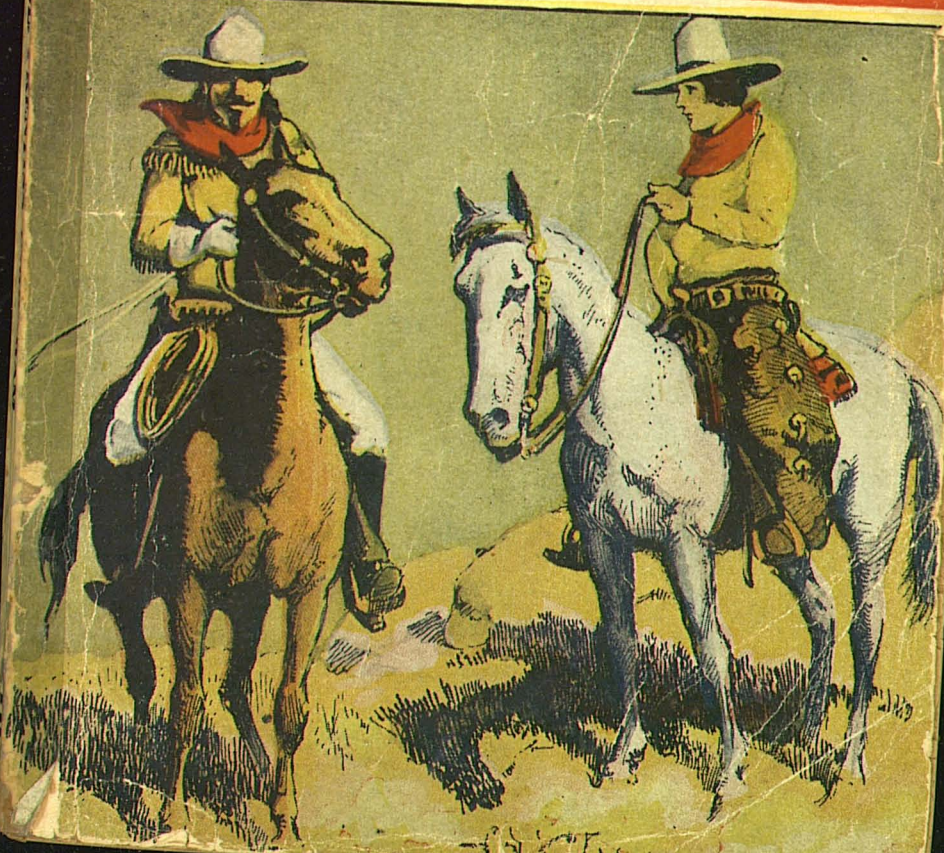


BUFFALO BILL BORDER STORIES - No 210

BUFFALO BILL'S BRAVO PARTNER

BY

Col. Prentiss Ingraham



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There is no more romantic character in American history than William F. Cody, or as he was internationally known, Buffalo Bill. He, with Colonel Prentiss Ingraham, Wild Bill Hickok, General Custer, and a few other adventurous spirits, laid the foundation of our great West.

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Buffalo Bill's Bravo Partner

OR,

THE MAN WITH A PUNCH

BY

Colonel Prentiss Ingraham

Author of the celebrated "Buffalo Bill" stories, published in the
BORDER STORIES. For other titles see catalogue.

**STREET & SMITH CORPORATION****PUBLISHERS****79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York**

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Buffalo Bill's Bravo Partner

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IN APPRECIATION OF WILLIAM F. CODY (BUFFALO BILL).

It is now some generations since Josh Billings, Ned Buntline, and Colonel Prentiss Ingraham, intimate friends of Colonel William F. Cody, used to forgather in the office of Francis S. Smith, then proprietor of the *New York Weekly*. It was a dingy little office on Rose Street, New York, but the breath of the great outdoors stirred there when these old-timers got together. As a result of these conversations, Colonel Ingraham and Ned Buntline began to write of the adventures of Buffalo Bill for Street & Smith.

Colonel Cody was born in Scott County, Iowa, February 26, 1846. Before he had reached his teens, his father, Isaac Cody, with his mother and two sisters, migrated to Kansas, which at that time was little more than a wilderness.

When the elder Cody was killed shortly afterward in the Kansas "Border War," young Bill assumed the difficult rôle of family breadwinner. During 1860, and until the outbreak of the Civil War, Cody lived the arduous life of a pony-express rider. Cody volunteered his services as government scout and guide and served throughout the Civil War with Generals McNeil and A. J. Smith. He was a distinguished member of the Seventh Kansas Cavalry.

During the Civil War, while riding through the streets of St. Louis, Cody rescued a frightened schoolgirl from a band of annoyers. In true romantic style, Cody and Louisa Federici, the girl, were married March 6, 1866.

In 1867 Cody was employed to furnish a specified amount of buffalo meat to the construction men at work on the Kansas Pacific Railroad. It was in this period that he received the sobriquet "Buffalo Bill."

In 1868 and for four years thereafter Colonel Cody

served as scout and guide in campaigns against the Sioux and Cheyenne Indians. It was General Sheridan who conferred on Cody the honor of chief of scouts of the command.

After completing a period of service in the Nebraska legislature, Cody joined the Fifth Cavalry in 1876, and was again appointed chief of scouts.

Colonel Cody's fame had reached the East long before, and a great many New Yorkers went out to see him and join in his buffalo hunts, including such men as August Belmont, James Gordon Bennett, Anson Stager, and J. G. Heckscher. In entertaining these visitors at Fort McPherson, Cody was accustomed to arrange wild-West exhibitions. In return his friends invited him to visit New York. It was upon seeing his first play in the metropolis that Cody conceived the idea of going into the show business.

Assisted by Ned Buntline, novelist, and Colonel Ingraham, he started his "Wild West" show, which later developed and expanded into "A Congress of the Roughriders of the World," first presented at Omaha, Nebraska. In time it became a familiar yearly entertainment in the great cities of this country and Europe. Many famous personages attended the performances, and became his warm friends, including Mr. Gladstone, the Marquis of Lorne, King Edward, Queen Victoria, and the Prince of Wales, now King of England.

At the outbreak of the Sioux, in 1890 and 1891, Colonel Cody served at the head of the Nebraska National Guard. In 1895 Cody took up the development of Wyoming Valley by introducing irrigation. Not long afterward he became judge advocate general of the Wyoming National Guard.

Colonel Cody (Buffalo Bill) died in Denver, Colorado, on January 10, 1917. His legacy to a grateful world was a large share in the development of the West, and a multitude of achievements in horsemanship, marksmanship, and endurance that will live for ages. His life will continue to be a leading example of the manliness, courage, and devotion to duty that belonged to a picturesque phase of American life now passed, like the great patriot whose career it typified, into the Great Beyond.

BUFFALO BILL'S BRAVO PARTNER.

CHAPTER I.

A WOMAN'S WARNING.

It was a time of terror in the wild West.

The worst element of mining camp, Overland Trail, and settlement held sway, with road agents and hostile redskins doing more than their share in the deviltry, and only a limited number of honest men and soldiers at the military post to put down the evil, or to check the growing lawlessness.

And in this wild land, and amid these wilder scenes, Buffalo Bill—William F. Cody—army scout, guide, buckskin detective, and the worst foe of desperadoes and outlawry, held a power that the good upheld and the wicked feared.

In touch with him in his deadly, dangerous, and valuable work were such men as Wild Bill Hickok, Texas Jack, Gordon Lillie—known as Pawnee Bill—and other heroes of the plains, along with others of lesser fame.

One day an Overland stage was making its westward run along the trail of deadly danger leading to Fort Keo.

The stagecoach was a large one, roomy and comfortable; the passengers were six in number, and the driver was a veritable king of the reins, for no better man ever held the ribbons over a Rocky Mountain stage team, and he had won, from his wonderful night drives through dangers, the name of Owl Eyes, though he wrote himself down on the stage books as Kit Keene, which his pards immediately transposed into Keen Kit.

The coach had reached a part of the trail which descended into a valley, where was a swift-flowing stream, bridged with a rude structure, that looked very shaky to cross by day, and doubly so at night.

