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THE DESERT HOME: THE ADVENTURES OF A LOST FAMILY IN THE WILDERNESS

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Mayne Reid
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Chapter One.
The Great American Desert

There is a great desert in the interior of North America. It is almost as large as the famous Saära of Africa. It is fifteen hundred miles long, and a thousand wide. Now, if it were of a regular shape – that is to say, a parallelogram – you could at once compute its area, by multiplying the length upon the breadth; and you would obtain one million and a half for the result – one million and a half of square miles. But its outlines are as yet very imperfectly known; and although it is fully fifteen hundred miles long, and in some places a thousand in breadth, its surface-extent is probably not over one million of square miles, or twenty-five times the size of England. Fancy a desert twenty-five times as big as all England! Do you not think that it has received a most appropriate name when it is called the *Great American Desert*?

Now, my young friend, what do you understand by a desert? I think I can guess. When you read or hear of a desert, you think of a vast level plain, covered with sand, and without trees, or grass, or *any* kind of vegetation. You think, also, of this sand being blown about in thick yellow clouds, and no water to be met with in any direction. This is your idea of a desert, is it not? Well, it is not altogether the correct one. It is true that in almost every desert there are these sandy plains, yet are there other parts of its surface of a far different character, equally deserving the name of *desert*. Although the interior of the great Saära has not been fully explored, enough is known of it to prove that it contains large tracts of mountainous and hilly country, with rocks and valleys, lakes, rivers, and springs. There are, also, fertile spots, at wide distances from each other, covered with trees, and shrubs, and beautiful vegetation. Some of these spots are small, while others are of large extent, and inhabited by independent tribes, and even whole kingdoms of people. A fertile tract of this kind is called an oasis; and, by looking at your map, you will perceive that there are many oases in the Saära of Africa.

Of a similar character is the Great American Desert; but its surface is still more varied with what may be termed “geographical features.” There are plains – some of them more than a hundred miles wide – where you can see nothing but white sand, often drifting about on the wind, and here and there thrown into long ridges such as those made by a snowstorm. There are other plains, equally large, where no sand appears, but brown barren earth utterly destitute of vegetation. There are others, again, on which grows a stunted shrub with leaves of a pale silvery colour. In some places it grows so thickly, interlocking its twisted and knotty branches, that a horseman can hardly ride through among them. This shrub is the *artemisia*– a species of wild sage or wormwood, – and the plains upon which it grows are called by the hunters, who cross them, the *sage prairies*. Other plains are met with that present a black aspect to the traveller. These are covered with lava, that at some distant period of time has been vomited forth from volcanic mountains, and now lies frozen up, and broken into small fragments like the stones upon a new-made road. Still other plains present themselves in the American Desert. Some are white, as if snow had fallen freshly upon them, and yet it is not snow, but salt! Yes; pure white salt – covering the ground six inches deep, and for fifty miles in every direction! Others, again, have a similar appearance; but instead of salt, you find the substance which covers them to be soda – a beautiful efflorescence of soda!

There are mountains, too – indeed, one-half of this Desert is very mountainous; and the great chain of the Rocky Mountains – of which you have no doubt heard – runs sheer through it from north to south, and divides it into two nearly equal parts. But there are other mountains besides these; mountains of every height, and sometimes in their shape and colour presenting very striking and singular appearance. Some of them run for miles in horizontal ridges like the roofs of houses, and seemingly so narrow at their tops that one might sit astride of them. Others, again, of a conical form, stand out in the plain apart from the rest, and look like teacups turned upside down in the middle of a table. Then there are sharp peaks that shoot upward like needles, and others shaped like the dome of some great cathedral – like the dome of Saint Paul's. These mountains are of many colours. Some are dark, or dark-green, or blue when seen from a distance. They are of this colour when covered by forests of pine or cedar, both of which trees are found in great plenty among the mountains of the Desert.

There are many mountains, where no trees are seen, nor any signs of vegetation along their sides. Huge naked rocks of granite appear piled upon each other, or jutting out over dark and frowning chasms. There are peaks perfectly white, because they are covered with a thick mantle of snow. These can always be seen from the greatest distance, as the snow lying upon them all the year without melting proves them to be of vast elevation above the level of the sea. There are other peaks almost as white, and yet it is not with snow. They are of a milky hue, and stunted cedar-trees may be seen clinging in seams and crevices along their sides. These are mountains of pure limestone, or the white quartz rock. There are mountains, again, upon which neither tree nor leaf is to be; seen; but, in their stead, the most vivid colours of red and green and yellow and white, appearing in stripes along their sides, as though they had been freshly painted. These stripes mark the strata of different coloured rocks, of which the mountains are composed. And there are still other mountains in the Great American Desert, to startle the traveller with their strange appearance. They are those that glitter with the mica and selenite. These, when seen from a distance flashing under the sun, look as though they were mountains of silver and gold!

The rivers, too. Strange rivers are they. Some run over broad shallow beds of bright sand. Large rivers – hundreds of yards in width, with sparkling waters. Follow them down their course. What do you find? Instead of growing larger, like the rivers of your own land, they become less and less, until at length their waters sink into the sands, and you see nothing but the dry channel for miles after miles! Go still farther down, and again the water appears, and increases in volume, until – thousands of miles from the sea – large ships can float upon their bosom. Such are the Arkansas and the Platte.

There are other rivers that run between bleak, rocky banks – banks a thousand feet high, whose bald, naked "bluffs" frown at each other across the deep chasm, in the bottom of which roars the troubled water. Often these banks extend for hundreds of miles, so steep at all points that one cannot go down to the bed of their stream; and often – often – the traveller has perished with thirst, while the roar of their water was sounding in his ears! Such are the Colorado and the Snake.

Still others go sweeping through the broad plains, tearing up the clay with their mighty floods, and year after year changing their channels, until they are sometimes an hundred miles from their ancient beds. Here they are found gurgling for many leagues under ground – under vast rafts formed by the trees which they have borne downward in their current. There you find them winding by a thousand loops like the sinuosities of a great serpent, rolling sluggishly along, with waters red and turbid as though they were rivers of blood! Such are the Brazos and the Red River.

Strange rivers are they that struggle through the mountains, and valleys, and plateau-lands of the Great American Desert.

Not less strange are its lakes. Some lie in the deep recesses of hills that dip down so steeply you cannot reach their shores; while the mountains around them are so bleak and naked, that not even a bird ever wings its flight across their silent waters. Other lakes are seen in broad, barren plains; and yet, a few years after, the traveller finds them not – they have dried up and disappeared. Some

are fresh, with waters like crystal – others brackish and muddy – while many of them are more salt than the ocean itself.

In this Desert there are springs – springs of soda and sulphur, and salt waters; and others so hot that they boil up as in a great caldron, and you could not dip your finger into them without scalding it.

There are vast caves piercing the sides of the mountains, and deep chasms opening into the plains – some of them so deep, that you might fancy mountains had been scooped out to form them. They are called "barrancas." There are precipices rising straight up from the plains – thousands of feet in height – and steep as a wall; and through the mountains themselves you may see great clefts cut by the rivers, as though they had been tunnelled and their tops had fallen in. They are called "cañons." All these singular formations mark the wild region of the Great American Desert.

It has its denizens. There are oases in it; some of them large, and settled by civilised men. One of these is the country of New Mexico, containing many towns, and 100,000 inhabitants. These are of the Spanish and mixed Indian races. Another oasis is the country around the Great Salt and Utah Lakes. Here is also a settlement, established in 1846. Its people are Americans and Englishmen. They are the Mormons; and, although they dwell hundreds of miles from any sea, they seem likely to become a large and powerful nation of themselves.

Besides these two great oases, there are thousands of others, of all sizes – from fifty miles in breadth, to the little spot of a *few* acres, formed by the fertilising waters of some gurgling spring. Many of these are without inhabitants. In others, again, dwell tribes of Indians – some of them numerous and powerful, possessing horses and cattle; while others are found in small groups of three or four families each, subsisting miserably upon roots, seeds, grass, reptiles, and insects. In addition to the two great settlements we have mentioned, and the Indians, there is another class of men scattered over this region. These are white men – hunters and trappers. They subsist by trapping the beaver, and hunting the buffalo and other animals. Their life is one continued scene of peril, both from the wild animals which they encounter in their lonely excursions, and the hostile Indians with whom they come in contact. These men procure the furs of the beaver, the otter, the musk-rat, the marten, the ermine, the lynx, the fox, and the skins of many other animals. This is their business, and by this they live. There are forts, or trading posts – established by adventurous merchants – at long distances from each other; and at these forts the trappers exchange their furs for food, clothing, and for the necessary implements of their perilous calling.

There is another class of men who traverse the Great Desert. For many years there has been a commerce carried on between the oasis of New Mexico and the United States. This commerce employs a considerable amount of capital, and a great number of men – principally Americans. The goods transported in large wagons drawn by mules or oxen; and a train of these wagons is called a "caravan." Other caravans – Spanish ones – cross the western wing of the Desert, from Sonora to California, and thence to New Mexico. Thus, you see, the American Desert has its caravans as well as the Saära of Africa.

These caravans travel for hundreds of miles through countries in which there are no inhabitants, except the scattered and roving bands of Indians; and there are many parts on their routes so sterile, that not even Indians can exist there.

The caravans, however, usually follow a track which is known, and where grass and water may be found at certain seasons of the year. There are several of these tracks, or, as they are called, "trails," that cross from the frontier settlements of the United States to those of New Mexico. Between one and another of these trails, however, stretch vast regions of desert country – entirely unexplored and unknown – and many fertile spots exist, that have never been trodden by the foot of man.

Such, then, my young friend, is a rough sketch of some of the more prominent features of the Great American Desert.

Let me conduct you into it, and show you – from a nearer view – some of its wild but interesting aspects. I shall not show you the wildest of them, lest they might terrify you. Fear not – I shall not lead you into danger. Follow me.

Chapter Two.
The White Peak

Some years ago, I was one of a party of "prairie merchants," who crossed with a caravan from Saint Louis on the Mississippi, to Santa Fé in New Mexico. We followed the usual "Santa Fé trail." Not disposing of all our goods in New Mexico, we kept on to the great town of Chihuahua, which lies farther to the south. There we settled our business, and were about to return to the United States the way we had come, when it was proposed (as we had now nothing to encumber us but our bags of money), that we should explore a new "trail" across the prairies. We all wished to find a better route than the Santa Fé road; and we expected that such an one lay between the town of El Paso – on the Del Norte River – and some point on the frontiers of Arkansas.

On arriving at El Paso, we sold our wagons, and purchased Mexican pack-mules – engaging, at the same time, a number of "arrieros," or muleteers to manage them. We also purchased saddle-horses – the small tight horses of New Mexico, which are excellent for journeying in the Desert. We provided ourselves, moreover, with such articles of clothing and provisions as we might require upon our unknown route. Having got everything ready for the journey, we bade adieu to El Paso, and turned our faces eastward. There were in all twelve of us – traders, and a number of hunters, who had agreed to accompany us across the plains. There was a miner, too, who belonged to a copper mine near El Paso. There were also four Mexicans – the "arrieros" who had charge of our little train of pack-mules. Of coarse, we were all well armed, and mounted upon the best horses we could procure for money.

We had first to cross over the Rocky Mountains, which run north and south through all the country. That chain of them which lies eastward of El Paso is called the Sierra de Organos, or "Organ mountains." They are so called from the fancied resemblance which is seen in one of their cliffs to the tubes of an organ. These cliffs are of trap rock, which, as you are aware, often presents very fantastic and singular formations, by means of its peculiar stratification. But there is a still more curious feature about these Organ mountains. On the top of one of them is a lake, which has its tides that ebb and flow like the tides of the ocean! No one has yet accounted for this remarkable phenomenon, and it remains a puzzle to the geological inquirer. This lake is a favourite resort for the wild animals of the country, and deer and elk are found in great numbers around its shores. They are not even molested by the Mexican hunters of these parts, who seem to have a superstitious fear of the spirits of the Organ mountains, and rarely climb up their steep sides.

