

Altsheler Joseph Alexander

**The Quest of the Four:  
A Story of the Comanches  
and Buena Vista**



Joseph Altsheler

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**Altsheler J.**

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# **Altsheler Joseph A. Joseph Alexander**

## **The Quest of the Four: A Story of the Comanches and Buena Vista**

### **CHAPTER I**

#### **THE MEETING OF THE FOUR**

A tall boy, dreaming dreams, was walking across the Place d'Armes in New Orleans. It was a brilliant day in early spring, and a dazzling sunlight fell over the city, gilding the wood or stone of the houses, and turning the muddy current of the Mississippi into shimmering gold. Under such a perfect blue sky, and bathed in such showers of shining beams, New Orleans, a city of great and varied life, looked quaint, picturesque, and beautiful.

But the boy, at that moment, thought little of the houses or people about him. His mind roamed into the vast Southwest, over mountains, plains, and deserts that his feet had never trod, and he sought, almost with the power of evocation, to produce regions that he had never seen, but which he had often heard described. He had forgotten no detail of the stories, but, despite them, the cloud of mystery and romance remained, calling to him all the more strongly because he had come upon a quest the most vital of his life, a quest that must lead him into the great unknown land.

He was not a native of New Orleans or Louisiana. Any one could have told at a glance that the blue eyes, fair hair, and extreme whiteness of skin did not belong to the Gulf coast. His build was that of the Anglo-Saxon. The height, the breadth of shoulder and chest, and the whole figure, muscled very powerfully for one so young, indicated birth in a clime farther North—Kentucky or Virginia, perhaps. His dress, neat and clean, showed that he was one who respected himself.

Phil Bedford passed out of the Place d'Armes, and presently came to the levee which ran far along the great river, and which was seething with life. New Orleans was then approaching the zenith of its glory. Many, not foreseeing the power of the railroad, thought that the city, seated near the mouth of the longest river of the world, into which scores of other navigable streams drained, was destined to become the first city of America. The whole valley of the Mississippi, unequalled in extent and richness, must find its market here, and beyond lay the vast domain, once Spain's, for which New Orleans would be the port of entry.

Romance, too, had seized the place. The Alamo and San Jacinto lay but a few years behind. All the states resounded with the great story of the Texan struggle for liberty. Everybody talked of Houston and Crockett and Bowie and the others, and from this city most of the expeditions had gone. New Orleans was the chief fountain from which flowed fresh streams of men who steadily pushed the great Southwestern frontier farther and farther into the Spanish lands.

It seemed to Phil, looking through his own fresh, young eyes, that it was a happy crowd along the levee. The basis of the city was France and Spain, with an American superstructure, but all the materials had been bound into a solid fabric by their great and united defense against the British in 1815. Now other people came, too, called by the spirit of trade or adventure. Every nation of Europe was there, and the states, also, sent their share. They came fast on the steamers which trailed their black smoke down the yellow river.

The strong youth had been sad, when he came that morning from the dingy little room in which he slept, and he had been sad when he was walking across the Place d'Armes, but the scene was too bright and animated to leave one so young in such a state of mind. He bought a cup of hot coffee from one of the colored women who was selling it from immense cans, drank it, exchanged a cheerful

word or two of badinage, and, as he turned away, he ran into a round man, short, rosy, and portly. Phil sprang back, exclaiming:

"Your pardon, sir! It was an accident! All my fault!"

"No harm done where none is meant," replied the stranger, speaking excellent English, although with a German accent. It was obvious, even without the accent, that he was of German birth. The Fatherland was written all over his rotund figure, but he was dressed in the fashion of the Southwest—light suit, light shoes, and a straw hat.

It was a time when chance meetings led to long friendships. On the border, a stranger spoke to another stranger if he felt like it. One could ask questions if he chose. Partnerships were formed on the spur of the moment in the vast army that was made up of the children of adventure, formality was a commodity little in demand. The German looked rather inquiringly at the boy.

"From farther North, is it not so?" he asked. "Answer or be silent. Either is your right."

Bill laughed. He liked the man's quaint manner and friendly tone, and he replied promptly:

"I was born in Kentucky, my name is Philip Bedford, and I am alone in New Orleans."

"Then," said the German, "you must be here for some expedition. This is where they start. It is so. I can see it in your face. Come, my young friend, no harm is done where none is meant."

Phil had taken no offense. He had merely started a little at the shrewd guess. He replied frankly:

"I'm thinking of the West, Texas and maybe New Mexico, or even beyond that—California."

"It is a long journey to take alone," said the German, "two thousand, three thousand miles, and not one mile of safe road. Indians, Mexicans, buffaloes, bears, deserts, mountains, all things to keep you from getting across."

"But I mean to go," said Phil firmly.

The German looked at him searchingly. His interest in Phil seemed to increase.

"Something calls you," he said.

Phil was silent.

"No harm is done where none is meant," the German. "You have told me who you are, Mr. Philip Bedford, and where you come from. It is right that I tell you as much about myself. My name is Hans Arenberg, and I am a Texan."

Phil looked at him, his eyes full of unbelief, and the German laughed a little.

"It is so," he said. "You do not think I look like a Texan, but I am one by way of Germany. I live at New Braunfels."

Arenberg's voice broke suddenly, and then Phil remembered vaguely—New Braunfels, a settlement of German immigrants in Texas, raided by Comanches, the men killed, and the women carried off! It was one of those terrible incidents of the border, so numerous that the new fast crowded the old out of place.

"You come from New Braunfels! You are one of the survivors of the massacre!" he exclaimed.

"It is so," said the German, his eyes growing sober, "and I, too, wish to go far into the West. I, too, seek something, young Mr. Philip Bedford, and my road would lie much where yours leads."

The two looked at each other with inquiry that shaded into understanding. Arenberg was the first to speak.

"Yes, we could go together," he said. "I trust you, and you trust me. But two are not strong enough. The chances are a thousand to one that neither of us would find what he is seeking. The Mexicans wish revenge on the Texans, the Comanches raid to the outskirts of San Antonio. Puff! Our lives would not be worth that! It must be a strong party of many men!"

"I believe you are right," said Phil, "but I wish to go. I wish to go very much."

"So do I," said Arenberg. "It is the same with both of us, but suppose we wait. Where do you live?"

Phil no longer hesitated to confide in this chance acquaintance, and he replied that he was staying in a house near the Convent of the Ursuline Nuns, where a little room sheltered him and his few belongings.

"Suppose," said Arenberg, "that I join you there, and we save our expenses. In union there is strength. If you do not like my suggestion say so. No harm is done where none is meant."

"On the contrary, I do like it," said Phil heartily. "It seems to me that we can help each other."

"Then come," said Arenberg. "We will go first to my place, where I will pay my own bill, take away what I have, and then we will join forces at yours, is it not so?"

Arenberg was staying at one of the inns that abounded in New Orleans, and it took him only a half hour to pack and move, carrying his baggage in his hand. Phil's room was in a large, rambling old house, built of cypresswood, with verandas all about it. There an American widow kept boarders, and she had plenty of them, as New Orleans was overflowing with strangers. The room was small and bare, but it was large enough, as Phil's baggage, too, was limited. A cot was put in for Arenberg, and the two were at home.

The day was now drawing to a close, and the two ate supper with a strange company in the large dining-room of the boarding house. Phil, a close observer, noted that six languages were spoken around that more or less hospitable board. He understood only his own, and a little French and Spanish, but the difference in sound and intonation enabled him to note the others. One of the men who sat opposite him was a big fellow with glistening gold rings in his ears, evidently a West Indian of somewhat doubtful color, but he was quiet, and adept and skillfully with his knife. A sallow young Mexican with curling black mustaches complained incessantly about his food, and a thin New Englander spoke at times of the great opportunities for capital in the Southwest.

Phil and Arenberg, who sat side by side, said little, but both watched all the other guests with interested eyes. The one who held Phil's gaze the longest was a smoothly shaven young man on the other side of the table. It was the difference between him and the others that aroused Phil's curiosity. He sat very erect, with his square shoulders thrown back, and he never spoke, except to accept or reject the food passed by colored girls. His eyes were blue, and his face, cut clear and strong, betokened perception and resolve. Phil believed that he could like him, but his attention by and by wandered elsewhere.

Philip Bedford had not felt so nearly content for many days. The making of a new friend was a source of strength to the boy, and he felt that he had taken a step forward in his great search. Fresh confidence flowed like good wine into his veins. He had friendly feelings toward all those around the table, and the room itself became picturesque. He ate of strange dishes, French or Spanish, and liked them, careless what they were. A mild breeze came through the open windows, and the outlines of buildings were softened in the dusk. Within the room itself six candles in tall candlesticks, placed at regular intervals on the table, cast a sufficient light. Two young colored women in red calico dresses, and with red turbans on their heads, kept off the flies and mosquitoes with gorgeous fans of peacock feathers, which they waved gently over the heads of the guests. Phil became deeply conscious of the South, of its glow and its romance.

The guests, having a sufficiency of food, left the table one by one. The young man with the smooth face was among the first to go. Phil noticed him again and admired his figure—tall, slender, and beautifully erect. He walked with ease and grace, and his dress of plain brown was uncommonly neat and well fitting. "I should like to know that man," was Phil's thought.

After dinner the boy and Arenberg sat on the veranda in the dusk, and talked in low voices of their plans. They deemed it better to keep their intentions to themselves. Many expeditions were fitting out in New Orleans. Some were within the law, and some were not. Wise men talked little of what was nearest to their hearts.

"If we go into the West—and we are going," said Phil, "we shall need weapons—rifles, pistols."

"Time enough for that," said Arenberg. "If we have the money, we can arm ourselves in a day. Weapons are a chief article of commerce in New Orleans."

An hour later they went up to their room and to bed. Phil carried his money on his person, and most of his other belongings were in a stout leather bag or valise, which was fastened with a brass lock. It was necessary for him to open the bag to obtain some clean linen, and as Arenberg's back was turned he took out, also, a small paper, yellow and worn. He opened it for the thousandth time, choked a sigh, and put it back. As he relocked the bag and turned, he noticed that Arenberg also had been looking at something. It seemed to be a photograph, and the German, after returning it to his own bag, gazed absently out of the window. His face, which at other times was obviously made for smiles and cheeriness, was heavy with grief. A flood of sympathy rushed over Philip Bedford. "I wonder what it is he seeks out there," the boy thought as he looked unconsciously toward the West. But he had too much delicacy of mind to say anything, and presently Arenberg was himself again, speaking hopefully of their plans as they prepared for bed.

Phil slept soundly, except for one interval. Then he dreamed a dream, and it was uncommonly vivid. He saw Hans Arenberg rise from his cot, take from his bag the small object which was undoubtedly a photograph, go to the window, where the moonlight fell, and look at it long and earnestly. Presently his chest heaved, and tears ran down either cheek. Then his head fell forward, and he dropped the photograph to his breast. He stood in that stricken attitude for at least five minutes, then he put the photograph back in the bag, and returned to his cot. In the morning Phil's recollection of the dream was very vivid, but Arenberg was cheery and bright.

The boy and the man ate breakfast together in the dining-room, a breakfast of oranges—Phil had never seen an orange until he came to New Orleans—cakes and butter and coffee. Only a few of the diners of the evening before were present when they went into the room, but among them was the young man with the shaven face and the firm chin. Phil liked him even better in the morning light. His seemed the kindly face of a man with a strong and decided character. Their eyes met, and the strangers smiled and nodded. Phil smiled and nodded back. After breakfast Phil and Arenberg went out upon the veranda. The man was already there, smoking a cigarette.

"Fine morning," he observed easily. "One could not ask anything better than these early spring days in New Orleans. In the North we are still in the grasp of snow and ice."

Phil and Arenberg also sat down, as the way was now opened for conversation.

"Then you are from the North, I suppose," said Phil.

"Yes," replied the stranger, "from the State of New York, but I am traveling now, as you see. My name is Middleton, George Middleton."

He paused, meditatively blew a whiff of smoke from the little Spanish cigarrito, and added:

"I'm not for long in New Orleans. I'm thinking of a journey in the West."

"Nobody goes there unless he has a very good reason for going. Is it not so? No harm is done where none is meant," said Arenberg, in a tone half of apology and half of inquiry.

Middleton laughed and took another puff at his cigarrito.

"Certainly no harm has been done," he replied. "You are right, also, in saying that no one goes into the West unless he has an excellent reason. I have such a reason. I want to look for something there."

Phil and the German exchanged glances. They, too, wished to look for something there. So! Here was a third man seeking to embark upon the great journey. But it was no business of theirs what he sought, however curious they might feel about it. Phil took another look at Middleton. Surely his was a good face, a face to inspire trust and courage.

"We wish to go across Texas and New Mexico, also," he said, "but we've been delaying until we could form a party."

"You've two at least," said Middleton, "and you now have the chance to make it three. Why not do so?"

"We will," said Arenberg. "It iss a case wherethree are company, and two are not so much. Our firmis now Middleton, Bedford, Arenberg & Co."

"Do not put me first," said Middleton. "We mustall be on exactly the same plane. But I hope, friends, that you trust me as much as I trust you. I think Iknow truth and honesty when I see them."

"We do!" said Phil and Arenberg together and emphatically.

The three shook hands, and that single act boundthem into a solemn compact to stand by one anotherthrough all things. They did not waste words. Thenthe three went into the town, walking about among theinns and on the levee to hear the gossip of New Orleans, and to learn what chance there was of a large party goinginto the West. On the way Middleton told them of somethings that he had learned. He was not sure, but a largewagon train might start soon for Santa Fé, in the farMexican land of New Mexico. It was to be a tradingexpedition, carrying much cloth, metal goods, and otherarticles of value to this, the greatest of Mexico's outlyingposts.

"It will be a numerous train," said Middleton,"perhaps too numerous, as it may arouse the suspicion ofthe Mexicans. The relations of the States and Mexicoare none too good. There is trouble over Texas, and whocan tell what will happen a thousand miles in the depthsof the wilderness?"

"Nobody," said Arenberg. "Who should know better than I?"

He spoke with such sudden emphasis that Middletonopened his mouth as if he would ask a question, butchanged his mind and was silent.

"Then it is your opinion, Mr. Middleton," said Phil,"that we should join this train?"

"If nothing better offers. All such expeditions areloosely organized. If we should wish to leave it we cando so."

"It iss well to keep it in mind," said Arenberg."No harm can be done where none iss meant."

They entered a large inn kept by a Frenchman. Many men were sitting about drinking or smoking. Middletonordered lemonade for the three, and they sat at a smalltable in the corner, observing the life of the place. Phil'sattention was presently attracted to another small tablenear them, at which a single man sat. His gaze wouldnot have lingered there, had it not been for this man'speculiar appearance. His age might have been thirty-five, more or less, and his figure was powerful. Hisface was burned almost black by a sun that could nothave been anything but ardent, but his features and hisblue eyes showed him to be American of a fair race. Hisclothes were poor, and he looked depressed. Yet thestranger was not without a certain distinction, an air asof one who did not belong there in an inn. Somethingin the blue eyes told of wild freedom and great spaces.He interested Phil more than anybody else in the room.He felt that here was another man whom he could like.

The talk about them drifted quite naturally upon thesubject of the West, what Texas was going to do, whatMexico was going to do, the great trail toward the Pacific, and the prospect of trouble between the United States andMexico. The shabby man raised his head and showedinterest. His eyes began to glow. He was not morethan three feet away, and Phil, prompted by a sort ofinstinct, spoke to him.

"It seems that all eyes turn toward the West now,"he said.

"Yes," replied the stranger, "and they're right. It'sout there that the great things lie."

He moved his hand with a slight but significantgesture toward the setting sun.

"I've been there once," he said, "and I want to go back."

"A man takes his life in his hands when he travelsthat way," said Phil.

"I know," replied the stranger, "but I'm willing torisk it. I must go back there. I want to look forsomething, something very particular."

Phil started. Here was a fourth who sought somedarling wish of his heart in that far mysterious West.He felt a strange influence. It seemed to him a sign, orrather a command that must be obeyed. He glanced atMiddleton and Arenberg, who had been listening, and, understanding him perfectly, they nodded.

"We three are going into the West, also, on errands of our own," said Phil. "Why not join us? Three are good, but four are better."

"It is a fair proposition," added Arenberg. "No harm is done where none is meant."

"We make the offer," said Middleton, "because on such a journey one needs friends. If you do not think you can trust us, as our acquaintance is so short, say so."

The man examined them keenly, one by one. Phil, looking with equal keenness at him, saw that, despite shabbiness of dress and despondency of manner, he was not a common man. In truth, as he looked, the depression seemed to be passing away. The stranger raised his head, threw back his shoulders, and the blue eyes began to glow.

"You look all right to me," he said. "A man has got to make friends, and if you trust me I don't see why I can't trust you. Besides, I'm terribly anxious to go back out there, and my reason is mighty good."

