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THE LONE RANCHE

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Содержание

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Chapter One.
A Tale of the Staked Plain.
"Hats Off!"

Within the city of Chihuahua, metropolis of the northern provinces of Mexico – for the most part built of mud – standing in the midst of vast barren plains, o'ertopped by bold porphyritic mountains – plains with a population sparse as their timber – in the old city of Chihuahua lies the first scene of our story.

Less than twenty thousand people dwell within the walls of this North Mexican metropolis, and in the country surrounding it a like limited number.

Once they were thicker on the soil; but the tomahawk of the Comanche and the spear of the Apache have thinned off the descendants of the *Conquistadores*, until country houses stand at wide distances apart, with more than an equal number of ruins between.

Yet this same city of Chihuahua challenges weird and wonderful memories. At the mention of its name springs up a host of strange records, the souvenirs of a frontier life altogether different from that wreathed round the history of Anglo-American borderland. It recalls the cowled monk with his cross, and the soldier close following with his sword; the old mission-house, with its church and garrison beside it; the fierce savage lured from a roving life, and changed into a toiling *peon*, afterwards to revolt against a system of slavery that even religion failed to make endurable; the neophyte turning his hand against his priestly instructor, equally his oppressor; revolt followed by a deluge of blood, with ruinous devastation, until the walls of both *mission* and military *cuartel* are left tenantless, and the redskin has returned to his roving.

Such a history has had the city of Chihuahua and the settlements in its neighbourhood. Nor is the latter portion of it all a chronicle of the olden time. Much of it belongs to modern days; ay, similar scenes are transpiring even now. But a few years ago a stranger entering its gates would have seen nailed overhead, and whisked to and fro by the wind, some scores of objects similar to one another, and resembling tufts of hair, long, trailing, and black, as if taken from the manes or tails of horses. But it came not thence; it was human hair; and the patches of skin that served to keep the bunches together had been stripped from human skulls! They were *scalps*– the scalps of Indians, showing that the Comanche and Apache savages had not had it all their own way.

Beside them could be seen other elevated objects of auricle shape, set in rows or circles like a festooning of child peppers strung up for preservation. No doubt their procurement had drawn tears from the eyes of those whose heads had furnished them, for they were human ears!

These ghastly souvenirs were the *bounty warrants* of a band whose deeds have been already chronicled by this same pen. They were the trophies of "Scalp Hunters" – vouchers for the number of Indians they had killed.

They were there less than a quarter of a century ago, waving in the dry wind that sweeps over the plains of Chihuahua. For aught the writer knows, they may be there still; or, if not the same, others of like gory record replacing or supplementing them.

It is not with the "Scalp Hunters" we have now to do – only with the city of Chihuahua. And not much with it either. A single scene occurring in its streets is all of Chihuahuaense life to be depicted in this tale.

It was the spectacle of a religious procession – a thing far from uncommon in Chihuahua or any other Mexican town; on the contrary, so common that at least weekly the like may be witnessed. This was one of the grandest, representing the story of the Crucifixion. Citizens of all classes assisted at the ceremony, the soldiery also taking part in it. The clergy, of course, both secular and regular, were its chief supports and propagators. To them it brought bread, and if not butter – since there is none in Chihuahua – it added to their incomes and influence, by the sale of leaden crosses, images of the Virgin Mother, and the numerous sisterhood of saints. In the *funcion* figured the usual Scripture characters: – The Redeemer conducted to the place of Passion; the crucifix, borne on the shoulders of a brawny, brown-skinned Simon; Pilate the oppressor; Judas the betrayer – in short, every prominent personage spoken of as having been present on that occasion when the Son of Man suffered for our sins.

There is, or was then, an American hotel in Chihuahua, or at least one conducted in the American fashion, though only a mere *posada*. Among its guests was a gentleman, stranger to the town, as the country. His dress and general appearance bespoke him from the States, and by the same tokens it could be told that he belonged to their southern section. He was in truth a Kentuckian; but so far from representing the type, tall, rough, and stalwart, usually ascribed to the people "Kaintuck," he was a man of medium size, with a build comparable to that of the Belvidere Apollo. He had a figure tersely set, with limbs well knitted; a handsome face and features of amiable cast, at the same time expressing confidence and courage. A costly Guayaquil hat upon his head, and coat to correspond, bespoke him respectable; his *tout ensemble* proclaimed him a man of leisure; while his air and bearing were unmistakably such as could only belong to a born gentleman.

Why he was in Chihuahua, or whence he had come to it, no one seemed to know or care. Enough that he was there, and gazing at the spectacular procession as it filed past the posada.

He was regarding it with no eye of wonderment. In all likelihood he had seen such before. He could not have travelled far through Mexico without witnessing some ceremony of a similar kind.

Whether interested in this one or no he was soon notified that he was not regarding it in the manner proper or customary to the country. Standing half behind one of the pillars of the hotel porch, he had not thought it necessary to take off his hat. Perhaps placed in a more conspicuous position he would have done this. Frank Hamersley – for such was his name – was not the sort of man to seek notoriety by an exhibition of bravado, and, being a Protestant of a most liberal creed, he would have shrunk from offending the slightest sensibilities of those belonging to an opposite faith – even the most bigoted Roman Catholic of that most bigoted land. That his "Guayaquil" still remained upon his head was due to simple forgetfulness of its being there; it had not occurred to him to uncover.

While silently standing with eyes turned towards the procession, he observed scowling looks, and heard low growlings from the crowd as it swayed slowly past. He knew enough to be conscious of what this meant; but he felt at the same time disinclined to humiliate himself by a too facile compliance. A proud American, in the midst of a people he had learned to despise – their idolatrous observances along with them – no wonder he should feel a little defiant and a good deal exasperated. Enough yielding, he thought, to withdraw farther back from behind the pillar, which he did.

It was too late. The keen eye of a fanatic had been upon him – one who appeared to have authority for meting out chastisement. An officer, bearded and grandly bedizened, riding at the head of a troop of lancers, quickly wheeled his horse from out of the line of march, and spurred him towards the porch of the posada. In another instant his bared blade was waving over the hatted head of the Kentuckian.

"*Gringo! alto su sombrero! Abajo! a sus rodillas*!" ("Off with your hat, greenhorn! Down upon your knees!") were the words that came hissing from the moustached lips of the lancer.

As they failed to beget compliance, they were instantly followed by a blow from the blade of his sabre. It was given sideways, but with sufficient sleight and force to send the Guayaquil hat whirling over the pavement, and its wearer reeling against the wall.

It was but the stagger of a sudden and unexpected surprise. In another instant the “gringo” had drawn a revolving pistol, and in yet another its bullet would have been through the brain of the swaggering aggressor, but for a third personage, who, rushing from behind, laid hold of the Kentuckian’s arm, and restrained the firing.

At first it seemed to Hamersley the act of another enemy; but in a moment he knew it to be the behaviour of a friend – at least a pacificator bent upon seeing fair play.

“You are wrong, Captain Uraga,” interposed he who had intermeddled, addressing himself to the officer. “This gentleman is a stranger in the country, and not acquainted with our customs.”

“Then it is time the heretico should be taught them, and, at the same time, respect for the Holy Church. But what right, Colonel Miranda, have you to interfere?”

“The right, first of humanity, second of hospitality, and third that I am your superior officer.”

“Bah! You mistake yourself. Remember, señor coronel, you are not in your own district. If it was in Albuquerque, I might take commands from you. This is the city of Chihuahua.”

“Chihuahua or not, you shall be made answerable for this outrage. Don’t imagine that your patron, Santa Anna, is now Dictator, with power to endorse such base conduct as yours. You seem to forget, Captain Uraga, that you carry your commission under a new regime – one that holds itself responsible, not only to fixed laws, but to the code of decency – responsible also for international courtesy to the great Republic of which, I believe, this gentleman is a citizen.”

“Bah!” once more exclaimed the bedizened bully. “Preach your *palabras* to ears that have time to listen to them. I shan’t stop the procession for either you or your Yankee protégé. So you can both go to the devil.”

With this benevolent permission the captain of lancers struck the spurs into his horse, and once more placed himself at the head of his troop. The crowd collected by the exciting episode soon scattered away – the sooner that the strange gentleman, along with his generous defender, had disappeared from the portico, having gone inside the inn.

The procession was still passing, and its irresistible attractions swept the loiterers along in its current – most of them soon forgetting a scene which, in that land, where “law secures not life,” is of too frequent occurrence to be either much thought of or for long remembered.

Chapter Two.
A Friend in Need

The young Kentuckian was half frenzied by the insult he had received. The proud blood of his republican citizenship was boiling within his veins. What was he to do?

In the agony of his dilemma he put the question to the gentleman who, beyond all doubt, had restrained him from committing manslaughter.

The latter was an entire stranger to him – never seen him before. He was a man of less than thirty years of age, wearing a broad-brimmed hat upon his head, a cloth jacket, slashed *calzoneras*, and a red crape scarf around his waist – in short, the *ranchero* costume of the country. Still, there was a military bearing about him that corresponded to the title by which the lancer captain had addressed him.

"Caballero," he said in reply, "if your own safety be of any consequence to you I should advise you to take no further notice of the incident that has arisen, however much it may have exasperated you, as no doubt it has done."

"Pardon me, señor; but not for all the world would I follow your advice – not for my life. I am an American – a Kentuckian. We do not take blows without giving something of the same in return. I must have redress."

"If you seek it by the law I may as well warn you, you won't have much chance of finding it."

"I know that. The law! I did not think of such a thing. I am a gentleman; I suppose this Captain Uraga supposes himself to be the same, and will not refuse to give me the usual satisfaction."

"He may refuse, and very likely will, on the plea of your being a stranger – only a barbarian, a *Tejano* or *gringo*, as he has put it."

"I am alone here – what am I to do?"

The Kentuckian spoke half in soliloquy, his countenance expressing extreme chagrin.

"*Fuez, señor*!" responded the Mexican colonel, "if you're determined on a *desafio* I think I might arrange it. I feel that I am myself a little compromised by my interference; and if you'll accept of me for your second, I think I can answer for it that Captain Uraga will not dare to deny us."

"Colonel Miranda – your name, I believe – need I attempt to express my thanks for so much generosity? I cannot – I could not. You have removed the very difficulty that was in my way; for I am not only a stranger to you, but to every one around. I arrived at Chihuahua but yesterday, and do not know a soul in the place."

"Enough; you shall not be disappointed in your duel for the want of a second. As a preliminary, may I ask if you are skilled in the use of the sword?"

"Sufficiently to stake my life upon it."

"I put the question, because that is the weapon your adversary will be certain to choose. You being the challenger, of course he has the choice; and he will insist upon it, for a reason that may perhaps amuse you. It is that we Mexican gentlemen believe you Americans somewhat *gauche* in the handling of the rapier, though we know you to be adepts in the use of the pistol. I take Captain Gil Uraga to be as thorough a poltroon as ever wore epaulettes, but he will have to meet you on my account; and he would perhaps have done so anyhow – trusting to the probability of your being a bad swordsman."

"In that he may find himself disappointed."

"I am glad to hear it; and now it only needs to receive your instructions. I am ready to act."

The instructions were given, and within two hours' time Captain Gil Uraga, of the Zacatecas Lancers, was in receipt of a challenge from the Kentuckian – Colonel Miranda being its bearer.

With such a voucher the lancer officer could not do otherwise than accept, which he did with cooler confidence for the very reason Miranda had made known. A *Tejano*, was his reflection – what should he know of the sword?

And swords were the weapons chosen.

Had the captain of Zacatecas Lancers been told that his intended adversary had spent a portion of his life among the Creoles of New Orleans, he would have been less reliant on the chances likely to turn up in his favour.

We need not describe the duel, which, if different from other encounters of the kind, was by being on both sides bitter, and of deadly intent. Suffice it to say, that the young Kentuckian displayed a skill in swordsmanship sufficient to disarrange several of Gil Uraga's front teeth, and make an ugly gash in his cheek. He had barely left to him sufficient command of his mouth to cry "Basta!" and so the affair ended.

"Señor Hamersley," said the man who had so effectively befriended him, after they had returned from the encounter, and were drinking a bottle of Paso wine in the posada, "may I ask where you intend going when you leave Chihuahua?"

"To Santa Fé, in New Mexico; thence to the United States, along with one of the return caravans."

"When do you propose starting?"

"As to that, I am not tied to time. The train with which I am to cross the plains will not be going for six months to come. I can get to Santa Fé by a month's travel, I suppose?"

"Less than that. It is not a question of how soon you may arrive there, but when you leave here. I advise you to start at once. I admit that two days is but a short time to see the sights of even so small a place as Chihuahua. But you have witnessed one of them – enough, I should say. If you take my advice you will let it content you, and kick the Chihuahua-ense dust from your feet before another twenty-four hours have passed over your head."

"But why, Colonel Miranda?"

"Because so long as you remain here you will be in danger of losing your life. You don't know the character of the man with whom you have crossed swords. I do. Although wearing the uniform of an officer in our army, he is simply a *salteador*. A coward, as I told you, too. He would never have met you if he had thought I would have given him a chance to get out of it. Perhaps he might have been tempted by the hopes of an easy conquest from your supposed want of skill. It would have given him something to boast about among the dames of Chihuahua, for Captain Gil deems himself no little of a lady-killer. You have spoilt his physiognomy for life; and, depend upon it, as long as life lasts, he will neither forget nor forgive that. I shall also come in for a share of his spite, and it behoves both of us to beware of him."

"But what can he do to us?"

"Caballero, that question shows you have not been very long in this country, and are yet ignorant of its customs. In Mexico we have some callings not congenial to your people. Know that stilettoes can here be purchased cheaply, with the arms of assassins to use them. Do you understand me?"

"I do. But how do you counsel me to act?"

"As I intend acting myself – take departure from Chihuahua this very day. Our roads are the same as far as Albuquerque, where you will be out of reach of this little danger. I am returning thither from the city of Mexico, where I've had business with the Government. I have an escort; and if you choose to avail yourself of it you'll be welcome to its protection."

"Colonel Miranda, again I know not how to thank you. I accept your friendly offer."

"Reserve your thanks till I have done you some service beyond the simple duty of a gentleman, who sees another gentleman in a dilemma he had no hand in creating. But enough, señor; we have no time to spend in talking. Even now there may be a couple of poignards preparing for us. Get your

things ready at once, as I start two hours before sunset. In this sultry weather we are accustomed to travel in the cool of the evening."

"I shall be ready."

That same afternoon, two hours before the going down of the sun, a party of horsemen, wearing the uniform of Mexican dragoons of the line, issued from the *garita* of Chihuahua, and took the northern road leading to Santa Fé, by El Paso del Norte. Colonel Miranda, his ranchero dress changed for the fatigue uniform of a cavalry officer, was at its head, and by his side the stranger, whose cause he had so generously and gallantly espoused.

Chapter Three.
The Colonel Commandant

Six weeks have elapsed since the day of the duel at Chihuahua. Two men are standing on the *azotea* of a large mansion-like house close to the town of Albuquerque, whose church spire is just visible through the foliage of trees that shade and surround the dwelling. They are Colonel Miranda and the young Kentuckian, who has been for some time his guest; for the hospitality of the generous Mexican had not terminated with the journey from Chihuahua. After three weeks of toilsome travel, including the traverse of the famed "Dead Man's Journey," he was continuing to extend it in his own house and his own district, of which last he was the military commandant, Albuquerque being at the time occupied by a body of troops, stationed there for defence against Indian incursions.

The house on whose roof the two men stood was that in which Colonel Miranda had been born – the patrimonial mansion of a large estate that extended along the Rio del Norte, and back towards the Sierra Blanca, into territories almost unknown.

Besides being an officer in the Mexican army, the colonel was one of the *ricos* of the country. The house, as already said, was a large, massive structure, having, like all Mexican dwellings of its class, a terraced roof, or *azotea*. What is also common enough in that country, it was surmounted by a *mirador*, or "belvedere." Standing less than half a mile distant from the soldier's *cuartel*, the commandant found it convenient to make use of it as his headquarters. A small guard in the *saguan*, or covered entrance below, with a sentinel stationed outside the gate in front, indicated this.

