, which he did not understand, but he knew what the action signified, and he swung off the pony. He was so stiff from the long ride that he fell to the ground, but he sprang up instantly when he heard a sneering laugh from one of the Indians.

"Bear in mind, Heraka," he said, "that I cannot see and so it was not so easy for me to balance myself. Even you, O chief, might have fallen."

"It is true," said Heraka. "Inmutanka, take the bandage from his eyes."

They were welcome words to Will, who had endured all the tortures of blindness without being blind. He felt the hands of the elderly Indian plucking at the bandage, and then it was drawn aside.

"Thank you, Dr. Inmutanka," he said, but for a few moments a dark veil was before his eyes. Then it drifted aside, and he saw that it was night, a night in which the figures around him appeared dimly. Heraka stood a few feet away, gazing at him maliciously, but during that long and terrible ride, the prisoner had taken several resolutions, and first of them was to appear always bold and hardy among the Indians. He stretched his arms and legs to restore the circulation, and also took a few steps back and forth.

He saw that they were in a small open space, surrounded by low bushes and he surmised that there was a pool just beyond the bushes as he heard the ponies drinking and gurgling their satisfaction.

"The ride has been long and hard," he said to Heraka, "and I am now ready to eat and drink. Bid some warrior bring me food and water."

Then he sat down and rejoiced in the use of his eyes. Had they been faced by a dazzling light when the bandage was taken off he might not have been able to see for a little while, but the darkness was tender and soothing. Gradually he was able to see all the warriors at work making a camp, and Heraka, as if the captive's command had appealed to his sense of humor, had one man bring him

an abundance of water in a gourd, and then, when a fire was lighted and deer and buffalo meat were broiled, he ate with the rest as much as he liked.

After supper Inmutanka replaced with a fresh one the bandage upon his head, from which the pain had now departed. Will was really grateful.

"I want to tell you, Dr. Inmutanka," he said, "that there are worse physicians than you, where I come from."

The old Sioux understood his tone and smiled. Then all the Indians, most of them reclining on the earth, relapsed into silence. Will felt a curious kind of peace. A prisoner with an unknown and perhaps a terrible fate close at hand, the present alone, nevertheless, concerned him. After so much hardship his body was comfortable. They had not rebound him, and they had even allowed him to walk once to the bushes, from which he could see beyond the clear pool at which the Indians had filled their gourds and from which the ponies drank.

One of these ponies, Heraka's own, was standing near, and Will with a pang saw bound to it his own fine repeating rifle, belt of cartridges and the leather case containing his field glasses. Heraka's look followed his and in the light of the fire the smile of the chief was so malicious that the great pulse in Will's throat beat hard with anger.

"They were yours once," said Heraka, "the great rifle that fires many times without reloading, the cartridges to fit, and the strong glasses that bring the far near. Now they are mine."

"They are yours for the present. I admit that," said the lad, "but I shall get them back again. Meanwhile, if you're willing, I'll go to sleep."

He thought it best to assume a perfect coolness, even if he did not feel it, and Heraka said that he might sleep, although they bound his arms and ankles again, loosely, however, so that he suffered no pain and but little inconvenience. He fell asleep almost at once, and did not awake until old Inmutanka aroused him at dawn.

After breakfast he was put on the pony again, blindfolded, and they rode all day long in a direction of which he was ignorant, but, as he believed, over low hills, and, as he knew, among bushes, because they often reached out and pulled at his legs. Nevertheless his sense of an infinite distance being created between him and his own world increased. All this traveling through the dark was like widening a gulf. It had not distance only, but depth, and the weight it pressed upon him was cumulative, making him feel that he had been riding in invisible

regions for weeks, instead of two days.

Being deprived of his eyes for the time being, the other four primal senses again became more acute. He heard a wind blowing but it was not the free wind of the plains that meets no obstacle. Instead, it brought back to him a song that was made by the moving air playing softly upon leaf and bough. Hence, he inferred that they were still ascending, and had come into better watered regions where the bushes had grown to the height of trees now in full leaf.

Once they crossed a rather deep creek, and deliberately letting his foot drop down into it, he found the water quite cold, which was proof to him that they were going back toward the ridges, and that this current was chill, because it flowed from great heights, perhaps from a glacier. They made no stop at noon, merely eating a little pemmican, Will's share being handed to him by Inmutanka. He ate it as he rode along still blindfolded.

The ponies, wiry and strong though they were, soon began to go much more slowly, and the captive was sure that the ascent was growing steeper. He was confirmed in this by the fact that the wind, although it was mid-afternoon, the hottest part of the day, had quite a touch of coolness. They must have been ascending steadily ever since they began the march.

He soon noticed another fact. The ears that had grown uncommonly acute discerned fewer hoofbeats about him. He was firm in the belief that the band had divided and to determine whether the chief was still with them, he said:

"Heraka, we're climbing the mountains. I know it by the wind among the leaves and the cool air."

"Wayaka is learning to see even though his eyes are shut," said the voice of the chief on his right.

"And a part of your force has left us. I count the hoofbeats, and they're not as many as they were before."

"You are right, the mind of Wayaka grows. Some day—if you live—you will know enough to be a warrior."

Will pondered these words and their bearing on his fate, and, being able to make nothing of them, he abandoned the subjective for the objective, seeking again with the four unsuppressed senses to observe the country through which they were passing.

The next night was much like the one that had gone before. They did not stop

until after twilight, and the darkness was heavier than usual. The camp was made in a forest, and the wind, now quite chill, rustled among the trees. Although the bandage was removed, Will could not see far in the darkness, but he was confident that high mountains were straight ahead.

A small brook furnished water for men and ponies, and the Indians built a big fire. They were now but eight in number. Inmutanka removed the last bandage from Will's head, which could now take care of itself, and as the Sioux permitted him to share on equal terms with themselves, he ate with a great appetite. Heraka regarded him intently.

"Do you know where you are, Wayaka?" he asked.

"No," replied Will, carelessly, "I don't. Neither am I disturbed about it. You say that I shall never see my own people, but that is more than you or I or anyone else can possibly know."

A flicker of admiration appeared in the eyes of Heraka, but his voice was even and cold as he said:

"It is well that you have a light heart, because to-morrow will be as to-day to you, and the next day will be the same, and the next and many more."

The Sioux chief spoke the truth. They rode on for days, Will blindfolded in the day, his eyes free at night. He thought of himself as the Man in the Deerskin Mask, but much of the apprehension that must overtake the boldest at such a moment began to disappear, being replaced by an intense curiosity, all the greater because everything was shut from his eyes save in the dusk.

But he knew they were in high mountains, because the cold was great, and now and then he felt flurries of snow on his face, and at night he saw the loom of lofty peaks. But they did not treat him unkindly. Old Inmutanka threw a heavy fur robe over his shoulders, and when they camped they always built big fires, before which he slept, wrapped in blankets like the others.

Heraka said but little. Will heard him now and then giving a brief order to the warriors, but he scarcely ever spoke to the lad directly. Once in their mountain camp when the night was clear Will saw a vast panorama of ridges and peaks white with snow, and he realized with a sudden and overwhelming sinking of the heart that he was in very truth and fact lost to his world, and as the Sioux chief had threatened, he might never again look upon a white face save his own. It was a terrifying thought. Sometimes when he awoke in the night the cold chill that he felt was not from the air. His arms were always bound when he lay down

between the blankets and, once or twice, he tried to pull them free, but he knew while he was making it that the effort was vain and, even were it successful and the thongs were loosened, he could not escape.

At the end of about a week they descended rapidly. The air grew warmer, the snow flurries no longer struck him in the face and the odors of forest, heavy and green, came to his nostrils. One morning they did not put the bandage upon his face and he looked forth upon a wild world of hills and woods and knew it not, nor did he know what barrier of time and space shut him from his own people.



CHAPTER XII

THE CAPTIVE'S RISE

Will did not know just how long they had been traveling, having lost count of the days, but he knew they had come an immense distance, perhaps a thousand miles, maybe more, because the hardy Indian ponies always went at a good pace, and he felt that the distance between him and every white settlement must be vast.

The sun at first hurt the eyes that had been bandaged so long in daylight, but as the optic nerves grew less sensitive and they could take in all the splendor of the world, he had never before seen it so beautiful. He was like one really and truly blind for years who had suddenly recovered his sight. Everything was magnified, made more vivid, more intense, and his joy, captive though he was, was so keen that he could not keep from showing it.

"You find it pleasant to live," said Heraka.

"Yes," replied the lad frankly, "I don't mind admitting to you that I like living. And I like seeing, too, in the bright sunshine, when I've been so long without it. You warned me, Heraka, that I would not know my fate, nor whence nor when it might come, but instinct tells me that it's not coming yet, and as one who can see again I mean to enjoy the bright days."

"Wayaka is but a youth. If he were older he would fear more."

"But I'm not older. This, I suppose, is where we mean to stay awhile?"

"It is. It is one of our hidden valleys. Beyond the stretch of forest is a Sioux village, and there you will stay until your fate befalls you."

"I imagine, Heraka, that you did not come here merely to escort me. So great a chief would not take so long a ride for one so insignificant as I am. You must have had another motive."

"Though Wayaka is a youth he is also keen. It is part of a great plan, of which I will tell you nothing, save that the Sioux are a mighty nation, their lands extending hundreds of miles in every direction, and they gather all their forces to push back the whites."

"Then your long journey must be diplomatic. You travel to the farthest outskirts

in order to gather your utmost forces for the conflict."

Heraka smiled rather grimly.

"Wayaka may be right," he said. "He is a youth of understanding, but in the village beyond the wood you are to stay until you leave it, but you will not know in what manner or when you will depart from it."

Will inferred that his departure might be for the happy hunting grounds rather than for some other place, but it could not depress him. He was too much suffused with joy over his release from his long blindness and with the splendor of the new world about him to feel sadness. For a while nothing can weigh down the blind who see again. It was surely the finest valley in the world into which they had come!

Heraka gave the word and he and his men rode forward toward the strip of wood that he had indicated. All the ponies, although strong and wiry, were thin and worn by their long journey, and some of the Indians, despite their great endurance, showed signs of weariness. Little as they displayed emotion, their own eyes had lighted up at sight of the pleasant place into which they had come.

Will could not tell the length of the valley owing to its curving nature, but he surmised that it might possibly be twenty miles, with a general average width of perhaps two or three. All around it were high mountains, and on the distant and loftier ones the snow line seemed to come further down than on those he had seen with his comrades. Quick to observe and to draw conclusions the fact was another proof to him that they had been traveling mostly north. The trees in the valley were chiefly of the coniferous type, fir, pine and spruce. Despite the warmth of the air all things wore for him a northern aspect, but he made no comment to Heraka.

They reached the strip of wood, and one of the warriors uttered a long cry that was answered instantly from a point not far ahead. Then young Indian lads came running, welcoming them with shouts of joy, and, with this escort, they rode into the village, which was well placed in a grassy opening in the very center of the forest.

Will saw an irregular collection of about a hundred tepees, all conical, most of them made from the skin of the buffalo, though in some cases the hides of bear and elk had been used. All were supported on a framework of poles stripped of their bark. The poles were about twenty feet in length, fastened in a circle at the bottom and leaning toward a common center, where they crossed at a height of twelve or thirteen feet. The diameter of the tepees at the bottom was anywhere

from fifteen to twenty feet, and hence they were somewhat larger than the usual Sioux lodges.

All the tepees had an uncommon air of solidity, as if the poles that made their framework were large, strong, and thrust deep in the earth. The covering skins were sewed together with rawhide strings as tight and secure as the work of any sailor. One seam reaching about six feet from the ground was left open and this was the doorway, over which a buffalo hide or other skin could be lashed in wintry or stormy weather.

At present all the tepees were open, and Will saw many squaws and children about. Just beyond the village and at the edge of the forest ran a considerable creek, evidently fed by the melting snows on the high mountains, and, on extensive meadows of high grass beyond the creek, grazed a great herd of ponies, fat and in good condition. Will decided at once that it was a village of security and abundance. The mountains must be filled with game, and the creek was deep enough for large fish.