The bridge was the dread of all drivers on the Overland who had ever been compelled to cross it, not only on account of the perilous undertaking, but because right here had more deeds of red deviltry been committed than anywhere else upon the line.

Upon either side of the bridge, near the road, was a little burying ground, and fully a score of victims of redskins and outlaws rested in one, while in the other were the graves of a dozen outlaws and Indians, killed in attacks upon the coaches.

The mountains which sheltered this valley were known as the Haunted Range, and not a driver of the Overland ever cared to be caught there by night, though it often happened that they were.

It was before descending into the Valley of Death that Owl Eyes had come to a sudden halt.

"What is it, driver?"

"You has eyes, ain't yer?"

"Yes," came in a chorus from the passengers.

"Then look ahead on ther trail," replied Keen Kit, pointing with his whip to where a woman in black, mounted on a black horse, plainly revealed in the moonlight, barred their way.

An exclamation of surprise, mingled with alarm, came from the lips of the passengers, while one said:

"A woman! and in this wild region?"

"Yes," answered Kit.

"Are you afraid of her, driver?"

"More'n I am of any man as lives."

"Who is she?"

"I knows her as the Woman in Black."

"Drive on, past her."

"See here, pard, don't be too flip with yer advice,

for I knows jist what I am doing, and I ain't been picked up fer a fool many times."

"Do you intend to stay here all night, driver, because a woman bars your way?" asked a stern voice, and a man, in the uniform of an army officer, sprang out of the stage.

"S-sh, cap'n! Wait!"

The officer seemed impressed by the manner of the driver. He knew his courage but too well, and so he stood gazing upon the strange horsewoman.

The woman's face seemed ghastly white, while from her head to the end of her long skirt she was enveloped in black. Her horse was also jet-black, and stood as still as though carved of stone. The right hand of the woman was raised, the palm toward the coach, as though warning them back from the Valley of Death ahead.

"Shall I go forward and speak to her, Kit?"

"No, cap'n; don't do it."

"What is to be done, then?"

"Wait."

"Well, I'll humor you, Keen, for I know your undoubted pluck; but, if she detains us beyond five minutes, I will go forward and see just who this mournful Amazon is."

"You has heerd o' her, cap'n?"

"Yes, Kit."

"I has seen her twice afore."

"Well?"

"She warned me then."

"Yes."

"I didn't heed her."

"And the result?"

"Is some graves down in ther walley."

"Ah! on each occasion?"

"Yas; each time, cap'n, thar was ghosts made."

"I'll give you ten minutes' delay, Kit."

And it was evident that the army officer was influenced by the manner and words of the driver.

"All right, cap'n."

And Kit kept his eye upon the Woman in Black.

The minutes passed slowly. Still the woman held her position; as still as statues, horse and rider.

At last the captain grew impatient, and said: "I am going ahead, Kit." He moved a few paces, when the woman slowly turned her horse and rode under the dark shadow of a cliff, where she halted, but was yet seen.

Her hand was seen to move, as though she were waving it; and, a moment after, she wheeled her horse suddenly, and rode away rapidly, her horse's hoofs giving back no sound upon the rock trail.

Quickly the captain walked forward. He halted near the cliff, and then called out to Kit to drive on.

The driver obeyed, and, as the coach pulled up, all saw, written upon the cliff, in what appeared to be letters of fire:

"Go back, for death awaits you ahead on this trail!"

"What does it mean?" gasped a passenger.

"Didn't I tell yer?" Keen Kit returned.

"Well, Kit, what do you intend to do?" asked the captain.

"I ain't no fool, cap'n."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you see them letters o' fire?"

"Nonsense! It is written with phosphorus, and, if the moonlight fell upon the rock, it could not be seen, as in the dark."

"It is a warning in letters of fire, cap'n."

"Well, Keen, I've got to go through, so, if you wish to camp from fear of danger ahead, do so, and I'll take one of your leaders and go on," said the captain impatiently.

"No, cap'n, don't do that, but git upon the box with me, for I knows yer wuth, and we'll drive through."

"All right, Kit."

"But not on this trail."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll go by the Devil's Trail, cap'n."

"Kit, if any other man than you suggested going by that wild trail, I'd set him down as a fool."

"I drove it once, cap'n."

"I heard so, to escape a freshet down the cañon, and saved the lives of all in doing it."

"I'll go that way, cap'n."

"It is as dangerous as risking this trail, Kit."

"No, cap'n; it's sure death in the valley, but big chances going round by the Devil's Trail, and shorter, too."

"Yes; but go ahead, for I am with you, go which way you may."

So saying, the captain leaped up to the box, and, turning his horses around, Keen Kit started back on the trail to where he would have to take the terrible road known as the Devil's Trail.

CHAPTER II.

BUFFALO BILL TAKES A HAND.

Buffalo Bill entered the headquarters of the commandant of Fort Keo, where he was serving as chief of scouts.

"You sent for me, Colonel Roy?"

"Yes, Cody, for I am anxious to place in your hands the solving of a frontier mystery, and also the bringing to justice of the lawless band known as the Toll Takers of the Trail," answered Colonel Roy.

"I am at your command, colonel, for any duty you may wish me to perform," answered the scout.

"I am always sure of that, Cody, and know that I can count upon you. I am sorry to send you away upon a mission of desperate risk, I may say, but I have confidence in your coolness, judgment, and skill, and I believe you, of all men, can do what I wish done. Sit down, for Captain Taylor will be here in a few minutes, and I wish you to hear his story."

"Taylor has just returned from Salt Lake, sir, I believe?"

"Yes, and has a strange story to tell, which urged me to delay no longer in sending you upon the duty I have in mind. Captain Taylor is anxious to go himself, but I cannot spare him just now, so you must pick your own comrades for the work.

"If any officer other than Taylor told me what he did, I would be a little doubtful; but, as you know, Taylor is no man to be frightened, and is cool as an icicle under all circumstances—ah! here he is now."

Just then entered a tall, athletic, but slenderly formed man, in the undress uniform of a captain of cavalry.

It was the same officer who had sprung from Keen

Kit's coach on the Overland Trail when the Woman in Black barred the way. He saluted the commandant politely, shook hands with Cody, and remarked:

"Glad to see you, Bill. I dropped in to see you last night, but was told you were away on a scout."

"Yes, captain, I got back at dawn, and was glad to hear of your return, for we missed you over in our quarters," returned the scout.

"Taylor, I sent for Cody, after our talk this morning, for I have decided that he is the best man to send upon this mission."

"By long odds the best, colonel."

"Well, let Cody know of your adventure, and then I will tell him what I wish him to do."

"It is a long tale, Bill, but it is a strange one," said Taylor. "You know Keen Kit, I believe?"

"Old Owl Eyes of the Overland, sir?"

"Yes."

"I know him well, sir, and he is the king of drivers, while he has the courage of a grizzly bear."

"You are right. I went West on Kit's hearse, as they call the coaches, and returned with him also. I was behindhand on sleep going out, so was taking a nap inside the coach when two shots awakened me. I discovered that Kit was in a skirmish with road agents, and so I went to his aid.

"There were but three of them, and one got away, the other two remaining—for reasons unnecessary to state!

"Kit informed me that, as there were but three, he concluded to fight when they held him up, and thought it not worth while to waken me.

"This showed me my man, and so I arranged to catch his coach coming back.

"I had ridden on the box the night and day before, to escape being talked to death by a Jew, an Irishman, and an Englishman talking American poli-

tics, so the next night I left the box for a few hours' sleep inside.

"I was awakened by voices, and found that Kit had drawn rein, so, as I heard some one say there was a woman in the trail ahead, I got out."

The captain then told of the adventure with the Woman in Black, and Buffalo Bill remarked:

"They call her the Shadow of the Overland."

"Yes, so I heard; but after that warning, written with punk upon the rocks, Kit would not go on, but decided to take a breakneck trail known as the Devil's Trail."

"I have heard of it, sir."

"Yes, and Kit had driven over it once; but that any wheeled vehicle could go that way I would never have believed had I not been there to see for myself.