Our party found an easy pass through the range, which brought us out into an open country on the other side. After travelling several days through the eastern spurs of the Rocky Mountains, known as the Sierras Sacramento and Guadalupe, we struck upon a small stream, which we followed downward. It brought us at length to a large river running north and south, which we knew to be the celebrated Pecos, or, as it is sometimes called, the Puerco. These, you will perceive, are all Spanish names, for the country through which we were travelling, although uninhabited and almost unexplored by the Mexican Spaniards, was yet part of their territory; and such objects as were known to them, through hunters or others, had received names in their language.

We crossed the Pecos, and travelled for some days up its left bank, in hopes of reaching some other stream that might run into it from the east, which we could follow. No such stream appeared; and we were forced at times to leave the Pecos itself, and take out into the open country for a distance of miles, before we could get back to its waters. This was on account of the deep channel which the river – working for long ages – had cut through hills that opposed its course, leaving on both sides vast precipices for its banks.

Having got farther to the north than we wished, our party at length determined to attempt the passage of the arid plain which stretched away eastward as far as the eye could reach. It was a perilous

enterprise to leave the river, without some knowledge that there was water ahead of us. Travellers, under such circumstances, usually keep close to a stream – wherever it runs in the direction in which they wish to go; but we had grown impatient on not finding one flowing into the Pecos from the east; and, having filled our gourd canteens, and given our animals as much water as they could drink, we turned their heads towards the open plain.

After riding for several hours, we found ourselves in the midst of a wide desert, with neither hill, mountain, nor any other landmark in view. Scarcely a trace of vegetation appeared around us. Here and there were patches of stunted sage-bushes and clumps of thorny cactus; but not a blade of grass to gladden the eyes of our animals. Not a drop of water was met with, nor any indication that rain had ever fallen upon that parched plain. The soil was as dry as powder, and the dust, kicked up by the hoofs of our mules and horses, hung around us in clouds as we marched. In addition to this, the heat was excessive; and this, with the dust and fatigue of travel, brought on an unquenchable thirst, that soon caused us to drink up the contents of our water-gourds. Long before night they were all empty, and every one of our party was crying out from thirst. Our animals suffered worse – for we, at least, had food, while they, poor brutes, were without a bite to sustain them.

We could not well turn back. We thought we should surely come to water, sooner than we could get back to the river we had left; and with this hope we struggled on. Late in the afternoon, our eyes were greeted by a glad sight, that caused us to start up in our saddles with a feeling of joy. You may think that it was water – but it was not. It was a white object that appeared against the sky at a great distance. It was of a triangular shape, and seemed to be suspended in the air like the upper half of a huge kite. All of us knew at a glance what it was. We knew that it was the white cap of a snowy mountain.

You will wonder why this sight should have given us such feelings of pleasure, as, in your opinion, there is nothing very hospitable in the appearance of a snow-capped mountain. That is because you do not understand the peculiarities of the Desert. I will explain. We knew, from the appearance of the mountain, that it was one of those where the snow lies for ever, and which throughout Mexico are termed “Nevada,” or snowy. We knew, moreover, that wherever these are met with, streams of water will be found running down their sides, almost at all seasons, but certainly in hot or summer weather, in consequence of the melting of the snow. It was this knowledge, then, that cheered us; and although the mountain seemed at a great distance, we pushed forward with renewed energy and hope. Our animals, too, as if they also understood the matter, neighed and brayed loudly, and stepped out with a more springy and elastic tread.

The white triangle grew bigger as we advanced. At sunset we could distinguish the brown seams in the lower part of the mountain; and the yellow rays glancing upon the snowy crystals of the cone caused it to glitter like a coronet of gold. The sight cheered us on.

The sun set, and the moon took his place in the heavens. Under her pale light we travelled on – the peak of the mountain still glistening coldly before us. We travelled all night – and why not? There was nothing to halt for. We could not have halted, except to die.

The morning broke upon us as we dragged wearily along. We could not have ridden less than an hundred miles since leaving the Pecos river; and yet, to our dismay, the mountain was still at a good distance before us. As the day brightened, we could trace the configuration of its base; and we observed that upon its southern face a deep ravine indented the mountain nearly to its top. On its western side – the one nearest us – there was no such feature; and we conjectured that the most likely place for water would be in the ravine on the south, where a stream would be formed by the aggregation of the melted snows.

We directed our course toward the point, where the ravine appeared to have its débouchement on the plain. We had calculated rightly. As we approached it, winding round the foot of the mountain, we saw a line of a bright green colour, running out into the brown desert. It looked like a low hedge, with here and there tall trees growing up above the rest. We knew well what it was – a grove of

willows, with trees of cotton-wood interspersed. We knew them to be the sure signs of water, and we hailed their appearance with delight. The men huzzaed hoarsely – the horses neighed – the mules hinnied – and, in a few moments more, men, mules, and horses, were kneeling by a crystal streamlet, and drinking deeply of its sweet and refreshing waters.

Chapter Three.
The Valley Oasis

After so long and terrible a journey, of course, we all stood in need of rest and refreshment. We made up our minds to stay by the stream all night, and perhaps for a day or two. The fringe of willows extended on both sides of it for a distance of fifty yards into the plain; and among these, growing under their shade, there were patches of grass – that species known in Mexico as the *gramma* grass. It is a rich, nutritious herbage; and horses and cattle – as well as the buffaloes and other wild animals – are very fond of it. Our mules and horses gave proof of this; for, as soon as they had satisfied themselves with the water, they attacked it with open mouths, and eyes sparkling with delight. We relieved them of their packs and saddles: and then, having picketed them, left them to eat to their hearts' content.

We now set about looking after something for our own supper. We had not yet suffered much from hunger, as we had occasionally chewed pieces of our dried meat while crossing the plain. But we had eaten it quite raw; and *tasajo*– for that is its name – is no great eating, either raw or roasted. We had been living upon it for more than a week, and we longed for something fresh. During all the route from El Paso we had fallen in with no game, except some half-dozen lean antelopes, only one of which we had succeeded in shooting.

While we were picketing our animals, and getting ready to cook our supper of coffee and tasajo, one of the hunters – a tireless fellow named Lincoln – had stolen off up the ravine. Presently we heard the sharp crack of his rifle ringing through the defile; and, looking up, we saw a flock of "bighorns" – so the wild sheep of the Rocky Mountains are called – leaping from rock to rock, and almost flying like birds up the face of the cliffs. It was not long before Lincoln made his appearance at the mouth of the defile, carrying a large body upon his shoulders – which we knew, by the huge crescent-shaped horns, had once been a member of the flock we had seen escaping. It proved to be as fat as a buck; and the knives of the skilful hunters were not long in skinning and dissecting it. Meanwhile, a couple of axes had been grappled by stout hands; a cotton-wood tree name crashing down after a few sharp blows; and, having been cut into "logs," was soon crackling under the red blaze. Over this, the ribs and steaks of the bighorn soon sputtered, and the coffee-kettle steamed, simmered, and bubbled, with its brown and aromatic contents. Our supper over, one and all of us rolled ourselves in our blankets, and were soon forgetful of the perils through which we had passed.

Next morning we arose refreshed, and after breakfast a consultation was held as to what course we should now take. We would have followed the stream, but it appeared to run in a southerly direction, and that would not do for us. We wanted to go eastward. While we were deliberating upon this, an exclamation from the hunter Lincoln drew our attention. He was standing in the open ground, at some distance out from the willows, and pointing southward. We all looked in that direction, and, to our great surprise, beheld a pillar of blue smoke curling up into the sky, and seeming to rise out of the plain!

"It must be Indians!" cried one.

"I noticed an odd-looking hole in the prairie down there," said Lincoln; "I noticed it last night, when I was up after the bighorn. The smoke we see comes out of it; and where there's smoke there must be a fire, they say – there's somebody about that fire, be they Injuns or whites."

"Indians, of course," rejoined several; "who else would be found within hundreds of miles of such a place as this? Indians, they must be."

A brief consultation was held among us, as to what was best to be done. Our fire was at once "choked out," and our mules and horses brought into the cover of the willow thicket. Some proposed that a small party of us should go down the stream and reconnoitre; while others advised that we should climb the mountain, from which we might get a view of the strange place whence the smoke

seemed to proceed. This was plainly the best course to adopt – as, in case it should fail to satisfy us, we could still follow the other plan. Half-a-dozen of us, therefore, leaving the others to guard the camp, immediately set out to ascend the mountain.

We climbed up the ravine, occasionally stopping to look out over the plain. We climbed until we had reached a considerable elevation. At length we caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a deep barranca, – into which ran the stream – but we could distinguish nothing within it at so great a distance. We could see the plain stretching away beyond, naked and sterile. On one side only, and that towards the east, there was a belt of verdure, with here and there a solitary tree, or at most two or three growing together, stunted-like and shrubby. Running in the centre of this belt, we could distinguish a line or crack in the plain. This was, no doubt, a channel by which the stream escaped from the barranca. As nothing farther could be gained by remaining upon the mountain, we descended, and joined our companions at the camp.

It was now agreed that a select party should follow the stream, until we had approached the edge of this strange valley, and reconnoitred it with caution. Six of us again started, leaving our horses as before. We stole silently along, keeping among the willows, and as near as possible to the banks of the rivulet. In this way we travelled about a mile and a half. We saw then that we were near to the end of the barranca. We could hear a noise like the sound of a waterfall. We guessed that it must be a cataract formed by the stream, where it leaped into the strange ravine that already began to expand before our faces. We were right in our conjectures, for the next moment we crept out upon the edge of a fearful cliff, where the water of the rivulet swept over, and fell through a height of several hundred feet.

It was a beautiful sight to look upon, as the long jet, curving like the tail of a horse, plunged into the foaming pool below; and then rising with its millions of globules of snowy spray, glittered under the sunbeam with all the colours of the rainbow. It was, indeed, a beautiful sight; but our eyes did not dwell long upon it, for other objects were before them that filled us with wonder. Away below – far below where we were – lay a lovely valley, smiling in all the luxuriance of bright vegetation. It was of nearly an oval shape, bounded upon all sides by a frowning precipice, that rose around it like a wall. Its length could not have been less than ten miles, and its greatest breadth about half of its length. We were at its upper end, and of course viewed it lengthwise. Along the face of the precipice there were trees hanging out horizontally, and some of them even growing with their tops downward. These trees were cedars and pines; and we could perceive also the knotted limbs of huge cacti protruding from the crevices of the rocks. We could see the mezcal, or wild maguey plant, growing against the cliff – its scarlet leaves contrasting finely with the dark foliage of the cedars and cacti. Some of these plants stood out on the very brow of the overhanging precipice, and their long curving blades gave a singular character to the landscape. Along the face of the dark cliffs all was rough, and gloomy, and picturesque. How different was the scene below! Here everything looked soft, and smiling, and beautiful. There were broad stretches of woodland, where the thick foliage of the trees met and clustered together, so that it looked like the surface of the earth itself; but we knew it was only the green leaves, for here and there were spots of brighter green, that we saw were glades covered with grassy turf. The leaves of the trees were of different colours, for it was now late in the autumn. Some were yellow, and some of a deep claret colour. Some were bright red, and some of a beautiful maroon; and there were green, and brighter green, and others of a silvery, whitish hue. All these colours were mingled together, and blended into each other, like the flowers upon a rich carpet.

Near the centre of the valley was a large shining object, which we knew to be water. It was evidently a lake of crystal purity, and smooth as a mirror. The sun was now up to meridian height, and his yellow beams falling upon its surface caused it to gleam like a sheet of gold. We could not trace the outlines of the water – for the trees partially hid it from our view – but we saw that the smoke that had at first attracted us rose up somewhere from the western shore of the lake.

We returned to the camp, where we had left our companions. It was now agreed that we should all ride down the side of the barranca together, until we could find a place to descend into it. It was evident some such place existed, else, how could they have got in who had kindled the fire there?