He had been left unbound as they descended into the valley and, deciding that he must follow a policy of boldness, he leaped off the pony when they entered the village, just as if he were coming back home. But the old squaws and the children did not give him peace. They crowded around him, uttering cries that he knew must be taunts or jeers. Then they began to push and pull him and to snatch at his hair. Finally an old squaw thrust a splinter clean through his coat and into his arm. The pain was exquisite, but, turning, he took her chin firmly in one hand and with the other slapped her cheeks so severely that she would have fallen to the ground if it had not been for the detaining grasp on her chin.

The crowd, with the instinct for the rough that dwells in all primitive breasts, roared with laughter, and Will knew that his bold act had brought him a certain measure of public favor. Heraka with a sharp word or two sent all the women and children flying, and then said in tones of great gravity to Will:

"Here you are to remain a prisoner, the prisoner of all the village, until we choose your fate. You will stay in a tepee with Inmutanka, but everybody will watch you, the men, the women, the girls and the boys. Nothing that you do can escape their notice, and you will not have the slightest chance of flight."

"If I am to be anybody's guest," said Will, "I'd choose to be old Dr. Inmutanka's. He has a soul in his body."

"You are not a guest, you are a slave," said Heraka.

Will did not appreciate the full significance of his words then, because Inmutanka was showing the way to one of the smaller tepees and he entered it, finding it clean and commodious. The ground was covered with bark, over which furs and skins were spread and there was a place in the center for a fire, the smoke to ascend through a triangular opening in the top, where it was regulated by a wing worked from the outside.

Inmutanka, who undoubtedly had a kind heart, pointed to a heap of buffalo robes in the corner, and Will threw himself upon them. All the enormous exhaustion of such a tremendous journey suddenly became cumulative and he slept until Inmutanka awoke him a full fifteen hours later. Then he discovered that the old Indian really knew a little English, though he had hidden the fact before.

"You eat," he said, and gave him fish, venison and some bread of Indian corn, which Will ate with the huge appetite of the young and strong.

"Now you work," said Inmutanka, when he had finished.

Will stared at him, and then he remembered Heraka's words of the day before that he was a slave. He was assailed by a sickening sensation but he pulled himself together bravely, and, having become a wise youth, he resolved that he would not make his fate worse by vain resistance.

"All right," he said, "what am I to do?"

"You be pony herd now."

"Well, that isn't so bad."

Inmutanka led the way across the creek, or rather river, and Will saw that the herd on the meadows was quite large, numbering at least a thousand ponies, and also many large American horses, captured or stolen. They grazed at will on the deep grass, but small Indian boys carrying sticks watched them continually.

"You take your place here with boys," said Inmutanka, "and see that ponies don't run up and down valley."

He gave him a stick and left him with the little Sioux lads. Will considered the task extremely light, certainly not one that had a savor of slavery, but he soon found that he was surrounded by pests. The Indian boys began to torment him, slipping up behind him, pulling his hair and then darting away again, throwing stones or clods of earth at him, and seeking to drive ponies upon him.

Will's heart was suffused with anger. They were younger and smaller than he,

but they had an infinite power to vex or cause pain. Nevertheless he clung to his resolution. He refused to show anger, and while it was by no means his disposition to turn one cheek when the other was smitten, he exhibited a patience of which he had not believed himself capable. He also showed a power that they did not possess. When some of the younger and friskier ponies sought to break away from the main herd and race up the river he soothed them by voice and touch and turned them back in such an amazing manner that the Indian boys brought some of the older warriors to observe his magic with horses.

Will saw the men watching, but he pretended not to notice. Nevertheless he felt that fate, after playing him so many bad tricks, was now doing him a good turn. He would exploit his power with animals to the utmost. Indians were always impressed with an unusual display of ability of any kind, and they felt that its possessor was endowed with magic. He walked freely among the ponies, which would have turned their heels on the Indian lads, and stroked their manes and noses.

The warriors went away without saying anything. The Indian boys returned to the village shortly after noon, but their place was taken by a fresh band, while Will remained on duty. Nor was he allowed to leave until long after twilight, when, surprised to find how weary he was, he dragged his feet to the tepee of Inmutanka, where he had venison, pemmican and water.

"Not so bad," he said to the old Indian. "I believe I'm a good herd for ponies, though I'd rather do it riding than walking."

"To-morrow you scrape hides with squaws," said Inmutanka.

Will was disappointed, but he recalled that after the threat of Heraka he should not expect to get off with such an easy task as the continual herding of ponies. Scraping hides would be terribly wearying and it would be a humiliation to put him with the old squaws. Nevertheless his heart was light. The fate of the white captive too often was speedy and horrible torture and death. He felt that the longer they were delayed, less was the likelihood that he would ever have to suffer them at all.

He was awakened at dawn, and as soon as he had eaten he was put to his task. Fresh buffalo hides were stretched tightly and staked upon the ground, the inner side up, and he and a dozen old squaws began the labor of scraping from them the last particles of flesh with small knives of bone.

He cut his hands, his back ached, the perspiration streamed from his face, and the squaws, far more expert than he, jeered at him continually. Warriors also

passed and uttered contemptuous words in an unknown language. But Will, clinging to his resolution, pretended to take no notice. Long before the day was over every bone in him was aching and his hands were bleeding, but he made no complaint. When he returned to the tepee Inmutanka put a lotion on his hands.

"It good for you, but must not tell," he said.

"I wouldn't dream of telling," said Will fervently. "God bless you, Inmutanka. If there's any finer doctor than you anywhere in the world I never heard of him."

But he had to go back to the task of scraping the skins early in the morning, and for a week he labored at it, until he thought his back would never straighten out again. He recalled that first day with the pony herd. The labor there was heaven compared with that which he was now doing. Perhaps he had been wrong to show his power with animals: If he had pretended to be awkward and ignorant with horses they might have kept him there.

He made no sign, nor did he give any hint to Inmutanka that he would like a change. He judged, too, that he had inspired a certain degree of respect and liking in the old Indian who put such effective ointment on his hands every night that at the end of a week all the cuts and bruises were healed. Moreover, he had learned how to use the bone scrapers with a sufficient degree of skill not to cut himself.

But he was still a daily subject of derision for the warriors, women and children. It was the little Indian boys who annoyed him most, often trying to thrust splinters into his arms or legs, although he invariably pushed them away. He never struck any of them, however, and he saw that his forbearance was beginning to win from the warriors, at least, a certain degree of toleration.

When the scraping of the skins was finished he was set to work with some of the old men making lances. These were formidable weapons, at least twelve feet long, an inch to an inch and a half in diameter, ending in a two-edged blade made of flint, elk horn or bone, and five or six inches in length. The wood, constituting the body of the lance, had to be scraped down with great care, and the prisoner toiled over them for many days.

Then he began to make shields from the hide that grew on the neck of the buffalo, where it was thickest. When it was denuded of hair the hide was a full quarter of an inch through. Then it was cut in a circle two or two and a half feet in diameter and two of the circles were joined together, making a thickness of a full half inch. Dried thoroughly the shield became almost as hard as iron, and the bullet of the old-fashioned rifle would not penetrate it.

He also helped to make bows, the favorite wood being of osage orange, although pine, oak, elm, elder and many other kinds were used, and he was one of the toilers, too, at the making of arrows. Mounted on his wiry pony with his strong shield, his long lance, his powerful bow and quiver of arrows, the Sioux was a formidable warrior, and Will understood how he had won the overlordship of such a vast area.

A month, in which he was subjected to the most unremitting toil, passed, yet his spirit and body triumphed over it, and both grew stronger. He felt now as if he could endure anything and he knew that he would be called upon to endure much.

His youth and his plastic nature caused him to imitate to a certain extent, and almost unconsciously, the manners and customs of those around him. He became stoical, he pretended to an indifference which often he did not feel, and he never spoke of the friends who had disappeared so suddenly from his life, even to old Inmutanka. The "doctor," as Will called him, was improving his English by practice, and Will in return was learning Sioux fast both from Inmutanka and from the people in the village. He knew the names of many animals. The buffalo was Pteha, the bear was Warankxi, the badger, Roka; the deer, Tarinca; the wolf, Xunktokeca.

One can get along with a surprisingly small vocabulary, and one also learns fast when he is surrounded by people who do not speak his own language. In six weeks Will had quite a smattering of the Sioux tongue. He still lived in the lodge of Inmutanka, who was invariably kind and helpful, and Will soon had a genuine liking for the good old doctor. It pleased him to wait upon Inmutanka as if he were a son.

It was, on the whole, well for the lad that he was compelled to work, because after the day's labors were over and he had eaten his supper, he fell asleep from exhaustion, and slept without dreams. Thus he was not able to think as much as he would have done about his present condition, the great quest that he had been compelled to abandon, and those whom he had lost. Yet he could not believe, despite what Heraka had said, that Boyd, Brady and the Little Giant were lost. But he had many bitter moments. Often the humiliations were almost greater than he could bear, and it seemed that his quest was over forever.

These thoughts came most at night, but renewed courage would always reappear in the morning. He was too young, too strong, to feel permanent despair, and his body was growing so tough and enduring that, in his belief, if a

time to escape ever came, he would be equal to it. But it was obvious that no such time was at hand. There were several hundred pairs of eyes in the village and he knew that every pair above five years of age watched him. Nothing that he did escaped their attention. Somebody was always near him, and, if he attempted flight, the alarm would be given before he went ten yards, and the whole village would come swarming upon him. So he wisely made no such trial, and seemed to settle down into a sort of content.

He saw no more then of Heraka, who had evidently gone away to the great war with the white men, but he saw a good deal of the chief of the village, an old man named Xingudan, which in Sioux meant the Fox. Xingudan's face was seamed with years, though his tall figure was not bent, and Will soon learned that his name had been earned. Xingudan, though he seldom went on the war path now, was full of craft and guile and cunning. The village under his rule was orderly and more far-seeing than Indians usually are.

The Sioux began to strengthen their lodges and to accumulate stores of pemmican. The maize in several small, sheltered fields farther down the valley was gathered carefully. The boys brought in bushels of nuts, and Will admired the industry and ability of Xingudan. It was evident that winter was coming, although the touch as yet was only that of autumn.

It was a magnificent autumn that the lad witnessed. The foliage in the mountains glowed in the deepest and most intense colors that he had ever seen, reds, yellows, browns and shades between. Far up on the slopes he saw great splotches of color blazing in scarlet, and far beyond them in the north the white crests of dim and towering mountains. He was strengthened in his belief that he was far to the north of the fighting line, although his conclusion was based only upon his own observations. No Indian, not even a child, had ever spoken to him a word to indicate where he was. He inferred that silence upon that point had been enjoined and that old Xingudan would punish severely any infraction of the law. Even Inmutanka, so kind in other respects, would never give forth a word of information.

As the autumn deepened, the lad's mind underwent another strange change, or perhaps it was not so strange at all. Youth must adapt itself, and he began to feel a certain sympathy and friendliness with the young Sioux of his own age. He also began to see wild life at its best, that is, under the circumstances most favorable to happiness.

The village was full of food, the hunting had never been better, and the forest

had yielded an uncommon quantity of fruits and nuts. All the primitive wants were satisfied, and there was no sickness. After dark the youths of the village roamed about, playing and skylarking like so many white lads of their own age, but the girls as soon as the twilight came remained close in the lodges. Will saw a kind of happiness he had never looked upon before, a happiness that was wholly of the moment, untroubled by any thoughts of the future, and therefore without alloy. He saw that the primitive man when his stomach was full, and the shelter was good could have absolute physical joy. Strangely enough he found himself taking an interest in these pleasures, and by and by he began to share in them to a minor degree.

The river afforded a fine stretch of water, and the Indians had large canoes which they now used freely for purposes of sport. These boats were made of strong rawhide, generally about thirty feet long, although one was a full fifty feet, and they also had several boats shaped like huge bowls, made with a frame of wicker and covering it, the strongest buffalo hide, sewed together with unbreakable rawhide strings. They called these round boats watta tatankaha, which Will learnt meant in English bull boats. Just such boats as these were used on the Tigris, and the Euphrates, the oldest of rivers known to civilized man.