"Why, at two places we had to unhitch the team, and with ropes let the coach down the steep hill—yes, and hold back on the horses, too, as they went down, to prevent their breaking their necks.

"Kit made the Englishman, the Jew, and the Irishman do the most work by scaring them with stories of soon being pursued and murdered by the Toll Takers, so I had my revenge for my sleepless night and day.

"It took us three hours to go seven miles, and I'll give Kit Keene a prize as the best driver I ever saw handle the reins.

"We cut off about eight miles by the turnpike, and did not go through the valley where that arch outlaw they call Mephisto and twenty of his band of cut-throats were lying in wait for us.

"That Kit carried a treasure box aboard, and that I had considerable government money along, will prove that we made a fortunate escape, while, had

we resisted, not one of us would have been spared by the red-handed fiends."

"You said that the westernbound coach met the same band, captain?"

"Yes, colonel. Mephisto waited for us until dawn, and, enraged at finding from a scout that we had turned on the ridge and gone by the Devil's Trail, he shot the driver of the westbound coach and two passengers, as the pony-express messenger who passed us on the trail the next day told us."

"Now, Cody, you have heard the captain's story. What do you think of this Woman in Black? Do you think she is in any way connected with Mephisto and his Toll Takers?"

"It would seem so, sir, for she knew of the ambush prepared for Taylor."

"Yes, and warned us."

"Well, Cody, it is my wish to have you solve the mystery about this woman. If she is guilty of being in league with the Toll Takers, I will pardon her, in that she has thrice warned Kit Keene of danger.

"But I wish you to see if you cannot find her out, and also discover just how and when this villain, Mephisto, and his band can be brought to the gallows. These outlaws have been holding a high hand of late, and as just now the Indians are quiet, I wish you to go upon this special duty."

"I will go, colonel, whenever you deem best."

"Take your time in preparing for the work, for you must go wholly prepared. I will allow you a detail of a sergeant and as many men as you need, with those of your scouts you wish to take with you."

"Thank you, Colonel Roy, but I think it hardly wise to let the Toll Takers know that we are on the search for them. I have a friend here now, and no better ally can I ask. We will go together."

"I believe you are right, Cody, in not taking a force with you. But who is your friend?"

"Wild Bill, sir."

"The very man, and you two can accomplish wonders," said the colonel, with enthusiasm.

Buffalo Bill knew his man, and there was none better on the frontier for any game of life and death, with chances in favor of death, than was Wild Bill Hickok.

The two "Bills," as they were called, were devoted pards, had been on a hundred desperate trails together, were men without fear, giants in strength, dead shots, true as steel, and each knew that he could depend on the other as he could upon himself.

Two days after Buffalo Bill's talk with Colonel Roy, and hearing what Captain Taylor had to report of the Woman in Black, Buffalo Bill and his pard were upon the trail together, armed and equipped for the work to be done.

They had arranged their plans carefully, and were on their way to what was known as one of the worst mining settlements in borderland, and which was filled with a number of characters whose match could not have been found the world over.

That settlement was known as "Hallelujah City," and, strange to relate, the only females there were two young and handsome women; one the keeper of the populated tavern of the place, the other the head of a gambling saloon, yet both wielding wonderful power over the rough characters about them.

The place centered upon the ruins of an old fort, and just there in the old-time military headquarters, overlooking a grand view of mountain, valley, and river scenery, had been established the tavern of "Kate's Kitchen," with the Overland stage stables near, the pony-express riders' quarters, and not far away the "Queen of Hearts Saloon," while the stores

and cabins of the people were scattered on the slopes of the mountain.

The tavern was an eating house, with a wing on either side, where were the rooms of those who lodged there through force of circumstances.

Along the front was a piazza, so-called, though it was a shed roof and had earth for flooring.

Here were benches for loungers, and they were generally occupied.

There was a small second floor, containing a few choice rooms over one wing, and here the landlady had her quarters. She had come to the tavern in male attire one night, two years before, and had asked to see the landlord—Frank Fenwick, a gambler, and a dashing fellow.

Not known to be a woman, she had gone up to the landlord's room, and, soon after, a shot was heard, and those who ran to the room found Fenwick dead upon the floor.

To the amazed crowd the pretended youth said:

"I am a woman. That man wronged me beyond forgiveness, and I tracked him here. I was his wife. Do with me as you will, for I am ready to face death!"

The miners stood aghast, until one said:

"If ye're satisfied, miss, we are; and as you was Frank's wife, jist take the tavern for yer own, and run it to suit yerself."

The woman was beautiful in face and form, and it was not strange that the rude men before her bowed down in admiration to her.

Fenwick was buried that afternoon, and the next day Kate Fenwick took charge. Thereafter the hotel became known as Kate's Kitchen, and no one ever went hungry from its doors.

The widow took Fenwick's two rooms, and ob-

servers were wont to say that she often was seen standing at the window gazing down upon the little cemetery a half mile away on the river bank, where was the grave of her husband.

Some said that Fenwick had killed himself at sight of his wife, and others that she had shot him; but, certain it was that she was never asked for the truth of the affair. She dressed well, had several good saddle horses in the stable, and was a superb rider, while about her waist was always strapped a belt of arms, and, as she was known to be a dead shot, no mixer or camp ruffian had been tempted thus far to force her to use her weapons, or to arouse her wrath by prying into the secrets of her life.

The only other female in Hallelujah City was, by a strange coincidence, a beautiful one, and also the proprietress of an establishment equally as popular as was Kate's Kitchen.

This was the Queen of Hearts Saloon, which had been opened by a gambler, who had arrived at the camps one day, and at once had the shanty erected in which he combined gambling tables and a bar.

Soon after his arrival he built a house for himself on the hill behind the tavern, and, to the surprise of all, the coach one day set down at Kate's Kitchen a young woman whom Gambler Gray met and introduced to Kate Fenwick as his wife.

On Sunday night, some weeks after her arrival, as Gray was going home from his saloon, carrying a large sum of money with him, he was shot down and robbed; but he managed to reach his home and tell his story, and after one week of mourning, the gambling den was opened by the Queen of Hearts, Louise Gray, who was also known in Hallelujah City as Lady Lou.

Between Kate and Lady Lou there seemed to be a

stronger bond of friendship than the mere fact that they were the only females in Hallelujah City warranted. Often were they together, and the respect shown them was marked.

The men of Hallelujah City, storekeepers, overland hangers-on, camp idlers, and miners, were not a community to be proud of, in spite of their few remaining good qualities, which were buried under a rough exterior. They were none too honest in their dealings with strangers, their morals were on a low plane, their manners even lower; but occasionally some less hardened characters among them would display loyalty in friendship, or generosity, or kindness toward dumb animals—a few redeeming traits!

Gambling was the principal amusement, with drinking and life-taking as side shows.

The mines panned out well, gold dust circulated freely, and the camps could boast, all told, some six hundred souls, scattered about within a radius of half a dozen miles.

There were Americans, Mexicans, and half-breeds from California and New Mexico, a few Indians, a score of Chinese, and an equal number of negroes, and among the first named were representatives from every State and Territory in the Union.

With such a mixture it is not to be wondered at that Devil's Den would be a far more appropriate name for the settlement than was that of Hallelujah City.

That, too, there was a villain to every more honest man in the community goes without saying, and this same desperado element made itself felt on all occasions.

It was while on the trail to this mining settlement, to begin their work of solving a mystery, that Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill heard two shots, and which at once

put them upon their guard, for it seemed that they had been fired from the hills.

They were in a cañon, nothing more than a valley, with lofty ranges rising upon either side, and a dangerous spot to be caught in for a foe who wished to ambush them.

CHAPTER III.

THE THREE BILLS.

That the scouts were in a dangerous locality they well knew, and though they had not heard the whiz of bullets near them, perceiving the two shots, they yet could not be but most cautious and on their guard against a surprise.

"We were not their game, I guess, Bill, because no man could fire so wild as that," remarked Buffalo Bill composedly.

