Hamp Sidford Frederick

The Trail of The Badger: A Story of the Colorado Border Thirty Years Ago

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Содержание

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PREFACE

In writing the adventures of the boys who followed "The Trail of the Badger" down into that part of Colorado where the fringes of two discordant civilizations overlapped each other – the strenuous Anglo-Saxon and the easygoing Mexican – the author has endeavored to show how two healthy, enterprising young fellows were able to do their little part in that great work of Desert Reclamation whose importance is now as well understood by the general public as it always has been by those whose lot has been cast to the west of meridian one hundred and five.

To some it may appear that the boys are ahead of their time, but to the author, whose introduction to "the arid region" dates back thirty years and more, remembering the conditions then prevailing, it seems no more than natural that they should recognize the unusual opportunity presented to them of making a career for themselves, and even that they should be dimly conscious of the fact that if they "could make two ears of corn, or two blades of grass, to grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before" they would be deserving well of the infant community of which they formed a part.

That in making this attempt they would meet with adventures – in fact, that they could hardly avoid them – the author, recalling his own experiences in that country at that time, feels well assured.

CHAPTER I
Dick Stanley

"Look out! Look out! Behind you, man! Behind you! Jump quick, or he'll get you!"

It was a boy, a tall, spare, wiry young fellow of sixteen, who shouted this warning, his voice, in its frantic urgency, rising almost to a shriek at the end; and it was another boy, also tall, spare and wiry, to whom the warning was shouted. The latter turned to look behind him, and for one brief instant his whole body stiffened with fear – his very hair stood on end. Nor is this a mere figure of speech: the boy's hair did actually stand on end: he could feel it "creep" against the crown of his hat. *I know*– for I was the boy!

That I had good reason to be "scared stiff" I think any other boy will admit, for, not thirty feet below me, coming quickly and silently up the rocks, his little gleaming eyes fixed intently upon me, was a grim old cinnamon bear, an animal which, though less dangerous than his big cousin, the grizzly, is quite dangerous enough when he is thoroughly in earnest.

But for my companion's warning shout the bear would surely have caught me, and my story would have come to an end at the very beginning of the first chapter.

It was certainly an awkward situation, about as awkward, I should think, as any boy ever got himself into; and how I, Frank Preston, lately a schoolboy in St. Louis, happened to find myself on a spur of Mescalero Mountain, in Colorado, with a cinnamon bear charging up the rocks within a few feet of me, needs a word of explanation.

I will therefore go back a few steps in order to give myself space for a preliminary run before jumping head-first into my story, and will tell not only how I came to be there, but will relate also the curious incident which first brought me into contact with my future friend, Dick Stanley; an incident which, while it served as an introduction, at the same time gave me some idea of the resourcefulness and promptness of action with which his very peculiar training had endowed him.

It was in the last week of October, 1877, that I was seated one evening in my room in St. Louis, very busy preparing my studies for next day, when the door opened suddenly and in walked my Uncle Tom.

When, at the age of seven, I had been left an orphan, Uncle Tom, my mother's brother, though himself a bachelor, had taken charge of me, and with him I had lived ever since. He and I, I am glad to say, were the best of friends – regular chums – for, though twenty years my senior, he seemed in some respects to be as young as myself, and our relations were more like those of elder and younger brother than of uncle and nephew.

Uncle Tom was rather short and rather fat, and he was moreover one of the jolliest of men, being blessed with a disposition which prompted him always to see the bright side of things, no matter how dark and threatening they might look. Having at a very early age been pitched out into the world to "fend for himself," and having by square dealing and hard work done remarkably well, he had imbibed the idea that book-learning as a means of getting on in the world was somewhat overrated; an idea which, right or wrong – and I think myself that Uncle Tom carried it rather too far – was to have a decided effect in shaping my own career.

As it was against the rule, laid down by Uncle Tom himself, for any one to disturb me at my studies, I naturally looked up from my books to ascertain the cause of the intrusion, when, with a cigar in his mouth and his hands in his pockets, he came bulging in, half filling the little room.

That there was something unusual in the wind I felt sure, and my guardian's first act went far to confirm my suspicion, for, removing one hand from his pocket, he quietly reached forward and with his finger tilted my book shut.

"Put 'em away," said he. "You won't need them for a month or more."

As the fall term of school was then in full swing, this declaration was a good deal of a surprise to me, as any one will suppose, and doubtless I showed as much in my face.

"I have a scheme in my head, Frank," said he, with a knowing wag of that member, in reply to my look of inquiry.

"I know *that*," I replied, laughing; for there never was a moment when Uncle Tom had not a scheme in his head of one sort or another.

"You spider-legged young reptile!" cried he, with perfect good humor, but at the same time shaking a threatening finger at me. "Don't you dare to laugh at my schemes; especially this one. For this is a brand-new idea, and a very important one – to you. I'm leaving to-morrow night for Colorado."

"Are you?" I cried, a good deal surprised by this sudden announcement. "When did you decide upon that?"

"To-day. I got a letter this afternoon from my friend, Sam Warren, the assayer, written from Mosby – if you know where that is."

I shook my head.

"I didn't suppose you did," remarked Uncle Tom. "It is a new mining camp on one of the spurs of Mescalero Mountain in Colorado, and in the opinion of Sam Warren – my old schoolmate, you know – it has a great future before it. So he has written me that if I have the time to spare I had better come out and take a look at it."

Uncle Tom's business was that of a mining promoter, the middle man between the prospector and the capitalist, a business in which his ability and his honorable methods had gained for him an enviable reputation.

"So you have decided to go out, have you?" said I.

"Yes," he replied. "I leave to-morrow evening – and you are coming with me."

As may be imagined, I opened my eyes pretty widely at this unfolding of the "brand-new idea."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Look here, Frank, old chap," said he, seating himself on the edge of the table and becoming confidential. "You've stuck to your books very well – if anything, too well. Now, I've had my eye on you ever since the hot weather last summer, and it strikes me you need a change – you are too pale and altogether too thin."

Being fat and "comfortable" himself, Uncle Tom was disposed to regard with pity any one, like myself, whose framework showed through its covering.

"But – " I began; when Uncle Tom headed me off.

"Now you be quiet," said he, "and let me finish. I've had some such idea brewing in my head for some time; it isn't a sudden freak, as you imagine. I've considered the matter carefully, and I've come to the conclusion that you'll lose nothing by the move. In fact, what you will lose by missing a month or so of schooling will be more than made up to you by the eye-opener you will get in making this expedition."

"How so?" I asked.

"You will make the acquaintance of a young State just learning to walk alone – for, as you know, it was only last year that Colorado came into the Union; you will see a new mining camp, and rub up against the men, good, bad and indifferent, who go to make up the community of a frontier town; and more than that, you will get at first hand, what you never could get by sitting here and reading about it, a correct idea of the country traversed by the explorers – Pike, Frémont and the rest of them.

"I am honestly of opinion, Frank," he went on, seriously, "that this is an opportunity not to be neglected. At the same time, old fellow, as it is your education and not mine that is under discussion, I consider that you have a right to a voice in the matter; so I'll leave you to think it over, and to-morrow at breakfast you can tell me whether you are coming or not."

With that, Uncle Tom slipped down from the table, walked out and shut the door behind him. That was his way: he was always as sudden as a clap of thunder.

Anybody will guess that my books did not receive much more attention that evening. For an hour I paced up and down the room, considering Uncle Tom's proposition. It was true that I did feel pulled down by the effects of the hot weather, combined with a pretty close application to my books, and I had no doubt that the expedition proposed would do me a world of good; though whether my education would be benefited in like manner I was not so sure as Uncle Tom seemed to be.

But though I did my best honestly to consider the question in all its aspects, there can be little doubt that my inclinations – whether I was aware of it or not – colored my judgment, so that my final decision was just what might have been expected in any active boy of sixteen. As the clock struck ten I ran down-stairs and informed Uncle Tom that I was going with him.

It is not necessary to go into all the details of our journey, though to me, who had never before been a hundred miles from home, everything was new and everything was interesting. It is enough to say that, leaving the train at the foot of the mountains – for the railroad then went no further – we engaged places in the mail-carrier's open buckboard, and after a very rough and very tiring drive of a day and a half we at last reached our destination and were set down at the door of a house outside which hung a "shingle" bearing the legend, "Samuel Warren, Assayer and U. S. Dep. Min. Surveyor."

It will be remembered that one of Uncle Tom's reasons for breaking into my school term was that I should rub up against the citizens comprising a frontier settlement. He could hardly have contemplated, however, that I should come in contact with quite so many of them quite so early in the day as I did.

We had hardly sat down to the refreshments spread before us by our host – a big, bearded man, clad in a suit of brown canvas – when we, in common with the rest of the community, were startled by the sudden shriek of a woman in distress. To rush to the door was the work of a moment, when, the first thing we caught sight of was a man, clad only in his nightshirt, running like a madman up the street, while far behind him, and losing ground at every step, ran a woman, calling out with all the breath she had to spare – which was not much – "Stop him! Stop him!"

"It's Tim Donovan!" shouted the assayer. "He's sick with the mountain-fever! He's crazy! Head him off! Head him off! The poor chap will die of exposure!"