The first sign of relenting toward the captive lad was when he was allowed to withdraw from the hard work of strengthening a lodge to take a place alone in one of the bull boats and navigate it with a paddle down the river, at a place where it had a depth past fording. The stream was swift here and, despite his knowledge of ordinary curves, the round craft overturned with him before he had gone twenty feet, amid shouts of laughter from the Sioux gathered on either bank.

The water flowing down from the mountains was very cold, but Will scorned to cry for help. He was a powerful swimmer and he struck out boldly for the round boat, which was floating ahead. He had held on to the paddle all the while and, by a desperate struggle, he managed to right his craft and pull himself into it again. He was so much immersed in his physical struggle that he did not know the Indian children were pelting him with sticks and clods of earth, and were shouting in amusement and derision. But the warriors were grave and silent.

Another struggle and the round boat overturned again. But he held on to the paddle and recovered it a second time. A new and desperate contest between him and the boat followed, but in the end he was victor and paddled it both down and up-stream in a fairly steady manner. Then he brought it into the landing where he was received in a respectful silence.

In his struggles to succeed Will had taken little notice of the coldness of the waters, but when he went back to the lodge he had a severe chill, followed by a high fever. Then old Inmutanka proved himself the doctor that Will called him by using a remedy that either killed or cured.

Inmutanka gave the lad a sweat bath. He made a heap of stones and built a big fire upon them, feeding it until their heat was very great. Then he scraped away the fuel and put up a framework made of poles, covered with layers of skins. These layers were six or seven feet above the stones. Will was placed in a skin hammock under the layers and suspended about two feet above the hot stones. Water was then poured on these, until a dense steam arose. When Inmutanka thought that Will had stood it as long as he could, he withdrew him from the hot steam bath, although medicine men sometimes left their patients in too long, allowing them to be scalded to death.

In Will's case it was cure, not kill. The fever quickly disappeared from his system and though it left him very weak he recovered so rapidly that in a few days he was as strong as ever, in fact, stronger, because all the impurities had been steamed out of his system, and the new blood generated was better than the old. He learned, too, from Inmutanka that he had won respect in the village by his courage and tenacity, and that many were in favor of lightening his labors, although the Fox was as stern as ever.

Will was still compelled to realize that he was a slave; that he, a white lad, the heir of untold centuries of civilization and culture, was the slave of a people who, despite all their courage and other virtues, were savages. They stood where, in many respects, his ancestors had stood ten or twenty thousand years ago. Again and again, the thought was so bitter that he felt like making a run for freedom and ending it all on the Indian spear. But the thought would change, and with it came the hope that some day or other the moment of escape would appear, and there was a lurking feeling, too, that his present life was not wholly unpleasant, or, at least, there were compensations.

An increased strength came with the rapid recovery from his illness. Beyond any question he had grown in both height and breadth since he had been in the mountains, and his muscles were as hard as iron. Not one of the Indian youths could exert as much direct strength as he, or endure as much.

His patience, which was now largely the result of calculation and will, began to have its visible effect upon the people. There is nothing that an Indian admires more than stoicism. The fortitude that can endure pain without a groan is to him

the highest of attributes. Will had never complained, no matter how great his hardships or labors, and gradually they began to look upon him as one of their own. His face was tanned heavily by continuous exposure to all kinds of weather, his original garments were worn out, and he was now clad wholly in deerskins. A casual observer would have passed him at any time as a tall Indian youth.

One day as a mark of favor he was put back as a guard upon the herd of ponies, now considerably increased in numbers, probably by raids upon other tribes, and full of life, as they had done little all the autumn but crop the rich grass of the valley. Will found himself busy keeping them within bounds, but his old, happy touch soon returned, and the Indians, to their renewed amazement, soon saw the animals obeying him instinctively.

"It is magic," said old Xingudan.

"Then it is good magic," said Inmutanka, "and Wayaka is a good lad. He does not know it yet, but he is beginning to like our life. Think of that, O, Xingudan."

"You were ever of soft heart, O, Inmutanka," said Xingudan, as he turned away.

Will's tasks were as long as ever, but they changed greatly in character. He was no longer compelled to work with the women and children, save when the tending of the herds brought him into contact with the boys, but there he was now an acknowledged chief. A distemper appeared among the ponies and the Sioux were greatly alarmed, but Will, with some simple remedies he had learned in the East, stopped it quickly and with the loss of but two or three ponies. Old Xingudan gave him no thanks save a brief, "It is well," but the lad knew that he had done them a great service and that they were not wholly ungrateful.

He had proof of it a little later, when he was allowed to take part in the trapping and snaring of wild beasts, although he was always accompanied by three or four Indian youths, and was never permitted to have any weapon.

But he showed zeal, and he enjoyed the freedom, although it was only that of the valley and the slopes. He learned to set traps with the best of them, and became an adept in the taking and curing of game. All the while the autumn was deepening and wild life was becoming more endurable. The foliage on slopes and in the valley that had burned in fiery hues, now began to fade into yellow and brown. The winds out of the north grew fierce and cutting, and on the vast and distant peaks the snow line came down farther and farther.

"Waniyetu (winter) will soon be here," said old Inmutanka.

"The village is in good condition to meet it," said Will.

"Better than most villages of our people," said Inmutanka. "The white man presses back the red man because the red man thinks only of today, while the white man thinks of tomorrow too. The white man is not any braver than the red man, often he is not as brave, and he is not as cunning, but when the Indian's stomach is full his head goes to sleep. While the plains are covered with the buffalo in the summer, sometimes our people starve to death in the winter."

"I suppose, doctor," said Will, "that one can't have everything. If he is anxious about the future he can't enjoy the present."

The old Sioux shook his head and remained dissatisfied.

"The buffalo is our life," he said, "or, at least, the life of the Sioux tribes that ride the Great Plains. Manitou sends the buffalo to us. Buffaloes, in numbers past all human counting, are born by the will of Manitou under the ground and in the winter. When the spring winds begin to blow they come from beneath the earth through great caves and they begin their march northward. If the Sioux and the other Indian nations were to displease Manitou he might not send the buffalo herds out through the great caves, and then we should perish."

Will afterward discovered that this was a common belief among the Indians of the plains. Some old men claimed to have seen these caves far down in Texas, and it was quite common for the ancients of the tribes to aver that their fathers or grandfathers had seen them. Most of them held, too, to the consoling belief that however great the slaughter of buffaloes by white man and red, Manitou would continue to send them in such vast numbers that the supply could never be exhausted, although a few such as Inmutanka had a fear to the contrary.

Inmutanka, as became his nature, was provident. The lodge that he and Will inhabited was well stored with pemmican, with nuts and a good store of shelled corn. It also held many dried herbs and to Will's eyes, now long unused to civilization, it was a comfortable and cheerful place. A fire was nearly always kept burning in the centre, and he managed to improve the little vent and wind vane at the top in such a manner that the smoke was carried off well, and his eyes did not suffer from it.

Then a fierce, cold rain came, blown by bitter winds and stripping the last leaf from the trees. At Will's own suggestion, vast brush shelters had been thrown up near the slopes. Crude and partial though they were, they gave the great pony

herd much protection, and when old Xingudan inspected them carefully he looked at Will and said briefly: "It is good."

Will felt that he had taken another step into favor, and it was soon proved by a lightening of his labors and an increase in his share of the general amusements. Life was continually growing more tolerable. The black periods were becoming shorter and the bright periods were growing longer. The evenings had now grown so cold that the young Sioux spent them mostly in the lodges, Will devoting a large part of his time to learning the language from Inmutanka, who was a willing teacher. As he had much leisure and the Sioux vocabulary was limited he could soon talk it fluently.

All the while the winter deepened and Will, seeing that he would have no possible chance of escape for many months, resigned himself to his captivity. The fierce rain that lasted two days, was followed by snow, but the Indians still hunted and brought in much game, particularly several fine elk of the great size found only in the far northwest. They stood as tall as a horse, and Will judged that they weighed more than a thousand pounds apiece.

Then deeper snow came and he could hear it thundering in avalanches on the distant slopes. He was quite sure now that they were even farther north than he had at first supposed, and that probably they would be snowed in all the winter in the valley, a condition to which the Indians were indifferent, as they had good shelter and plenty of food. They began to make snowshoes, but Will judged that they would be used for hunting rather than for travel. There was no reason on earth that he knew why the village should move, or any of its people abandon it.

The warriors spent a part of their time making lances, bows, arrows and shields, sometimes working in a cave-like opening in the slope a little distance from the village. Will did his share of this work and grew exceedingly skilful. One very cold morning he and several others were toiling hard at the task under the critical eye of old Xingudan, who sat on a ledge wrapped in a pair of heavy blankets, Will's fine repeating rifle lying across his knees.

Two of the warriors were sent back to the village for more materials, the others were dispatched on different tasks until finally only Will was left at work, with Xingudan watching. The Fox had seen many winters and summers, and his wilderness wisdom was great, but he was an Indian and a Sioux to the bone. He had noted the steady march of the white man toward the west, and even if the buffalo continued to come forever in countless numbers out of the vast caves in the south, they might come, in time, for the white man only and not for the red.

He regarded Will with a yellow and evil eye. Wayaka was a good lad—he had proved it more than once—but he was a representative of the conquering and hated race. Heraka had said that his fate, the most terrible that could be devised, must come some day, but Wayaka was not to know the hour of its coming; no sign that it was at hand must be given.

Xingudan went over again the words of Heraka, who was higher in rank than he, and he pursed his lips thoughtfully, trying to decide what he would do. Then he heard a woof and a snort, and a sudden lurch of a heavy body. He sprang to his feet in alarm. While he was thinking and inattentive, Rota (the grizzly bear), not yet gone into his winter sleep, vast and hungry, was upon him.

Xingudan was no coward, but he was not so agile as a younger man. He sprang to his feet and hastily leveling the repeating rifle fired once, twice. The Indian is not a good marksman, least of all when in great haste. One of the bullets flew wild, the other struck him in the shoulder, and to Rota that was merely the thrust of a needle, stinging but not dangerous. A stroke of a great paw and the rifle was dashed from the hands of the old chief. Then he upreared himself in his mighty and terrible height, one of the most powerful and ferocious beasts, when wounded, that the world has ever known.

Will had seen the rush of the grizzly and the defense of the chief. He snatched up a great spear, a weapon full ten feet long and with a point and blade as keen as a razor. He thrust it past Xingudan and, with all his might, full into the chest of the upreared bear. Strength and a prodigious effort driven on by nervous force sped the blow, and the bear, huge as he was, was fairly impaled. But Will still hung to the lance and continued to push.

Terrific roars of pain and anger came from the throat of the bear. A bloody foam gushed from his mouth and he fell heavily, wrenching the spear from the boy's grasp and breaking the shaft as he fell. His great sides heaved, but presently he lay quite still, and Will, quivering from his immense nervous effort, knew that he was dead.

Old Xingudan, who had been half stunned, rose to his feet, steadied himself, and said with great dignity:

"You have saved my life, Wayaka. It was a great deed to slay Rota with only capa (a spear) and the beast, too, is one of the most monstrous that has ever come into this valley. You are no longer Wayaka, but you shall be known as Waditaka (The Brave), nor shall I forget to be grateful."

Will steadied himself and sat down on a rock, because he was somewhat dizzy

after such a frightful encounter. But he was glad that it had occurred. He had no doubt that Xingudan had spoken with the utmost sincerity, and now the ruler of the village was his staunch friend.



CHAPTER XIII

THE REWARD OF MERIT

While he was yet dizzy and the motes were flying in millions before his eyes, he heard shouts, and warriors came running, attracted by the sound of the shots. They cried out in amazement and delight at the monstrous grizzly lying slain upon the ground, and then turned to Xingudan to compliment him upon his achievement. But the old warrior spoke tersely:

"It was not I," said he, "it was Wayaka, who has now become Waditaka, who slew the great grizzly with a spear. Rarely has such a deed been done. The life of your chief, Xingudan, has been saved by a slave."

