

ALTSHELER
JOSEPH
ALEXANDER

THE TEXAN SCOUTS: A
STORY OF THE ALAMO
AND GOLIAD

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**The Texan Scouts: A Story
of the Alamo and Goliad**

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Joseph A. Altsheler
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FOREWORD

"The Texan Scouts," while a complete story in itself, continues the fortunes of Ned Fulton and his friends, who were the central characters in "The Texan Star."

CHAPTER I

IN THE STORM

The horseman rode slowly toward the west, stopping once or twice to examine the wide circle of the horizon with eyes that were trained to note every aspect of the wilderness. On his right the plains melted away in gentle swell after swell, until they met the horizon. Their brown surface was broken only by the spiked and thorny cactus and stray bits of chaparral.

On his left was the wide bed of a river which flowed through the sand, breaking here and there into several streams, and then reuniting, only to scatter its volume a hundred yards further into three or four channels. A bird of prey flew on strong wing over the water, dipped and then rose again, but there was no other sign of life. Beyond, the country southward rolled away, gray and bare, sterile and desolate.

The horseman looked most often into the south. His glances into the north were few and brief, but his eyes dwelled long on the lonely land that lay beyond the yellow current. His was an attractive face. He was young, only a boy, but the brow was broad and high, and the eyes, grave and steady, were those of one who thought much. He was clad completely in buckskin, and his hat was wide of brim. A rifle held in one hand lay across the pommel of his saddle and there were weapons in his belt. Two light, but warm, blankets, folded closely, were tied behind him. The tanned face and the lithe, strong figure showed a wonderful degree of health and strength.

Several hours passed and the horseman rode on steadily though slowly. His main direction was toward the west, and always he kept the river two or three hundred yards on his left. He never failed to search the plains on either side, but chiefly in the south, with the eager, intent gaze that missed nothing. But the lonesome gray land, cut by the coiling yellow river, still rolled before him, and its desolation and chill struck to his heart. It was the depth of the Texan winter, and, at times, icy gusts, born in far mountains, swept across the plains.

The rider presently turned his horse toward the river and stopped on a low bluff overlooking it. His face showed a tinge of disappointment, as if his eyes failed to find objects for which they sought. Again he gazed long and patiently into the south, but without reward.

He resumed his ride parallel with the river, but soon stopped a second time, and held up an open hand, like one who tests the wind. The air was growing perceptibly colder. The strong gusts were now fusing into a steady wind. The day, which had not been bright at any time, was turning darker. The sun was gone and in the far north banks of mists and vapor were gathering. A dreary moaning came over the plain.

Ned Fulton, tried and brave though he was, beheld the omens with alarm. He knew what they portended, and in all that vast wilderness he was alone. Not a human being to share the danger with him! Not a hand to help!

He looked for chaparral, something that might serve as a sort of shelter, but he had left the last clump of it behind, and now he turned and rode directly north, hoping that he might find some deep depression between the swells where he and his horse, in a fashion, could hide.

Meanwhile the Norther came down with astonishing speed. The temperature fell like a plummet. The moan of the wind rose to a shriek, and cold clouds of dust were swept against Ned and his horse. Then snow mingled with the dust and both beat upon them. Ned felt his horse shivering under him, and he shivered, too, despite his will. It had turned so dark that he could no longer tell where he was going, and he used the wide brim of his hat to protect himself from the sand.

Soon it was black as night, and the snow was driving in a hurricane. The wind, unchecked by forest or hill, screamed with a sound almost human. Ned dismounted and walked in the lee of his horse. The animal turned his head and nuzzled his master, as if he could give him warmth.

Ned hoped that the storm would blow itself out in an hour or two, but his hope was vain. The darkness did not abate. The wind rose instead of falling, and the snow thickened. It lay on the plain several inches deep, and the walking grew harder. At last the two, the boy and the horse, stopped. Ned knew that they had come into some kind of a depression, and the full force of the hurricane passed partly over their heads.

It was yet very dark, and the driving snow scarcely permitted him to open his eyes, but by feeling about a little he found that one side of the dip was covered with a growth of dwarf bushes. He led the horse into the lower edge of these, where some protection was secured, and, crouching once more in the lee of the animal, he unfolded the two blankets, which he wrapped closely about himself to the eyes.

Ned, for the first time since the Norther rushed down upon him, felt secure. He would not freeze to death, he would escape the fate that sometimes overtook lone hunters or travelers upon those vast plains. Warmth from the blankets began gradually to replace the chill in his bones, and the horse and the bushes together protected his face from the driven snow which had been cutting like hail. He even had, in some degree, the sense of comfort which one feels when safe inside four walls with a storm raging past the windows. The horse whinnied once and rubbed his nose against Ned's hand. He, too, had ceased to shiver.

All that afternoon the Norther blew with undiminished violence. After a while the fall of snow thinned somewhat, but the wind did not decrease. Ned was devoutly thankful for the dip and the bushes that grew within it. Nor was he less thankful for the companionship of his horse. It was a good horse, a brave horse, a great bay mustang, built powerfully and with sinews and muscles of steel. He had secured him just after taking part in the capture of San Antonio with his comrades, Obed White and the Ring Tailed Panther, and already the tie between horse and rider had become strong and enduring. Ned stroked him again, and the horse, twisting his neck around, thrust his nose under his arm.

"Good old boy! Good fellow!" said Ned, pinching his ear. "We were lucky, you and I, to find this place."

The horse neighed ever so gently, and rubbed his nose up and down. After a while the darkness began to increase. Ned knew that it was not a new development of the storm, but the coming of night, and he grew anxious again. He and his horse, however secure at the present moment, could not stay always in that dip among the bushes. Yet he did not dare to leave it. Above on the plain they would receive the full sweep of the wind, which was still bitterly cold.

He was worn by the continued buffetings of blast and snow, but he did not dare to lie down, even in the blankets, lest he never wake again, and while he considered he saw darker shadows in the darkness above him. He gazed, all attention, and counted ten shadows, following one another, a dusky file. He knew by the set of their figures, short and stocky, that they were Mexicans, and his heart beat heavily. These were the first Mexicans that any one had seen on Texan soil since the departure of Cos and his army on parole from captured San Antonio. So the Mexicans had come back, and no doubt they would return in great force!

Ned crouched lower, and he was very glad that the nose of the horse was still under his arm. He would not have a chance to whinny to his kind that bore the Mexicans. But the horse made no attempt to move, and Ned watched them pass on and out of sight. He had not heard the sound of footsteps or voices above the wind, and after they were gone it seemed to him that he had seen a line of phantoms.

But he was sure that his own mortal eyes had beheld that for which he was looking. He and his comrades had been watching the Rio Grande to see whether the Mexicans had crossed, and now he at least knew it.

He waited patiently three or four hours longer, until the wind died and the fall of snow ceased, when he mounted his horse and rode out of the dip. The wind suddenly sprang up again in about fifteen minutes, but now it blew from the south and was warm. The darkness thinned away as the moon and stars came out in a perfect sky of southern blue. The temperature rose many degrees in an hour and Ned knew that the snow would melt fast. All danger of freezing was past, but he was as hungry as a bear and tired to death.

He unwrapped the blankets from his body, folded them again in a small package which he made fast to his saddle, and once more stroked the nose of his horse.

"Good Old Jack," he murmured—he had called him Old Jack after Andrew Jackson, then a mighty hero of the south and west, "you passed through the ordeal and never moved, like the silent gentleman that you are."

Old Jack whinnied ever so softly, and rubbed his nose against the boy's coat sleeve. Ned mounted him and rode out of the dip, pausing at the top of the swell for a long look in every direction. The night was now peaceful and there was no noise, save for the warm wind that blew out of the south with a gentle sighing sound almost like the note of music. Trickle of water from the snow, already melting, ran down the crests. Lighter and lighter grew the sky. The moon seemed to Ned to be poised directly overhead, and close by. New stars were springing out as the last clouds floated away.

Ned sought shelter, warmth and a place in which to sleep, and to secure these three he felt that he must seek timber. The scouts whom he had seen were probably the only Mexicans north of the Rio Grande, and, as he believed, there was not one chance in a thousand of meeting such enemies again. If he should be so lucky as to find shelter he would sleep there without fear.

He rode almost due north for more than two hours, seeing patches of chaparral on both right and left. But, grown fastidious now and not thinking them sufficient for his purpose, he continued his northern course. Old Jack's feet made a deep sighing sound as they sank in the snow, and now there was water everywhere as that soft but conquering south wind blew steadily over the plain.

When he saw a growth of timber rising high and dark upon a swell he believed that he had found his place, and he urged his horse to renewed speed. The trees proved to be pecans, aspens and oaks growing so densely that he was compelled to dismount and lead Old Jack before they could force an entrance. Inside he found a clear space, somewhat like the openings of the north, in shape an irregular circle, but not more than fifteen feet across. Great spreading boughs of oaks had protected it so well that but little snow had fallen there, and that little had melted. Already the ground in the circle was drying.

Ned uttered an exclamation of relief and gratitude. This would be his camp, and to one used to living in the wilderness it furnished good shelter. At one edge of the opening was an outcropping of flat rock now quite dry, and there he would spread his bed. He unsaddled and unbridled his horse, merely tethering him with a lariat, and spread the horse blanket upon the flat rock. He would lie upon this and cover himself with his own blankets, using the saddle as a pillow.

But the security of the covert tempted the boy, who was now as hungry as a bear just come from winter quarters. He felt weak and relaxed after his long hours in the snow and storm, and he resolved to have warm food and drink.

There was much fallen wood among the trees, and with his strong hunting knife he whittled off the bark and thin dry shavings until he had a fine heap. Working long with flint and steel, he managed to set fire to the shavings, and then he fed the flames with larger pieces of wood until he had a great bed of glowing coals. A cautious wilderness rover, learning always from his tried friends, Ned never rode the plains without his traveling equipment, and now he drew from his pack a small tin coffee pot and tiny cup of the same material. Then with quick and skillful hands he made coffee over the coals and warmed strips of deer and buffalo meat.

He ate and drank hungrily, while the horse nibbled the grass that grew within the covert. Glorious warmth came again and the worn feeling departed. Life, youthful, fresh and abounding, swelled in every vein.

He now put out all the coals carefully, throwing wet leaves upon them, in order that not a single spark might shine through the trees to be seen by an enemy upon the plain. He relied upon the horse to give warning of a possible approach by man, and to keep away wolves.

Then he made his bed upon the rock, doing everything as he had arranged it in his mind an hour before, and, wrapped in his blankets, fell into the soundest of sleeps. The south wind still blew steadily, playing a low musical song among the trees. The beads of water on the twigs and the few leaves that remained dried fast. The grass dried, too, and beyond the covert the snow, so quick to come, was equally quick to go.

The horse ceased to nibble the grass, looked at the sleeping boy, touched his blankets lightly with his nose, and walked to the other side of the opening, where he lay down and went to his own horse heaven of sleep.

It was not many hours until day and Old Jack was a light sleeper. When he opened his eyes again he saw a clear and beautiful winter day of the far south. The only clouds in the sky were little drifting bits of fine white wool, and the warm wind still blew. Old Jack, who was in reality Young Jack, as his years were not yet four, did not think so much of the covert now, as he had already eaten away all the grass within the little opening but his sense of duty was strong. He saw that his human master and comrade still slept, apparently with no intention of awakening at any very early date, and he set himself to gleaning stray blades of grass that might have escaped his notice the night before.

Ned awoke a little after the noon hour, and sprang to his feet in dismay. The sun was almost directly over his head, showing him how late it was. He looked at his horse as if to reproach his good comrade for not waking him sooner, but Old Jack's large mild eyes gave him such a gaze of benignant unconcern that the boy was ashamed of himself.

"It certainly was not your fault," he said to his horse, "and, after all, it probably doesn't matter. We've had a long sound sleep and rest, and I've no doubt that both of us will profit by it. Nothing seems to be left in here for you to eat, but I'll take a little breakfast myself."

He did not relight the fire, but contented himself with cold food. Then resaddling, he left the grove and rode northward again until he came to a hill, or, rather, a swell, that was higher than the rest. Here he stopped his horse and took a glance at the sun, which was shining with uncommon brilliancy. Then he produced a small mirror from the pocket of his hunting shirt and held it in such a position that it made a focus of the sun's rays, throwing them in a perfect blazing lance of light.

He turned the flaming lance around the horizon, until it completed the circle and then he started around with it again. Meantime he was keeping a close watch upon every high point. A hill rose in the north, and he looked at it longest, but nothing came from it. There was another, but lower, hill in the west, and before he had completed the second round with his glass a light flashed from it. It was a brilliant light, almost like a sheaf of white incandescent rays. He lowered his own mirror and the light played directly upon his hill. When it ceased he sent back answering rays, to which, when he stopped, a rejoinder came in like fashion. Then he put the little mirror back in the safe pocket of his hunting shirt and rode with perfect confidence toward that western hill.

The crest that Ned sought was several miles away, although it looked much nearer in the thin clear air of the plains, but he rode now at increased speed, because there was much to draw him on. Old Jack seemed to share in his lightness of spirit, raising his head once and neighing, as if he were sending forth a welcome.

The boy soon saw two figures upon the hill, the shapes of horse and man, outlined in black against the sun, which was now declining in the west. They were motionless and they were exaggerated into gigantic stature against the red background. Ned knew them, although the distance was far too

great to disclose any feature. But signal had spoken truly to signal, and that was enough. Old Jack made a fresh burst of speed and presently neighed once more. An answering neigh came back from the hill.

Ned rode up the slope and greeted Obed White and the Ring Tailed Panther with outstretched hands.

"And it's you, my boy," said Obed, his eyes glistening. "Until we saw your signal we were afraid that you might have frozen to death in the Norther, but it's a long lane that has no happy ending, and here we are, all three of us, alive, and as well as ever."

"That's so," said the Panther, "but even when the storm was at its worst I didn't give up, Ned. Somehow, when things are at the blackest I'm always hopin'. I don't take any credit fur it. I was just born with that kind of a streak in me."