Warren's house was near the upper end of the street, and just as we three jumped down the porch steps, the demented fugitive passed the door, going like the wind. At once we set off in pursuit, while behind us came all the rest of the population and most of the dogs, by this time roused to action by the cries of the sick man's wife.

Nobody knows until he has tried it how hard it is to run up-hill at an elevation of nine thousand feet, especially to one unaccustomed to such altitudes. Uncle Tom, who was not built for such exercise, fell out in the first fifty yards, while, of the others, the short-winded barroom loafers – of whom, as is always the case in a new camp, there were more than enough – gave out even more quickly, their habits of life being a fatal handicap in a foot-race. One by one, nearly all the rest came down to a walk, until presently the only ones left with any run in them were Jake Peters and Oscar Swansen, both timber-cutters from the hills, Aleck Smith, a wiry little teamster, and myself.

As for me, having the advantage of a good start over everybody else, being only sixteen years old, and having a reputation at school as a long-distance runner, it seemed as though I ought to be able to catch the unfortunate fugitive, who, having run a quarter of a mile already, should by this time be out of breath.

Indeed, I believe I should have caught him at the first dash had he not resorted to tactics which made me chary of coming near him. Not more than thirty yards separated us and I was gaining steadily, when he, barefooted himself and making no noise, hearing the clatter of my shoes behind him, suddenly stopped, picked up a stone and hurled it at me. It would have taken me square in the chest had I not jumped aside; when, finding that the man was really dangerous, and knowing very well that I should have no chance whatever in a personal struggle with him – for he was a stout young Irish miner with a fore-arm like a leg of mutton – I contented myself with trotting behind and keeping

him in sight; trusting to the able-bodied men following me to do the tackling when the opportunity should arise.

The town of Mosby consisted of one steep street about half a mile long and two houses thick; for it was situated in a valley, or, rather, in a gorge, so narrow that there was no room for it to spread except at the two ends. In truth, there was no room for it to grow except southward, for at the upper, or northern, end the mountains came together, forming an inaccessible cañon through which rushed the little stream of ice-cold water coming down from Mescalero.

From the lower end of this cañon the stream fell perpendicularly into a great hole in the rocks – a sort of natural chimney, or well, about sixty feet deep. The down-stream side of this "chimney" was split from top to bottom, and through the narrow crack, only four or five feet wide, the water leaped foaming down in a series of miniature cascades. The only way of getting into this deep pit was by taking to the water, scrambling up the steep, step-like bed of the stream and passing through the crack, when, once inside, a man might defy the world to come and get him out.

This was exactly what Tim Donovan did. Seeing that he could follow the stream no further, I was wondering whether he would take to the mountain on the right or the one on the left, when he suddenly jumped into the water, ran up the smooth, wet "steps," and disappeared from sight through the crevice. In ten seconds, however, he showed himself again. He had found in the driftwood a ragged branch of a pine tree about three feet long, and with this in one hand and a ten-pound stone in the other he stood at bay, regardless of the icy water which poured over his feet, or of the spray from the fall behind him, which in half a minute had wet his thin single garment through and through.

It was an impregnable stronghold. No one could get in from the rear, and the place could not be rushed from the front – the ascent was too steep and slippery and the entrance too narrow. If Tim were determined to stay there and perish with cold, it appeared to me that nobody could do anything to prevent him.

One by one the pursuers joined me before the entrance, when Mrs. Donovan, who was among the last to arrive, advanced as near as she could without getting into the water, and besought her errant husband to come down.

But Tim was deaf to entreaty; all the blandishments of his anxious wife were without effect, and if she could not get him to come down it appeared as though nobody could.

Tim, though, was a popular young fellow, and it was not in the nature of a Colorado miner, or of an Irishman either – for they hold together like burrs in a horse's tail – to desert a comrade in distress. So, Mrs. Donovan having failed, there stepped to the front a short, thick-set, red-haired man, Mike O'Brien by name, Tim's partner and particular crony, who, talking pleasantly and naturally to him, as though his friend were quite sane and rational, stepped into the water and waded carefully up the steep slope.

"How are ye, Tim, me boy?" said he, with off-hand cordiality. "It's glad I am to see ye out again. It's me birthday to-day, Tim; I'm having a bit of a supper at home an' I come up to ask ye – "

Whack! came the stone from Tim's hand, breaking to pieces against the rocky wall within an inch of Mike's head. The invitation was declined.

Mike himself, in his effort to dodge the missile, missed his footing, fell on his back, and in a series of dislocating bumps was swept down the "steps" to the starting place, wet, as he declared, right through to his bones.

Up to this time the demented man had kept silence, but on seeing Mike go tumbling down-stream, he shook his fist after him and cried out:

"Come back and try again, ye devouring baste! Come on, the whole pack of yez! Don't stand there howling, ye cowardly curs; come up and get me out – if ye dare!"

"I believe he thinks we are a pack of wolves," said Mr. Warren.

"That's it, Mr. Warren, sir," exclaimed Mrs. Donovan, turning to the assayer. "That's it, entirely. He heard a wolf howl last night, and it was hard wor-rk I had to kape him from jumping out of his bed and running off right thin. He thinks it's a pack of them that's hunting him."

"Poor fellow! No wonder he refuses to come down. What are we going to do? We *must* get him out."

Then ensued an eager debate, in which everybody took a share except Uncle Tom and myself, who, standing a little apart from the rest on the sloping bank of the stream, were listening and looking on, when some one touched me on my arm, and a boyish voice said:

"What's the matter? What's it all about?"

Turning round, I saw before me a tall young fellow about my own age, with reddish hair, very keen gray eyes and a much-freckled face, carrying in one hand an old-fashioned, muzzle-loading rifle, nearly as long as himself, and in the other three grouse which he appeared to have shot.

Wondering who the boy might be, I explained the situation, when he cried:

"What! Tim Donovan! Why he'll die if he's left in there. Poor chap! We must get him out."

"Yes," said Uncle Tom. "That's just it. But how? The man won't be persuaded to come out, and no one can get in to drag him out – so what's to be done?"

The young fellow stood for a minute thinking, and then, suddenly lifting his head, he exclaimed, with a half laugh:

"I know! I know what we can do! He can't be persuaded out or dragged out, but he can be driven out."

"How?" asked Uncle Tom.

"If you'll come with me," replied the boy, "I'll show you in two minutes."

So saying, he jumped across the creek and set off straight up the almost perpendicular side of the mountain, we two following. Uncle Tom, however, finding the climb too steep for him, very soon turned back again, so we two boys went on alone.

About three hundred feet up my companion stopped, and it was well for me he did, for I could hardly have gone another step, so desperately out of breath was I.

"Not used to it, are you?" said the boy, who himself seemed to be quite unaffected. "Well, we don't have to go any higher, fortunately. Look over there. Do you see that stubby pine tree growing out of the rocks and overhanging the waterfall?"

"Yes, I see it," I replied. "And what's that big round thing hanging to it?"

"A wasps' nest."

"A wasps' nest?"

"A wasps' nest," repeated my new acquaintance with peculiar emphasis and with a twinkle in his eye.

"Ah!" I exclaimed, suddenly enlightened. "I see your little game. Good! You propose to knock down the wasps' nest into the 'well,' and then poor Tim will just have to vacate."

"That's my idea."

"Great idea, too. But, look here! Are the wasps alive at this time of year?"

"They are this year. We've had such a wonderfully warm season that they are just as brisk as ever."

"Well, but there's another thing: how are you going to do it? You can't get at it: the rocks are too straight-up-and-down; and you can't come near enough to knock it off with a stone. How are you going to do it?"

The young fellow smiled and patted the stock of his gun.

"Shoot it down!" I exclaimed. "Do you think you can? It won't be any use plugging it full of holes, you know; you'll have to nip off the little twig it hangs on. Can you do that?"

"I think I can."

"All right, then, fire away and let's see."

I must confess I felt doubtful. The boy did not look nor talk like a braggart, but nevertheless, to cut with a bullet the slim little branch, no bigger than a lead-pencil, upon which the nest hung suspended looked to me like a pretty ticklish shot.

My companion, however, seemed confident. Cocking his gun, he kneeled down, and using a big rock as a rest he took careful aim and fired.

It was a perfect shot. The big ball of gray "paper" dropped like a plumb, struck the rim of the "well," burst open, and emptied upon the head of the unfortunate Tim about a bucketful of venomous little yellow-jackets, each and every one of them quivering with rage, and each and every one bent on taking vengeance on somebody.

The people below were still debating how to get the sick man out of his fortress, when the sound of the rifle-shot caused them all to look up; but only for an instant, for the echoes had not yet died away, when, with a startling yell, out came Tim, frantically waving his club above his head, seemingly more crazy than ever. Supposing that he was making a dash for liberty, half a dozen of his particular friends flung themselves upon him, and down they all went in a heap together.

But this arrangement was of the briefest. In another moment, with shrieks and yells and whirling arms, the whole population went charging down the street, Uncle Tom in the lead, running – breath or no breath – as he had never run before.

Never was there a more complete victory: besiegers and besieged flying in one general rout before the assaults of the new enemy. And never did I laugh so extravagantly as I did then, to see the enraged yellow-jackets "take it out" on an unoffending community, while the real culprits were all the time sitting safely perched on the mountainside looking down on the rumpus.