Will, who now understood Sioux well, heard every word and his heart began to beat. The motes ceased to dance before his eyes and the blood flowed back into his veins. It was a strange thing, but he had begun to acquire a liking for these Indians, savage and wild though they were, and, as he judged, so far removed from the white people that they came into contact with them but seldom. Perhaps a lucky chance, a valiant impulse, was about to put him on their social plane, that is, he might be raised from the condition of a slave to that of a freeman, free, at least, to go about the village as he pleased, and not to do the work of a menial.

Several of the young warriors turned to him and spoke their approval. The trace of a liking that had appeared in him had found a response in them. Friendship replies to friendship, and Will, who six months ago would have laughed at the endorsement of blanketed wild men, now felt a thrill of pleasure. But Xingudan as yet said little more. He pointed to the great bear and said:

"The skin belongs to Waditaka and Inmutanka. The flesh will be divided among the people."

Will and the old warrior, with the help of some of the young men, removed the monstrous hide. He did not care for any of the flesh, although he knew that the people would use large portions of it. Then he and Inmutanka scraped it carefully, and, when it was well cured until it was soft and flexible, they put it in their lodge, where it spread so far over the bark floor that they were compelled to roll it back partly, to keep it out of the fire in the centre. It was the finest trophy

in the village, and many came to admire it.

"Rota was the largest that any of us has ever seen," said Inmutanka, "but the farther north we go the larger grow the great bears. Far up near the frozen seas it is said they are so large that they are almost as heavy as a buffalo. It is true, too, of Ta (the moose). Word comes out of the far north that he has been found there having the weight of at least three of our ponies."

Will did not doubt what Inmutanka said, but his interest in his words was due chiefly to the inferences he drew from them. Inmutanka spoke of the immensity of the bear because they were in the far north, and it was only another confirmation of his belief that the great march after he was taken captive had been made almost due north. They must be in some valley in the vast range of mountains that ran in an unbroken chain from the Arctic to the Antarctic, more than ten thousand miles. Perhaps they had gone much beyond the American line, and this was the last outlying village of the Sioux.

But he did not bother himself about it now, knowing that he could do nothing until next spring, as the snow fell heavily and almost continuously. It was three or four feet deep about the lodges and he knew that it lay in unmeasured depths in the passes. All the world was gleaming white, but the crests of the mountains were seldom visible, owing to the driving storms.

Plenty and cheerfulness prevailed in the village. Will had an idea that he was seeing savage life under the most favorable conditions. It was too true that the Indian coming in contact with the white man generally learned his vices and not his virtues, and too often forgot his own virtues also, until he became wholly bad. But this village, save for its firearms and metal tomahawks, was in much the same condition that other Indian villages must have been four or five hundred years earlier.

Old Xingudan ruled with the alternate severity and forbearance of a patriarch, and now he showed his kindly side to Will, treating him almost as one of their own young warriors. The "almost" was soon turned to a fact, as old Inmutanka formally adopted Will as his son with the ceremonies customary on such occasions, and he knew therefore that his struggle had been achieved at last, that he had now attained a plane of social equality with the Indians of the village.

Whatever it may have seemed six months before, it was no small triumph now. His task was chiefly in the making of arms, along with the other warriors, and he soon became the equal of any of them. He also practiced with them the throwing of the tomahawk at trees, in which he acquired wonderful dexterity.

But his best work was done among the ponies. Often in jest he called himself the horse doctor of the camp. He had studied their ailments and he knew how to cure them, but above all was his extraordinary gift of reaching into the horse nature, a power, derived he knew not whence or how, of conveying to them the sympathy for them in his nature. They responded as human beings do to such a feeling, and, with a word and a sign, he could lead a whole herd from one field to another.

This power of his impressed the Sioux even more than his slaying of the monstrous grizzly bear with only a spear. It was a gift direct from Manitou, and they were proud that an adopted warrior of their village should have such a mysterious strength. Will knew now that he was no longer in danger of torture by fire or otherwise. Old Xingudan would not do it. Heraka, who was his superior chief, might return and command it, but Xingudan and the whole village would disobey. Moreover, he was now the adopted son of Inmutanka, a young Sioux warrior with all the rights of a Sioux, and the law forbade them to torture him or put him to death. And Indian laws were often better obeyed than white man's laws.

Xingudan kept his repeating rifle, his revolver and his field glasses, but a bow and arrows were permitted to him, and he learned to use them as well as any of the Indians. The valley and the slopes that were not too high and steep, afforded an extensive hunting range, despite the deep snow, and Will brought down with a lucky arrow a fine elk that made for him a position yet better in the village, as he and Inmutanka, his father, were entitled to the body, but instead divided at least half of it among the older and weaker men and women.

Despite the favor into which he had come, Will could learn nothing of his location or of the progress of the war between the great Sioux nation and the whites. Yet of the latter he had a hint. Just before the winter closed in on them finally, a young warrior, evidently a runner because he bore all the signs of having travelled far and fast, arrived in the valley. He was taken into the lodge of Xingudan and he departed the next morning with five of the young warriors of the village, the best men they had. When Will referred to their absence he received either no answer or an ambiguous one. Inmutanka himself would say nothing about them, but Will made a shrewd surmise that the runner had come for help in the great war and that the last and uttermost village would be stripped in the attempt to turn back the white tide.

His growing appreciation of wild life caused him to have an increasing feeling of sympathy for the Sioux. The white flood would engulf them some day. He

knew that just as well as he knew that he was in the valley, but as for himself, he had no wish to see the buffalo disappear from the plains. If his own personal desires were consulted the west would remain a wilderness and a land of romance. It was pleasant to think that there was an immense region in which one could always discover a towering peak, a noble river or a splendid lake.

Adopted now into the tribe, and far from the battle line, he might have drifted on indefinitely with the Indians, but there was the memory of his white comrades, whom he could not believe dead, and also the mission upon which he had started, the hunt for the great mine which his father had found. The reasons why he should continue the search were overwhelming, and despite the kindness of Inmutanka and the others he meant to escape from them whenever he could.

The winter shut down fierce and hard. Will had never before known cold so intense and continuous. In the valley itself the snow lay deep and its surface was frozen hard, but the Indians moved over it easily on their snowshoes, the use of which Will learned with much pain and tribulation. The river was covered with ice of great thickness, but the Indians cut holes in it and caught many excellent fish, which added a pleasant variety to their diet.

One of their hardest struggles was to keep alive the herd of ponies. At the suggestion of Will and of Xingudan, who was a wise man beyond his race, much forage had been cut for them before the winter fell, and in the alcoves of the mountains where the snow was thin they were continually seeking grass, which grew despite everything. Will led in the work of saving the herd, and gradually he directed almost his whole time to it. He insisted upon gathering anything they could eat, even twigs, and Indian ponies are very tough. The young boys, the old men and the old women helped him and were directed by him.

Scarcely any young warriors were left in the village and Will's strength and intelligence fitted him for leadership. The weaker people began to rely upon him and, as he learned the ways of the wild and fused them with the ways of civilization, he became a great source of strength in the village. He wore a beautiful deerskin suit which several of the old women had made for him in gratitude for large supplies of food that he had given to them, and he had a splendid overcoat which Inmutanka and he had made of a buffalo robe.

The lodge of Inmutanka and Waditaka, who had once been known as Wayaka, became the most attractive in the village. Will lined the fire hole in the centre with stones, and in the roof he made a sort of flue which caused the vent to draw so much better that they were not troubled by smoke. He reinforced the bark

floor with more bark, over which the great bear robe was spread on one side of the fire, while the other side was covered with the skins of smaller bears, wolves and wildcats. Many small articles of decoration or adornment hung about the walls. Inmutanka had been in the habit of shutting the door tightly at night, but as Will insisted upon leaving it open partly, no matter how bitter the weather, they always had plenty of fresh air and suffered from no colds. Will, too, insisted upon the utmost cleanliness and neatness, qualities in which the Indian does not always excel, and his example raised the tone of the village.

A period of very great cold came. Will reckoned that the mercury must be at least forty degrees below zero, and, for a week, the people scarcely stirred from their lodges. Then occurred the terrible invasion of the mountain wolves, the like of which the oldest man could not recall. Will and Inmutanka were awakened at dawn by a distant but ferocious whining.

"Wolves," said Inmutanka, "and they are hungry, but they will not attack a village."

He turned over in his warm buffalo robes and prepared to go to sleep again, but the whining grew louder and more ferocious, increasing to such an extent that Inmutanka became alarmed and went to the door. When he pulled back the flap yet farther the howling seemed very near and inexpressibly fierce.

"It is a great pack," said the old Sioux. "I have never before heard so many wolves howl together, and their voices are so big and fierce that they must be those of the great wolves of the northern mountains."

"They're going to attack the village," said Will. "I can tell that by the way they're coming on."

"It is so," said Inmutanka. "They run on the snow, which is frozen so deep that it can bear their weight."

Will threw on rapidly his deerskin suit, his buffalo overcoat and took down his bow and quiver of arrows. Inmutanka meanwhile beat heavily on a war drum, and in the bitter cold and darkness all who were able to fight poured out of the lodges, Xingudan at their head, carrying Will's rifle and revolver.

Several of the Indian women brought torches and held them aloft, casting vivid lines of red upon the frozen snow. From the great corral came frightened neighs and whinnies from the ponies, that knew a terrible foe was at hand. It was probably the ponies that would have been attacked first, but it was not in the character of the Sioux to stay in their lodges and let their animals be devoured.

Valiantly, they had rushed forth to meet the most formidable wolf pack that had ever come out of the north, and by the light of the torches Will presently saw the great, gaunt, shadowy forms and the fiery eyes of the huge wolves which, driven by hunger, had boldly attacked a village.

It was impossible for him to estimate even their approximate numbers, but he believed they could not be less than several hundred. They hovered a while at the north side of the village, and then old Xingudan opened fire with the repeating rifle. Howling savagely, the wolves made their rush. The Indians who had rifles fired as fast as they could, but the bows, much more numerous, did the deadlier work. Will, remembering to keep his nerves steady, and standing by the side of his foster father, Inmutanka, sent arrow after arrow, generally at the throats of the wolves, and he rarely missed.

But the great pack, evidently driven by the fiercest hunger, did not give way for bullet or arrows. Huge slaving beasts, they pressed on continually. Two or three of the older men were pulled down and devoured before the very eyes of the people, and Will, who was rapidly shooting away his last arrows, felt himself seized by an immense horror. If the savage brutes should break through their line they would all be killed and eaten. Save for a rifle or two, time had turned back ten or twenty thousand years, when men fought continually with the great flesh-eaters for a place on earth.

Seized by an idea, he rushed to the center of the village where a great fire was burning, and snatched up a torch, calling to others to do likewise. It was the old squaws who were the quickest witted and they obeyed him at once. Twenty women held aloft the flaming wood, and they rushed directly in the faces of the wolves, which gave back as they had not given back before either rifle or arrow. Then the arrows sang in swarms, and the pack, fierce though its hunger might be, was unable to withstand more and fled.

Xingudan urged forward a pursuit. Will had exhausted his arrows, but an old warrior loaned him a long lance, and with it he slew two of the brutes which were now panic stricken. Yet the chief, like a good general, still pressed the fleeing horde, although the wolves turned once and another old man was killed. Inmutanka himself came very near losing his life, as a monster whirled and sprang for him, but Will received the throat of the wolf on the point of the lance, and although he was borne to the earth, the raging brute was killed instantly.

When the wintry dawn came, none of the great pack was left alive near the village. At least half were slain, and the others had scrambled away in some

fashion among the mountains.

The village had escaped a great danger, but it rejoiced in victory. The old men, or what was left of them, were buried decently and then there was an immense taking of wolf-skins, the fine pelts of the huge northern beasts, which would long adorn the lodges of the Sioux, and Will again received approval for his quick and timely attack with fire. Xingudan knew in his heart that the village might have been overpowered and devoured had it not been for the wit and courage of Waditaka. But he merely said "Waditaka has done well." Will, however, knew that the four words meant much and that the liberty of the village was his. He was a sharer of all things save one—that, however, being much—namely, the knowledge of their location, which was kept from him as thoroughly as in the beginning.