There was no family inside, wife, woman, or child; for the colonel, still a young man, was a bachelor. Only *peons* in the field, grooms and other servants around the stables, with domestics in the dwelling – all, male and female, being Indians of the race known as "Indios mansos" – brown-skinned and obedient.

But though at this time there was no living lady to make her soft footsteps heard within the walls of the commandant's dwelling, the portrait of a lovely girl hung against the side of the main *sola*, and on this his American guest had more than once gazed in silent admiration. It showed signs of having been recently painted, which was not strange, since it was the likeness of Colonel Miranda's sister, a few years younger than himself – at the time on a visit to some relatives in a distant part of the Republic. Frank Hamersley's eyes never rested on it without his wishing the original at home.

The two gentlemen upon the housetop were leisuring away the time in the indulgence of a cigar, watching the water-fowl that swam and plunged on the bosom of the broad shallow stream, listening to the hoarse croakings of pelicans and the shriller screams of the *guaya* cranes. It was the hour of evening, when these birds become especially stridulent.

"And so you must go to-morrow, Señor Francisco?" said his host, taking the cigaritto from between his teeth, and looking inquiringly into the face of the Kentuckian.

"There is no help for it, colonel. The caravan with which I came out will be leaving Santa Fé the day after to-morrow, and there's just time for me to get there. Unless I go along with it, there may be no other opportunity for months to come, and one cannot cross the plains alone."

"Well, I suppose I must lose you. I am sorry, and selfishly, too, for, as you see, I am somewhat lonely here. There's not one of my officers, with the exception of our old *medico*, exactly of the sort to be companionable. True, I have enough occupation, as you may have by this time discovered, in looking after our neighbours, the *Indios bravos*, who, knowing the skeleton of a regiment I've got, are growing saucier every day. I only wish I had a score or two of your stalwart trappers, who now and then pay a visit to Albuquerque. Well, my sister will soon be here, and she, brave girl, has plenty of life in her, though she be but young. What a joyous creature she is, wild as a mustang filly fresh

caught. I wish, Don Francisco, you could have stayed to make her acquaintance. I am sure you would be delighted with her."

If the portrait on the wall was anything of a faithful likeness, Hamersley could not have been otherwise. This was his reflection, though, for certain reasons, he did not in speech declare it.

"It is to be hoped we shall meet again, Colonel Miranda," was his ingenious rejoinder. "If I did not have this hope, I should now be parting from you with greater regret. Indeed, I have more than a presentiment we shall meet again; since I've made up my mind on a certain thing."

"On what, Don Francisco?"

"On returning to New Mexico."

"To settle in the country?"

"Not exactly that; only for a time – long enough to enable me to dispose of a cargo of merchandise in exchange for a bag of your big Mexican dollars."

"Ah! you intend to become one of the prairie merchants, then?"

"I do. That intention has been the cause of my visiting your country. I am old enough to think of some calling, and have always had a fancy for the adventurous life of the prairie trader. As I have sufficient means to stock a small caravan for myself, I think now of trying it. My present trip has been merely one of experiment and exploration. I am satisfied with the result, and, if no accident arise, you may see me back on the Del Norte before either of us be twelve months older."

"Then, indeed, is there a hope of our meeting again. I am rejoiced at it. But, Señor Don Francisco," continued his host, changing to a serious tone, "a word lest I might forget it – a word of counsel, or warning, I may call it. I have observed that you are too unsuspicious, too regardless of danger. It does not all lie upon the prairies, or among red-skinned savages. There is as much of it here, amid the abodes of our so-called civilisation. When you are travelling through this country bear your late antagonist in mind, and should you at any time meet, beware of him. I have given you some hints about the character of Gil Uraga. I have not told you all. He is worse than you can even imagine. I know him well. Do you see that little house, out yonder on the other side of the river?"

Hamersley nodded assent.

"In that hovel he was born. His father was what we call a *pelado*– a poor devil, with scarce a coat to his back. Himself the same, but something worse. He has left in his native place a record of crimes well known, with others more than suspected. In short, he is, as I have told you, a robber. No doubt you wonder that such a man should be an officer in our army. That is because you are ignorant of the state of our service – our society as well. It is but the result of constantly recurring changes in our political system. Still you may feel surprise at his holding this commission, with the patriotic party – the pure one – in power, as it now is. That might be inexplicable even to myself, since I know that he will be traitor to our cause when convenient to him. But I also know the explanation. There is a power, even when the party exercising it is not in the ascendant – an influence that works by sap and secrecy. It is that of our hierarchy. Gil Uraga is one of its tools, since it exactly suits his low instincts and treacherous training. Whenever the day is ripe for a fresh *pronunciamento* against our liberties – if we are so unfortunate as to have one – he will be amongst the foremost of the traitors. *Carrai*! I can think of him only with disgust and loathing. Would you believe it, señor, that this fellow, now that epaulettes have been set on his shoulders – placed there for some vile service – has the audacity to aspire to the hand of my sister? Adela Miranda standing in bridal robes by the side of Gil Uraga! I would rather see her in her shroud!"

Hamersley's bosom heaved up as he listened to the last words, and with emotion almost equalling that which excited his host. He had just been thinking about the portrait upon the wall, and how beautiful the original must be. Now hearing her name coupled with that of the ruffian whose blow he had felt, and whose blood he had spilled, he almost regretted not having ended that duel by killing his adversary outright.

"But surely, Colonel Miranda," he said at length, "there could be no danger of such an event as that you speak of?"

"Never, so long as I live. But, amigo, as you have learnt, this is a strange land – a country of quick changes. I am here to-day, commanding in this district, with power, I may almost say, over the lives of all around me. To-morrow I may be a fugitive, or dead. If the latter, where is she, my poor sister, going to find the arm that could protect her?"

Again the breast of Hamersley heaved in a convulsive manner. Strange as it might appear, the words of his newly-made friend seemed like an appeal to him. And it is just possible some such thought was in the mind of the Mexican colonel. In the strong man by his side he saw the type of a race who can protect; just such an oak as he would wish to see his sister extend her arms tendril-like around, and cling on to for life.

Hamersley could not help having vague and varied misgivings; yet among them was one purpose he had already spoken of – a determination to return to Albuquerque.

"I am sure to be back here," he said, as if the promise was meant to tranquillise the apprehensions of the colonel. Then, changing to a more careless tone, he added, —

"I cannot come by the spring caravans; there would not be time enough to make my arrangements. But there is a more southern route, lately discovered, that can be travelled at any season. Perhaps I may try that. In any case, I shall write you by the trains leaving the States in the spring, so that you may know when to expect me. And if, Colonel Miranda," he added, after a short reflective pause, in which his countenance assumed a new and graver form of expression, "if any political trouble, such as you speak of, should occur, and you may find it necessary to flee from your own land, I need not tell you that in mine you will find a friend and a home. After what has happened here, you may depend upon the first being true, and the second hospitable, however humble."

On that subject there was no further exchange of speech. The two individuals, so oddly as accidentally introduced, flung aside the stumps of their cigars; and, clasping hands, stood regarding one another with the gaze of a sincere, unspeakable friendship.

Next morning saw the Kentuckian riding away from Albuquerque towards the capital of New Mexico, an escort of dragoons accompanying him, sent by the Mexican colonel as a protection against marauding Indians.

But all along the road, and for months after, he was haunted with the memory of that sweet face seen upon the *sola* wall; and instead of laughing at himself for having fallen in love with a portrait, he but longed to return, and look upon its original – chafing under an apprehension, with which the parting words of his New Mexican host had painfully inspired him.

Chapter Four.
A Pronunciamento

A little less than a quarter of a century ago the Navajo Indians were the terror of the New Mexican settlements. It was no uncommon thing for them to charge into the streets of a town, shoot down or spear the citizens, plunder the shops, and seize upon such women as they wanted, carrying these captives to their far-off fastnesses in the land of Navajoa.

In the *canon* de Chelley these savages had their headquarters, with the temple and *estufa*, where the sacred fire of *Moctezuma* was never permitted to go out; and there, in times past, when Mexico was misruled by the tyrant Santa Anna, might have been seen scores of white women, captives to the Navajo nation, women well born and tenderly brought up, torn from their homes on the Rio del Norte, and forced to become the wives of their red-skinned captors – oftener their concubines and slaves. White children, too, in like manner, growing up among the children of their despoilers; on reaching manhood to forget all the ties of kindred, with the *liens* of civilised life – in short, to be as much savages as those who had adopted them.

At no period was this despoliation more rife than in the time of which we write. It had reached its climax of horrors, day after day recurring, when Colonel Miranda became military commandant of the district of Albuquerque; until not only this town, but Santa Fé, the capital of the province itself, was menaced with destruction by the red marauders. Not alone the Navajoes on the west, but the Apaches on the south, and the Comanches who peopled the plains to the east, made intermittent and frequent forays upon the towns and villages lying along the renowned Rio del Norte. There were no longer any outlying settlements or isolated plantations. The grand *haciendas*, as the humble *ranchos*, were alike lain in ruins. In the walled town alone was there safety for the white inhabitants of Nuevo Mexico, or for those Indians, termed *mansos*, converted to Christianity, and leagued with them in the pursuits of civilisation. And, indeed, not much safety either within towns – even in Albuquerque itself.

Imbued with a spirit of patriotism, Colonel Miranda, in taking charge of the district – his native place, as already known – determined on doing his best to protect it from further spoliation; and for this purpose had appealed to the central government to give him an increase to the forces under his command.

It came in the shape of a squadron of lancers from Chihuahua, whose garrison only spared them on their being replaced by a troop of like strength, sent on from the capital of the country.

It was not very pleasant to the commandant of Albuquerque to see Captain Gil Uraga in command of the subsidy thus granted him. But the lancer officer met him in a friendly manner, professing cordiality, apparently forgetful of their duelling feud, and, at least outwardly, showing the submission due to the difference of their rank.

Engaged in frequent affairs with the Indians, and expeditions in pursuit of them, for a while things seemed to go smoothly enough.

But as Adela Miranda had now returned home, and was residing with her brother, in the interludes of tranquillity he could not help having some concern for her. He was well aware of Uraga's aspirations; and, though loathing the very sight of the man, he was, nevertheless, compelled to tolerate his companionship to a certain extent, and could not well deny him the *entrée* of his house.

At first the subordinate bore himself with becoming meekness. Mock humility it was, and soon so proved itself. For, as the days passed, rumours reached the distant department of New Mexico that the old tyrant Santa Anna was again returning to power. And, in proportion as these gained strength, so increased Gil Uraga's confidence in himself, till at length he assumed an air of effrontery – almost insolence – towards his superior officer; and towards the sister, in the interviews he was permitted with her, a manner significantly corresponding.

These were few, and still less frequent, as his brusque behaviour began to manifest itself. Observing it, Colonel Miranda at length came to the determination that the lancer captain should no longer enter into his house – at least, by invitation. Any future relations between them must be in the strict execution of their respective military duties.

"Yes, sister," he said, one afternoon, as Adela was buckling on his sword-belt, and helping to equip him for the evening parade, "Uraga must come here no more. I well understand the cause of his contumacious behaviour. The priest party is again getting the ascendency. If they succeed, heaven help poor Mexico. And, I may add, heaven help us!"

Drawing the girl to his bosom with a fond affectionate embrace, he gave her a brother's kiss. Then, striding forth, he sprang upon a saddled horse held in waiting, and rode off to parade his troops on the *plaza* of Albuquerque.

A ten minutes' trot brought him into their presence. They were not drawn up in line, or other formation, to receive him. On the contrary, as he approached the *cuartel*, he saw strange sights, and heard sounds corresponding. Everything was in confusion – soldiers rushing to and fro, uttering seditious cries. Among these were "Viva Santa Anna!"

"Viva el General Armijo!"

"Viva el *Coronel* Uraga!"

Beyond doubt it was a *pronunciamento*. The old regime under which Colonel Miranda held authority was passing away, and a new one about to be initiated.

Drawing his sword and putting spur to his horse, he dashed in among the disaffected men.

A few of the faithful ran up, and ranged themselves by his side.

Then commenced a struggle, with shouting, shooting, sabring, and lance-thrusts. Several fell – some dead, some only disabled; among the last, Colonel Miranda himself, gravely wounded.

In ten minutes it was all over; and the commandant of Albuquerque, no longer commanding, lay lodged in the garrison *carcel*; Captain Gil Uraga, now colonel, replacing him as the supreme military officer of the district.

While all around ran the rumour that Don Antonio Lopes de Santa Anna was once more master of Mexico; his satellite, Manuel Armijo, again Governor of Santa Fé.

Chapter Five.
"Why comes he not?"

"What delays Valerian? What can be keeping him?"

These questions came from Adela Miranda, on the evening of that same day, standing in the door of her brother's house, with eyes bent along the road leading to Albuquerque. Valerian was her brother's baptismal name, and it was about his absence she was anxious.

For this she had reasons – more than one. Though still only a young girl, she quite understood the political situation of the Mexican Republic; at all times shifting, of late more critical than usual. In her brother's confidence, she had been kept posted up in all that transpired in the capital, as also the district over which he held military command, and knew the danger of which he was himself apprehensive – every day drawing nigher and nigher.

Shortly after his leaving her she had heard shots, with a distant murmur of voices, in the direction of the town. From the *azolea*, to which she had ascended, she could note these noises more distinctly, but fancied them to be salutes, vivas, and cheers. Still, there was nothing much in that. It might be some jubilation of the soldiery at the ordinary evening parade; and, remembering that the day was a *fiesta*, she thought less of it.

But, as night drew down, and her brother had not returned, she began to feel some slight apprehension. He had promised to be back for a dinner that was long since due – a repast she had herself prepared, more sumptuous than common on account of the saint's day. This was it that elicited the anxious self-asked interrogatories.

After giving utterance to them, she paced backward and forward; now standing in the portal and gazing along the road; now returning to the *sola de comida*, to look upon the table, with cloth spread, wines decantered, fruits and flowers on the épergne – all but the dishes that waited serving till Valerian should show himself.

To look on something besides – a portrait that hung upon the wall, underneath her own. It was a small thing – a mere photographic carte-de-visite. But it was the likeness of one who had a large place in her brother's heart, if not in her own. In hers, how could it? It was the photograph of a man she had never seen – Frank Hamersley. He had left it with Colonel Miranda, as a souvenir of their short but friendly intercourse.

Did Colonel Miranda's sister regard it in that light? She could not in any other. Still, as she gazed upon it, a thought was passing through her mind somewhat different from a sentiment of simple friendship. Her brother had told her all – the circumstances that led to his acquaintance with Hamersley; of the duel, and in what a knightly manner the Kentuckian had carried himself; adding his own commentaries in a very flattering fashion. This, of itself, had been enough to pique curiosity in a young girl, just escaped from her convent school; but added to the outward semblance of the stranger, by the sun made lustrous – so lustrous inwardly – Adela Miranda was moved by something more than curiosity. As she stood regarding the likeness of Frank Hamersley she felt very much as he had done looking at hers – in love with one only known by portrait and repute.

In such there is nothing strange nor new. Many a reader of this tale could speak of a similar experience.

While gazing on the carte-de-visite she was roused from the sweet reverie it had called up by hearing footsteps outside. Someone coming in through the *saggan*.

"Valerian at last!"

The steps sounded as if the man making them were in a hurry. So should her brother be, having so long delayed his return.

She glided out to meet him with an interrogatory on her lips.

"Valerian?" – this suddenly changing to the exclamation, "*Madre de Dios*! 'Tis not my brother!"

It was not, but a man pale and breathless – a *peon* of the establishment – who, on seeing her, gasped out, —

"Señorita! I bring sad news. There's been a mutiny at the cuartel – a *pronunciamento*. The rebels have had it all their own way, and I am sorry to tell you that the colonel, your brother – "

"What of him? Speak! Is he – "

"Not killed, *nina*; only wounded, and a prisoner."

Adela Miranda did not swoon nor faint. She was not of the nervous kind. Nurtured amid dangers, most of her life accustomed to alarms from Indian incursions, as well as revolutionary risings, she remained calm.