"Well, we got him out all right," remarked my companion, as he calmly reloaded his rifle. "I thought we could. You're a newcomer, aren't you? My name's Dick Stanley; I live up-stream, just at the head of the cañon. Are you expecting to make a long stay?"

"Two or three weeks, I think," I replied. "My uncle, Mr. Tom Allen, is here to inspect the mines, and he brought me with him. We come from St. Louis. My name's Frank Preston. We're staying at Mr. Warren's house."

"Well, come up to our house some day. It is in a little clearing just at the head of the cañon – you can't miss it – and we'll go off for a day's grouse-shooting up into the mountains if you like."

"All right, I will. That would just suit me. To-morrow?"

"Yes, come up to-morrow, if you like. I'll be on the lookout for you. I suppose you are going home now," he continued, as we rose to our feet. "If I were you, I'd keep up here on the side of the mountain – the street will be full of yellow-jackets – and then, when you come opposite the assayer's house, make a bolt for his back door, or some of them may get you yet."

"That's a good idea. I'll do it. Well, good-bye. I'll come up to-morrow then, if I can."

CHAPTER II
Sheep and Cinnamon

"That was the funniest thing I ever saw," exclaimed Uncle Tom, laughing in spite of himself, while at the same time, with a comically rueful twist of his countenance, he rubbed the back of his neck where one of the wasps had "got" him. "The way poor Tim bolted out of his stronghold after defying the whole population to come and get him out, was the very funniest thing I ever did see. That was a smart trick of that young rascal; though I wish he had given me notice beforehand of what he intended to do. I'd have started to run a good five minutes earlier if I'd known what was coming. Who is the boy, Warren?"

"Well, that is not easy to say," replied our host, "for, as a matter of fact, he does not know himself. His history, what there is of it, is a peculiar one. He lives up here at the head of the cañon with an old German named Bergen – commonly known as the Professor – and his Mexican servant, a man of forty whom the professor brought up with him from Albuquerque, I believe. If Frank's object in coming here was to rub up against all sorts and conditions of men, he could hardly have chosen a better place. Certainly he cannot expect to find a more remarkable character than the professor.

"The old fellow is regarded by the people here as a harmless lunatic – which, in a community like this, where muscle is at a premium and scientific attainments at a discount, is not to be wondered at – for it is incomprehensible to them that any man in his right mind should spend his life as the professor spends his.

"The old gentleman is an enthusiastic naturalist. He is making a collection of the butterflies, beetles and such things, of the Rocky Mountain region, and with true German thoroughness he has spent years in the pursuit. Choosing some promising spot, he builds a log cabin, and there he stays one year – or two if necessary – until that district is 'fished out,' as you may say, when he packs up and moves somewhere else, to do the same thing over again."

"Well, that is certainly a queer character to come across," was Uncle Tom's comment. "But how about the boy, Sam? How does he happen to be in such company?"

"Why, about twelve or thirteen years ago, old Bergen was 'doing' the country somewhere northwest of Santa Fé, when he made a very strange discovery. It was a bad piece of country for snowslides, which were frequent and dangerous in the spring, and one day, being anxious to get to a particular point quickly, the professor was crossing the tail of a new slide – a risky thing to do – as being the shortest cut, when his attention was attracted by some strange object lodged half way up the great bank of snow. Climbing up to it, he found to his astonishment that the strange object was a wagon-bed, while, to his infinitely greater astonishment, inside it on a mattress, fast asleep, was a three-year-old boy – young Dick!"

"That was an astonisher, sure enough!" exclaimed I, who had been an eager listener. "And was that all the professor found?"

"That was all. The running-gear of the wagon had vanished; the horses had vanished; and the boy's parents or guardians had vanished – all buried, undoubtedly, under the snow."

"And what did the professor do?"

"The only thing he could do: took the boy with him – and a fortunate thing it was for young Dick that the old gentleman happened to find him. But though he inquired of everybody he came across – they were not many, for white folks were scarce in those parts then – the professor could learn nothing of the party; so, not knowing what else to do, he just carried off the youngster with him, and with him Dick has been ever since."

"That's a queer history, sure enough," remarked Uncle Tom. "And was there nothing at all by which to identify the boy?"

"Just one thing. I forgot to say that in the wagon-bed was a single volume of Shakespeare – one of a set: volume two – on the fly-leaf of which was written the name, 'Richard Livingstone Stanley, from Anna,' and as the boy was old enough to tell his own name – Dick Stanley – the professor concluded that the owner of the book was his father. Moreover, as the boy made no mention of his mother, though he now and then spoke of his 'Daddy' and his 'Uncle David,' the old gentleman formed the theory that the mother was dead and that the father and uncle, bringing the boy with them, had come west to seek their fortunes, and being very likely tenderfeet, unacquainted with the dangerous nature of those great snow-masses in spring time, they had been caught in a slide and killed."

"Poor little chap," said Uncle Tom. "And he has been wandering about with the old gentleman ever since, has he? He must be a sort of Wild Man of the West in miniature."

"Not a bit of it. The professor is a man of learning, and he has not neglected his duty. Dick has a highly respectable education, including some items rather out of the common for a boy: he speaks German and Spanish; he has a pretty intimate knowledge of the wild animals of the Rocky Mountains; and he is one of the best woodsmen and quite the best shot of anybody in these immediate parts."

"Well, they are an odd pair, certainly. I should like to go up and see the professor – that is, if he ever receives visitors."

"Oh, yes. He's a sociable old fellow. He and I are very good friends. I'll take you up there and introduce you some day. He is well worth knowing. If there is any information you desire concerning the Rocky Mountain country from here southward to the border, Herr Bergen can give it you. You are to be congratulated, Frank, on making Dick's acquaintance so early: he will be a fine companion for you while you stay here. You propose to go grouse-shooting to-morrow, do you? Well, you can take my shotgun – it hangs up there on the wall – and make a day of it; for your uncle and I are proposing to ride up to inspect a mine on Cape Horn, which will take us pretty well all afternoon."

I thanked our host for his offer, and next morning, gun in hand, I set off immediately after breakfast for Dick's dwelling.

Passing the "well" where Tim Donovan had taken refuge the day before, I ascended by a clearly-marked trail to the edge of the cañon, and following along it through the woods for about a mile, I presently came in sight of a little clearing, in which stood a neat log cabin of two or three rooms. Outside was a Mexican, chopping wood, while in the doorway stood Dick, evidently looking out for me, for, the moment I appeared, he ran forward to meet me.

"How are you?" he cried. "Glad you came early: I have a new plan for the day, if it suits you. I've been spying around with a field-glass and I've just seen a band of sheep up on that big middle spur of Mescalero; they are working their way up from their feeding-ground, and I propose that we go after them instead of hunting grouse. What do you say?"

"All right; that will suit me."

"Come on, then. Just come into the house for a minute first and see the professor, and then we'll dig out at once."

From the fact that Mr. Warren had so frequently spoken of the professor as "the old gentleman," I was prepared to see a bent old man, with a white beard and big round spectacles – the typical "German professor," of my imagination. I was a good deal surprised, then, to find a small, active man of sixty, perhaps, a little gray, certainly, but with a clear blue eye and a wide-awake manner I was far from anticipating. He was in the inner room when I entered – evidently the sanctum where he prepared and stored his specimens – but the moment he heard our steps he came briskly out, and, on Dick's introducing me, shook hands with me very heartily.

"And how's poor Tim this morning?" he asked, as soon as the formalities, if they can be called so, were over.

"He is all right, sir," I replied. "I went down there before breakfast this morning at Mr. Warren's request to inquire. In fact, Tim was so much better apparently that Mrs. Donovan declares that if he ever gets the fever again she intends to apply iced water to his feet and wasp-stings to the rest of his

anatomy, as being a sure cure. She is immensely grateful to Dick for having discovered and applied a remedy that has worked so well."

"Then if Tim is wise," remarked the professor, laughing, "he won't get the fever again, for I should think the cure would be worse than the disease. But you want to be off, don't you? Do you understand the working of a Winchester repeater? Well," as I shook my head, "then you had better take the Sharp's and Dick the Winchester. And, Dick, you'd better have an eye on the weather. Romero says there is a change coming, and he is generally pretty reliable. So, now, off you go; and good luck to you."

Leaving the cabin, we went straight on up the narrow valley for about three miles – the pine-clad mountains rising half a mile high on either side of us – going as quickly as we could, or, to be more exact, going as quickly as I could. For the elevation, beginning at nine thousand feet, increased, of course, at every step, and I, being unused to such altitudes, found myself much distressed for breath – a fact which was rather a surprise to me, considering that in our track-meets at school the mile run was my strong point. I did not understand then that to get enough oxygen out of that thin mountain air it was necessary to take two breaths where one would suffice at sea-level.

We had ascended about a thousand feet, I think, when, at the base of the bare ridge for which we had been making, we slackened our pace, and my companion, who knew the country, taking the lead, we went scrambling up over the rocks and snow for an hour or more.

The quantity of snow we found up there was a surprise to me, for, from below the amount seemed trifling. There had been a heavy fall up in the range a month before, and this snow, drifting into the gullies, had settled into compact masses, the surface of which, on this, the southern face of the mountain, being every day slightly softened by the heat of the sun, and every night frozen solid again, made the footing exceedingly treacherous. Whenever, therefore, we found it necessary to cross one of these steep-tilted snow-beds we did so with the greatest caution.