"Then shall we consider it a bargain?" said Middleton.

"You may count me one of the band as long as you will have me," said the stranger with hearty emphasis, "and I suppose I oughtn't to come in as an unknown. My name is Breakstone, William Breakstone, though I am always called Bill Breakstone by those who know me. Bill Breakstone seems to run off smoother."

He smiled in the most ingratiating manner. The sudden acquisition of friends seemed to have clothed him about with sunlight. All the others felt that they had made no mistake.

"I'm a rover," said Bill Breakstone in round, cheerful tones. "I've been roaming all my life, though I'm bound to say it hasn't been to much purpose. As you see me now, I haven't got nearly enough to buy either a rifle or a horse for this big trip on which you're asking me to go, and on which I'm wanting to go terrible bad."

"Never mind, Mr. Breakstone—" began Middleton, but he was interrupted.

"I'm Breakstone or Bill to those that feed with me," said the new man, "and I'm Mr. Breakstone to those that don't like me or suspect me."

"All right," said Middleton with a laugh, "it's Breakstone for the present. By and by we may call you Bill. I was going to tell you, Breakstone, that we four go in together. We furnish you what you need, and later on you pay us back if you can. It's the usual thing in the West."

"You're right, my lord," said Bill Breakstone, "and I accept. It gives me pleasure to be enrolled in your most gallant company, and, by my troth, I will serve you right well."

Middleton looked at him in amazement, and Bill Breakstone broke into a mellow, infectious laugh.

"I don't talk that way all the time," he said. "It merely bursts out in spots. You may not believe it, when you look at me, but I studied for the stage once, and I've been an actor. Now and then the old scraps come to the end of my tongue. All's well that ends well, and may that be the fate of our expedition."

"Come," said Middleton, after telling his own name and that of his friends to Breakstone, "we'll go to our quarters and make a place for you. Phil and Arenberg are in a room together, and you shall share mine."

"Lead on!" said Bill Breakstone.

The four left the inn. Bill Breakstone was as poor as he described himself to be. He owned only the worn suit of clothes in which he stood, a pistol, and a pair of saddle bags, seeming to contain some linen, of which he took good care.

"Prithee, young sir," he said to Phil, "I would faithfully guard well the little that I have, because if I lose the little that I have, then what I have shall be nothing. Do I argue well, Sir Ivanhoe?"

"It's conclusive," said Phil. He took greatly to this man who had become in an hour the life of their little band, a constant source of cheerful patter that invigorated them all. Middleton bought him a new suit of clothes, gave him some money, which he promised earnestly to return a hundredfold, and

then they went forth to inquire further into the matter of the trading expedition for Santa Fé. But their attention was diverted by the arrival of a large steamboat that had come all the way from Pittsburgh loaded with passengers. A particular group among the arrivals soon became the center of their interest.

The members of the group were Mexicans, and they were evidently people of distinction, or, at least, position. The first among them was middle-aged, fat, and yellow, and dressed in garments much brighter in color than Americans wear. Indeed, as a wind somewhat chill swept over the river, he threw around his shoulders a red serape with a magnificent border of gold fringe. But a young man who walked by his side made no acknowledgment to the wind. It was he whom Phil watched most. Some people inspire us at once with hostility, and Phil had this feeling about the stranger, who bore himself in a manner that had more than a tinge of sneering arrogance.

The young man was obviously of the Spanish race, although his blood might run back to Northern Spain, as he was tall and very strongly built, and his complexion inclined to fairness, but Phil believed him to be of Mexican birth, as he showed the shade of change that the New World always made in the old. He wore the uniform of a captain in the Mexican army. Mexican uniforms were not popular in the States, but he bore himself as if he preferred the hostility of the crowd to its friendship. His insolent gaze met Phil's for an instant, and the boy gave it back with interest. For a few moments these two who had never met before, who did not know the names of each other, and who might never meet again, stared with immediate hostility. Eye plumbed the depths of eye, but it was the Mexican who looked away first, although he let his lips curl slightly into a gesture with which he meant to convey contempt.

Middleton had observed this silent drama of a few moments, and he said quietly:

"You do not know, Philip, who these men are?"

"No," replied the boy, "but I should like to know."

"The stout, elderly man is Don August Xavier Hernando Zucorra y Palite, who is at the head of a special Mexican embassy that has been at Washington to treat with our government about the boundary of Texas—you know there has been trouble between the States and Mexico over the Texan boundary—and the younger is Pedro de Armijo, his nephew, and the nephew, also, of Armijo, the governor of New Mexico, where we are planning to go."

"I fancied from his manner," said Bill Breakstone, "that young Armijo was the President of Old Mexico and New Mexico both. I have called you Sir Knight, and My Lord Phil, but our young Mexican is both His Grace and His Royal Highness. By my halidome, we are indeed proud and far above that vile herd, the populace."

"Well, he will not bother us," said Arenberg. "If you run after trouble you will find it coming to meet you."

Middleton watched the Mexicans with uncommon interest until they passed out of sight. Arenberg, a shrewd and penetrating man himself, said:

"You are interested in them, Mr. Middleton?"

"I am," replied Middleton frankly, "and I know, too, that the errand of Zucorra to Washington has been a failure. The relations of the United States and Mexico are no better."

"But that won't keep us from going across to the Pacific, will it, Cap?" said Bill Breakstone briskly. "You don't mind if I call you Cap, do you, Mr. Middleton? You are, in a way, our leader, because you are most fit, and the title seems to suit you."

"Call me Cap if you wish," replied Middleton, "but we are all on equal terms. Now, as we have seen the Mexicans, and, as there is nothing more here to attract us, we might go on up the levee."

"Prithee, we will suit the deed to the word," said Bill Breakstone, "but do not run into that drunken Indian there, Phil. I would not have thy garments soiled by contact with this degraded specimen of a race once proud and noble."

Phil turned a little to one side to avoid the Indian of whom Breakstone spoke. The levee was littered with freight, and the red man huddled against a hogshead of tobacco from far Kentucky. His

dress was partly savage and partly civilized, and he was sodden with dirt and drink. But, as Breakstone spoke, he raised his head and flashed him a look from fiery, glowing eyes. Then his head sank back, but the single glance made Breakstone shiver.

"I felt as if I had received a bullet," he said. "Now what did the noble savage mean by giving me such a look? He must have understood what I said. Ah, well, it mattereth not. He looked like a Comanche. It has been wisely said, let the cobbler stick to his last, and there is no last in New Orleans for Mr. Cobbler Comanche."

"You didn't suppose he understood you," said Arenberg, "and no harm is done where none is meant."

Phil looked back at the Comanche, but there was nothing heroic about him. He was huddled lower than ever against the tobacco hogshead. Certainly there was no suggestion of the dauntless warrior, of the wild horseman. Phil felt a curious little thrill of disappointment.

He looked in the same place the next day for the Comanche, but he did not see him, and then, in the excitement of great preparations, he forgot the Indian. The New Mexico expedition was about to become a fact, and the little band of four were promptly received as members. On all such perilous trips strong and well-armed men were welcome.

The outfit would embrace about sixty wagons and two hundred men, and the goods they carried would be of great value. Phil and his comrades paid for the right to put their extra supplies in one of the wagons, and then they equipped themselves with great care. They bought four good horses, four fine rifles, made by the famous Dickson, of Louisville, four double-barreled pistols of long range, knives and hatchets, a large quantity of ammunition, an extra suit apiece of stout deerskin, four small pocket compasses, and many other things which seem trifles in a town, but which are important in the wilderness.

It took them but a few days to make their purchases, but it was at least three weeks before the train started. The Mexicans, meanwhile, had stayed about a week at the chief hotel, and then had left on a steamer for their own country. Phil heard that there had been much talk about the high-handed manner of young Armijo, and that he had been extremely disagreeable to all about him. The older man, Zucorra, who was milder and more diplomatic, had sought to restrain him, but with no success. It was a relief when they were gone.

The boy, still curious about the Comanche, looked for him once more on the levee. More hogsheads of tobacco and sugar were there, but the Indian was not leaning against any of them. At last he found him in one of the inns or taverns frequented by sailors and roustabouts, a rough place at any time, and crowded then with men from the ships and boats. The Indian was sitting in a corner, huddled down in a chair, in much the same attitude of sloth and indifference that he had shown when leaning against the hogshead. Phil saw that when he stood up he would be a tall man, and his figure, if it were not flabby, would be powerful.

Phil was intensely interested. The Indian had always appealed to his romantic imagination, and now that he saw one of the race close at hand, he wished to learn more. He sat down near the man, and, not knowing what else to say, remarked that it was a fine day. The Comanche raised his head a little, and bent upon Phil a look like that he had given to Breakstone. It was a piercing glance, full of anger and hatred. Then the glowing eyes were veiled, and his head dropped back on his arms. He did not utter a word in reply.

The innkeeper, who had noticed the brief incident, laughed.

"Don't you try to get up a conversation with Black Panther, my boy," he said. "He ain't what you would call a pow'ful talker."

"No, I suppose he wouldn't talk anybody to death," said Phil. "What is he?"

"He's a tame Comanche, an' he's been loafing around New Orleans for two or three months—learnin' the whiteman's vices, 'specially the drinkin' of fire water, which he keeps first on the list. You can see what it's done for him—taken all the pith right out of him, same as you would take it out of a

length of elder to make a pop gun. I reckon New Orleans ain't no place for an Indian. Hello, what's the matter with Black Panther?"

The Indian uttered a short, savage exclamation that startled every one in the place, and sprang to his feet. His long coal black hair was thrown back from his face, and he seemed to be alive in every fiber. The eyes were like two points of fire.

"Black Panther was a great warrior and a chief," he said. "He has been a dog in the white man's town, and he has burned his brain with fire water until it is like that of a little child. But he will be a great warrior and a chief again. Now, I go."

He gathered a tattered old blanket around his shoulders, and, holding himself erect, stalked in savage dignity out of the place.

"Now, what in thunder did he mean?" exclaimed the astonished innkeeper.

"I think he meant just what he said," replied Phil. "He is going away from New Orleans. He certainly looked it."

So far as he knew, the assertion was true, because, as long as he remained in the city, he neither saw nor heard anything further of the Comanche. But the time for his own departure was soon at hand, and in the excitement of it he forgot all about the Comanche.

## CHAPTER II

### THE MARCH OF THE TRAIN

The train made an imposing appearance with its sixty wagons and its horsemen, numerous and well armed. It was commanded by a middle-aged trader of experience, Thomas Woodfall, who had already made several trips to Santa Fé, and the hopes of all were high. They carried, among other things, goods that these señoras and señoritas of Santa Fé would be eager to buy, and much gain might be obtained. But every one of the four who rode so closely together thought most in his heart of that for which he sought, and in no instance was the object of search the same.

But they were cheerful. Whatever were past griefs or whatever might be those to come, the present was propitious and fair. The Southern spring was not yet advanced far enough to drive the cool tang out of the air by daylight, while at night fires were needed. It rained but little, and they marched steadily on through crisp sunshine.

"I trust that the good Sir Roland is pleased," said Bill Breakstone to Phil. "Fresh air in the lungs of youth produces exhilaration."

"It's fine," said Phil, with emphasis.

"But we may yet come to our Pass of Roncevalles. Bethink you of that, Sir Roland. They say that it's an ill wind that blows nobody good, and I say that it's a good wind that blows nobody ill. The rain will rain, the snow will snow, the wind will blow, and what will poor rabbit do then?"

"Get into his little nest, cover himself up warm and dry, and wait until it passes," replied Phil.

"Right, Master Philip. Go up to the head of the class," said Bill Breakstone in his usual joyous tones. Phil always thought that Bill had the cheeriest voice in the world. "I'm glad to see you taking thought for the future. Now our good friend Hans, here, would not have made such an apt reply."

"Perhaps not, and I do not mind your saying so, Herr Bill Breakstone," said Arenberg, smiling broadly. "No harm is done where none is meant."

"A fit answer from a loyal representative of the Hohenstauffens, the Hohenzollerns, and the Katzenellenbogens," chanted Bill Breakstone.

"Ah, Herr Breakstone, it is that you are one happy man," said Arenberg. "I wonder that you go to find something, when you have the joy of living anywhere."

"But I do go to find something," said Breakstone, suddenly becoming grave. Phil noticed that he puckered up his eyes and gazed far into the West, as if he would see already that for which he sought.

They traveled for several days among plantations in a low damp country, and then they passed suddenly beyond the line of cultivation into a drier region of low hills and small prairies. Phil was pleased with the change. If they were going into the wilderness, he was anxious to reach it as soon as possible, and this, beyond a doubt, was the edge of the unknown. The first night that he heard the scream of a panther in the woods he felt that they were leaving all civilization behind, and that, save for the train, the world of men was blotted out.

Yet it was very pleasant as long as the weather remained dry, and the early spring was certainly doing its best. It was a succession of crisp days and cool nights, and Phil liked the steady advance by day through new lands, and the rest in the evening, when they built fires for the cooking and to fend off the chill. They usually drew the wagons up in a circle in one of the little prairies, and then went to the forest near by for wood that belonged to whomsoever took it. Phil and Bill Breakstone were always active in this work.

"It gives me an appetite for supper," said Breakstone. "I would have you to know, Sir Philip of the Forest, that sitting long hours on a horse which carries me luxuriously along, the horse doing all the work and I doing none, tends to laziness and fat. I need this exercise to put me in proper trim for the luscious repast that awaits us."

"I don't need anything to whet my appetite," replied Phil, as he laughed. "To tell you the truth, Bill, I'm always hungry."

"Do not grieve or have fears for the larder, Sir Philip of the Hungry Countenance. There is an abundance of food in the wagons, and we also shall soon be in a good game country. Unless my eye and hand have lost their cunning, a fat deer shall speedily be roasting over the coals."

The four kept close together, and they usually gathered around the fire at which Thomas Woodfall, the leader, sat. Woodfall had shown a decided respect and liking for Middleton, and, following the custom which Breakstone had established, always addressed him as Cap, short for Captain. Phil and Breakstone had been particularly active gathering wood that evening, and it had been Phil's task and pleasure, when it was all put in a heap, to light it. Now he was watching the little flames grow into big ones, and the yellow light turn to blazing red. He listened, also, as the flames hissed a little before the wind, and the dry boughs snapped and crackled under the fiery torch. Middleton regarded him with kindly approval.

"A good boy," he said to Woodfall. "A lad with fine instincts and a brave spirit."

"And a mighty handy one, too," said Woodfall. "I've noticed how he works. He's as big and strong as a man, and I never saw anybody else who was just prized down like a hogshead of tobacco, crowded full of zeal."

"I think it likely he will need it all before our journey is over," said Middleton.

"It's probable," repeated Woodfall, "but I'll ask you, Cap, not to speak it. It may be that this expedition was begun at the wrong time. I had heard, and the owners had heard, that the troubles with Mexico were quieting down, but it seems that, instead of doing so, they are getting livelier."

"I shall certainly say nothing about it to our people here," replied Middleton. "Cheerful hearts are the best, and we may have trouble with neither Mexicans nor Indians."

Phil himself was not thinking at that moment of either yellow or red foes. His fire had grown into a mighty pyramid, and, as the dead wood burned fast, it soon sank down into a great mass of glowing coals. Then he, Breakstone, and Arenberg boiled coffee in big iron pots, and cooked bread and many slices of bacon. The night was cool and nipping, but the coals threw out an abundance of heat. A delicious aroma arose and spread far. Everybody came forward with tin cup and tin plate, and helped himself. Phil took his filled plate in one hand, his filled cup in the other, and sat down on a fallen log with Breakstone and Arenberg.

"In my time, and as an ornament to the stage," said Bill Breakstone, "I have eaten some bountiful repasts. I have feasted as a prince, a duke, or some other lordling. I have been the wrestler in the Forest of Arden with *Rosalind* and *Celia*. I have had my head deep in the mug of sack, as *Sir John Falstaff*, but most of those magnificent repasts depended largely upon the imagination. Here I am neither prince nor duke, but the food is real, and the air is so good that one might even bite a chip with a certain pleasure. Excuse me, Sir Philip of the Forest, while I even drain the coffee-cup."

He took it all down at one draught, and a beatific glow overspread his face. Arenberg regarded him with admiration.

"Ach, Mein Herr Breakstone, but you are one cheerful man!" he said. "You never do any harm, because none is meant. When you drink the coffee you make me think of the German in the old country drinking beer, and you like it as well."

"I snatch the joys of the flying day, or, rather, night, and think not of the ills of the morrow," replied Breakstone. "Somebody somewhere said something like that, and, whoever he was, he was a good talker. To-morrow, Phil, I think I may get a chance to show you how to shoot a deer."