"No, but yonder is where the shots came from, fully half a mile away." Wild Bill pointed up the mountain farther down the valley, where two little white clouds of smoke were floating away from a rocky spur almost hidden in pines. "There is a cabin there, too," he added. "But what were they shooting at?"

Cody had already leveled a powerful field glass he had swung to his belt at the spot indicated by his comrade.

"Don't know, Bill; but if the shots were at us we will know the reason; so come on, for I am going visiting."

"Up to the cabin?"

"Yes."

"I am with you, Bill Cody, for I am curious about those shots."

And the two scouts rode on down the valley.

Just a hundred yards from where they halted was a group of bowlders, with a few stunted pines scattered about among them.

Here the two Bills suddenly drew rein, for behind a large rock lay two men—two bodies, rather—whose positions were strange ones, indicating how suddenly they had died.

Upon the top of the rock, which was some six feet in height, and sloped off to the ground, was the branch of a pine tree, which concealed the heads of the two men, whose rifles covered every person coming down the valley trail, as Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill had been doing.

The men lay flat upon the rock, and their arms resting upon the summit, and their rifles in their grasp, the finger of one actually on the trigger guard.

Their faces were now pressed close to the rock, and in the back of the head of each was a bullet hole from which the warm life current was just beginning to flow.

The men were clad in buckskin, were all armed, wore top-boots, and their slouch hats were near them on the rocks.

"Those fellows were not bad shots, after all, for they brought down their game," Wild Bill observed.

"Yes, and just in time to be the game of these two gentlemen."

"Ah! you think they were in ambush for us?"

"Don't you see that they were, Bill?"

"I had not thought of that."

"Then look at their faces, and see if they were not two of the Toll Takers' gang."

"By the Rockies, but you are right, Buffalo Bill! They have been trailing us until they knew where we were going, and then switched round ahead and ambushed us. It was a close call for us, for I confess I didn't expect trouble here."

"Nor I, and they would have struck us sure, if——"

"Those who fired those shots had not been mighty quick."

"Yes, and dead shots as well."

"But could they have come from the hill yonder?"

"Where else?"

"Correct! But it was a long range and dead-center shooting."

"And were these men killed to save us?"

"That's what we must find out—Ah! there are the horses the gentlemen came on!"

The two scout pards rode forward to where they had discovered two horses hitched to a small pine tree.

The animals were fastened so that they could be hastily unhitched, if need came for it, and their appearance indicated that they had been hard ridden.

The trail of the horses led from down the valley, and had either come from the mining camps, three miles away, or through a cañon that cut through the right-hand range beyond the rocky spur from whence had come the two shots.

"We'll leave them here, Buffalo Bill, while we go up yonder and investigate."

The scouts branched off from the trail and soon after began to ascend the mountainside toward the rocky spur.

The way they had to go made the distance about three-quarters of a mile, but when nearing the spur they got into a trail and readily followed it to the summit.

As they neared the point they beheld, half hidden among the boulders and pines, a small log cabin, with a shed behind it. The trail led to the rear of the cabin, and both men rode along with their rifles ready for instant use.

About a hundred feet from the cabin, on a grass plat, was staked out a large, long-bodied, jet-black horse that eyed the intruders curiously.

Then came the sharp bark of a dog, which, however was hushed at once by the stern tones of a man.

Nearing the cabin, a horse was seen standing by the open door of the shed, saddled and bridled. The ani-

mal was a match for the one staked out, and also was as black as ink, while his saddle and bridle were of the Mexican pattern.

A dog stood at the corner of the cabin, and his eyes were upon the scouts, while his look was vicious as that of an aroused tiger. This animal on guard was a huge one and black as were the horses.

"Black horses, black outfit, black dog—next we'll see a nigger, Bill," suggested Hickok, as the two rode around to the front of the cabin, ready to meet friend or foe.

"Good evening, gentlemen. Dismount, and accept my hospitality for the night, for you are heartily welcome."

So said a man who stood in front of the little cabin on the spur, up to which Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill had ridden.

They came to a halt and gazed with surprise upon the speaker—a man six feet in height, broad-shouldered, superbly formed, and clad from head to foot in black.

His hair was worn long, falling below his shoulders, and was jet-black, and upon his head was a very broad-brimmed black sombrero, encircled by a gold cord.

But his face! A handsome face it was, the face of a man of perhaps thirty, the features stamped with indomitable will, fearlessness, and strength of character. The eyes reminded one of the large, expressive, sad orbs of a deer that has been wounded, and the same thought flashed through the mind of each scout.

At one side of the cabin was a workbench and a box of carpenter's tools, and the strange man in black stood by a coffin which had just been stained to an inky hue, the paint brush then being held in one hand as he turned and faced the two scouts. That the

coffin had lately been made was shown by the fresh shavings under the workbench.

"Well, pard, you are very kind, but we have come up here on a business trip, so we don't expect to stay long," said Buffalo Bill in his quiet way.

"How can I serve you, gentlemen?"

"We are not in search of wooden overcoats, like the one you have just built there, though we came rather near being in need of one each a while since; but we would like to know who fired two shots from this spur half an hour ago?"

"I did," was the calm response of the stranger.

"You fired both of them?"

"Yes, sir."

"What with?"

"My repeating rifle."

The man took from where it stood behind the coffin, within reach of his hand, a handsome weapon, of the latest manufacture, and which was painted black, barrel and stock.

"You fired at two men in the valley?"

"Yes, there they lie upon that rock to the left of the trail you were following."

"You killed them both?"

"Yes, I fired to kill, and aimed at their heads."

"There's where your bullets hit, pard; but, may I ask why you shot them?"

"It was their lives or yours, and as they were cut-throats, and you I recognized, I concluded that I would cut down the weeds and save the wheat."

The stranger spoke in a deep voice of peculiar richness of tone, and with a manner that was full of calm dignity, which could not but impress the two scouts.

"You recognized us, you say?"

"Yes, as I did those men. You see, from my position here I look over into the cañon which cuts this

range and I saw those men riding at full speed toward the valley.

"They turned up the trail and rode to yonder rocks, where they dismounted and went into ambush. Soon after you came along, and my glass showed me who you were, so I fired to save you, and that is all there is about it."

"And a great deal it is, for we owe you our lives," said Hickok, "and I for one never go back upon a man who has saved me from death, while my pard here is like me in that respect."

"I know that well, Wild Bill, of you and of Buffalo Bill also."

"You do know us," cried Buffalo Bill, in surprise.

"So I said."

"May I ask where we have met before, sir?" Cody asked, striving in vain to recall the face of the man before him.

"Neither of you know me, though I know you; but, will you not dismount and share my cabin for the night?"

"Thank you, no. Those two fellows must be buried before night, for I cannot leave even an Indian to become food for wolves. Then we must go to the mining camps below," answered Cody.

"To Hallelujah?"

"Yes, that is what the miners call their camp."

"It hardly deserves the name, as you will discover; but I will meet you to-night, for I have business to call me there later."

"Well, we will be glad to meet you again, I assure you, for we fully appreciate what you have done for us, and we will be glad to know your name."

"My name, gentlemen, may seem as out of place as that of Hallelujah City; but then, you know, the miners may suit their fancy, so, as I dress above the average of ordinary border mortals, they call me Coffin

Bill. Not knowing me, they also dub me the Unknown, and, on account of other peculiarities I have, The Undertaker, and The Man in Black. I am rich in names, so take your choice."

The man was becoming more of a mystery than ever to the two scouts, who regarded him with an interest akin to awe.

Then Buffalo Bill remarked:

"Well, my friend, as we cannot go back upon our own names we will call you Broadcloth Bill, and certainly you do look more like a citizen than a frontiersman."

"I hope we'll meet you to-night in Hallelujah City," Wild Bill added.

"I will be there without fail, gentlemen, and you'll find me at the Queen of Hearts Saloon, which adjoins Kate's Kitchen, as the best tavern there is called."

"Yes, we put up at Kate's Kitchen, and will drop in at the Queen of Hearts and see you, so don't fail to be there, pard."

"Do you see this?" asked the man, placing his hand lightly upon the coffin.