We had been climbing, as I have said, for more than an hour, and were nearing the top of the ridge, when Dick stopped and silently beckoned to me to come up to where he lay, crouching under shelter of a little ledge.

"Smell anything?" he whispered.

I gave a sniff and raised my eyebrows inquiringly.

"Sheep?" said I, softly.

My companion nodded.

"They must be somewhere close by," said he, in a voice hardly audible. "Go very carefully and keep your eyes wide open. If you see anything, stop instantly."

We were lying side by side upon the rocks, Dick considerately waiting a moment while I got my breath again, and were just about to crawl forward, when there came the sound of a sudden rush of hoofs and a clatter of stones from some invisible point ahead of us, and then dead silence again.

"They've winded us and gone off," whispered Dick. But the next moment he added eagerly, "There they are! Look! There they are! Up there! See? My! What a chance!"

Immediately on our left was a deep gorge, so narrow and precipitous that we could not see the bottom of it from where we lay. The sheep, having seemingly got wind of us, with that agility which is always so astonishing in such heavy animals, had rushed down one side of the precipitous gorge and up the other, and now, there they were, all standing in a row – eleven of them – on the opposite summit, looking down, not at us, but at something immediately below them.

"What do you suppose it is, Dick?" I whispered.

"Don't know," my companion replied. "Mountain-lion, perhaps: they are very partial to mutton. Anyhow," he continued, "if we want to get a shot we must shoot from here: we can't move without the sheep seeing us, and they'd be off like a flash if they did. You take a shot, Frank. Take the nearest one. Sight for two hundred yards."

"No," I replied. "You shoot. I shall miss: I'm too unsteady for want of breath."

"All right."

Raising himself a fraction of an inch at a time until he had come to a kneeling position, Dick pushed his rifle-barrel through a crevice in the rocks, took aim and fired. The nearest sheep, a fine fellow with a handsome pair of horns, pitched forward, fell headlong from the ledge upon which he had been standing and vanished from our sight among the broken rocks below; while the others turned tail and fled up the mountain, disappearing also in a minute or less.

"Come on!" cried Dick, springing to his feet. "Let's go across and get him. Round this way. Don't trust to that slope of ice: you may slip and break your neck."

"But the mountain-lion, Dick," I protested. "Suppose there's a mountain-lion down there."

"Oh, never mind him!" Dick exclaimed. "If there was one, he's gone by this time. And even if he should be there yet, he'd skip the moment he saw us. We needn't mind him. Come on!"

Away we went, therefore, Dick in the lead, and scrambling quickly though carefully down the rocky wall, we made our way up the bed of the ravine until we found ourselves opposite the ledge upon which the sheep had been standing. Here we discovered that the wall of the gorge was split from top to bottom by a narrow cleft – previously invisible to us – filled with hard snow, and whether the sheep had been standing on the right side or the left of this crevice, and therefore on which side the big ram had fallen, we could not tell; for the wall of the gorge, besides being exceedingly rough, was littered with great masses of rock against any of which the body of the sheep might have lodged.

"I'll tell you what, Frank," said my companion. "It might take us an hour or two to search all the cracks and crannies here. The best plan will be to climb straight up to the ledge where the sheep stood and look down. Then, if he is lodged against the upper side of any of these rocks, we shall be able to see him. But as we can't tell whether he was standing on the right or the left of this crevice, suppose you climb up one side while I go up the other."

"All right," said I. "You take the one on the left and I'll go up on this side."

It was a laborious climb for both of us – and how those sheep got up there so quickly is a wonder to me still – but as my side of the crevice happened to be easier of ascent than Dick's I got so far ahead of him that I presently found myself about fifty yards in the lead.

At this point, however, I met with an obstruction which at first seemed likely to stop me altogether. The fallen rocks were so big, and piled so high, that I could not get over them, and for a moment I thought I should be forced to go back and try another passage. Before resorting to this measure, though, I thought I would attempt to get round the barrier by taking to the snow-bank, supporting myself by holding on to the rocks. To do this I should need the use of both my hands, so, as my rifle had no strap by which to hang it over my shoulder, I took out my handkerchief, tied one end to the trigger-guard, took the other end in my teeth, and slinging the weapon behind me, I seized the rock with both hands and set one foot on the snow.

It was at this moment that Dick, down below me on the other side of the crevice, while in the act of crawling up over a big rock, caught a glimpse of something moving over on my side, and the next instant, out from between two great fragments of granite rushed a cinnamon bear and went charging up the slope after me.

The bear – as we discovered afterward – had found our sheep, and was agreeably engaged in tearing it to pieces, when he caught a whiff of me. He was an old bear, and had very likely been chased and shot at more than once in the past few years – since the white men had begun to invade his domain – and having conceived a strong antipathy for those interfering bipeds which walked on their hind legs and carried "thunder-sticks" in their fore paws, he decided instantly that, before finishing his dinner, he would just dash out and finish me.

And very near he came to doing it. It was only Dick's quick sight and his equally quick shout that saved me.

My companion's warning cry to jump could have but one meaning: there was nowhere to jump except out upon the snow-bank; and recovering from my first momentary panic, I let go my rifle and sprang out from the rocks.

My hope was that I should be able to keep my footing long enough to scramble across to the rocks on the other side; but in this I was disappointed. The snow-bed lay at an angle as steep as a church roof, and while its surface was slightly softened by the sun, just beneath it was as hard and as slippery as glass. Consequently, the moment my feet struck it they slipped from under me, down I went on my face, and in spite of all my frantic clawing and scratching I began to slide briskly and steadily down-hill.

The bear – most fortunately for me – seemed to be less cunning than most of his fellows. Had he paused for a moment to reason it out, he would have seen that by waiting five seconds he might leap upon my back as I went by. Luckily, however, he did not reason it out, but the instant he saw me jump he jumped too, and he, too, began sliding down the icy slope ahead of me; for being, as I said, an old bear, his blunted claws could get no hold.

It was an odd situation, and "to a man up a tree," as the saying is, it might have been entertaining. Here was the pursuer retreating backward from the pursued, while the pursued, albeit with extreme reluctance, was pursuing the pursuer – also backward.

It was like a nightmare – and a real, live, untamed broncho of a nightmare at that – but luckily it did not last long. Finding that no efforts of mine would arrest my downward progress, and knowing that the bear, reaching the bottom first, need only stand there with his mouth wide open and wait for me to fall into it, I whirled myself over and over sideways, until presently my hand struck the rocks, my finger-tips caught upon a little projection, and there I hung on for dear life, not daring to move a muscle for fear my hold should slip.

But from this uncomfortable predicament I was promptly relieved. I had not hung there five seconds ere the sharp report of a rifle rang out, and then another, and next came Dick's voice hailing me:

"All right, Frank! I've got him! Hold on: I'm coming up!"

Half a minute later, as I lay there face downward on the ice, I heard footsteps just above me, a firm hand grasped my wrist, and a cheerful voice said:

"Come on up, old chap. I can steady you."

"But the bear, Dick! The bear!" I cried, as I rose to my knees.

"Dead as a door-nail," he replied, calmly. "Look."

I glanced over my shoulder down the slope. There, on his back among the rocks, lay the cinnamon, his great arms spread out and his head hanging over, motionless. As the snarling beast had slid past him, not ten feet away, Dick, with his Winchester repeater, had shot him once through the heart and once in the base of the skull, so that the bear was stone dead ere he fell from the little two-foot ice-cliff at the bottom of the slope.

As for myself, I had had such a scare and was so completely exhausted by my vehement struggles during the past couple of minutes, that for a quarter of an hour I lay on the rocks panting and gasping ere I could get my lungs and my muscles back into working order again.

As soon as I could do so, however, I sat up, and holding out my hand to my companion, I said:

"Thanks, old chap. I'm mighty glad you were on hand, or, I'm afraid, it would have been all up with me."

"It was a pretty close shave," replied Dick; "rather too close for comfort. He meant mischief, sure enough. Well, he's out of mischief now, all right. Let's go down and look at him."

"I suppose," said I, "it was the bear that the sheep were looking down at when they stood up there on the ledge all in a row."

"Yes, that was it. If I'd known it was a bear they were staring at I'd have left them alone. A mountain-lion I'm not afraid of: he'll run ninety-nine times out of a hundred. But a cinnamon bear is quite another thing: the less you have to do with them, the better."

"Well, as far as I'm concerned," said I, "the less I have to do with them, the better it will suit me. If this fellow is a sample of his tribe I'm very willing to forego their further acquaintance: my first interview came too unpleasantly near to being my last. Come on; let's go down."

CHAPTER III
The Mescalero Valley

It had been our intention to take off the bear's hide and carry it home with us, but we found that he was such a shabby old specimen that the skin was not worth the carriage, so, after cutting out his claws as trophies, we went on to inspect our sheep. Here again we found that "the game was not worth the candle," as the saying is, for the bear had torn the carcass so badly as to render it useless, while the horns, which at a distance and seen against the sky-line, had looked so imposing, proved to be too much chipped and broken to be any good.