Ned regarded him with admiration. The Ring Tailed Panther was certainly a gorgeous object. He rode a great black horse with a flowing mane. He was clad completely in a suit of buckskin which was probably without a match on the border. It and his moccasins were adorned with thick rows of beads of many colors, that glittered and flashed as the sunlight played upon them. Heavy silver spurs were fastened to his heels, and his hat of broad brim and high cone in the Mexican fashion was heavy with silver braid. His saddle also was of the high, peaked style, studded with silver. The Panther noticed Ned's smile of appraisal and smiled back.

"Ain't it fine?" he said. "I guess this is about the beautifullest outfit to be found in either Texas or Mexico. I bought it all in honor of our victory just after we took San Antonio, and it soothes my eyes and makes my heart strong every time I look at it."

"And it helps out the prairies," said Obed White, his eyes twinkling. "Now that winter has made 'em brown, they need a dash of color and the Panther gives it to 'em. Fine feathers don't keep a man from being a man for a' that. What did you do in the storm, Ned?"

"I found shelter in a thick grove, managed to light a fire, and slept there in my blankets."

"We did about the same."

"But I saw something before I reached my shelter."

"What was that?" exclaimed the two, noting the significance in Ned's tone.

"While I was waiting in a dip I saw ten Mexican horsemen ride by. They were heavily armed, and I've no doubt they were scouts belonging to some strong force."

"And so they are back on this side of the Rio Grande," said Obed White thoughtfully. "I'm not surprised. Our Texans have rejoiced too early. The full storm has not burst yet."

The Panther began to bristle. A giant in size, he seemed to grow larger, and his gorgeous hunting suit strained at the seams.

"Let 'em come on," he said menacingly. "Let Santa Anna himself lead 'em. We Texans can take care of 'em all."

But Obed White shook his head sadly.

"We could if we were united," he said, "but our leaders have taken to squabbling. You're a Cheerful Talker, Panther, and you deserve both your names, but to tell you the honest truth I'm afraid of the Mexican advance."

"I think the Mexicans probably belonged to Urrea's band," said Ned.

"Very likely," said Obed. "He's about the most energetic of their partisan leaders, and it may be that we'll run against him pretty soon."

They had heard in their scouting along the Rio Grande that young Francisco Urrea, after the discovery that he was a spy and his withdrawal from San Antonio with the captured army of Cos, had organized a strong force of horsemen and was foremost among those who were urging a new Mexican advance into Texas.

"It's pretty far west for the Mexicans," said the Panther. "We're on the edge of the Indian country here."

But Obed considered it all the more likely that Urrea, if he meditated a raid, would come from the west, since his approach at that point would be suspected the least. The three held a brief discussion and soon came to an agreement. They would continue their own ride west and look for Urrea. Having decided so, they went into the task heart and soul, despite its dangers.

The three rode side by side and three pairs of skilled eyes examined the plain. The snow was left only in sheltered places or among the trees. But the further they went the scarcer became the trees, and before night they disappeared entirely.

"We are comin' upon the buffalo range," said the Panther. "A hundred miles further west we'd be likely to strike big herds. When we're through fightin' the Mexicans I'm goin' out there again. It's the life fur me."

The night came, dark and cold, but fortunately without wind. They camped in a dip and did not light any fire, lying as Ned had done the night before on their horse blankets and wrapping themselves in their own. The three horses seemed to be contented with one another and made no noise.

They deemed it wise now to keep a watch, as they might be near Urrea's band or Lipans might pass, and the Panther, who said he was not sleepy at all, became sentinel. Ned, although he had not risen until noon, was sleepy again from the long ride, and his eyes closed soon. The last object that he saw was the Panther standing on the crest of the swell just beyond them, rifle on shoulder, watching the moonlit plains. Obed White was asleep already.

The Panther walked back and forth a few times and then looked down at his comrades in the dip. His trained eyes saw their chests rising and falling, and he knew that they were far away in the land of Nowhere. Then he extended his walk back and forth a little further, scanning carefully the dusky plain.

A light wind sprang up after a while, and it brought a low but heavy and measured tread to his ears. The Panther's first impulse was to awaken his friends, because this might be the band of Urrea, but he hesitated a moment, and then lay down with his ear to the earth. When he rose his uneasiness had departed and he resumed his walk back and forth. He had heard that tread before many times and, now that it was coming nearer, he could not mistake it, but, as the measured beat indicated that it would pass to one side, it bore no threat for his comrades or himself.

The Panther did not stop his walk as from a distance of a few hundred yards he watched the great buffalo herd go by. The sound was so steady and regular that Ned and Obed were not awakened nor were the horses disturbed. The buffaloes showed a great black mass across the plain, extending for fully a mile, and they were moving north at an even gait. The Panther watched until the last had passed, and he judged that there were fully a hundred thousand animals in the herd. He saw also the big timber wolves hanging on the rear and flanks, ready to cut out stray calves or those weak from old age. So busy were the wolves seeking a chance that they did not notice the gigantic figure of the man, rifle on shoulder, who stood on the crest of the swell looking at them as they passed.

The Panther's eyes followed the black line of the herd until it disappeared under the northern rim of darkness. He was wondering why the buffaloes were traveling so steadily after daylight and he came to the conclusion that the impelling motive was not a search for new pastures. He listened a long time until the last rumble of the hundred thousand died away in a faint echo, and then he awakened his comrades.

"I'm thinkin'," he said, "that the presence of Urrea's band made the buffaloes move. Now I'm not a Ring Tailed Panther an' a Cheerful Talker for nothin', an' we want to hunt that band. Like as not they've been doin' some mischief, which we may be able partly to undo. I'm in favor of ridin' south, back on the herd track an' lookin' for 'em."

"So am I," said Obed White. "My watch says it's one o'clock in the morning, and my watch is always right, because I made it myself. We've had a pretty good rest, enough to go on, and what we find may be worth finding. A needle in a haystack may be well hid, but you'll find it if you look long enough."

They rode almost due south in the great path made by the buffalo herd, not stopping for a full two hours when a halt was made at a signal from the Panther. They were in a wide plain, where buffalo grass yet grew despite the winter, and the Panther said with authority that the herd had been grazing here before it was started on its night journey into the north.

"An' if we ride about this place long enough," he said, "we'll find the reason why the buffaloes left it."

He turned his horse in a circuit of the plain and Ned and Obed followed the matchless tracker, who was able, even in the moonlight, to note any disturbance of the soil. Presently he uttered a little cry and pointed ahead. Both saw the skeleton of a buffalo which evidently had been killed not long and stripped of its meat. A little further on they saw another and then two more.

"That tells it," said the Panther succinctly. "These buffaloes were killed for food an' most likely by Mexicans. It was the shots that set the herd to runnin'. The men who killed 'em are not far away, an' I'm not a Ring Tailed Panther an' a Cheerful Talker if they don't belong to Urrea's band."

"Isn't that a light?" said Ned, pointing to the west, "or is it a firefly or something of the kind?"

A glowing spark was just visible over the plain, but as it neither moved nor went out the three concluded that it was made by a distant fire.

"I think it's in chaparral or among trees," said Obed, "or we would see it more plainly. It's a poor camp fire that hides its light under a bushel."

"I think you're right an' it must be chaparral," said the Panther. "But we'll ride toward it an' soon answer our own questions."

The light was more than a mile away and, as they advanced slowly, they saw it grow in size and intensity. It was surely a campfire, but no sound that they could yet hear came from it. They did not expect to hear any. If it was indeed Urrea and his men they would probably be sleeping soundly, not expecting any foe to be near. The Panther now dismounted, and the other two did likewise.

"No need to show too high above the plain," he said, "an' if we have to run it won't take a second to jump back on our horses."

Ned did not take the bridle of his horse as the others did. He knew that Old Jack would follow as faithful as any dog to his master, and he was right. As they advanced slowly the velvet nose more than once pressed trustfully against his elbow.

They saw now that an extensive growth of chaparral rose before them, from the center of which the light seemed to be shining. The Panther lay down on the prairie, put his ear to the ground, and listened a long time.

"I think I hear the feet of horses movin' now an' then," he said, "an' if so, one of us had better stay behin' with ours. A horse of theirs might neigh an' a horse of ours might answer. Yon can't tell. Obed, I guess it'll be for you to stay. You've got a most soothin' disposition with animals."

"All right," said Obed philosophically, "I'd rather go on, but, if it's better for me to stay, I'll stay. They also serve who stand and hold the reins. If you find you've got to leave in a hurry I'll be here waiting."

He gathered up the reins of the three horses and remained quietly on the plain, while Ned and the Panther went forward, making straight for the light.

When they came to the edge of the chaparral they knelt among the bushes and listened. Now both distinctly heard the occasional movement of horses, and they saw the dusky outlines of several figures before the fire, which was about three hundred yards away.

"They are bound to be Mexicans," whispered the Panther, "'cause there are no Texans in this part of the country, an' you an' me, Ned, must find out just who they are."

"You lead the way, Panther," said Ned. "I'll follow wherever you go."

"Then be mighty careful. Look out for the thorns an' don't knock your rifle against any bush."

The Panther lay almost flat. His huge figure seemed to blend with the earth, and he crept forward among the thorny bushes with amazing skill. He was like some large animal, trained for

countless generations to slip through thickets. Ned, just behind him, could hear only the faintest noise, and the bushes moved so little that one, not knowing, might have credited it to the wind.

The boy had the advantage of following in the path made by the man's larger figure, and he, too, was successful in making no sound. But he could hear the stamp of horses' feet clearly now, and both to left and right he caught glimpses of them tethered in the thickets. His comrade stopped at last. They were not more than a hundred yards from the fire now, and the space in front of them was mostly open. The Panther, crouching among the bushes, raised his finger slowly and pointed toward the fire.

Ned, who had moved to one side, followed the pointing finger and saw Urrea. He was the dominant figure in a group of six or seven gathered about the flames. He was no longer in any disguise, but wore an officer's gorgeous uniform of white and silver. A splendid cocked hat was on his head, and a small gold hilted rapier swung by his side.

It may have been partly the effect of the night and the red flame, but the face of Urrea had upon Ned an effect much like that of Santa Anna. It was dark and handsome, but full of evil. And evil Ned knew Urrea to be. No man with righteous blood in his veins would play the spy and traitor as he had done.

"I could shoot him from here," whispered the Panther, who evidently was influenced in a similar way, "then reach our horses an' get away. It might be a good deed, an' it might save our lives, Ned, but I'm not able to force myself to do it."

"Nor I," said Ned. "I can't shoot an enemy from ambush."

Urrea and the other men at the fire, all of whom were in the dress of officers, were in a deep talk. Ned inferred that the subject must be of much importance, since they sat awake, discussing it between midnight and morning.

"Look beyond the fire at the figures leanin' against the trees," whispered the Panther.

Ned looked and hot anger rose in his veins.

CHAPTER II

THE CAPTIVES

Ned had not noticed at first, but, since his eyes were growing used to the dim light, and since the Panther had pointed the way, he saw a dozen men, arms bound tightly behind them, leaning against the trees. They were prisoners and he knew instinctively that they were Texans. His blood, hot at first, now chilled in his veins. They had been captured by Urrea in a raid, and as Santa Anna had decreed that all Texans were rebels who should be executed when taken, they would surely die, unless rescue came.

"What shall we do?" he whispered.

"Nothing now," replied the Panther, in the same soft tone, "but if you an' Obed are with me we'll follow this crowd, an' maybe we can get the Texans away from 'em. It's likely that Urrea will cross the Rio Grande an' go down into Mexico to meet Cos or Santa Anna. Are you game enough to go, Ned? I'm a Ring Tailed Panther an' a roarin' grizzly bear, but I don't like to follow all by myself."

"I'm with you," said Ned, "if I have to go all the way back to the City of Mexico, an' I know that I can speak for Obed, too."

"I jest asked as a matter of form," said the Panther. "I knowed before askin' that you an' Obed would stick to me."

There was a sudden gust of wind at that moment and the light of the fire sprang higher. The flames threw a glow across the faces of the prisoners. Most of them were asleep, but Ned saw them very distinctly now. One was a boy but little older than himself, his face pale and worn. Near him was an old man, with a face very uncommon on the border. His features were those of a scholar and ascetic. His cheeks were thin, and thick white hair crowned a broad white brow. Ned felt instinctively that he was a man of importance.

Both the boy and the man slept the sleep of utter exhaustion.

Urrea rose presently and looked at his prisoners. The moonlight was shining on his face, and it seemed to Ned to be that of some master demon. The boy was far from denying many good qualities to the Mexicans, but the countenance of Urrea certainly did not express any of them that night. It showed only savage exultation as he looked at the bound men, and Ned knew that this was a formidable enemy of the Texans, one who would bring infinite resources of cunning and enterprise to crush them.

Urrea said a few words to his officers and then withdrew into a small tent which Ned had not noticed hitherto. The officers lay down in their blankets, but a dozen sentinels watched about the open space. Ned and the Panther crept slowly back toward the plain.

"What is our best plan, Panther?" whispered the hoy.

"We can't do anything yet but haul off, watch an' then follow. The chaparral runs along for a mile or two an' we can hide in the north end of it until they march south an' are out of sight. Then we'll hang on."

They found Obed standing exactly where they had left him, the reins of the three horses in his hands.

"Back at last," he said. "All things come to him who waits long enough, if he doesn't die first. Did you see anything besides a lot of Mexican vaqueros, fuddled with liquor and sound asleep?"

"We did not see any vaqueros," replied the Panther, "but we saw Urrea an' his band, an' they had among them a dozen good Texans bound fast, men who will be shot if we three don't stand in the way. You have to follow with us, Obed, because Ned has already promised for you."

The Maine man looked at them and smiled.

"A terribly good mind reader, that boy, Ned," he said. "He knew exactly what I wanted. There's a lot of things in the world that I'd like to do, but the one that I want to do most just now is to follow Urrea and that crowd of his and take away those Texans. You two couldn't keep me from going."