"Yes, it has been a very conspicuous object in my eyes ever since I rode up here," answered Wild Bill.

"Well, this coffin is to have an occupant to-night, gentlemen, and the man is now alive and in good health who is to fill it, so I'll be there," said the strange man in black.

Neither Buffalo Bill nor Wild Bill made reply. There was something so uncanny in the words of the strange man and his look, that they could not find response; so bowed and rode down the trail. As the two again reached the valley, Buffalo Bill rode up alongside of his companion.

"That gentleman in black just beats any one I ever corralled. He is certainly a mystery, and I must know more of him."

"We can doubtless find out about him in Hallelujah City."

"Hallelujah City? What a name! And the Queen of Hearts Saloon, and Kate's Kitchen, too!"

"Yes, we have got among a queer lot, Buffalo; but we came for a purpose, and must carry it through."

"Yes, we must do that," was the determined reply of Buffalo Bill, and the two scouts drew rein by the rock upon which lay the two bodies of the men who had been killed while lying in ambush to kill.

"A remarkable shot, that man, Buffalo."

"He is, indeed; but what about the horses of these men?"

"To the victor belongs the spoils, so we'll take them with us and turn them over to Coffin Bill to-night. But now let us bury these fellows with a thanksgiving prayer that they failed to connect."

The two scouts dismounted and set to work upon their task.

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CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERIES OF THE MINES.

Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill rode into the mining camp, after their adventure with Coffin Bill, without further adventure. They directed their way straight to the tavern.

The loungers about Kate's Kitchen eyed them as they rode up, and when they were met by Kate Fenwick, who welcomed them with a smile and a pleasant word, they felt that their lot might have been cast in a far worse place than the tavern of Hallelujah City.

They registered their names as "William Cody" and "James Hickok," their real names, and were glad to see that no one seemed to know them.

Kate gave them a room upon the upper floor, reserved for favored guests, and set them down to a supper which they were more than pleased with.

"Do yer know them two pilgrims as yer is so sweet on?" asked a villainous-looking man, as the landlady returned after showing her guests to the supper table.

"They register as Cody and Hickok," was the quiet reply of the woman, who felt that the man was plotting mischief—something he was noted for in the camps.

His general appearance was against him, for there was a hideous scar upon his face, which had been made by his falling upon a buzz saw, he said, when working in a lumber mill, and hence his nickname, Buzz Saw, of which he seemed to be proud.

"Waal, they is Wild Bill and Buffalo Bill, government scouts, and they is here for no good."

"I have heard of the men you name as wonderful specimens of manhood. Are you sure you are not mistaken, Buzz Saw?"

"No, for I knows 'em, and they is here sartin to nip some poor fellow."

"I guess the man they nip, as you call it, will not be missed, Buzz Saw," was the quiet response, and Kate Fenwick turned to Lady Lou Gray, who just then entered, and the two really beautiful women went in to supper.

"Buffalo, who is that woman?" asked Wild Bill quickly, as the two sat down near the scouts.

"One is our landlady, Bill, but the other I do not know."

"I have seen her somewhere before, but I can't recall when and where I've seen the fair gambler."

Having told Louise Gray what Buzz Saw had said of the scouts, Kate Fenwick seemed anxious to discover more about them and their coming to the mining camps, so she said:

"Gentlemen, as you said you expected to be my guests for some little time, permit me to present my friend Mrs. Gray, better known here as Lady Lou."

The scouts bowed, and Buffalo Bill responded in his pleasant way:

"Yes, we are taking a ride through the mountains and camps for a few weeks, and, finding your hotel such a good one, we will hardly be tempted to leave it until we have to do so."

"You will find Hallelujah City a very rough place," remarked Louise.

"Judging from the only two acquaintances we have made here, I beg to differ with you," was Buffalo Bill's gallant response.

"Thank you, but we are the only representatives of our sex here. You will have to deal with the wild element of a very tough camp, so be on your guard."

"We are not wholly strangers to the border, but we thank you for your kind warning. I may add, we had another warning on our way here."

"How so, may I ask?" said Louise Gray, and both women seemed interested.

Wild Bill had remained quiet, but was attentive while Buffalo Bill told the story of their being ambushed and saved by two wonderful shots at long range by the mysterious man living alone upon the mountain spur.

"Who is this unknown dead shot?" suddenly asked Wild Bill.

"Well, he is, as you say, unknown; but we call him the Bravo here and sometimes Coffin Bill."

Has he tried his aim before in these parts, Mrs. Gray?"

"Yes, a number of times."

"What does he do?"

"No one knows," said Kate. "He has money in plenty, pays liberally for all he gets, and plays cards often, paying promptly when he loses, though he is often successful, as Lou knows, for my friend is the owner of the Queen of Hearts gambling saloon."

"Yes, he is a bold, clever, fearless player, and he seems to know all that is going on about him the while. The man is a mystery to me, and I am sure he is here for some purpose that he keeps to himself," Louise Gray remarked, in a tone that showed more than a passing interest in the handsome and mysterious frontiersman.

The scouts were becoming more and more interested in him also, and Buffalo Bill told of his having just completed a coffin when they rode up.

"Then some man's doom is sealed for this night, for the Bravo always gives fair notice to his victim, if I may so call the man he kills, and brings a coffin to bury him in."

"He's a liberal sort of pilgrim, to say the least of him," Wild Bill said, with a smile.

Supper was now finished, and Lady Lou invited

the strangers to call at the Queen of Hearts during the evening, and they promised to be there, as they had told the Bravo they would meet him there.

Lighting their cigars, the two scouts sat down in front of the hotel, while they became objects of interest to half a hundred loungers gathered there, as Buzz Saw had already spread it about who they were. They were too well known by reputation not to create an excitement in Hallelujah City, and, wondering what could be their mission there, those among the camp-dwellers who had guilty consciences for crimes committed, began to feel very uneasy at the presence in their midst of two men whose names were a terror along the border.

That some one had recognized them the scout soon discovered; but, though they had hoped to remain unknown, they had hardly expected to do so.

They had come to that mining camp as the starting point for the duty they had to perform in solving the mystery of the Woman in Black, who had warned Keen Kit's stage of danger, and to strike the track of the Toll Takers of the Trails, whom they hoped to run to earth. They had already discovered a trio of mysteries for which they had been unprepared in that wild community, and Wild Bill remarked, very properly:

"Buffalo, it will take a hand full of trumps to win the game we have got to play in these parts."

"Yes, you are right; but somehow I believe we have struck the head center of the Toll Takers right here."

"Maybe; but let us go in and take a squint at the Queen of Hearts layout."

And the two scouts walked over to the saloon of the fair gambler. Approaching it, they heard the deep voice of some desperado above the noise in the large saloon, ringing out in earnest tones.

Over at the table of the Queen of Hearts the des-

perado who rejoiced in the title Six-shooter Sam was in luck, for he had been winning steadily from the boys.

The Queen of Hearts showed no annoyance at his doing so, counted out his winnings with firm hands and laid them before him, and went on dealing from the little tin box without any sign of nervousness.

At last the man said, in his rude, boisterous manner:

"I'll let up, fer I hate ter take money from a woman."

"Oh, no; if you enjoy the game pray keep on, without consulting my pleasure," said Louise quietly.

"If I only had a man ter play with I'd be glad; but ther durned garloots o' this town is sich cowards they is afeered ter lose a leetle dust at keerds."

"Well, pard, as I am not from Hellelujah City I am not afraid to risk a little gold dust in a game with you," said Buffalo Bill.

All turned their eyes upon the scout, who stood as though unconscious of the gaze his words brought upon him.

Calm and self-possessed, a perfect specimen of splendid manhood, he coolly eyed the astonished desperado, who, as soon as he could decide that his challenge had been accepted, said in his rough way:

"You are a stranger in this town?"

"I am."

"I guess yer must be, ter have ther cheek ter offer to tackle me at keerds."

"Are you so dangerous, then?"

"Am I dangerous? Waal, I see yer does not know me."

"No; but I hope to have that honor."

"I'm Six-shooter Sam."