My rifle we found lying beside the bear, it also having slid down the ice-slope when I dropped it.

"Well, Frank," remarked my companion, "our hunt so far doesn't seem to have had much result – unless you count the experience as something."

"Which I most decidedly do," I interjected.

"You are right enough there," replied Dick; "there's no gainsaying that. Well, what I was going to say was that the day is early yet, and if you like there is still time for us to go off and have a try for a deer. I should like to take home something to show for our day's work."

"Very well," said I. "Which way should we take? There are no deer up here among the rocks, I suppose."

"Why, I propose that we go up over this ridge here and try the country to the southwest. I've never been down there myself, having always up to the present hunted to the north and east of camp; but I've often thought of trying it: it is a likely-looking country, quite different from that on the Mosby side of the divide: high mesa land cut up by deep cañons. What do you say?"

"Anything you like," I answered. "It is all new to me, and one direction is as good as another."

"Very well, then, let us get up over the ridge at once and make a start."

Having discovered a place easier of ascent than those by which we had first tried to climb up, we soon found ourselves on top of the ridge, whence we could look out over the country we were intending to explore.

It was plain at a glance that the two sides of the divide were very different. Behind us, to the north, rose Mescalero Mountain, bare, rugged and seamed with strips of snow. From this mountain, as from a center, there radiated in all directions great spurs, like fingers spread out, on one of which we were then standing. Looking southward, we could see that our spur continued for many miles in the form of a chain of round-topped mountains, well covered with timber, the elevation of which diminished pretty regularly the further they receded from the parent stem. On the left hand side of this chain – the eastern, or Mosby side – the country was very rough and broken: from where we stood we could see nothing but the tops of mountains, some sharp and rugged, some round and tree-covered, seemingly massed together without order or regularity. But to the south and southwest it was very different. Here the land lying embraced between two of the spurs was spread out like a great fan-shaped park, which, though it sloped away pretty sharply, was fairly smooth, except where several dark lines indicated the presence of cañons of unknown depth. The whole stretch, as far as we could distinguish, was pretty well covered with timber, though occasional open spaces showed here and there, some of two or three acres and some of two or three square miles in extent.

"Just the country for black-tail," said Dick, "especially at this time of year – the beginning of winter. For, you see, it lies very much lower on the average than the Mosby side, and the snow consequently will not come so early nor stay so late. It ought to be a great hunting-ground."

"It is a curious thing to find an open stretch like that in the midst of the mountains," said I. "What is it called?"

"The Mescalero valley. The professor says it was once an arm of the sea – and it looks like it, doesn't it? Over on the Mosby side the rocks are all granite and porphyry, tilted up at all sorts of angles; but down there it is sandstone and limestone, lying flat – a sure sign that it was once the bottom of a sea."

"Is the valley inhabited?" I asked.

"Down at the southern end, about fifty miles away, there is a Mexican settlement, at the foot of those twin peaks you see down there standing all alone in the midst of the valley – the Dos Hermanos: Two Brothers, they are called – but up at this end there are no inhabitants, I believe."

"Well, there will be some day, I expect," said I. "It ought to be a fine situation for a saw-mill, for instance."

"I don't know about that. There would be no way of getting your product to market. Old Jeff Andrews, the founder of Mosby, told me about it once – he's been across it two or three times – and he says that the country is so slashed with cañons that a wheeled vehicle couldn't travel across it, and consequently the expense of road-making would amount to about as much as the value of the timber."

"I see. And, of course, the streams are much too shallow to float out the logs. Well, let us get along down."

"All right. By the way, before we start, there was one thing I wanted to say: – If we should happen to get separated, all you have to do is to turn your face eastward, climb up over the Mosby Ridge, and you'll find yourself on our own creek, either above or below the town. It's very plain; you can hardly lose yourself – by daylight at any rate. So, now, let's be off."

The climb down on this side we found to be very much steeper than the climb up on the other had been. We dropped, by Dick's guess, about three thousand feet in the three miles we traversed ere we found ourselves in the midst of the thick timber, walking on comparatively level ground. Keeping along the eastern side of the valley, in the neighborhood of the Mosby Ridge, we made our way forward, steering by the sun – for the trees were so thick we could see but a short distance ahead – when we came upon one of the little open spaces I have mentioned. We were just about to walk out from among the trees, when my companion, with a sudden, "Pst!" stepped behind a tree-trunk and went down on one knee. Without knowing the reason for this move, I did the same, and on my making a motion with my eyebrows, as much as to say, "What's up?" Dick whispered:

"Do you see that white patch on the other side of the clearing? An antelope with its back to us. I'll try to draw him over here, so that you may get a shot."

So saying, Dick took out a red cotton handkerchief, poked the corner of it into the muzzle of his rifle, and standing erect behind his tree, held out his flag at right angles.

At first the antelope took no notice, but presently, catching a glimpse of the strange object out of the corner of his eye, he whirled round and stood for a moment facing us with his head held high. A slight puff of wind fluttered the handkerchief; the antelope started as though to run; but finding himself unhurt, his curiosity got the better of his fears, and he came trotting straight across the clearing in order to get a closer view. At about a hundred yards distance he stopped, his body turned broadside to us, all ready to bolt at the shortest notice, when Dick whispered to me to shoot.

It was a splendid chance; nobody could ask for a better target; but do you think I could hold that rifle steady? Not a bit of it! Instead of one sight, I could see half a dozen; and finding that the longer I aimed the more I trembled, I at length pulled the trigger and chanced it. Where the bullet went I know not: somewhere southward; and so did the antelope, and at much the same pace, if I am any judge of speed.

"Never mind, old chap," said Dick, laughing. "That is liable to happen to anybody. Most people get a touch of the buck-fever the first time they try to shoot a wild animal. You'll probably find yourself all right the next chance you get."

"I'm afraid there's not likely to be a 'next chance,' is there?" I asked. "Won't that shot scare all the deer out of the country?"

"I hardly think so: the deer are almost never disturbed down here; it isn't like the Mosby side, where the prospectors are tramping over the hills all the time."

"Don't they ever come down here, then?"

"No, never. There is a common saying, as you know, perhaps, that 'gold is where you find it'; meaning that it may be anywhere – one place is as likely as another. But, all the same, the prospectors seem to think the chances are better among the granite and porphyry rocks on the other side, where the formation has been cracked and broken and heaved up on end by volcanic force. They never trouble to come down here, where any one can see at a glance that the deposits have never been disturbed since they were first laid down at the bottom of a great inlet of the ocean."

"I see what you mean: and as nobody ever comes down here the deer are not fidgety and suspicious as they would be if they were always being disturbed."

"That's it, exactly. They are so unused to the presence of human beings that I doubt if they would take any notice of your shot except to cock their ears and sniff at the breeze for a minute or two. Anyhow, we'll go ahead and find out. Let us go across this clearing and see if there isn't a spring on the other side. That antelope was drinking when we first saw him, if I'm not mistaken."

Sure enough, just before we entered the trees again, we came upon a pool of water around the softened rim of which were many tracks of animals.

"Hallo!" cried Dick. "Just look here! See the wolf tracks – any number of them. It must be a great wolf country as well as a great deer country – in fact, because it is a great deer country. I shouldn't like to be caught here in the winter with so many wolves about; they are unpleasant neighbors when food is scarce."

"Are they dangerous to a man with a gun?" I asked.

"Yes, they are. One wolf – or even two – doesn't matter much to a man with a breach-loading rifle; but when a dozen or twenty get after you, you'll do well to go up a tree and stay there. A pack of hungry wolves is no trifle, I can tell you."

"Have you ever had any experience with them yourself?"

"I did once, and a mighty distressing one it was, though it didn't hurt me, personally. I was out hunting with my dog, Blucher, a little short-legged, long-bodied fellow of no particular breed, and was up among the tall timber east of the house, going along suspecting nothing, when Blucher, all of a sudden, began to whine and crowd against my legs. I looked back, and there I saw six big timber-wolves slipping down a hill about a quarter of a mile behind me. They stopped when I stopped, but as soon as I moved, on they came again – it was very uncomfortable, especially when two of them vanished among the trees, and I couldn't tell whether they might not be running to get round the other side of me. I went on up the next rise, the wolves keeping about the same distance behind me, and as soon as we were out of their sight, Blucher and I ran for it. But it was no use: the wolves had taken the same opportunity, and when I looked back again, there they were, all six of them, not a hundred yards behind this time.

"It began to look serious; for though it was possible that they were after Blucher, and not after me at all, I couldn't be sure of that. So, first picking out a tree to go up in case of necessity, I knelt down and fired into the bunch, getting one. I had hoped that the others would turn and run, but the shot seemed to have a directly opposite effect: the remaining five wolves came charging straight at me.

"I gave the dog one kick and yelled at him to 'Go home!' – it was all I could do – dropped my rifle, jumped for a branch, and was out of reach when the wolves rushed past in pursuit of Blucher.

"Poor little beast! Though he was a mongrel with no pretence at a pedigree, he was a good hunting dog and a faithful friend. But what chance had he in a race with five long-legged, half-starved timber-wolves? It happened out of my sight, I am glad to say; all I heard was one yelp, followed by an angry snarling, and then all was silent again."