She dispatched messengers to the town, secretly, one after another; and, while awaiting their reports, knelt before an image of the Virgin, and prayed.

Up till midnight her couriers went, and came. Then one who was more than a messenger – her brother himself!

As already reported to her, he was wounded, and came accompanied by the surgeon of the garrison, a friend. They arrived at the house in hot haste, as if pursued.

And they were so, as she soon after learnt.

There was just time for Colonel Miranda to select the most cherished of his *penates*; pack them on a *recua* of mules, then mount, and make away.

They had scarce cleared the premises when the myrmidons of the new commandant, led by the man himself, rode up and took possession of the place.

By this time, and by good luck, the ruffian was intoxicated – so drunk he could scarce comprehend what was passing around him. It seemed like a dream to him to be told that Colonel Miranda had got clear away; a more horrid one to hear that she whom he designed for a victim had escaped from his clutches.

When morning dawned, and in soberer mood he listened to the reports of those sent in pursuit – all telling the same tale of non-success – he raved like one in a frenzy of madness. For the escape of the late Commandant of Albuquerque had robbed him of two things – to him the sweetest in life – one, revenge on the man he heartily hated; the other, possession of the woman he passionately loved.

Chapter Six.
Surrounded

A plain of pure sand, glaring red-yellow under the first rays of the rising sun; towards the east and west apparently illimitable, but interrupted northward by a chain of table-topped hills, and along its southern edge by a continuous cliff, rising wall-like to the height of several hundred feet, and trending each way beyond the verge of vision.

About half-distance between this prolonged escarpment and the outlying hills six large "Conestoga" waggons, locked tongue and tail together, enclosing a lozenge-shaped or elliptical space – a *corral*– inside which are fifteen men and five horses.

Only ten of the men are living; the other five are dead, their bodies lying a-stretch between the wheels of the waggons. Three of the horses have succumbed to the same fate.

Outside are many dead mules; several still attached to the protruding poles, that have broken as their bodies fell crashing across them. Fragments of leather straps and cast gearing tell of others that have torn loose, and scoured off from the perilous spot.

Inside and all around are traces of a struggle – the ground scored and furrowed by the hoofs of horses, and the booted feet of men, with here and there little rivulets and pools of blood. This, fast filtering into the sand, shows freshly spilled – some of it still smoking.

All the signs tell of recent conflict. And so should they, since it is still going on, or only suspended to recommence a new scene of the strife, which promises to be yet more terrible and sanguinary than that already terminated.

A tragedy easy of explanation. There is no question about why the waggons have been stopped, or how the men, mules, and horses came to be killed. Distant about three hundred yards upon the sandy plain are other men and horses, to the number of near two hundred. Their half-naked bodies of bronze colour, fantastically marked with devices in chalk-white, charcoal-black, and vermillion red – their buckskin breech-clouts and leggings, with plumes sticking tuft-like above their crowns – all these insignia show them to be Indians.

It is a predatory band of the red pirates, who have attacked a travelling party of whites – no new spectacle on the prairies.

They have made the first onslaught, which was intended to stampede the caravan, and at once capture it. This was done before daybreak. Foiled in the attempt, they are now laying siege to it, having surrounded it on all sides at a distance just beyond range of the rifles of those besieged. Their line forms the circumference of a circle of which the waggon clump is the centre. It is not very regularly preserved, but ever changing, ever in motion, like some vast constricting serpent that has thrown its body into a grand coil around its victim, to close when ready to give the fatal squeeze.

In this case the victim appears to have no hope of escape – no alternative but to succumb.

That the men sheltered behind the waggons have not "gone under" at the first onslaught is significative of their character. Of a surety they are not common emigrants, crossing the prairies on their way to a new home. Had they been so, they could not have "corralled" their unwieldy vehicles with such promptitude; for they had started from their night camp, and the attack was made while the train was in motion – advantage being taken of their slow drag through the soft, yielding sand. And had they been but ordinary emigrants they would not have stood so stoutly on the defence, and shown such an array of dead enemies around them. For among the savages outside can be seen at least a score of lifeless forms lying prostrate upon the plain.

For the time, there is a suspension of hostilities. The red men, disappointed by the failure of their first charge, have retreated back to a safe distance. The death-dealing bullets of the whites, of which they have had fatal proof, hold them there.

But the pause is not likely to be for long, as their gestures indicate. On one side of the circle a body of them clumped together hold counsel. Others gallop around it, bearing orders and instructions that evidently relate to a changed plan of attack. With so much blood before their eyes, and the bodies of their slain comrades, it is not likely they will retire from the ground. In their shouts there is a ring of resolved vengeance, which promises a speedy renewal of the attack.

"Who do you think they are?" asks Frank Hamersley, the proprietor of the assaulted caravan. "Are they Comanches, Walt?"

"Yis, Kimanch," answers the individual thus addressed; "an' the wust kind o' Kimanch. They're a band o' the cowardly Tenawas. I kin tell by thar bows. Don't ye see that thar's two bends in 'em?"

"I do."

"Wal, that's the sort o' bow the Tenawas carry – same's the Apash."

"The Indians on this route were reported friendly. Why have they attacked us, I wonder?"

"Injuns ain't niver friendly – not Tenawas. They've been riled considerably of late by the Texans on the Trinity. Besides, I reck'n I kin guess another reezun. It's owin' to some whites as crossed this way last year. Thar war a scrimmage atween them and the redskins, in the which some squaws got kilt – I mout say murdered. Thar war some Mexikins along wi' the whites, an' it war them that did it. An' now we've got to pay for their cussed crooked conduk."

"What's best for us to do?"

"Thar's no best, I'm afeerd. I kin see no chance 'cept to fight it out to the bitter eend. Thar's no mercy in them yells – ne'er a morsel o' it."

"What do they intend doing next, think you?"

"Jest yet 'taint easy to tell. Thar's somethin' on foot among 'em – some darned Injun trick. Clar as I kin see, that big chief wi' the red cross on his ribs, air him they call the Horned Lizard; an' ef it be, thar ain't a cunniner coon on all this contynent. He's sharp enough to contrive some tight trap for us. The dose we've gin the skunks may keep 'em off for a while – not long, I reck'n. Darnation! Thar's five o' our fellows wiped out already. It looks ugly, an' like enuf we've all got to go under."

"Don't you think our best way will be to make a dash for it, and try to cut through them. If we stay here they'll starve us out. We haven't water enough in the waggons to give us a drink apiece."

"I know all that, an' hev thort o' 't. But you forget about our hosses. Thar's only two left alive – yours and myen. All the rest air shot or stampedoed. Thurfor, but two o' us would stand a chance o' gettin' clar, an' it slim enough."

"You are right, Walt; I did not think of that I won't forsake the men, even if assured of my own safety – never!"

"Nobody as knows you, Frank Hamersley, need be tolt that."

"Boys!" cries out Hamersley, in a voice that can be heard all through the corral; "I needn't tell you that we're in a fix, and a bad one. There's no help for us but to fight it out. And if we must die, let us die together."

A response from eight voices coming from different sides – for those watching the movements of the enemy are posted round the enclosure – tells there is not a craven among them. Though only teamsters, they are truly courageous men – most of them natives of Kentucky and Tennessee.

"In any case," continues the owner of the caravan, "we must hold our ground till night. In the darkness there may be some chance of our being able to steal past them."

These words have scarce passed the lips of the young prairie merchant, when their effect is counteracted by an exclamation. It comes from Walt Wilder, who has been acting as guide to the party.

"Dog-goned!" he cries; "not the shadder o' a chance. They ain't goin' to give us till night. I knewed the Horned Lizard 'ud be after some trick."

"What?" inquire several voices.

"Look whar that lot's stannin' out yonder. Can't ye guess what they're at, Frank Hamersley?"

"No. I only see that they have bows in their hands."

"An' arrers, too. Don't you obsarve them wroppin' somethin' round the heads o' the arrers – looks like bits o' rags? Aye, rags it air, sopped in spittles and powder. They're agoin' to set the waggons afire! They air, by God!"

Chapter Seven.
Fiery Messengers

The teamsters, each of whom is watching the post assigned to him, despite the danger, already extreme, see fresh cause of alarm in Wilder's words. Some slight hope had hitherto upheld them. Under the protection of the waggons they might sustain a siege, so long as their ammunition lasts; and before it gave out some chance, though they cannot think what, might turn up in their favour. It was a mere reflection founded on probabilities still unscrutinised – the last tenacious struggle before hope gives way to utter and palpable despair. Hamersley's words had for an instant cheered them; for the thought of the Indians setting fire to the waggons had not occurred to any of the party. It was a thing unknown to their experience; and, at such a distance, might be supposed impossible.

But, as they now look around them, and note the canvas tilts, and light timbers, dry as chips from long exposure to the hot prairie sun; the piles of dry goods – woollen blankets, cotton, and silk stuffs – intended for the stores of Chihuahua, some of which they have hastily pulled from their places to form protecting barricades – when they see all this, and then the preparations the Indians are engaged in making, no wonder that they feel dismay on Walt Wilder shouting out, "They're agoin' to set the waggons afire!"

The announcement, although carrying alarm, conveys no counsel. Even their guide, with a life-long experience on the prairies, is at a loss how they ought to act in this unexpected emergency. In the waggons water there is none – at least not enough to drown out a conflagration such as that threatened; and from the way the assailants are gesturing the traders can predict that ere long, a shower of fiery shafts will be sent into their midst. None of them but have knowledge sufficient to admonish them of what is intended. Even if they had never set foot upon a prairie, their school stories and legends of early life would tell them. They have all read, or heard, of arrows with tinder tied around their barbs, on fire and spitting sparks, or brightly ablaze.

If any are ignorant of this sort of missile, or the mode of dispatching it on its mischievous errand, their ignorance is not destined longer to continue. Almost as soon as Wilder has given utterance to the warning words, half a score of the savages can be seen springing to the backs of their horses, each bearing a bow with a bunch of the prepared arrows. And before a single preventive step can be taken by the besieged traders, or any counsel exchanged between them, the pyrotechnic display has commenced.

The bowmen gallop in circles around the besieged enclosure, their bodies concealed behind those of their horses – only a leg and an arm seen, or now and then a face for an instant, soon withdrawn. Not exactly in circles but in spiral rings – at each turn drawing closer and nearer, till the true distance is attained for casting the inflammatory shafts.

"Stand to your guns, men!" is the hurried command of the guide, backed by a kind of encouragement from the proprietor of the caravan.

"Now, boys!" adds the guide, "ye've got to look out for squalls. Keep two an' two of ye thegither. While one brings down the hoss, t' other take care o' the rider as he gits unkivered. Make sure afore ye pull trigger, an' don't waste so much as the snappin' o' a cap. Thar goes the first o' the fire works!"

As Wilder speaks, a spark is seen to shoot out from one of the circling cavaliers, which rising rocket-like into the air, comes in parabolic curve towards the corral.

It falls short some twenty yards and lies smoking and sputtering in the sand.

"They han't got thar range yit," cries the guide; "but this child hez got his – leastwise for that skunk on the clay-bank mustang. So hyar goes to rub him off o' the list o' fire shooters."

And simultaneous with the last word is heard the crack of Wilder's rifle.

The young prairie merchant by his side, supposing him to have aimed only at the Indian's horse, has raised his own gun, ready to take the rider as soon as uncovered.

"No need, Frank," shouts the guide, restraining him. "Walt Wilder don't waste two charges o' powder that way. Keep yur bullet for the karkidge o' the next as comes 'ithin range. Look yonder! I know'd I'd fetch him out o' his stirrups – tight as he's tried to cling to 'em. Thar he goes to grass!"

Hamersley, as the others on the same side of the corral, were under the belief that the shot had been a miss; for the Indian at whom it was aimed still stuck to his horse, and was carried for some distance on in curving career. Nor did the animal show any sign of having been hit. But the rider did. While engaged in the effort of sending his arrow, the savage had exposed his face, one arm, and part of the other. Ere he could withdraw them, Walt's bullet had struck the arm that supported him, breaking the bone close to the elbow-joint. He has clung on with the tenacity of a shot squirrel, knowing that to let go will be certain death to him. But, despite all his efforts, the crippled arm fails to sustain him; and, with a despairing cry, he at length tumbles to the ground. Before he can rise to his feet, his body is bored by a leaden messenger from one of the men watching on that side, which lays him lifeless along the sand.

No cheer of triumph ascends from among the waggons; the situation of those who defend them is too serious for any idle exhibition. The man who has fired the last shot only hastens to re-load, while the others remain mute and motionless – each on the look-out for a like opportunity.

The fall of their comrade has taught the freebooters a lesson, and for a time they make their approach with more caution. But the shouts of those standing spectators in the outer circle stimulate them to fresh efforts, as the slightest show of cowardice would surely cause them to be taunted. Those entrusted with the fiery arrows are all young warriors, chosen for this dangerous service, or volunteers to perform it. The eyes of their chief, and the braves of the tribe, are upon them. They are thirsting for glory, and hold their lives as of little account, in the face of an achievement that will gain them the distinction most coveted by an Indian youth – that which will give him rank as a warrior, and perhaps some day raise him to a chieftaincy.

Stimulated by this thought, they soon forget the check caused by the fall of their comrade; and, laying aside caution, ride nearer and nearer, till their arrows, one after another, hurtle through the air, and dropping like a continuous shower of spent rocket-sticks upon the covers of the corralled waggons.

Several of them fall to shots from the barricade, but then places are supplied by fresh volunteers from the outer circle; and the sparkling shower is kept up, till a curl of smoke is seen soaring above the white tilts of the waggons, and soon after others at different places and on different sides of the enclosure.

As yet the besieged have not seen this. The powder-smoke puffing up from their own guns, discharged in quick repetition, obscures everything in a thick, sulphurous cloud; so that even the white covers of the waggons are scarce distinguishable, much less the spots where it has commenced smoking.

Not long, however, till something besides smoke makes itself visible, as also audible. Here and there flames flicker up, with a sharp crackling noise, which continues. The one is not flashes from the guns, nor the other a snapping of percussion-caps.

Wilder, with eyes turning to all points, is the first to perceive this.

"We're on fire, boys!" he vociferates; "on fire everywhar!"

"Great God! yes! What are we to do?" several ask, despairingly.

"What air we to do?" shouts the guide, in response. "What kin we do, but fight it out to the death, an' then die! So let us die, not like dogs, but as men – as Americans!"

Chapter Eight.
Knife, Pistol, and Hatchet

The brave words had scarce passed from Walt Wilder's lips when the waggons became enveloped in a cloud of smoke. From all sides it rolled into the corral till those inside could no longer see one another.

Still through the obscurity rang their cries of mutual encouragement, repeating the determination so tersely expressed.

They knew they had no water by which to extinguish the fast-threatening flames; yet in that moment of emergency they thought of an expedient. There were shovels in the waggons; and laying hold of these, they commenced flinging sand over the places that had caught fire, with the intent to smother the incipient blaze. Left alone, and with time, they might have succeeded. But they were not left alone, for the savages, seeing the advantage they had gained, were now fast closing for a final charge upon the corral, and the implements of industry had to be abandoned.

These were thrown despairingly aside; and the besieged, once more grasping their rifles, sprang back into the waggons – each with eager eye searching for an assailant. Though themselves half blinded by the smoke, they could still see the enemy outside; for the Indians, grown confident by the *coup* they had made, were now riding recklessly near. Quick came the reports of rifles – faster and more frequent than ever; fast as ten men, all practised marksmen, could load and fire. In less than sixty seconds nearly a score of savages dropped to the death-dealing bullets, till the plain appeared strewn with dead bodies.

But the crisis had come – the time for a general charge of the whole band; and now the dusky outside ring was seen gradually contracting towards the corral – the savages advancing from all sides, some on foot, others on horseback, all eager to secure the trophy of a scalp.

On they came, violently gesticulating, and uttering wild vengeful shouts.

With the besieged it was a moment for despair. The waggons were on fire all around them, and in several places flames were beginning to flicker up through the smoke. They no longer thought of making any attempt to extinguish them. They knew it would be idle.

Did they think of surrender? No – not a man of them. That would have been equally idle. In the voices of the advancing foe there was not an accent of mercy.