We left the Mexicans in camp with our mules, and all the rest of us having mounted our horses, rode off together. We went by the eastern side, keeping well back upon the plain, so that we might not be seen until we discovered what sort of people were in the valley. When we had got opposite to where the smoke was still curling up, we stopped; and two of us, dismounting, crawled forward to the very edge of the precipice. We took care to keep some bushes, that grew along the brink, between ourselves and the lake. At length we were able to get a good view of everything below; and a very strange sight that was, – at least it was very strange in such a place, where it was so little expected. There was a large lake – as I have already stated – and on its opposite side, not over a hundred yards from its shore, was a fine-looking log-house, with other smaller ones standing in the rear. There were rail-fences around them, and a cleared space divided into fields, some of which appeared to be under cultivation, while others were green and filled with flocks of animals. The whole picture was exactly like a snug farm-house, with its stables and other outhouses, with its garden and fields, and horses and cattle! The distance was too great for us to distinguish what sort of cattle they were, but there appeared to be many kinds, both red, and black, and speckled. We could see several figures of men and boys – four of them in all – moving about the enclosures, and there was a woman near the door of the house. It was impossible in the distance to tell whether they were white people, but we never imagined for a moment they could be Indians. No Indian could have built such a house. Of course we were filled with astonishment at finding such a picture in so unexpected a place; and a beautiful picture it was to our eyes, fresh as we were from looking upon the barren desert. The lake was smooth as a mirror; the sun was shining upon it, and we could see upon its farther shore several large animals standing up to their knee in the water.

There were many other striking objects which met our eyes, but we had no time to dwell upon them, and we crawled back again to our companions.

It was at once agreed that we should go still farther down, and endeavour to find a road leading into this most singular oasis. We thought we could distinguish a sort of depression in the plain near the lower end of the valley, and for this point we directed our course. After riding a few miles farther we reached the place where the stream issued out in an easterly direction. There sure enough, was the very road we were in search of, winding down along the bank of the stream, and as if carved out from the face of the precipice. It was not much wider than the track of a wagon, but was of very easy descent. We did not hesitate a moment, but commenced riding downward.

Chapter Four.
The Strange Settlement

We were soon in the bottom of the valley, where we followed a plain track that led along the banks of the rivulet. We knew that that would direct us up to the lake, where we should get a view of the house. We were astonished at the great variety of trees which we saw in the woods; but there appeared to be almost as great a variety of beautiful birds, that fluttered among the leaves as we rode forward.

We came at length within sight of the opening in which the house and lake were situated. It was prudent to make another reconnoissance before we advanced farther; and two of us, again dismounting, stole cautiously forward through a thicket of leafy Shrubs. The house and all its grounds lay before us.

It was a log-house – such as are met with in the western states of America – and well constructed. There was a garden at one end, and fields on all sides. These fields were, as we had supposed, some of them under cultivation. We noticed one with a crop of Indian corn, and another of wheat. But what most astonished us was the kind of animals we saw in the enclosures. One would have thought at first sight that they were the animals usually seen around an English or American farm-house, – that is to say, horses, cattle, sheep, goats, hogs, and poultry. You may fancy, then, our surprise, when, on looking narrowly at them, we could not make out a single animal exactly resembling any one of the above, with the exception of horses; and even these were unlike the common kind, for they were smaller, and spotted all over like hounds! We knew that they were *mustangs*– the wild horses of the Desert.

We glanced at the animals we had taken for black cattle. What were they but buffaloes! Buffaloes penned up in fields, and not heeding the human beings that passed shouting among them! More than all, we now saw that two animals yoked to the plough were of the same species, – a pair of huge buffalo bulls; and they were working with all the quietness and regularity of oxen!

Another kind of large animals drew our attention, still taller than the buffaloes. We saw several of them standing quietly in the water of the lake, in which their huge bodies and branching horns were shadowed as in a mirror. These we knew to be elk – the great American elk. We saw several kinds of deer, and antelopes with their short pronged horns, and animals that resembled these last in size – but with immense curving horns like those of the ram – and other animals like goats or sheep. We saw some without tails, having the appearance of pigs, and others resembling foxes and dogs. We could see fowls of different kinds moving about the doors, and among others we distinguished the tall, upright form of the wild turkey. The whole picture looked like the collection of some zoological garden or menagerie.

Two men were seen, – one a tall, white man, with a somewhat florid complexion. The other was a short and very thick-set negro. The latter was by the plough. There were two younger men, or lads nearly grown. A woman sat by the door engaged in some occupation, and near her were two little girls, no doubt her daughters.

But the sight which was strangest of all, both to my companion and myself, was what appeared in front of the house, and around the little porch where the woman was sitting. It was a fearful sight to look upon. First there were two large black bears, perfectly loose, and playing with each other! Then there were several smaller animals, that we had at first taken for dogs, but that we now recognised, by their bushy tails, sharp snouts, and short erect ears, to have at least as much of the wolf as dog in them. They were of that kind often met with among the Indians, and might more properly be called dog-wolves than wolf-dogs. There were at least half-a-dozen of them sauntering about. But the most fearful-looking of all were two animals of a tawny red colour, that lay in crouching attitudes within

the porch, almost at the feet of the woman. Their round, cat-like heads and ears, their short black muzzles, their white throats, and pale reddish breasts, told us what they were at a glance.

"Panthers!" ejaculated my companion, drawing a long breath, and looking at me with a puzzled air. Yes; they were panthers – so called by the hunters, but more properly cougars – the *felis concolor* of the naturalists – the lion of America.

In the midst of all these fierce creatures, the two young girls were moving about, apparently unconcerned at their presence, while the animals appeared equally unconcerned about them! The whole scene reminded us of the fanciful pictures, we had seen, of that time promised in the Sacred Book, when all the earth shall be at peace, and "the lion shall lie down with the lamb."

We did not stop to see more. We were satisfied, and went back for our companions. In five minutes after, the whole of us entered the clearing, and rode up to the house. Our sudden appearance produced consternation on all sides. The men shouted to each other – the horses neighed – the dogs howled and barked hoarsely – and the fowls mingled their voices in the clamour. We were taken, no doubt, for a party of Indians; but we were not long in making it understood who and what we were. As soon as our explanations were given, the white man invited us, in the politest manner, to alight, and partake of his hospitality. At the same time he gave orders for our dinner to be prepared; and, desiring us to lead our horses into one of the enclosures, he commenced throwing corn into a large wooden trough. In this he was assisted by the negro, who was his servant, and the two young lads, who appeared to be his sons.

As yet we had not ceased to wonder. Everything around us was strange and inexplicable. The animals, which none of us had ever seen, except in their wild state, were as tame and gentle as farm cattle; and we noticed some new species at every turn. There were strange plants too, growing in the fields and garden, and vines trained upon espaliers, and corn-cribs filled with yellow corn, and dove-cotes, and martin-boxes, with swallows twittering around them. All formed a curious but pleasing picture.

We had sauntered about for an hour, when we were summoned to dinner.

"Follow me, gentlemen," said our host, as he led the way to the house. We entered, and seated ourselves around a good-sized table, upon which smoked several savoury and inviting dishes. Some of these we recognised as old acquaintances, while others were new to us. We found venison-steaks, with buffalo tongues and hump-ribs, – the daintiest portions of that animal. There were fresh-cooked fowls, and eggs of the wild turkey boiled and dressed in omelettes. There were bread and butter, and milk and rich cheese, all set out to tempt our appetites, that, to say the truth, just at that time did not require much coaxing to do justice to the viands before us. We were all quite hungry, for we had eaten nothing since morning. A large kettle simmered by the fire. What could it contain? thought we; surely, not tea or coffee. In a short time we were satisfied on this head. Bowls were placed before us; and into these the hot liquid was poured, which we found to be a very palatable as well as wholesome beverage – the tea of the sassafras root. It was sweetened by maple-sugar; and each helped himself to cream to his own liking. We had all tasted such tea before, and many of our party liked it as well as the tea of China.

While we continued to eat, we could not help noticing the strangeness of everything around us. All the articles of furniture were of unique and rude description; and it was plain that most of them had been manufactured upon the spot. The vessels were of several sorts and of different materials. There were cups and dishes, and bowls cut out of shells of the gourd or calabash; and there were spoons and ladles of the same material. There were wooden platters and trays carved and scooped out of the solid tree. And more numerous were the vessels of red pottery, of different shapes and for different uses. Of these there were large pots for cooking, and jars for holding water, and jugs of various dimensions.

The chairs, too, were all of rude construction; but admirably adapted to their purpose. Most of them were covered with raw-hide seats, which stretched up the back in a slanting line, and thus

rendered them firm and commodious. A few lighter ones – evidently intended as the furniture of the inner rooms – (there were but two in the house), had seats woven out of the leaves of the palmetto.

There was very little attempt at ornament upon the walls – if we except some curiosities that were placed there, all of which were evidently the productions of the valley itself. There were stuffed birds of rare and bright plumage, and huge horns of animals, with two or three shells of the land tortoise carefully polished. There were no mirrors nor pictures, and not a book to be seen, except *one*; that was a medium-sized volume, placed on a small table by itself, and evidently preserved with great care as it had been neatly and elaborately bound in the skin of a young antelope. I had the curiosity to open this book, shortly after entering. I read upon the title-page the words "Holy Bible." This circumstance increased the interest I already felt in our host and his family; and I sat down with feelings of confidence, for I knew that even in this remote place we were enjoying the hospitality of a Christian.

During the meal our host with his family were present. We had seen them all on our arrival, for they had run forward to greet and welcome us; but we became puzzled as we listened to the conversation of the children. We heard with surprise that we were the first white men they had seen for a period of nearly ten years! They were all beautiful children – robust, and full of life and animation. There were two boys – Frank and Harry, – so their mother called them – and two girls. Of the girls one was of a very dark complexion – in fact, quite a brunette, and with a Spanish expression of face. The other was as fair as her sister was dark. The fair one was a beautiful little creature with flowing yellow hair and deep blue eyes, with long, dark lashes. Her name was Mary. That of the sister was Luisa. They were both very pretty, but very unlike each other; and, what was odd to me, they appeared to be about the same age and size. The boys were also of like size, though both much older than their sisters. They appeared to be seventeen or more, but I could not have guessed which was the elder. Harry, with his fair curling hair, and red manly face, bore a strong resemblance to his father; while the other was darker, and altogether more like the mother. She herself did not appear to be much over thirty-five years of age, and was still a beautiful and evidently a light-hearted woman.

Our host was a man of about forty – a tall, well formed man, with light ruddy complexion, and hair that had been fair and curling, but was now somewhat grey. He had neither beard nor whiskers; but, on the contrary, his chin bore evidence that he had freshly shaved himself that very day; and his whole appearance was that of a man who regularly attended to the duties of the toilet. There was also about him a gentlemanlike bearing; and his address and conversation soon convinced all of us that we were in the company of an educated man.

The dress of the whole family was peculiar. The man himself wore a hunting-shirt and leggings of tanned deerskin, and not unlike that of our own hunters. The boys were similarly attired, but we could see that they had a sort of homespun linen garment underneath. The female part of the family were dressed in clothes, part of which were of the same homespun, and part of a fine skin, that of the fawn, dressed to the softness of a glove. Several hats were lying about; and we noticed that they were curiously fabricated from the leaves of the palmetto.

While we were eating, the negro appeared at the door, and, looking in, eyed us with glances of extreme curiosity. He was a short, stout man, black as jet, and apparently about forty years old. His head was covered with a thick crop of small curls, that appeared to form an even surface, making the outline of the skull as round as a ball. His teeth were very large and white, and anything but fierce – as he showed them only when he smiled, and that he did almost continually. There was something very pleasing in the expression of his rich black eyes, which were never at rest, but kept always rolling on both sides of his flat and expanded nose.

"Cudjo! drive out these animals," said the woman – or rather lady, we should call her – for she was evidently entitled to be so styled. Her command, or more properly request – for she had made it in that tone – was obeyed with alacrity. Cudjo leaped into the floor, and, after a short while,

succeeded in turning out the wolf-dogs, and panthers, and other strange animals, that up to this time had been snarling at each other, among our feet, to the no small terror of several of our party.