"I hope so," said Phil eagerly. He, too, was luxuriating, and he was fully as cheerful as Bill Breakstone. The great beds of coal threw a warm, luminous glow overall the circle enveloped by the wagons. Everybody ate and felt good. The pleasant hum of pleasant talk arose. Outside the wagons the tethered horses cropped the short young grass, and they, too, were content. Not far away the forest of

magnolia, poplar, and many kinds of oak rustled before the slight wind, and the note that came from it was also of content.

Phil, after he had eaten and drunk all that he wished, and it was much, lay on the ground with his back against the log and listened to the talk. He heard wonderful tales of adventure in the West Indies and on the South American coast, of fights in Mexico and Texas, when the little bands of Texans won their independence, of encounters with raiding Comanches, and of strange stone ruins left by vanished races in the deserts of the Far West. He was fascinated as he listened. The spirit of romance was developed strongly within him. It was, indeed, a most adventurous search upon which he was embarked, and this spirit, strong, enduring, hardened to meet all things, was what he needed most.

As the fires died down, and the warmth decreased, he wrapped his blanket around himself, and now and then dozed a little. But he still felt very content. It seemed to him that it was uncommon fortune to have joined such an expedition, and it was a good omen. He must succeed in his great search.

"Well, Sir Roland, what is it?" said Bill Breakstone at last. "Do you want to sleep in the wagon or on the ground here? The good Knight Orlando, who for the present is myself, means to choose the ground."

"No stuffy wagon for me on a night like this," rejoined Phil sleepily. "I am going to sleep just where I lie."

He settled back more comfortably, put his arm under his head, and in a few moments was in the deep, dreamless sleep of youth and health. Bill Breakstone quickly followed him to that pleasant land of Nowhere. Then Arenberg and the Captain were soon entering the same region. The fires sank lower and lower, the sound of breathing from many men arose, the horses outside became quiet, and peace settled over the wilderness camp.

Phil slept far into the night, he never knew how far, but he believed it was about half way between midnight and morning. When he awoke it was very dark, and there was no noise but that of the breathing men and the rustling wind. Just why he, a sound sleeper, had awakened at that time he could not say. But he had eaten largely, and he was conscious of thirst, a thirst that could be quenched easily at a little spring in the wood.

The boy rose, letting his blanket drop to the ground, and glanced over the sleeping camp. Despite the darkness, he saw the forms of recumbent men, and some coal that yet glimmered faintly. Around them was the dark circling line of the wagons. No regular watch was kept as they were yet far from dangerous country, and, passing between two of the wagons, Phil went toward the spring, which was about three hundred yards away.

It was a nice cold spring, rising at the base of a rock, and running away in a tiny stream among the poplars. Phil knelt and drank, and then sat upon an upthrust root. The desire for sleep had left him, and his mind turned upon his great search. He took the paper from the inside pocket of his coat, unfolded it, and smoothed it out with his fingers. It was too dark for him to read it, but he held it there a little while, then folded it up again, and returned it to its resting place. He was about to rise again and return to the camp, but something moved in the thicket. It might have been a lizard, or it might have been the wind, but he was sure it was neither. The sound was wholly out of harmony with the note of the night.

Phil remained sitting on the upthrust root, but leaned against the trunk to which the root belonged. His figure blended darkly against the bark. Only an eye of uncommon acuteness would note him. The slight stirring, so much out of tune with all the wilderness noises, came again, and, despite his strength and will, both of which were great, Phil felt ice pass along his spine, and his hair rose slightly. That uncanny hour at which evil deeds happen held him in its spell. But he did not move, except for the slipping of his hand to the pistol in his belt, and he waited.

Slowly a dark face formed itself in the bushes, and beneath it was the faint outline of a human figure. The face was malignant and cruel, a reddish copper in color, with a sharp, strong chin, high

cheek-bones, and blackglowing eyes. These eyes were bent in a fierce gaze upon the circle of wagons. They did not turn in Phil's direction at all, but the face held him fascinated.

It seemed to Phil that he had seen that countenance before, and as he gazed he remembered. It was surely that of Black Panther, the Comanche, but what a startling change. The crouching, fuddled lump of a man in tattered clothes, whom he had seen in New Orleans, had been transformed when the breath of the wilderness poured into his lungs. He fitted thoroughly into this dark and weird scene, and the hair on Phil's head rose a little more. Then the head, and the figure with it, suddenly melted away and were gone. There was no strange stirring in the thicket, nothing that was not in accord with the night.

The ice left Phil's spine, the hair lay down peacefully once more on his head, and his hand moved away from the pistol at his belt. It was like a dream in the dark, the sudden appearance of that Medusa head in the bushes, and he was impressed with all the weight of conviction that it was an omen of bad days to come. The wind whispered it, and the quiver in his blood answered. But the men in the train might laugh at him if he told that he had merely seen an Indian's face in the bushes. The thing itself would be slight enough in the telling, and he did not wish to be ridiculed as a boy whose fears had painted a picture of that which was not. But he walked warily back, and he was glad enough when he repassed between two of the wagons, and resumed his old place. Middleton, Arenberg, and Bill Breakstone all slept soundly, and Phil, wrapped in his blanket, sought to imitate them. But he could not. He lay there thinking until the low band of scarlet in the east foreshadowed the day. He rose and looked once more over the camp. The last coal had died, and the dark forms, wrapped in their blankets, looked chill and cold. But the red dawn was advancing, and warmth came with it. One by one the men awoke. The horses stirred. Phil stood up and stretched his arms. Middleton, Bill Breakstone, and Arenberg awoke. They had slept soundly and pleasantly all through the night.

"'Tis a fine couch, this Mother Earth," said Bill Breakstone, "finer than cloth of gold, if it be not raining or snowing, or the winds be not nipping. Then, in such a event, I should take the cloth of gold, with a snug tent over it."

"I have slept well, and I awake strong and refreshed," said Arenberg simply. "It is all I ask of a night."

"I have not slept well," said Phil, "at least I did not during the latter part of the night."

There was a certain significance in his tone, and the others looked at him. Only they were near, and Phil said in a low tone:

"I awoke in the night, and I was restless. I walked down to the spring for a drink, and I saw a face in the bushes, the face of a man who was watching us."

"Ah!" said Middleton, a single monosyllable, long drawn. But his tone expressed interest, not surprise. He looked at the boy as if he expected to hear more.

"I saw the face clearly," continued Phil. "It was changed, wonderfully changed in expression, but I knew it. I could not be mistaken. It was that Comanche, called Black Panther, whom we saw in New Orleans. He was dirty and degraded there, but he did not seem so last night."

"I am glad that you told this, Phil," said Middleton. "It was a lucky chance that awakened you and sent you to the spring."

"Once I thought I would not speak of it at all," said the boy. "I was afraid they would say it was only a dream or a creation of my fancy."

"I'm sure that you really saw it," said Middleton, "and I will speak with Mr. Woodfall. The time has come when we must be cautious."

The camp was now wholly awake, and the men began to light the fires anew, and take their breakfasts. Middleton talked with Mr. Woodfall, and, as the latter kept it no secret, the news soon spread throughout the train. Philip Bedford, prowling about in the dark, had seen an Indian in the woods near by, an Indian who seemed to be watching them.

The news was variously received, because there were many kinds of men in this train. Some took it seriously; others were disposed to laugh, and to hint, as Phil had feared, that it was fancy or a dream; and others cared nothing about it. What was a single wandering warrior to them? But the leader compelled a more careful advance. Scouts were sent ahead, and others rode on the flanks. Phil and his comrades shared in this duty, and that very day he and Bill Breakstone and Arenberg were among those who rode ahead.

It was not an easy duty, because they were now in thick forest, with much swampy ground about. Dark funeral cypresses abounded in the marshy soil, and gloomy moss hung from the live oaks. A deer sprang up, and Phil pulled down his rifle, but Breakstone would not let him shoot.

"Not now, Phil," he said. "We must not shoot at chance game when we are scouting. My talk may not sound like it, but I know something of wilderness life. One can never be too cautious, whether on the plains or in the woods. Things may happen. Wait for them. As the poet saith, 'One crowded hour of glorious life is worth a world without a name.'"

"Say that again," said Arenberg.

"One crowded hour of glorious life is worth a world without a name."

"It sounds good. It is good. I will remember it," said the German.

But as two or three days passed with no sign of trouble, the face that Phil had seen in the bushes was forgotten or ignored. It was a light-hearted crowd, used to wild life and adventure, and these men, drawn from different parts of the globe, occupied with to-day, took little thought of to-morrow's dangers. The weather remained beautiful. Days and nights were dry, and they were again on good firm earth, which made the way of the wagons easy. Phil, instructed by Bill Breakstone, stalked and shot a deer, a fine, fat buck, which gave a slice for everybody in the train, and which brought him compliments. In fact, he was already a general favorite, and he did not mind when they jested now and then about the face in the bushes, and told him that he was a seer of visions. He was rapidly becoming an adept in the forest life, to which he took naturally, and in Bill Breakstone he had no mean tutor. Breakstone soon showed that he was a scout and trailer of the first quality, although he did not explain why he had spent so many years in the wilds.

"It's partly gift, and partly training, Sir Philip of the Youthful Countenance and of the Good Blue Eye," he said. "If you just teach yourself to see everything and to hear everything about you, and never forget it, you've got most of the lesson. And you, Phil, with good eyes, good ears, a quick mind, and a willing heart, ought to come fast toward the head of the class."

Phil flushed with pleasure. In the task that he had set for himself he greatly needed forest lore, and it was a keen satisfaction to know that he was acquiring it. He redoubled his efforts. He always noted carefully the country through which they passed, the configuration of the earth, and the various kinds of trees and bushes. At night he would often ask Bill Breakstone to question him, and from his superior knowledge and longer training to point out a mistake whenever he might make it. Bill was a severe teacher, and he criticised freely whenever Phil was wrong. But he admitted that his pupil was making progress. Arenberg was smoking his pipe at one of their sittings, and, taking it out of his mouth, he remarked:

"No harm is done where none is meant. Now what I wish to ask you, Herr Breakstone, and you, young Herr Philip, would you remember all your lessons if you were on foot on the prairie, unarmed, and a wild Comanche warrior were riding at you, ready to run his lance through you?"

"I don't know," replied Phil frankly, "but I hope such a time will never come."

"That's the rub," said Arenberg meditatively. "It is good to know all the rules, to do all you can before, but it is better to think fast, and act right when the great emergency comes. It is only then that you are of the first class. I say so, and I say so because I know."

Only Phil noticed the faint tone of sadness with which his words ended, and he glanced quickly at the German. But Arenberg's face expressed nothing. Once more he was pulling calmly at his pipe. Bill Breakstone gave his words hearty indorsement.

"You're right," he said. "The Grand Duke of Germany speaks the truth. I've embodied that piece of wisdom in a little poem, which I will quote to you:

"You may lead a horse to the water,  
But you cannot make him drink.  
You may stuff a man with knowledge,  
But you cannot make him think."

"Part of that is borrowed, and part of it is original, but, combining the two parts, I think it is a little masterpiece."

Arenberg took out his pipe again, and regarded Bill Breakstone with admiration.

"It is one great man, this Herr Bill Breakstone," he said. "He makes poetry and tells the truth at the same time."

"Thanks, most puissant lord," said Breakstone, "and now, the lesson being over, Phil, I think we might all of us go to sleep and knit up a few raveled sleeves of care."

"We might take to the wagon," said Middleton. "If I'm any judge of weather, Phil, the beautiful spell that we've had is coming to an end."

"You're right, Cap," said Breakstone. "I noticed that when the sun set to-day it looked redder than usual through a cloud of mist, and that means rain. Therefore, Orlando deserts his little Forest of Arden, and betakes himself to the shelter of the curved canvas."

Phil deemed it wise to imitate him, and the four found places in the large wagon among their goods, where they had the shelter of the canvas roof, although the cover was open at either end to allow the clean sweep of the air. Phil, as usual, slept well. Five minutes was about all he needed for the preparatory stage, and to-night was no exception. But he awoke again in the middle of the night. Now he knew full well the cause. Low thunder was rumbling far off at the edge of the earth, and a stroke of lightning made him wink his sleepy eyes. Then came a rush of cold air, and after it the rain. The big drops rattled on the curving canvas roof, but they could not penetrate the thick cloth. Phil raised himself a little, and looked out at the open ends, but he saw only darkness.

Meanwhile the rain increased and beat harder upon the roof, which shed it like shingles. Phil drew his blanket up to his chin, rested his head and shoulders a little more easily against a bag of meal, and never had a greater sense of luxury in his life. The beat of the rain on the canvas was like the patter of the rain on the roof of the old home, when he was a little boy and lay snug under the eaves. He had the same pleasant sense of warmth and shelter now. The storm might beat about him, but it could not touch him. He heard the even breathing of his comrades, who had not awakened. He heard the low thunder still grumbling far off in the south-west, and the lightning came again at intervals, but he sank gently back to slumber.

When he awoke the next morning the rain was still falling, and the whole world was a sodden gray. The air, too, was full of raw chill, despite the southern latitude, and Phil shivered. It was his first impulse to draw the blanket more tightly, but he resolutely put the impulse down. He threw the blanket aside, slipped on his coat and boots, the only apparel that he had removed for the night's rest, and sprang out into the rain, leaving his comrade still asleep.

Not many of the men were yet up, and Phil went at once into the forest in search of fallen wood, which was always abundant. It was not a pleasant task. For the first time he felt the work hard and disagreeable. Mists and vapors were rising from the wet earth, and the sun did not show. The rain came down steadily, and it was cold to the touch. It soaked through the boy's clothing, but he stuck to his task, and brought in the dead wood by the armful. At the third load he met Bill Breakstone, who hailed him cheerily.

"Well, you do make me ashamed of myself, Sir Knight of the Dripping Forest," he said. "When we awoke and found you already up and at work, we concluded that it was time for us to imitate so good an example. Ugh, how cold this rain is, and we five hundred miles from an umbrella!"

Phil was compelled to laugh, and then the laugh made him feel better. But it was a morning that might well oppress the bravest. The wet wood was lighted with extreme difficulty, and then it smoked greatly under the rain. It was hard to do the cooking, and breakfast was not satisfying. But Phil refused to make any complaint. With the rain in his face, he spoke cheerfully of sunshine and warm dry plains.

"We ought to strike the plains of Texas to-morrow or the next day," said Bill Breakstone. "I've been through this region before, and I don't think I'm mistaken. Then we'll get out of this. If it's a long lane that has no turning, it's one just as long that has no end."

They started late, and deep depression hung over the train. The men no longer sang or made jokes at the expense of one another, but crouched upon their horses or the wagon seats, and maintained a sullen silence. Phil was on horseback, but he dried himself at one of the fires, and with the blanket wrapped around his body he was now fairly well protected. It was hard to maintain a pleasant face, but he did it, and Middleton, whom all now usually called Cap, looked his approval.

They advanced very slowly through thickets and across small streams, with mists and vapors so dense that they could see but little ahead. They did not make more than seven or eight miles that day, and, wet and miserable, they camped for the night. The guard was still maintained, and Phil was on duty that night until twelve. When midnight came he crawled into the wagon, depressed and thoroughly exhausted. But he slept well, and the next morning the rain was over. The mists and vapors were gone, and a beautiful sun was shining. All of Phil's good spirits came back as he sprang out of the wagon and looked at the drying earth.

The whole camp was transformed. The cooking fires burned ruddily and with a merry crackle. The men sang their little songs and made their little jokes. They told one another joyously that they would be out of the forest soon and upon the open prairies. They would be in Texas-Texas, that wonderful land of mystery and charm; Texas, already famous for the Alamo and San Jacinto. The fact that this Texas was filled with danger took nothing from the glow at their hearts. Phil shared in the general enthusiasm, and cried with the others, "Ho for Texas!"

Arenberg's face became very grave.

"Do not be carried away with the high feelings that run to the head," he said. "No harm is done where none is meant, but it is a long road across Texas, and there is no mile of it which does not have its dangers. Who should know better than I?"

"You speak the truth," said Middleton. "I often think of that Comanche, Black Panther, whose face Phil saw in the thicket."

"You are right to speak of it," said Bill Breakstone. "I have been in the West. I have spent years there. I have been in places that no other white man has ever seen, and just when you think this West, beyond the white man's frontier, is most peaceful, then it is most dangerous. *Hamlet*, Prince of Denmark, was a dreamy kind of fellow, but when the time came he was a holy terror."

Phil was impressed, but in a little while it seemed to him that it could scarcely be so. The threat contained in Black Panther's face was fading fast from his mind, and danger seemed to him very far. His exuberance of spirit was heightened by the easy journey that they now had through a forest without any undergrowth. The wagons rolled easily over short, young grass, and the thick boughs of the trees overhead protected them from the sun.

"Do you know the country, Bill?" asked Middleton.

"I think so," replied Breakstone. "Unless I'm mightily mistaken, and I don't think I am, this forest ends in four or five miles. Then we come right out on the genuine Texas plain, rolling straight; away for hundreds of miles. I think I'll take Phil here and ride forward and see if I'm not right. Come, Phil!"