Surrender! And be slain afterwards! Before which to be tortured, perhaps dragged at the horse's tail, or set up as a target for the Tenawa sharpshooters to practise at. No! They would have to die anyhow. Better now than then. They were not the men to offer both cheeks to the insulter. They could resign sweet life, but death would be all the sweeter with corpses of Indians lying thickly around them. They would first make a hecatomb of their hated foes, and then fall upon it. That is the sort of death preferred by the prairie man – hunter, trapper, or trader – glorious to him as the cannon-furrowed field to the soldier. That is the sort of death of which Walt Wilder spoke when he said, "Let us die, not like dogs, but as men – as Americans!"

By this time the smoke had completely enveloped the waggons, the enclosed space between, and a fringe of some considerable width around them. But a still darker ring was all around – the circle of savage horsemen, who from all sides were galloping up and dismounting to make surer work of the slaughter. The warriors jostled one another as they pressed forward afoot, each thirsting for a scalp.

The last throe of the conflict had come. It was no longer to be a duel at a distance – no more a contest between rifle-bullets and barbed arrows; but the close, desperate, hand-to-hand contest of pistol, knife, spear, club, and hatchet.

The ten white men – none of them yet *hors de combat*– knew well what was before them. Not one of them blanched or talked of backing. They did not even think of surrender. It would have been too late to sue for mercy, had they been so inclined.

But they were not. Attacked without provocation, and treacherously, as they had been, their fury was stronger than their fear; and anger now nerved them to frenzied energy of action.

The savages had already closed around the waggons, clustering upon the wheels, some like snakes, wriggling through the spaces left undefended. Rifles ceased to ring; but pistols cracked – repeating pistols, that dealt death at every shot, sending redskin after redskin to the happy hunting grounds. And by the pistol's flash blades were seen gleaming through the smoke – now bright, anon dimmed, and dripping blood.

For every white man that fell, at least three red ones went down upon the sand.

The unequal contest could not long continue. Scarce ten minutes did it last, and but for the obscuring smoke five would have finished it. This was in favour of the assailed, enabling them to act with advantage against the assailants. Such a quick, wholesale slaughter did the white men make with their revolvers that the savages, surprised and staggered by it, for a moment recoiled, and appeared as if again going to retreat.

They did not – they dared not. Their superior numbers – the shame of being defeated by such a handful of foes – the glory of conquest – and, added to it, an angry vengeance now hot in their hearts – all urged them on; and the attack was renewed with greater earnestness than ever.

Throughout every scene in the strife Frank Hamersley had comported himself with a courage that made his men feel less fear of death, and less regret to die by his side. Fighting like a lion, he had been here, and there, and everywhere. He had done his full share of slaving.

It was all in vain. Though standing in the midst of thick smoke, unseeing and unseen, he knew that most of his faithful men had fallen. He was admonished of this by their less frequent responses to his cries of encouragement, telling him the struggle was close upon its termination. No wonder his fury was fast giving place to despair. But it was no craven fear, nor any thought of escape. His determination not to be taken alive was strong as ever.

His hand still firmly clasped his bowie-knife, its blade dripping with the blood of more than one enemy; for into the body of more than one had he plunged it. He clutched it with the determination still farther to kill – to take yet another life before parting with his own.

It was hopeless, useless slaughter; but it was sweet. Almost insane with anger, he thought it sweet.

Three dusky antagonists lay dead at his feet, and he was rushing across the corral in search of a fourth. A giant figure loomed up before him, looking more gigantic from the magnifying effect of the smoke. It was not that of a savage; it was Walt Wilder.

"Dead beat!" hoarsely and hurriedly muttered the guide. "We must go under, Frank. We're boun' to go under, if we don't – "

"Don't what, Walt?"

"Git away from hyar."

"Impossible."

"No. Thar's still a chance, I think – for us two anyways. There ain't many o' the others left, an' ef thar war, we can't do 'em any good now. Our stayin' 'ud be no use – no use dyin' along wi' 'em; while ef we get clar, we mout live to revenge 'em. Don't ye see our two horses are still safe? Thar they air, cowerin' clost in agin one o' the waggons. 'Tain't much kit? I admit; still thar's a shadder. Come, Frank, and let's try it."

Hamersley hesitated. It was at thought of deserting even the last of his faithful followers, who had sacrificed, or were still sacrificing, their lives in his service. But, as the guide had truly said what good could he do them by staying and getting killed? And he might survive to avenge them!

The last reflection would have decided him! But Wilder had not waited for him to determine. While speaking the urgent words, he laid his huge hand upon Hamersley's shoulder and half led, half dragged him in the direction of the horses. "Keep hold o' yur rifle, though it air empty," hurriedly counselled the guide. "If we shed get away, it will be needed. We mout as well go under hyar as be upon the pararira without a gun. Now mount!"

Almost mechanically the young Kentuckian climbed upon the back of the horse nearest to him – his own. The guide had not yet mounted his; but, as could be seen through the smoke, was leaning against the wheel of one of the waggons. In an instant after Hamersley perceived that the vehicle was in motion, and could hear a slight grating noise as the tire turned in the sand. The great Conestoga, with its load had yielded to the strength of the Colossus.

In another instant he had sprung upon his horse's back and riding close to Hamersley, muttered in his ear, "Now I've opened a crack atween two o' the wehicles. Let's cut out through it. We kin keep in the kiver o' the smoke as far as it'll screen us. You foller, an' see that ye don't lose sight o' me. If we must go under in the eend, let it be out on the open plain, an' not shut up hyar like badgers in a barr'l. Follow me clost, Frank. Now or niver!"

Almost mechanically the young Kentuckian yielded obedience; and in ten seconds after the two horsemen had cleared the waggon clump, with the shouting crowd that encircled it and were going at full gallop across the sand-strewn plain.

Chapter Nine.
Quarrelling over Scalps

Nearly simultaneous with the departure of the two horsemen came the closing scene of the conflict. Indeed it ended on the instant of their riding off. For of their comrades left behind there was not one upon his feet – not one able to fire another shot, or strike another blow. All lay dead, or wounded, among the waggons; some of the dead, as the wounded, clasping the handle of a knife whose blade reeked with blood, or a pistol from whose muzzle the smoke was still oozing.

But soon among the whites there were no wounded, for the hovering host, having closed in from all sides, leaped from their horses, swarmed over the barrier between, tomahawking the last that showed signs of life, or thrusting them with their long lances, and pinning them to the sand. Through the body of every white man at least a half-dozen spear-blades were passed, while a like number of savages stood exultingly over, or danced triumphantly around it.

And now ensued a scene that might be symbolised only among wild beasts or fiends in the infernal regions. It was a contest for possession of the scalps of those who had fallen – each of the victors claiming one. Some stood with bared blades ready to peel them off, while others held out hands and weapons to prevent it. From the lips of the competitors came shouts and expostulations, while their eyes flashed fire, and their arms rose and fell in furious gesticulations.

Amidst their demoniac jargon could be heard a voice louder than all, thundering forth a command. It was to desist from their threatening strife and extinguish the flames that still flared up over the waggons. He who spoke was the one with the red cross upon his breast, its bars of bright vermilion gleaming like fire against the sombre background of his skin. He was the chief of the Tenawa Comanches – the Horned Lizard – as Wilder had justly conjectured.

And as their chief he was instantly obeyed. The wranglers, one and all, promptly suspended their disputes; and flinging their weapons aside, at once set to carrying out his orders.

Seizing upon the shovels, late dropped from the hands of their now lifeless antagonists, and plying them to better purpose, they soon smothered the flame, and the smoke too, till only a thin drift stole up through the sand thrown thickly over it.

Meanwhile a man, in appearance somewhat differing from the rest, was seen moving among them.

Indian in garb and guise, savage in his accoutrements, as the colour of his skin, he nevertheless, showed features more resembling races that are civilised. His countenance was of a cast apparently Caucasian, its lineaments unlike those of the American aboriginal; above all, unlike in his having a heavy beard, growing well forward upon his cheeks, and bushing down below the chin.

True, that among the Comanche Indians bearded men are occasionally met with —*mestizos*, the descendants of renegade whites. But none paraded as he, who now appeared stalking around the ruined caravan. And there was another individual by his side, who had also hair upon his cheeks, though thinner and more straggling; while the speech passing between the two was not the guttural tongue of the Tenawa Comanches, but pure Mexican Spanish.

Both were on foot, having dismounted; he with the heavy beard leading, the other keeping after as if in attendance.

The former flitted from one to another of those who lay slain; in turn stooping over each corpse, and scrutinising it – to some giving but a cursory glance, to others more careful examination – then leaving each with an air of disappointment, and a corresponding exclamation.

At length, after going the complete round of the dead, he faced towards his satellite, saying, —

"*Por dios*! he don't appear to be among them! What can it mean? There could be no doubt of his intention to accompany the caravan. Here it is, and here we are; but where is he? *Carajo*! If he has escaped me, I shall feel as if I'd had all this trouble for nothing."

"Think of the precious plunder," rejoined the other. "These grand *carretas* are loaded with rich goods. Surely they don't count for nothing."

"A fig for the goods! I'd give more for his scalp than all the silks and satins that were ever carried to Santa Fé. Not that I'd care to keep such a trifle. The Horned Lizard will be welcome to it, soon as I see it stripped from his skull. That's what I want to see. But where is it? Where is he? Certainly not among these. There isn't one of them the least like him. Surely it must be his party, spoken of in his letter? No other has been heard of coming by this route. There they lie, all stark and staring – men, mules, and horses – all but him."

The smoke has thinned off, only a thin film still wafting about the waggons, whose canvas tilts, now consumed, expose their contents – some of them badly burnt, some but slightly scorched. The freebooters have commenced to drag out boxes and bales, their chief by a stern command having restrained them from returning to take the scalps of the slain. All has been the work of only a few moments – less than ten minutes of time – for it is scarce so much since Wilder and Hamersley, stealing out between the wheels, rode off under cover of the cloud.

By this he with the beard, speaking Spanish, has ceased to scrutinise the corpses, and stands facing his inferior, his countenance showing an air of puzzled disappointment, as proclaimed by his repeated speeches.

Once again he gives speech to his perplexity, exclaiming:

"*Demonios*! I don't understand it. Is it possible that any of them can have got away?"

As he puts the question there comes a shout from outside, seeming to answer it. For it is a cry half in lamentation – a sort of wail, altogether unlike the charging war-whoop of the Comanches. Acquainted with their signals, he knows that the one he has heard tells of an enemy trying to escape.

Hurrying outside the corral, he sees two mounted men, nearly a mile off, making in the direction of the cliffs. And nearer, a score of other men, in the act of mounting, these being Indians, who have just caught sight of the fugitives, and are starting to pursue.

More eager than any, he rushes direct to his horse, and, having reached, bestrides him at a spring. Then, plunging deep the spur, he dashed off across the plain towards the point where the two men are seen making away. Who both may be he knows not, nor of one need he care; but of one he does, feeling sure it is the same for whom he has been searching among the slain.

"Not dead yet, but soon shall be!"

So mutters he, as with clenched teeth, bridle tight-drawn, and fingers firmly clasping the butt of a double-barrelled pistol, he spurs on after the two horsemen, who, heading straight for the cliff, seem as if they had no chance to escape; for their pursuers are closing after them in a cloud, dark as the dreaded "norther" that sweeps over the Texan desert, with shout symbolising the clangour that accompanies it.

Chapter Ten.
A Brave Steed Abandoned

In making his bold dash, Walt Wilder was not acting without a preconceived plan. He had one. The smoke, with its covering cloud, might be the means of concealment, and ultimate salvation; at all events, it would cover their retreat long enough to give them a start of the pursuers, and then the speed of their horses might possibly be depended upon for the rest.

They at first followed this plan, but unfortunately soon found that it would not long avail them. The smoke was not drifting in the right direction. The breeze carried it almost straight towards the line of the cliffs, while their only chance was to strike for the open plain. At the cliffs their flight would be stopped.

So far the smoke had favoured them. Thick and stifling in the immediate vicinity of the waggons, it enabled them to slip unobserved through the ruck of savages. Many of these, still mounted, had seen them pass outward, but through the blue film had mistaken them for two of their own men. They perhaps knew nothing of there having been horses inside the corral, and did not expect to see any of their caged enemies attempting to escape in that way. Besides, they were now busy endeavouring to extinguish the fires, all resistance being at an end.

As yet there was no sign of pursuit, and the fugitives rode up with the projecting *nimbus* around them. In the soft sand their horses' hoofs made no noise, and they galloped towards the cliff silent as spectres.

On reaching its base, it became necessary for them either to change the direction of their flight, or bring it to a termination. The bluff towered vertically above them, like a wall of rude masonwork. A cat could not have scaled it, much less horse, or man. They did not think of making the attempt.

And now, what were they to do? Ride out from the smoke-cloud, or remain under its favouring shelter? In either case they were sure of being discovered and pursued. It would soon clear off, and they would be seen from the waggons. Already it was fast thinning around them; the Indians having nearly extinguished the fires in order to save the treasure, which had no doubt been their chief object for attacking the caravan. Soon there would be no smoke – and then?

The pursued men stayed not to reflect further. Delay would only add to their danger; and with this thought urging them on, they wheeled their horses to the left, and headed along the line of the bluff. Six seconds after they were riding in a pure atmosphere, under clear dazzling sunlight.

But it gave them no delight. A yell from the savages told them they were seen, and simultaneously with the shout, they perceived a score of horsemen spurring from the crowd, and riding at full speed towards them.

They were both splendidly mounted, and might still have had a fair chance of escape; but now another sight met their eyes that once more almost drove them to despair.

A promontory of the cliff, stretching far out over the sandy plain, lay directly in their track. Its point was nearer to the pursuers than to them. Before they could reach, and turn it, their retreat would be intercepted.

Was there still a chance to escape in the opposite direction?

Again suddenly turning, they galloped back as they had come; again entered the belt of smoke; and, riding on through it, reached the clear sunlight beyond.

Again a torturing disappointment. Another promontory – twin to the first – jutted out to obstruct them.

There was no mystery in the matter. They saw the mistake they had made. In escaping under cover of the cloud they had gone too far, ridden direct into a deep embayment of the cliff!

Their pursuers, who had turned promptly as they, once more had the advantage. The outlying point of rocks was nearer to them, and they would be almost certain to arrive at it first.

To the fugitives there appeared no alternative but to ride on, and take the chance of hewing their way through the savages surrounding – for certainly they would be surrounded.

"Git your knife riddy, Frank!" shouted Wilder, as he dug his heels into his horse's side and put the animal to full speed. "Let's keep close thegither – livin' or dead, let's keep thegither!"

Their steeds needed no urging. To an American horse accustomed to the prairies there is no spur like the yell of an Indian; for he knows that along with it usually comes the shock of a bullet, or the sting of a barbed shaft.

Both bounded off together, and went over the soft sand, silent, but swift as the wind.

In vain. Before they could reach the projecting point, the savages had got up, and were clustering around it. At least a score, with spears couched, bows bent, and clubs brandishing, stood ready to receive them.

It was a gauntlet the pursued men might well despair of being able to run. Truly now seemed their retreat cut off, and surely did death appear to stare them in the face.

"We must die, Walt," said the young prairie merchant, as he faced despairingly toward his companion.

"Maybe not yet," answered Wilder, as with a searching glance, he directed his eye along the façade of the cliff.

The red sandstone rose rugged and frowning, full five hundred feet overhead. To the superficial glance it seemed to forbid all chance either of being scaled, or affording concealment. There was not even a boulder below, behind which they might find a momentary shelter from the shafts of the pursuers. For all that, Wilder continued to scan it, as if recalling some old recollection.

"This must be the place," he muttered. "It is, by God!" he added more emphatically, at the same time wrenching his horse around, riding sharp off, and calling to his companion to follow him.

Hamersley obeyed, and rode after, without knowing what next. But, in another instant, he divined the intent of this sudden change in the tactics of his fellow fugitive. For before riding far his eyes fell upon a dark list, which indicated an opening in the escarpment.

It was a mere crack, or chine, scarce so wide as a doorway, and barely large enough to admit a man on horseback; though vertically it traversed the cliff to its top, splitting it from base to summit.