All these things were so strange, that we watched them with interest and curiosity. At length our meal was ended; and as we were most anxious to have everything explained to us, we signified this desire to our host.

"Wait until night," said he. "Around the cheerful log-fire I will tell you my story. Meanwhile you all need other refreshment than eating. Come to the lake then, and take a bath. The sun is high and warm. A bath will refresh you after your dusty travel."

So saying, he stepped out of the cottage, and proceeded towards the lake, followed by all our party. A few minutes after, we were refreshing ourselves in the crystal water.

During the remainder of the day, we occupied ourselves at different employments. Some went back to the mountain-foot for the mules and Mexicans; while the rest of us strolled about the house and grounds – every now and then stumbling upon some new object of wonder.

We were impatient for the coming of night, for we were wound up to a pitch of extreme curiosity, and longed for an explanation of what we saw around us.

Night came at length; and after an excellent supper, we all sat around the cheerful fire, to listen to the strange history of Robert Rolfe – for that was the name of our host.

Chapter Five.
Rolfe's Early History

"Brothers," began he, "I am of your own race, although I am not an American. I am an Englishman. I was born in the south of that country something more than forty years ago. My father was a yeoman – an independent, or, as he was sometimes styled, a gentleman-farmer. Unfortunately, he was a man of too much ambition for his class. He was determined that I, his only son, should be a gentleman in the ordinary sense of the word; that is, that I should be educated in all those expensive habits and accomplishments, which are sure to lead men of moderate fortune along the direct road to ruin. This was not wise of my father; but it would not be graceful in me to reflect upon a fault, that consisted in his too great fondness for myself. I believe it was the only fault which my good, kind father, was ever charged with. Beyond this somewhat foolish ambition, his character was without reproach among men.

"I was sent to those schools where I should meet the scions of the aristocracy. I was taught to dance, to ride, and to play. I was allowed spending money at will, and could call for champagne, and drink it, with any of my companions. At the end of my college life, I was sent upon my travels. I made the tour of the Rhine, of France, and Italy; and after some years spent in this way, I returned to England – sent for, to be present at the death of my father.

"I was now sole heir to his property, which was by no means inconsiderable for a man of his class. I soon reduced it in bulk. I must needs live in London, where I could enjoy the company of many of my old school and college companions. I was welcome amongst them while my purse held out – for many of them were needy men – lawyers without briefs, and officers with nothing to live upon but their pay. Of course, such men are fond of play. They have nothing to lose, and all to win; and it was but a short year or two, until they had won from me the best part of my patrimonial property. I was on the eve of becoming a bankrupt. But one thing saved me —*she* saved me!"

Here our host pointed to his wife, who sat surrounded by her family at one side of the great fireplace. The lady held down her eyes and smiled; while the children, who had been listening attentively, all turned towards her with looks of interest.

"Yes," continued he, "Mary saved me. We had been playmates together in earlier life; and at this time we again met. We felt an affection for each other. It ended in our getting married.

"Fortunately, my dissipated life had not destroyed, as it often does with men, all my virtuous principles. Many of these, that had been early instilled into my mind by the teachings of a good mother, still remained fixed and true.

"As soon as we were married, I resolved to change altogether my mode of life. But this is not so easily done as men imagine. Once you are surrounded by associates, such as mine were – once you are plunged into debts and obligations – it requires both courage and virtuous determination to meet and discharge them. It requires a terrible effort to free one's self from evil companions, whose interest it is, that you should still remain as profligate as themselves. But I was resolved; and, thanks to the counsels of my Mary, I succeeded in carrying out my resolve.

"To pay my debts, I was compelled to sell the property left me by my father. This done, and every bill discharged, I found myself worth only five hundred pounds.

"My little wife, there, had brought me the sum of twenty-five hundred; and this still left us three thousand pounds with which to begin the world. Three thousand pounds is not much to live upon in England – that is, among the class of people with whom I had hitherto associated; and after spending several years in trying to increase it, I found that it was every day growing less. I found, after three years engaged in farming, that my three thousand pounds was only worth two. I was told

that this sum would go much farther in America – that it would purchase me a fine home – and, with thoughts of providing well for my family, I embarked with my wife and children for New York.

"There I found the very man whom I wanted – that was, some one to advise me how to begin life in the New World. My predilections were in favour of agriculture; and these were encouraged by the advice of him whom I had met. He told me that it would be unwise for me to lay out my money upon new or uncleared land; as, with my want of experience as a farmer, I would have to pay more for clearing it of its timber than the land would be worth. 'It would be better for you,' continued my new acquaintance, 'to buy a tract already cleared and fenced, with a good house upon it, where you will be at home at once.'

"I admitted the truth of all this reasoning; but would my money be sufficient for this? 'Oh, yes,' answered he; and then he told me that he 'knew of a farm in the State of Virginia,' – a plantation, as he called it, that would suit me exactly. It could be purchased for five hundred pounds. With the remainder of my money I should be able to stock it handsomely.

"After some farther conversation, I found that the plantation belonged to himself. So much the better, thought I; and in the end I bought it from him, and set out immediately after for my new home."

Chapter Six.
The Virginia Plantation

"I found the farm everything he had described it – a large plantation with a good wooden house, and well-enclosed fields. I immediately set about 'stocking' it with my remaining cash. What was my surprise to find that I must spend the greater part of this in *buying men*! Yes – there was no alternative. There were no labourers to be had in the place – except such as were slaves – and these I must either buy for myself, or hire from their masters, which, in point of morality, amounted to the same thing.

"Thinking that I might treat them with at least as much humanity, as they appeared to receive from others, I chose the former course; and purchasing a number of blacks, both men and women, I began life as a planter. After such a bargain as that, I did not deserve to prosper; and I did not prosper, as you shall see.

"My first crop failed; in fact, it scarcely returned me the seed. The second was still worse; and to my mortification I now ascertained the cause of the failure. I had come into possession of a 'worn-out' farm. The land looked well, and on sight you would have called it a fertile tract. When I first saw it myself, I was delighted with my purchase – which seemed indeed a great bargain for the small sum of money I had paid. But appearances are often deceptive; and never was there a greater deception than my beautiful plantation in Virginia. It was utterly worthless. It had been cropped for many years with maize, and cotton, and tobacco. These had been regularly carried off the land, and not a stalk or blade suffered to return to the soil. As a natural fact, known to almost every one, the vegetable or organic matter will thus in time become exhausted, and nothing will remain but inorganic or purely mineral substances, which of themselves cannot nourish vegetation, and of course can give no crop. This is the reason why manure is spread upon land – the manure consisting of substances that are for the most part organic, and contain the principles of life and vegetation. Of course, gentlemen, these things are known to you; but you will pardon my digression, as my children are listening to me, and I never lose an opportunity of instructing them in facts that may hereafter be useful to them.

"Well, as I have said, I had no crops, or rather very bad ones, for the first and second years. On the third it was, if possible, still worse; and on the fourth and fifth no better than ever. I need hardly add that by this time I was ruined, or very nearly so. The expense of feeding and clothing my poor negroes had brought me in debt to a considerable amount. I could not have lived longer on my worthless plantation, even had I desired it. I was compelled, in order to pay my debts, to sell out everything – farm, cattle, and negroes. No, I did not sell all. There was one honest fellow to whom both Mary and I had become attached. I was resolved not to sell him into slavery. He had served us faithfully. It was he who first told me how I had been tricked; and, sympathising in my misfortune, he endeavoured – both by industry on his own part, and by encouraging his fellow-labourers – to make the ungrateful soil yield me a return. His efforts had been vain, but I determined to repay him for his rude but honest friendship. I gave him his liberty. He would not accept it. He would not part from us. He is there!"

As the narrator said this, he pointed to Cudjo, who stood hanging by the door-post; and, delighted at these compliments which were being paid him, was showing his white teeth in a broad and affectionate smile.

Rolfe continued: —

"When the sale was completed, and the account settled, I found that I had just five hundred pounds left. I had now some experience in farming; and I resolved to move out to the West – into the great valley of the Mississippi. I knew that there my five hundred pounds would still set me up again in a farm as big as I wanted, where the timber was still growing upon it.

"Just at this time my eye fell upon some flaming advertisements in the newspapers, about a new city which was then being built at the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. It was called 'Cairo,' and as it was situated on the fork between two of the largest and most navigable rivers in the world, it could not fail in a few years to become one of the largest cities in the world. So said the advertisement. There were maps of the new city everywhere, and on these were represented theatres, and banks, and court-houses, and churches of different religious denominations. There were lots offered for sale, and, along with these, small tracts of land adjoining the town – so that the inhabitants might combine the occupations of merchant and agriculturist. These lots were offered very cheap, thought I; and I did not rest, night nor day, until I had purchased one of them, and also a small farm in the adjacent country.

"Almost as soon as I had made the purchase, I set out to take possession. Of course, I took with me my wife and children. I had now three – the two eldest being twins and about nine years old. I did not intend to return to Virginia any more. Our faithful Cudjo accompanied us to our far Western home.

"It was a severe journey, but not so severe as the trial that awaited us on our arrival at 'Cairo.' As soon as I came within sight of the place, I saw, to use an expressive phrase, that I had been 'sold' again. There was but one house, and that stood upon the only ground that was not a swamp. Nearly the whole site of the proposed city was under water, and the part not wholly inundated consisted of a dark morass, covered with trees and tall reeds! There were no theatres, no churches, no court-houses, no banks, nor any likelihood there ever would be, except such as might be built to keep back the water from the only house in the place – a sort of rough hotel, filled with swearing boatmen.

"I had landed, of course; and, after putting up at the hotel, proceeded in search of my 'property.' I found my town-lot in a marsh, which took me over the ankles in mud. As for my farm, I was compelled to get a boat to visit it; and after sailing all over it without being able to touch bottom, I returned to the hotel, heartless and disgusted.

"By the next steamboat that came along, I embarked for Saint Louis – where I sold both lot and farm for a mere trifle.

"I need not say that I was mortified at all this. I was almost heart-broken when I reflected on my repeated failures, and thought of my young wife and children. I could have bitterly cursed both America and the Americans, had that been of any use; and yet such a thing would have been as unjust as immoral. It is true I had been twice outrageously swindled; but the same thing had happened to me in my own country, and I had suffered in the same way by those who professed to be my friends. There are bad men in every country – men willing to take advantage of generosity and inexperience. It does not follow that all are so; and we hope far less than the half – for it must be remembered that the bad points of one country are more certain to be heard of in another than its good ones. When I look to the schemes and speculations which have been got up in England, and which have enriched a few accomplished rogues, by the ruin of thousands of honest men, I cannot, as an Englishman, accuse our American cousins of being greater swindlers than ourselves. It is true I have been deceived by them, but it was from the want of proper judgment in myself, arising from a foolish and ill-directed education. I should have been equally ill-treated in the purchase of a horse at Tattersall's, or a pound of tea in Piccadilly, had I been equally unacquainted with the value of the articles. We both, as nations, have erred. Neither of us can, with grace, cast a stone at the other; and as for myself, why, look there!" said Rolfe, smiling and pointing to his family, "two of my children only are Englishmen; the others are little Yankees. Almost every Englishman can say something similar. Why, then, should we sow jealousy between them?"

Chapter Seven.
The Caravan and its Fate

Our host continued: —

"Well, my friends, I was in Saint Louis. I had now left out of my three thousand pounds not quite an hundred; and this would soon melt away should I remain idle. What was I to do?

"There happened to be a young Scotchman at the hotel where I had put up. He was, like myself, a stranger in Saint Louis; and being from the 'old country,' we soon became acquainted, and, very naturally under the circumstances, shared each other's confidence. I told him of my blunders in Virginia and Cairo, and I believe that he really felt sympathy for me. In return, he detailed to me part of his past history, and also his plans for the future. He had been for several years employed in a copper mine, away near the centre of the Great American Desert, in the mountains called Los Mimbres, that lie west of the Del Norte river.