The Panther smiled back.

"You are shorely the right stuff, Obed White," he said. "We're only three in this bunch, but two of 'em besides me are ring-tailed panthers. Now we'll just draw off, before it's day, an' hide in the chaparral up there."

They rode a mile to the north and remained among dense bushes until daylight. At dawn they saw a column of smoke rise from Urrea's camp.

"They are cookin' breakfast now," said the Panther. "It's my guess that in an hour they'll be ridin' south with their prisoners."

The column of smoke sank after a while, and a couple of hours later the three left the chaparral. From one of the summits they dimly saw a mass of horsemen riding toward Mexico.

"There's our men," said the Panther, "an' now we'll follow all day at this good, safe distance. At night we can draw up closer if we want to do it."

The Mexicans maintained a steady pace, and the three pursuers followed at a distance of perhaps two miles. Now and then the swells completely shut Urrea's band from sight, but Ned, Obed and the Panther followed the broad trail without the slightest difficulty.

"They'll reach the river before noon," said the Panther. "There ain't any doubt now that they're bound for Mexico. It's jest as well for what we want to do, 'cause they're likely to be less watchful there than they are in Texas."

The band of Urrea, as nearly as they could judge, numbered about fifty, all mounted and armed well. The Mexicans were fine horsemen, and with good training and leadership they were dangerous foes. The three knew them well, and they kept so far behind that they were not likely to be observed.

It was only a half hour past noon when Urrea's men reached the Rio Grande, and without stopping made the crossing. They avoided the quicksands with experienced eyes, and swam their horses through the deep water, the prisoners always kept in the center of the troop. Ned, Obed and the Panther watched them until they passed out of sight. Then they, too, rode forward, although slowly, toward the stream.

"We can't lose 'em," said the Panther, "so I think we'd better stay out of sight now that they're on real Mexican soil. Maybe our chance will come to-night, an' ag'in maybe it won't."

"Patience will have its perfect rescue, if we only do the right things," said Obed.

"An' if we think hard enough an' long enough we're bound to do 'em, or I'm a Ring Tailed Panther an' a Cheerful Talker fur nothin'," said the Panther.

Waiting until they were certain that the Mexicans were five or six miles ahead, the three forded the Rio Grande, and stood once more on Mexican soil. It gave Ned a curious thrill. He had passed through so much in Mexico that he had not believed he would ever again enter that country. The land on the Mexican side was about the same as that on the Texan, but it seemed different to him. He beheld again that aspect of infinite age, of the long weariness of time, and of physical decay.

They rode more briskly through the afternoon and at darkness saw the camp fires of Urrea glimmering ahead of them. But the night was not favorable to their plans. The sky was the usual cloudless blue of the Mexican plateau, the moon was at the full and all the stars were out. What they wanted was bad weather, hoping meanwhile the execution of the prisoners would not be begun until the Mexicans reached higher authority than Urrea, perhaps Santa Anna himself.

They made their own camp a full two miles from Urrea's, and Obed and the Panther divided the watch.

Urrea started early the next morning, and so did the pursuing three. The dawn was gray, and the breeze was chill. As they rode on, the wind rose and its edge became so sharp that there was a

prospect of another Norther. The Panther unrolled from his pack the most gorgeous serape that Ned had ever seen. It was of the finest material, colored a deep scarlet and it had a gold fringe.

"Fine feathers are seen afar," said Obed.

"That's so," said the Panther, "but we're not coming near enough to the Mexicans for them to catch a glimpse of this, an' such bein' the case I'm goin' to put it between me an' the cold. I'm proud of it, an' when I wrap it aroun' me I feel bigger an' stronger. Its red color helps me. I think I draw strength from red, just as I do from a fine, tender buffalo steak."

He spoke with much earnestness, and the other two did not contradict him. Meanwhile he gracefully folded the great serape about his shoulders, letting it fall to the saddle. No Mexican could have worn it more rakishly.

"That's my shield and protector," he said. "Now blow wind, blow snow, I'll keep warm."

It blew wind, but it did not blow snow. The day remained cold, but the air undoubtedly had a touch of damp.

"It may rain, and I'm sure the night will be dark," said Obed. "We may have our chance. Fortune favors those who help themselves."

The country became more broken, and the patches of scrub forest increased in number. Often the three rode quite near to Urrea's men and observed them closely. The Mexicans were moving slowly, and, as the Americans had foreseen, discipline was relaxed greatly.

Near night drops of rain began to fall in their faces, and the sun set among clouds. The three rejoiced. A night, dark and wet, had come sooner than they had hoped. Obed and Ned also took out serapes, and wrapped them around their shoulders. They served now not only to protect their bodies, but to keep their firearms dry as well. Then they tethered their horses among thorn bushes about a mile from Urrea's camp, and advanced on foot.

They saw the camp fire glimmering feebly through the night, and they advanced boldly. It was so dark now that a human figure fifty feet away blended with the dusk, and the ground, softened by the rain, gave back no sound of footsteps. Nevertheless they saw on their right a field which showed a few signs of cultivation, and they surmised that Urrea had made his camp at the lone hut of some peon.

They reckoned right. They came to clumps of trees, and in an opening inclosed by them was a low adobe hut, from the open door of which a light shone. They knew that Urrea and his officers had taken refuge there from the rain and cold and, under the boughs of the trees or beside the fire, they saw the rest of the band sheltering themselves as best they could. The prisoners, their hands bound, were in a group in the open, where the slow, cold rain fell steadily upon them. Ned's heart swelled with rage at the sight.

Order and discipline seemed to be lacking. Men came and went as they pleased. Fully twenty of them were making a shelter of canvas and thatch beside the hut. Others began to build the fire higher in order to fend off the wet and cold. Ned did not see that the chance of a rescue was improved, but the Panther felt a sudden glow when his eyes alighted upon something dark at the edge of the woods. A tiny shed stood there and his keen eyes marked what was beneath it.

"What do you think we'd better do, Panther?" asked Obed.

"No roarin' jest now. We mustn't raise our voices above whispers, but we'll go back in the brush and wait. In an hour or two all these Mexicans will be asleep. Like as not the sentinels, if they post any, will be asleep first."

They withdrew deeper into the thickets, where they remained close together. They saw the fire die in the Mexican camp. After a while all sounds there ceased, and again they crept near. The Panther was a genuine prophet, known and recognized by his comrades. Urrea's men, having finished their shelters, were now asleep, including all the sentinels except two. There was some excuse for them. They were in their own country, far from any Texan force of importance, and the night could scarcely have been worse. It was very dark, and the cold rain fell with a steadiness and insistence that

sought and finally found every opening in one's clothing. Even the stalking three drew their serapes closer, and shivered a little.

The two sentinels who did not sleep were together on the south side of the glade. Evidently they wished the company of each other. They were now some distance from the dark little shed toward which the Panther was leading his comrades, and their whole energies were absorbed in an attempt to light two cigarritos, which would soothe and strengthen them as they kept their rainy and useless watch.

The three completed the segment of the circle and reached the little shed which had become such an object of importance to the Panther.

"Don't you see?" said the Panther, his grim joy showing in his tone.

They saw, and they shared his satisfaction. The Mexicans had stacked their rifles and muskets under the shed, where they would be protected from the rain.

"It's queer what foolish things men do in war," said Obed. "Whom the gods would destroy they first deprive of the sense of danger. They do not dream that Richard, meaning the Panther, is in the chaparral."

"If we approach this shed from the rear the sentinels, even if they look, will not be able to see us," said the Panther. "By the great horn spoon, what an opportunity! I can hardly keep from roarin' an' ravin' about it. Now, boys, we'll take away their guns, swift an' quiet."

A few trips apiece and all the rifles and muskets with their ammunition were carried deep into the chaparral, where Obed, gladly sacrificing his own comfort, covered them against the rain with his serape. Not a sign had come meanwhile from the two sentinels on the far side of the camp. Ned once or twice saw the lighted ends of their cigarritos glowing like sparks in the darkness, but the outlines of the men's figures were very dusky.

"An' now for the riskiest part of our job, the one that counts the most," said the Panther, "the one that will make everything else a failure if it falls through. We've got to secure the prisoners."

The captives were lying under the boughs of some trees about twenty yards from the spot where the fire had been built. The pitiless rain had beaten upon them, but as far as Ned could judge they had gone to sleep, doubtless through sheer exhaustion. The Panther's plan of action was swift and comprehensive.

"Boys," he said, "I'm the best shot of us three. I don't say it in any spirit of boastin', 'cause I've pulled trigger about every day for thirty years, an' more'n once a hundred times in one day. Now you two give me your rifles and I'll set here in the edge of the bushes, then you go ahead as silent as you can an' cut the prisoners loose. If there's an alarm I'll open fire with the three rifles and cover the escape."

Handing the rifles to the Panther, the two slipped forward. It was a grateful task to Ned. Again his heart swelled with wrath as he saw the dark figures of the bound men lying on the ground in the rain. He remembered the one who was youthful of face like himself and he sought him. As he approached he made out a figure lying in a strained position, and he was sure that it was the captive lad. A yard or two more and he knew absolutely. He touched the boy on the shoulder, whispered in his ear that it was a friend, and, with one sweep of his knife, released his arms.

"Crawl to the chaparral there," said Ned, in swift sharp tones, pointing the way. "Another friend is waiting at that point."

The boy, without a word, began to creep forward in a stiff and awkward fashion. Ned turned to the next prisoner. It was the elderly man whom he had seen from the chaparral, and he was wide awake, staring intently at Ned.

"Is it rescue?" he whispered. "Is it possible?"

"It is rescue. It is possible," replied Ned, in a similar whisper. "Turn a little to one side and I will cut the cords that bind you."

The man turned, but when Ned freed him he whispered:

"You will have to help me. I cannot yet walk alone. Urrea has already given me a taste of what I was to expect."

Ned shuddered. There was a terrible significance in the prisoner's tone. He assisted him to rise partly, but the man staggered. It was evident that he could not walk. He must help this man, but the others were waiting to be released also. Then the good thought came.

"Wait a moment," he said, and he cut the bonds of another man.

"Now you help your friend there," he said.

He saw the two going away together, and he turned to the others. He and Obed worked fast, and within five minutes the last man was released. But as they crept back toward the chaparral the slack sentinels caught sight of the dusky figures retreating. Two musket shots were fired and there were rapid shouts in Mexican jargon. Ned and Obed rose to their feet and, keeping the escaped prisoners before them, ran for the thickets.

A terrific reply to the Mexican alarm came from the forest. A volley of rifle and pistol shots was fired among the soldiers as they sprang to their feet and a tremendous voice roared:

"At 'em, boys! At 'em! Charge 'em! Now is your time! Rip an' t'ar an' roar an' chew! Don't let a single one escape! Sweep the scum off the face of the earth!"

The Ring Tailed Panther had a mighty voice, issuing from a mighty throat. Never had he used it in greater volume or to better purpose than on that night. The forest fairly thundered with the echoes of the battle cry, and as the dazed Mexicans rushed for their guns only to find them gone, they thought that the whole Texan army was upon them. In another instant a new terror struck at their hearts. Their horses and mules, driven in a frightful stampede, suddenly rushed into the glade and they were now busy keeping themselves from being trampled to death.

Truly the Panther had spent well the few minutes allotted to him. He fired new shots, some into the frightened herd. His tremendous voice never ceased for an instant to encourage his charging troops, and to roar out threats against the enemy. Urrea, to his credit, made an attempt to organize his men, to stop the panic, and to see the nature of the enemy, but he was borne away in the frantic mob of men and horses which was now rushing for the open plain.

Ned and Obed led the fugitives to the place where the rifles and muskets were stacked. Here they rapidly distributed the weapons and then broke across the tree trunks all they could not use or carry. Another minute and they reached their horses, where the Panther, panting from his huge exertions, joined them. Ned helped the lame man upon one of the horses, the weakest two who remained, including the boy, were put upon the others, and led by the Panther they started northward, leaving the chaparral.

It was a singular march, but for a long time nothing was said. The sound of the Mexican stampede could yet be heard, moving to the south, but they, rescuers and rescued, walked in silence save for the sound of their feet in the mud of the wind-swept plain. Ned looked curiously at the faces of those whom they had saved, but the night had not lightened, and he could discern nothing. They went thus a full quarter of an hour. The noise of the stampede sank away in the south, and then the Panther laughed.

It was a deep, hearty, unctuous laugh that came from the very depths of the man's chest. It was a laugh with no trace of merely superficial joy. He who uttered it laughed because his heart and soul were in it. It was a laugh of mirth, relief and triumph, all carried to the highest degree. It was a long laugh, rising and falling, but when it ceased and the Panther had drawn a deep breath he opened his mouth again and spoke the words that were in his mind.

"I shorely did some rippin' an' roarin' then," he said. "It was the best chance I ever had, an' I guess I used it. How things did work for us! Them sleepy sentinels, an' then the stampede of the animals, carryin' Urrea an' the rest right away with it."

"Fortune certainly worked for us," said Ned.

"And we can find no words in which to describe to you our gratitude," said the crippled man on the horse. "We were informed very clearly by Urrea that we were rebels and, under the decree of Santa Anna, would be executed. Even our young friend here, this boy, William Allen, would not have been spared."

"We ain't all the way out of the woods yet," said the Panther, not wishing to have their hopes rise too high and then fall. "Of course Urrea an' his men have some arms left. They wouldn't stack 'em all under the shed, an' they can get more from other Mexicans in these parts. When they learn from their trailers how few we are they'll follow."

The rescued were silent, save one, evidently a veteran frontiersman, who said:

"Let 'em come. I was took by surprise, not thinkin' any Mexicans was north of the Rio Grande. But now that I've got a rifle on one shoulder an' a musket on the other I think I could thrash an acre-lot full of 'em."

"That's the talk," said Obed White. "We'll say to 'em: 'Come one, come all, this rock from its firm base may fly, but we're the boys who'll never say die.'"