The desperado made the announcement with the air

of a man who expected to see the one who did not know him flinch at the information.

Buffalo Bill smiled and said:

"It's a real, cute name; but I never heard of you before, pard."

"Never heard o' me?"

"No, where are you from?"

"Hallelujah City, and ther boss o' the town."

"I can hardly believe that."

"Waal, why can't yer believe it?"

"Because, though a stranger here, I have seen some pretty square-looking men around who don't look as though they served under a master."

Six-shooter Sam laughed loudly. He seemed to enjoy urging the scout on, as a cat plays with a mouse before destroying it.

"Waal, I'm master in Hallelujah, and I says so, and no man denies it unless he calls me a liar."

"Well, I cannot speak for the people here; but it seems to me if I lived in Hallelujah, I would not wear a yoke for any man."

"Pard, what might your name be?"

"I am often called Buffalo Bill."

All saw the start the bully gave. His dark face paled quickly, while he glanced about him, catching the eyes of his special pals.

"Does yer mean that yer're Buffalo Bill, ther scout?"

"Yes."

Six-shooter Sam seemed ill at ease, and in vain tried to hide it; but he had been leading the conversation, intending to spring a mine in the end which would add more of a crimson hue to his name. He felt that he could not now afford to drop the stranger then and there without being thought a coward.

So, after another quick glance over the crowd, to see that his gang were all present, he said:

"Waal, Buffalo Bill, yer may be ther king bee up whar you lives, but in Hallelujah City you're not ther boss, and no man dare say *I ain't*."

Buffalo Bill had sought no quarrel with the man. He had watched his playing with Louise Gray, the gambler's widow, whom they called the Queen of Hearts; and he had decided to "chip in" and prevent the woman from losing more money by asking the desperado to play with him, for he knew that Sam was a cheat. He had read the big ruffian at a glance, and, fond of a game of cards, he was anxious to win from the man and avenge the losses of Lady Lou.

If Six-shooter Sam sought a quarrel with him that would be the bully's own lookout, and he must take the consequences, and Bill mentally calculated that if the desperado forced him to kill him the loss would not be deeply felt in Hallelujah City.

Before he could reply to the man's direct dare to him to say he did not believe he was the boss of the camps, the door of the saloon swung open and, as all beheld who it was that entered, a hum of voices ran around the room, and in a chorus the name was spoken:

"The Bravo!"

It was Coffin Bill who entered! Upon one shoulder he carried a coffin, and all present felt that he had come to the saloon to find an occupant for the uncanny "overcoat." He walked straight toward the platform, on which sat the Queen of Hearts, with Kate Fenwick by her side, and before which were Six-shooter Sam, Buffalo Bill, and the immediate group about them.

A deathlike silence fell upon the throng at sight of the Bravo in black, carrying his coffin, and brave as were most of those present they shuddered at the sight.

The coming of the mysterious man at once turned

the attention of all from the threatened war between the desperado and Buffalo Bill, and the latter whispered to Wild Bill:

"Our mountain pard has arrived."

"Yes, and he has brought his burying box with him, which means business," was the answer.

The crowd gave way as the mysterious man advanced. All seemed to realize that he had come upon a special mission.

Coolly placing the coffin by the faro table, the Bravo raised his hat politely to the Queen of Hearts and Kate Fenwick; then, turning quickly upon the desperado, he covered him with a revolver, which no one had seen him draw, while he said sternly:

"Six-shooter Sam, I brought that coffin for you."

The change was so sudden, from the bullying manner of the desperado, who seemed proud of his name and reputation and the terror he caused many to feel, to the coming in of the Bravo, that it was a relief to all present, with perhaps the exception of the six-shooter braggart himself.

Excitement ran high, and yet it was suppressed, and all eyes were turned upon the man from the mountains who had brought such a weird gift to the desperado.

Buffalo Bill merely stepped back, as though he readily understood that there was no further cause for quarrel between the bully and himself.

The handsome Bravo looked dangerous. His suit of black fitted him well and displayed the firm contours of his superbly muscular figure. The coat was buttoned up close to his throat, giving him a clerical look, while his black, broad-brimmed sombrero was turned up on the left side, and caught there by a small star of black enamel. He wore no arms that were visible, and yet he had suddenly leveled a short revolver, but of large caliber, at the desperado.

The coffin was now seen to be well made, stained black, and upon the lid in red letters those near enough read: "Six-shooter Sam."

Mrs. Gray and the fair landlady of Kate's Kitchen were too familiar with scenes of death, which were almost of a daily occurrence, to show any excitement, and they calmly waited the ordeal that must come, while the crowd, with quick unanimity, separated on either side, and left the space behind the Bravo and the bully open for flying bullets.

The bluster of the desperado was at once checked by the threatening words of the Man in Black. Sam had often said in public that the Bravo was an over-rated man, and that he wished a chance at him some day, either with cards, knives, or revolvers. The fact was, he was jealous of the reputation which the mysterious mountaineer had gained, and he hoped for a chance to remove his rival—for as such he looked upon him.

Several times he had challenged the Bravo for a game of cards, or to shoot with him for a money prize, but the reply had always been:

"Some day, Six-shooter Sam, when I feel in the humor for a game with you, I'll let you know, and I'll give you fair warning."

That any other game than one of cards was intended by the Bravo, Sam had not the remotest idea; but he hinted to a few of his intimates that he wished them to be on hand, and added that, after he had won a handsome sum of money from his adversary, he would pick a quarrel with him.

Upon this promise his friends had gone there, feeling sure of sport, as they looked upon an encounter which they were not engaged in.

When, therefore, the Bravo entered, bearing a coffin, a hush fell upon all.

Several times before he had given warning of his coming to certain wild characters in the camps, and he had never failed to keep his word, and, more, a death was certain to follow his arrival, until, as Texas Jack once said, he seemed to have a "contract" for taking off some of the lawless spirits of the mines.

CHAPTER V.

COFFIN BILL ACTS.

Sam saw the entrance of the Bravo, as the others did, and beheld the grim box he carried; but he was not prepared for such quick work of a hostile nature, so he was taken unawares. He was covered with a revolver, which looked into his eyes not three feet away, and his own weapons, four splendid shooting irons, were yet in his belt.

"Say, pard, I ain't no actor, to play jokes on, for I don't take kindly to funny business," growled the desperado.

"I certainly fail to see any joke in my telling you that I have brought a coffin for you, Six-shooter Sam," was the reply, in the deep, stern voice of the Bravo.

"Does yer mean it?"

"I do, for I left you a note on your door that I would be here to-night to have a game with you."

"And is this the game?"

"No; I merely intend to disarm you now, and then give you my commands, which you are to obey."

"Durned if I do!"

"That we shall see."

The Bravo quickly unbuckled the belt of arms around the desperado's waist, still keeping him covered with his revolver.

"Pards, ain't I no right here, thet yer see me disarmed?" cried the bully.

As his eyes met those of several of his pals, they made a step forward, when Buffalo Bill called out:

"Hold on, there. This is a case of man to man, so the one who chips in dies with his boots on."

This caused the bully's immediate friends to drop back, and the Bravo said politely:

"Thank you, sir; but I will soon settle this affair."

Raising his voice, he called out:

"Who of you here have lost money in a game of cards with this man?"

"Lots of us has lost, but not lately, though Lady Lou got roped in fer a cool fifteen hundred to-night."

"Is that so, Lady Lou?"

"Yes, it is."

"At faro?"

"Yes."

"What cards did you use?"

"My own pack."

"Where do you leave them?"

"In the lock drawer of this table."

"Look and see if they have not been doctored."

She glanced rapidly over the cards, and quickly said:

"Yes, they have been, and I noticed to-night that the smaller cards seemed to come out oftener than I could account for, and Six-shooter Sam won on those."

"You are a stranger in Hallelujah City, sir?" said the Bravo, turning upon Wild Bill.

"Yes."

"Please take the money from this man's pocket, and give back to Lady Lou the amount he won from her to-night."

"I'll do it, pard," and Wild Bill did so, in a very quick and skillful manner.