"They are a wonderful people these same Scotch. They are but a small nation, yet their influence is felt everywhere upon the globe. Go where you will, you will find them in positions of trust and importance – always prospering, yet, in the midst of prosperity, still remembering, with strong feelings of attachment, the land of their birth. They manage the marts of London – the commerce of India – the fur trade of America – and the mines of Mexico. Over all the American wilderness you will meet them, side by side with the backwoods-pioneer himself, and even pushing him from his own ground. From the Gulf of Mexico to the Arctic Sea, they have impressed with their Gaelic names rock, river, and mountain; and many an Indian tribe owns a Scotchman for its chief. I say, again, they are a wonderful people.

"Well; my Saint Louis Scotchman had come from his mine upon a visit of business to the United States, and was now on his return by Saint Louis and Santa Fé. His wife was along with him – a fine-looking, young Mexican woman, with only one child. He was waiting for a small caravan of Spanish people, who were about to start for New Mexico. With these he intended to travel, so as to be in safety from the Indians along the route.

"As soon as he understood my situation, he advised me to accompany him – offering me a lucrative situation in the mine, of which he was the sole manager.

"Disgusted as I then was with the treatment I had received in the United States, I embraced his proposal with alacrity; and, under his superintendence, I set about making preparations for the long journey that lay before us. The money I had left, enabled me to equip myself in a tolerable manner. I bought a wagon and two pair of stout oxen. This was to carry my wife and children, with such furniture and provisions as would be necessary on the journey. I had no need to hire a teamster, as our faithful Cudjo was to accompany us, and I knew there was no better hand to manage a team of oxen than Cudjo. For myself I purchased a horse, a rifle, with all the paraphernalia that are required by those who cross the great prairies. My boys, Harry and Frank, had also a small rifle each, which we had brought with us from Virginia: and Harry was very proud of the manner in which he could handle his.

"Everything being prepared, we bade adieu to Saint Louis, and set forth upon the wild prairies.

"Ours was but a small caravan, as the large one which crosses annually to Santa Fé had taken its departure some weeks before. There were about twenty men of us, and less than half that number of wagons. The men were nearly all Mexicans, who had been to the United States to procure some pieces of cannon, for which they had been sent by the governor of Santa Fé. They had the cannon along with them – two brass howitzers, with their carriages and caissons.

"My friends, I need not tell you the various incidents that befell us, in crossing the great plains and rivers that lie between Saint Louis and Santa Fé. Upon the plains we fell in with the Pawnees; and near the crossing of the Arkansas, we encountered a small tribe of Cheyennes; but neither of these

bands offered us any molestation. When we were nearly two months on our journey, the party left the usual trail taken by the traders, and struck across to one of the head tributaries of the Canadian river. This they did to avoid meeting the Arapahoes, who were hostile to the Mexican people. We kept down the banks of this stream as far as the Canadian itself; and, then turning westward, travelled up the latter. We travelled upon the right or southern bank, for we had forded the Canadian on reaching it.

"It soon became apparent that we had got into a very rough and difficult country. It was the morning of the second day, after we had turned westward up the Canadian river. We were making but slow progress, as the trail we had to follow was intersected at frequent intervals with 'arroyos' running into the river from the south. Many of these were deep ditches, although quite dry; and every now and then we were compelled to stop the whole train until we levelled in the banks, and made a road for the wagons to pass.

"In crossing one of these ruts, the tongue of my wagon was broken; and Cudjo and I, having loosed out the oxen, set about splicing it the best way we could. The rest of the train was ahead of us, and kept moving on. My friend, the young Scotchman, seeing that we had stopped, came galloping back, and offered to remain and assist us. I declined his offer, telling him to move on with the rest, as I would easily overtake them; at all events, I would get up, whenever they halted for their night camp. It was not unfrequent for a single wagon, with its attendants, thus to stay behind the rest, to make some repairs. When it did not come up to the night encampment, a party would go back early the next morning to ascertain the cause of the delay. For several years, before the time I am telling you about, there had been no trouble with the Indians in crossing the prairies; and consequently the people of the caravans had grown less cautious. Besides, we were then in a part of the country where Indians had been seldom seen – as it was an extremely desert place, without grass or game of any description. On this account – and knowing that Cudjo was an excellent carpenter – I had no fears but that I could be up with the others before night. So, by my persuasion, the young Scotchman left me, and rode on to look after his own wagons.

"After about an hour's hammering and splicing, Cudjo and I got the tongue all right again; and 'hitching up' the oxen, we drove on after our companions. We had not gone a mile, when the shoeing of one of the wheels – that had shrunk from the extreme dryness of the atmosphere – rolled off; and the felloes came very near flying asunder. We were luckily able to prevent this, by suddenly stopping, and setting a prop under the body of the wagon. This, as you may perceive, was a much more serious accident than the breaking of the tongue; and at first I thought of galloping forward, and asking some of our companions to come back to my assistance. But in consequence of my inexperience upon the prairies, I knew that I had given them considerable trouble along the route, at which some of them had murmured – being Mexicans – and in one or two instances had refused to assist me. I might bring back the young Scotchman, it was true, but – 'Come!' cried I, 'it is not yet as bad as Cairo. Come, Cudjo! we shall do it ourselves, and be indebted to no one.'

"'Dat's right, Massa Roff!' replied Cudjo; 'ebery man put him own shoulder to him own wheel, else de wheel no run good.'

"And so the brave fellow and I stripped off our coats, and set to work in earnest. My dear Mary here, who had been brought up a delicate lady, but could suit herself gracefully to every situation, helped us all she could, cheering us every now and then with an allusion to Cairo, and our farm under the water. It has always a comforting effect, to persons in situations of difficulty to reflect that they might still be worse off, and such reflections will often prop up the drooping spirits, and lead to success in conquering the difficulty. 'Never give up' is a good old motto, and God will help them who show perseverance and energy.

"So did it happen with us. By dint of wedging and hammering we succeeded in binding the wheel as fast as ever; but it was near night before we had finished the job. When we had got it upon the axle again, and were ready for the road, we saw, with some apprehension, that the sun was setting.

We knew we could not travel by night, not knowing what road to take; and, as we were close to water, we resolved to stay where we were until morning.

"We were up before day, and, having cooked and eaten our breakfast, moved forward upon the track made by the caravan. We wondered that none of our companions had come back during the night – as this is usual in such cases, – but we expected *every* moment to meet some of them returning to look after us. We travelled on, however, until noon, and still none of them appeared. We could see before us a rough tract of country with rocky hills, and some trees growing in the valleys; and the trail we were following evidently led among these.

"As we pushed forward, we heard among the hills a loud crashing report like the bursting of a bombshell. What could it mean? We knew there were some shells along with the howitzers. Were our comrades attacked by Indians, and was it one of the cannon they had fired upon them? No; that could not be. There was but one report, and I knew that the discharge of a shell from a howitzer must give two, – that which accompanies the discharge, and then the bursting of the bomb itself. Could one of the shells have burst by accident? That was more likely; and we halted, and listened for further sounds. We stopped for nearly half an hour, but could hear nothing, and we then moved on again. We were filled with apprehension – less from the report we had heard, than from the fact that none of the men had come back to see what delayed us. We still followed the track of the wagons. We saw that they must have made a long march on the preceding day, for it was near sunset when we entered among the hills, and as yet we had not reached their camp of the night before. At length we came in sight of it, – and oh! horror! what a sight! My blood runs cold when I recall it to my memory. There were the wagons – most of them with their tilts torn off, and part of their contents scattered over the ground. There were the cannons too, with fires smouldering near them, but not a human being was in sight! Yes, there were human beings – dead men lying over the ground! and living things – wolves they were – growling, and quarrelling, and tearing the flesh from their bodies! Some of the animals that had belonged to the caravan were also prostrate – dead horses, mules, and oxen. The others were not to be seen.

"We were all horror-struck at the sight. We saw at once that our companions had been attacked and slaughtered by some band of savage Indians. We would have retreated, but it was now too late, for we were close in to the camp, before we had seen it. Had the savages still been upon the ground, retreat would be of no avail. But I knew that they must have gone some time, from the havoc the wolves had made in their absence.

"I left my wife by our wagon, where Harry and Frank remained with their little rifles ready to guard her, and along with Cudjo I went forward to view the bloody scene. We chased the wolves from their repast. There was a pack of more than fifty of these hideous animals, and they only ran a short distance from us. On reaching the ground we saw that the bodies were those of our late comrades, but they were all so mutilated that we could not distinguish a single one of them. They had every one been scalped by the Indians; and it was fearful to look upon them as they lay. I saw the fragments of one of the shells that had burst in the middle of the camp, and had torn two or three of the wagons to pieces. There had not been many articles of merchandise in the wagons, as it was not a traders' caravan; but such things as they carried, that could be of any value to the Indians, had been taken away. The other articles, most of them heavy and cumbersome things, were lying over the ground, some of them broken. It was evident the savages had gone off in a hurry. Perhaps they had been frightened by the bursting of the shell, not knowing what it was, and from its terrible effects – which they no doubt witnessed and felt – believing it to be the doing of the Great Spirit.

"I looked on all sides for my friend, the young Scotchman, but I could not distinguish his body from the rest. I looked around, too, for his wife – who was the only woman besides Mary that accompanied the caravan. Her body was not to be seen. 'No doubt,' said I to Cudjo, 'the savages have carried her off alive.' At this moment we heard the howls and hoarse worrying of dogs, with the fiercer snarling of wolves, as though the dogs were battling with these animals. The noises came from

a thicket near the camp. We knew that the miner had brought with him two large dogs from Saint Louis. It must be they. We ran in the direction of the thicket, and dashed in among the bushes. Guided by the noises, we kept on, and soon came in sight of the objects that had attracted us. Two large dogs, foaming and torn and covered with blood, were battling against several wolves, and keeping them off from some dark object that lay among the leaves. We saw that the dark object was a woman, and clinging around her neck, and screaming with terror, was a beautiful child! At a glance we saw that the woman was dead, and – ”

Here the narrative of our host was suddenly interrupted. McKnight, the miner, who was one of our party, and who had appeared labouring under some excitement during the whole of the recital, suddenly sprang to his feet, exclaiming —

“O God! my wife – my poor wife! Oh! Rolfe – Rolfe – do you not know me?”

“McKnight!” cried Rolfe, springing up with an air of astonishment, “McKnight! it is he indeed!”

“My wife! – my poor wife!” continued the miner, in accents of sorrow. “I knew they had killed her. I saw her remains afterwards – but my child! Oh, Rolfe! what of my child?”

“She is *there*!” said our host, pointing to the darkest of the two girls, and the next moment the miner had lifted the little Luisa in his arms, and was covering her with his kisses. He was her father!

Chapter Eight.
The Miner's Story

It would be very difficult, my young readers, to describe to you the scene which followed this unexpected recognition. The family had all risen to their feet, and with cries and tears in their eyes clung around the little Luisa as though they were about to lose her for ever. And, indeed, it is likely that an indistinct thought of this kind had flitted across their minds, when they saw that she was no longer their sister – for they had almost forgotten that she was not so, and they loved her as well as if she had been. Up to this time none of them had thought of her but as a sister; and Harry, with whom she was a great favourite, used to call her his "dark sister," while the younger, Mary, was known as the "fair" one in the midst of the group stood the little brunette, like the rest, overwhelmed with singular emotions, but calmer, and apparently more mistress of her feelings, than any of them.

The traders and hunters were all upon their feet congratulating McKnight on the happy discovery; while each of them shook hands with our host and his wife, whom they now remembered having heard of, as well as the story of the massacre. Old Cudjo leaped over the floor, whipping the panthers and wolf-dogs, and cutting various capers, while the very animals themselves howled with a sort of fierce joy. Our host went into an inner apartment of the cabin, and presently returned with a large jar of brown earthenware. Cups cut out of the calabash were set upon the table; and into these a red liquid was poured from the jar, and we were all invited to drink. What was our surprise on tasting the beverage to find that it was wine – wine in the middle of the desert! But it was so – excellent wine – homemade, as our host informed us – pressed from the wild muscadine grapes that grew plentifully in his valley.