They relapsed once more into silence. The rain had lightened a little, but the night was as dark as ever. The boy whom the man had called William Allen drew up by the side of Ned. They were of about the same height, and each was as tall and strong as a man.

"Have you any friends here with you?" asked Ned.

"All of them are my friends, but I made them in captivity. I came to Texas to find my fortune, and I found this."

The boy laughed, half in pity of himself, and half with genuine humor.

"But I ought not to complain," he added, "when we've been saved in the most wonderful way. How did you ever happen to do it?"

"We've been following you all the way from the other side of the Rio Grande, waiting a good chance. It came to-night with the darkness, the rain, and the carelessness of the Mexicans. I heard the man call you William Allen. My name is Fulton, Edward Fulton, Ned to my friends."

"And mine's Will to my friends."

"And you and I are going to be friends, that's sure."

"Nothing can be surer."

The hands of the two boys met in a strong grasp, signifying a friendship that was destined to endure.

The Panther and Obed now began to seek a place for a camp. They knew that too much haste would mean a breakdown, and they meant that the people whom they had rescued should have a rest. But it took a long time to find the trees which would furnish wood and partial shelter. It was Obed who made the happy discovery some time after midnight. Turning to their left, they entered a grove of dwarf oaks, covering a half acre or so, and with much labor and striving built a fire. They made it a big fire, too, and fed it until the flames roared and danced. Ned noticed that all the rescued prisoners crouched close to it, as if it were a giver of strength and courage as well as warmth, and now the light revealed their faces. He looked first at the crippled man, and the surprise that he had felt at his first glimpse of him increased.

The stranger was of a type uncommon on the border. His large features showed cultivation and the signs of habitual and deep thought. His thick white hair surmounted a broad brow. His clothing, although torn by thorns and briars, was of fine quality. Ned knew instinctively that it was a powerful face, one that seldom showed the emotions behind it. The rest, except the boy, were of the border, lean, sun-browned men, dressed in tanned deerskin.

The Panther and Obed also gazed at the crippled man with great curiosity. They knew the difference, and they were surprised to find such a man in such a situation. He did not seem to notice them at first, but from his seat on a log leaned over the fire warming his hands, which Ned saw were large, white and smooth. His legs lay loosely against the log, as if he were suffering from a species

of paralysis. The others, soaked by the rain, which, however, now ceased, were also hovering over the fire which was giving new life to the blood in their veins. The man with the white hands turned presently and, speaking to Ned, Obed and the Panther, said:

"My name is Roylston, John Roylston."

Ned started.

"I see that you have heard of it," continued the stranger, but without vanity. "Yes, I am the merchant of New Orleans. I have lands and other property in this region for which I have paid fairly. I hold the deeds and they are also guaranteed to me by Santa Anna and the Mexican Congress. I was seized by this guerilla leader, Urrea. He knew who I was, and he sought to extract from me an order for a large sum of money lying in a European bank in the City of Mexico. There are various ways of procuring such orders, and he tried one of the most primitive methods. That is why I cannot walk without help. No, I will not tell what was done. It is not pleasant to hear. Let it pass. I shall walk again as well as ever in a month."

"Did he get the order?" asked Obed curiously.

Roylston laughed deep in his throat.

"He did not," he said. "It was not because I valued it so much, but my pride would not permit me to give way to such crude methods. I must say, however, that you three came just in time, and you have done a most marvelous piece of work."

Ned shuddered and walked a little space out on the plain to steady his nerves. He had never deceived himself about the dangers that the Texans were facing, but it seemed that they would have to fight every kind of ferocity. When he returned, Obed and the Panther were building the fire higher.

"We must get everybody good and dry," said the Panther. "Pursuit will come, but not to-night, an' we needn't worry about the blaze. We've food enough for all of you for a day, but we haven't the horses, an' for that I'm sorry. If we had them we could git away without a doubt to the Texan army."

"But not having them," said Obed, "we'll even do the best we can, if the Mexicans, having run away, come back to fight another day."

"So we will," said a stalwart Texan named Fields. "That Urrea don't get me again, and if I ain't mistook your friend here is Mr. Palmer, better known in our parts as the Ring Tailed Panther, ain't he?"

Ned saw the Panther's huge form swell. He still wore the great serape, which shone in the firelight with a deep blood-red tinge.

"I am the Ring Tailed Panther," he said proudly.

"Then lemme shake your hand. You an' your pards have done a job to-night that ain't had its like often, and me bein' one of them that's profited by it makes it look all the bigger to me."

The Panther graciously extended an enormous palm, and the great palm of Fields met it in a giant clasp. A smile lighted up the somber face of Mr. Roylston as he looked at them.

"Often we find powerful friends when we least expect them," he said.

"As you are the worst hurt of the lot," said the Panther, "we're going to make you a bed right here by the fire. No, it ain't any use sayin' you won't lay down on it. If you won't we'll jest have to put you down."

They spread a blanket, upon which the exhausted merchant lay, and they covered him with a serape. Soon he fell asleep, and then Fields said to Ned and his comrades:

"You fellows have done all the work, an' you've piled up such a mountain of debt against us that we can never wipe it out. Now you go to sleep and four of us will watch. And, knowin' what would happen to us if we were caught, we'll watch well. But nothing is to be expected to-night."

"Suits us," said Obed. "Some must watch while others sleep, so runs the world away. Bet you a dollar, Ned, that I'm off to Slumberland before you are."

"I don't take the bet," said Ned, "but I'll run you an even race."

In exactly five minutes the two, rolled in their own blankets, slept soundly. All the others soon followed, except four, who, unlike the Mexicans, kept a watch that missed nothing.

CHAPTER III

THE FIGHT WITH URREA

Morning came. Up rose the sun, pouring a brilliant light over the desolate plains. Beads of water from the rain the night before sparkled a little while and then dried up. But the day was cold, nevertheless, and a sharp wind now began to search for the weakest point of every one. Ned, Obed and the Panther were up betimes, but some of the rescued still slept.

Ned, at the suggestion of the Panther, mounted one of the horses and rode out on the plain a half mile to the south. Those keen eyes of his were becoming all the keener from life upon the vast rolling plains. But no matter how he searched the horizon he saw only a lonesome cactus or two shivering in the wind. When he returned with his report the redoubtable Panther said:

"Then we'll just take our time. The pursuit's goin' to come, but since it ain't in sight we'll brace up these new friends of ours with hot coffee an' vittles. I guess we've got coffee enough left for all."

They lighted the fire anew and soon pleasant odors arose. The rescued prisoners ate and drank hungrily, and Mr. Roylston was able to limp a little. Now that Ned saw him in the full daylight he understood more clearly than ever that this was indeed a most uncommon man. The brow and eyes belonged to one who thought, planned and organized. He spoke little and made no complaint, but when he looked at Ned he said:

"You are young, my boy, to live among such dangers. Why do you not go north into the states where life is safe?"

"There are others as young as I, or younger, who have fought or will fight for Texas," said Ned. "I belong here and I've got powerful friends. Two of them have saved my life more than once and are likely to do so again."

He nodded toward Obed and the Panther, who were too far away to hear. Roylston smiled. The two men were in singular contrast, but each was striking in his way. Obed, of great height and very thin, but exceedingly strong, was like a steel lath. The Panther, huge in every aspect, reminded one, in his size and strength, of a buffalo bull.

"They are uncommon men, no doubt," said Roylston. "And you expect to remain with them?"

"I'd never leave them while this war lasts! Not under any circumstances!"

Ned spoke with great energy, and again Roylston smiled, but he said no more.

"It's time to start," said the Panther.

Roylston again mounted one of the horses. Ned saw that it hurt his pride to have to ride, but he saw also that he would not complain when complaints availed nothing. He felt an increasing interest in a man who seemed to have perfect command over himself.

The boy, Will Allen, was fresh and strong again. His youthful frame had recovered completely from all hardships, and now that he was free, armed, and in the company of true friends his face glowed with pleasure and enthusiasm. He was tall and strong, and now he carried a good rifle with a pistol also in his belt. He and Ned walked side by side, and each rejoiced in the companionship of one of his own age.

"How long have you been with them?" asked Will, looking at Obed and the Panther.

"I was first with Obed away down in Mexico. We were prisoners together in the submarine dungeon of San Juan de Ulua. I'd never have escaped without him. And I'd never have escaped a lot more things without him, either. Then we met the Panther. He's the greatest frontiersman in all the southwest, and we three somehow have become hooked together."

Will looked at Ned a little enviously.

"What comrades you three must be!" he said. "I have nobody."

"Are you going to fight for Texas?"

"I count on doing so."

"Then why don't you join us, and we three will turn into four?"

Will looked at Ned, and his eyes glistened.

"Do you mean that?" he asked.

"Do I mean it? I think I do. Ho, there, Panther! You and Obed, just a minute or two!"

The two turned back. Ned and Will were walking at the rear of the little company.

"I've asked Will to be one of us," said Ned, "to join our band and to share our fortunes, good or bad."

"Can he make all the signs, an' has he rid the goat?" asked the Panther solemnly.

"Does he hereby swear never to tell any secret of ours to Mexican or Indian?" asked Obed.

"Does he swear to obey all our laws and by-laws wherever he may be, and whenever he is put to the test?"

"He swears to everything," replied Ned, "and I know that he is the kind to make a trusty comrade to the death."

"Then you are declared this minute a member of our company in good standin'," said the Panther to Will, "an' with this grip I give you welcome."

He crushed the boy's hand in a mighty grasp that made him wince, and Obed followed with one that was almost equally severe. But the boy did not mind the physical pain. Instead, his soul was uplifted. He was now the chosen comrade of these three paladins, and he was no longer alone in the world. But he merely said:

"I'll try to show myself worthy."

They were compelled to stop at noon for rather a long rest, as walking was tiresome. Fields, who was a good scout, went back and looked for pursuers, but announced that he saw none, and, after an hour, they started again.

"I'm thinkin'," said the Panther, "that Urrea has already organized the pursuit. Mebbe he has pow'ful glasses an' kin see us when we can't see him. He may mean to attack to-night. It's a lucky thing for us that we can find timber now an' then."

"It's likely that you're right about to-night," said Obed, "but there's no night so dark that it doesn't have its silver lining. I guess everybody in this little crowd is a good shot, unless maybe it's Mr. Roylston, and as we have about three guns apiece we can make it mighty hot for any force that Urrea may bring against us."

They began now to search for timber, looking especially for some clump of trees that also inclosed water. They did not anticipate any great difficulty in regard to the water, as the winter season and the heavy rains had filled the dry creek beds, and had sent torrents down the arroyos. Before dark they found a stream about a foot deep running over sand between banks seven or eight feet high toward the Rio Grande. A mile further on a small grove of myrtle oaks and pecans grew on its left bank, and there they made their camp.

Feeling that they must rely upon their valor and watchfulness, and not upon secrecy, they built a fire, and ate a good supper. Then they put out the fire and half of them remained on guard, the other half going to sleep, except Roylston, who sat with his back to a tree, his injured legs resting upon a bed of leaves which the boys had raked up for him. He had been riding Old Jack and the horse had seemed to take to him, but after the stop Ned himself had looked after his mount.

The boy allowed Old Jack to graze a while, and then he tethered him in the thickest of the woods just behind the sleeping man. He wished the horse to be as safe as possible in case bullets should be flying, and he could find no better place for him. But before going he stroked his nose and whispered in his ear.

"Good Old Jack! Brave fellow!" he said. "We are going to have troublous times, you and I, along with the others, but I think we are going to ride through them safely."

The horse whinnied ever so softly, and nuzzled Ned's arm. The understanding between them was complete. Then Ned left him, intending to take a position by the bank of the creek as he was on the early watch. On the way he passed Roylston, who regarded him attentively.

"I judge that your leader, Mr. Palmer, whom you generally call the Panther, is expecting an attack," said the merchant.

"He's the kind of man who tries to provide for everything," replied Ned.

"Of course, then," said Roylston, "he provides for the creek bed. The Mexican skirmishers can come up it and yet be protected by its banks."

"That is so," said the Panther, who had approached as he was speaking. "It's the one place that we've got to watch most, an' Ned an' me are goin' to sit there on the banks, always lookin'. I see that you've got the eye of a general, Mr. Roylston."

The merchant smiled.

"I'm afraid I don't count for much in battle," he said, "and least of all hampered as I am now. But if the worst comes to the worst I can sit here with my back to this tree and shoot. If you will kindly give me a rifle and ammunition I shall be ready for the emergency."

"But it is your time to sleep, Mr. Roylston," said the Panther.

"I don't think I can sleep, and as I cannot I might as well be of use."

The Panther brought him the rifle, powder and bullets, and Roylston, leaning against the tree, rifle across his knees, watched with bright eyes. Sentinels were placed at the edge of the grove, but the Panther and Ned, as arranged, were on the high bank overlooking the bed of the creek. Now and then they walked back and forth, meeting at intervals, but most of the time each kept to his own particular part of the ground.

Ned found an oak, blown down on the bank by some hurricane, and as there was a comfortable seat on a bough with the trunk as a rest for his back he remained there a long time. But his ease did not cause him to relax his vigilance. He was looking toward the north, and he could see two hundred yards or more up the creek bed to a point where it curved. The bed itself was about thirty feet wide, although the water did not have a width of more than ten feet.

Everything was now quite dry, as the wind had been blowing all day. But the breeze had died with the night, and the camp was so still that Ned could hear the faint trickle of the water over the sand. It was a fair night, with a cold moon and cold stars looking down. The air was full of chill, and Ned began to walk up and down again in order to keep warm. He noticed Roylston still sitting with eyes wide open and the rifle across his lap.

As Ned came near in his walk the merchant turned his bright eyes upon him.

"I hear," he said, "that you have seen Santa Anna."

"More than once. Several times when I was a prisoner in Mexico, and again when I was recaptured."

"What do you think of him?"

The gaze of the bright eyes fixed upon Ned became intense and concentrated.

"A great man! A wickedly great man!"

Roylston turned his look away, and interlaced his fingers thoughtfully.