The two galloped away straight toward the West, and, as the forest offered no difficulties, they were not compelled to check their speed. But in less than an hour Breakstone, who was in advance, pulled his horse back sharply, and Phil did the same.

"Look, Phil!" exclaimed Breakstone, making a wide sweep with his hands, while face and eyes were glowing, "See, it is Texas!"

Phil looked. None could have been more eager than he was. The hill seemed to drop down before them sheer, like a cliff, but beyond lay a great gray-green waving sea, an expanse of earth that passed under the horizon, and that seemed to have no limit. It was treeless, and the young grass had touched the gray of winter with fresh green.

"The great plains!" exclaimed Phil. He felt an intense thrill. He had at last reached the edge of this vast region of mystery, and to-morrow they would enter it.

"Yes, the great plains," said Bill Breakstone. "And down here, I think, is where our wagons will have to pass." He turned to the left and followed a gentle slope that led to the edge of the plains. Thus, by an easy descent, they left the forest, but when they turned back Phil's eye was caught by a glittering object:

"Look, Bill!" he exclaimed. "See the arrow! What does it mean?"

An arrow with a deeply feathered shaft had been planted deep in an oak tree. Evidently it had been fired from a bow by some one standing on the plain, and it was equally evident that a powerful hand had drawn the string. It stood out straight and stark as if it would stay there forever. Bill Breakstone rode up to it and examined it critically.

"It's a Comanche arrow, Phil," he said, "and, between you and me, I think it means something:

"An arrow I see  
Stuck in a tree,  
But what it does mean  
Has not yet been seen-

"Especially when it's coupled with the fact that you saw Black Panther's face in the thicket. I may have an imaginative mind, Sir Philip of the Forest, soon to be Sir Philip of the Plain, but this arrow I take to be our first warning. It tells us to turn back, and it may have been fired by Black Panther himself, late Knight of the Levee and of Strong Drink."

"Will we turn back?" asked Phil somewhat anxiously.

Bill Breakstone laughed scornfully.

"Do you think a crowd like ours would turn back for a sign?" he asked. "Why, Phil, that arrow, if it is meant as a threat, is the very thing to draw them on. It would make them anxious to go ahead and meet those who say they must stop. If they were not that kind of men, they wouldn't be here."

"I suppose so," said Phil. "I, for one, would not want to turn back."

He rode up to the tree, took the arrow by the shaft, and pulled with all his might. He was a strong youth, but he could not loosen it. Unless broken off, it was to stay there, a sign that a Comanche warning had been given.

"I knew you couldn't move it," said Bill Breakstone. "The Indians have short bows, and you wouldn't think they could get so much power with them, but they do. It's no uncommon thing for a buck at close range to send an arrow clear through a big bull buffalo, and it takes powerful speed to do that."

They rode back, met the advancing line of wagons, and told what they had seen, to which the men themselves, as they came to the edge of the prairie, were able to bear witness. Yet they were not greatly impressed. Those who believed that it meant a challenge gladly accepted it as Breakstone had predicted.

"Let the Comanches attack, if they will," they said, shaking their rifles. Even the face of the quiet Middleton kindled.

"It's a good spirit our men show," he said to the three who were his chosen comrades, "but I knew that they would never turn back because of an Indian threat."

The train advanced slowly down into the plain, and then began its march across the vast, grayish-green expanse. The traveling was very easy here, and they made seven or eight miles over the rolling earth before they stopped at sunset. Phil, looking back, could still see the dark line of the hilly country and the forest, but before him the prairie rolled away, more than ever, as the twilight came, like an unknown sea.

The camp was beside a shallow stream running between low banks. They built their fires of cottonwood and stunted oaks that grew on either side, and then Phil saw the darkness suddenly fall like the fall of a great blanket over the plains. With the night came a low, moaning sound which Bill Breakstone told him was merely the wind blowing a thousand miles without a break.

Phil took his turn at guard duty the latter half of that night, walking about at some distance from the camp, now and then meeting his comrades on the same duty, and exchanging a word or two. It was very dark, and the other sentinels were not in the best of humor, thinking there was little need for such a watch, and Phil by and by confined himself strictly to his own territory.

Although his eyes grew used to the darkness, it was so heavy that they could not penetrate it far, and he extended his beat a little farther from the camp. He thought once that he heard a light sound, as of footsteps, perhaps those of a horse, and in order to be certain, remembering an old method, he lay down and put his ear to the ground. Then he was quite sure that he heard a sound very much like the tread of hoofs, but in a moment or two it ceased. He rose, shaking his head doubtfully, and advanced a little farther. He neither saw nor heard anything more, and he became convinced that the footsteps had been those of some wild animal. Perhaps a lone buffalo, an outlaw from the herd, had been wandering about, and had turned away when the human odor met his nostrils.

He returned toward the camp, and something cold passed his face. There was a slight whistling sound directly in his ear, and he sprang to one side, as if he had narrowly missed the fangs of a rattlesnake. He heard almost in the same instant a slight, thudding sound directly in front of him, and he knew instinctively what had made it. He ran forward, and there was an arrow sticking half its length in the ground. The impulse of caution succeeded that of curiosity. Remembering Bill Breakstone's teachings, he threw himself flat upon the ground, letting his figure blend with the darkness, and lay there, perfectly still. But no other arrow came. Nothing stirred. He could not make out among the shadows anything that resembled a human figure, although his eyes were good and were now trained to the work of a sentinel. Once when he put his ear to the earth he thought he heard the faint beat of retreating hoofs, but the sound was so brief and so far away that he was not sure.

Phil felt shivers, more after he lay down than when the arrow passed his cheek. It was the first time that a deadly weapon or missile had passed so close to him, fired perhaps with the intent of slaying him, and no boy could pass through such an experience without quivers and an icy feeling along the spine.

But when he lay still awhile and could not detect the presence of any enemy, he rose and examined the arrow again. There was enough light for him to see that the feathered shaft was exactly like that of the arrow they had found in the tree.

He pulled the weapon out of the ground and examined it with care. It had a triangular head of iron, with extremely sharp edges, and he shuddered again. If it had struck him, it would have gone through him as Bill Breakstone said the Comanche arrows sometimes went entirely through the body of a buffalo.

He took the arrow at once to the camp, and showed it to the men who were on guard there, telling how this feathered messenger—and he could not doubt that it was a messenger—had come. Woodfall and Middleton were awakened, and both looked serious. It could not be any play of fancy on the part of an imaginative boy. Here was the arrow to speak for itself.

"It must have been the deed of a daring Comanche," said Middleton with conviction. "Perhaps he did not intend to kill Phil, and I am sure that this arrow, like the first, was intended as a threat."

"Then it's wasted, just as others will be," said Woodfall. "My men do not fear Comanches."

"I know that," said Middleton. "It is a strong train, but we must realize, Mr. Woodfall, that the Comanches are numerous and powerful. We must make every preparation, all must stay close by the train, and there must be a strict night watch."

He spoke in a tone of authority, but it fitted so well upon him, and seemed so natural that Woodfall did not resent it. On the contrary, he nodded, and then added his emphatic acquiescence in words.

"You are surely right," he said. "We must tighten up everything."

This little conference was held beside some coals of a cooking fire that had not yet died, and Phil was permitted to stand by and listen, as it was he who had brought in the significant arrow. The coals did not give much light, and the men were half in shadow, but the boy was impressed anew by the decision and firmness shown by Middleton. He seemed to have an absolutely clear mind, and to know exactly what he wanted. Phil wondered once more what a man of that type might be seeking in the vast and vague West.

"I'll double the guard," said Woodfall, "and no man shall go out of sight of the train. Now, Bedford, my boy, you might go to sleep, as you have done your part of a night's work."

Phil lay down, and, despite the arrow so vivid in memory, he slept until day.

## CHAPTER III AT THE FORD

As Phil had foreseen, his latest story of warning found universal credence in the camp, as the arrow was here, visible to all, and it was passed from hand to hand. He was compelled to tell many times how it had whizzed by his face, and how he had found it afterward sticking in the earth. All the fighting qualities of the train rose. Many hoped that the Comanches would make good the threat, because that it must be, and attack. The Indians would get all they wanted and plenty more.

"The Comanche arrow has been shot,  
For us it has no terror;  
He can attack our train or not,  
If he does, it's his error,"

chanted Bill Breakstone in a mellow voice, and a dozen men took up the refrain: "He can attack our train or not, if he does, it's his error."

The drivers cracked their whips, the wagons, in a double line, moved slowly on over the gray-green plains. A strong band of scouts preceded it, and another, equally as strong, formed the rear-guard. Horsemen armed with rifle and pistol rode on either flank. The sun shone, and a crisp wind blew. Mellow snatches of song floated away over the swells. All was courage and confidence. Deeper and deeper they went into the great plains, and the line of hills and forest behind them became dimmer and dimmer. They saw both buffalo and antelope grazing, a mile or two away, and there was much grumbling because Woodfall would not let any of the marksmen go in pursuit. Here was game and fresh meat to be had for the taking, they said, but Woodfall, at the urgent insistence of Middleton, was inflexible. Men who wandered from the main body even a short distance might never come back again. It had happened too often on former expeditions.

"Our leader's right.  
A luckless wight  
Trusting his might  
Might find a fight,  
And then good night,"

chanted Bill Breakstone, and he added triumphantly:

"That's surely good poetry, Phil! Five lines all rhyming together, when most poets have trouble to make two rhyme. But, as I have said before, these plains that look so quiet and lonely have their dangers. We must pass by the buffalo, the deer, and the antelope, unless we go after them in strong parties. Ah, look there! What is that?"

The head of the train was just topping a swell, and beyond the dip that followed was another swell, rather higher than usual, and upon the utmost crest of this second swell sat an Indian on his horse, Indian and horse alike motionless, but facing the train with a fixed gaze. The Indian was large, with powerful shoulders and chest, and with an erect head and an eagle beak. He was of a bright copper color. His lips were thin, his eyes black, and he had no beard. His long back hair fell down on his back and was ornamented with silver coins and beads. He wore deerskin leggings and moccasins, sewed with beads, and a blue cloth around his loins. The rest of his body was naked and the great muscles could be seen.

The warrior carried in his right hand a bow about onehalf the length of the old English long bow, made of the tough bois d'arc or osage orange, strengthened and reinforced with sinews of deer wrapped firmly about it. The cord of the bow was also of deer sinews. Over his shoulder was a quiver filled with arrows about twenty inches in length, feathered and with barbs of triangular iron. On his left arm he carried a circular shield made of two thicknesses of hard, undressed buffalo hide, separated by an inch of space tightly packed with hair. His shield was fastened by two bands in such a manner that it would not interfere with the use of the arm, and it was so hard that it would often turn a rifle shot. Hanging at his horse's mane was a war club which had been made by bending a wither around a hard stone, weighing about two pounds, and with a groove in it. Its handle of wood, about fourteen inches in length, was bound with buffalo hide.

Apparently the warrior carried no firearms, using only the ancient weapons of his tribe. His horse was a magnificent coal black, far larger than the ordinary Indian pony, and he stood with his neck arched as if he were proud of his owner. The Indian's gaze and manner were haughty and defiant. It was obvious to every one, and a low murmur ran among the men of the train. Phil recognized the warrior instantly. It was Black Panther, no longer the sodden haunter of the levee in the white man's town, but a great chief on his native plains. Phil looked at Middleton, who nodded.

"Yes," he said, "I know him. He has, of course, been watching us, and knows every mile of our march. Unless I am greatly mistaken, Phil, this is the third warning."

Woodfall had ridden up by the side of Middleton, and the latter said that Black Panther would probably speak with them.

"Then," said Woodfall, "you and I, Mr. Middleton, will ride forward and see what he has to say."

Phil begged to be allowed to go, too, and they consented. Woodfall hoisted a piece of white cloth on the end of his rifle, and the Indian raised his shield in a gesture of understanding. Then the three rode forward. The whole of the wagon train was massed on the swell behind them, and scores of eyes were watching intently for every detail that might happen.

The Indian, after the affirmative gesture with the shield, did not move, but he sat erect and motionless like a great bronze equestrian statue. The blazing sunlight beat down upon horse and man. Every line of the warrior's face was revealed—the high cheek-bone, the massive jaw, the pointed chin, and, as Phil drew nearer, the expression of hate and defiance that was the dominant note of his countenance. Truly, this Black Panther of the slums had undergone a prairie change, a wonderful change that was complete.

Woodfall, Middleton, and Phil rode slowly up the second swell, and approached the chief, for such they could not doubt now that he was. Still he did not move, but sat upon his horse, gravely regarding them. Phil was quite sure that Black Panther remembered him, but he was not sure that he would admit it.

"You wish to speak with us," said Middleton, who in such a moment naturally assumed the position of leader.

"To give you a message," replied Black Panther in good English. "I have given you two messages already, and this is the third."

"The arrows," said Middleton.

"Yes, the Comanche arrows," continued the chief. "I thought that the white men would read the signs, and perhaps they did."

"What do you wish of us?" said Middleton. "What is this message which you say you now deliver for the third time?"

The chief drew himself up with a magnificent gesture, and, turning a little, moved his shield arm with a wide-sweeping gesture toward the West.

"I say, and I say it in behalf of the great Comanche nation, 'Go back.' The country upon which you come belongs to the Comanches. It is ours, and the buffalo and the deer and the antelope are ours. I say to you turn back with your wagons and your men."

The words were arrogant and menacing to the last degree. A spark leaped up in Middleton's eye, but he restrained himself.

"We are but peaceful traders going to Santa Fé," he said.

"Peaceful traders to-day, seizers of the land to-morrow," said the Comanche chief. "Go back. The way over the Comanche country is closed."

"The plains are vast," said Middleton mildly. "One can ride hundreds of miles, and yet not come to the end. Many parts of them have never felt the hoof of a Comanche pony. The plains do not belong to the Comanches or to anybody else."

"They are ours," repeated the chief. "We tell you to go back. The third warning is the last."

"If we still come on, what would you do?" said Middleton.

"It is war," replied Black Panther. "You will not reach Santa Fé, and you will not go back to New Orleans. The Comanches will welcome you to their plains with their arrows from their bows and the bullets from their rifles."

"Be it so," said Middleton, continuing his calm, even tone. "We have not come so far merely to turn back. The Comanche welcome of bullets and arrows may greet us, but we are strong men, and for any welcome that maybe given to us we shall always repay. Is it not so, Mr. Woodfall?"

Woodfall nodded.

"Give that answer to your tribe," said Middleton, speaking in firm tones, and looking the chief squarely in the eyes. "We have started to Santa Fé, and there we go. The Comanche nation has not enough warriors to turn us back."

A spark of fire seemed to leap from the chief's eye, but he made no other demonstration.

"I have given you the third and last warning," he said. "Now I go."

He raised the shield in a sort of salute, and, without a word, turned and rode away. The three sat on their horses, looking at him. When he had gone about two hundred yards he paused a moment, fitted an arrow to his bow, shot it almost straight up into the air, and then, uttering a long fierce whoop, galloped away over the plain.

The Indian's cry was sinister, ominous of great dangers, and its meaning sank deeply on Phil's heart. A peculiar shiver ran down his backbone, and the little pulses in his temples began to beat. He did not doubt for a moment that the warning of the Comanche was black with storm. He watched the sinister figure becoming smaller and smaller, until it turned into a dark blur, then a dot, and then was seen no more in the vast, gray-green expanse.

The incident seemed to have sunk deep into the minds of the other two, also, and they rode gravely and in silence back to the train, which was now drawn up in one great group on the crest of the swell. The men, keen borderers most of them, had divined the significance of what they saw, but they crowded around the three for more definite information. Woodfall told them briefly. He knew their temper, but he thought it best to put the question and to put it fairly.

"Men," he said, "we are undoubtedly threatened with an attack. The Comanches are numerous, brave, and cunning. I will not conceal from you those facts. A fight with them will mean loss to us, and, even if we win that fight, as I am sure we will, they will attack again. Now, if any want to turn back, let them do so. All who wish to go back, say 'I.'"

He paused. There was a dead silence throughout the train. The corners of Woodfall's lips curved a little into a slow smile.

"Those who wish to go on, Comanche or no Comanche, say 'Yes,'" he cried.

A single "Yes" was thundered out from scores of throats, and many of the more enthusiastic raised their rifles and shook them.

"I thought so," said Woodfall quietly, and then headed in a louder voice: "Forward!"

Fifty whips cracked like so many rifle shots. The wagons creaked and moved forward again, and by their side rode the armed horsemen. They descended the slope, rose to the crest of the next swell, where the Comanche horseman had stood, and then passed on, over wave after wave into the

unbroken gray-green expanse of the West. There was nothing before them but the plains, with a bunch of buffalo grazing far off to the right, and a herd of antelope grazing far off to the left. The ominous spell that the Indian had cast seemed to have vanished with him so far as the great majority of the men were concerned. But Phil and his immediate comrades did not forget.