"Off o' yur hoss!" cried Wilder, as he pulled up in front of it, at the same time flinging himself from his own. "Drop the bridle, and leave him behint. One o' 'em'll be enough for what I want, an' let that be myen. Poor critter, it air a pity! But it can't be helped. We must hev some kiver to screen us. Quick, Frank, or the skunks will be on to us!"

Painful as it was to abandon his brave steed, Hamersley did as directed without knowing why. The last speeches of the guide were somewhat enigmatical, though he presumed they meant an important signification.

Slipping down from his saddle, he stood by his horse's side, a noble steed, the best blood of his own State, Kentucky, famed for its fine stock. The animal appeared to know that its master was about to part from it. It turned its head towards him; and, with bent neck, and steaming nostrils, gave utterance to a low neigh that, while proclaiming affection, seemed to say, "Why do you forsake me?"

Under other circumstances the Kentuckian would have shed tears. For months he and his horse had been as man and man together in many a long prairie journey – a companionship which unites the traveller to his steed in liens strong as human friendship, almost as lasting, and almost as painful to break. So Frank Hamersley felt, as he flung the bridle back on the animal's withers – still retaining hold of the rein, loth to relinquish it.

But there was no alternative. Behind were the shouting pursuers quickly coming on. He could see their brandished spears glancing in the sun glare. They would soon be within reach, thrusting through his body; their barbed blades piercing him between the ribs.

No time for sentiment nor dallying now, without the certainty of being slain.

He gave one last look at his steed, and then letting go the rein, turned away, as one who, by stern necessity, abandons a friend, fearing reproach for what he does, but without the power to explain it.

For a time the abandoned steed kept its place, with glances inquiringly sent after the master who had forsaken it. Then, as the yelling crew came closer behind, it threw up its head, snorted, and tore off with trailing bridle.

Hamersley had turned to the guide, now also afoot, but still retaining hold of his horse, which he was conducting towards the crack in the cliff, with all his energies forcing it to follow him; for the animal moved reluctantly, as though suspecting danger inside the darksome cleft.

Still urging it on, he shouted back to the Kentuckian, "You go first, Frank! Up into the kanyon, without losin' a second's time. Hyar, take my gun, an' load both, whiles I see to the closin' o' the gap."

Seizing both guns in his grasp, Hamersley sprang into the chine, stopping when he got well within its grim jaws.

Wilder went after, leading his steed, that still strained back upon the bridle.

There was a large stone across the aperture, over which the horse had to straddle. This being above two feet in height, when the animal had got its forelegs over Wilder checked it to a stand. Hitherto following him with forced obedience, it now trembled, and showed a strong determination to go back. There was an expression, in its owner's eye it had never seen before – something that terribly frayed it. But it could not now do this, though ever so inclined. With its ribs close pressing the rocks on each side, it was unable to turn; while the bridle drawn firmly in front hindered it from retiring.

Hamersley, busily engaged in loading the rifles, nevertheless found time to glance at Wilder's doings, wondering what he was about.

"It air a pity!" soliloquised the latter, repeating his former words in similar tones of commiseration. "F'r all that, the thing must be done. If thar war a rock big enough, or a log, or anythin'. No! thar ain't ne'er another chance to make kiver. So hyar goes for a bit o' butcherin'."

As the guide thus delivered himself, Hamersley saw him jerk the bowie knife from his belt, its blade red and still reeking with human gore. In another instant its edge was drawn across the throat of the horse, from which the blood gushed forth in a thick, strong stream, like water from the spout of a pump. The creature made a last desperate effort to get off, but with its forelegs over the rocks and head held down between them, it could not stir from the spot. After a convulsive throe or two, it sank down till its ribs rested upon the straddled stone; and in this attitude it ended its life, the head after a time drooping down, the eyes apparently turned with a last reproachful look upon the master who had murdered it!

"It hed to be did; thar war no help for it," said Wilder, as he hurriedly turned towards his companion, adding: "Have you got the guns charged?"

Hamersley made answer by handing him back his own rifle. It was loaded and ready. "Darn the stinkin' cowarts!" cried the guide, grasping the gun, and facing towards the plain. "I don't know how it may all eend, but this'll keep 'em off a while, anyhow."

As he spoke he threw himself behind the body of the slaughtered steed, which, sustained in an upright position between the counterpart walls, formed a safe barricade against the bullets and arrows of the Indians. These, now riding straight towards the spot, made the rocks resound with exclamations of surprise – shouts that spoke of a delayed, perhaps defeated, vengeance.

They took care, however, not to come within range of that long steel-grey tube, that, turning like a telescope on its pivot, commanded a semicircle of at least a hundred yards' radius round the opening in the cliff.

Despite all the earnestness of their vengeful anger, the pursuers were now fairly at bay, and for a time could be kept so.

Hamersley looked upon it as being but a respite – a mere temporary deliverance from danger, yet to terminate in death. True, they had got into a position where, to all appearance, they could

defend themselves as long as their ammunition lasted, or as they could withstand the agony of thirst or the cravings of hunger. How were they to get out again? As well might they have been besieged in a cave, with no chance of sortie or escape.

These thoughts he communicated to his companion, as soon as they found time to talk.

"Hunger an' thirst ain't nothin' to do wi' it," was Wilder response. "We ain't a goin' to stay hyar not twenty minutes, if this child kin manage it as he intends ter do. You don't s'pose I rushed into this hyar hole like a chased rabbit? No, Frank; I've heern o' this place afore, from some fellers thet, like ourselves, made *caché* in it from a band o' pursuin' Kimanch. Thar's a way leads out at the back; an' just as soon as we kin throw dust in the eyes o' these yellin' varmints in front, we'll put straight for it. I don't know what sort o' a passage thar is – up the rocks by some kind o' raven, I b'lieve. We must do our best to find it."

"But how do you intend to keep them from following us? You speak of throwing dust in their eyes – how, Walt?"

"You wait, watch an' see. You won't hev yur patience terrifically tried: for thar ain't much time to spare about it. Thar's another passage up the cliffs, not far off; not a doubt but these Injuns know it; an' ef we don't make haste, they'll git up thar, and come in upon us by the back door, which trick won't do, nohowsomdever. You keep yurself in readiness, and watch what I'm agoin' to do. When you see me scoot up back'ards, follor 'ithout sayin' a word."

Hamersley promised compliance, and the guide, still kneeling behind the barricade he had so cruelly constructed, commenced a series of manoeuvres that held his companion in speechless conjecture.

He first placed his gun in such a position that the barrel, resting across the hips of the dead horse, projected beyond the tail. In this position he made it fast, by tying the butt with a piece of string to a projecting part of the saddle. He next took the cap from his head – a coonskin it was – and set it so that its upper edge could be seen alongside the pommel, and rising about three inches above the croup. The ruse was an old one, with some new additions and embellishments.

"It's all done now," said the guide, turning away from the carcase and crouching to where his comrade awaited him. "Come on, Frank. If they don't diskiver the trick till we've got time to speed up the clift, then thar's still a chance for us. Come on, an' keep close arter me!"

Hamersley went, without saying a word. He knew that Wilder, well known and long trusted, had a reason for everything he did. It was not the time to question him, or discuss the prudence of the step he was taking. There might be danger before, but there was death – sure death – behind them.

Chapter Eleven.
A Descent into Darkness

In less than a dozen paces from its entrance the chine opened into a wider space, again closing like a pair of callipers. It was a hollow of elliptical shape – resembling an old-fashioned butterboat scooped out of the solid rock, on all sides precipitous, except at its upper end. Here a ravine, sloping down from the summit-level above, would to the geologist at once proclaim the secret of its formation. Not so easily explained might seem the narrow outlet to the open plain. But one skilled in the testimony of the rocks would detect certain ferruginous veins in the sandstone that, refusing to yield to the erosion of the running stream, had stood for countless ages.

Neither Walt Wilder nor the young Kentuckian gave thought to such scientific speculations as they retreated through the narrow gap and back into the wider gorge. All they knew or cared for was that a gully at the opposite end was seen to slope upward, promising a path to the plain above.

In sixty seconds they were in it, toiling onward and upward amidst a chaos of rocks where no horse could follow – loose boulders that looked as if hurled down from the heavens above or belched upward from the bowels of the earth.

The retreat of the fugitives up the ravine, like their dash out of the enclosed corral, was still but a doubtful effort. Neither of them had full confidence of being able eventually to escape. It was like the wounded squirrel clutching at the last tiny twig of a tree, however unable to support it. They were not quite certain that the sloping gorge would give them a path to the upper plain; for Wilder had only a doubtful recollection of what some trapper had told him. But even if it did, the Indians, expert climbers as they were, would soon be after them, close upon their heels. The ruse could not remain long undetected.

They had plunged into the chasm as drowning men grasp at the nearest thing afloat – a slender branch or bunch of grass, a straw.

As they now ascended the rock-strewn gorge both had their reflections, which, though unspoken, were very similar. And from these came a gleam of hope. If they could but reach the summit-level of the cliff! Their pursuers could, of course, do the same; but not on horseback. It would then be a contest of pedestrian speed. The white men felt confidence in their swiftness of foot; in this respect believing themselves superior to their savage pursuers. They knew that the Comanches were horse Indians – a significant fact. These centaurs of the central plateaux, scarce ever setting foot upon the earth, when afoot are almost as helpless as birds with their wings plucked or pinioned.

If they could reach the crest of the cliff, then all might yet be well; and, cheered by this reflection, they rushed up the rock-strewn ravine, now gliding along ledges, now squeezing their bodies between great boulders, or springing from one to the other – in the audacity of their bounds rivalling a brace of bighorns.

They had got more than half-way up, when cries came pealing up the glen behind them. Still were they hidden from the eyes of the pursuers. Jutting points of rock and huge masses that lay loose in the bed of the ravine had hitherto concealed them. But for these, bullets and arrows would have already whistled about their ears, and perhaps put an end to their flight. The savages were near enough to send either gun-shot or shaft, and their voices, borne upward on the air, sounded as clear as if they were close at hand.

The fugitives, as already said, had reached more than halfway up the slope, and were beginning to congratulate themselves on the prospect of escape. They even thought of the course they should take on arriving at the summit-level, for they knew that there was an open plain above. All at once they were brought to a stop, though not by anything that obstructed their path. On the contrary, it only seemed easier; for there were now two ways open to them instead of one, the ravine at this point

forking into two distinct branches. There was a choice of which to take, and it was this that caused them to make a stop, at the same time creating embarrassment.

The pause, however, was but for a brief space of time – only long enough to make a hasty reconnoissance. In the promise of an easy ascent there seemed but little difference between the two paths, and the guide soon came to a determination.

"It's a toss up atween 'em," he said; "but let's take the one to the right. It looks a little the likest."

Of course his fellow-fugitive did not dissent, and they struck into the right-hand ravine; but not until Walt Wilder had plucked the red kerchief from his head, and flung it as far as he could up the left one, where it was left lying in a conspicuous position among the rocks.

He did not say why he had thus strangely abandoned the remnant of his head-gear; but his companion, sufficiently experienced in the ways and wiles of prairie life, stood in no need of an explanation.

The track they had now taken was of comparatively easy ascent; and it was this, perhaps, that had tempted Wilder to take it. But like most things within the moral and physical world, its easiness proved a delusion. They had not gone twenty paces further up when the sloping chasm terminated. It debouched on a little platform, covered with large loose stones, and there rested after having fallen from the cliff above. But at a single glance they saw that this cliff could not be scaled.

They had entered into a trap, out of which there was no chance of escape or retreat without throwing themselves back upon the breasts of their pursuers.

The Indians were already ascending the main ravine. By their voices it could be told that they had reached the point where it divided; for there was a momentary suspension of their cries, as with the baying of hounds thrown suddenly off the scent.

It would not be for long. They would likely first follow up the chasm where the kerchief had been cast, but, should that also prove a *cul-de-sac*, they would return and try the other.

The fugitives saw that it was too late to retrace their steps. They sprang together upon the platform, and commenced searching among the loose rocks, with a faint hope of finding some place of concealment.

It was but a despairing sort of search, again like two drowning men who clutch at a straw.

All at once an exclamation from the guide called his companion to his side. It was accompanied by a gesture, and followed by words low muttered.

"Look hyar, Frank! Look at this hole! Let's git into it!"

As Hamersley came close he perceived a dark cavity among the stones, to which Wilder was pointing. It opened vertically downward, and was of an irregular, roundish shape, somewhat resembling the mouth of a well, half-coped with slabs.

Dare they enter it? Could they? What depth was it?

Wilder took up a pebble and flung it down. They could hear it descending, not at a single drop, but striking and ricochetting from side to side.

It was long before it reached the bottom and lay silent. No matter for that. The noise made in its descent told them of projecting points or ledges that might give them a foothold.

They lost not a moment of time, but commenced letting themselves down into the funnel-shaped shaft, the guide going first.

Slowly and silently they went down – like ghosts through the stage of a theatre – soon disappearing in the gloom below, and leaving upon the rock-strewn platform no trace to show that human foot had ever trodden it.

Chapter Twelve.
A Storm of Stones

Fortunately for the fugitives, the cavity into which they had crept was a shaft of but slight diameter, otherwise they could not have gone down without dropping far enough to cause death, for the echoes from the pebbles betokened a vast vertical depth.

As it was, the void turned out to be somewhat like that of a stone-built chimney with here and there a point left projecting. It was so narrow, moreover, that they were able to use both hands and knees in the descent, and by this means they accomplished it.

They went but slowly, and took care to proceed with caution. They knew that a false step, the slipping of a foot or finger, or the breaking of a fragment that gave hold to their hands, would precipitate them to an unknown depth.

They did not go farther than was necessary for quick concealment. There was noise made in their descent, and they knew that the Indians would soon be above, and might hear them. Their only hope lay in their pursuers believing them to have gone by the left hand path to the plain above. In time the Indians would surely explore both branches of the ravine, and if the cunning savages should suspect their presence in the shaft there would be no hope for them. These thoughts decided them to come to a stop as soon as they could find foothold.

About thirty feet from the top they found this, on a point of rock or ledge that jutted horizontally. It was broad enough to give both standing room, and as they were now in the midst of amorphous darkness, they took stand upon it.

The Indians might at any moment arrive on the platform above. They felt confident they could not be seen, but they might be heard. The slightest sound borne upwards to the ears of the savages might betray them, and, knowing this, they stood still, scarce exchanging a whisper, and almost afraid to breathe.

It was not long before they saw that which justified their caution – the plumed head of a savage, with his neck craned over the edge of the aperture, outlined conspicuously against the blue sky above. And soon half a dozen similar silhouettes beside it, while they could hear distinctly the talk that was passing overhead.

Wilder had some knowledge of the Comanche tongue, and could make out most of what was being said. Amidst exclamations that spoke of vengeance there were words in a calmer tone – discussion, inquiry, and conjecture.

From these it could be understood that the pursuers had separated into two parties, one following on the false track, by the path which the guide had baited for them, the other coming direct up the right and true one.

There were bitter exclamations of disappointment and threats of an implacable vengeance; and the fugitives, as they listened, might have reflected how fortunate they had been in discovering that unfathomed hole. But for it they would have already been in the clutches of a cruel enemy.

However, they had little time for reflection. The talk overhead at first expressed doubts as to their having descended the shaft, but doubts readily to be set at rest.

The eyes of the Indians having failed to inform them, their heads were withdrawn; and soon after a stone came tumbling down the cavity.

Something of this kind, Wilder had predicted; for he flattened himself against the wall behind, and stood as “small” as his colossal frame would permit, having cautioned his companion to do the same.

The stone passed without striking them, and went crashing on till it struck on the bottom below.

Another followed, and another; the third creasing Hamersley on the breast, and tearing a couple of buttons from his coat.

This was shaving close – too close to be comfortable. Perhaps the next boulder might rebound from the wall above and strike one or both of them dead.

In fear of this result, they commenced groping to ascertain if the ledge offered any better screen from the dangerous shower, which promised to fall for some time longer.