But for a day or two he did not have much time to think of the question, as the whole village was busily engaged in skinning the slaughtered wolves and dressing the hides. Never before had so many been obtained at once by a single Indian village, and they secured every one, scraping them carefully and then drying them on high platforms or the boughs of trees. Often at night they heard a distant growling and they knew that a few wolves, still hiding in the valley, came out at night to devour the bodies of their dead comrades.

Will, lying between the furs in the strong lodge, would hear sometimes the sound of these faint growls, but they troubled him not at all. He would draw the buffalo robes more closely about him, as the child in the farmhouse pulls up the covers when he hears the patter of rain on the roof, and feels an immense sense of comfort. The compulsion of the life he was leading was fast sending him back to the primitive. He would have read had there been anything to read, but, despite the limited world of the valley in which he now lived, his daily activities were very great.

There was the pony herd, of which he was the chief guardian. Food must be found for it, though the hardy animals could and did do a great deal for themselves under the most adverse conditions. They ate twigs, they dug under the snow with their sharp hoofs for grass that yet lived in sheltered nooks, and Will and the Indians, by persistent seeking, were able to add to their supplies. They also had to break the ice on the river that they might drink, and, under the severe and continuous cold, the ice was now a foot thick.

Will also helped with the fishing through holes in the ice, and acquired all the Indian skill. The fish formed a most welcome addition to their diet of dried meat

and the occasional bread made from Indian corn. He helped, too, with the continual strengthening of the lodges, because all the old Indians foresaw the fiercest winter in a generation.

As Will reverted farther and farther into the primitive he retained a virtue which is the product of civilization. He was respectful and helpful to the very old and weak. The percentage of such in the village was much larger than usual, as nearly all the warriors had gone to the war. He invariably took food to the weazened old squaws and the decrepit old men, who presented him with another suit of beautifully decorated deerskin, and a coat of the softest and finest buffalo robe that he had ever seen.

"Waditaka big favorite," said Inmutanka when Will showed him the buffalo overcoat. "By and by all old squaws marry him."

"What?" exclaimed Will in horror.

"Of course," said Inmutanka, grinning slyly. "He make old squaws many presents. Leave venison, buffalo meat, bear meat at doors of their lodges. They marry him in the spring."

But Will caught the twinkle in Inmutanka's eyes.

"If they propose," he said, "I'll offer good old Dr. Inmutanka in my place. He's nearer their age, and with his medical skill he'll be able to take care of them."

"Inmutanka never had a wife. He always what you call in your language bachelor. Too late to change now."

"But since you've raised this question I'll insist," said Will formidably. "You've been a bachelor too long, and you a great medical man too. Men are scarce in this village, and you must have at least a dozen wives."

"You stop, I stop," said Inmutanka in a tone of entreaty.

"Very good, honored foster-father. It's a closed subject forever. I don't think I'd care to have a dozen stepmothers just now."

The cold remained intense. Everything was frozen up, but game, nevertheless, still wandered into the valley and the warriors continually hunted it. All their bullets, never in great supply, had been fired away in the battle with the wolves, and they relied now upon bow and arrow. Two of the old warriors, attacking a fierce grizzly with these weapons, were slain by it, and though a party led by Xingudan, with Will as one of his lieutenants, killed the monster, there was mourning in the village for several days. Then it ceased abruptly. The dead were

the dead. They had gone to the happy hunting grounds, where in time all must go, and it was foolish and unmanly to mourn so long. Will did not believe that the primitive retain grief as the civilized do. It was a provision to protect those among whom life was so uncertain.

A few days later a warrior of the Sioux nation arrived in the valley, suffering from a wound and on the point of death from cold and starvation. He was put in one of the warmest lodges, his wounds were dressed carefully and when he had revived sufficiently he asked for the old chief, Xingudan.

"I was hurt in battle with the white men many, many days' journey away," he said, "and the great chief Heraka, knowing I would not be fit for march and fight for a long time, sent me here to recover and he also sent with me a message for you."

"What was the message, Roka (Badger)?"

"It was in regard to the white youth, Wayaka, our prisoner."

"Wayaka has become Waditaka, owing to his great bravery. With only a spear he fought and slew a monstrous grizzly bear that would have killed me the next instant. When we drove off the huge pack of giant mountain wolves his service was the greatest."

"Even so, Xingudan. Those are brave deeds, but they cannot alter the command I brought from Heraka."

"What was the command, Roka?"

"That Waditaka be burned to death with slow fire at the stake, and that other tortures of which we know be inflicted upon him. We lost many warriors in battle with the whites and the soul of Heraka was bitter."

Old Xingudan leaned his chin on his hand and looked very thoughtfully at the fire that blazed in the centre of the lodge.

"The command of Heraka is unjust," he said.

"I cannot help that, as you know, Xingudan."

"I do not blame you, but there is something of which Heraka is ignorant."

"What is it?"

"Waditaka is now the adopted son of the wise and good Inmutanka."

"But the orders of Heraka are strict and stern."

"The rite of adoption is sacred. Until Waditaka himself chooses to change he is a Sioux and must be treated as a Sioux."

"The consent of Heraka was not secured for the adoption."

"It was impossible to reach him. The laws of the Sioux have not been violated. Waditaka is a brave young warrior. The fire shall not touch him. A winter great and terrible is upon us and it may be before it is over that we shall need him much. He is a brave young warrior and few of them are left now in the village. I am old, Roka, and the old as they draw near to Manitou and all the gods and spirits that people the air, hear many whispers of the future. A voice coming from afar tells low in my ear that before the snow and ice have gone Waditaka, who was born white but who is now a Sioux, the adopted son of Inmutanka, will save us all."

"And does Xingudan see that?"

"Yes, Roka, I see it."

The wounded warrior raised himself on his pallet and a look of awe appeared on his face.

"If thou readest the future aright, Xingudan," he said, "it would be well to save this lad and brave the anger of Heraka, if he be so bold as to defy the law of adoption."

"I am old and my bones are old, but even though he is a chief above me I do not fear Heraka. Waditaka shall not burn. I have said it."

"I have but delivered my message, Xingudan. Now I will sleep, as my wound is sore. I have traveled far and the cold is great."

Will little knew how his fate had been discussed in the lodge, and how his good humor, his acceptance of conditions and his zeal to help had saved him from a lingering and horrible death. Old Xingudan, taciturn though he was and severe of manner, was his firm friend and would defend him against Heraka, or the great war chief, Red Cloud, himself. Will was not only by formal rite of adoption a Sioux, but in the present crisis he was, on the whole, the most valuable young warrior in a village where young warriors were so scarce, owing to the distant war with the whites.

"You have delivered your message, Roka," said Xingudan, finally, "and you have no right to deliver it to anybody but me. Therefore your duty is done. Do not mention it again while you are with us."

"I obey, O Xingudan," said Roka. "Here I am under your command, and now I will exert all my energies to get well of my wound."

Will, meanwhile, relapsed farther and farther into the primitive, all the

conditions of extreme wildness exerting upon him a powerful influence. They no longer had bullets and gunpowder or cartridges, but must fight with bow and arrow, lance and war club. It was necessary, too, to defend themselves, as the tremendous cold was driving into the valley more beasts of prey, ravening with hunger.

And yet the primitive state of the youth and those around him was not ignoble. Just as the people of a village twenty thousand years before may have been drawn together by common dangers and the needs of mutual help, so were these. The women worked diligently on the wolf skins, making heavier and warmer clothing, the food supply was placed under the dictatorship of Xingudan, who saw that nothing was wasted. Will, with the superior foresight of the white man's brain, was really at the back of this measure.

To the most active and vigorous men was assigned the task of hunting the great wild beasts which now wandered into the valley, driven by cold and fierce, growing hunger.

The wolves were but the forerunners. Mountain lions of uncommon size and ferocity appeared. An old woman was struck down in the night and devoured, and in broad daylight a child standing at the brink of the river was killed and carried away. Then the grizzly bears or other bears, huge beyond any that they had ever seen before, appeared. A group came in the night and attacked the pony herd, slaying and partly devouring at least a dozen. All in the village were awakened by the stamping of the horses and in the bitter cold and darkness the brave children of the wild rushed to the rescue, the women snatching torches and hurrying with them to furnish light by which their men could fight.

The battle that ensued was fully as terrible as that with the wolves. The bears, although far fewer than the wolves had been, were the greatest of all the American carnivora, and they resented savagely the attempt to drive them from their food, turning with foaming mouths upon their assailants, who could not meet them now with bullets, but who fought with the weapons of an earlier time.

Will plied the bow and arrow, and, when the arrows were exhausted, used a long lance. He and Xingudan were really the leaders, marshalling their hosts with such skill and effect that they gradually drove the bears away from the ponies, leaving the animals to be quieted by the women and old men, while the warriors fought the bears. Among these men was Roka, now recovered from his wound, and using a great bow with deadly accuracy. He and Will at length drew up side by side, and the stout Indian planted an arrow deep in the side of a bear.

Yet the wound was not fatal, and the animal, first biting at the arrow, then charged. Will struck with the lance so fiercely that it entered the animal's heart and, wrenched from his hands, was broken as the great beast fell.

"Behold!" shouted Xingudan in Roka's ear, "he has saved your life even as he saved mine!"

Not one of the bears escaped, but two of the men lost their lives in the terrible combat, and the strength of the village was reduced yet further. The two men, however, had perished nobly and the people felt triumphant. Will examined the bears by the numerous torchlights. He and Xingudan and Inmutanka agreed that they were not the true grizzly of the Montana or Idaho mountains, but, like the first one, much larger beasts coming out of the far north. Will judged that the largest of them all weighed a full three-quarters of a ton or more, and a most terrific creature he was, with great hooked claws as hard as steel and nearly a foot in length.

"One blow of those would destroy the stoutest warrior, Waditaka," said Xingudan.

"Our bows and arrows and lances have saved us," said Will. "I think they've been driven out of the Arctic by the great cold, and have migrated south in search of food."

"Then they smelled the horses and attacked them."

"Truly so, Xingudan, and they or other wild beasts will come again. The ponies are our weakest point. The great meat-eating animals will always attack them."

"But we must keep our ponies, Waditaka. We will need them in the spring to hunt the buffalo."

"Of course, Xingudan, we must save the ponies."

"How, O Waditaka?"

The youth felt a thrill. The chief was appealing to him to show the way and he felt that he must do it. He had already the germ of an idea.

"I think I shall have a plan tomorrow, O Xingudan," he said.

When Will departed for their lodge with Inmutanka, Xingudan said to Roka:

"What think you now, Roka, of Waditaka, once Wayaka, a captive youth, but now Waditaka, the brave young Sioux warrior, the adopted son of Inmutanka,

who is the greatest curer of sickness among us?"

"He was as brave as any, as well as the most skillful of all those who fought against the great beasts," replied Roka, "and you spoke truly, Xingudan, when you said the village needed him. I make no demand that the command of Heraka be carried out. But can we keep him, Xingudan? Will he not go back to his own people when the chance comes?"

"That I know not, Roka, but it will be many a day before he has a chance to return to them. The distance is great, as you know, and we concealed from him the way we came. The knowledge of the region in which this village stands is hidden from him."

Will's idea, as he had promised, was developed the next day. The corral for the ponies, with one side of it against the overhanging cliff, was strengthened greatly with stakes and brush, and at night fires were lighted all about it, tended by relays. He knew that wild beasts dreaded nothing so much as fire, and if any of them appeared the guards were to beat the alarm on the war drum. There were enough people in the village to make it easy for the watchers, and the fires would keep them warm.

Xingudan expressed his full approval of the plan, and the watch was set that very night, Will, at his own request, being put in charge of it. Heavily wrapped in his buffalo coat over his deerskin suit, with two pairs of moccasins on his feet, a fur cap on his head and thick ear muffs, he walked from fire to fire and saw that they were well fed. There was no need to spare the wood, the valley having a great supply of timber.