"It's cussed robbery, and you'll pay ther costs, young feller. Yer hear what I says," savagely cried the Six-shooter.

"No, you'll pay the cost, for I'll return you your weapons now, and give you one hour to get out of these mines."

"Will you go?"

"You'll give me back my weapons?"

"Yes, I so said."

"Then I stands here and has it over with you," was the dogged reply.

All gazed at the Bravo, and saw him step up to the desperado, holding out his weapons, while they heard him say a few words in a low tone. What he said no ear caught, other than the one for which they were spoken, and the effect upon Sam was startling, for he turned to an ashen hue, staggered back as though dealt a blow, and gasped forth pleadingly:

"My stars! yes, I'll go! I'll go!"

"Here are your weapons, sir!"

The desperado grasped the belt of revolvers, turned quickly and strode from the saloon.

No shout of derision followed his exit, for the crowd seemed to be too deeply moved to shout. All gazed in silence at Bravo Bill, whose eyes followed the retreating form of the Six-shooter ruffian until the door closed behind him.

The moment the door closed upon the retreating form of Six-shooter Sam, the Bravo's manner changed, and, turning to the beautiful faro dealer, he said pleasantly:

"Pardon my interruption, Lady Lou, but I have relieved you of a nuisance, to say the least, and permit me to present the coffin as a souvenir of Six-shooter Sam."

"Thank you, sir! I will accept it, and appreciate the gift from you more than I did the man who so nearly became its occupant."

The Bravo bowed, and was about to retire, when Six-shooter Sam's gang, feeling themselves disgraced by the action of their leader, and confident in numbers, for there were fully a dozen of them, decided to crush Coffin Bill then and there.

So a self-appointed leader stepped forward, and leveled his revolver full upon the Bravo, while he said:

"See here, pard, ye ain't goin' ter have things all yer own way."

"Well, what do you wish," was the unmoved reply.

"Ye had the game all yer own with a man as I didn't think had any backdown in him, so now ye'll have ter crawfish, or turn up yer toes, for I has ye kivered."

No one had noticed what had become of the Bravo's revolver. It had disappeared as mysteriously as it had appeared when he needed it.

Now it was not to be disputed that Giant Bruce, as the tough was called, on account of his great size and strength, certainly had the Unknown covered.

Cheered at the sight, his comrades began to crowd around him, for to down the mysterious man would be to relieve Hallelujah City of one whom all the evil-doers feared greatly.

All felt for the Bravo, but he laughed lightly and said:

"Before you put on airs, Bruce, be sure you have not a revolver muzzle at the back of your own head."

The man wheeled quickly, and, more sudden than a panther's leap was that of the Bravo, who, in a flash of time had driven his fist into the face of his big foe, seized him by the throat, and hurled him, with an exhibition of seemingly more than mortal strength over a table into a corner of the room.

Then, in another second, he stood, a revolver now suddenly appearing in each hand, while he said in a tone of sarcasm:

"Do the friends of Giant Bruce wish to play the game to a finish?"

The gang were cowed somewhat by the sudden defeat of their leader who was rising, half stunned, from the corner, and yet when he joined them again, furious as a mad bull, bleeding and in pain, war to the knife

seemed to be the only alternative, when the voice of Buffalo Bill was heard:

"Men, don't crowd that gentleman, for he has friends here!"

The scout had drawn his weapons.

"So I say." Wild Bill also stood at bay, stepping to the side of the Bravo.

They certainly were a striking trio, as they stood at bay, side by side, all with revolvers drawn, facing the wildest element in Hallelujah City. The gambler's widow glanced with undisguised admiration at the tall form of the Bravo, and her eyes shone with pride and delight as they met his dark ones turned upon her for a moment.

Even the desperado band was struck by the determined look and general appearance of the three, and the Bravo said calmly:

"Giant Bruce, do you wish to play the game out?"

It was a critical moment, and the large crowd were as silent as the grave, wondering what the end would be.

But the Giant and his pals were no men to play against odds. They ran their eyes along the line of Coffin Bill and the two scouts—and he decided to let the matter drop. So he answered gruffly:

"I ain't no man to pick a quarrel in the presence o' ladies, so I jist say hold yer keerds ontill another time and we will see who holds trumps."

"I know now," was the cool response of the Bravo, and his words indicated that he wished the fracas to come then, backed as he was by such allies.

This banter the Giant was compelled to answer, so he said:

"Who holds trumps?"

"I do."

"I doubt it."

"Shall I give you proofs?"

"Does ye mean ter open fire here?"

"No."

"What does ye mean?"

"I will hand my weapons to Buffalo Bill here, while you place your belt of arms in the hands of that villain on your right; then step forward and let me say just half a dozen words to you."

"I'll do it!" and the Giant handed over his belt of arms.

The Bravo at once gave his two revolvers into Buffalo Bill's keeping and stepped up to the Giant and uttered a few low-spoken words.

The effect was magical, for the Giant shrank back with a look of horror upon his brutal face, which at once turned to the hue of death.

"Now, sir, go!"

Sharply the command rang out, and Giant Bruce seized his weapons and, without a word, slunk out of the saloon as had the Six-shooter before him.

All stood in amazement, gazing at the Bravo.

What strange power held this mysterious man over these wild border dwellers, almost as savage as wolves in their nature?

That question no one could answer, and, without any explanation Coffin Bill turned to Buffalo Bill and said in his courtly way:

"Gentlemen, you have canceled the debt you owed me, and I thank you. We will meet again."

He raised his black sombrero and walked from the saloon, while one of the gang of Six-shooter Sam called out:

"I seen whar he keeps them guns o' his! They was up his coat sleeves, pards; ef he isn't the devil hisself he is his leftenant."

CHAPTER VI.

A SECRET POWER.

When Six-shooter Sam left the Queen of Hearts Saloon he mounted his horse, a splendid animal which he always kept not far from him, and rode at a gallop down the valley to his cabin.

It was but a mile away and built against the mountainside, just where there was a trail around the cliff to the range above. This trail the desperado pretended to keep closed up, so that no one could pass that way, but the obstruction was such that a minute's work could dash it all into the river, forty feet below.

Just across the river was a flat which cut off approach from that direction, so that the cabin of the desperado was really approachable from the front only, and he could make a hasty retreat therefrom to the range above if it became necessary.

His cabin had but one room, and the door was made fast by two chains and padlocks.

Dismounting, he unlocked his door, and, entering, soon had a candle lighted. Then he stood like a great brute at bay, gnashing his yellow teeth, his hands clenched tightly together, and his face white as the bronze of his complexion would admit.

"Who is he? what is that man?" at last broke from his lips.

After a while he became more calm and threw himself into a rude chair and began to think.

"I obeyed, yes, because what else could I do? Curse him—curse him! And I must leave here, for here he will come to see if I have gone. I will at once get my traps together and go. But where? Bah! need I ask where? Why, I will go where he can never come."

Springing to his feet, he hastily began preparations to leave his cabin.

A couple of blankets, a large oilcloth, a storm suit, some cooking utensils, bag of provisions, a few extra clothes and a rifle and ammunition were all his belongings. These were made into two bundles and strapped upon a packsaddle.

Then he went out and led a second horse from where he was staked out in the bottom, up to the door, and placed the packsaddle upon him.

His next move was to take from a secure hiding place a belt of money, gold, bank notes, and dust.

This he strapped about his waist just as he heard the clatter of hoofs.

"Oh, he is coming! The hour is up that he gave me." And the voice of the ruffian trembled with excitement. "Oh, that I had the nerve to kill him! But, no! I dare not do that. Ha! I know that signal!"

And a whistle was heard, repeated five times, sharply.

Then up to the door dashed a horseman, and Giant Bruce sprang from his saddle, stooped at the low door and entered.

"Bruce, you here?"

"Yes."

"You have come to sneer at me, I suppose?" said Six-shooter Sam.

"Oh, no, for he knew me, too!"

"What!"

"I repeat it!"

"He recognized you?"

"Yes."

"As what?"

"Don't be a fool, Sam; for, though I did not know his power over you at first, I do now."

"What do you mean, Bruce?"