Good! Hamersley felt his hand entering a hole that opened horizontally. It proved big enough to admit his body, as also the larger frame of his companion. Both were soon inside it. It was a sort of grotto they had discovered; and, crouching within it, they could laugh to scorn the storm that still came pouring from above; the stones, as they passed close to their faces, hissing and hurtling like aerolites.

The rocky rain at length ended. The Indians had evidently come to the conclusion that it was either barren in result, or must have effectually performed the purpose intended by it, and for a short time there was silence above and below.

They who were hidden in the shaft might have supposed that their persecutors, satisfied at what they had accomplished, were returning to the plain, and had retired from the spot.

Hamersley did think so; but Walt, an old prairie man, more skilled in the Indian character, could not console himself with such a fancy.

"Ne'er a bit o' it," he whisperingly said to his companion. "They ain't agoin' to leave us that easy – not if Horned Lizard be amongst 'em. They'll either stay thar till we climb out agin, or try to smoke us. Ye may take my word for it, Frank, thar's some'ut to come yet. Look up! Didn't I tell ye so?"

Wilder drew back out of the narrow aperture, through which he had been craning his neck and shoulders in order to get a view of what was passing above.

The hole leading into the grotto that held them was barely large enough to admit the body of a man. Hamersley took his place, and, turning his eyes upward, at once saw what his comrade referred to. It was the smoke of a fire, that appeared in the act of being kindled near the edge of the aperture above. The smoke was ascending towards the sky, diagonally drifting across the blue disc outlined by the rim of rock.

He had barely time to make the observation when a swishing sound admonished him to draw back his head; then there passed before his face a ruck of falling stalks and faggots. Some of them settled upon the ledge, the rest sweeping on to the bottom of the abyss.

In a moment after the shaft was filled with smoke, but not that of an ordinary wood fire. Even this would have been sufficient to stifle them where they were; but the fumes now entering their nostrils were of a kind to cause suffocation almost instantaneously.

The faggots set on fire were the stalks of the creosote plant – the *ideodondo* of the Mexican table lands, well known for its power to cause asphyxia. Walt Wilder recognised it at the first whiff.

"It's the stink-weed!" he exclaimed. "That darned stink-weed o' New Mexico! It'll kill us if we can't keep it out. Off wi' your coat, Frank; it are bigger than my hunting skirt. Let's spread it across the hole, an' see if that'll do."

His companion obeyed with alacrity, stripping off his coat as quickly as the circumscribed space would permit. Fortunately, it was a garment of the sack specialty, without any split in the tail, and when extended offered a good breadth of surface.

It proved sufficient for the purpose, and, before the little grotto had become so filled with smoke as to be absolutely untenable, its entrance was closed by a curtain of broadcloth, held so hermetically over the aperture that even the fumes of Assafoetida could not possibly have found their way inside.

Chapter Thirteen.
Buried Alive

For nearly half an hour they kept the coat spread, holding it close around the edges of the aperture with their heads, hands, knees, and elbows. Withal some of the bitter smoke found ingress, torturing their eyes, and half stifling them.

They bore it with philosophic fortitude and in profound silence, using their utmost efforts to refrain from sneezing or coughing.

They knew that the least noise heard by the Indians above – anything to indicate their presence in the shaft – would ensure their destruction. The fumigation would be continued till the savages were certain of its having had a fatal effect. If they could hold out long enough, even Indian astuteness might be baffled.

From what Wilder had heard, their persecutors were in doubt about their having descended into the shaft; and this uncertainty promised to be their salvation. Unless sure that they were taking all this trouble to some purpose, the red men would not dally long over their work. Besides, there was the rich booty to be drawn from the captured waggons, which would attract the Indians back to them, each having an interest in being present at the distribution.

Thus reasoned Walt Wilder as they listened to detect a change in the performance, making use of all their ears.

Of course they could see nothing, no more than if they had been immured in the darkest cell of an Inquisitorial dungeon. Only by their ears might they make any guess at what was going on. These admonished them that more of the burning brush was being heaved into the hole. Every now and then they could hear it as it went swishing past the door of their curtained chamber, the stalks and sticks rasping against the rocks in their descent.

After a time these sounds ceased to be heard; the Indians no doubt thinking that sufficient of the inflammatory matter had been cast in to cause their complete destruction. If inside the cavern, they must by this time be stifled – asphyxiated – dead.

So must have reasoned the red-skinned fumigators; for after a while they desisted from their hellish task. But, as if to make assurance doubly sure, before taking departure from the spot, they performed another act indicative of an equally merciless intention.

During the short period of silence their victims could not tell what they were about. They only knew, by occasional sounds reaching them from above, that there was some change in the performance; but what it was they could not even shape a conjecture.

The interregnum at length ended with a loud rumbling noise, that was itself suddenly terminated by a grand crash, as if a portion of the impending cliff had become detached, and fallen down upon the platform.

Then succeeded a silence, unbroken by the slightest sound. No longer was heard either noise or voice – not the murmur of one.

It was a silence that resembled death; as if the vindictive savages had one and all met a deserved doom by being crushed under the falling cliff.

For some time after hearing this mysterious noise, which had caused the rock to tremble around them, the two men remained motionless within their place of concealment.

At length Wilder cautiously and deliberately pushed aside the curtain. At first only a small portion of it – a corner, so as to make sure about the smoke.

It still oozed in, but not so voluminously as at first. It had evidently become attenuated, and was growing thinner. It appeared also to be ascending with rapidity, as up the funnel of a chimney having a good draught. For this reason it was carried past the mouth of the grotto without much of it drifting

in, and they saw that they could soon safely withdraw the curtain. It was a welcome relaxation from the irksome task that had been so long imposed upon them, and the coat was at length permitted to drop down upon the ledge.

Although there were no longer any sounds heard, or other signs to indicate the presence of the Indians, the fugitives did not feel sure of their having gone; and it was some time before they made any attempt to reascend the shaft. Some of the pursuers might still be lurking near, or straying within sight. They had so far escaped death, as if by a miracle, and they were cautious of again tempting fate. They determined that for some time yet they would not venture out upon the ledge, but keep inside the grotto that had given them such well-timed shelter. Some sulky savage, disappointed at not getting their scalps, might take it into his head to return and hurl down into the hole another shower of stones. Such a whim was probable to a prairie Indian.

Cautious against all like contingencies, the guide counselled his younger companion to patience, and for a considerable time they remained without stirring out of their obscure chamber.

At length, however, perceiving that the tranquillity continued, they no longer deemed it rash to make a reconnoissance; and for this purpose Walt Wilder crawled out upon the ledge and looked upward. A feeling of surprise, mingled with apprehension, at once seized upon him.

“Kin it be night?” he asked, whispering the words back into the grotto.

“Not yet, I should think?” answered Hamersley. “The fight was begun before daybreak. The day can’t all have passed yet. But why do you ask, Walt?”

“Because thar’s no light comin’ from above. Whar’s the bit o’ blue sky we seed? Thar ain’t the breadth o’ a hand visible. It can’t a be the smoke as hides it. That seems most cleared off. Darned if I can see a steim o’ the sky. ’Bove as below, everything’s as black as the ten o’ spades. What kin it mean?”

Without waiting a reply, or staying for his companion to come out upon the ledge, Wilder rose to his feet, and, grasping the projecting points above his head, commenced swarming up the shaft, in a similar manner as that by which he had made the descent.

Hamersley, who by this time had crept out of the grotto, stood upon the ledge listening.

He could hear his comrade as he scrambled up; the rasping of his feet against the rocks, and his stentorian breathing.

At length Walt appeared to have reached the top, when Hamersley heard words that sent a thrill of horror throughout his whole frame.

“Oh!” cried the guide, in his surprise, forgetting to subdue the tone of his voice, “they’ve built us up! Thar’s a stone over the mouth o’ the hole – shettin’ it like a pot lid. A stone – a rock that no mortal ked move. Frank Hamersley, it’s all over wi’ us; we’re buried alive!”

Chapter Fourteen.
A Savage Saturnal

Only for a short while had Wilder's trick held the pursuers in check. Habituated to such wiles, the Indians, at first suspecting it to be one, soon became certain. For, as they scattered to each side of the cleft, the steel tube no longer kept turning towards them, while the coonskin cap remained equally without motion.

At length, becoming convinced, and urged on by the Red Cross chief and the bearded savage by his side, they dashed boldly up, and, dismounting, entered the chine over the body of the butchered horse.

Only staying to take possession of the relinquished rifle, they continued on up the ravine fast as their feet could carry them. A moment's pause where the red kerchief lay on the rock, suspecting this also a ruse to mislead them as to the track taken by the fugitives. To make certain, they separated into two parties – one going up the gulch, that led left, the other proceeding by that which conducted to the place where the two men had concealed themselves.

Arriving upon the little platform, the pursuers at once discovered the cavity, at the same time conjecturing that the pursued had gone into it. Becoming sure of this, they who took the left-hand path rejoined them, these bringing the report that they had ascended to the summit of the cliff, and seen nothing of the two men who were chased.

Then the stones were cast in; after them the burning stalks of the *ideodondo*; when, finally, to make destruction sure, the rock was rolled over, closing up the shaft as securely as if the cliff itself had fallen face downward upon the spot.

The savages stayed no longer there. All were too eager to return to the waggons to make sure of their share in the captured spoils.

One alone remained – he with the bushed beard. After the others were gone he stepped up to the boulder, and, stooping down, placed his ear close to it. He appeared as if trying to catch some sound that might come from the cavity underneath.

None came – no noise, even the slightest. Within the shut shaft all was still as death. For death itself must be down there, if there ever was life.

For some time he crouched beside the rock, listening. Then rising to his feet, with a smile of satisfaction upon his grim, sinister features, he said, in soliloquy, —

"They're down there, no doubt of it; and dead long before this. One of the two must have been he. Who the other matters not *Carrai*! I'd like to have had a look at him too, and let him see who has given him his quietus. Bah! what does it signify? It's all over now, and I've had my revenge. *Vamos*! I must get back to the waggons, or my friend the Horned Lizard may be taking his pick of the plunder. Luckily these redskins don't know the different values of the goods; so I shall bestow the cotton prints with a liberal hand, keeping the better sorts to myself. And now to assist in the partition of spoils."

So saying, he strode away from the rock, and, gliding back down the gulch, climbed over the carcass of the dead horse. Then, finding his own outside, he mounted and rode off to rejoin his red-skinned comrades engaged in sacking the caravan.

On reaching it a spectacle was presented to his eyes – frightful, though not to him. For he was a man who had seen similar sights before – one with soul steeped in kindred crime.

The waggons had been drawn partially apart, disclosing the space between. The smoke had all ascended or drifted off, and clear sunlight once more shone upon the sand – over the ground lately barricaded by the bodies of those who had so bravely defended it. There were thirteen of them – the party of traders and hunters being in all but fifteen. Of those slain upon the spot there was not one now wearing his hair. Their heads were bare and bloody, the crown of each showing a circular disc

of dark crimson colour. The scalping-knife had already completed its work, and the ghastly trophies were seen impaled upon the points of spears – some of them stuck upright in the sand, others borne triumphantly about by the exulting victors. Their triumph had cost them dear. On the plain outside at least thirty of their own lay extended, stone dead; while here and there a group bending over some recumbent form told of a warrior wounded.

By the orders of their chief, some had set about collecting the corpses of their slain comrades, with the intent of interring them. Others, acting without orders, still continued to wreak their savage spite upon the bodies of their white victims, submitting them to further mutilation. They chopped off their heads; then, poising these on the points of spears, tossed them to and fro, all the while shouting in savage glee, laughing with a cacchination that resembled the mirth of a madhouse.

Withal, there was stern vengeance in its tones. A resistance, they little expected, causing them such serious loss, had roused their passions to a pitch of the utmost exasperation; and they tried to allay their spiteful anger by expending it on the dead bodies of those who, while living, had so effectually chastised them. These were slashed and hacked with tomahawks, pierced with spears, and arrows, beaten with war clubs, then cut into pieces, to be tied to the tails of their horses, and dragged in gallop to and fro over the ground. For some time this tragical spectacle held play. Then ensued a scene savouring of the ludicrous and grotesque.

The waggons were emptied of their contents, while the rich freight, transported to a distance, was spread out upon the plain, and its partition entered upon – all crowding around to receive their share.

The distribution was superintended by the Horned Lizard, though he with the beard appeared to act with equal, or even greater, authority. Backed by the second personage, who wore hair on his cheeks, he dictated the apportionment.

And as he had said in soliloquy, the cotton prints of gaudy patterns satisfied the cupidity of his red-skinned companions, leaving to himself and his confidential friend the costlier fabrics of silken sheen. Among the traders' stock were knives of common sort – the cheapest cutlery of Sheffield; guns and pistols of the Brummagem brand, with beads, looking glasses, and such-like notions from the New England Boston. All these, delectable in the eyes of the Horned Lizard and his Tenawas, were left to them; while the bearded man, himself selecting, appropriated the silks and satins, the laces and real jewellery that had been designed to deck the rich *doncellas* of Santa Fé, El Paso, Chihuahua, and Durango.

The distribution over, the scene assumed a new aspect. It was now that the ludicrous came prominently into play. Though not much water had been found in the waggons, there was enough fluid of stronger spirit. A barrel of Monongahela whisky was part of the caravan stores left undestroyed. Knowing the white man's firewater but too well, the Indians tapped the cask, and quaffed of its contents.

In a short time two-thirds of the band became intoxicated. Some rolled over dead drunk, and lay a-stretch along the sand. Others tottered about, uttering maudlin speeches. Still others of stronger stomach and steader brain kept their feet, as also their senses; only that these became excited, increasing their cupidity. They wanted more than they had got, and would gamble to get it. One had a piece of cotton print, and so had another. Each wished to have both or none. How was it to be decided? By cards? By dice? No. There was a way more congenial to their tastes – more *à propos* to their habits. It should be done by their horses. They knew the sort of game, for it is not the first time they have played it. The piece of print is unrolled, and at each end tied to a horse's tail. The owners spring to the backs of the animals, then urge them in the opposite directions till the strain comes; at the pluck the web gives way, and he who holds the longer part becomes possessor of the whole.

Others, not gamblers, out of sheer devilry and diversion, similarly attach their stuffs, and gallop over the ground with the prints trailing fifty yards behind them. In the frenzied frolic that had seized hold of them they forgot their slain comrades, still unburied. They whoop, shout, and laugh till the

cliffs, in wild, unwonted echo, send back the sound of their demoniac mirth. A riot rare as original – a true saturnal of savages.

Chapter Fifteen.
A Living Tomb

Literally buried alive, as Walt Wilder had said, were he and his companion.

They now understood what had caused the strange noise that mystified them – the rumbling followed by a crash. No accidental *débâcle* or falling of a portion of the cliff, as they had been half supposing; but a deed of atrocious design – a huge rock rolled by the united strength of the savages, until it rested over the orifice of the shaft, completely coping and closing it.

It may have been done without any certain knowledge of their being inside – only to make things sure. It mattered not to the two men thus cruelly enclosed, for they knew that in any case there was no hope of their being rescued from what they believed to be a living tomb.

That it was such neither could doubt. The guide, gifted with herculean strength, had tried to move the stone on discovering how it lay. With his feet firmly planted in the projections below, and his shoulder to the rock above, he had given a heave that would have lifted a loaded waggon from its wheels.

The stone did not budge with all this exertion. There was not so much as motion. He might as successfully have made trial to move a mountain from its base. He did not try again. He remembered the rock itself. He had noticed it while they were searching for a place to conceal themselves, and had been struck with its immense size. No one man could have stirred it from its place. It must have taken at least twenty Indians. No matter how many, they had succeeded in their design, and their victims were now helplessly enclosed in the dark catacomb – slowly, despairingly to perish.

“All up wi’ us, I reck’n,” said the guide, as he once more let himself down upon the ledge to communicate the particulars to his companion.

Hamersley ascended to see for himself. They could only go one at a time. He examined the edge of the orifice where the rock rested upon it. He could only do so by the touch. Not a ray of light came in on any side, and groping round and round he could detect neither crevice nor void. There were weeds and grass, still warm and smouldering, the *débris* of what had been set on fire for their fumigation. The rock rested on a bedding of these; hence the exact fit, closing every crack and crevice.