"A good description, I think," he said. "You have chosen your words well. A singular compound is this Mexican, a mixture of greatness, vanity and evil. I may talk to you more of him some day. But I tell you now that I am particularly desirous of not being carried a prisoner to him."

He lifted the rifle, put its stock to his shoulder, and drew a bead.

"I think I could hit at forty or fifty yards in this good moonlight," he said.

He replaced the rifle across his knees and sighed. Ned was curious, but he would not ask questions, and he walked back to his old position by the bank. Here he made himself easy, and kept

his eyes on the deep trench that had been cut by the stream. The shadows were dark against the bank, but it seemed to him that they were darker than they had been before.

Ned's blood turned a little colder, and his scalp tingled. He was startled but not afraid. He looked intently, and saw moving figures in the river bed, keeping close against the bank. He could not see faces, he could not even discern a clear outline of the figures, but he had no doubt that these were Urrea's Mexicans. He waited only a moment longer to assure himself that the dark moving line was fact and not fancy. Then, aiming his rifle at the foremost shape, he fired. While the echo of the sharp crack was yet speeding across the plain he cried:

"Up, men! up! Urrea is here!"

A volley came from the creek bed, but in an instant the Panther, Obed, Will and Fields were by Ned's side.

"Down on your faces," cried the Panther, "an' pot 'em as they run! So they thought to go aroun' the grove, come down from the north an' surprise us this way! Give it to 'em, boys!"

The rifles flashed and the dark line in the bed of the creek now broke into a huddle of flying forms. Three fell, but the rest ran, splashing through the sand and water, until they turned the curve and were protected from the deadly bullets. Then the Panther, calling to the others, rushed to the other side of the grove, where a second attack, led by Urrea in person, had been begun. Here men on horseback charged directly at the wood, but they were met by a fire which emptied more than one saddle.

Much of the charge was a blur to Ned, a medley of fire and smoke, of beating hoofs and of cries. But one thing he saw clearly and never forgot. It was the lame man with the thick white hair sitting with his back against a tree calmly firing a rifle at the Mexicans. Roylston had time for only two shots, but when he reloaded the second time he placed the rifle across his knees as before and smiled.

Most Mexican troops would have been content with a single charge, but these returned, encouraged by shouts and driven on by fierce commands. Ned saw a figure waving a sword. He believed it to be Urrea, and he fired, but he missed, and the next moment the horseman was lost in the shadows.

The second charge was beaten back like the first, and several skirmishers who tried to come anew down the bed of the creek were also put to flight. Two Mexicans got into the thickets and tried to stampede the horses, but the quickness of Obed and Fields defeated their aim. One of the Mexicans fell there, but the other escaped in the darkness.

When the second charge was driven back and the horses were quieted the Panther and Obed threshed up the woods, lest some Mexican musketeer should lie hidden there.

Nobody slept any more that night. Ned, Will and the Panther kept a sharp watch upon the bed of the creek, the moon and stars fortunately aiding them. But the Mexicans did not venture again by that perilous road, although toward morning they opened a scattering fire from the plain, many of their bullets whistling at random among the trees and thickets. Some of the Texans, crawling to the edge of the wood, replied, but they seemed to have little chance for a good shot, as the Mexicans lay behind a swell. The besiegers grew tired after a while and silence came again.

Three of the Texans had suffered slight wounds, but the Panther and Fields bound them up skillfully. It was still light enough for these tasks. Fields was particularly jubilant over their success, as he had a right to be. The day before he could look forward only to his own execution. Now he was free and victorious. Exultantly he hummed:

You've heard, I s'pose, of New Orleans,
It's famed for youth and beauty;
There are girls of every hue, it seems,
From snowy white to sooty.
Now Pakenham has made his brags,

If he that day was lucky,
He'd have the girls and cotton bags
In spite of Old Kentucky.

But Jackson, he was wide awake,
And was not scared at trifles,
For well he knew Kentucky's boys,
With their death-dealing rifles.
He led them down to cypress swamp,
The ground was low and mucky;
There stood John Bull in martial pomp,
And here stood old Kentucky.

"Pretty good song, that of yours," said the Panther approvingly. "Where did you get it?"

"From my father," replied Fields. "He's a Kentuckian, an' he fit at New Orleans. He was always hummin' that song, an' it come back to me after we drove off the Mexicans. Struck me that it was right timely."

Ned and Will, on their own initiative, had been drawing all the fallen logs that they could find and move to the edge of the wood, and having finished the task they came back to the bed of the creek. Roylston, the rifle across his knees, was sitting with his eyes closed, but he opened them as they approached. They were uncommonly large and bright eyes, and they expressed pleasure.

"It gratifies me to see that neither of you is hurt," he said. "This has been a strange night for two who are as young as you are. And it is a strange night for me, too. I never before thought that I should be firing at any one with intent to kill. But events are often too powerful for us."

He closed his eyes again.

"I am going to sleep a little, if I can," he said.

But Ned and Will could not sleep. They went to Ned's old position at the edge of the creek bed, and together watched the opening dawn. They saw the bright sun rise over the great plains, and the dew sparkle for a little while on the brown grass. The day was cold, but apparently it had come with peace. They saw nothing on the plain, although they had no doubt that the Mexicans were waiting just beyond the first swell. But Ned and Will discerned three dark objects lying on the sand up the bed of the creek, and they knew that they were the men who had fallen in the first rush. Ned was glad that he could not see their faces.

At the suggestion of the Panther they lighted fires and had warm food and coffee again, thus putting heart into all the defenders. Then the Panther chose Ned for a little scouting work on horseback. Ned found Old Jack seeking blades of grass within the limits allowed by his lariat. But when the horse saw his master he stretched out his head and neighed.

"I think I understand you," said Ned. "Not enough food and no water. Well, I'll see that you get both later, but just now we're going on a little excursion."

The Panther and Ned rode boldly out of the trees, and advanced a short distance upon the plain. Two or three shots were fired from a point behind the first swell, but the bullets fell far short.

"I counted on that," said the Panther. "If a Mexican has a gun it's mighty hard for him to keep from firing it. All we wanted to do was to uncover their position an' we've done it. We'll go back now, an' wait fur them to make the first move."

But they did not go just yet. A man on horseback waving a large white handkerchief appeared on the crest of the swell and rode toward them. It was Urrea.

"He knows that he can trust us, while we don't know that we can trust him," said the Panther, "so we'll just wait here an' see what he has to say."

Urrea, looking fresh and spirited, came on with confidence and saluted in a light easy fashion. The two Americans did not return the salute, but waited gravely.

"We can be polite, even if we are enemies," said Urrea, "so I say good morning to you both, former friends of mine."

"I have no friendship with spies and traitors," growled the Panther.

"I serve my country in the way I think best," said Urrea, "and you must remember that in our view you two are rebels and traitors."

"We don't stab in the back," said the Panther.

Urrea flushed through his swarthy skin.

"We will not argue the point any further," he said, "but come at once to the business before us. First, I will admit several things. Your rescue of the prisoners was very clever. Also you beat us off last night, but I now have a hundred men with me and we have plenty of arms. We are bound to take you sooner or later."

"Then why talk to us about it?" said the Panther.

"Because I wish to save bloodshed."

"Wa'al, then, what do you have to say?"

"Give us the man, Royston, and the rest of you can go free."

"Why are you so anxious to have Royston?"

Ned eagerly awaited the answer. It was obvious that Royston had rather minimized his own importance. Urrea flicked the mane of his mustang with a small whip and replied:

"Our President and General, the illustrious Santa Anna, is extremely anxious to see him. Secrets of state are not for me. I merely seek to do my work."

"Then you take this from me," said the Panther, a blunt frontiersman, "my comrades an' me ain't buyin' our lives at the price of nobody else's."

"You feel that way about it, do you?"

"That's just the way we feel, and I want to say, too, that I wouldn't take the word of either you or your Santa Anna. If we was to give up Mr. Royston—which we don't dream of doin'—you'd be after us as hot an' strong as ever."

Urrea's swarthy cheeks flushed again.

"I shall not notice your insults," he said. "They are beneath me. I am a Mexican officer and gentleman, and you are mere riders of the plains."

"All the same," said the Panther grimly, "if you are goin' to talk you have to talk with us."

"That is true," said Urrea lightly, having regained complete control of his temper. "In war one cannot choose his enemies. I make you the proposition once more. Give us Royston and go. If you do not accept we shall nevertheless take him and all of you who do not fall first. Remember that you are rebels and traitors and that you will surely be shot or hanged."

"I don't remember any of them things," said the Panther grimly. "What I do remember is that we are Texans fightin' fur our rights. To hang a man you've first got to catch him, an' to shoot him you've first got to hit him. An' since things are to be remembered, remember that what you are tryin' to do to us we may first do to you. An' with that I reckon we'll bid you good day, Mr. Urrea."

Urrea bowed, but said nothing. He rode back toward his men, and Ned and the Panther returned to the grove. Royston was much better that morning and he was able to stand, leaning against a tree.

"May I ask the result of your conference," he said.

"There ain't no secret about it," replied the Panther, "but them Mexicans seem to be almighty fond of you, Mr. Royston."

"In what way did they show it?"

"Urrea said that all of us could go if we would give up you."

"And your answer?"

The Panther leaned forward a little on his horse.

"You know something about the Texans, don't you, Mr. Roylston?"

"I have had much opportunity to observe and study them."

"Well, they've got plenty of faults, but you haven't heard of them buyin' their lives at the price of a comrade's, have you?"

"I have not, but I wish to say, Mr. Palmer, that I'm sorry you returned this answer. I should gladly take my chances if the rest of you could go."

"We'd never think of it," said the Panther. "Besides, them Mexicans wouldn't keep their word. They're goin' to besiege us here, hopin' maybe that starvation or thirst will make us give you up. Now the first thing for us to do is to get water for the horses."

This presented a problem, as the horses could not go down to the creek, owing to the steep high banks, but the Texans soon solved it. The cliff was soft and they quickly cut a smooth sloping path with their knives and hatchets. Old Jack was the first to walk down it and Ned led him. The horse hung back a little, but Ned patted his head and talked to him as a friend and equal. Under such persuasion Old Jack finally made the venture, and when he landed safely at the bottom he drank eagerly. Then the other two horses followed. Meanwhile two riflemen kept a keen watch up and down the creek bed for lurking Mexican sharpshooters.

But the watering of the horses was finished without incident, and they were tethered once more in the thicket. Fields and another man kept a watch upon the plain, and the rest conferred under the trees. The Panther announced that by a great reduction of rations the food could be made to last two days longer. It was not a cheerful statement, as the Mexicans must know the scanty nature of their supplies, and would wait with all the patience of Indians.

"All things, including starvation, come to him who waits long enough," said Obed White soberly.

"We'll jest set the day through," said the Panther, "an' see what turns up."

But the day was quite peaceful. It was warmer than usual and bright with sunshine. The Mexicans appeared on some of the knolls, seemingly near in the thin clear air, but far enough away to be out of rifle shot, and began to play cards or loll on their serapes. Several went to sleep.

"They mean to show us that they have all the time in the world," said Ned to Will, "and that they are willing to wait until we fall like ripe apples into their hands."

"Do you think they will get us again?" asked Will anxiously.

"I don't. We've got food for two days and I believe that something will happen in our favor within that time. Do you notice, Will, that it's beginning to cloud up again? In winter you can't depend upon bright sunshine to last always. I think we're going to have a dark night and it's given me an idea."

"What is it?"

"I won't tell you, because it may amount to nothing. It all depends upon what kind of night we have."

The sun did not return. The clouds banked up more heavily, and in the afternoon Ned went to the Panther. They talked together earnestly, looking frequently at the skies, and the faces of both expressed satisfaction. Then they entered the bed of the creek and examined it critically. Will was watching them. When the two separated and Ned came toward him, he said:

"I can guess your idea now. We mean to escape to-night up the bed of the creek."

Ned nodded.

"Your first guess is good," he said. "If the promise of a dark night keeps up we're going to try."

The promise was fulfilled. The Mexicans made no hostile movement throughout the afternoon, but they maintained a rigid watch.

When the sun had set and the thick night had come down the Panther told of the daring enterprise they were about to undertake, and all approved. By nine o'clock the darkness was complete, and the little band gathered at the point where the path was cut down into the bed of the creek. It was likely that Mexicans were on all sides of the grove, but the Panther did not believe that any of

them, owing to bitter experience, would enter the cut made by the stream. But, as leader, he insisted upon the least possible noise. The greatest difficulty would be with the horses. Ned, at the head of Old Jack, led the way.

Old Jack made the descent without slipping and in a few minutes the entire force stood upon the sand. They had made no sound that any one could have heard thirty yards away.

"Now Mr. Royston," whispered the Panther to the merchant, "you get on Ned's horse an' we'll be off."

Royston sighed. It hurt his pride that he should be a burden, but he was a man of few words, and he mounted in silence. Then they moved slowly over the soft sand. They had loaded the extra rifles and muskets on the other two horses, but every man remained thoroughly armed and ready on the instant for any emergency.

The Panther and Obed led. Just behind them came Ned and Will. They went very slowly in order to keep the horses' feet from making any sound that listening Mexican sentinels might hear. They were fortunate in the sand, which was fine and soundless like a carpet. Ned thought that the Mexicans would not make any attempt upon the grove until late at night, and then only with skirmishers and snipers. Or they might not make any attempt at all, content with their cordon.

But it was thrilling work as they crept along on the soft sand in the darkness and between the high banks. Ned felt a prickling of the blood. An incautious footstep or a stumble by one of the horses might bring the whole Mexican force down upon them at any moment. But there was no incautious footstep. Nor did any horse stumble. The silent procession moved on, passed the curve in the bed of the creek and continued its course.

Urrea had surrounded the grove completely. His men were on both sides of the creek, but no sound came to them, and they had a healthy respect for the deadly Texan rifles. Their leader had certainly been wise in deciding to starve them out. Meanwhile the little procession in the bed of the creek increased its speed slightly.