"The words of that Indian, as you have delivered them to me, linger in my mind, young Sir Philip of the Plains," said Bill Breakstone, "but I am glad he took the trouble to give us a warning. A stitch in time may save the lives of nine good men.

"Give me the word  
That harm you mean,  
Then my good sword  
I take, I ween.

"At least that poem is short and to the point, Sir Philip. And now I think me that to-morrow about the noon hour, if we should maintain our present pace, we cross a river known variously to the different Indian tribes, but muddy, deep, and flowing between high banks. The crossing will be difficult, and I ought to tell Woodfall about it."

"By all means," said Middleton, "and I can tell you, Breakstone, that I already wish we were safely on the other side of that river."

They camped that night in the open plain. There was a good moonlight, but the watch was doubled, the most experienced frontiersmen being posted as sentinels. Yet the watchers saw nothing. They continuously made wide circles about the camp, but the footprint of neither man nor horse was to be seen. The day dawned, cold and gray with lowering skies, and, before the obscure sun was an hour above the plain, the train resumed its march, Woodfall, Middleton, Breakstone, Phil, and Arenberg riding in a little group at the head.

"How far on do you say is this river?" asked Woodfall.

"We should strike it about noon," replied Breakstone, repeating his statement of the day before. "It is narrow and deep, and everywhere that I have seen it the banks are high, but we ought to find somewhere a slope for a crossing."

"Is it wooded?" asked Middleton.

"Yes, there are cottonwoods, scrub oaks, bushes, and tall grass along either bank."

"I'm sorry for that," said Woodfall.

Phil knew perfectly well what they meant, but he kept, silent, although his heart began to throb. The other three also fell silent, and under the gray, lowering sky the spirits of the train seemed to sink. The men ceased to joke with one another, and no songs were sung. Phil heard only the tread of the horses and the creak of the wagons.

An hour or two later they saw a dim black line cutting across the plain.

"The trees along the banks of the river," said Bill Breakstone.

"And they are still two or three miles away," said Woodfall.

The leader rode among his men and spoke with them. The train moved forward at the same speed, drawing itself like a great serpent over the plain, but there was a closing up of the ranks. The wagons moved more closely together, and every driver had a rifle under his feet. The horsemen rode toward the head of the train, held their rifles across the pommels of their saddles, and loosened the pistols in their holsters. Phil was conscious of a deep, suppressed excitement, an intensity of expectation, attached to the dark line of trees that now rose steadily higher and higher out of the plain.

An old buffalo hunter in the train now recalled the river, also, and, after studying the lay of the land carefully, said that they would find a ford about two miles north of the point toward which the head of the train was directed. The course was changed at once, and they advanced toward the northwest.

"Do you think anything is going to happen, Bill?" asked Phil, speaking for the first time.

"Do you feel kind of tingly in your blood?" asked Breakstone, not replying directly.

"I tingle all over," said Phil frankly.

"I'm tingling a bit myself," said Breakstone, "and I've spent a good many years in the wilderness. Yes, Phil, I think something is going to happen, and I think you and me and the Cap and Arenberg ought to stick together."

"That is well spoken," said Middleton. "We are chosen comrades, and we must stand by one another. See how the trees are drawing nearer."

The black line now stood up level with the earth, and the trees became detached from one another. They could also see the thick undergrowth hiding the river, which seemed to flow in a deep gash across the plain. Middleton took from his saddlebags a pair of strong glasses, and, as they rode on, examined the double line of trees with the minutest scrutiny. Then he lowered the glasses, shaking his head.

"I can't make out anything," he said. "Nothing moves that I can see. There is no sign of human life."

"The Comanche is cunning," said Arenberg. "Harm is done where harm is meant, but I for one am willing to meet him."

The mild German spoke in such a tone of passion that Phil was startled and looked at him. Arenberg's blue eyes shone with a sort of blue fire, and he was unconsciously pressing his horse ahead of the others. It was evident, even to one as young as Phil, that he was stirred to his utmost depths. The boy leaned over and whispered to Breakstone:

"He must have some special cause to hate the Comanches. You know he was in that massacre at New Braunfels."

"That's so," said Breakstone,

"When you feel the savage knife,  
You remember it all your life."

"These mild men like Arenberg are terrible when they are stirred up, Phil. 'Still waters run deep,' which sounds to me rather Irish, because if they are still they don't run at all. But it's good all the same, and, between you and me, Phil, I'd give a lot if we were on the other side of this river, which has no name in the geographies, which rises I don't know where, which empties into I don't know what, and which belongs to I don't know whom. But, be that as it may, lay on, Macduff, and I won't be the first to cry 'Hold, enough!'"

The train took another curve to the northward, approaching the ford, of which the old scouts told. The swells dipped down, indicating a point at which the banks of the river were low, but they could still see the double line of trees lining either shore, and the masses of bushes and weeds that extended along the stream. But nothing stirred them. No wind blew. The boughs of the cottonwoods, live oaks, and willows hung lifeless under the somber sky. There was still no sign of human presence or of anything that lived.

But the men of the train did not relax their caution. They were approaching now up a sort of shallow trough containing a dry sandy bed, down which water evidently flowed during the wet season into the river. It, also, for the last half mile before it reached the main stream, had trees and bushes on either shore. Middleton suggested that they beat up this narrow strip of forest, lest they walk straight into an ambush. Woodfall thought the idea good, and twenty men scouted the thickets. They found nothing, and many in the train began to feel incredulous. That Comanche had been a mere boaster. He was probably still galloping away over the prairie, putting as much distance as he could between himself and the Santa Fé train. But Middleton yet distrusted. He seemed now to be in every sense the leader of the train, and he did it so quietly and with such indirection that Woodfall took him to be an assistant, and felt no offense. At his prompting, strong bodies of skirmishers were thrown forward

on either bank of the dry creek bed, and now, increasing their pace somewhat, they rapidly drew near the river.

It still seemed to Phil that nothing could happen. It was true that the skies were gray and somber, but there was no suggestion of an active and hostile presence, and now the river was only a hundred yards away. From his horse's back he could see the surface of the stream—narrow, muddy, and apparently deep. But on the hither shore there was a gradual slope to its waters, and another of the same kind on the farther bank seemed to lead up among the trees.

"It ain't so deep as it looks," said an old frontiersman. "Bout four feet, I should say. It'll just 'bouthit the bottoms o' our wagon beds."

The stream itself was not more than twenty yardswide. One could pass it in a few minutes, if nothing was thrown across the way, and Phil now began to feel that the unspoken alarm was false. But just when the feeling became a conviction and the wagons were not more than twenty yards from the river, he saw something gleaming in the brush on the far shore. It was the dyed feather of an eagle, and it made a blood red spot against the green bushes. Looking closely Phil saw beneath the feather the light copper face of an Indian, and then he knew that the Comanches were there.

Scarcely a second after he saw the coppery face, a hurricane of arrows whistled from the covert on the far shore. The short shafts of the Comanches filled the air. Mingled with them was the sharp crashing of rifles, and bullets and arrows whistled together. Then came the long yell of the Comanches, from scores of throats, high pitched, fierce, defiant, like the scream of a savage beast about to leap upon its prey. In spite of all his resolution, Phil felt that strong shiver in every nerve from head to heel. Some of the shafts were buried to the feather in the bodies of the horses and mules, and a terrible tumult arose as the animals uttered their screaming neigh and fought and kicked in pain and terror. Nor did the men escape. One, pierced through the throat by a deadly barb, fell lifeless from his horse. Another was stricken in the breast, and a dozen were wounded by either arrows or bullets.

The train was thrown into confusion, and the drivers pulled back on their lines. Sure death seemed to hover in front of them. The greatest danger arose from the wounded and frightened horses, which plunged and struggled and tried to break from their harness, but the hands on the lines were strong, and gradually they were reduced to order. The wagons, also, were driven back a little, and then the triumphant Comanches sent forth their warwhoop again and again. The short shafts once more flew in showers, mingled as before with the whistling of the bullets, but most of the missiles, both arrows and bullets, fell short. Now the Comanches appeared thickly among the bushes, chiefly on foot, their horses left at the edge of the timber, and began to make derisive gestures.

It seemed to Phil that the crossing of the river was impossible in the face of such a fierce and numerous foe, but Middleton and Woodfall had been conferring, and suddenly the Cap, to use his more familiar name among the men, whirled off to the south at the head of a hundred horsemen. He waved his hand to his three partners, and they galloped with the band.

"There must be another crossing, not as good as this, but still a crossing," said Bill Breakstone. "If at first you don't succeed, then try, try again."

This flanking movement was hidden from the Comanches on the other shore by the belt of timber on the side of the train, and the horsemen galloped along rapidly in search of a declivity. Phil's heart was thumping, and specks floated before his eyes, but he was well among the foremost, and he rode with them, stride for stride. Behind him he heard the crackle of rifle shots, the shouts of the Comanches, and the defiant replies of the white men.

"Keep a good hold on your rifle, Phil!" shouted Bill Breakstone in his ear. "If the gods whisper truly to me, we will be in the water soon, and, by my faith, you'll need it."

The Captain uttered a shout of joy. They had come to a place where the bank sloped down to the river and the opposite shore was capable of ascent by horses.

"Into the river, men, into the river!" he shouted. "The horses may have to swim, but we can cross it! We must cross it before the main Indian force comes up!"

The whole troop galloped into the water. Middleton shouted to them to keep their rifles dry, and every man held his above his head or on his shoulder. The muddy water splashed in Phil's face, but he kept by the side of Breakstone, and in a few moments both their horses were swimming.

"Let the horse have his head, Phil," said Breakstone. "He'll make for the nearest land, and you can use both your hands for the work that we now have to do."

Phil dropped the rein, and the horse swam steadily. They were now about the middle of the stream, which was wider here than at the ford. Two or three brown faces suddenly appeared in the brush on the bank in front of them, and the savage cry arose. Comanche skirmishers had discovered the flank movement, but the white troop was already more than half way across. Bullets were fired at the swimming men and horses. Some struck in flesh, but others dashed up jets of yellow foam.

"On! On!" cried Middleton. "We must gain the bank!"

"On! On!" cried Phil, borne on by excitement. "We must gain the bank!"

He was carried away so much by the fire and movement of the moment that he did not feel fear. His blood was tingling in every vein. Myriads of red specks danced before him. The yellow water splashed all about him, but he did not notice it. An arrow whizzed by his cheek, and two bullets struck near, but he continued to urge his horse, which, gallant animal, was already doing his best. Some of the white men, even from the unsteady position of a swimming horse's back, had begun to fire at the Indians in the brush. Phil heard Bill Breakstone utter a deep sigh of satisfaction as he lowered the muzzle of his rifle.

"Got one," said Bill. "It's good to be zealous, but that Comanche ought to have known more than to run square against a rifle bullet."

The feet of Phil's horse touched earth, and he began to wade. Everything now depended upon an instant or two. If they could gallop up the declivity before the Comanches could arrive in force they would secure a great advantage. But the Comanches were coming rapidly, and the fire from their bows and rifles increased. The white men, now that their position was steadier, also fired more rapidly. Phil sent a bullet at a bronze figure that he saw darting about in the undergrowth, but he could not tell whether or not he had hit.

"On!" shouted Middleton. "Give them no chance! Rush the slope!"

They were out of the river now, and in among the bushes and weeds. But they did not stop there. Dripping with the yellow water, streaked sometimes with red, they rode straight at the Comanches, shouting and firing with both rifles and pistols. The Indian skirmishers gave way, and, jumping upon their ponies, galloped down the stream to the main ford. The white men uttered a cry of exultation. They were now on the western bank, and the flank movement was a complete success.

"Follow them!" shouted Middleton. "We must press home the attack upon the main body!"

Ahead of them the Comanches, bent low on their mustangs, were galloping over the plain. Behind came the white men, hot with the fire of battle and urging on their horses. Phil, Bill Breakstone, and Arenberg rode knee to knee, the boy between. He was wet from head to foot with splashed water, but he did not know it. A bullet had touched the tip of one ear, covering it with blood, but he did not know that, either. There was no cruelty in his nature, but just now it thrilled with battle. He sought a shot at the flying Comanches, but they were too far away.

"Hold your fire," said Bill Breakstone. "The battle is not over yet by any means. A job that's half finished isn't finished at all."

They heard now the shots at the ford above them and a tremendous shouting. Evidently the two forces were firing at each other across the stream, and the wagons did not yet dare the passage. A few moments later they saw the smoke of the rifles and brown figures darting about the thickets.

"Now, boys!" shouted Middleton. "All together! A great cheer!"

A mighty shout was poured forth from three score throats, and Middleton waved his felt hat about his head. From the eastern bank came an answering cry, and the signal was complete. Woodfall and the others with the train knew that their comrades were across, and now was the time for them

to force the passage. Phil saw the white tops of the wagons shake. Then the wagons themselves rolled slowly forward into the water, with horsemen in front of them and on the flanks, firing at the Indians on the bank. The Comanches sent a shower of bullets and arrows upon the advancing line, but in another instant they were compelled to turn and defend themselves. Middleton and his victorious troop were thundering down upon them.

The attack upon their flank came so swiftly that the Comanches were taken by surprise. As their own skirmishers fled, the white force galloped in upon their heels. Yet these bold warriors, kings of the plains, victors in many a battle over other tribes and Mexicans, fought with a courage and tenacity worthy of their race and traditions. They were marshaled, too, by a chief who had returned to his own, the great Black Panther, and by able assistants.

Middleton's daring men met a storm of arrows and bullets, but they charged on, although some saddles were emptied. They were at the edge of the timber now, the mounted white men poured in a deadly fire. The sound of the shots became a steady, incessant crackle. Puffs of smoke arose, and, uniting, formed a canopy of vapor. The odor of gunpowder spread and filled the nostrils of the combatants. Shots, the trampling of hoofs, the cries of the wounded and dying rung upon the drums of their ears.

It was a terrific medley, seemingly all confusion, but really fought with order by skilled leaders. Black Panther had one half of his warriors to face the wagons and horsemen in the river and the other half faced south to beat off Middleton's troop, if it could. He himself passed from one to another, encouraging them by every art that he knew, and they were many.

But it was Middleton's men who gave the deathblow. They struck so hard and so often that it was continually necessary for Black Panther to send more of his warriors to the defense of his flank. The firing upon the wagons and horsemen in the river slackened, and they rushed forward. The horsemen gained the bank, and, at the same time, Middleton's men charged with greater fire than ever. Then the horsemen from the ford rushed up the ascent and joined in the attack. Compressed between the two arms of a vise, the Comanches, despite every effort of Black Panther and his chiefs, gave way. Yet they did not break into any panic. Springing on their horses, they retired slowly, sending back flights of arrows and bullets, and now and then uttering the defiant warwhoop.

Meanwhile, the last of the wagons emerged from the river, and was dragged up the ascent. Although the Comanches might yet shout in the distance, the crossing was won, and everybody in the train felt a mighty sense of relief.

## CHAPTER IV ON WATCH

The wagons drew up in a great square on the open plain, but just at the edge of the timber, and the men, breathless, perspiring, but victorious, dropped from their horses. The Comanches still galloped to and fro and shouted in the distance, but they kept well out of rifle shot, and Phil, although it was his first battle, knew that they would not attack again, at least not for the present. They had been driven out of an extremely strong position, ground of their own choosing, and nothing remained to them but to retire.

The boy stood by the side of his horse, holding the bridle in one hand and the rifle in the other. He was still trembling from the excitement of forcing the ford and the battle among the trees, but the reddish mist before his eyes was gradually clearing away. He let the bridle rein drop, and put his hand to his face. It came away damp and sticky. He looked at it in an inquiring way to see if he were wounded, but it was only dust and the smoke of burned gunpowder, kneaded together by perspiration. Then he felt cautiously of his body. No bullet or arrow had entered.

"Unhurt, Phil?" boomed out the voice of Bill Breakstone beside him. "So am I, and so is Middleton. Arenberg got a scratch, but he's forgotten it already. But, I trow, Sir Philip of the River, that was indeed a combat while it lasted!"

"The Comanches shot  
With spirit hot,  
But now, they're not.

"You can't say anything against that poem, Phil; it's short and to the point. It's true that the Comanches aren't entirely gone, but they might as well be. Let 'em shout out there in the plain as much as they choose, they're going to keep out of rifle range. And I congratulate you, Phil, on the way you bore yourself through your first 'baptism of fire.'"

"I thank you, Bill," said Phil, "but the fact is, I don't know just how I bore myself. It's been more like a dream than anything else."

"That's likely to happen to a man the first time under fire, and the second time, too, but here we are on the right side of the river and ready for a breathing spell."