On completing his exploration Hamersley returned to his companion below.

“Hopeless!” murmured Wilder, despondingly.

“No, Walt; I don’t think so yet.”

The Kentuckian, though young, was a man of remarkable intelligence as well as courage. It needed these qualities to be a prairie merchant – one who commanded a caravan. Wilder knew him to be possessed of them – in the last of them equalling himself, in the first far exceeding him.

“You think thar’s a chance for us to get out o’ hyar?” he said, interrogatively.

“I think there is, and a likely one.”

“Good! What leads ye to think so, Frank?”

“Reach me my bowie. It’s behind you there in the cave.”

Wilder did as requested.

“It will depend a good deal upon what sort of rock this is around us. It isn’t flint, anyhow. I take it to be either lime or sandstone. If so, we needn’t stay here much longer than it would be safe to go out again among those bloodthirsty savages.”

“How do you mean, Frank? Darn me if I yet understan ye.”

“It’s very simple, Walt. If this cliff rock be only sandstone, or some other substance equally soft, we may cut our way out – under the big stone.”

“Ah! I didn’t think o’ thet. Thar’s good sense in what ye say.”

"It has a softish feel," said the Kentuckian, as he drew his hand across one of the projecting points. "I wish I only had two inches of a candle. However, I think I can make my exploration in the dark."

There was a short moment of silence, after which was heard a clinking sound, as of a knife blade being repeatedly struck against a stone. It was Hamersley, with his bowie, chipping off a piece from the rock that projected from the side of the shaft.

The sound was pleasant to the Kentuckian's ear, for it was not the hard metallic ring given out by quartz or granite. On the contrary, the steel struck against it with a dull, dead echo, and he could feel that the point of the knife easily impinged upon it.

"Sandstone," he said; "or something that'll serve our purpose equally as well. Yes, Walt, there's a good chance for us to get out of this ugly prison; so keep up your heart, comrade. It may cost us a couple of days' quarrying. Perhaps all the better for that; the Indians are pretty sure to keep about the waggons for a day or so. They'll find enough there to amuse them. Our work will depend a good deal on what sort of a stone they've rolled over the hole. You remember what size the boulder was?"

"'Twas a largish pebble; looked to me at least ten feet every way. It sort o' serprised me how the skunks ked a budged it. I reck'n 'twar on a coggle, an' rolled eezy. It must ha' tuk the hul clanjamfry o' them."

"If we only knew the right edge to begin at. For that we must go by guess-work. Well, we mustn't lose time, but set about our stone-cutting at once. Every hour will be taking the strength out of us. I only came down for the bowie to make a beginning. I'll make trial at it first, and then we can take turn and turn about."

Provided with his knife, the Kentuckian again climbed up; and soon after the guide heard a crinkling sound, succeeded by the rattling of pieces of rock, as they got detached and came showering down.

To save his crown, now uncovered by the loss of both kerchief and cap, he crept back into the alcove that had originally protected them from the stones cast in by the Indians. Along with the splinters something else came past Walt's face, making a soft, rustling sound; it had a smell also that told what it was – the "cussed stink-weed."

From the falling fragments, their size and number, he could tell that his comrade was making good way.

Walt longed to relieve him at his work, and called up a request to this end; but Hamersley returned a refusal, speaking in a cautious tone, lest his voice might be borne out to the ear of some savage still lingering near.

For over an hour Wilder waited below, now and then casting impatient glances upward. They were only mechanical; for, of course, he could see nothing. But they were anxious withal; for the success of his comrade's scheme was yet problematical.

With sufficient food and drink to sustain them, they might in time accomplish what they had set about; but wanting these, their strength would soon give way, and then – ah! then —

The guide was still standing on the ledge, pursuing this or a similar train of reflection, when all at once a sight came, not under but above his eyes, which caused him to utter an exclamation of joy.

It was the sight of his comrade's face – only that!

But this had in it a world of significance. He could hot have seen that face without light. Light had been let into their rock-bound abode, so late buried in the profoundest darkness.

It was but a feeble glimmer, that appeared to have found admission through a tiny crevice under the huge copestone; and Hamersley's face, close to it, was seen only in faint shadow – fainter from the film of smoke yet struggling up the shaft.

Still was it light – beautiful, cheering light – like some shore-beacon seen by the storm-tossed mariner amid the dangers of a night-shrouded sea.

Hamersley had not yet spoken a word to explain what had occurred to cause it. He had suddenly left off chipping the rock, and was at rest, apparently in contemplation of the soft silvery ray that was playing so benignly upon his features.

Was it the pleasure of once more beholding what he lately thought he might never see again – the light of day? Was it this alone that was keeping him still and speechless?

No, something else; as he told his comrade when he rejoined him soon after on the ledge.

"Walt," he said, "I've let daylight in, as you see; but I find it'll take a long time to cut a passage out. It's only the weeds I've been able to get clear of. The big rock runs over at least five feet, and the stone turns out harder than I thought of."

These were not cheering words to Walt Wilder.

"But," continued Hamersley, his speech changing to a more hopeful tone, "I've noticed something that may serve better still; perhaps save us all the quarrying. I don't know whether I'm right; but we shall soon see."

"What hev ye noticed?" was the question put by Wilder.

"You see there's still some smoke around us."

"Yes, Frank, my eyes tell me that plain enuf. I've nigh nibbed 'em out o' thar sockets."

"Well, as soon as I had scooped out the crack that let in the daylight. I noticed that the smoke rushed out as if blasted through a pair of bellows. That shows there's a draught coming up. It can only come from some aperture below, acting as a furnace or the funnel of a chimney. We must try to get down to the bottom, and see if there's such a thing. If there be, who knows but it may be big enough to let us out of our prison, without having to carve our way through the walls, which I feel certain would take us several days. We must try to get down to the bottom."

To accede to this request the guide needed no urging, and both – one after the other – at once commenced descending.

They found no great difficulty in getting down, any more than they had already experienced, for the shaft continued all the way down nearly the same width, and very similar to what it was above the ledge. Near the bottom, however, it became abruptly wider by the retrocession of the walls. They were now in a dilemma, for they had reached a point where they could go no further without dropping off. It might be ten feet, it might be a hundred – in any case enough to make the peril appalling.

Wilder had gone first, and soon bethought himself of a test. He unslung his powder-horn and permitted it to drop from his hand, listening attentively. It made scarce any noise; still he could hear it striking against something soft. It was the brush thrown in by the Indians. This did not seem far below; and the half-burnt stalks would be something to break their fall.

"I'll chance it," said Walt, and almost simultaneous with his words was heard the bump of his heavy body alighting on the litter below.

"You may jump without fear, Frank. 'Taint over six feet in the clar."

Hamersley obeyed, and soon both stood at the bottom of the chimney – on the hearthstone where the stalks of the creosote still smouldered.

Chapter Sixteen.
Off at Last!

On touching *terra firma*, and finding plenty of space around, they scrambled from off the pile of loose stones and stalks cast down by the Indians, and commenced groping their way about. Again touching the firm surrounding of rock, they groped searchingly along it.

They were not long engaged in their game of blind-man's buff, when the necessity of trusting to the touch came abruptly to an end – as if the handkerchief had been suddenly jerked from their eyes. The change was caused by a light streaming in through a side gallery into which they had strayed. It was at first dim and distant, but soon shone upon them with the brilliance of a flambeau.

Following the passage through which it guided them, they reached an aperture of irregular roundish shape, about the size, of the cloister window of a convent. They saw at once that it was big enough to allow the passage of their bodies. They saw, too, that it was admitting the sunbeams – admonishing them that it was still far from night.

They had brought all their traps down along with them – their knives and pistols, with Hamersley's gun still carefully kept. But they hesitated about going out. There could be no difficulty in their doing so, for there was a ledge less than three feet under the aperture, upon which they could find footing. It was not that which caused them to hesitate, but the fact of again falling into the hands of their implacable enemies.

That these were still upon the plain they had evidence. They could hear their yells and whooping, mingled with peals of wild demon-like laughter. It was at the time when the firewater was in the ascendant, and the savages were playing their merry game with the pieces of despoiled cotton goods.

There was danger in going out, but there might be more in staying in. The savages might return upon their search, and discover this other entrance to the vault. In that case they would take still greater pains to close it and besiege the two fugitives to the point of starvation.

Both were eager to escape from a place they had lately looked upon as a living tomb.

Still, they dared not venture out of it. They could not retreat by the plain so long as the Indians were upon it. At night, perhaps, in the darkness, they might. Hamersley suggested this.

"No," said Walt, "nor at night eyther. It's moontime, you know; an' them sharp-eyed Injuns niver all goes to sleep thegither. On that sand they'd see us in the moonlight 'most as plain as in the day. Ef we wait at all, we'll hev to stay till they go clar off."

Wilder, while speaking, stood close to the aperture, looking cautiously out. At that moment, craning his neck to a greater stretch, so as to command a better view of what lay below, his eye caught sight of an object that elicited an exclamation of surprise.

"Darn it," he said, "thar's my old clout lyin' down thar on the rocks."

It was the red kerchief he had plucked from his head to put the pursuers on the wrong track.

"It's jest where I flinged it," he continued; "I kin recognise the place. That gully, then, must be the one we didn't go up."

Walt spoke the truth. The decoy was still in the place where he had set it. The square of soiled and faded cotton had failed to tempt the cupidity of the savages, who knew that in the waggons they had captured were hundreds of such, clean and new, with far richer spoil besides.

"S'pose we still try that path, Frank. It may lead us to the top arter all. If they've bin up it they've long ago gone down agin; I kin tell by thar yelpin' around the waggons. They've got holt of our corn afore this; and won't be so sharp in lookin' arter us."

"Agreed," said Hamersley.

Without further delay the two scrambled out through the aperture, and, creeping along the ledge, once more stood in the hollow of the ravine, at the point of its separation into the forks that

had perplexed them in their ascent. Perhaps, after all, they had chosen the right one. At the time of their first flight, had they succeeded in reaching the plain above, they would surely have been seen and pursued; though with superior swiftness of foot they might still have escaped.

Once more they faced upward, by the slope of the ravine yet untried.

On passing it, Walt laid hold of his "clout," as he called it, and replaced it, turban fashion, on his head.

"I can only weesh," he said, "I ked as convenient rekiver my rifle; an', darn me, but I would try, ef it war only thar still. It ain't, I know. Thet air piece is too precious for a Injun to pass by. It's gone back to the waggons."

They could now more distinctly hear the shouts of their despoilers; and, as they continued the ascent, the narrow chine in the cliff opened between them and the plain, giving them a glimpse of what was there going on.

They could see the savages – some on foot, others on horseback – the latter careering round as if engaged in a tournament.

They saw they were roystering, wild with triumph, and maddened with drink – the fire-water they had found in the waggons.

"Though they be drunk, we mustn't stay hyar so nigh 'em," muttered Walt. "I allers like to put space atween me and seech as them. They mout get some whimsey into their heads, an' come this ways. They'll take any amount o' trouble to raise ha'r; an' maybe grievin' that they hain't got ourn yit, an' mout think they'd hev another try for it. As the night's bound to be a mooner, we can't git too far from 'em. So let's out o' this quick's we kin."

"On, then!" said Hamersley, assenting; and the next moment the two were rapidly ascending the gorge, Wilder leading the way.

This time they were more fortunate. The ravine sloped on up to the summit of the cliff, debouching upon a level plain. They reached this without passing any point that could bring them under the eyes of the Indians.

They could still hear the shouts of triumph and wild revelry; but as they receded from the crest of the cliff these grew fainter and fainter, until they found themselves fleeing over an open table-land, bounded above by the sky, all round them silent as death – silent as the heart of a desert.

Chapter Seventeen.
Into the Desert

The cliff, up which the young prairie merchant and his guide, after their series of hairbreadth escapes, have succeeded in climbing, is the scarped edge of a spur of the famous Llano Estacado, or "Staked Plain," and it is into this sterile tract they are now fleeing.

Neither have any definite knowledge of the country before them, or the direction they ought to take. Their only thought is to put space between themselves and the scene of their disaster – enough to secure them against being seen by the eye of any Indian coming after.

A glance is sufficient to satisfy them that only by distance can they obtain concealment. Far as the eye can reach the surface appears a perfect level, without shrub or tree. There is not cover enough to give hiding-place to a hare. Although now in full run, and with no appearance of being pursued, they are far from being confident of escaping. They are under an apprehension that some of the savages have ascended to the upper plain, and are still on it, searching for them. If so, these may be encountered at any moment, returning disappointed from the pursuit.

The fugitives draw some consolation from the knowledge that the pursuers could not have got their horses up the cliff; and, if there is to be another chapter to the chase, it will be on foot – a contest of pedestrian speed. In a trial of this kind Walt Wilder, at least, has nothing to fear. The Colossus, with his long strides, would be almost a match for the giant with the seven-leagued boots.

Their only uneasiness is that the savages may have gone out upon the track they are themselves taking, and, appearing in their front, may head them off, and so intercept their retreat. As there is yet no savage in sight – no sign either of man or animal – their confidence increases; and, after making a mile or so across the plain, they no longer look ahead, but backward.

At short intervals the great brown beard of the guide sweeps his left shoulder, as he casts anxious glances behind him. They are all the more anxious on observing – which he now does – that his fellow-fugitive flags in his pace, and shows signs of giving out.

With a quick comprehension, and without any questions asked, Wilder understands the reason. In the smoke-cloud that covered their retreat from the corralled waggons – afterwards in the sombre shadow of the chine, and the obscurity of the cave, he had not observed what now, in the bright glare of the sunlight, is too plainly apparent – that the nether garments of his comrade are saturated with blood.

Hamersley has scarce noticed it himself, and his attention is now called to it, less from perceiving any acute pain than that he begins to feel faint and feeble. Blood is oozing through the breast of his shirt, running down the legs of his trousers, and on into his boots. And the fountain from which it proceeds is fast disclosing itself by an aching pain in his side, which increases as he strides on.

A moment's pause to examine it. When the vest and shirt are opened it is seen that a bullet has passed through his left side, causing only a flesh wound, but cutting an artery in its course. Scratched and torn in several other places, for the time equally painful, he had not yet perceived this more serious injury.

It is not mortal, nor likely to prove so. The guide and hunter, like most of his calling, is a rough practical surgeon; and after giving the wound a hurried examination, pronounces it "only a scratch," then urges his companion onward.

Again starting, they proceed at the same quick pace; but before they have made another mile the wounded man feels his weakness sensibly overcoming him. Then the rapid run is succeeded by a slow dog-trot, soon decreasing to a walk, at length ending in a dead stop.

"I can go no farther, Walt; not if all the devils of hell were at my heels. I've done my best. If they come after you keep on, and leave me."

"Niver, Frank Hamersley, niver! Walt Wilder ain't the man to sep'rate from a kumrade, and leave him in a fix that way. If ye must pull up, so do this child. An' I see ye must; thar's no behelp for it."

"I cannot go a step farther."

"Enuf! But don't let's stan' to be seen miles off. Squat's the word. Down on yer belly, like a toad under a harrer. Thar's jest a resemblance o' kiver, hyar 'mong these tussocks o' buffler-grass; an' this child ain't the most inconspicerousest objeck on the plain. Let's squat on our breast-ribs, an' lay close as pancakes."

Whilst speaking he throws himself to the earth, flat on his face.

Hamersley, already tottering, drops down by his side; as he does so, leaving the plain, as far as the eye can reach, without salient object to intercept the vision – any more than might be seen on the surface of a sleeping ocean.

It is in favour of the fugitives that the day has now well declined. But they do not remain long in their recumbent position before the sun, sinking behind the western horizon, gives them an opportunity of once more getting upon their feet.

They do so, glad to escape from a posture whose restraint is exceedingly irksome. They have suffered from the hot atmosphere rising like caloric from the parched plain. But now that the sun had gone down, a cool breeze begins to play over its surface, fanning them to fresh energy. Besides, the night closing over them – the moon not yet up – has removed the necessity for keeping any longer in concealment, and they proceed onward without fear. Hamersley feels as if fresh blood had been infused into his veins; and he is ready to spring to his feet at the same time as his comrade.