The Texans were now a full four hundred yards from the grove, and their confidence was rising.

"If they don't discover our absence until morning," whispered Ned to Will, "we'll surely get away."

"Then I hope they won't discover it until then," said Will fervently. "I don't want to die in battle just now, nor do I want to be executed in Mexico for a rebel or for anything else."

They were now a full mile from the grove and the banks of the creek were decreasing in height. They did not rise anywhere more than three or four feet. But the water increased in depth and the margin of sand was narrower. The Panther called a halt and they listened. They heard no sound but the faint moaning of the wind among the dips and swells, and the long lone howl of a lonesome coyote.

"We've slipped through 'em! By the great horn spoon, we've slipped through 'em!" said the Panther exultantly. "Now, boys, we'll take to the water here to throw 'em off our track, when they try to follow it in the mornin'."

The creek was now about three feet in depth and flowing slowly like most streams in that region, but over a bed of hard sand, where the trace of a footstep would quickly vanish.

"The water is likely to be cold," said the Panther, "an' if any fellow is afraid of it he can stay behind and consort with the Mexicans who don't care much for water."

"Lead on, Macduff," said Obed, "and there's nobody who will cry 'hold, enough.'"

The Panther waded directly into the middle of the stream, and all the others followed. The horses, splashing the water, made some noise, but they were not so careful in that particular now since they had put a mile between themselves and the grove. In fact, the Panther urged them to greater speed, careless of the sounds, and they kept in the water for a full two miles further. Then they quit the stream at a point where the soil seemed least likely to leave traces of their footsteps, and stood for a little while upon the prairie, resting and shivering. Then they started at a rapid pace across the country, pushing for the Rio Grande until noon. Then Fields stalked and shot an antelope, with which

they renewed their supply of food. In the afternoon it rained heavily, but by dark they reached the Rio Grande, across which they made a dangerous passage, as the waters had risen, and stood once more on the soil of Texas.

"Thank God!" said Will.

"Thank God!" repeated Ned.

Then they looked for shelter, which all felt they must have.

CHAPTER IV

THE CABIN IN THE WOODS

It proved a difficult matter to find shelter. All the members of the little group were wet and cold, and a bitter wind with snow began to whistle once more across the plain. But every one strove to be cheerful and the relief that their escape had brought was still a tonic to their spirits. Yet they were not without comment upon their condition.

"I've seen hard winters in Maine," said Obed White, "but there you were ready for them. Here it tricks you with warm sunshine and then with snow. You suffer from surprise."

"We've got to find a cabin," said the Panther.

"Why not make it a whole city with a fine big hotel right in the center of it?" said Obed. "Seems to me there's about as much chance of one as the other."

"No, there ain't," said the Panther. "There ain't no town, but there are huts. I've rid over this country for twenty year an' I know somethin' about it. There are four or five settlers' cabins in the valleys of the creeks runnin' down to the Rio Grande. I had a mighty good dinner at one of 'em once. They're more'n likely to be abandoned now owin' to the war an' their exposed situation, but if the roofs haven't fell in any of 'em is good enough for us."

"Then you lead on," said Obed. "The quicker we get there the happier all of us will be."

"I may not lead straight, but I'll get you there," replied the Panther confidently.

Roylston, at his own urgent insistence, dismounted and walked a little while. When he betook himself again to the back of Old Jack he spoke with quiet confidence.

"I'm regaining my strength rapidly," he said. "In a week or two I shall be as good as I ever was. Meanwhile my debt to you, already great, is accumulating."

The Panther laughed.

"You don't owe us nothin'," he said. "Why, on this frontier it's one man's business to help another out of a scrape. If we didn't do that we couldn't live."

"Nevertheless, I shall try to pay it," said Roylston, in significant tones.

"For the moment we'll think of that hut we're lookin' for," said the Panther.

"It will be more than a hut," said Will, who was of a singularly cheerful nature. "I can see it now. It will be a gorgeous palace. Its name will be the Inn of the Panther. Menials in gorgeous livery will show us to our chambers, one for every man, where we will sleep between white sheets of the finest linen."

"I wonder if they will let us take our rifles to bed with us," said Ned, "because in this country I don't feel that I can part with mine, even for a moment."

"That is a mere detail which we will discuss with our host," said Obed. "Perhaps, after you have eaten of the chicken and drunk of the wine at this glorious Inn of the Panther, you will not be so particular about the company of your rifle, Mr. Fulton."

The Panther uttered a cry of joy.

"I've got my b'arin's exactly now," he said. "It ain't more'n four miles to a cabin that I know of, an' if raiders haven't smashed it it'll give us all the shelter we want."

"Then lead us swiftly," said Obed. "There's no sunset or anything to give me mystical lore, but the coming of that cabin casts its shadow before, or at least I want it to do it."

The Panther's announcement brought new courage to every one and they quickened their lagging footsteps. He led toward a dark line of timber which now began to show through the driving snow, and when they passed among the trees he announced once more and with exultation:

"Only a mile farther, boys, an' we'll be where the cabin stands, or stood. Don't git your feelin's too high, 'cause it may have been wiped off the face of the earth."

A little later he uttered another cry, and this was the most exultant of all.

"There she is," he said, pointing ahead. "She ain't been wiped away by nobody or nothin'. Don't you see her, that big, stout cabin ahead?"

"I do," said young Allen joyously, "and it's the Inn of the Panther as sure as you live."

"But I don't see any smoke coming out of the chimney," said Ned, "and there are no gorgeous menials standing on the doorstep waiting for us."

"It's been abandoned a long time," said the Panther. "I can tell that by its looks, but I'm thinkin' that it's good enough fur us an' mighty welcome. An' there's a shed behind the house that'll do for the horses. Boys, we're travelin' in tall luck."

The cabin, a large one, built of logs and adobe, was certainly a consoling sight. They had almost reached the limit of physical endurance, but they broke into a run to reach it. The Panther and Ned were the first to push open a heavy swinging door, and they entered side by side. It was dry within. The solid board roof did not seem to be damaged at all, and the floor of hard, packed earth was as dry as a bone also. At one end were a wide stone fireplace, cold long since, and a good chimney of mud and sticks. There were two windows, closed with heavy clapboard shutters.

There was no furniture in the cabin except two rough wooden benches. Evidently the original owners had prepared well for their flight, but it was likely that no one had come since. The lonely place among the trees had passed unobserved by raiders. The shed behind the cabin was also in good condition, and they tethered there the horses, which were glad enough to escape from the bitter wind and driving snow.

The whole party gathered in the cabin, and as they no longer feared pursuit it was agreed unanimously that they must have luxury. In this case a fire meant the greatest of all luxuries.

They gathered an abundance of fallen wood, knocked the snow from it and heaped it on either side of the fireplace. They cut with infinite difficulty dry shavings from the inside of the logs in the wall of the house, and after a full hour of hard work lighted a blaze with flint and steel. The rest was easy, and soon they had a roaring fire. They fastened the door with the wooden bar which stood in its place and let the windows remain shut. Although there was a lack of air, they did not yet feel it, and gave themselves up to the luxury of the glowing heat.

They took off their clothes and held them before the fire. When they were dry and warm they put them on again and felt like new beings. Strips of the antelope were fried on the ends of ramrods, and they ate plentifully. All the chill was driven from their bodies, and in its place came a deep pervading sense of comfort. The bitter wind yet howled without and they heard the snow driven against the door and windows. The sound heightened their feeling of luxury. They were like a troop of boys now, all of them—except Roylston. He sat on one of the piles of wood and his eyes gleamed as the others talked.

"I vote that we enlarge the name of our inn," said Allen. "Since our leader has black hair and black eyes, let's call it the Inn of the Black Panther. All in favor of that motion say 'Aye.'"

"Aye!" they roared.

"All against it say 'no.'"

Silence.

"The Inn of the Black Panther it is," said Will, "an' it is the most welcome inn that ever housed me."

The Panther smiled benevolently.

"I don't blame you boys for havin' a little fun," he said. "It does feel good to be here after all that we've been through."

The joy of the Texans was irrepressible. Fields began to pat and three or four of them danced up and down the earthen floor of the cabin. Will watched with dancing eyes. Ned, more sober, sat by his side.

However, the highest spirits must grow calm at last, and gradually the singing and dancing ceased. It had grown quite close in the cabin now, and one of the window shutters was thrown open, permitting a rush of cool, fresh air that was very welcome. Ned looked out. The wind was still whistling and moaning, and the snow, like a white veil, hid the trees.

The men one by one went to sleep on the floor. Obed and Fields kept watch at the window during the first half of the night, and the Panther and Ned relieved them for the second half. They heard nothing but the wind, and saw nothing but the snow. Day came with a hidden sun, and the fine snow still driven by the wind, but the Panther, a good judge of weather, predicted a cessation of the snow within an hour.

The men awoke and rose slowly from the floor. They were somewhat stiff, but no one had been overcome, and after a little stretching of the muscles all the soreness disappeared. The horses were within the shed, unharmed and warm, but hungry. They relighted the fire and broiled more strips of the antelope, but they saw that little would be left. The Panther turned to Roylston, who inspired respect in them all.

"Now, Mr. Roylston," he said, "we've got to agree upon some course of action an' we've got to put it to ourselves squar'ly. I take it that all of us want to serve Texas in one way or another, but we've got only three horses, we're about out of food, an' we're a long distance from the main Texas settlements. It ain't any use fur us to start to rippin' an' t'arin' unless we've got somethin' to rip an' t'ar with."

"Good words," said Obed White. "A speech in time saves errors nine."

"I am glad you have put the question, Mr. Palmer," said Roylston. "Our affairs have come to a crisis, and we must consider. I, too, wish to help Texas, but I can help it more by other ways than battle."

It did not occur to any of them to doubt him. He had already established over them the mental ascendancy that comes from a great mind used to dealing with great affairs.

"But we are practically dismounted," he continued. "It is winter and we do not know what would happen to us if we undertook to roam over the prairies as we are. On the other hand, we have an abundance of arms and ammunition and a large and well-built cabin. I suggest that we supply ourselves with food, and stay here until we can acquire suitable mounts. We may also contrive to keep a watch upon any Mexican armies that may be marching north. I perhaps have more reason than any of you for hastening away, but I can spend the time profitably in regaining the use of my limbs."

"Your little talk sounds mighty good to me," said the Panther. "In fact, I don't see anything else to do. This cabin must have been built an' left here 'speshully fur us. We know, too, that the Texans have all gone home, thinkin' that the war is over, while we know different an' mebbe we can do more good here than anywhere else. What do you say, boys? Do we stay?"

"We stay," replied all together.

They went to work at once fitting up their house. More firewood was brought in. Fortunately the men had been provided with hatchets, in the frontier style, which their rescuers had not neglected to bring away, and they fixed wooden hooks in the walls for their extra arms and clothing. A half dozen scraped away a large area of the thin snow and enabled the horses to find grass. A fine spring two hundred yards away furnished a supply of water.

After the horses had eaten Obed, the Panther and Ned rode away in search of game, leaving Mr. Roylston in command at the cabin.

The snow was no longer falling, and that which lay on the ground was melting rapidly.

"I know this country," said the Panther, "an' we've got four chances for game. It may be buffalo, it may be deer, it may be antelope, and it may be wild turkeys. I think it most likely that we'll find

buffalo. We're so fur west of the main settlements that they're apt to hang 'roun' here in the winter in the creek bottoms, an' if it snows they'll take to the timber fur shelter."

"And it has snowed," said Ned.

"Jest so, an' that bein' the case we'll search the timber. Of course big herds couldn't crowd in thar, but in this part of the country we gen'rally find the buffalo scattered in little bands."

They found patches of forest, generally dwarfed in character, and looked diligently for the great game. Once a deer sprang out of a thicket, but sped away so fast they did not get a chance for a shot. At length Obed saw large footprints in the thinning snow, and called the Panther's attention to them. The big man examined the traces critically.

"Not many hours old," he said. "I'm thinkin' that we'll have buffalo steak fur supper. We'll scout all along this timber. What we want is a young cow. Their meat is not tough."

They rode through the timber for about two hours, when Ned caught sight of moving figures on the far side of a thicket. He could just see the backs of large animals, and he knew that there were their buffalo. He pointed them out to the Panther, who nodded.

"We'll ride 'roun' the thicket as gently as possible," he said, "an' then open fire. Remember, we want a tender young cow, two of 'em if we can get 'em, an' don't fool with the bulls."

Ned's heart throbbed as Old Jack bore him around the thicket. He had fought with men, but he was not yet a buffalo hunter. Just as they turned the flank of the bushes a huge buffalo bull, catching their odor, raised his head and uttered a snort. The Panther promptly fired at a young cow just beyond him. The big bull, either frightened or angry, leaped head down at Old Jack. The horse was without experience with buffaloes, but he knew that those sharp horns meant no good to him, and he sprang aside with so much agility that Ned was almost unseated.

The big bull rushed on, and Ned, who had retained his hold upon his rifle, was tempted to take a shot at him for revenge, but, remembering the Panther's injunction, he controlled the impulse and fired at a young cow.

When the noise and confusion were over and the surviving buffaloes had lumbered away, they found that they had slain two of the young cows and that they had an ample supply of meat.

"Ned," said the Panther, "you know how to go back to the cabin, don't you?"

"I can go straight as an arrow."

"Then ride your own horse, lead the other two an' bring two men. We'll need 'em with the work here."

The Panther and Obed were already at work skinning the cows. Ned sprang upon Old Jack, and rode away at a trot, leading the other two horses by their lariats. The snow was gone now and the breeze was almost balmy. Ned felt that great rebound of the spirits of which the young are so capable. They had outwitted Urrea, they had taken his prisoners from him, and then had escaped across the Rio Grande. They had found shelter and now they had obtained a food supply. They were all good comrades together, and what more was to be asked?