His assistants were small boys, old men and old women. The intelligence, activity and strength of these ancient squaws always surprised William. They were terribly weazened and withered, and far from beautiful to look upon, but once having arrived at that condition they seemed able to live forever, and to take a healthy interest in life as they went along. Owing to the lack of men in the village their importance had increased also, and they liked it. Under Will's eye they worked with remarkable zeal, and a band of living light surrounded the entire corral. Other lights blazed at points about the village, as they intended to make everything safe.

Will was chief of the watch, until about three o'clock in the morning. Often he went among the ponies and soothed them with voice and touch, for they were generally restless. Out of the darkness, well beyond the light of the flames, came growls and the noises of fierce combat. They had skinned all the bears, and also

had taken away all the eatable portions of their bodies, but other beasts had come for what was left. The Indians distinguished the voices of bear, mountain lion and wolf. From the slopes also came fierce whines, and the old squaws, shuddering, built the fires yet higher.

"Son of Inmutanka," said Xingudan at last to Will, "go to your lodge and sleep. You have proved anew that you are a man and worthy to belong to the great Dakota nation. The fires will be kept burning all through the night and see you, Inmutanka, that no one awakens him. Let his sleep go of its own accord to its full measure."

A year earlier Will would have been so much excited that sleep would have been impossible to him, but the primitive life he was leading had hardened all his nerves so thoroughly that he slumbered at once between the buffalo robes.

Old Inmutanka did not awaken him when the dawn came, although most of the people were already at work, curing the meat of the bears and scraping and drying the huge hides. They were also putting more brush and stakes around the great corral for the ponies, and many were already saying it was Waditaka who had saved their horses for them the night before. But the day had all the intense cold of extreme winter in the great mountains of North America. The mercury was a full forty degrees below zero, and the Indians who worked with the spoils had only chin, eyes and mouth exposed. Among them came old Inmutanka, very erect and strong despite his years, and full of honest pride. He thumped himself twice upon the chest, and then said in a loud, clear voice:

"Does anyone here wish to question the merit of my son, Waditaka? Is he not as brave as the bravest, and does he not think further ahead than any other warrior in the village?"

Then up spoke old Xingudan and he was sincere.

"Your words are as true as if they had been spoken by Manitou himself," he said. "The youth, Waditaka, the son of Inmutanka, was the greatest warrior of us all when the bears came, and his deeds stand first."

Then up spoke the messenger, Roka, also.

"It is true," he said. "I witnessed with my own eyes the great deeds of Waditaka. Our chief, Xingudan, must be proud to have such a brave and wise young warrior in his village."

The two talked later on about the matter and Roka fully agreed with Xingudan that the command of Heraka should be disregarded. Red Cloud, the great

Mahpeyalute, would support them in it and, in any event, it was quite sure that the village itself would not allow it.

Will did not awake until the afternoon, and then he yawned and stretched himself a minute or two between the warm covers before he opened his eyes. He saw a low fire of big coals burning in the centre of the lodge, neutralizing the intensely cold air that came in where the door of the lodge was left open for a foot or more.

He surmised from the angle of the sun's rays that the day was far advanced. Pemmican, strips of venison and some corn cakes lay by the edge of the fire and he knew that good old Inmutanka had left them there for him. He began to feel hungry. He would rise in a few minutes and warm the bread and meat by the fire, but he first listened to a chant that came from the outside, low at first, though swelling gradually. His attention was specially attracted, because he caught the sound of his own name in a recurring note. At length he made out the song, something like this:

Lo, in the night the great bears came
Our horses they would crush and devour.
Mighty were they in their size and strength
And hunger fierce and terrible drove them on.
Bullets we had none, only the edge of steel
and bone,
But the fires of Waditaka filled their souls
with fear,
Waditaka, the wise, the brave son of
Inmutanka,
Without him our herd would have been lost,
and we, too.

Waditaka, the valiant and wise, showed us the
way.
Young, but his arrow sings true, his lance
strikes deep,
Waditaka, the thoughtful, the bold, the son of
Inmutanka,
Proud we are that he belongs to us and fights
for us.

Young Clarke lay back between the buffalo covers. The song, crude though it was, and without rhyme or metre in the Indian fashion, gave him a strange and deep thrill. It was in just such manner that the Greeks chanted the praises of some hero who had saved them from great disaster, or who had done a mighty deed against dragons. From his early reading came visions of Hercules and Theseus, of Perseus and Bellerophon. But he did not put himself with such champions. He was merely serving a primitive little village, carried by its primitive state farther back than that world in which the more or less legendary Greek heroes lived.

But it was pleasant, wonderfully pleasant, to hear the chant. This was his world and to know, for a time at least, that he was first among the people, was very grateful to young ears. Listening a while he rose, dressed, warmed his food, and ate it with the appetite of a young lion.



CHAPTER XIV

THE DREADFUL NIGHT

When Will came out of the lodge he witnessed such a scene as one might have looked upon ten thousand years ago. The cold was bitter, but there were many fires. Vast icicles hung from the slopes of the mountains, glittering in the sun like gigantic spears. The trees were sheathed in ice, and, when the wind shook the boughs, pieces fell like silver mail. It was an icy world, narrow and enclosed, but it was a cheerful world just the same.

The squaws were pounding the bear meat, much as the white housewife would pound a steak, but with more vigor. Grizzly or any other kind of big bear was exceedingly tough, even after treatment, but, in the last resort, the Indians would eat it, and, despite their great stores of ordinary food, Xingudan feared they would not last through the long and bitter winter now promised.

The huge skins which had all the quality of fur were welcome. Will believed the bears were not grizzlies, and later, when he heard of the mighty Alaskan bears, he was sure of it. Great portions of the animals could not be used, and, as Xingudan knew that the odor would draw the fierce carnivora at night, he ordered it all carried to a point far up the valley and dumped there. Then the night was filled with howlings as the big wolves came down again and fought and ate.

Will listened with many a shudder as, heavily clothed and armed, he helped to keep the guard about the village and the corral, and, as he listened, he reverted by another great stage back into the primitive. He was with his friends, those who had fought beside him, those who cared for him, and those who looked upon him as a leader. For the present, at least, he was content. His hours were full of useful labor, of excitement, and of rewards. He knew that another of the great bearskins would be placed in the lodge that belonged to himself and Inmutanka, and that the best of the food would always be theirs if they were willing to take it.

The most difficult of their tasks was to procure enough food for the ponies, and they were continually turning up the snow in secluded alcoves in search of it. Once the weather moderated considerably for a week, and the snow melting in vast volume freshened all the grass and foliage. Heavy and continuous rains for

several days renewed much vegetation, apparently dead in this secluded valley, and the ponies, which were permitted to graze freely in the course of the day, although they were driven back to the corral at night, regained much of their lost flesh. The Indians also used this interval to gather and store much forage for them.

With the cessation of the rain however, the fierce cold returned. Everything froze up tight and fast again, and once more at night they heard the fierce howlings of the wild beasts. The fires around the corral were renewed and were never permitted to die, and it was necessary also to keep them burning continually about the village. A wolf stole in between the lodges, killed and carried off a little child. He was trailed by Will, Roka, now his fast friend, and a young warrior named Pehansan, the Crane, because of his extreme height and thinness. But Pehansan's figure, despite its slenderness, was so tough that he seemed able to endure anything, and on this expedition he was the leader. They tracked the wolf up the mountain side, slew it with arrows and recovered the body of the child, to which they gave proper burial, thus making sure of the immortality of its soul.

The danger from the wild beasts remained. It was the theory of the old and wise Xingudan that the pony herd drew them. The fierce winter made the hunting bad, but the word had been passed on by wolves, mountain lions and bears that a certain valley was filled with fine, toothsome horses, little able to protect themselves, and all of the fierce meat-eaters were coming to claim their share.

"We shall have to fight them until the spring," said the wise old chief, "and since we have neither cartridges nor powder and lead, we must make hundreds and hundreds of arrows."

This was hard and tedious labor, but nearly all in the village, who were able, devoted most of their time to it. They used various kinds of wood, scraping the shafts until they were perfectly round, and making on every one three fine grooves which kept them from warping. The arrows were of two different kinds, those for hunting and those for war. The barb of the war arrow was short, and it was not fastened very tightly to the shaft. When it struck the enemy, it would become detached and remain in the wound, while the shaft fell away. A cruel device, but not worse than has since been shown by highly civilized people in a universal war.

The head of the hunting arrow was longer, more tapering and it was fastened

securely. The people of the village made these in much greater numbers than the war arrows, as they certainly expected no fighting with men before the spring, and then they would procure ammunition for their rifles. The Sioux were not good marksmen at long range, but they shot their arrows with amazing swiftness. Will noted that a man holding a dozen arrows in his left hand could fire them all in as many seconds, and they could be discharged with such power that at very close range one would pass entirely through the body of a buffalo.

While Will did not learn to shoot the arrows as fast as the Indians, he was soon a better marksman at long range than anybody else in the village. Then Xingudan gave him the most beautiful bow he had ever seen. It was made of pieces of elkhorn that had been wrapped minutely and as tightly as possible with the fresh intestines of a deer. When the intestines dried the bow became to all purposes a single piece of powerful horn, yet with the flexibility and elasticity that one horn did not have. It was unbreakable, it did not suffer from weather, and it had among the Sioux the same value that a jewel of great price has among white people. Will knew that old Xingudan considered it a full equivalent for his repeating rifle, revolver and field glasses that the old chief kept in his lodge.

Will and the Crane, otherwise Pehansan, formed a warm friendship, and he found a similar friend in Roka, the stalwart warrior who had come with the order for his death by torture. Soon after he received the gift of the great bow the three decided on a hunting expedition toward the upper end of the valley, all traveling on snowshoes.

"Beware of the wild beasts, my son," said Inmutanka.

"We have heard nothing of them for a week past," said Will.

"The greater reason to expect them, because the word has been sent over a thousand miles of snow fields that we are here to be eaten. I know you are brave, watchful and quick, but take many arrows and see that Roka and Pehansan do the same."

Will was gay and light of heart, but he obeyed the injunction of Inmutanka and filled the quiver. He saw that Roka and Pehansan had an abundance, also, and the three, wrapped in furs, departed on their snowshoes. The Indians had not gone much toward the upper end of the valley. The slopes were less precipitous there and the forest heavier, giving better hiding for the great wild beasts, and hence making them much more dangerous. But with his magnificent new bow on his shoulder and his stout comrades beside him Will was not afraid.

The cold was less intense than it had been for some time and the exercise of

walking with the snowshoes gave them plenty of warmth. The snow itself, which had now begun to soften at the surface, lay to a depth of about three feet, hiding the river save where the Indians had cut holes through ice and snow to capture fish.

Pehansan, an inveterate hunter who would willingly have passed a thousand years of good life in such pursuits, had an idea that elk might be found in some of the secluded alcoves to the north. His mind was full of such thoughts, but Will, exhilarated by motion, was looking at the mountain tops which, like vast white pillars, were supporting a sky of glittering blue. He swept his hand in a wide gesture.

"It's a fit place up there for Manitou to live," he said.

"Beyond the blue the hunting grounds go on forever," said Pehansan.

"I can understand and appreciate your belief," said Will in his enthusiasm. "Think of it, Pehansan, to be strong and young forever and forever; never to know wounds or weariness; to hunt the game over thousands and tens of thousands of miles; to find buffaloes and bears and elk and moose twice, yes, three times as big as any here on earth; to discover and cross rivers and lakes and seas and always to come back safe! To sleep well every night and to wake every morning as keen for the chase as ever! to have your friends with you always, and to strive with them in the hunt in generous emulation! Aye, Pehansan, that would be the life!"

"Some day I shall find the life of which you speak so well, Waditaka! A happy death on the battlefield and lo! I have it!"

"Think you that the snow is now too soft to bear the weight of the wolves?" asked Roka, breaking into plain prose.

"Not yet," replied Pehansan, the mighty hunter, "but it may be soon. Hark to their howling on the slopes among the dwarf trees!"

Will heard a long, weird moaning sound, but he only laughed. It was the voice of the great wolves, but they and the bears had been defeated so often that he did not fear them. He swung the magnificent bow jauntily and was more than willing to put it to deadly use.