Phil threw the reins over his horse's neck, knowing that the latter would not leave the camp, and set to work, helping to put everything in order, ready for fight or rest, whichever the Comanches chose to make it. The wagons were already in a hollow square, and the wounded, at least twenty in number, laid comfortably in the wagons, were receiving the rude but effective treatment of the border. Seven or eight had been killed, and three or four bodies had been lost in the current of the stream. They were now digging graves for the others. Little was known of the slain. They were wandering, restless spirits, and they may or may not have been buried under their own names. They had fallen in an unknown land beside an unknown river, but their comrades gave all due honor as they put them beneath the earth. Middleton said a few words over the body of each, while others stood by with their hats off. Then they smoothed out the soil above them as completely as possible, in order that their graves might be lost. They took this precaution lest the Comanches come after they had gone, take up the bodies, and mutilate them.

When the solemn task was done, the men turned away to other duties. They were not discouraged; on the contrary, their spirits were sanguine. The gloom of the burial was quickly dispelled, and these wild spirits, their fighting blood fully up, were more than half willing for the Comanches to

give them a new battle. It was such as these, really loving adventure and danger more than profit, who steadily pushed forward the southwestern frontier in the face of obstacles seemingly insuperable.

Their position at the edge of the wood, with the strong fortification of the wagons, was excellent, and Middleton and Woodfall, after a short consultation, decided to remain there until morning, for the sake of the wounded men and for rest for all. Phil worked in the timber, gathering up fallen fuel for fires, which were built in the center of the hollow square, and he found the work a relief. Such a familiar task steadied his nerves. Gradually the little pulses ceased to beat so hard, and his head grew cool. When enough dead wood had been brought in, he took another look at the western horizon. Comanches could still be seen there, but they no longer galloped about and shouted. A half dozen sat motionless on their ponies, apparently looking at the white camp, their figures, horse and rider, outlined in black tracery against the blood-red western sun. Phil had a feeling that, although beaten at the ford, they were not beaten for good and all, and that the spirit of Black Panther, far from being crushed, would be influenced to new passions and new attack. But, as he looked, the Comanche horseman seemed to ride directly into the low sun and disappear. The hard work that had kept him up now over, he felt limp, and sank down near one of the fires.

"Here, Phil, drink this," said Bill Breakstone, handing him a cup of hot coffee. "It has been a pretty hard day on the nerves, and you need a stimulant."

Phil swallowed it all, almost at a draught—never had coffee tasted better—and his strength came back rapidly. Breakstone, also, drank a cup and sat down beside the boy.

"Here comes Arenberg," he said in a low tone to Phil. "That German was a very demon to-day. He got right into the front of the charge, and after his rifle was empty he clubbed it and brought down one of the Comanches."

Phil looked up. Arenberg's face was still set in a stern, pitiless mask, but when his eyes caught the boy she relaxed.

"It is a good day well spent," he said, throwing himself down by the side of the two. "We never could have forced the ford if we had not made that flank movement. Harm was meant by both sides and harm was done. But it is over now. How does the young Herr Philip feel?"

"Pretty good now," replied Phil, "but I've had my ups and downs, I can tell you. A little while ago I felt as if there were no backbone in me at all."

Food was now cooked, and, after eating, the three relapsed into silence. Presently Middleton, also, joined them, and told them that very thorough preparations had been made to guard against a surprise. Sentinels on horseback were already far out on the plain, riding a watchful round which would be continued all through the night.

"It is easy to guard against surprise on that side," said Middleton, "but snipers may creep down the riverbank in the timber. We must keep our best watch there."

"I'll go on duty," said Philip promptly.

"Not yet," replied Middleton. "You may be needed late in the night, in which case we'll call on you, but our most experienced borderers don't think the Comanches will come back."

"You can never trust them," said Arenberg earnestly.

"We don't mean to," said Middleton. "Now, Phil, I'd advise you to wrap yourself in your blanket and go to sleep. On a campaign it's always advisable to sleep when you're off duty, because you never know when you will get the chance again."

It seemed to Phil that it was impossible to sleep, after so much excitement and danger, but he knew that Middleton was speaking wise words, and he resolved to try. There were yet hours of daylight, but, putting his blanket beneath him, he lay before one of the fires with his arm under his head and closed his eyes. He would open them now and then to see the yellow flames, the figures of the men moving back and forth, and the circle of wagons beyond. He could not make himself feel sleepy, but he knew that his nerves were relaxing. Physically he felt a soothing languor, and with it came a mental

satisfaction. He had helped to win his first battle, and, like the older and seasoned men around him, the victory encouraged him to bid further defiance to the Comanches or anything else that threatened.

These reflections were so grateful that he found himself able to keep his eyes shut longer. It was not so much of an effort to pull the eyelids down, and when, at intervals steadily growing more distant, he opened his eyes, it was to find the fires and figures of the men becoming dim, while the circling line of the wagons beyond was quite lost. At last the eyelids stayed down of their own accord, and he floated away into a sleep that was deep, sweet, and refreshing.

Others in the camp slept, also, some in the wagons and some on the ground, with saddles for pillows. Those whose duty it was to watch paid no attention to them, but beat up the brush incessantly, and kept up their endless circles on the plains. The somber clouds that had obscured the morning floated away, driven back by a late afternoon sun of uncommon splendor. The gray-green plains turned to a brilliant red and gold; the willows, cottonwoods, and oaks seemed sheathed in gold, every bough and twig; the muddy river took on rich gleaming tints, and then suddenly the sun was gone, leaving all in darkness, save for the smoldering fires.

Phil slept soundly hour after hour. He was so exhausted physically and mentally that the relaxation was complete. No dream good or bad came to trouble him, and Breakstone, who observed his peaceful face, said to Middleton:

"Talk about knitting up the raveled sleeve of care. That boy is knitting up both sleeves at the same time, and he is knitting them fast."

"He is a good lad," said Middleton, "and a brave one, too. It was his first battle, but he certainly bore himself well. Now I wonder what search is bringing him out here into the wilderness."

"And I guess he, too, often wonders the same about us."

"Just as I have wondered it about you, and as you have wondered it about me."

"But we find it best—every one of us—to keep our search to ourselves for the present."

"It is surely best."

The two men looked at each other rather significantly, and then talked of other things.

Phil was awakened at midnight to take his turn at the watch. The night, as it is so often on the plains of Texas, even in summer, was cold, and he shivered a little when he drew himself out of his warm blankets. The fires were nearly out, leaving only a few coals that did not warm, and few figures were moving except outside the circle. His body told Phil that he would much rather sleep on, but his mind told him with greater force that he must go ahead and do his duty with a willing heart, a steady hand, and a quick eye. So he shook himself thoroughly, and was ready for action. His orders were to go in the timber a little to the northward and watch for snipers. Three others were going with him, but they were to separate and take regular beats.

Phil shouldered his rifle and marched with his comrades. They passed outside the circles of wagons, and stood for a few moments on the bare plain. A far off they saw their own mounted sentinels who watched to the westward, riding back and forth. The moon was cold, and a chill wind swept over the swells, moaning dismally. Phil shivered and was glad that he had a watch on foot in the timber. His comrades were willing to hasten with him to that shelter, and there they arranged their beats. The belt of timber was about a hundred yards wide, with a considerable undergrowth of bushes and tall weeds. They cut the hundred yards into about four equal spaces, and Phil took the quarter next to the river. He walked steadily back and forth over the twenty-five yards, and at the western end of his beat he regularly met the next sentinel, a young Mississippian named Welby, whom Phil liked. They exchanged a few words now and then, but, save their low tones, the monotonous moaning of the wind among the trees, and an occasional sigh made by the current of the river, which here flowed rather swiftly, there was no sound. On the opposite bank the trees and bushes reared themselves, a wall of dark green.

The chill of the night grew, but the steady walking back and forth had increased the circulation and warmed the blood in Phil's veins, and he did not feel it. His long sleep, too, had brought back all his strength, and he was full of courage and zeal. He had suffered a reaction after the battle, but now

the second reaction came. The young victor, refreshed in mind and body, feared nothing. Neither was he lonely nor awed by the vast darkness of night in the wilderness. The words that he spoke with Welby every few minutes were enough to keep him in touch with the human race, and he really felt content with himself and the world. He had done his duty under fire, and now he was doing his duty again.

He paused a little longer every time he came to the river, and forcing his mind now to note every detail, he was impressed by the change that the stream had undergone. There was a fine full moon, and the muddy torrent of the day was turned into silver, sparkling more brightly where the bubbles formed and broke. The stream, swollen doubtless by rains about its source, flowed rapidly with a slight swishing noise. Phil looked up and down it, having a straight sweep of several hundred yards either way. Now and then the silver of its surface was broken by pieces of floating debris, brought doubtless from some far point. He watched these fragments as they passed, a bough, a weed, or a stump, or the entire trunk of a tree, wrenched by a swollen current from some caving bank. He was glad that he had the watch next to the river, because it was more interesting. The river was a live thing, changing in color, and moving swiftly. Its surface, with the objects that at times swept by on it, was a panorama of varied interest.

Besides Welby he saw no living creature. The camp was hidden from him completely by the trees and bushes, and they were so quiet within the circle of the wagon that no sound came from them. An hour passed. It became two, then three. Vaporous clouds floated by the moon. The silver light on the river waned. The current became dark yellow again, but flowing as ever with that soft, swishing sound. The change affected Phil. The weird quality of the wilderness, clothed in dark, made itself felt. He was glad when he met Welby, and they lingered a few seconds longer, talking a little. He came back once more to the river, now flowing in a torrent almost black between its high banks.

He took his usual long survey of the river, both up and down stream. Phil was resolved to do his full duty, and already he had some experience, allied with faculties naturally keen. He examined the opposite bank with questioning eyes. At first it had seemed a solid wall of dark green, but attention and the habit of the darkness now enabled him to separate it into individual trees and bushes. Comanches ambushed there could easily shoot across the narrow stream and pick off a white sentinel, but he had always kept himself well back in his own bushes, where he could see and yet be hidden.

His gaze turned to the river. Darker substances, drifted from far banks, still floated on its surface. The wind had died. The branches of the trees did not move at all, and, in the absence of all other sound, the slight swishing made by the flowing of the river grew louder. His wandering eyes fastened on a small stump that was coming from the curve above, and that floated easily on the surface. Its motion was so regular that his glance stayed, and he watched it with interested eyes. It was an independent sort of stump, less at the mercy of the current than the others had been. It came on, bearing in toward the western bank, and Phil judged that if it kept its present course it would strike the shore beneath him.

The black stump was certainly interesting. He looked farther. Four feet behind it was floating another stump of about the same size, and preserving the same direction, which was a diagonal line with the current. That was a coincidence. Yet farther was a third stump, showing all the characteristics of the other two. That was remarkable. And lo! when a fourth, and then a fifth, and then a sixth came, a floating line, black and silent, it was a prodigy.

The first black stump struck lightly against the bank. Then a Comanche warrior, immersed hitherto to the chin, rose from the stream. The water ran in black bubbles from his naked body. In his right hand he held a long knife. The face was sinister, savage, and terrible beyond expression. Another of the stumps was just rising from the stream, but Phil fired instantly at the first face, and then sprang back, shouting, "The Comanches." He did not run. He merely sheltered himself behind a tree, and began to reload rapidly. Welby came running through the bushes, and then the others, drawn by the shout. In a minute the timber was filled with armed men.

"What is it? What is it? What did you shoot at?" they cried, although the same thought was in the minds of every one of them.

"The Comanches!" replied Phil. "They came swimming in a line down the river. Their heads looked like black stumps on the water! I fired at the first moment he rose from the stream! I think it was their plan to ambush and kill the sentinels!"

Bill Breakstone was among those who had come, and he cried:

"Then we must beat them off at once! We must not give them a chance to get a footing on the bank!"

They rushed forward, Phil with them, his rifle now reloaded, and gazed down at the river. They heard no noise, but that slight swishing sound made by the current, and the surface of the stream was bare. The river flowed as if no foreign body had ever vexed its current. Fifty pairs of eyes used to the wilderness studied the stream and the thickets. They saw nothing. Fifty pairs of ears trained to hear the approach of danger listened. They heard nothing but the faint swishing sound that never ceased. A murmur not pleasant to Phil, arose.

"I've no doubt it was a stump, a real stump," one of the older men said.

A deep flush overspread Phil's face.

"I saw a Comanche with long black hair rise from the water," he said.

The man who had spoken grinned a little, but the expression of his face showed that doubt had solidified into certainty.

"A case of nerves," he said, "but I don't blame you so much, bein' only a boy."

Phil felt his blood grow hot, but he tried to restrain his temper.

"I certainly saw a Comanche," he said, "and there were others behind him!"

"Then what's become of all this terrible attack?" asked the man ironically.

"Come! Come!" said Woodfall. "We can't have such talk. The boy may have made a mistake, but the incident showed that he was watching well, just what we want our sentinels to do."

Phil flushed again. Woodfall's tone was kindly, but he was hurt by the implication of possible doubt and mistake. Yet Woodfall and the others had ample excuse for such doubts. There was not the remotest sign of an enemy. Could he really have been mistaken? Could it have been something like a waking dream? Could his nerves have been so upset that they made his eyes see that which was not? He stared for a full minute at the empty face of the river, and then a voice called:

"Oh, you men, come down here! I've something to show you!"

It was Bill Breakstone, who had slipped away from them and gone down the bank. His voice came from a point at least a hundred yards down the stream, and the men in a group followed the sound of it, descending the slope with the aid of weeds and bushes. Bill was standing at the edge of a little cove which the water had hollowed out of the soft soil, and something dark lay at his feet.

"I dragged this out of the water," he said. "It was floating along, when an eddy brought it into this cove."

They looked down, and Phil shut off a cry with his closed teeth. The body, a Comanche warrior, entirely naked, lay upon its back. There was a bullet hole in the center of the forehead. The features, even in death, were exactly those that the boy had seen rising from the water, sinister, savage, terrible beyond expression. Phil felt a cold horror creeping through all his bones, but it was the look of this dead face more than the fact that he had killed a man. He shuddered to think what so much malignant cruelty could have done had it gained the chance.

"Well, men," said Bill Breakstone quietly, "was the story our young friend here told such stuff as dreams are made on, or did it really happen?"

"The boy told the truth, and he was watching well," said a half dozen together.

The old frontiersman who had so plainly expressed his disbelief in Phil-Gard was his name-extended his hand and said to the lad:

"I take it all back. You've saved us from an ambush that would have cost us a lot of men. I was a fool. Shake hands."

Phil, with a great leap of pride, took the proffered hand and shook it heartily.

"I don't blame you, Mr. Gard," he said. "Things certainly looked against me."

"The Comanches naturally took to flight when their leader was killed," said Woodfall. "They could not carry through such an attempt without surprise, but good eyes stopped them."

Phil's heart leaped again with pride, but he said nothing. They climbed back up the slope, and the guard in the timber was tripled for the short time until day. Phil was told that, as he had already done so much, he might go off duty now.

He was glad enough to seek rest, and so rapidly was he becoming used to danger that he lay down calmly before one of the fires and went to sleep again. He awoke two or three hours later to a crisp fresh morning, and to the news that the train would promptly resume its advance, whether or not Comanches tried to bar the way. With the intoxicating odor of victory still in their nostrils, the hardy frontiersmen were as willing as ever for another combat. But the enemy had disappeared completely. A brilliant sun rose over the gray-green swells, disclosing nothing but a herd of antelope that grazed far to the right.

"The antelope mean that no Comanches are near," said Arenberg. "The warriors will now wait patiently and a long time for a good opportunity. Sometimes much harm is done where much is intended."

"That is so," chanted Bill Breakstone.

"Over the plains we go,  
Our rifles clear the way.  
The Indians would say no.  
Our band they cannot stay.

"As I have often remarked before, Phil, my poetry may be defective in meter and some other small technicalities, but it comes to the point. That, I believe, was the characteristic of Shakespeare, also. I agree, too, with Arenberg, that the Comanches will not trouble us again for some time. So, I pray thee, be of good cheer, Sir Philip of the Merry Countenance, Knight of the Battle beside the Unknown River, Slayer of Comanches in the Dark, Guardian of the Public Weal, et cetera, et cetera."

"I am cheerful," said Phil, to whom Breakstone was always a tonic, "and I believe that we can beat off the Comanches any time and every time."

"Jump on your horse," said Breakstone, a little later; "we're all ready."

Phil leaped into the saddle with one bound. The train moved forward, and he and Breakstone joined Middleton and Arenberg at its head. Middleton had powerful glasses, and he swept the plain far ahead, and to right and left. His gaze finally settled on a point to the south-west. The others followed his look with great interest, but the naked eye could see nothing but the rolling gray-green plains and the dim blue horizon beyond. Middleton looked so long that at last Bill Breakstone asked:

"What do you see?"

"I do not see anything that I can really call living," replied Middleton, "but I do see a knoll or slight elevation on the plain—what would be called farther north a butte—and on that knoll is a black blur, shapeless and unnamable at this distance."

"Does the black blur move?" asked Bill Breakstone.