Dick paused for a moment, his face looking very grim for a boy, and then continued: "I've hated the sight and the sound of wolves ever since. Of course, I know they were only following their nature, but – I can't help it – I hate a wolf, and that's all there is to it."

"I don't wonder," said I. "Any one – "

"Hark!" cried Dick, clapping his hand on my arm. "Did you hear that? Listen!"

We stood silent for a moment, and then, far off in the direction from which we had come, I heard a curious whimpering sound, the nature of which I could not understand.

"What is it?" I whispered, involuntarily sinking my voice.

"Wolves – hunting."

"Hunting what?"

"I don't know; but we'll move away from here, anyhow. Come on."

Dick's manner, more than his words, made me feel a little uneasy and I followed him very willingly as he set off at a smart walk through the timber.

"You don't suppose they are hunting us, Dick, do you?" I asked, as we strode along side by side.

"I can't tell yet. It seems hardly likely – in daylight, and at this time of year. I could understand it if it were winter. If they are hunting us, it is probably because they, like the deer, are unacquainted with men, and never having been shot at, they don't know what danger they are running into. Still, I feel a little suspicious that it is our trail they are following. They are coming down right on the line we took, at any rate. We shall be able to decide, though, in a minute or two. Look ahead. Do you see how the trees are thinning out? We are coming to another open space, a big one, I think; I noticed it when we were up on the ridge just now."

"What good will that do us?" I asked.

"We shall be able to get a sight of them. Come on. I'll show you."

True enough, we presently stepped out from among the trees again and found ourselves on the edge of another open, grassy space, very much larger than the last one. It was about three hundred yards across to the other side, and a mile in length from east to west. We had struck it about midway of its east-and-west length. Out into the open Dick walked some twenty yards, and there stopped once more to listen.

We had not long to wait. The eager whimper came again, much nearer, and now and then a quavering howl. I did not like the sound at all. I looked at Dick, who was standing "facing the music" and frowning thoughtfully.

"Well, Dick!" I exclaimed, getting impatient.

"I think they are after us," said he.

"And what do you mean to do? Not stay out here in the open, I suppose."

"Not we; at least, not for more than five minutes. Look here, Frank," he went on, speaking quickly. "I'll tell you what I propose to do. We'll keep out here in the open, about this distance from the trees, and make straight eastward for the Mosby Ridge; it is only half a mile or so to the woods at that end of the clearing and we can make it in five minutes. Then, if the wolves are truly hunting us, they will follow our trail out into the open, when we shall get a sight of them and be able to count them. If they are only three or four we can handle them all right, but if there is a big pack of them we shall have to take to a tree. Give me your rifle to carry – my breathing machinery is better used to it than yours – and we'll make a run for it."

It was only a short half-mile we had to run – quite enough for me, though – and under the first tree we came to, Dick stopped.

"This will do," said he, handing back my rifle. "We'll wait here now and watch. Hark! They're getting pretty close. Hallo! Hallo! Why, look there, Frank!"

That Dick should thus exclaim was not to be wondered at, for out from the trees, scarce a hundred paces from us, there came, not the wolves, but a man! And such an odd-looking man, riding on such an odd-looking steed!

"What is he riding on, Dick?" I asked. "A mule?"

"No; a burro – a jack – a donkey; a big one, too; and it need be, for he is a tremendous fellow. Did you ever see such a chest?"

"Is he an Indian?"

"No; a Mexican. An Indian wouldn't deign to ride a burro. I understand it all now. The wolves are not hunting us at all: they are after the donkey. And the man is aware of it, too: see how he keeps looking behind. What is that thing he is carrying in his left hand? A bow?"

"Yes; a bow. And a quiver of arrows over his shoulder."

"So he has! He doesn't seem to be in much of a hurry, does he? Evidently he is not much afraid of the wolves. Why, he's stopping to wait for them! He's a plucky fellow. Why, Frank, just look! Did you ever see such a queer-looking specimen?"

This exclamation was drawn from my companion involuntarily when the Mexican, checking his donkey, sprang to the ground. He certainly was a queer-looking specimen. If he had looked like a giant on donkey-back, he looked like a dwarf on foot; for, though his head was big and his body huge, his legs were so short that he appeared to be scarce five feet high; while his muscular arms were of such length that he could touch his knees without stooping.

To add to his strange appearance, the man was clad in a long, sleeveless coat made of deer-skin, with the hairy side out.

We had hardly had time to take in all these peculiarities when Dick once more exclaimed:

"Ah! Here they come! One, two, three – only five of them after all."

As he spoke, the wolves came loping out from among the trees; but the moment they struck our cross-trail the suspicious, wary creatures all stopped with one accord, puzzled by coming upon a scent they had not expected.

This was the Mexican's opportunity. Raising his long left arm, he drew an arrow to its head and let fly.

I thought he had missed, for I saw the arrow strike the ground and knock up a little puff of dust. But I was mistaken. One of the wolves gave a yelp, ran back a few steps, fell down, got up again and ran another few steps, fell again, and this time lay motionless. The arrow had gone right through him!

Almost at the same instant Dick raised his rifle and fired. The shot was electrical. One of the wolves fell, when the remaining three instantly turned tail and ran.

But not only did the wolves run: the Mexican, casting one glance in our direction, sprang upon his donkey and away he went, at a pace that was surprising considering the respective sizes of man and beast.

It was in vain that Dick ran out from under our tree and shouted after him something in Spanish. I could distinguish the word, *amigos*, two or three times repeated, but the man took no notice. Perhaps he did not believe in friendships so suddenly declared. At any rate, he neither looked back nor slackened his pace, and in a minute or less he and his faithful steed vanished into the timber on the south side of the clearing.

The whole incident had not occupied five minutes; but for the presence of the two dead wolves one would have been tempted to believe it had never happened at all – solitude and silence reigned once more.

"Well, wasn't that a queer thing!" cried Dick.

"It certainly was," I replied. "I wonder who the man is. Anyhow, he's not coming back, so let's go and pick up his arrow."

CHAPTER IV
Racing the Storm

Walking over to where the two wolves lay, we soon found the arrow, its head buried out of sight in the hard ground, showing with what force it had come from the bow. It was carefully made of a bit of some hard wood, scraped down to the proper diameter, and fitted with three feathers – eagle feathers, Dick said – one-third as long as the shaft, very neatly bound on with some kind of fine sinew.

"Looks like a Ute arrow," remarked my companion, as he stooped to pick it up; "yet the man was a Mexican, I am sure. I suppose he must have got it from the Indians."

"Do the Utes use copper arrow-heads?" I asked.

"No, they don't. They use iron or steel nowadays. Why do you ask?"

"Because this arrow-head is copper," I replied.

"Why, so it is!" cried Dick, rubbing the soil from the point on his trouser-leg. "That's very odd. I never saw one before. I feel pretty sure the Indians never use copper: it is too soft. This bit seems to take an edge pretty well, though. See, the point doesn't seem to have been damaged by sticking into the ground; and it has been filed pretty sharp, too; or, what is more likely, rubbed sharp on a stone. It has evidently been made by hand from a piece of native copper."

"I wonder why the man should choose to use copper," said I. "Though when you come to think of it, Dick," I added, "I don't see why it shouldn't make a pretty good arrow-head. It is soft metal, of course, but it is only soft by comparison with other metals. This wedge of copper weighs two or three ounces, and it is quite hard enough to go through the hide of an animal at twenty or thirty yards' distance when 'fired' with the force that this one was."

"That's true. And I expect the explanation is simple enough why the man uses copper. It is probably from necessity and not from choice. Like nearly all Mexicans of the peon class, he probably never has a cent of money in his possession. Consequently, as he can't buy a gun, he uses a bow; and for the same reason, being unable to procure iron for arrow-heads, he uses copper. I expect he comes from the settlement at the foot of the valley, for copper is a very common metal down there."

"Why should it be more common there than elsewhere?" I asked.

"Well, that's the question – and a very interesting question, too. The professor and I were down in that neighborhood about a year ago, and on going into the village we were a good deal surprised to find that every household seemed to possess a bowl or a pot or a cup or a dipper or all four, perhaps, hammered out of native copper – all of them having the appearance of great age. There were dozens of them altogether."

"How do they get them?" I asked.

"That's the question again – and the Mexicans themselves don't seem to know. They say, if you ask them, that they've always had them. And the professor did ask them. He went into one house after another and questioned the people, especially the old people, as to where the copper came from; but none of them could give him any information. I wondered why he should be so persevering in the matter – though when there is anything he desires to learn, no trouble is too much for him – but after we had left the place he explained it all to me, and then I ceased to wonder."

"What was his explanation, then?"

"He told me that when he was in Santa Fé about fifteen years before, he made the acquaintance of a Spanish gentleman of the remarkable name of Blake – "

"Blake!" I interrupted. "That's a queer name for a Spaniard."

"Yes," replied Dick. "The professor says he was a descendant of one of those Irishmen who fled to the continent in the time of William III, of England, most of them going into the service of the king of France and others to other countries – Austria and Spain in particular."

"Well, go ahead. Excuse me for interrupting."