As soon as we had all passed the cups of wine, and had got fairly seated again, McKnight, at the request of Rolfe, took up the thread of the story, in order to detail how he had escaped from the Indians on that fearful night. His story was a short one and ran as follows: —

"After I left you," said he, addressing Rolfe, "where you had broken your wagon, I rode on, and overtook the caravan. The road, as you may remember, became smooth and level; and as there appeared to be no good camping-ground nearer than the hills, we kept on for them without stopping. It was near sundown, when we reached the little stream where you saw the wagons. There, of course, we halted, and formed our camp. I did not expect you to come in for an hour or so later, as I calculated that it would take you about that length of time to mend the tongue. We kindled fires, and, having cooked our supper and eaten it, were sitting around the logs chatting, smoking, and some of the Mexicans, as is their custom, playing at *monte*. We had put out no guard, as we had no expectation that there were Indians in that quarter. Some of the men said they had travelled the trail before; and had never met an Indian within fifty miles of the place. At length it became dark, and I began to grow uneasy about you, fearing you might not be able to make out our trail in the night. Leaving my wife and child by one of the fires I climbed a hill that looked in the direction you should have come; but I could see nothing for the darkness. I stood for some time listening, thinking I might hear the rattle of your wheels, or some one of you talking. All at once a yell broke upon my ears, that caused me to turn toward the camp with a feeling of consternation. I well knew the meaning of that yell. I knew it was the war-cry of the Arapahoes. I saw savage figures dashing about in the red glare of the fires. I heard shots and shouts, and screams and groans; and, among the rest, I recognised the voice of my wife calling me by name!

"I did not hesitate a moment, but ran down the hill, and flung myself into the thick of the fight, which was now raging fiercely. I had nothing with which to arm myself but a large knife, with which I struck on all sides, prostrating several of the savages. Here I fought for a moment, and there I ran, calling for my wife. I passed through among the wagons, and on all sides of the camp crying, 'Luisa!'

There was no answer; she was nowhere to be seen. Again I was face to face with painted savages, and battling with desperation. Most of my comrades were soon killed, and I was forced among the bushes, and into the darkness, by one of the Indians, who pressed upon me with his spear. I felt the weapon pass through my thigh, and I fell impaled upon the shaft. The Indian fell above me; but, before he could struggle up again, I had thrust him through with my knife, and he lay senseless.

"I rose to my feet, and succeeded in drawing out the spear. I saw that the struggle had ceased around the fires; and, believing that my comrades, as well as my wife and child, were all dead, I turned my back upon the fires, and stole off into the thicket, determined to get as far as possible from the camp. I had not gone more than three hundred yards when I fell, exhausted with the loss of blood and the pain of my wound. I had fallen near some rocks at the bottom of a precipice, where I saw there was a small crevice or cave. I had still strength enough left to enable me to reach this cave, and crawl into it; but I fainted as soon as the effort was over.

"I must have lain insensible for many hours. When I came to consciousness again, I saw that daylight was shining into the cave. I felt that I was very weak, and could scarcely move. My ghastly wound stared me in the face, – still undressed, but the blood had ceased flowing of its own accord. I tore up my shirt, and dressed it as well as I was able; and then, getting nearer to the mouth of the cave, I lay and listened. I could hear the voices of the Indians, though very indistinctly, in the direction of the camp. This continued for an hour or more; and then the rocks rang with a terrible explosion, which I knew to be the bursting of a shell. After that I could hear loud shouts, and soon after, the hurried trampling of many horses; and then all was silence. I thought at the time that the Indians had taken their departure; but I knew not what had caused them to go off in such a hurry. I found out afterwards. Your conjecture was right. They had thrown one of the bombs into the fire, and the fuse catching, had caused it to explode, killing several of their number. As they believed it to be the hand of the Great Spirit, they had hastily gathered up such plunder as was most desirable to them, and ridden away from the spot. I did not know this at the time, and I lay still in my cave. For several hours all was silence; but, as night drew near, I fancied I again heard noises about the camp, and I thought the Indians might not yet be gone.

"When darkness came, I would have crawled toward the camp, but I could not; and I lay all night in the cave, chafing with the pain of my wound, and listening to the howling of the wolves. That was a terrible night.

"Morning dawned again, and I could hear no sounds. I was now suffering dreadfully, both from hunger and thirst. I saw a well-known tree growing in front of the cave. I knew it, because the same tree is found upon the mountains of the Mimbres, near our mine. It was a species of pine, called by the Mexicans 'piñon,' whose cones afford food to thousands of the miserable savages who roam over the great western Desert from the Rocky Mountains to California. If I could only reach this tree, I might find some of its nuts upon the ground; and, with this hope, I dragged myself painfully out of the cave. It was not twenty paces from the rocks where the tree grew; yet, with my weakness and the pain of my wound, I was nearly half an hour in reaching it. To my joy, I found the ground under it covered with cones. I was not long in stripping off the rinds of many of them, and getting the seeds, which I ate greedily, until I had satisfied my hunger.

"But another appetite far more terrible was craving me – I was tortured with thirst. Could I crawl as far as the camp? I knew that there I should find water in the stream; and, from the position of the cave, I knew I could not find it nearer. I must either reach it or die; and, with this thought to spur me on, I commenced the short journey of three hundred yards, although I was not certain I might live to see the end of it. I had not crawled six paces through the underwood, when a bunch of small white flowers attracted my attention. They were the flowers of the sorrel-tree – the beautiful lyonia – the very sight of which sent a thrill of gladness through my heart. I was soon under the tree, and, clutching one of its lowermost branches, I stripped it of its smooth, serrated leaves, and eagerly chewed them. Another and another branch were successively divested of their foliage, until the little

tree looked as if a flock of goats had been breakfasting upon it. I lay for nearly an hour masticating the soft leaves, and swallowing their delicious and acid juice. At length my thirst was alleviated, and I fell asleep under the cool shadow of the lyonia.

"When I awoke again, I felt much stronger, and with new appetite to eat. The fever which had begun to threaten me was much allayed; and I knew this was to be attributed to the virtue of the leaves I had eaten – for besides relieving thirst, the sap of the sorrel-tree is a most potent febrifuge. Gathering a fresh quantity of the leaves, and tying them together, I again set out for the piñon-tree. I took the leaves with me, so that I should not have to make the return trip to the sorrel that night again. In a few minutes I had reached the end of my journey, and was busy among the cones. You laugh at my calling it a journey; but I assure you it was a most painful one to me, although it was not ten paces from one tree to the other. The slightest motion agonised me.

"That night I passed under the piñon, and in the morning, having made my breakfast of the seeds, I collected my pockets full, and set out again for the sorrel-tree. Here I spent the day; and with a fresh cargo of leaves returned at night to the piñon, where I again slept.

"Thus, for four successive days and nights, I passed between these two brave trees, living upon the sustenance they afforded. The fever was luckily warded off by the leaves of the friendly lyonia. My wound began to heal, and the pain left it. The wolves came at intervals; but, seeing my long knife, and that I still lived, they kept at a wary distance.

"Although the leaves of the sorrel assuaged my thirst, they did not satisfy it. I longed for a good draught of water; and, on the fourth day, I set out for the stream. I was now able to creep upon my hands and one knee, dragging the wounded limb after me. When I had got about half-way through the underwood, I came upon an object that almost congealed the blood in my veins. It was a human skeleton. I knew it was not that of a man – I knew it was – "

Here the voice of the miner became choked with sobs, and he was unable to finish the sentence. Nearly all in the room – even the rude hunters – wept as they beheld his emotion. After an effort he continued: —

"I saw that she had been buried; and I wondered at this, for I knew the Indians had not done it. I was never certain until this hour who had performed for her that sacred rite. I thought, however, it must have been you; for after I had recovered I went back upon the trail; and, not finding your wagon anywhere, I knew you must have come on to the camp, and gone away again. I looked in every direction to find which way you had gone; but, as you will remember, there was a heavy fall of rain shortly after, and that had obliterated every track. All this happened after I was able to get upon my feet, which was not for a month after the night of the massacre. But let me go back in my narrative to where I had found the remains of my poor wife.

"The wolves had torn the body from its grave. I looked for some vestige of my child. With my hands I dug down into the loose mould and leaves, which you had thrown over her body; but no infant was there. I crawled on to the camp. I found that, just as you have described it – except that the bodies were now bleaching skeletons, and the wolves had taken their departure. I searched around, on all sides, thinking I might find some traces of my little Luisa; but in vain. 'The Indians have either carried the child away,' thought I, 'or the fierce wolves have devoured it altogether.'

"In one of the wagons I found an old mess-chest lying hid under some rubbish. It had escaped the hurried plunder of the savages. On opening it, I saw that it contained, among other things, some coffee and several pounds of jerked meat. This was a fortunate event, for the meat and coffee nourished me, until I was able to gather a sufficient quantity of the piñons.

"In this way I spent a whole month, sleeping in one of the wagons at night, and crawling off to collect piñons during the day. I had but little fear that the Indians would return; for I knew that that part of the country was not inhabited by any tribe; and we must have fallen in with a party of the Arapahoes, wandering out of their usual range. As soon as I grew strong enough, I dug a grave,

where I interred the remains of my poor wife; and now I began to think of taking my leave of that melancholy scene.

"I knew that I was not much more than a hundred miles distant from the eastern settlements of New Mexico; but a hundred miles of uninhabited wilderness, and on foot, was a barrier that seemed almost as impassable as the ocean itself. I was determined, however, to make the attempt; and I set about sewing a bag in which I should carry my roasted piñons – the only provision I could get to sustain me through the journey.

"While engaged in this operation, with my eyes fixed upon the work, I heard footsteps near me. I raised my head suddenly, and in alarm. What was my joy, when I saw that the object which had startled me was neither more nor less than a mule, that was slowly coming towards the camp! I recognised it as one of the mules that had belonged to our caravan.

"The animal had not yet observed me; and I thought it might shy away, if I showed myself too suddenly. I resolved, therefore, to capture it by stratagem. I crept into the wagon, where I knew there was a lazo; and having got hold of this, I placed myself in ambush, where I saw the mule would most likely pass. I had scarcely got the noose ready, when, to my extreme satisfaction, the mule came directly to where I lay expecting it. The next moment its neck was firmly grasped in the loop of the lazo, and the animal itself stood tied to the tongue of one of the wagons. It was one of our mules that had escaped from the Indians, and after wandering over the country for weeks had now found the track, and would, no doubt, had I not caught it, have found its way back to Saint Louis; for this is by no means an unfrequent occurrence with animals that stray off from the caravans. It soon became tame with me, and in a few days more I had manufactured a bridle and saddle; and, mounting with my bag of roasted piñons, I rode off on the trail for Santa Fé. In about a week I reached that place in safety, and continued my journey southward to the mine.

"My history since that time can have but little interest for any of you. It is that of a man sorrowing for the loss of all he loved on earth. But you, Rolfe, you have given me new life in restorer; to me my child, my Luisa; and every chapter of your history, woven as it is with hers, will be to me, at least, of the deepest interest. Go on then, – go on!"

With this the miner concluded; and our host, after inviting each of us to re-fill our cups with wine, and our pipes with tobacco, resumed his narrative where he had left it off, in consequence of the happy, but unexpected episode, to which it had led.