He whistled as he rode along, but when he was half way back to the cabin he noticed something in a large tree that caused him to stop. He saw the outlines of great bronze birds, and he knew that they were wild turkeys. Wild turkeys would make a fine addition to their larder, and, halting Old Jack, he shot from his back, taking careful aim at the largest of the turkeys. The huge bird fell, and as the others flew away Ned was lucky enough to bring down a second with a pistol shot.

His trophies were indeed worth taking, and tying their legs together with a withe he hung them across his saddle bow. He calculated that the two together weighed nearly sixty pounds, and he rode triumphantly when he came in sight of the cabin.

Will saw him first and gave a shout that drew the other men.

"What luck?" hailed young Allen.

"Not much," replied Ned, "but I did get these sparrows."

He lifted the two great turkeys from his saddle and tossed them to Will. The boy caught them, but he was borne to his knees by their weight. The men looked at them and uttered approving words.

"What did you do with the Panther and Obed?" asked Fields.

"The last I saw of them they had been dismounted and were being chased over the plain by two big bull buffaloes. The horns of the buffaloes were then not more than a foot from the seats of their trousers. So I caught their horses, and I have brought them back to camp."

"I take it," said Fields, "that you've had good luck."

"We have had the finest of luck," replied Ned. "We ran into a group of fifteen or twenty buffaloes, and we brought down two fine, young cows. I came back for two more men to help with them, and on my way I shot these turkeys."

Fields and another man named Carter returned with Ned. Young Allen was extremely anxious to go, but the others were chosen on account of their experience with the work. They found that Obed and the Panther had already done the most of it, and when it was all finished Fields and Carter started back with the three horses, heavily laden. As the night promised to be mild, and the snow was gone, Ned, Obed and the Panther remained in the grove with the rest of their food supply.

They also wished to preserve the two buffalo robes, and they staked them out upon the ground, scraping them clean of flesh with their knives. Then they lighted a fire and cooked as much of the tender meat as they wished. By this time it was dark and they were quite ready to rest. They put out the fire and raked up the beds of leaves on which they would spread their blankets. But first they enjoyed the relaxation of the nerves and the easy talk that come after a day's work well done.

"It certainly has been a fine day for us," said Obed. "Sometimes I like to go through the bad days, because it makes the good days that follow all the better. Yesterday we were wandering around in the snow, and we had nothing, to-day we have a magnificent city home, that is to say, the cabin, and a beautiful country place, that is to say, this grove. I can add, too, that our nights in our country place are spent to the accompaniment of music. Listen to that beautiful song, won't you?"

A long, whining howl rose, sank and died. After an interval they heard its exact duplicate and the Panther remarked tersely:

"Wolves. Mighty hungry, too. They've smelled our buffalo meat and they want it. Guess from their big voices that they're timber wolves and not coyotes."

Ned knew that the timber wolf was a much larger and fiercer animal than his prairie brother, and he did not altogether like this whining sound which now rose and died for the third time.

"Must be a dozen or so," said the Panther, noticing the increasing volume of sound. "We'll light the fire again. Nothing is smarter than a wolf, an' I don't want one of those hulkin' brutes to slip up, seize a fine piece of buffalo and dash away with it. But fire will hold 'em. How a wolf does dread it! The little red flame is like a knife in his heart."

They lighted four small fires, making a rude ring which inclosed their leafy beds and the buffalo skins and meat. Before they finished the task they saw slim dusky figures among the trees and red eyes glaring at them. The Panther picked up a stick blazing like a torch, and made a sudden rush for one of the figures. There was a howl of terror and a sound of something rushing madly through the bushes.

The Panther flung his torch as far as he could in the direction of the sounds and returned, laughing deep in his throat.

"I think I came pretty near hittin' the master wolf with that," he said, "an' I guess he's good an' scared. But they'll come back after a while, an' don't you forget it. For that reason, I think we'd better keep a watch. We'll divide it into three hours apiece, an' we'll give you the first, Ned."

Ned was glad to have the opening watch, as it would soon be over and done with, and then he could sleep free from care about any watch to come. The Panther and Obed rolled in their blankets, found sleep almost instantly, and the boy, resolved not to be a careless sentinel, walked in a circle just outside the fires.

Sure enough, and just as the Panther had predicted, he saw the red eyes and dusky forms again. Now and then he heard a faint pad among the bushes, and he knew that a wolf had made it. He merely changed from the outside to the inside of the fire ring, and continued his walk. With the fire about him and his friends so near he was not afraid of wolves, no matter how big and numerous they might be.

Yet their presence in the bushes, the light shuffle of their feet and their fiery eyes had an uncanny effect. It was unpleasant to know that such fierce beasts were so near, and he gave himself a reassuring glance at the sleeping forms of his partners. By and by the red eyes melted away, and he heard another soft tread, but heavier than that of the wolves. With his rifle lying in the hollow of his arm and his finger on the trigger he looked cautiously about the circle of the forest.

Ned's gaze at last met that of a pair of red eyes, a little further apart than those of the wolves. He knew then that they belonged to a larger animal, and presently he caught a glimpse of the figure. He was sure that it was a puma or cougar, and so far as he could judge it was a big brute. It, too, must be very hungry, or it would not dare the fire and the human odor.

Ned felt tentatively of his rifle, but changed his mind. He remembered the Panther's exploit with the firebrand, and he decided to imitate it, but on a much larger scale. He laid down his rifle, but kept his left hand on the butt of the pistol in his belt. Then selecting the largest torch from the fire he made a rush straight for the blazing eyes, thrusting the flaming stick before him. There was a frightened roar, and then the sound of a heavy body crashing away through the undergrowth. Ned returned, satisfied that he had done as well as the Panther and better.

Both the Panther and Obed were awake and sitting up. They looked curiously at Ned, who still carried the flaming brand in his hand.

"A noise like the sound of thunder away off wakened me up," said the Panther. "Now, what have you been up to, young 'un?"

"Me?" said Ned lightly. "Oh, nothing important. I wanted to make some investigations in natural history out there in the bushes, and as I needed a light for the purpose I took it."

"An' if I'm not pressin' too much," said the Panther, in mock humility, "may I make so bold as to ask our young Solomon what is natural history?"

"Natural history is the study of animals. I saw a panther in the bushes and I went out there to examine him. I saw that he was a big fellow, but he ran away so fast I could tell no more about him."

"You scared him away with the torch instead of shooting," said Obed. "It was well done, but it took a stout heart. If he comes again tell him I won't wake up until it's time for my watch."

He was asleep again inside of a minute, and the Panther followed him quickly. Both men trusted Ned fully, treating him now as an experienced and skilled frontiersman. He knew it, and he felt proud and encouraged.

The panther did not come back, but the wolves did, although Ned now paid no attention to them. He was growing used to their company and the uncanny feeling departed. He merely replenished the fires and sat patiently until it was time for Obed to succeed him. Then he, too, wrapped himself in his blankets and slept a dreamless sleep until day.

The remainder of the buffalo meat was taken away the next day, but anticipating a long stay at the cabin they continued to hunt, both on horseback and on foot. Two more buffalo cows fell to their rifles. They also secured a deer, three antelope and a dozen wild turkeys.

Their hunting spread over two days, but when they were all assembled on the third night at the cabin general satisfaction prevailed. They had ranged over considerable country, and as game was plentiful and not afraid the Panther drew the logical conclusion that man had been scarce in that region.

"I take it," he said, "that the Mexicans are a good distance east, and that the Lipans and Comanches are another good distance west. Just the same, boys, we've got to keep a close watch, an' I think we've got more to fear from raidin' parties of the Indians than from the Mexicans. All the Mexicans are likely to be ridin' to some point on the Rio Grande to meet the forces of Santa Anna."

"I wish we had more horses," said Obed. "We'd go that way ourselves and see what's up."

"Well, maybe we'll get 'em," said the Panther. "Thar's a lot of horses on these plains, some of which ought to belong to us an' we may find a way of claimin' our rights."

They passed a number of pleasant days at the cabin and in hunting and foraging in the vicinity. They killed more big game and the dressed skins of buffalo, bear and deer were spread on the floor or were hung on the walls. Wild turkeys were numerous, and they had them for food every day. But they discovered no signs of man, white or red, and they would have been content to wait there had they not been so anxious to investigate the reported advance of Santa Anna on the Rio Grande.

Roylston was the most patient of them all, or at least he said the least.

"I think," he said about the fourth or fifth day, "that it does not hurt to linger here. The Mexican power has not yet gathered in full. As for me, personally, it suits me admirably. I can walk a full two hundred yards now, and next week I shall be able to walk a mile."

"When we are all ready to depart, which way do you intend to go Mr. Roylston?" asked Ned.

"I wish to go around the settlements and then to New Orleans," replied Roylston. "That city is my headquarters, but I also have establishments elsewhere, even as far north as New York. Are you sure, Ned, that you cannot go with me and bring your friend Allen, too? I could make men of you both in a vast commercial world. There have been great opportunities, and greater are coming. The development of this mighty southwest will call for large and bold schemes of organization. It is not money alone that I offer, but the risk, the hopes and rewards of a great game, in fact, the opening of a new world to civilization, for such this southwest is. It appeals to some deeper feeling than that which can be aroused by the mere making of money."

Ned, deeply interested, watched him intently as he spoke. He saw Roylston show emotion for the first time, and the mind of the boy responded to that of the man. He could understand this dream. The image of a great Texan republic was already in the minds of men. It possessed that of Ned. He did not believe that the Texans and Mexicans could ever get along together, and he was quite sure that Texas could never return to its original position as part of a Mexican state.

"You can do much for Texas there with me in New Orleans," said Roylston, as if he were making a final appeal to one whom he looked upon almost as a son. "Perhaps you could do more than you can here in Texas."

Ned shook his head a little sadly. He did not like to disappoint this man, but he could not leave the field. Young Allen also said that he would remain.

"Be it so," said Roylston. "It is young blood. Never was there a truer saying than 'Young men for war, old men for counsel.' But the time may come when you will need me. When it does come send the word."

Ned judged from Roylston's manner that dark days were ahead, but the merchant did not mention the subject again. At the end of a week, when they were amply supplied with everything except horses, the Panther decided to take Ned and Obed and go on a scout toward the Rio Grande. They started early in the morning and the horses, which had obtained plenty of grass, were full of life and vigor.

They soon left the narrow belt of forest far behind them, maintaining an almost direct course toward the southeast. The point on the river that they intended to reach was seventy or eighty miles away, and they did not expect to cover the distance in less than two days.

They rode all that day and did not see a trace of a human being, but they did see both buffalo and antelope in the distance.

"It shows what the war has done," said the Panther. "I rode over these same prairies about a year ago an' game was scarce, but there were some men. Now the men are all gone an' the game has come back. Cur'us how quick buffalo an' deer an' antelope learn about these things."

They slept the night through on the open prairie, keeping watch by turns. The weather was cold, but they had their good blankets with them and they took no discomfort. They rode forward again

early in the morning, and about noon struck an old but broad trail. It was evident that many men and many wagons had passed here. There were deep ruts in the earth, cut by wheels, and the traces of footsteps showed over a belt a quarter of a mile wide.

"Well, Ned, I s'pose you can make a purty good guess what this means?" said the Panther.

"This was made weeks and weeks ago," replied Ned confidently, "and the men who made it were Mexicans. They were soldiers, the army of Cos, that we took at San Antonio, and which we allowed to retire on parole into Mexico."

"There's no doubt you're right," said the Panther. "There's no other force in this part of the world big enough to make such a wide an' lastin' trail. An' I think it's our business to follow these tracks. What do you say, Obed?"

"It's just the one thing in the world that we're here to do," said the Maine man. "Broad is the path and straight is the way that leads before us, and we follow on."

"Do we follow them down into Mexico?" said Ned.

"I don't think it likely that we'll have to do it," replied the Panther, glancing at Obed.

Ned caught the look and he understood.

"Do you mean," he asked, "that Cos, after taking his parole and pledging his word that he and his troops would not fight against us, would stop at the Rio Grande?"

"I mean that an' nothin' else," replied the Panther. "I ain't talkin' ag'in Mexicans in general. I've knowed some good men among them, but I wouldn't take the word of any of that crowd of generals, Santa Anna, Cos, Sesma, Urrea, Gaona, Castrillon, the Italian Filisola, or any of them."

"There's one I'd trust," said Ned, with grateful memory, "and that's Almonte."

"I've heard that he's of different stuff," said the Panther, "but it's best to keep out of their hands."

They were now riding swiftly almost due southward, having changed their course to follow the trail, and they kept a sharp watch ahead for Mexican scouts or skirmishers. But the bare country in its winter brown was lone and desolate. The trail led straight ahead, and it would have been obvious now to the most inexperienced eye that an army had passed that way. They saw remains of camp fires, now and then the skeleton of a horse or mule picked clean by buzzards, fragments of worn-out clothing that had been thrown aside, and once a broken-down wagon. Two or three times they saw little mounds of earth with rude wooden crosses stuck upon them, to mark where some of the wounded had died and had been buried.

They came at last to a bit of woodland growing about a spring that seemed to gush straight up from the earth. It was really an open grove with no underbrush, a splendid place for a camp. It was evident that Cos's force had put it to full use, as the earth nearly everywhere had been trodden by hundreds of feet, and the charred pieces of wood were innumerable. The Panther made a long and critical examination of everything.

"I'm thinkin'," he said, "that Cos stayed here three or four days. All the signs p'int that way. He was bound by the terms we gave him at San Antonio to go an' not fight ag'in, but he's shorely takin' his time about it. Look at these bones, will you? Now, Ned, you promisn' scout an' skirmisher, tell me what they are."

"Buffalo bones," replied Ned promptly.

"Right you are," replied the Panther, "an' when Cos left San Antonio he wasn't taking any buffaloes along with him to kill fur meat. They staid here so long that the hunters had time to go out an' shoot game."

"A long lane's the thief of time," said Obed, "and having a big march before him, Cos has concluded to walk instead of run."

"'Cause he was expectin' somethin' that would stop him," said the Panther angrily. "I hate liars an' traitors. Well, we'll soon see."