"I cannot tell. It is too far even for that, but from it comes a beam of brilliant light that shifts here and there over the plain. Take a look, Bill."

Breakstone eagerly put the glasses to his eyes, and turned them upon the knoll.

"Ah, I see it!" he exclaimed. "It's like a ball of light! There it goes to the right! There it goes to the left! Now it falls in our direction! What in the name of Shakespeare's thirty-five or forty plays is it, Cap?"

"Let me have the glasses, I want another look," replied Middleton.

His second look was a long one taken in silence. At last he replied:

"It's a signal, lads. I've seen the Comanches talk to one another in this way before. A Comanche chief is sitting on his horse on top of that knoll. He holds a rounded piece of looking-glass in the hollow of his hand, and he turns it in such a way that he catches the very concentrated essence of the sun's rays, throwing a beam a tremendous distance. The beam, like molten gold, now strikes the grass on top of a swell off toward the north. It's a secret just how they do it, for not yet has any white man learned the system of signals which they make with such a glass. Ah!"

The "Ah!" came forth, so deep, so long drawn, and so full of meaning that Phil, Arenberg, and Bill Breakstone exclaimed together:

"What is it?"

"I would not have known that the black blur on top of the knoll was a chief on horseback if I had not been on the Texas plains before," replied Middleton, "but now I can make out the figures of horse and man, as he is riding around and around in a circle and riding very rapidly."

"What does that mean?" asked Phil.

"It means danger, not to us, but to the Comanches. The warrior is probably signaling to a band of his tribe who are meditating attack upon us that we are too strong."

"Then it must be some fresh band," said Bill Breakstone, "because the one that had the little encounter with us yesterday knew that already."

"I take it that you're right," said Middleton, smiling and closing the glasses. "The second band won't molest us—not to-day."

"That seems to be a very effective way of signaling," remarked Phil.

"On the plains, yes," said Middleton. "It is astonishing how far such a vivid beam of light will carry, as the crest of the knoll was too high for it to be intercepted by the swells."

Middleton told Woodfall what they had seen. The leader's chin stiffened a little more, and the wagons went on at the same pace, trailing their brown length across the prairie.

About ten o'clock the march became difficult, as they entered a town, but such a town! Its inhabitants were prairie dogs, queer little animals, which darted down into their burrows at the approach of the horsemen and wagons, often sharing the home with a rattlesnake. But the horsemen were now compelled to proceed with exceeding care, as the horses' feet often sank deep down in the dens. Stumbles were frequent and there were several falls. Wagon wheels, also, sank, and the advance became so difficult that Woodfall halted the train and sent Phil and some others to find a way around the town.

They rode five or six miles to the south, and still the singular town stretched away, apparently endless. Then they came back and rode five or six miles to the north with the same result. Acting upon the advice of Middleton, Woodfall, after hearing these reports, decided to go straight on through the town. It was known that such towns had been found twenty-five miles long, and this might be as large. So they went directly ahead. Their riders dismounted and led their horses. Three times Phil killed coiling rattlesnakes with the butt of his rifle, but he did not seek to molest any of the prairie dogs.

They moved very slowly, and it was three hours before they crossed the prairie dog town, leaving behind them some destruction, but not more than they could help.

"Well, Sir Philip of the Prairie Dogs, what name are you going to give to the populous community through which we have just passed?" asked Breakstone.

"I suppose Canine Center will do as well as any other," replied Phil.

"A wise selection, my gay youth," replied Bill Breakstone. "But these animals, properly speaking, are not dogs, they are more like rats. I'm glad we've passed 'em. It isn't pleasant to have your horse put his foot in one of their dens and shoot you over his head. The good hard plain for me."

He cantered forward, and Phil cantered with him, raising his head and breathing the pure air that blew over such vast reaches of clean earth. He felt the blood leaping in his veins again from mere physical happiness. He began to whistle gayly, and then to sing "Open thy lattice, love," a song just coming into favor, written by the man who became yet more famous with "Old Kentucky Home" and

"Suwanee River." Phil had a fine, fresh, youthful voice, and Breakstone listened to him as he sang through two verses. Then he held up his hand, and Phil stopped.

"What's the trouble?" asked the boy.

"I don't object to your song, Phil, and I don't object to your singing, but it won't be a good time for love to open the lattice; it will be better to close it tight. Don't you feel a change in the air, Phil? Just turn your face to the northwest, and you'll notice it."

Phil obeyed, and it seemed to him now that the air striking upon his cheek was colder, but he imagined that it was due to the increasing strength of the wind.

"I do not care if the wind is a little cold," he said. "I like it."

"The wind is cold,  
And you are bold;  
The sky turns gray  
You're not so gay;  
And by and by  
For sun you'll sigh,"

chanted Bill Breakstone, and then he added:

"See that gray mist forming in a circle about the sun, and look at that vapor off there in the northwest. By George, how fast it spreads! The whole sky is becoming overcast! Unroll your blanket, Phil, and have it ready to wrap around you! The whole train must stop and prepare!"

Bill Breakstone turned to give his warning, but others, too, had noticed the signals of danger. The command stop was given. The wagons were drawn rapidly into a circle, and just as when the danger was Indians, instead of that which now threatened, all the horses and mules were put inside the circle. But now all the men, also, took their station inside, none remaining outside as guard. The wind meanwhile rose fast, and the temperature fell with startling rapidity. The edge of the blast seemed to be ice itself. Phil, who was helping with the corral of wagons, felt as if it cut him to the bone. He fully appreciated Bill Breakstone's advice about the blanket. The day also was swiftly turning dark. The sun was quite gone out. Heavy clouds and masses of vapor formed an impenetrable veil over all the sky. Now, besides the cold, Phil felt his face struck by fine particles that stung. It was the sand picked up by the wind, perhaps hundreds of miles away, and hurled upon them in an enveloping storm.

Phil pulled down his cap-brim and also sheltered his eyes as much as he could with his left arm. "It's the Norther," cried Breakstone. "Listen to it!"

The wind was now shrieking and howling over the plains with a voice that was truly human, only it was like the shout of ten thousand human beings combined. But it was a voice full of malice and cruelty, and Phil was glad of the companionship of his kind.

The cold was now becoming intense, and he rapidly drew the blanket about his body. Then he suddenly bent his head lower and completely covered his eyes with his arm. It was hailing fiercely. Showers of white pellets, large enough to be dangerous, pounded him, and, as the darkness had now increased to that of night, he groped for shelter. Bill Breakstone seized him by the arm and cried:

"Jump into the wagon there, Phil! And I'll jump after you!"

Phil obeyed with the quickness of necessity, and Breakstone came in on top of him. Middleton and Arenberg were already there.

"Welcome to our wagon," said Arenberg, as Phil and Breakstone disentangled themselves. "You landed on one of my feet, Phil, and you landed on the other, Bill, but no harm is done where none is meant."

Phil cowered down and drew his blanket more closely around him, while the hail beat fiercely on the arched canvas cover, and the cold wind shrieked and moaned more wildly than ever. He peeped out at the front of the wagon and beheld a scene indescribable in its wild and chilling grandeur. The

darkness endured. The hail was driven in an almost horizontal line like a sheet of sleet. The wagons showed but dimly in all this dusk. The animals, fortunately, had been tethered close to the wagons, where they were, in a measure, protected, but many of them reared and neighed in terror and suffering. One look satisfied Phil, and he drew back well under cover.

"How often does this sort of thing happen in Texas?" he asked Arenberg.

"Not so often," replied the German, "and this Norther, I think, is the worst I ever saw. The cold wind certainly blows like der Teufel. These storms must start on the great mountains far, far to the north, and I think they get stronger as they come. Iss it not so, Herr Breakstone?"

"Your words sound true to me, Sir Hans of the Beer Barrel," replied Breakstone. "I've seen a few Northerners in my time, and I've felt 'em, but this seems to me to be about the most grown-up, all-around, healthy and frisky specimen of the kind that I ever met."

Phil thought that the Norther would blow itself out in an hour or two, but he was mistaken. Several hours passed and the wind was as strong and as cold as ever. The four ate some cold food that was in the wagon, and then settled back into their places. No attempt would be made to cook that day. But Phil grew so warm and snug in his blanket among the baggage, and the beating of the rain on the stout canvas cover was so soothing, that he fell asleep after awhile. He did not know how long he slept, because when he awoke it was still dark, the wind was still shrieking, and the other three, as he could tell by their regular breathing, were asleep, also. He felt so good that he stretched himself a little, turned on the other side, and went to sleep again.

## CHAPTER V

### THE COMANCHE VILLAGE

The Norther did not blow itself out until noon of the next day. Then it ceased almost as abruptly as it had begun. The wind stopped its shrieking and howling so suddenly that the silence, after so long a period of noise, was for awhile impressive. The clouds fell apart as if cut down the middle by a saber, and the sun poured through the rift.

It was like a fairy transformation scene. The rift widened so fast that soon all the clouds were gone beyond the horizon. The sky was a solid blue, shot through with the gold of the warm sun. The hail melted, and the ground dried. It was spring again, and the world was beautiful. Phil saw, felt, and admired. Bill Breakstone burst into song:

"The Norther came,  
The Norther went.  
It suits its name,  
Its rage is spent.

"From the looks of things now," he continued, "you wouldn't think it had been whistling and groaning around us for about twenty-four hours, trying to shoot us to death with showers of hail, but I'd have you to know, Sir Philip of the Untimely Cold and the Hateful Storm, that I have recorded it upon the tablets of my memory. I wouldn't like to meet such a Norther when I was alone on the plains, on foot, and clad in sandals, a linen suit, and a straw hat."

"Nor I," said Phil with emphasis.

Now they lighted fires of buffalo chips which were abundant everywhere, and ate the first warm food that they had had since the day before at noon. Then they advanced four or five miles and encamped on the banks of a creek, a small stream of water flowing in a broad, sandy bed. Phil and some of the others scouted in a wide circle for Comanches, but saw no signs, and, as he had slept so late that day, the boy remained awake most of the night. There was a good moonlight, and he saw dusky slinking forms on the plain.

"Coyotes," said Bill Breakstone. "At least, most of them are, though I think from their size that two or three of those figures out there must be timber wolves. If I'm right about 'em, it means that we're not far from a belt of forest country."

"I hope you're right," said Phil. "I'm getting tired of plains now, and I'd like to see trees and hills again, and also water that runs faster and that's less muddy than these sluggish and sandy creeks."

Bill Breakstone threw back his head and laughed with unctiousness.

"That's the way with fellows who were born in the hills," he said. "Wherever you go, sooner or later you'll pine for 'em again. I'm one of that lot, too."

"Yes, it's so," admitted Phil. "I like the great plains, the vastness, the mystery, and the wonderful air which must be the purest in the world, that's always blowing over them, but for a real snug, homey feeling give me a little valley in the hills, with a brook of green-white water about six inches deep running down it, and plenty of fine trees—oak, beech, hickory, elm, walnut, and chestnut—growing on the slopes and tops of the hills."

"A pretty picture, Sir Philip of the Brook, the Hill, the Valley, and the Tree," said Bill Breakstone, "and maybe we will see it soon. As I told you, timber wolves indicate trees not far off."

But the chief event that day was buffaloes and no timber. They ran into a vast herd, traveling north with the spring, and killed with ease all they wanted. The bodies were cut up, and the wagons were filled with fresh meat. There was a momentary quandary about the hides, which they wished to

save, a process that required immediate curing, but they were unwilling to stop for that purpose on the plain. Two of the scouts came in at sundown with news that the timber was only three or four miles ahead, and the whole train pushed forward, reaching it shortly after nightfall.

The wagons stopped just within the edge of the timber, but Phil, Breakstone, Arenberg, and Middleton rode on, the night being so clear and bright that they could see almost as well as by day. The first range of hills was low, but beyond lay others, rising perhaps two hundred feet above the level of the plain. The timber on all the hills and the valleys between was dense and heavy, embracing many varieties of hard wood, elm, hackberry, overcup, ash, pecan, and wild china. There were also the bushes and vines of the blackberry, gooseberry, raspberry, currant, and of a small fox grape, plentiful throughout the mountains of Texas. The fox grape grew on a little bush like that of the currant, and growing in abundance was another bush, from two to six feet in height, that would produce wild plums in the autumn.

"It's a good country, a fine country," said Bill Breakstone. "A man could live all the year around on the food that he would find in this region, buffalo and antelope on the plains, deer and maybe beaver in here, and all sorts of wild fruits."

Phil nodded. He was reveling in the hills and timber. The moonlight fell in a vast sheet of silver, but the foliage remained a solid mass of dark green beneath it. A tremulous little wind blew, and the soft sound of fresh young leaves rubbing together came pleasantly. A faint noise like a sigh told of a tiny stream somewhere trickling over the pebbles. Phil opened his eyes as wide as he could and drew in great gulps of the scented air. Big bronze birds, roused by the tread of the horsemen, rose from a bough, and flew away among the trees. They were wild turkeys, but the lad and his comrades were not seeking game just then. Bill Breakstone, who was in advance, stopped suddenly.

"Come here, Sir Philip of the Hilly Forest," he cried, "and see what uncle has found for his little boy."

Phil rode up by his side and uttered a little gasp of admiration. As he sat on his horse, he looked into a ravine about two hundred feet deep. Down the center of the ravine dashed a little mountain river of absolutely clear water. It was not more than twenty feet wide, but very deep. As Breakstone said, "it ran on its side," but it ran along with much murmur and splash and laughter of waters. Often as the swift current struck the stony sides of the ravine it threw up little cascades of foam like snow. The banks themselves, although of stone, were covered most of the way with clustering vines and short green bushes. The crest of the farther bank was wooded so heavily with great trees that they were like a wall. Farther down, the stream descended with increased swiftness, and a steady murmuring noise that came to them indicated a waterfall. The brilliant moonlight bathed the river, the hills, and the forest, and the great silence brooded over them all. Middleton and Arenberg also came, and the four side by side on their horses sat for a while, saying nothing, but rejoicing in a scene so vivid and splendid to them, after coming from the monotony of the great plains.

"I'd like to drop off my horse after a hot day's ride," said Bill Breakstone, "and have some of that river run over me. Wouldn't that be a shower-bath for a tired and dusty man!"

"It's likely to be ice-cold," said Middleton.

"Why so?" asked Phil.

"Because it rises somewhere high up. There must be mountains to the northward, and probably it is fed most of the year by melting snows. I think Bill would have enough of his bath very quickly."

"If I get a chance, and there is any way to get down to that stream, I may try it to-morrow," said Bill threateningly.

"Meanwhile, we'll ride back and tell what we've seen," said Middleton.

"Isn't there any danger of Indian ambush in the timber?" asked Phil.

"I don't think so," replied Middleton. "The Comanches are horse Indians, and keep entirely to the plains. The other tribes are too much afraid of the Comanches to remain near them, and in consequence the edge of a hilly stretch such as this is likely to be deserted."

They rode back to the wagons and found that the cooking fires were already lighted, and their cheerful blaze was gleaming among the trees. Everybody else, also, was delighted at being in the timber, where clear water flowed past, and most of the wounded were able to get out of the wagons and sit on the grass with their comrades. Woodfall decided that it was a good place in which to spend a few days for rest, repairs, and the hunting of game, as they wanted other fresh meat besides that of the buffalo.

The next morning they began to cure the buffalo hides that they had already obtained. A smooth piece of ground, exposed all day to the rays of the sun, was chosen. Upon this the skin was stretched and pegged down. Then every particle of the flesh was scraped off. After that, it was left about three days under the rays of the sun, and then it was cured. Twenty-five skins were saved in this manner, and, also, by the same method of drying in the sun, they jerked great quantities of the buffalo meat.

But Middleton, Arenberg, Breakstone, and Phil turned hunters for the time. They found that the hill region was very extensive, timbered heavily, and abundant in game. They hunted wholly on foot, and found several places where the ravine opened out, at which they could cross the little river by walking, although the water rose to their waists.

They had great luck with the game, shooting a half dozen splendid black-tailed deer, a score of wild turkeys, and many partridges, quail, and grouse. Bill Breakstone, according to his promise, bathed in the river, and he did it more than once. He was also joined by his comrades, and, as Middleton had predicted, they found the water ice-cold. No one could stand it more than five minutes, but the effect was invigorating.

A great deal of work was done at the camp. The axles of wagons were greased, canvas ripped by wind or hail was sewed up again, clothing was patched, and the wounded basked in sun or shade. Two of these had died, but the rest were now nearly well. All except two or three would be fit to resume their duties when they started again.

Woodfall, knowing the benefit of a complete rest, still lingered, and Phil and his friends had much time for exploration. They combined this duty with that of the scouting, and penetrated deep into the hills, watching for any Comanches who might stray in there, or for the mountain tribes. Once they came upon several abandoned lodges, made partly of skins and partly of brush, but they were falling in ruins, and Bill Breakstone reckoned they were at least two years old.