As the bird flies, the valley might have had a length of twenty miles, but following its curves it was nearer forty, and as the three had no reason for haste they took their time, traveling over the river bed, because it was free from obstruction. At noon they ate pemmican, and, after a rest of a half hour, pushed

on again. The valley at this point was not more than two miles wide, and Pehansan had his eyes set on a deep gorge to the left, where the cedars and pines sheltered from the winds seemed to have grown to an uncommon size.

"May find elk in here, where snow is not deep. Best place to look. Don't you think?" he said.

"I agree with you," replied Will.

"Pehansan speaks well," said Roka.

Then they left the river bed and, bearing away toward the west, approached the gorge which Will could now see was very deep, and with a comparatively easy slope. He had an idea that many of the great carnivora came into the valley by this road, but he did not speak of it to the other two.

About an hour after noon they came to the edge of the forest and Pehansan, searching in the snow, found large tracks which were evidently those of hoofs.

"Elk?" said Will, "and a big one, too, I suppose."

"No," replied Pehansan, "not elk. Something bigger."

"What can it be? Moose, then?"

"No, not moose. Bigger still!"

"I give it up. What is it?"

"A mountain buffalo, a bigger beast than those we find in the great herds on the plains, which you know, Waditaka, are very big, too."

"Then this giant is ours. He has come in here for food and shelter, and we ought not to have much trouble in finding him. Lead on, Pehansan, and I'll get a chance to use this grand bow sooner than I had thought."

The tracks were deep sunken in the snow, but he was not yet expert enough to tell their probable age.

"How old would you say they are, Pehansan?" he asked.

"Made to-day," replied the Indian, bending his glowing eyes upon the trail. "Two, three hour ago. He not far away."

"Then he's ours. A big mountain buffalo fresh on the hoof will be welcome in the village."

"Be careful about the snowshoes," said Roka. "The buffalo will be among the

trees and bushes and when we wound him he will charge. The snowshoes must not become entangled."

Will knew that it was excellent advice and he resolved to be exceedingly cautious. He could walk well on the snowshoes though he was not as expert as the Indians, but he held himself steady and made no noise among the bushes as they advanced, Pehansan leading, with Roka next.

"Very near now," whispered Pehansan, looking at the deep tracks, his eyes still glowing. It was a great triumph to kill a mountain buffalo, above all at such a time, and it was he, Pehansan, who led the way. If the other two shared in the triumph so much the better. There was no jealous streak in the Crane.

Pehansan knew also that the quest was not without danger. Wounded, the buffalo could become very dangerous and on snowshoes, among the thick bushes, it would be difficult for the hunters to evade the crashing charges of that mighty beast.

He came to a wide and deep depression in the snow.

"He lie down here and rest a while," he said. "Just beyond he dig in the snow for bunches of the sweet grass that grow here in summer and that keep alive under the snow."

"Then he is not a half hour away," said Roka.

"Not more than that," said Pehansan. "We barely creep now."

Will began to feel excitement. He had killed big buffaloes before, but then he had his repeating rifle, now he was to meet a monster of the mountains only with the bow and arrow. Even in that moment he remembered that man did not always have the bow and arrow. His primitive ancestors were compelled to face not only buffaloes but the fierce carnivora with the stone axe and nothing more.

The great trail rapidly grew fresher. Among the pines and cedars, the snow was not more than a foot deep and the three hunters had much difficulty in making their way noiselessly where the brush was so dense. But the footprints were monstrous. The great hoofs had crushed down through the snow, and had even bitten into the earth. Will had a curious idea that it might not be a mountain buffalo, large as they grew, but some primordial beast, a survivor of a prehistoric time, a mammoth or mastodon, the pictures of which he recalled in his youthful geography. If America itself had so long passed unknown to the white man, why could not these vast animals also be still living, hidden in the secluded valleys of the great Northwest?

Pehansan paused and turned upon the other two eyes that glowed from internal fires. He, too, had been impressed by the enormous size of the hoof prints, the largest that he had ever seen, but there was no fear, nor even apprehension in his valiant soul.

"It is the king of them all," he said. "Pteha (the buffalo) in these mountains has grown to twice the usual size, and attacked by cold and hunger he has the temper of the grizzly bear. He is but a little distance away, and we need rifles to go against him, but we do not turn back! Do we, Roka? Do we, Waditaka?"

"We do not," whispered Roka.

"Not thinking of such a thing," whispered Will.

They pushed their way farther, crossed a small ravine and, resting a moment or two on the other side, heard a puffing, a low sound but of great volume.

"Pteha," whispered Pehansan.

"Among the cedars, scarce fifty yards away," said Roka. "Now suppose we separate and approach from three points. It will give us a better chance to plant our arrows in him, and he cannot charge more than one at a time."

"Good tactics, Roka," whispered Will.

Roka, as the oldest, took the center, Pehansan turned to the right and Will to the left. The white youth held his great elkhorn bow ready and the quiver of arrows was over his shoulder, but, after the Sioux fashion, he carried five or six also in his left hand that he might fire them as quickly as one pulls the trigger of a repeating rifle. The figures of Roka and Pehansan were hidden from him almost instantly by the bushes and he went forward slowly, picking his dangerous way on the snowshoes, his heart beating hard. He still had the feeling that he was creeping upon a mammoth or mastodon, and the low puffing and blowing increased in volume, indicating very clearly that it came from mighty lungs.

The feeling that he had been thrown back into a distant past grew upon Will. He was in the deep snow, armed only with bow and arrows, around him were the huge, frozen mountains, desolate and awful in their majesty, and before him, only a few yards away, was the great beast, the puffings and blowings of which filled his ears. He fingered the elkhorn bow and then recalled his steadiness and courage. A few steps farther and he caught a glimpse of a vast hairy back. Evidently the animal was lying down and it would give the hunters an advantage, as they could fire at least one arrow apiece before it rose to its feet.

Another long, sliding step on the snowshoes and he saw more clearly the beast, on its side in a great hollow it had made for itself in the snow. But as he looked the huge bull lurched upward and charged toward the right, from which point Pehansan was coming. Evidently a shift of the wind had brought it the odor of the Crane, and it attacked at once with all the ferocity of a mad elephant.

Will had a clear view of a vast body, great humped shoulders, and sharp, crooked horns. But now that the danger had come his pulses ceased to leap and hand and heart were steady. The arrow sang from the bow and buried itself deep in the great bull's neck. Another and another followed until a full dozen were gone, every one sunk to the feather in the animal's body. Roka and Pehansan were firing at the same time, sending in arrows with powerful arms and at such close range that not one missed. They stood out all over his body and he streamed with blood.

But the bull did not fall. No arrow had yet touched a vital spot. Bellowing with pain and rage, he whirled, and catching sight of Will, who was only a few yards away, charged. Pehansan and Roka uttered warning shouts, and the youth, who in his enthusiasm had gone too near, made a convulsive leap to one side. Had he been on hard ground and in his moccasins he might easily have escaped that maddened rush, but the long and delicate snowshoes caught in a bush, and he fell at full length on his side. Then it was the very completeness of his fall that saved him. The infuriated beast charged directly over him, trampling on the point of one snowshoe and breaking it, but missing the foot. Will was conscious of a huge black shape passing above him and of blood dripping down on his body, but he was not hurt and he remembered to cling to his bow.

The raging bull, feeling that he had missed his prey, turned and was about to charge again. Will would not have been missed by him a second time. The youth would have been cut to pieces as he struggled for his balance, but Pehansan did a deed worthy of the bravest of the brave. Far more agile on the snowshoes than Will, he thrust himself in front of the animal, waved his bow and shouted to attract his attention. The bull, uttering a mighty bellow, charged, but the brave Crane half leaped, half glided aside, and his arrows thudded in the great rough neck as the beast rushed by.

When the monster turned again, Will, although he was compelled to lean against a bush for support, had drawn a fresh sheaf of arrows from the quiver, and he sent them home in a stream. Roka from another point was doing the same and Pehansan from a third place was discharging a volley. The great beast, encircled by stinging death, threw up his head, uttered a tremendous bellow of

agony and despair and crashed to the earth, where he breathed out his life.

Will, trembling from his exertions and limping from the broken snowshoe approached cautiously, still viewing that huge, hairy form with wonder and some apprehension. Nor were Roka and Pehansan free from the same nervous strain and awe.

"What is it?" asked Will, "a mammoth or a mastodon?"

"Don't know mammoth and don't know mastodon," replied Pehansan, shaking his head, "but do know it is the biggest of all animals my eyes have ever seen."

"It is a woods or mountain buffalo that has far outgrown its kind, just as there are giants among men," said Roka.

"If this were a man and he bore the same relation to his species he would be thirteen or fourteen feet tall," said Will, his voice still shaking a little. "Why, he'd make most elephants ashamed to be so puny and small."

"He, too, like the bears, came out of the far North," said Pehansan. "Maybe there is not another in the world like him."

"That hide of his is thick with arrows," said Will, "but in so big a skin I don't think the arrow holes will amount to much. We ought to have it. We must carry so grand a trophy back to the village to-night."

Roka shook his head.

"Not to-night," he said. "We three be strong, but we cannot move the body of this mighty beast, and so we cannot take off the skin."

"I will go to the village and bring many people," said Pehansan.

Again the wise Roka shook his head.

"No," he said, "we three will stay by the bull. You are fast on your snowshoes, Pehansan, and you can shoot your arrows swift, hard and true, but you would never reach the village, which is many miles from here. The fierce wild animals would devour you. We must clear the snow away as fast as we can and build fires all about us. The beasts have already scented the dead bull, and will come to eat him and us."

The shadows of the twilight were falling already, and they heard the faint howls of the meat-eaters on the slopes. Will and his comrades, taking off their snowshoes, worked with frantic energy, clearing away the snow with their mittened hands, bringing vast quantities of the dead wood, lighting several fires

in a circle about the bull, and keeping themselves, with the surplus wood, inside the circle. Then, while Will fed the fires, Roka and Pehansan carefully cut the arrows out of the body.

"We may need them all before morning," said Roka.

"It is so, if the growling be a true sign," said Pehansan.

The two warriors partly skinned the body and cut off great chunks of meat, which they broiled over the fires, and all three ate. Meanwhile, Will, bow and arrows ready, watched the bushes beyond the circle of flame. If his situation had been nearly primitive in the day it was wholly primitive at night. The mighty bull buffalo was to him truly a mammoth, and beyond the circle of fire, which they dreaded most of all things, the fierce carnivora were waiting to devour the hunters and their giant prize alike. When a pair of green eyes came unusually near Will fired an arrow at a point midway between them, and a terrific howling and shrieking followed.

"It was one of the great wolves, I think," said Roka, "and your arrow sped true. The others are devouring him now. Listen, you can hear his big bones cracking!"

Will shuddered and threw more wood on the fires. What a blessed thing fire was! It saved them from the freezing night and it saved them from the teeth of the wild beasts, which he knew were gathering in a great circle, mad with hunger. The flames leaped higher, and he caught glimpses of dusky figures hovering among the bushes, wolves, bears and he knew not what, because imagination was very lively within him then and he had traveled back to a primordial time.

The night became very dark and the snow hardened again under the cold that came with it. Will, crouched by one of the fires with his bow and arrows ever ready in his hands, heard the sounds of heavy bodies, either sinking into the snow or crushing their way through it. The wind rose and cut like a knife. Despite his heavy buffalo robe overcoat he moved a little closer to the fire, and Pehansan and Roka almost unconsciously did the same. They were all sitting, and the great body of the slain bull towered above them. The sound of the wind, as it swept through the gorges, was ferocious like the growling of the beasts with which it mingled.

"The spirits of evil are abroad to-night," said Roka. "The air is full of them and they rush to destroy us, but Manitou has given us the fire with which to defend us."

A long yell like that of a cat, but many times louder, came from a point beyond and above them, where a tree of good size grew about fifty yards away. Roka seized a piece of burning wood and held it aloft.

"It's a monstrous mountain lion stretched along a bough," he said. "Look closely, Waditaka, and you will see. At a long distance you are the best bowman of us all. Can you not reach him with an arrow from your great elkhorn bow?"