"Well, this gentleman was engaged in hunting through the old Spanish records kept there in Santa Fé, looking up something about the title to a land-grant, I believe, and he told the professor that in the course of his search he had frequently come across copies of reports to the Spanish government of shipments of copper from a mine called the King Philip mine. That it was a mine of importance was evident from the frequency and regularity of the 'returns,' which were kept up for a number of years, until somewhere about the year 1720, if I remember rightly, they began to become irregular and then suddenly ceased altogether."

"Why?"

"There was no definite statement as to why; but from the reports it appeared that the miners were much harried by the Indians, sometimes the Navajos and sometimes the Utes, while the loss, partial or total, of two or three trains with their escorts, seemed to bring matters to a climax. Shipments ceased and the mine was abandoned."

"That's interesting," said I. "And where was this King Philip mine?"

"The gentleman could not say. There seemed to be no map or description of any kind among the records; but from casual statements, such as notes of the trains being delayed by floods in this or that creek, or by snow blockades on certain passes, he concluded that the mine was somewhere up in this direction."

"Well, that is certainly very interesting. And the professor, I suppose, concludes that the Mexicans down there at – What's the name of the place?"

"Hermanos – called so after the two peaks, at the foot of which it stands."

"The professor concludes, I suppose, that the Mexicans' unusual supply of copper pots and pans came originally from the King Philip mine."

"Yes; and I've no doubt they did; though the Mexicans themselves had never heard of such a mine. Yet – and it shows how names will stick long after people have forgotten their origin – yet, just outside the village there stands a big, square adobe building, showing four blank walls to the outside, with a single gateway cut through one of them, flat-roofed and battlemented – a regular fortress – and it is called to this day the *Casa del Rey*: – the King's House. Now, why should it be called the King's House? The Mexicans have no idea; but to me it seems plain enough. The King Philip mine was probably a royal mine, and the residence of the king's representative, the storage-place for the product of the mine, the headquarters of the soldier escort, would naturally be called the King's House."

"It seems likely, doesn't it? Is that the professor's opinion?"

"Yes. He feels sure that the King Philip mine is not far from the village; possibly – in fact, probably – in the Dos Hermanos mountains."

"And did he ever make any attempt to find it?"

"Not he. Prospecting is altogether out of his line. It was only the historical side of the matter that interested him. All he did was to write to the Señor Blake at Cadiz, in Spain, telling him about it; though whether the letter ever reached its destination he has never heard."

"And who lives in the King's House now?" I asked. "Anybody?"

"Yes. It is occupied by a man named Galvez, the 'padron' of the village, who owns, or claims, all the country down there for five miles square – the Hermanos Grant. We did not see him when we were there, but from what we heard of him, he seems to regard himself as lord of creation in those parts, owning not only the land, but the village and the villagers, too."

"How so? How can he own the villagers?"

"Why, it is not an uncommon state of affairs in these remote Mexican settlements. The padron provides the people with the clothes or the tools or the seed they require on credit, taking security on next year's crop, and so manages matters as to get them into debt and keep them there; for they are an improvident lot. In this way they fall into a state of chronic indebtedness, working their land practically for the benefit of the padron and becoming in effect little better than slaves."

"I see. A pretty miserable condition for the poor people, isn't it? And doesn't this man, Galvez, with his superior intelligence – presumably – know anything of the King Philip mine?"

"Apparently not."

"My word, Dick!" I exclaimed. "What fun it would be to go and hunt for it ourselves, wouldn't it?"

"Wouldn't it! I've often thought of it before, but I know the professor would never consent. He would consider it a waste of time. It's an idea worth keeping in mind, though, at any rate. There's never any telling what may turn up. We might get the chance somehow; though I confess I don't see how. But we must be moving, Frank," said he, suddenly changing the subject. "It's getting latish. Hallo!"

"What's the matter?" I asked, looking wonderingly at my companion, who, with his hand held up to protect his eyes from the glare, was standing, staring at the sun.

"Why, the matter is, Frank, that the professor will say that I've neglected my duty, I'm afraid. You remember he told me to look out for a change of weather? I'd forgotten all about it."

"Well," said I, "I don't see that that matters. There's no sign of a change, is there?"

"Yes, there is. Look up there. Do you see a number of tiny specks all hurrying across the face of the sun from north to south?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"Snow."

"Snow!" I cried, incredulously. "How can it be snow, when there isn't a scrap of cloud visible anywhere?"

"It is snow, all the same," said Dick; "old snow blown from the other side of Mescalero."

"But how can that be, Dick? All the snow we found up there was packed like ice."

"Ah, but we were on the south side. On the north side, where the sun has no effect, it is still as loose and as powdery as it was when it fell."

"Of course. I hadn't thought of that. There must be a pretty stiff breeze blowing overhead to keep it hung up in the sky like that and not allow a speck of it to fall down here."

"Yes, it's blowing great guns up there, all right, and I am afraid we shall be getting it ourselves before long. We must dig out of here hot foot, Frank. I hope we haven't stayed too long as it is."

It was hard to believe that there was anything to fear from the weather, with the unclouded sun shining down upon us with such power as to be almost uncomfortably hot; but Dick, I could see, felt uneasy, and as I could not presume to set up my judgment against his larger experience, I did not wait to ask any more questions, but set off side by side with him when he started eastward at a pace which required the saving of all my breath to keep up with him.

We had been walking through the woods for about half an hour and were expecting to begin the ascent of the Mosby Ridge in a few minutes, when we were brought to a standstill by coming suddenly upon the edge of a deep cleft in the earth, cutting across our course at right angles. It was one of the many cañons for which the Mescalero valley was notorious.

Looking across the cañon, we could see that the opposite wall was composed of a thick bed of limestone overlying another of sandstone, the latter, being the softer, so scooped out that the limestone cap projected several feet beyond it. It appeared to be quite unscalable, and on our side it was doubtless the same, for, on cautiously approaching the edge as near as we dared, we could see that the cliff fell sheer for three hundred feet or more.

"No getting down here!" cried Dick. "Up stream, Frank! The cañon will shallow in that direction."

Away we went again along the edge of the gorge, and presently were rejoiced to find a place where the cliff had broken away, enabling us, with care, to climb down to the bottom. The other side, however, presented no possible chance of getting out, so on we went, following up the dry bed of the arroyo, looking out sharply for some break by which we might climb up, when, on rounding a slight bend, Dick stopped so suddenly that I, who was close on his heels, bumped up against him.

"What's the matter, Dick?" I asked. "What are you stopping for?"

"Look up there at Mescalero," said he.

It was the first glimpse of the mountain we had had since entering the woods at the head of the valley, and the change in its appearance was alarming. The only part of it we could see was the summit, standing out clear and sharp against the sky; all the rest of it, and of the whole range as well, was shrouded by a heavy gray cloud, which, creeping round either side of the peak, was rolling down our side of the range, slowly and steadily filling up and blotting out each gully and ravine as it came to it. There was a stealthy, vindictive look about it I did not at all like.

"Snow, Dick?" I asked.

"Yes, and lots of it, I'm afraid. See how the cloud comes creeping down – like cold molasses. I expect it is so heavy with snow that it can't float in the thin air up there, and the north wind is just shouldering it up over the range from behind. We've got to get out of here, Frank, as fast as we can and make the top of the Mosby Ridge, if possible, before that cloud catches us. Once on the other side, we're pretty safe: I know the country; but on this side I don't. So, let us waste no more time – we have none to waste, I can tell you."

Nor did we waste any, for neither of us had any inclination to linger, but pushing forward once more along the bottom of the cañon, we presently espied a place where we thought we might climb out. Scrambling up the steep slope of shaly detritus, we had come almost to the top, when to our disappointment we found our further progress barred by a little cliff, not more than eight feet high, but slightly overhanging, and so smooth that there was no hold for either feet or fingers.

"Up on my shoulders, Frank!" cried my companion, laying down his rifle and leaning his arms against the rock and his head against his arms.

In two seconds I was standing on his shoulders, but even then I could not get any hold for my hands on the smooth, curved, shaly bank which capped the limestone. Only a foot out of my reach, however, there grew a little pine tree, about three inches thick, and whipping off my belt I lashed at the tree trunk with it. The end of the belt flew round; I caught it; and having now both ends in my hands I quickly relieved my companion of his burden and crawled up out of the ravine.

Then, buckling the belt to the tree, I took the loose end in one hand, and lying down flat I received and laid aside the two rifles which Dick handed up to me, one at a time. Dick himself, though, was out of reach, perceiving which, I pulled off my coat, firmly grasped the collar and let down the other end to him, lying, myself, face downward upon the stones, with the end of the belt held tight in the other hand.

"All set?" cried Dick; and, "All set!" I shouted in reply. There was a violent jerk upon the coat, and the next thing, there was Dick himself kneeling beside me.

"Well done, old chap!" cried he. "That was a great idea. Now, then, let's be off. I'll carry the two rifles. It's plain sailing now. Straight up the Ridge for those two great rocks that stand up there like a gateway to the pass. I know the place. Only a couple of thousand feet to climb and then we begin to go down-hill. We shall make it now. Come on!"

The trees were thin just here, and as we started to ascend the pass we obtained one more glimpse of Mescalero – the last one we were to get that day. The bank of cloud had advanced about half a mile since we first caught sight of it, while it had become so much thicker as the wind rolled it up from the other side of the range, that now only the very tip of the mountain showed above it. Even as we watched it, a great fold of the cloud passed over the summit, hiding it altogether.