Chapter Nine.
Lost in the Desert

"Well, my friends," proceeded our host, "it was a terrible sight to look upon – those fierce, gaunt wolves – the mad and foaming mastiffs – the dead mother, and the terrified and screaming child. Of course, the wolves fled at the approach of myself and Cudjo, and the dogs whimpered with delight. Well they might, poor brutes! for had we not come to their aid, they could not have held out much longer against such fearful odds. Although the battle had not been a long one, and commenced most likely after we had driven the wolves from the camp, yet the poor mastiffs were torn and bleeding in many places. As I stooped down to take up the little Luisa, she still clung close around the neck of her mother, crying for her 'mamma' to awake. I saw that her mamma would never wake again. She was lifeless and cold. There was an arrow in her breast. It was plain, that after receiving this wound she had fled into the thicket – no doubt followed by the faithful dogs – and, favoured by the darkness, had kept on, until she had fallen and died. The position of her arms showed that she had breathed her last clasping her child to her bosom.

"Leaving Cudjo to guard the body, I carried the child back to my own wagon. Although so lately terrified with the battle of the wolves and dogs, the little creature cried at being separated from its mother, and struggled in my arms to be taken back."

Here Rolfe's narrative was again interrupted by the sobs of McKnight, who – although a firm, lion-hearted man – could not restrain himself on listening to these painfully affecting details. The children of Rolfe, too, repeatedly wept aloud. The "dark sister" herself seemed least affected of all. Perhaps that terrible scene, occurring at such an early period of her life, had impressed her character with the firmness and composure which afterwards marked it. Every now and then she bent towards the "fair one," throwing her arms around the neck of the latter, and endeavouring to restrain her tears.

"I gave the child to my wife," continued Rolfe, after a pause, "and in the company of little Mary, then about her own age, she soon ceased crying, and fell asleep in my wife's bosom. I took a spade which I had in my wagon, and going back dug a grave; and, with the help of Cudjo, hastily interred the body. I say *hastily*, for we did not know the moment we might stand in need of some one to do as much for ourselves. It seems that our labour was in vain; yet even had we known this was to be the case, we should not the less have acted as we did. There was some satisfaction in performing this last sacred and Christian ceremony for our murdered friend; and both Cudjo and I felt it to be nothing more than our duty.

"We did not remain any longer near the spot, but hastening back to our wagon, I led the oxen in among some trees, where they might be hidden from view. Commending my wife and little ones to God, I shouldered my rifle, and set out – for the purpose of discovering whether the savages had left the place, and in what direction they had gone. It was my intention, should I be able to satisfy myself about the road they had taken, to go by some other course, yet by one that would bring me back into the trail, so that I could go on to the country of New Mexico. I knew very well that at that late season, and with oxen worn-out, as ours were, I could never get back to Saint Louis – which was nearly eight hundred miles distant.

"After proceeding a mile or two – creeping through bushes, and skulking behind rocks – I saw the trail of the Indians striking out into an open plain, in a due westerly direction. They must have formed a large band, and all mounted, as the tracks of their horses testified. Seeing that they had moved off westward, I formed the resolution of making two or three days' journey to the south, and afterwards turning in a westerly direction. This would most likely secure me from meeting them again, and would bring me, as I guessed, to the eastern ranges of the Rocky Mountains through which I might pass into the valley of New Mexico. I had heard my companions speak of a more southern

pass through these mountains, than that which lies near Santa Fé; and I hoped to be able to reach it, although I believed it to be two hundred miles distant. With these plans in my mind, I returned to where I had left my little party.

"It was night when I got back to the wagon, and I found Mary and the children in great distress at my delay; but I had brought them good news – that the Indians were gone away.

"I first thought of remaining all night where we were; but, not being yet fully satisfied that the Indians were gone, I changed my intention. Seeing that we were to have a moon, and that a smooth plain stretched away towards the south, I concluded that it would be better to make a night journey of it, and put twenty miles, if possible, between us and the camp. All agreed with this proposal. In fact, we were all equally anxious to get away from that fearful spot; and had we stayed by it, not one of us could have slept a wink. The apprehension that the savages might return, and the excited state of our feelings – to say nothing of the terrible howling of the wolves – would have kept us awake; so, resolving to take our departure, we waited for the rising of the moon.

"We did not waste time, my friends. You all know that water is the great want in these deserts, both for man and beast. We knew not where or when we might next find it; so we took the precaution to fill our vessels at the stream. We filled all we had that would hold water. Alas! these were not enough, as you shall hear.

"The moon rose at length. She seemed to smile upon the horrid picture that lay below at the deserted camp; but we stayed no longer to contemplate it. Leading our oxen out of their *cache*, we struck out into the open plain, in a direction as nearly south as I could guide myself. I looked northward for the star in the tail of the Little Bear – the polar star – which I soon found by the pointers of the Ursa Major; and keeping this directly on our backs, we proceeded on. Whenever the inequalities of the ground forced us out of our track, I would again turn to this little star, and consult its unfailing index. There it twinkled in the blue heavens like the eye of a friend. It was the finger of God pointing us onward.

"And onward we went – here creeping around some gaping fissure, that opened across our track – there wading over a sandy swell – and anon rolling briskly along the smooth, herbless plain; for the country we were passing through was a parched and treeless desert.

"We made a good night's journey of it, cheered by the prospect of escaping from the savages. When day broke, we were twenty miles from the camp. The rough hills that surrounded it were completely lost to our view, and we knew from this that we had travelled a long way; for some of these hills were of great height. We knew that we must have passed over a considerable arc of the earth's surface before their tops could have sunk below the horizon. Of course, some intervening ridges, such as the sandy swells I have mentioned, helped to hide them from our view; but, at all events, we had the satisfaction of knowing that the savages, even had they returned to the camp, could not now see us from that point. We only feared the chances of their discovering our tracks, and following us. Urged by this apprehension, we did not halt when the day broke, but kept on until near noontide. Then we drew up – for our oxen, as well as the horse, were completely tired out, and could go no farther without rest.

"It was but a poor rest for them – with neither grass nor water – not a blade of anything green except the *artemisia* plant, the wild wormwood – which, of course, neither horse nor oxen would touch. This grew all around us in low thickets. Its gnarled and twisted bushes, with their white silvery leaves, so far from gladdening the eye, only served to render the scene more dreary and desolate – for we knew that this plant denoted the extreme barrenness of the soil. We knew that, wherever it grew, the desert was around it.

"It was, indeed, but a poor rest for our animals – for the hot sun glanced down upon them during the noon hours, making them still more thirsty. We could not afford them a drop of the precious water; for we ourselves were oppressed with extreme thirst, and our stock was hourly diminishing. It was as much as we could to spare a small quantity to the dogs, Castor and Pollux.

"Long before night, we once more yoked to the oxen, and continued our journey, in the hope of reaching some stream or spring. By sunset we had made ten miles farther to the south, but no landmark as yet appeared in sight – nothing to indicate the presence of water. We could see nothing around us but the sterile plain stretching on all sides to the horizon – not even a bush, or rock, or the form of a wild animal, relieved the monotonous expanse. We were as much alone, as if we had been in an open boat in the middle of the ocean!

"We began to grow alarmed, and to hesitate. Should we go back? No, that would never do. Even had the prospect at the end of a backward journey been more cheering, we felt uncertain whether we might be able to reach the stream we had just left. We should surely reach water as soon by keeping forward; and with this thought we travelled on through all the livelong night.

"When morning came, I again surveyed the horizon, but could see no object along its level line. I was riding gloomily alongside the poor oxen, watching their laborious efforts, when a voice sounded in my ears. It was that of Frank, who was standing in the fore part of the wagon, looking out from under the tilt.

"'Papa! papa!' cried he, 'look at the pretty white cloud!'

"I looked up at the boy, to see what he meant. I saw that he was pointing to the south-east, and I turned my eyes in that direction. I uttered an exclamation of joy, which startled my companions; for I saw that what Frank had taken for a white cloud was the snowy cap of a mountain! I might have seen it before, had my eyes been searching in that quarter; but they were not, as I was examining the sky more towards the south and west.

"Guided by no very extraordinary experience, I knew that where there was snow there must be water; and, without another word, I directed Cudjo to head his oxen for the mountain. It was out of the way we wanted to go; but we thought not of that, for the saving of our lives had now come to be the only question with us.

"The mountain was still twenty miles distant. We could have seen it much farther off, but we had been travelling through the night. The question was, would our oxen be able to reach it? They were already tottering in their tracks. If they should break down, could we reach it? Our water was all gone, and we were suffering from thirst as the sun rose. A river, thought I, must run from the mountain, fed by the melting of its snows. Perhaps we might come to this river before arriving at the mountain-foot. But, no; – the plain evidently sloped down from us to the mountain. Whatever stream ran from it must go the other way. We should find no water before reaching the mountain – perhaps, not then; and, tortured with these doubts, we pushed gloomily forward.

"By noon the oxen began to give out. One of them fell dead, and we left him. The other three could not go much farther. Every article that was of no present use was thrown from the wagon to lighten it, and left lying on the plain; but still the poor brutes were scarce able to drag it along. We went at a snail's pace.

"A short rest might recruit the animals, but I could not bring myself to halt again, as my heart was agonised by the cries of my suffering children. Mary bore up nobly; so, too, did the boys. For myself, I could not offer a word of consolation, for I knew that we were still ten miles from the foot of the mountain. I thought of the possibility of riding on ahead, and bringing back some water in the vessels; but I saw that my horse could never stand it. He was even now unable to carry me, and I was afoot, leading him. Cudjo also walked by the side of the oxen. Another of these now gave up, and only two remained to drag the vehicle.

"At this terrible moment several objects appeared before us on the plain, that caused me to cry out with delight. They were dark-green masses, of different sizes – the largest of them about the size of a bee cap. They looked like a number of huge hedge hogs rolled up, and presenting on all sides their thorny spikes. On seeing them, I dropped my horse; and, drawing my knife, ran eagerly forward. My companions thought I had gone mad, not understanding why I should have drawn my

knife on such harmless-looking objects, and not knowing what they were. But I knew well what they were: I knew they were the *globe cacti*.

"In a moment's time I had peeled the spikelets from several of them; and as the wondering party came up, and saw the dark-green succulent vegetables, with the crystal water oozing out of their pores, they were satisfied that I had not gone mad.

"In a short while, we had cut the huge spheroids into slices, which we chewed with avidity. We set some of them also before the horse and oxen, both of which devoured them greedily, sap, fibres, and all; while the dogs lapped the cool liquid wherever they were cut.

"It is true, that this did not quench thirst, in the same way that a drink of water would have done; but it greatly relieved us, and would, perhaps, enable us to reach the mountain. We resolved to halt for a short while, in order to rest the oxen. Unfortunately, the relief had come too late for one of them. It had been his last stretch; and when we were about to start again, we found that he had lain down and was unable to rise. We saw that we must leave him; and, taking such harness as we could find, we put the horse in his place, and moved onward. We were in hopes of finding another little garden of cactus plants; but none appeared, and we toiled on, suffering as before.

"When we had got within about five miles of the mountain-foot, the other ox broke down, and fell – as we supposed – dead. We could take the wagon no farther; but it was no time either to hesitate or halt: we must try it afoot, or perish where we were.

"I loosed out the horse, and left him to his will – I saw he was no longer able to carry any of us. I took an axe from the wagon – also a tin-pot, and a piece of dry beef that still remained to us. Cudjo shouldered the axe and little Mary; I carried the beef, the pot, Luisa, and my rifle; while my wife, Frank, and Harry, each held something in their hands. Thus burdened, we bade adieu to the wagon, and struck off toward the mountain. The dogs followed; and the poor horse, not willing to be left behind, came tottering after.

"There is not much more of that journey to be detailed. We toiled through the five miles the best way we could. As we drew nearer to the mountain, we could see deep dark ravines running down its sides, and in the bottom of one we distinguished a silvery thread, which we knew was the foam of water as it dashed over the rocks. The sight gave us new energy, and in another hour we had reached the banks of a crystal stream, and were offering thanks for our deliverance."