"I think so," replied Will, concentrating his gaze until he could make out clearly the outlines of the giant cat. "He's a monster of his kind. All the animals in this region seem to be about twice the size of ordinary types."

"But if the arrow touches the heart the big as well as the little will fall."

"True, Roka, and while you hold that torch aloft I can mark the spot on his yellowish hide beneath which his heart lies. Steady, now, don't let the light waver and I think I can reach the place."

He fitted the arrow to the string, bent the great bow and let fly. The arrow sang a moment through the air, and then it stood out, buried to the feathers in the body of the lion. The wounded beast uttered a scream so fierce that all three shuddered and drew a little closer together, and then launched itself through the air like a projectile. It struck in the snow somewhere, disappeared from their sight, and they heard terrible sounds of growling and fighting.

"Your arrow went straight to its heart," said Roka. "The spring was its last convulsion of the muscles and now the other beasts are fighting over its body as they eat it."

"I don't care how soon this night is over," said Will. "All the meat-eating wild beasts in the mountains must be gathering about us."

"It is not a time for sleep," said Roka gravely. "While Manitou has given us the fire to serve as a wall around us, he tells us also that we must watch every minute of the night with the bows and arrows always in our hands, or we die."

"Aye," said Pehansan, "there is one that comes too near now!"

He sent an arrow slithering at a bulky figure dimly outlined not more than ten yards away. At so short a distance a Sioux could shoot an arrow with tremendous force, and there followed at once a roar of pain, a rush of heavy feet, and a wild threshing among the bushes.

"I know not what beast it was," said Pehansan proudly, "but like the other it will soon find a grave in the stomachs of the great wolves."

They did not see any more figures for an hour or two, but a dreadful howling came from the great beasts, from every point in the complete circle about them. The three watched closely, eager to speed more arrows, but evidently the carnivora had taken temporary alarm and would not come too near lest the flying death reach them again. Roka cut fresh pieces from the buffalo and roasted them over one of the fires.

"Eat," he said to his comrades. "It is as wearing to watch and wait as it is to march and fight. Eat, even if you are not hungry, that your strength may be preserved."

Will, who at any other time would have found the meat of the bull too tough before pounding, ate, and he ate, too, with an appetite, Roka and Pehansan joining with vigor.

The odor of the cooking steak penetrated the darkness about them and they heard the fierce growling of bears and the screaming of great cats. Will was growing so much used to these terrible noises, he felt so much confidence in their ring of fire that he laughed, and his laugh had a light trace of mockery.

"Wouldn't they be glad to get at us?" he said, "and wouldn't they like to sink their teeth in the giant bull here? Why, there's enough of him to feed a whole gang of 'em!"

"But he'll feed our people down in the village," said Pehansan, who was also in good spirits. "Still the wild beasts are coming nearer. It is great luck that we have so much wood for the fires."

He and Will built the fires higher, while Roka sent two or three arrows at the green or yellow eyes in the dark. The roars or fierce yells showed that he had hit, and they heard the sound of heavy bodies being threshed about in the dusk.

"We are not eaten but some of our enemies are," said Will. "It would be a good plan, wouldn't it, to slay them whenever we can in order that they may be food for one another?"

"It is wisely spoken," said Roka. "We will shoot whenever we see a target, but we will never neglect the fires because they are more important even than the arrows."

All through that dark, primordial night, in which they were carried back, in effect, at least ten thousand years, they never relaxed the watch for a moment. Now and then they sent arrows into the dusk, sometimes missing and sometimes hitting, and the growling of the bears and wolves and the screaming of the great

cats was almost continuous. The darkness seemed eternal, but at length, with infinite joy, they saw the first pale streak of dawn over the eastern mountains.

"Now the fierce animals will withdraw farther into the forest," said Roka. "Beyond the reach of our arrows they will be, but they will not depart wholly."

"Someone must go to the village for help," said Will, "help not only for us, but to take away two or three tons of this good meat. Why, the bull looks even bigger this morning than he did last night. One of my snowshoes is broken, but, if Pehansan will lend me his, I'll make the trip."

"You will not," said Roka. "Despite your skill with the bow and arrow you would be devoured before you had gone a mile. The fierce beasts would be in waiting for you and you would no longer have a ring of fire to protect you."

"Then what are we to do, Roka? We can't stay here forever within the ring of fire, living on steaks cut from the bull."

"Waditaka has become a great young warrior and he thinks much. Few as young as he is think as much as he does."

"I don't grasp your meaning, Roka."

"Perhaps it would be better to say that no one thinks of everything."

"I'm still astray."

"We'll call the people of the village to us."

"If you had the voice of old Stentor himself, of whom you never heard, you couldn't reach the village, which you know is more than twenty miles away."

"We will not call with our voices, Waditaka. Behold how clear the morning comes! It is the light of bright winter and there is no light brighter. The sun is rising over the mountains in a circle of burning gold and all the heavens are filled with its rays."

"You're a poet, Roka. The spell has fallen upon you."

"Against the shining blaze of the sky the smallest object will show, and a large object will be seen at a vast distance. Bring our blankets, Pehansan, and we will spread them over the little fire here."

Will laughed at himself.

"The smoke signals!" he exclaimed. "How simple the plan and how foolish I was not to think of it!"

"As I told you," said Roka, "one young warrior, no matter how wise, cannot think of everything. We will talk not with our mouths but with the blankets."

In this case the signals were quite simple. Pehansan passed the blanket twice rapidly over the fire, allowing two great coils of smoke to ascend high in the air, and then dissipate themselves there. After five minutes he sent up the two smoky circles again. The signal meant "Come."

"We will soon see the answer," said Roka, "because they are anxious about us and will be looking for a sign."

All three gazed in the direction of the village, the only point from which the reply could be sent, and presently a circle of smoke, then two, then three, rose there. Pehansan, in order to be sure, sent up the two circles again, and the three promptly replied.

"It is enough," said Roka joyfully. "Now they will come in great force on their snowshoes, and we will be saved with our huge prize."

They waited in the utmost confidence and at times Pehansan sent up the two rings again to guide the relief band. But the people from the village had a long distance to travel, and it was noon when they saw the dark figures among the undergrowth and hailed them with joyous cries. At least thirty had come, a few young warriors—there were few in the village—but mostly old men, and the dauntless, wiry old squaws.

They exclaimed in wonder and admiration over the mighty beast the three had killed, and among the bushes about the campfire they found great skeletons, all eaten clean by the huge mountain wolves.

"Truly you were saved by fire," said old Xingudan, who had himself headed the relieving party.

With so many to lift and pull they were able to remove the entire robe from the giant buffalo, the finest skin that many of them had ever seen. It was so vast that it was a cause of great wonder and admiration.

"It belongs," said Xingudan, "to Waditaka, Pehansan and Roka, the three brave warriors who slew the buffalo."

"The three live in different lodges and they will have to pass it one to another for use," said Inmutanka.

Will glanced at Roka, who understood him, and then he glanced at Pehansan, who also understood him.

"It is the wish of the three of us," said the youth, "that this great skin be accepted by the brave and wise Xingudan, whose knowledge and skill have kept the village unhurt and happy under conditions that might well have overcome any man."

A look of gratification, swift but deep, passed over the face of Xingudan, but he declined the magnificent offer. Nevertheless the three insisted, and old Inmutanka observed wisely that the skin should go only in the lodge of the head chief. At last Xingudan accepted, and Will, although he had not made the offer for that purpose, had a friend for life.

The band began to cut up the vast body, which, when the flesh was well pounded and softened by the squaws, would alone feed the village for quite a period. The task could not be finished that day, but they built such a ring of great fires for the night that the fierce carnivora did not dare to come near. The next day they reached the village with the great bull, carried in many sections.

Will's nerves had been attuned so highly during the terrible siege that he collapsed to a certain extent after his return to the village, but he suffered no loss of prestige because of it, as everybody believed that he and his comrades had been besieged by evil spirits, and Pehansan and Roka as well were compelled to take a long rest. He remained in the lodge a whole day, and Inmutanka brought him the tenderest of food and the juices of medicinal herbs to drink, telling him it was said on every side that the prophecy had come true, and his craft and skill had saved the village in the terrible winter.

The second day he was in the village, where the women and old men were pounding and drying the flesh of the buffalo, but only the most skilful were permitted to scrape the vast skin, which, when it was finally cured, would make such an ornament as was never before seen in the lodge of a Sioux chief. But Will, Pehansan and Roka were not allowed to have a share in any work for a long time. They were three heroes who had fought with demons and who had triumphed, and for a space they were looked upon as demi-gods.

Nevertheless, they had their full share in the hunt. The wise old Xingudan, backed by the equally wise old Inmutanka, forbade any expeditions far from the village unless they were made in great force, and their judgment was soon proved by the fact that many bears, wolves and mountain lions of the greatest size were slain. Numerous fires, however, made the region immediately about the lodges safe, and as the river flowed almost at their feet the women could break the thick ice and catch fish, without fear of the wild beasts.

It was during this interval that Will began to think again very much of the faithful white friends whom he had lost, the redoubtable scout, the whistling and cheerful Little Giant, and the brave and serious Brady. Heraka had told him that they were dead, but he could not believe it. He began to feel that he would see them again, and that they would renew the great quest. He had preserved the map with care, but he had not looked at it for a long time. Yet he remembered the lines upon it as well as ever. As he had reflected before, if it were destroyed, he could easily reproduce it from memory.

Then his three lost friends became vague again. The months that had passed since his capture seemed years, and he was so far away from all the paths of civilization that it was like being on another planet. He had never yet learned exactly where he was, but he knew it must be in the high mountains of the far north, and therefore toward the Pacific coast.

Then all these memories and mental questions faded, as the life of the village became absorbing again. Frightened herds of elk and moose, evidently chased by the great carnivora or in search of food, came into the valley and the Indians killed as many as they needed. They might have killed more, but Xingudan forbade them.

"Let them take shelter here," he said, "and grow more numerous. It is not to the interest of our people that the big deer should decrease in numbers, and if we are wise we will let live that which we do not need to eat."

They saw the wisdom of Xingudan's words and obeyed him. Perhaps there was not another Indian village in all North America which had greater plenty than Xingudan's in that winter, so long and terrible, in the northern mountains. Big game was abundant, and fish could always be obtained through holes in the thick ice that invariably covered the river. Their greatest difficulty was in keeping the horses, but they met the emergency. Not only did the horses dig under the snow with their sharp feet, but the Indians themselves, with Will at their head, uncovered or brought much forage for them.

Will understood why such sedulous care was bestowed upon the ponies, which could be of little use among the great mountains. When spring was fully come they would go eastward out of the mountains, and upon the vast plains, where they would hunt the buffalo. Then he must escape. Although he was an adopted Sioux, the son of Inmutanka, and had adapted himself to the life of the village, where he was not unhappy, he felt at times the call of his own people.

The call was especially strong when he was alone in the lodge, and the snow

was driving heavily outside. Then the faces of the scout, the Little Giant and the beaver hunter appeared very clearly before him. His place was with them, if they were still alive, and in the spring, when the doors of ice that closed the valley were opened, he would go, if he could.

But the spring was long in coming. Xingudan himself could not recall when it had ever before been so late. But come at last it did, with mighty rains, the sliding of avalanches, the breaking up of the ice, floods in the river and countless torrents. When the waters subsided and the slopes were clear of snow Xingudan talked of moving. The lodges were struck and the whole village passed out of the valley. The tall youth, dressed like the others and almost as brown as they, who had been known among white people as Will Clarke, but whom the Indians called Waditaka, wondered what the spring was going to bring to him, and he awaited the future with intense curiosity and eagerness.

Transcriber's Note

Some inconsistent hyphenation and spelling in the original document has been preserved.

Typographical errors corrected in the text:

Page 14 hutner changed to hunter
Page 55 commisariat changed to commissariat
Page 166 wondered changed to wandered
Page 181 double-barrelled changed to double-barreled
Page 191 which added after "weapon with"
Page 266 Wll changed to Will
Page 325 Pahansan changed to Pehansan

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