"Wichitas, Wacos, Kechies, and Quapaws live around in the hills and mountains," he said, "and this, I take it, was a little camp of Kechies, from the looks of the lodges. Two or three groups of them may be lingering yet in this region, but we haven't much to fear from them."

Woodfall, intending at first to make the stay only four or five days, decided now to protract it to ten or twelve. The journey to Santa Fé was one of tremendous length and hardship. Moreover, a buffalo hunter, straying in, told them that the Comanches were very active all over the Texas plains. Hence the Santa Fé train would need all its strength, and Woodfall was anxious that every one of the wounded should be in fighting condition when they left the timber. Therefore the delay.

Phil was glad of the added stay in the hills. He was developing great skill as a hunter and a trapper, and he and his comrades wandered farther and farther every day into the broken forest region toward the north. Often the two and Bill Breakstone were together. Despite the difference in years, they had become brothers of the wilderness. In their scouting they found available pathways for horses over the hills and among the great trees, and, starting, one morning, they rode far to the north, covering thirty or forty miles. Phil was interested in some high mountains which showed a dim blue ahead, and Breakstone was carefully examining the rock formations. But as night came on they found that the hills were dropping down, and the mountains seemed to be about as blue and as far ahead as ever.

"I should judge from these signs," said Breakstone, "that there is a valley or narrow plain ahead, between us and the mountains. But we'll look into that to-morrow. It isn't good to be riding around in the dark over hills and through thickets."

They found a little grassy open space, where they tethered their horses, leaving them to graze as long as they wished, and, lighting no fire, they ate jerked buffalo meat. Then they crept into snug coverts under the bushes, wrapped their blankets about them, and fell asleep. Phil opened his eyes at daylight to find Breakstone already awake. The horses were grazing contentedly. The trees and bushes were already tipped with fire by the gorgeous Texas sun.

"Sir Philip of the Bushes," said Bill Breakstone, "you just lie here and chew up a buffalo or two, while I go ahead and take a look. As I said last night, these hills certainly drop down into a plain, and I want to see that plain."

"All right," said Phil, "I'll stay where I am. It's so snug in this blanket on a cool morning that I don't care to move anyhow, and I can eat my breakfast lying down."

He drew out a freshly jerked strip of buffalo meat, and another very tender portion of a black-tailed deer that he himself had shot, and fell to it. Bill Breakstone, his rifle held conveniently at his side, slid away among the bushes. Phil ate contentedly. The sun rose higher. The morning was absolutely still. The horses seemed to have had enough grass, and lay down placidly on their sides. It occurred to Phil that he, too, had eaten enough, and he put the remainder of the food back in his hunter's knapsack. Then he began to get drowsy again. It was so very still. He thought once of rising and walking about, but he remembered Breakstone's advice to lie still, and, against his will, he kept it. Then his drowsiness increased, and, before he was aware of it he was asleep again.

When Phil awoke the second time, he threw off his blanket and sprang to his feet in surprise. The sun was high up in the blue arch. It must be at least ten o'clock in the morning, and Bill Breakstone had not come back. The horses were on their feet and were grazing again. They were proof that nothing had disturbed the glade. But Bill Breakstone was not there. Nor had he come back and gone away again. If he had done so, he would have awakened the boy. He had been absent three or four hours, and Phil was alarmed.

The boy stood up, holding his hand on the hammer of his rifle. This beautiful day, with its blue skies above and its green forest below, oppressed him. It was so still, so silent, and Bill Breakstone had vanished so utterly, just as if he had been turned into thin air by the wave of a magician's wand! The boy was alone in the wilderness for the first time. Moreover, he felt the presence of danger, and the queer little shiver which often comes at such moments ran through his blood. But the shiver passed, and his courage rose. He had no thought of going back to the camp to report that Bill Breakstone was missing. No, he would find him himself. That was his duty to his comrade.

The boy waited a little longer, standing there in the shade with his rifle ready, and eyes and ears intent. He stood thus for a quarter of an hour, scarcely moving. The brilliant sunshine poured down upon him, bringing out every line of the strong young figure, illuminating the face which was thrown a little forward, as the blue eyes, gazing intently through the undergrowth, sought some evidence of a hostile presence. Finally the eyes turned to the horses which were grazing calmly in the full circle of their long lariats. Phil decided that such calm on their part signified the absence of any enemy. If either man or beast came near they would raise their heads.

Then Phil moved forward through the bushes, putting into use all his new skill and caution. The bushes closed softly behind him, and he entered a slope covered with great trees without undergrowth. His eyes could range forward several hundred yards, but he saw nothing. He advanced for a few minutes, steadily descending, and he was tempted to shout his loudest or fire off his rifle as a signal to the derelict Bill Breakstone that it was time for him to come back. But he resisted both temptations, and soon he was glad that he had done so. The slope was very gradual, and he traveled a full two miles before he came to the edge of the woods and saw before him the plain that Bill Breakstone had predicted. He took one look, and then, springing back, sank down in the covert of the bushes.

Before Phil lay a fairly level plain about a mile in width and of unknown length, as in either direction it parsed out of sight among the hills. In the center of it was a shallow but wide creek which

perhaps flowed into the nameless river. The valley was very fertile, as the grass was already rich and high, despite the earliness of spring.

At the widest point of the valley stood a large Indian village, two hundred lodges at least, and Phil could not doubt that it was a village of the Comanches. Hundreds of ponies, grazing in the meadows to the north, and guarded by boys, proved that they were horse Indians, and no other tribe dared to ride where the Comanches roamed.

Phil could see far in the dazzling sunlight, and all the normal activities of human life, that is, of wild life, seemed to prevail in the Comanche village. Evidently the warriors had been on a great buffalo hunt. Perhaps they had struck at another point the same herd into which the train had run. Over a wide space buffalo hides were pegged down. Old squaws were scraping the flesh from some with little knives, while others, already cleaned, were drying in the sun. Vast quantities of buffalo meat were being jerked on temporary platforms. Little Indian boys and girls carried in their hands bones of buffalo or deer, from which they ate whenever they felt hungry. Everywhere it was a scene of savage plenty and enjoyment, although signs of industry were not wholly lacking, even among the warriors. Many of these, sitting on the grass, were cleaning their rifles or making new bows and arrows. Now and then one would make a test, sending into the air an arrow which some little boy was glad to run after and bring back. At another point a number of boys were practicing at a target with small bows and blunt-headed arrows. Two warriors on their ponies came up the valley, each carrying before him the body of a black-tailed deer. They were received with shouts, but soon disappeared with their spoils among the lodges, which were made universally of the skin of the buffalo. Down at the end of the village some warriors, naked to the breech cloth, danced monotonously back and forth, while an old man blew an equally monotonous tune on a whistle made of the bone of an eagle.

Phil, lying close in his covert, watched with absorbed eyes, and with mind and vision alike quick and keen, he took in every detail. The warriors were tall men, with intelligent faces, aquiline noses, thin lips, black eyes and hair, and but little beard. The hair grew very long, as they never cut it, and in many cases it was ornamented with bright beads and little pieces of silver. They wore deer skin leggins or moccasins, and a cloth of some bright color, bought from American Mexican traders, wrapped around the loins. The body from the loin cloth upward was naked, but in winter was covered with a buffalo robe. The women were physically very much inferior to the men. They were short and with crooked legs. Moreover, they wore their hair cut close, being compelled to do so by tribal law, the long-haired Comanche men and the short-haired Comanche women thus reversing the custom of civilization. Both men and women wore amulets. The Comanches, like most Indian tribes, were great believers in dreams, and the amulets were supposed to protect them from such as were bad.

Phil's roving eye lighted upon a small frame structure built of slight poles, the only one in the village not of hides. Such a building was always to be found in every Comanche village, but he did not know until later that it was a combined medicine lodge and vapor bath house. It was spherical in shape, and securely covered with buffalo hides. When a warrior fell seriously ill, he was seated in this lodge, beside several heated stone ovens, on which water was thrown in profusion. Then, while a dense, hot vapor arose, the shaman, or medicine man, practiced incantations, while men outside made music on whistles or the Indian drums. The hot bath was often effective, but the Comanche ascribed at least a part of the cure to the medicine man's incantations. Young Comanche men, also, often took a vapor bath before going on the war path, thinking that it had power to protect them from wounds.

Then Philip saw to the right a far larger building than that of the vapor bath, although it was made of dressed skins with just enough poles to support it. This was the medicine lodge of the Comanche village, a building used for important purposes, some of which Phil was to learn soon.

The boy did not doubt that his comrade had been taken, and, unless killed, was even now a captive in the Comanche village. He might be held in that huge medicine lodge, and the boy's resolution strengthened to the temper of steel. He could not go back to the train without Bill Breakstone; so he would rescue him. He did not yet have any idea how, but he would find a way. There were depths

of courage in his nature of which he himself did not know, and springing from this courage was the belief that he would succeed.

While he yet lay in the covert he saw a band of Indians, about a dozen in number, riding up the valley. They were apparently visitors, but they were welcomed with loud cries. The leader of the band, a large man with brilliant feathers in his hair, replied with a shout. Then a horseman rode forth to meet him. Even at the distance Phil recognized the horseman as Black Panther. He, too, was arrayed in his finest, and, as a great crowd gathered, the two chiefs slowly approached each other. When their horses were side by side, Black Panther leaned over in his saddle, put his head on the other's shoulder, clasped his arms around his chest, and gave him a tremendous squeeze. The stranger returned the salute in kind, and then the two, amid great shouts of approval, rode among the lodges, disappearing from Phil's sight.

Phil watched awhile longer, but he saw nothing except the ordinary life of the village. Then he went back to the glen in which the horses were tethered. They were still grazing, and Bill Breakstone had not returned. He led them down to a little brook, let them drink, and then, after some thought, took off the lariats, coiled them around the saddles, and turned the animals loose. He believed they would stay in the glen or near it, as the pasturage was good, and the water plentiful, and that they could be found when needed.

Having attended to the horses, he returned to the edge of the forest and sat himself down to think out the plan of his great adventure.

It was his intention to enter the Comanche village without detection, and, hard as such a task seemed to him, it was even harder in reality. No race more wary than the Comanches ever lived. Besides the boys who habitually watched the ponies, they had regular details of warriors as herdsmen. Other details served as sentries about the village, and the adjacent heights were always occupied by scouts. All these guards were maintained night and day. Phil could see some of them now patrolling, and, knowing that any attempt of his would be impossible in the daylight, he waited patiently for night. He had with him enough food to last for a day or two, and, choosing a place in the dense covert, he lay down. He called up now all the wilderness lore of Breakstone, Arenberg, Middleton, and the others in the train. He knew that he must restrain all impulsiveness until the appointed time, and that he must lie without motion lest the keen eyes of wandering warriors should see the bushes above him moving in a direction other than that of the wind. He also laid his rifle parallel with his body, in the position in which it could be used most quickly, and loaded the pistol. It was hardest of all to lie perfectly still. He wished to turn over, to crawl to a new place, and his bones fairly ached, but he restrained himself. Naturally a youth of strength and determination, his mind took the mastery over his body, and held it fast and motionless among the bushes.

It was well that he controlled himself so completely. Indians came near the edge of the woods, and once some boys passed, driving a herd of ponies. But he crouched a little closer, and they went on. The day was fearfully long. The high sun poured down a shower of vertical beams that reached him even in the shelter of the bushes. The perspiration stood out on his brow, and his collar clung to his neck. He envied the freedom of the Comanches in the villages and the easy way in which they went about the pleasure of savage life. More warriors, evidently hunters, came in. Some bore portions of the buffalo, and others were loaded with wild turkeys.

In these hard hours the boy learned much. He had passed safely through battle. But there one was borne up by the thrill and excitement of the charge, the firing and shouting and the comradeship of his fellows. Here he was alone, silent and waiting. Enduring such as that, his will achieved new powers. A single day saw the mental growth of a year or two.

The sun passed the zenith and crept slowly down the western heavens. Welcome shadows appeared in the east, and the far lodges of the Comanches grew misty. Phil thought now that the village would sink into quiet, but he noticed instead a great bustle, and many people going about. Squaws bore torches which made a bright core of flame in the increasing dusk, and Phil was quite sure now that something unusual was going to occur. It seemed to him that the whole population of the village was

gathering about the great medicine lodge. It must be the beginning of some important ceremony, and the time to enter the Comanche village was propitious. He inferred that on such an occasion the guard would be relaxed, at least in part, and as he heard the sound of hundreds of voices chanting monotonously he prepared for his great adventure.

The twilight faded, and the night came in its place, thick and dark. The sound of many voices, some singing, some talking, came clearly through the crisp, dry air. The core of light before the medicine lodge increased, and, by its radiance, he saw dusky figures hastening toward it to join the great group gathered there.

Phil took off his cap and hid it in the bushes. He would be bareheaded like the Comanches, wishing to look as much like them as possible. Fortunately his hair had grown somewhat long, and his face was deeply tanned. Once he thought of stripping to the waist in Comanche fashion, but his body, protected from the sun, was white, and he would be detected instantly.

He spent a little time flexing and stretching his muscles, because, when he first rose to his feet, he could scarcely stand, and the blood, choked up in the arteries and veins, tingled for lack of circulation. But the stiffness and pain soon departed, and he felt stronger than ever before in his life. Then he started.

He advanced boldly into the plain, bent very low, stopping at times to look and listen, and, also, to rest himself. More than once he lay flat upon the ground and allowed his muscles to relax. Once he saw upon his right two Indian warriors standing upon a knoll. They were a part of the night guard, and their figures were outlined dusky against the dusky sky. Their faces were not disclosed. But Phil knew that they were watching—watching with all the effectiveness of eye and ear for which the Indian is famous. At this point he crawled, and, in his crawling, he was so nearly flat upon his stomach that his advance was more like a serpent's than that of anything else.

He left the patrol behind, and then he saw another on his left, and much nearer to him, two more warriors, who did not occupy any knoll, but who merely walked back and forth on the flat plain. They were between him and the great fire, and he saw them very distinctly, tall men of light copper color, with high cheek-bones and long black hair. Both were armed with rifles, of which the Comanches were beginning to obtain a supply, and their faces in the glow of the firelight seemed very savage and very cruel to Phil. Now he flattened himself out entirely, and moved forward in a slow series of writhings, until he had passed them. There was an icy rim around his heart until he left these two behind, but when they were gone in the darkness his courage leaped up anew.

He now reached the eastern end of the village and crept among the lodges. They were all deserted. Their occupants had gone to witness the ceremony that was now at hand, whatever it might be. Not a woman, not a child was left. Phil stood up straight, and it was an immense relief to him to do so. It was a relief to the spirit as well as the body. He felt like a human being again, and not some creeping animal, a human being who stands upon his two feet, a human being who has a brain with which he thinks before he acts. It was strange, but this mere physical change gave him a further supply of courage and hope, as if he had already achieved his victory.

He passed between two lodges and saw a gleam beyond. It was the surface of the wide but shallow creek, showing through the dusk. The banks were five or six feet high, and there was a broad bed of sand extending on either side of the water.

Phil glanced up the stream, and saw that it flowed very close to the medicine lodge. An idea sprang up at once in his alert brain. Here was his line of approach. He dropped softly down the bank, taking his chance of quicksand, but finding instead that it was fairly firm to the feet. Then, hugging the bank, he advanced with noiseless tread toward the medicine lodge. Chance and his own quick mind served him well. His feet did not sink more than a few inches in the sand, and the bank continued at its uniform height of about six feet. He continued slowly, pausing on occasion to listen, because he could see nothing in the village. But occasional stray beams from the fires, passing over his head, fell upon the creek, lingering there for a moment or two in a red glow. Above him on the bank, but some

distance back, the fires seemed to grow, and the monotonous beat of the singing grew louder. Phil knew that he was now very near the medicine lodge, and he paused a little longer than usual, leaning hard against the sandy bank with a sort of involuntary impulse, as if he would press his body into it to escape observation.

He looked up and saw two or three boughs projecting over the bank. Then the medicine lodge was some distance away, perhaps fifteen or twenty yards, and, therefore, the adventure would increase in peril! Another glance at the boughs reassured him. Perhaps there was a little grove between the creek and the medicine lodge, and it would afford him hiding! The largest of the boughs, amply able to support his weight, was not more than three or four feet above the bank, and, climbing cautiously the sandy slope, he grasped it and drew himself up. Then he slid along it until he came to the crotch of the tree, where he crouched, holding his rifle in one hand.

He was right in his surmise about the grove, although it was narrower than he had supposed, not more than seven or eight yards across at the utmost. But the trees were oak, heavy-limbed and heavy-trunked, and they grew close together. Nevertheless, the light from some of the fires showed through them, and at one side loomed the dark mass of the medicine lodge. As nearly as he could see, it was built directly against some of the trees. He crawled from his tree to the one next to it, and then to a third. There he stopped, and a violent fit of shuddering seized him. The trees were occupied already.

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