Chapter Ten.
Adventure with an Armadillo

"Well, my friends, we had arrived on the banks of a rivulet, and were thanking God for bringing us safely there. We soon satisfied our thirst, as you may believe, and began to look around us. The stream we had reached was not that which runs into the valley here, but altogether on the other side of the mountain. It was but a mere rill, and I saw that several similar ones issued from the ravines, and after running a short distance into the plain, fell off toward the south-east, and united with others running from that side. I found afterwards that they all joined into the same channel, forming a considerable river, which runs from this elevated plain in an easterly direction; and which I take to be a head-water of the Great Red River of Louisiana, or perhaps of the Brazos, or Colorado, of Texas. I have called it a considerable river. That is not quite correct; for although, where they all unite, they form a good-sized body of water, yet twenty miles farther down, for three-fourths of the year the channel is perfectly dry; and that is the case I know not how far beyond. The water, which passes from the mountain at all times, is either evaporated by the hot sun, or sinks into the sands of its own bed, during a run of twenty miles. It is only in times of great rain – a rare occurrence here – or when very hot weather melts an unusual quantity of the snow, that there is water enough to carry the stream over a flat sandy tract which stretches away to the eastward. All these things I found out afterwards, and as you, my friends, know them to be common phenomena of the Desert, I shall not now dwell upon them.

"I saw that, where we were, there was but little chance of getting anything to eat. The sides of the mountain were rugged and grim, with here and there a stunted cedar hanging from the rocks. The small patches of grass and willows that lined the banks of the little rills – although cheering to the eye, when compared with the brown barrenness of the Desert – offered but little prospect that we should get any thing to eat there. If the Desert stretched away to the south of the mountain, as we saw that it did to the north, east, and west, then we had only reached a temporary resting-place, and we might still perish, if not from thirst, from what was equally bad – hunger.

"This was uppermost in our thoughts at the time, – for we had not eaten a morsel during that day; so we turned our attention to the piece of dried meat.

"'Let us cook it, and make a soup,' said Mary; 'that will be better for the children.' My poor wife! I saw that the extreme fatigue she had undergone had exhausted her strength, yet still she endeavoured to be cheerful.

"'Yes, papa, let us make soup; soup is very nice,' added Frank, trying to cheer his mother by showing that he was not dismayed.

"'Very well, then,' I replied. 'Come, Cudjo, shoulder your axe, and let us to the mountain for wood. Yonder are some pine-trees near the foot, – they will make an excellent fire.'

"So Cudjo and I started for the wood, which was growing about three hundred yards distant, and close in to the rocks where the stream came down.

"As we drew nearer to the trees, I saw that they were not pine-trees, but very different indeed. Both trunks and branches had long thorny spikes upon them like porcupine's quills, and the leaves were of a bright shining green, pinnate with small oval leaflets. But what was most singular was the long bean-shaped pods that hung down thickly from the branches. These were about an inch and a half in breadth, and some of them not less than twelve inches in length. They were of a reddish-brown, nearly a claret colour. Except in the colour, they looked exactly like large bean-pods filled with beans.

"I was not ignorant of what species of tree was before us. I had seen it before. I knew it was the honey-locust, or thorny acacia, – the carob-tree of the East, and the famed 'algarobo' of the Spaniards.

"I was not ignorant of its uses neither, – for I knew this to be the tree upon which (as many suppose) Saint John the Baptist sustained himself in the Desert, where it is said, 'his meat was locusts and wild honey.' Hence it is sometimes called, 'Saint John's bread.' Neither was Cudjo ignorant of its value. The moment his eyes rested upon the long brown legumes, he cried out, with gestures of delight: —

"'Massa – Massa Roff, lookee yonder! – beans and honey for supper!'

"We were soon under the branches: and while I proceeded to knock down and collect a quantity of the ripe fruit. Cudjo went farther up among the rocks, to procure his firewood from the pines that grew there.

"I soon filled my handkerchief, and was waiting for Cudjo, when I heard him shout, —

"'Massa Roff! come dis away, and see de varmint – what him be.'

"I immediately ran up among the rocks. On reaching the spot where Cudjo was, I found him bending over a crevice or hole in the ground, from which protruded an object very much like the tail of a pig.

"'What is it, Cudjo?' I asked.

"'Don't know, Massa. Varmint I never see in Vaginny – looks someting like de ole 'possum.'

"'Catch hold of the tail, and pull him out,' said I.

"'Lor! Massa Roff, I've tried ma best, but can't fetch 'im no how. Look yar!' And so saying, my companion seized the tail, and pulled – seemingly with all his might – but to no purpose.

"'Did you see the animal when it was outside?' I inquired.

"'Yes, Massa; see 'im and chase 'im 'till I tree him yar in dis cave.'

"'What was it like?'

"'Berry like a pig – maybe more belike ole 'possum, but cubberd all ober wi' shell like a Vaginny turtle.'

"'Oh! then – it is an armadillo.'

"'An amadiller! Cudjo niver hear o' dat varmint afore.'

"I saw that the animal which had so astonished my companion was one of those curious living things – which Nature, in giving variety to her creatures, has thought proper to form – and which are known throughout Mexico and South America by the name of 'armadilloes.' They are so called from the Spanish word 'armado,' which signifies armed – because all over their body there is a hard, shell-like covering divided into bands and regular figures, exactly like the coats-of-mail worn by the warriors of ancient times. There is even a helmet covering the head, connected with the other parts of the armour by a joint, which renders this resemblance still more complete and singular. There are many species of these animals; some of them as large as a full-sized sheep, but the generality of them are much smaller. The curious figuring of the shell that covers them differs in the different species. In some the segments are squares, in others hexagons, and in others, again, they are of a pentagonal shape. In all of them, however, the figures have a mathematical form and precision, that is both strange and beautiful. They look as though they were artificial, – that is, carved by the hand of man. They are harmless creatures, and most of the species feed upon herbs and grass. They do not run very nimbly, though they can go much faster than one would suppose, considering the heavy armour which they carry. This, however, is not all in one shell, but in many pieces connected together by a tough, pliable skin. Hence they can use their limbs with sufficient ease. They are not such slow travellers as the turtles and tortoises. When they are pursued and overtaken, they sometimes gather themselves into a round ball, as hedgehogs do; and if they should happen to be near the edge of a precipice they will roll themselves over to escape from their enemy. More often when pursued they betake themselves to their holes, or to any crevice among rocks that may be near; and this was evidently the case with that which Cudjo had surprised. When they can hide their heads, like the ostrich they fancy themselves safe; and so, no doubt, thought this one, until he felt the sinewy fingers of Cudjo grasping him by the tail. It was evident the animal had run into a shallow crack where he could get no farther, else we

would soon have lost sight of his tail; but it was equally evident, that pulling by that appendage was not the method to get him out. I could see that he had pushed the scaly armour outward and upward, so that it held fast against the rocks on every side. Moreover, his claws, which are remarkable both for length and tenacity, were clutched firmly against the bottom of the crevice. It would have taken a team of oxen to have pulled him out, as Cudjo remarked with a grin.

"I had heard of a plan used by the Indians who hunt the armadillo, and are very fond of his flesh; and as I was determined to try it, I told my companion to let go the tail, and stand to one side.

"I now knelt down in front of the cave, and, taking a small branch of cedar, commenced tickling the hind-quarters of the animal with the sharp needles. In a moment I saw that his muscles began to relax, as the shell to separate from the rocks, and close in toward his body. After continuing the operation for some minutes, I observed that he had reduced himself to his natural size, and had no doubt forgotten to keep a look-out with his claws. Seeing this, I seized the tail firmly; and, giving it a sudden jerk, swung the armadillo out between the feet of my companion. Cudjo aimed a blow with the axe which nearly severed its head from its body, and killed the animal outright. It was about the size of a rabbit, and proved to be of the eight-banded species – reckoned more delicious eating than any other.

"We now returned to camp with our firewood, our locust-beans, and our armadillo – the last of which horrified my wife, when I told her I was going to eat it. It proved a great curiosity to the boys, however, who amused themselves by running their fingers all over its mottled armour. But I had something that amused the little Mary and Luisa still more – the delicious, honey-like pulp from the pods of the locust-tree, which they greedily ate. The seeds we extracted from the pulp, intending to roast them as soon as we had kindled our fire.

"And now, my friends," continued Rolfe, rising to his feet, "since we have got to talking about this same locust-tree, I hope you will not refuse to try a mug of my home-brewed beer, which I made out of its beans this very day, while you were wandering about my grounds and through the valley. It is, perhaps, not equal to Barclay and Perkins'; but I flatter myself that, under the circumstances, you will not find it unpalatable."

Saying this, our host brought forward a large flagon, and pouring into our cups a brown-coloured liquid, set them before us. We all drank of the "locust beer," which was not unlike mead or new cider; and to prove that we liked it, we drank again and again.

This ceremony over Rolfe once more resumed his narrative.

Chapter Eleven.
A Very Lean Buffalo

"We were all soon engaged in different occupations. Mary was preparing the dried meat, which she intended to boil along with the locust-beans in our tin-pot. Fortunately, it was a large one, and held nearly a gallon. Cudjo was busy kindling the fire, which already sent up its volumes of blue smoke. Frank, Harry, and the little ones, were sucking away at the natural preserves of the acacia, while I was dressing my armadillo for the spit. In addition to this, our horse was filling out his sides upon the rich buffalo-grass that grew along the stream; and the dogs – poor fellows! they were like to fare worst of all – stood watching my operations, and snapped eagerly at every scrap that fell from my knife. In a very short while the fire was blazing up, the beef and beans were bubbling over it in the tin-pot, and the armadillo was sputtering on the spit beside them. In another short while all things were cooked and ready to be eaten.

"We now remembered that we had neither plates, glasses, knives, forks, nor spoons – yes, Cudjo and I had our hunting-knives; and, as it was no time to be nice, with these we fished the pieces of meat and some of the beans out of the soup-pot, and placed them upon a clean, flat stone. For the soup itself, we immersed the lower part of the pot into the cool water of the stream, so that in a short time Mary and the children could apply the edge of it to their lips, and drink of it in turn.

"As for Cudjo and myself, we did not want any of the soup. We were altogether for the 'substantials.'

"I thought, at first, I should have all the armadillo to myself. Even Cudjo, who in 'ole Vaginny' had bolted 'coons, 'possums, and various other 'varmints,' for a long time hung back. Seeing, however, that I was eating with evident relish, he held out his sable paw, and desired me to help him to a small piece. Having once tasted it, the ice of his appetite seemed to be all at once broken, and he kept asking for more, and then for more, until I began to fear he would not leave me enough for my own support.

"Neither Mary nor the boys, however, would consent to share with us, although I assured them, what was positively the fact, that what I was eating was equal in delicacy of flavour to the finest roast pig – a dish, by the way, to which the armadillo bears a very great resemblance.

"The sun was now setting, and we began to think how we were to pass the night. We had left all our blankets in the wagon, and the air was fast becoming cold, which is always the case in the neighbourhood of snowy mountains. This is easily explained. The atmosphere getting cool upon the peak, where it envelopes the snow, of course becomes heavier, and keeps constantly descending around the base of the mountain, and pushing up and out that air which is warmer and lighter. In fact, there was a sensible breeze blowing down the sides of the mountain – caused by these natural laws – and it had already made us chilly, after the burning heat through which we had been travelling. Should we sleep in this cold atmosphere – even though we should keep up a fire during the whole night – I knew that we must suffer much.

"The thought now entered my mind, that I might go back to the wagon – which was only five miles off – and bring up our blankets. Should I go myself, or send Cudjo, or should both of us go? All at once the idea came into my head that one of us might ride there, and bring back a load of other articles, as well as the blankets. Our horse, who had been filling himself for the last hour and a half with good grass and water, already began to show symptoms of life and vigour. Animals of this kind soon recover from fatigue, when their food and drink are restored to them. I saw that he would be quite able to do the journey, so I gave Cudjo directions to catch him. There happened to be a piece of rope around his neck, and this would serve for a bridle. I hesitated for some time, whether both Cudjo and I should leave Mary and the children; but my wife urged us to go, telling us she would have no fear, as long as Harry and Frank with their rifles remained with her. The dogs, too, would stay.

Indeed, there was not much danger of their leaving her, while she held in her arms the little Luisa, whom both these animals seemed to watch over.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.