Their curiosity became so great that they rode at a swift trot on the great south trail, and not ten miles further they came upon the unmistakable evidences of another big camp that had lasted long.

"Slower an' slower," muttered the Panther. "They must have met a messenger. Wa'al, it's fur us to go slow now, too."

But he said aloud:

"Boys, it ain't more'n twenty miles now to the Rio Grande, an' we can hit it by dark. But I'm thinkin' that we'd better be mighty keerful now as we go on."

"I suppose it's because Mexican scouts and skirmishers may be watching," said Ned.

"Yes, an' 'specially that fellow Urrea. His uncle bein' one of Santa Anna's leadin' gen'ral, he's likely to have freer rein, an', as we know, he's clever an' active. I'd hate to fall into his hands again."

They rode more slowly, and three pairs of eyes continually searched the plain for an enemy. Ned's sight was uncommonly acute, and Obed and the Panther frequently appealed to him as a last resort. It flattered his pride and he strove to justify it.

Their pace became slower and slower, and presently the early twilight of winter was coming. A cold wind moaned, but the desolate plain was broken here and there by clumps of trees. At the suggestion of the Panther they rode to one of these and halted under cover of the timber.

"The river can't be much more than a mile ahead," said the Panther, "an' we might run into the Mexicans any minute. We're sheltered here, an' we'd better wait a while. Then I think we can do more stalkin'."

Obed and Ned were not at all averse, and dismounting they stretched themselves, easing their muscles. Old Jack hunted grass and, finding none, rubbed Ned's elbow with his nose suggestively.

"Never mind, old boy," said Ned, patting the glossy muzzle of his faithful comrade. "This is no time for feasting and banqueting. We are hunting Mexicans, you and I, and after that business is over we may consider our pleasures."

They remained several hours among the trees. They saw the last red glow that the sun leaves in the west die away. They saw the full darkness descend over the earth, and then the stars come trooping out. After that they saw a scarlet flush under the horizon which was not a part of the night and its progress. The Panther noted it, and his great face darkened. He turned to Ned.

"You see it, don't you? Now tell me what it is."

"That light, I should say, comes from the fires of an army. And it can be no other army than that of Cos."

"Right again, ain't he, Obed?"

"He surely is. Cos and his men are there. He who breaks his faith when he steals away will have to fight another day. How far off would you say that light is, Panther?"

"'Bout two miles, an' in an hour or so we'll ride fur it. The night will darken up more then, an' it will give us a better chance for lookin' an' listenin'. I'll be mightily fooled if we don't find out a lot that's worth knowin'."

True to Obed's prediction, the night deepened somewhat within the hour. Many of the stars were hidden by floating wisps of cloud, and objects could not be seen far on the dusky surface of the plain. But the increased darkness only made the scarlet glow in the south deepen. It seemed, too, to spread far to right and left.

"That's a big force," said the Panther. "It'll take a lot of fires to make a blaze like that."

"I'm agreeing with you," said Obed. "I'm thinking that those are the camp fires of more men than Cos took from San Antonio with him."

"Which would mean," said Ned, "that another Mexican army had come north to join him."

"Anyhow, we'll soon see," said the Panther.

They mounted their horses and rode cautiously toward the light.

CHAPTER V

SANTA ANNA'S ADVANCE

The three rode abreast, Ned in the center. The boy was on terms of perfect equality with Obed and the Panther. They treated him as a man among men, and respected his character, rather grave for one so young, and always keen to learn.

The land rolled away in swells as usual throughout a great part of Texas, but they were not of much elevation and the red glow in the south was always in sight, deepening fast as they advanced. They stopped at last on a little elevation within the shadow of some myrtle oaks, and saw the fires spread before them only four or five hundred yards away, and along a line of at least two miles. They heard the confused murmur of many men. The dark outlines of cannon were seen against the firelight, and now and then the musical note of a mandolin or guitar came to them.

"We was right in our guess," said the Panther. "It's a lot bigger force than the one that Cos led away from San Antonio, an' it will take a heap of rippin' an' t'arin' an' roarin' to turn it back. Our people don't know how much is comin' ag'in 'em."

The Panther spoke in a solemn tone. Ned saw that he was deeply impressed and that he feared for the future. Good cause had he. Squabbles among the Texan leaders had reduced their army to five or six hundred men.

"Don't you think," said Ned, "that we ought to find out just exactly what is here, and what this army intends?"

"Not a doubt of it," said Obed. "Those who have eyes to see should not go away without seeing."

The Panther nodded violently in assent.

"We must scout about the camp," he said. "Mebbe we'd better divide an' then we can all gather before day-break at the clump of trees back there."

He pointed to a little cluster of trees several hundred yards back of them, and Ned and Obed agreed. The Panther turned away to the right, Obed to the left and Ned took the center. Their plan of dividing their force had a great advantage. One man was much less likely than three to attract undue attention.

Ned went straight ahead a hundred yards or more, when he was stopped by an arroyo five or six feet wide and with very deep banks. He looked about, uncertain at first what to do. Obed and the Panther had already disappeared in the dusk. Before him glowed the red light, and he heard the distant sound of many voices.

Ned quickly decided. He remembered how they had escaped up the bed of the creek when they were besieged by Urrea, and if one could leave by an arroyo, one could also approach by it. He rode to the group of trees that had been designated as the place of meeting, and left his horse there. He noticed considerable grass within the ring of trunks, and he was quite confident that Old Jack would remain there until his return. But he addressed to him words of admonition:

"Be sure that you stay among these trees, old friend," he said, "because it's likely that when I want you I'll want you bad. Remain and attend to this grass."

Old Jack whinnied softly and, after his fashion, rubbed his nose gently against his master's arm. It was sufficient for Ned. He was sure that the horse understood, and leaving him he went back to the arroyo, which he entered without hesitation.

Ned was well armed, as every one then had full need to be. He wore a sombrero in the Mexican fashion, and flung over his shoulders was a great serape which he had found most useful in the winter.

With his perfect knowledge of Spanish and its Mexican variants he believed that if surprised he could pass as a Mexican, particularly in the night and among so many.

The arroyo led straight down toward the plain upon which the Mexicans were encamped, and when he emerged from it he saw that the fires which at a distance looked like one continuous blaze were scores in number. Many of them were built of buffalo chips and others of light wood that burned fast. Sentinels were posted here and there, but they kept little watch. Why should they? Here was a great Mexican army, and there was certainly no foe amounting to more than a few men within a hundred miles.

Ned's heart sank as he beheld the evident extent of the Mexican array. The little Texan force left in the field could be no match for such an army as this.

Nevertheless, his resolution to go through the Mexican camp hardened. If he came back with a true and detailed tale of their numbers the Texans must believe and prepare. He drew the brim of his sombrero down a little further, and pulled his serape up to meet it. The habit the Mexicans had of wrapping their serapes so high that they were covered to the nose was fortunate at this time. He was now completely disguised, without the appearance of having taken any unusual precaution.

He walked forward boldly and sat down with a group beside a fire. He judged by the fact that they were awake so late that they had but little to do, and he saw at once also that they were Mexicans from the far south. They were small, dark men, rather amiable in appearance. Two began to play guitars and they sang a plaintive song to the music. The others, smoking cigarritos, listened attentively and luxuriously. Ned imitated them perfectly. He, too, lying upon his elbow before the pleasant fire, felt the influence of the music, so sweet, so murmurous, speaking so little of war. One of the men handed him a cigarrito, and, lighting it, he made pretense of smoking—he would not have seemed a Mexican had he not smoked the cigarrito.

Lying there, Ned saw many tents, evidence of a camp that was not for the day only, and he beheld officers in bright uniforms passing among them. His heart gave a great jump when he noticed among them a heavy-set, dark man. It was Cos, Cos the breaker of oaths. With him was another officer whose uniform indicated the general. Ned learned later that this was Sesma, who had been dispatched with a brigade by Santa Anna to meet Cos on the Rio Grande, where they were to remain until the dictator himself came with more troops.

The music ceased presently and one of the men said to Ned:

"What company?"

Ned had prepared himself for such questions, and he moved his hand vaguely toward the left.

"Over there," he said.

They were fully satisfied, and continued to puff their cigarritos, resting their heads with great content upon pillows made of their saddles and blankets. For a while they said nothing more, happily watching the rings of smoke from their cigarritos rise and melt into the air. Although small and short, they looked hardy and strong. Ned noticed the signs of bustle and expectancy about the camp. Usually Mexicans were asleep at this hour, and he wondered why they lingered. But he did not approach the subject directly.

"A hard march," he said, knowing that these men about him had come a vast distance.

"Aye, it was," said the man next on his right. "Santiago, but was it not, José?"

José, the second man on the right, replied in the affirmative and with emphasis:

"You speak the great truth, Carlos. Such another march I never wish to make. Think of the hundreds and hundreds of miles we have tramped from our warm lands far in the south across mountains, across bare and windy deserts, with the ice and the snow beating in our faces. How I shivered, Carlos, and how long I shivered! I thought I should continue shivering all my life even if I lived to be a hundred, no matter how warmly the sun might shine."

The others laughed, and seemed to Ned to snuggle a little closer to the fire, driven by the memory of the icy plains.

"But it was the will of the great Santa Anna, surely the mightiest man of our age," said Carlos. "They say that his wrath was terrible when he heard how the Texan bandits had taken San Antonio de Bexar. Truly, I am glad that I was not one of his officers, and that I was not in his presence at the time. After all, it is sometimes better to be a common soldier than to have command."

"Aye, truly," said Ned, and the others nodded in affirmation.

"But the great Santa Anna will finish it," continued Carlos, who seemed to have the sin of garrulity. "He has defeated all his enemies in Mexico, he has consolidated his power and now he advances with a mighty force to crush these insolent and miserable Texans. As I have said, he will finish it. The rope and the bullet will be busy. In six months there will be no Texans."

Ned shivered, and when he looked at the camp fires of the great army he saw that this peon was not talking foolishness. Nevertheless his mind returned to its original point of interest. Why did the Mexican army remain awake so late?

"Have you seen the President?" he asked of Carlos.

"Often," replied Carlos, with pride. "I fought under him in the great battle on the plain of Guadalupe less than two years ago, when we defeated Don Francisco Garcia, the governor of Zacatecas. Ah, it was a terrible battle, my friends! Thousands and thousands were killed and all Mexicans. Mexicans killing Mexicans. But who can prevail against the great Santa Anna? He routed the forces of Garcia, and the City of Zacatecas was given up to us to pillage. Many fine things I took that day from the houses of those who presumed to help the enemy of our leader. But now we care not to kill Mexicans, our own people. It is only the miserable Texans who are really Gringos."

Carlos, who had been the most amiable of men, basking in the firelight, now rose up a little and his eyes flashed. He had excited himself by his own tale of the battle and loot of Zacatecas and the coming slaughter of the Texans. That strain of cruelty, which in Ned's opinion always lay embedded in the Spanish character, was coming to the surface.

Ned made no comment. His serape, drawn up to his nose, almost met the brim of his sombrero and nobody suspected that the comrade who sat and chatted with them was a Gringo, but he shivered again, nevertheless.

"We shall have a great force when it is all gathered," he said at length.

"Seven thousand men or more," said José proudly, "and nearly all of them are veterans of the wars. We shall have ten times the numbers of the Texans, who are only hunters and rancheros."

"Have you heard when we march?" asked Ned, in a careless tone.

"As soon as the great Santa Anna arrives it will be decided, I doubt not," said José. "The general and his escort should be here by midnight."

Ned's heart gave a leap. So it was that for which they were waiting. Santa Anna himself would come in an hour or two. He was very glad that he had entered the Mexican camp. Bidding a courteous good night to the men about the fire, he rose and sauntered on. It was easy enough for him to do so without attracting attention, as many others were doing the same thing. Discipline seldom amounted to much in a Mexican army, and so confident were both officers and soldiers of an overwhelming victory that they preserved scarcely any at all. Yet the expectant feeling pervaded the whole camp, and now that he knew that Santa Anna was coming he understood.

Santa Anna was the greatest man in the world to these soldiers. He had triumphed over everything in their own country. He had exhibited qualities of daring and energy that seemed to them supreme, and his impression upon them was overwhelming. Ned felt once more that little shiver. They might be right in their view of the Texan war.

He strolled on from fire to fire, until his attention was arrested suddenly by one at which only officers sat. It was not so much the group as it was one among them who drew his notice so strongly. Urrea was sitting on the far side of the fire, every feature thrown into clear relief by the bright flames. The other officers were young men of about his own age and they were playing dice. They were evidently in high good humor, as they laughed frequently.

Ned lay down just within the shadow of a tent wall, drew his serape higher about his face, and rested his head upon his arm. He would have seemed sound asleep to an ordinary observer, but he was never more wide awake in his life. He was near enough to hear what Urrea and his friends were saying, and he intended to hear it. It was for such that he had come.

"You lose, Francisco," said one of the men as he made a throw of the dice and looked eagerly at the result. "What was it that you were saying about the general?"

"That I expect an early advance, Ramon," replied Urrea, "a brief campaign, and a complete victory. I hate these Texans. I shall be glad to see them annihilated."

The young officer whom he called Ramon laughed.

"If what I hear be true, Francisco," he said, "you have cause to hate them. There was a boy, Fulton, that wild buffalo of a man, whom they call the Panther, and another who defeated some of your finest plans."

Urrea flushed, but controlled his temper.

"It is true, Ramon," he replied. "The third man I can tell you is called Obed White, and they are a clever three. I hate them, but it hurts my pride less to be defeated by them than by any others whom I know."

"Well spoken, Urrea," said a third man, "but since these three are fighters and will stay to meet us, it is a certainty that our general will scoop them into his net. Then you can have all the revenge you wish."

"I count upon it, Ambrosio," said Urrea, smiling. "I also hope that we shall recapture the man Roylston. He has great sums of money in the foreign banks in our country, and we need them, but our illustrious president cannot get them without an order from Roylston. The general would rather have Roylston than a thousand Texan prisoners."

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