"Frank! d'ye think ye kin go a little furrer now?" is the interrogatory put by the hunter.

"Yes, Walt; miles further," is the response. "I feel as if I could walk across the grandest spread of prairie."

"Good!" ejaculates the guide. "I'm glad to hear you talk that way. If we kin but git a wheen o' miles atween us an' them yelpin' savages, we may hev a chance o' salvation yit. The wust o' the thing air, that we don't know which way to go. It's a toss up 'tween 'em. If we turn back torst the Canadyen, we may meet 'em agin, an' right in the teeth. Westart lies the settlement o' the Del Nort; but we mout come on the same Injuns by goin' that direckshun. I'm not sartin they're Tenawas. Southart this Staked Plain hain't no endin' till ye git down to the Grand River below its big bend, an' that ain't to be thort o'. By strikin' east, a little southart, we mout reach the head sources o' the Loozyany Red; an' oncest on a stream o' runnin' water, this child kin generally navigate down it, provided he hev a rifle, powder, an' a bullet or two in his pouch. Thank the Almighty Lord, we've stuck to your gun through the thick an' the thin o't. Ef we hedn't we mout jest as well lie down agin' an' make a die at oncest."

"Go which way you please, Walt; you know best. I am ready to follow you; and I think I shall be able."

"Wal, at anyhow, we'd best be movin' off from hyar. If ye can't go a great ways under kiver o' the night, I reck'n we kin put enough o' parairia atween us an' these Injuns to make sure agin thar spyin' us in the mornin'. So let's start south-eastart, an' try for the sources o' the Red. Thur's that ole beauty o' the North Star that's been my friend an' guide many's the good time. Thar it is, makin' the handle o' the Plough, or the Great Bar, as I've heern that colleckshin o' stars freekwently called. We've only to keep it on our left, a leetle torst the back o' the shoulder, an' then we're boun' to bring out on some o' the head-forks o' the Red – if we kin only last long enough to reach 'em. Darn it! thar's no danger; an' anyhow, thar's no help for't but try. Come along!"

So speaking, the guide started forward – not in full stride, but timing his pace to suit the feeble steps of his disabled comrade.

Chapter Eighteen.
A Lilliputian Forest

Guiding their course by the stars the fugitives continue on – no longer going in a run, nor even in a very rapid walk. Despite the resolution with which he endeavours to nerve himself, the wounded man is still too weak to make much progress, and he advances but laggingly. His companion does not urge him to quicken his pace. The experienced prairie man knows it will be better to go slowly than get broken down by straining forward too eagerly. There is no sign or sound of Indian, either behind or before them. The stillness of the desert is around them – its silence only interrupted by the "whip-whip" of the night-hawk's wings, and at intervals its soft note answering to the shriller cry of the kid-deer plover that rises screaming before their feet. These, with the constant skirr of the ground-crickets and the prolonged whine of the coyote, are the only sounds that salute them as they glide on – none of which are of a kind to cause alarm.

There appears no great reason for making haste now. They have all the night before them, and, ere daylight can discover them, they will be sure to find some place of concealment.

The ground is favourable to pedestrianism in the darkness. The surface, hard-baked by the sun, is level as a set flagstone, and in most places so smooth that a carriage could run upon it as on the drive of a park. Well for them it is so. Had the path been a rugged one the wounded man would not go far before giving out. Even as it is, the toil soon begins to tell on his wasted strength. His veins are almost emptied of blood.

Nor do they proceed a very great distance before again coming to a halt; though far enough to feel sure that, standing erect, they cannot be descried by any one who may have ascended the cliff at the place where they took departure from it.

But they have also reached that which offers them a chance of concealment – in short, a forest. It is a forest not discernible at more than a mile's distance, for the trees that compose it are "shin oaks," the tallest rising to the height of only eighteen inches above the surface of the ground. Eighteen inches is enough to conceal the body of a man lying in a prostrate attitude; and as the Lilliputian trees grow thick as jimson weeds, the cover will be a secure one. Unless the pursuers should stray so close as to tread upon them, there will be no danger of their being seen. Further reflection has by this time satisfied them that the Indians are not upon the upper plain. It is not likely, after the pains they had taken to smoke them in the cave and afterwards shut them up. Besides, the distribution of the spoils would be an attraction sure to draw them back to the waggons, and speedily.

Becoming satisfied that there is no longer a likelihood of their being pursued across the plain, Wilder proposes that they again make stop; this time to obtain sleep, which in their anxiety during their previous spell of rest they did not attempt. He makes the proposal out of consideration for his comrade, who for some time, as he can see, has evidently been hard pressed to keep up with him.

"We kin lie by till sun-up," says Walt; "an' then, if we see any sign o' pursoot, kin stay hyar till the sun goes down agin. These shin oaks will gie us kiver enuf. Squatted, there'll be no chance o' thar diskiverin' us, unless they stumble right atop o' us." His companion is not in the mood to make objection, and the two lay themselves along the earth. The miniature forest not only gives them the protection of a screen but a soft bed, as the tiny trunks and leaf-laden branches become pressed down beneath their bodies.

They remain awake only long enough to give Hamersley's wound such dressing as the circumstances permit, and then both sink into slumber.

With the young prairie merchant it is neither deep nor profound. Horrid visions float before his rapt senses – scenes of red carnage – causing him ever and anon to awake with a start, once or twice with a cry that wakes his companion.

Otherwise Walt Wilder would have slept as soundly as if reposing on the couch of a log cabin a thousand miles removed from any scene of danger. It is no new thing for him to go to sleep with the yell of savages sounding in his ears. For a period of over twenty years he has daily, as nightly, stretched his huge form along mountain slope or level prairie, and often with far more danger of having his "hair raised" before rising erect again. For ten years he belonged to the "Texas Rangers" – that strange organisation that has existed ever since Stephen Austin first planted his colony in the land of the "Lone Star." If on this night the ex-Ranger is more than usually restless, it is from anxiety about his comrade, coupled with the state of his nervous system, stirred to feverish excitement by the terrible conflict through which they have just passed. Notwithstanding all, he slumbers in long spells, at times snoring like an alligator.

At no time does the ex-Ranger stand in need of much sleep, even after the most protracted toil. Six hours is his usual daily or nocturnal dose; and as the grey dawn begins to glimmer over the tops of the shin oaks, he springs to his feet, shakes the dew from his shoulders like a startled stag, and then stoops down to examine the condition of his wounded comrade.

"Don't ye git up yit, Frank," he says. "We mustn't start till we hev a clar view all roun', an' be sure there's neery redskin in sight. Then we kin take the sun a leetle on our left side, an' make tracks to the south-eastart. How is't wi' ye?"

"I feel weak as water. Still I fancy I can travel a little farther."

"Wall, we'll go slow. Ef there's none o' the skunks arter us, we kin take our time. Durn me! I'm still a wonderin' what Injuns they war; I'm a'most sartint thar the Tenawa Kimanch – a band o' the Buffler-eaters an' the wust lot on all the parairia. Many's the fight we rangers used to hev wi' 'em, and many's the one o' 'em this child hev rubbed out. Ef I only hed my rifle hyar – durn the luck hevin' to desart that gun – I ked show you nine nicks on her timmer as stan' for nine Tenawa Kimanch. Ef't be them, we've got to keep well to the southart. Thar range lays most in the Canadyen, or round the head o' Big Wichitu, an' they mout cross a corner o' the Staked Plain on thar way home. Tharfer we must go southart a good bit, and try for the north fork o' the Brazos. Ef we meet Indian thar, they'd be Southern Kimanch – not nigh sech feeroshus varmints as them. Do you know, Frank, I've been hevin' a dream 'bout them Injuns as attacked us?"

"A dream! So have I. It is not strange for either of us to dream of them. What was yours, Walt?"

"Kewrus enuf mine war, though it warn't all a dreem. I reck'n I war more 'n half awake when I tuk to thinkin' about 'em, an' 'twar somethin' I seed durin' the skrimmage. Didn't you observe nothin' queery?"

"Rather say, nothing that was not that way. It was all queer enough, and terrible, too."

"That this child will admit wi' full freedom. But I've f't redskin afore in all sorts an' shapes, yet niver seed redskin sech as them."

"In what did they differ from other savages? I saw nothing different."

"But I did; leastways, I suspeck I did. Didn't you spy 'mong the lot two or three that had ha'r on thar faces?"

"Yes; I noticed that. I thought nothing of it. It's common among the Comanches and other tribes of the Mexican territory, many of whom are of mixed breed – from the captive Mexican women they have among them."

"The ha'r I seed didn't look like it grew on the face o' a mixed blood."

"But there are pure white men among them – outlaws who have run away from civilisation and turned renegades – as also captives they have taken, who become Indianised, as the Mexicans call it. Doubtless it may have been some of these we saw."

"Wall, you may be right, Frank. Sartint thar war one I seed wi' a beard 'most as big as my own – only it war black. His hide war black, too, or nigh to it; but ef that skunk wan't white un'erneath a coatin' o' charcoal an' vermilion then Walt Wilder don't know a Kristyun from a heethun. I ain't no use spek'latin' on't now. White, black, yella-belly, or red, they've put us afoot on the parairia, an' kim

darned nigh wipin' us out althegither. We've got a fair chance o' goin' un'er yet, eyther from thirst or the famishment o' empty stomaks. I'm hungry enuf already to eat a coyat. Thar's a heavy row afore us, Frank, an' we must strengthen our hearts to hoein' o' it. Wall, the sun's up; an' as thar don't appear to be any obstrukshun, I reck'n we'd best be makin' tracks."

Hamersley slowly and somewhat reluctantly rises to his feet. He still feels in poor condition for travelling. But to stay there is to die; and bracing himself to the effort, he steps out side by side with his colossal companion.

Chapter Nineteen.
The Departure of the Plunderers

On the day after the capture of the caravan the Indians, having consumed all the whisky found in the waggons, and become comparatively sober, prepared to move off.

The captured goods, made up into convenient parcels, were placed upon mules and spare horses. Of both they had plenty, having come prepared for such a sequel to their onslaught upon the traders.

The warriors, having given interment to their dead comrades, leaving the scalped and mutilated corpses of the white men to the vultures and wolves, mounted and marched off.

Before leaving the scene of their sanguinary exploit, they had drawn the waggons into a close clump and set fire to them, partly from a wanton instinct of destruction, partly from the pleasure of beholding a great bonfire, but also with some thoughts that it might be as well thus to blot out all the traces of a tragedy for which the Americans – of whom even these freebooters felt dread – might some day call them to account.

They did not all go together, but separated into two parties on the spot where they had passed the night. They were parties, however, of very unequal size, one of them numbering only four individuals.

The other, which constituted the main body of the plunderers, was the band of the Tenawa Comanchey, under their chief, Horned Lizard. These last turned eastward, struck off towards the head waters of the Big Witches, upon which and its tributaries lie their customary roving grounds.

The lesser party went off in almost the opposite direction, south-westerly, leaving the Llano Estacado on their left, and journeying on, crossed the Rio Pecos at a point below and outside the farthest frontier settlement of New Mexico towards the prairies. Then, shaping their course nearly due south, they skirted the spurs of the Sierra Blanca, that in this latitude extend eastward almost to the Pecos.

On arriving near the place known as Gran Quivira – where once stood a prosperous Spanish town, devoted to gathering gold, now only a ruin, scarcely traceable, and altogether without record – they again changed their course, almost zigzagging back in a north-westerly direction. They were making towards a depression seen in the Sierra Blanca, as if with the intention to cross the mountains toward the valley of the Del Norte. They might have reached the valley without this circumstance, by a trail well known and often travelled. But it appeared as if this was just what they wanted to avoid.

One of the men composing this party was he already remarked upon as having a large beard and whiskers. A second was one of those spoken of as more slightly furnished with these appendages, while the other two were beardless.

All four were of deep bronze complexion, and to all appearance pure-blooded aboriginals. That the two with hirsute sign spoke to one another in Spanish was no sure evidence of their not being Indians. It was within the limits of New Mexican territory, where there are many Indians who converse in Castilian as an ordinary language.

He with the whiskered cheeks – the chief of the quartet, as well as the tallest of them – had not left behind the share of plunder that had been allotted to him. It was still in his train, borne on the backs of seven strong mules, heavily loaded. These formed an *atajo* or pack-train, guided and driven by the two beardless men of the party, who seemed to understand mule driving as thoroughly as if they had been trained to the calling of the *arriero*; and perhaps so had they been.

The other two took no trouble with the pack-animals, but rode on in front, conversing *sans souci*, and in a somewhat jocular vein.

The heavily-bearded man was astride a splendid black horse; not a Mexican mustang, like that of his companions, but a large sinewy animal, that showed the breed of Kentucky. And so should he

– since he was the same steed Frank Hamersley had been compelled to leave behind in that rapid rush into the crevice of the cliff.

"This time, Roblez, we've made a pretty fair haul of it," remarked he who bestrode the black. "What with the silks and laces – to say nothing of this splendid mount between my legs – I think I may say that our time has not been thrown away."

"Yours hasn't, anyhow. My share won't be much."

"Come, come, *teniente*! don't talk in that way. You should be satisfied with a share proportioned to your rank. Besides, you must remember the man who puts down the stake has the right to draw the winnings. But for me there would have been no spoils to share. Isn't it so?"

This truth seeming to produce an impression on Roblez's mind, he made response in the affirmative.

"Well, I'm glad you acknowledge it," pursued the rider of the black. "Let there be no disputes between us; for you know, Roblez, we can't afford to quarrel. You shall have a liberal percentage on this lucky venture; I promise it. By the bye, how much do you think the plunder ought to realise?"

"Well," responded Roblez, restored to a cheerful humour, "if properly disposed of in El Paso or Chihuahua, the lot ought to fetch from fifteen to twenty thousand dollars. I see some silk-velvet among the stuff that would sell high, if you could get it shown to the rich damsels of Durango or Zacatecas. One thing sure, you've got a good third of the caravan stock."

"Ha! ha! More than half of it in value. The Horned lizard went in for bulk. I let him have it to his heart's content. He thinks more of those cheap cotton prints, with their red and green and yellow flowers, than all the silk ever spun since the days of Mother Eve. Ha! ha! ha!"

The laugh, in which Roblez heartily joined, was still echoing on the air as the two horsemen entered a pass leading through the mountains. It was the depression in the sierra, seen shortly after parting with the Horned Lizard and his band. It was a pass rugged with rock, and almost trackless, here and there winding about, and sometimes continued through canons or clefts barely wide enough to give way to the mules with the loads upon their backs.

For all this the animals of the travellers seemed to journey along it without difficulty, only the American horse showing signs of awkwardness. All the others went as if they had trodden it before.

For several hours they kept on through this series of canons and gorges – here and there crossing a transverse ridge that, cutting off a bend, shortened the distance.

Just before sunset the party came to a halt; not in the defile itself, but in one of still more rugged aspect, that led laterally into the side of the mountain. In this there was no trace or sign of travel – no appearance of its having been entered by man or animal.

Yet the horse ridden by Roblez, and the pack-mules coming after, entered with as free a step as if going into a well-known enclosure. True, the chief of the party, mounted on the Kentucky steed, had gone in before them; though this scarce accounted for their confidence.

Up this unknown gorge they rode until they had reached its end. There was no outlet, for it was a *cul-de-sac*– a natural court – such as are often found among the amygdaloidal mountains of Mexico.

At its extremity, where it narrowed to a width of about fifty feet, lay a huge boulder of granite that appeared to block up the path; though there was a clear space between it and the cliff rising vertically behind it.

The obstruction was only apparent, and did not cause the leading savage of the party to make even a temporary stop. At one side there was an opening large enough to admit the passage of a horse; and into this he rode, Roblez following, and also the mules in a string, one after the other.

Behind the boulder was an open space of a few square yards, of extent sufficient to allow room for turning a horse. The savage chief wheeled his steed, and headed him direct for the cliff; not with the design of dashing his brains against the rock, but to force him into a cavern, whose entrance showed its disc in the façade of the precipice, dark and dismal as the door of an Inquisitorial prison.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.