"See that, Dick?" said I.

"Yes," he replied. "A very big snow, I expect. Hark! Do you hear that faint humming? The wind in the pines. We shall be getting it soon. Come on, now; stick close to my heels; if I go too fast, call out."

Away we went up the pass, pressing forward at the utmost speed I could stand, desperately anxious to get as far ahead as possible before the storm should overtake us. The ascent, though very

steep on this side, presented no other special difficulty, and at the end of an hour we had come close to the two great rocks for which we had been making.

All this time the sun continued to shine down upon us, though with diminishing power as the hurrying snowflakes passing above our heads became thicker and thicker; while, as to the storm-cloud itself, we could not see how near it had come, for the pine-clad mountain, rising high on our left hand, obstructed our view in that direction. That it was not far off, though, we were pretty sure, for the humming of the wind in the woods – the only thing by which we could judge – though faint at first, had by this time increased to a roar.

The storm was, in fact, much nearer than we imagined, and just as we passed between the "gateway" rocks it burst upon us with a fury and a suddenness that, to me at least, were appalling.

Almost as though a door had been slammed in our faces, the light of the sun was cut off, leaving us in twilight gloom, and with a roar like a stampede of cattle across a wooden bridge, a swirling, blinding smother of snow, driven by a furious wind, rushed through the "gateway," taking us full in the face, with such violence that Dick was thrown back against me, nearly knocking us both from our feet. Instinctively, we crouched for shelter behind the rock, and there we waited a minute or two to recover breath and collect our senses.

"Pretty bad," said Dick. "But it might have been worse: it isn't very cold – not yet; we have only about two miles to go, and I know the lay of the land. We'll start again as soon as you are ready. I'll go first and you follow close behind. Whatever you do, don't lose sight of me for an instant: it won't do to get lost. Hark! Did you hear that?"

There was a rending crash, as some big tree gave way before the storm. It was a new danger, one I had not thought of before. I looked apprehensively at my companion.

"Suppose one of them should fall on us, Dick," said I.

"Suppose it shouldn't," replied Dick. "That is just as easy to suppose, and a good deal healthier."

I confess I had been feeling somewhat scared. The sudden gloom, the astonishing fury of the wind, the confusing whirl and rush of the snow, and then from some point unknown the sharp breaking of a tree, sounding in the midst of the universal roar like the crack of a whip – all this, coming all together and so suddenly, was quite enough, I think, to "rattle" a town-bred boy.

But if panic is catching, so is courage. Dick's prompt and sensible remark acted like a tonic. Springing to my feet, I cried:

"You are right, old chap! Come on. Let's step right out at once. I'm ready."

It was most fortunate that Dick knew where he was, for the light was so dim and the snow so thick that we could see but a few paces ahead; while the wind, though beating in general against our left cheeks, was itself useless as a guide, for, being deflected by the ridges and ravines of the mountain, it would every now and then strike us square in the face, stopping us dead, and the next moment leap upon us from behind, sending me stumbling forward against my leader.

In spite of its vindictive and ceaseless assaults, though, Dick kept straight on, his head bent and his cap pulled down over his ears; while I, following three feet behind, kept him steadily in view. Presently he stopped with a joyful shout.

"Hurrah, Frank!" he cried. "Look here! Now we are all right. Here's a thread to hold on by: as good as a rope to a drowning man."

The "thread" was a little stream of water, appearing suddenly from I know not where, and running off in the direction we were going.

"This will take us home, Frank!" my companion shouted in my ear. "It runs down and joins our own creek about a quarter of a mile above the house. With this for a guide we are all safe; we mustn't lose it, that's all. And we won't do that: we'll get into it and walk in the water if we have to. Best foot foremost, now! All down-hill! Hurrah, for us!"

Dick's cheerful view of the situation was very encouraging, though, as a matter of fact, it was a pretty desperate struggle we had to get down the mountain, with the darkness increasing and the

snow becoming deeper every minute. Indeed it was becoming a serious question with me whether I could keep going much longer, when at the end of the most perilous hour I ever went through, we at last came down to the junction of the creeks, and turning to our right presently caught sight of a lighted window.

Five minutes later we were safe inside the professor's house – and high time too, for I could not have stood much more of it: I had just about reached the end of my tether. But the warmth and rest and above all the assurance of safety quickly had their effect, and very soon I found myself seated before the fire consuming with infinite gusto a great bowl of strong, hot soup which Romero had made all ready for us; thus comfortably winding up the most eventful day of my existence – up to that moment.

CHAPTER V
How Dick Brought the News

"You ran it rather too close, Dick," said the professor, with a shake of his head, when we had told him the story of our race with the storm. "I was beginning to be afraid; not so much for you as for your companion: it was too big an undertaking for him, considering that it was his first day in the mountains; even leaving out the risk of the snow-storm."

"I'm afraid I was thoughtless," replied Dick, penitently; "especially in not looking out for a change of weather. It did run us too close, as you say – a great deal too close. But there is one thing I can do, anyhow, to repair that error to some extent, and I'll be off at once and do it."

So saying, Dick, who by this time had finished his supper, jumped out of his chair and began putting on his overcoat.

"Where are you off to, Dick?" I exclaimed. "Not going out again to-night?"

"Only a little way," replied Dick. "Down to the town to let your uncle know that you are all safe. He'll be pretty anxious, I expect."

I had thought of that, but I could see no way of getting over it. I could not go myself, for even if I had dared to venture I had not the strength for it, and of course I could not expect any one else to do it for me. My first thought, therefore, when Dick announced that he was going, was one of satisfaction; though my next thought, following very quickly upon the first one, was to protest against his doing any such thing.

"No, no, Dick," I cried, "it's too risky – you mustn't! Uncle Tom will be worried, I know, but he will conclude that I am staying the night with you. And though I should be glad to have his mind relieved, I don't consider – and he would say the same, I'm pretty sure – that that is a good enough reason for you to take such a risk."

"Thanks, old chap," replied Dick; "but it isn't so much of a risk as you think. Going down wind to the town is a very different matter from coming down that rough mountain with the storm beating on us from every side. I've been over the trail a thousand times, and I believe I could follow it with my eyes shut; and, anyhow, to lose your way is pretty near impossible, you know, with the cañon on your right hand and the mountain on your left. So, don't you worry yourself, Frank: I'll be under cover again in an hour or less."

Seeing that the professor nodded approval, I protested no more, though I still had my doubts about letting him go.

"Well, Dick," said I, "it's mighty good of you. I wish I could go, too, but that is out of the question, I'm afraid: I should only hamper you if I tried. I can tell you one thing, anyhow: Uncle Tom will appreciate it – you may be sure of that."

In this I was right, though I little suspected at the moment in what form his appreciation was to show itself. As a matter of fact, Dick's action in braving the storm a second time that evening was to be a turning-point in his fortune and mine.

"Good-night, Frank," said he. "I'll be back again in the morning, I expect. Hope you'll sleep as well in my bed as I intend to do in yours. Good-night."

So saying, Dick, this time overcoated, gloved and ear-capped, opened the door and stepped out. Watching him from the window, I saw him striding off down wind, to be lost to sight in ten seconds in the maze of driving snow.

"Are you sure it's all right, Professor?" said I, anxiously. "There's time yet to call him back."

"It is all right," replied my host, reassuringly. "You need not fear. Dick has been out in many a storm before, and he knows very well how to take care of himself. You may be sure I would not let

him go if I thought it were not all right. And now, I think, it would be well if you took possession of Dick's bed. You have had a very hard day and need a good long rest."

To this I made no objection, and early though it was, I was asleep in five minutes, too tired to be disturbed even by the insistent banging and howling of the storm outside.

Meanwhile, Uncle Tom, down in the town, was, as I had suspected, fretting and fuming and worrying himself in his uncertainty as to whether I was safe under cover or not.

The storm had taken the town by surprise, for the morning had opened gloriously, clear and sharp and still, as it had done every day for a month past, and most people naturally supposed there was to be another day as fine as those which had gone before; little suspecting that the north wind, up there among the icebound peaks and gorges of the mother range, was at that moment marshaling its forces for a mad rush down into the valley.

And how should they suspect? Of the three hundred people comprising the population, not one, not even old Jeff Andrews himself, the patriarch of the district, had spent more than two winters in the camp. In the year of its founding there were about a dozen men and no women who had braved the hardships of the first winter, but as the fame of the new camp extended to the outer world, other people began to come in, slowly at first and then in larger numbers, so that by this time the population numbered, as I said, about three hundred souls, including twenty-one women and two babies; while at a rough guess I should say there was about two-thirds of a dog to each citizen, counting in the twelve children of school age and the two babies as well.

These dogs, by the way, were the chief source of entertainment in the town, for during the hours of daylight there was always a fight going on somewhere, while at night most of them, especially the younger ones, used to sit out in the middle of the street barking defiance at the coyotes, which, from the hills all round, howled back at them in unceasing chorus. This part of the programme was changed, however, later in the winter, for one half-cloudy night the blacksmith's long-legged shepherd pup, seated in front of the forge door, was barking himself hoarse at the moon when a big timber-wolf came slipping down out of the woods and finished the puppy's song and his existence with one snap. After this the other dogs were more careful about the hours they kept.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.