Each man had now dropped the border dialect in the excitement of the moment.

"I mean just what I say."

"And what do you say?"

"I say that but one thing could be said to you to make you sneak away like a whipped cur, as you did, and that thing was said by the Bravo—the same that he said to me."

"Did you have trouble with him?"

"Yes."

"How so?"

"I felt ashamed of your cowardice, so I took up your quarrel."

"The more fool you! Well?"

"I had him fairly covered, and yet he tricked me by telling me to be first sure that a revolver muzzle was not at the back of my head."

"And you looked to see?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"I got a blow like the kick of a government mule, full in the face; then he grasped my throat, and hurled me with a strength which mine is but child's play as compared to, over a table and chairs, into a corner. See, his fist bruised my face, and I was cut on the forehead by my fall."

"And what happened then?"

"Oh! our gang took up the quarrel, when those two scouts, Wild Bill and Buffalo Bill, chipped in on one side of him to back him up, and six revolvers were leveled, as steady as cannon. Of course the boys caved, and I was told to step forward and hear what the gent had to say."

"What had he to say?"

"More than I wanted to hear."

"What was it?"

"See here, Sam, only certain words could be said to a man that would make him back down as we did. Those words were said, and they proved to me that

you and I were in the same boat, though we did not know it."

"Well, you accuse me of being under that man's power?"

"I do."

"Name the power, then."

"It is unnamable, but you are obeying his command, for you are ready to go."

"Well, and what about you?"

"I would not let the sun rise upon me in Hallelujah City for a cool five thousand."

"Then go with me," suggested Sam.

"Agreed! Which is your way?"

"North, south, east, west—anywhere."

"That suits me; but have you money?"

"Some little."

"And I have a few hundreds."

"With your horse and outfit?"

"Yes. My extra animal will also carry your pack."

"Good! Come with me to my shanty."

"It is on the trail to his home."

"Yes, but we must go that way. Bruce, you say we are in the same boat. Won't you tell me his power over you?"

"No more than you dare tell me what he said to you."

"We are two. Well, why not meet him on his homeward way?"

"Sam! dare you do it?"

"Dare *you*?"

Thus the two stood in silence for full a minute, and Bruce said at last:

"Let us go."

"You did not answer my question, Bruce."

"You know that I can give no answer."

"How do I know it?"

and he rode the same night, and we

to make no response. It was not

to me and Jerry himself, and you

to be able to do so. That the same

which had they appeared to admit,

it is not the unknown influence

and his horse and rode away from

which Sam had long dwelt as a

company.

which had been lost, was not as brutal

than mine, and his will had been lost

of the desperate.

the gang, some eight in number, were

the chief of Sam, their chief, from fear,

and from other motives.

Sam's mysterious power had sent the

movement into exile.

entered the cabin of the Giant gangster.

He had but a few minutes, and his belonging

rested upon the back of Sam's horse.

He rode down into the broad trail leading

to the shanty, and just there they suddenly halted.

They were waiting for their spurs sank into the

ground, and they sped away at a run

to the shanty.

Sam's head was the Bravo seated upon his

side of the trail, silent, motionless.

While the moon rising above the mountain

light fell upon him. He uttered no

word, there urged them on as though

of their heels.

The members of Six-shooter Sam's gang

showed signs of distress.

They were feared by their leader and his lieutenants.

They felt

"Because we are both under the same spell, and we dare not break it."

Six-shooter Sam made no response. It was evident that neither man dared betray himself, and yet each tried to make the other do so. That the same secret power influenced both they appeared to admit, yet neither dared say what that unknown influence was.

So they mounted their horses and rode away from the cabin where Six-shooter Sam had long dwelt as a terror in the community.

Giant Bruce, though also dreaded, was not as brutal as the Six-shooter ruffian, and his will had been led by the stronger one of the desperado.

The rest of the gang, some eight in number, were but tools in the hands of Sam, their chief, from fear, because of pay, and from other motives.

But Coffin Bill's mysterious power had sent the leader and his lieutenant into exile.

They soon reached the cabin of the Giant gangster. His packing up took but a few minutes, and his belongings were strapped upon the back of Sam's horse.

Then they moved down into the broad trail leading down the valley, and just there they suddenly halted, but only for an instant, for their spurs sank into the flanks of their horses and they sped away at a run at what they saw.

What they beheld was the Bravo seated upon his black horse on one side of the trail, silent, motionless as a statue, while the moon rising above the mountains cast its light full upon him. He uttered no word, but his presence there urged them on as though Satan was at their heels.

The other members of Six-shooter Sam's gang were in a quandary, and showed signs of distress. They had been deserted by their leader and his lieutenant without a word of explanation. They felt

angry toward them, and far more offended with Coffin Bill.

It was "pay night" for them, as Six-shooter Sam always paid his gang a certain sum weekly to be ready for his beck and call.

They were short, therefore, the sums they had expected to get that night, and so they placed this to the account of the Bravo.

These men, eight in number, lived near together, as their leader had suggested. Their home was in the edge of the camps, upon a ridge two miles from the town. If they mined any, no one had discovered it; yet they called themselves miners. Their chief occupation was loafing about the saloons, gambling, drinking, and obeying the commands of their master.

They were a dangerous lot to set loose in a community, and, finding themselves deserted by Six-shooter Sam and Giant Bruce, they were in a fair humor to do mischief. They slunk out of the Queen of Hearts Saloon soon after Giant Bruce had gone, but went one by one.

Then they met outside, went to another drinking place and filled up with bad liquor, after which they proceeded to the cabin of their leader to find it abandoned. On to the home of Giant Bruce they tramped, to discover that it, too, was deserted.

They sat down in a very ugly mood. Each waited for the other to speak, and at last one of the gang, who answered to the cheerful cognomen of Buzz Saw, and whom the reader has seen before when he recognized the two scouts, broke forth:

"Pardners, as Six-shooter and Giant hev deserted us, I claims ther right o' leadin', for I has turned up more toes than any other man in this crowd. And, more: I are willin' ter fight right here now fer ther place o' cap'n. Who are ther man as is willin' ter do ther same?"

'As Buzz Saw had already whipped out his gun, not another one dared move a muscle, fearing that it would be looked upon as an effort to draw and contest the place of captain, and so only silence followed the words of the self-appointed chief.

Then, too, nobody else just then wished to take the lead and go wrong.

Buzz Saw seemed satisfied, as there was no opposition, and pleased, too, so he said:

"Waal, thet settles it, as yer all agrees, and I are cap'n o' ther layout, which I hereby christens as ther Buzz Saw Bravos."

A hum of admiration at this name ran around the crowd, and, seeing the good impression he was making, Buzz Saw continued:

"Now, pards, one man in Hallelujah has got the town by the throat, and he are ther pilgrim thet this night druv two o' our best pards out o' the mines. I refers ter Coffin Bill, who yer all knows hev been king bee long enough. He hev nigh onto a dozen graves down in ther bone garden, all of his makin'; and he hev before this druv men out o' ther camps which didn't go feet fust, but skipped out o' fear o' him.

"Now, I says this ain't squar' o' one man ter do, and I are the one ter say no to his yes.

"Is yer with me, lads?"

A general assent was the response, and Buzz Saw, intoxicated with bad rum and delight at his success mixed, went on to say:

"Now, jest two miles from here are ther home o' that unknown gent. We left him at the saloon, and ef he ain't gone by yet, we'll jest interview him on ther way.

"Ef he hev gone by, then he have skipped to his den and so thar we goes, and ef his cabin catches fire

and burns down with him inside, them who is ter blame fer it?"

This was a startling suggestion, and it went far to sober the gang.

But they were bent on mischief, and Buzz Saw soon discovered that they would follow his lead.

"We kin find out, by sneakin' up to his stable, ef his horses is thar, and, ef so, then he are inside."

"Then we kin light a fire all around ther cabin, and hide, and, ef he runs out, drop him.

"Then we kin skip for home, and be in our leetle beds long afore dawn.

"Does yer follow me, pards?"

He started down the trail leading from the cabin of Giant Bruce, and, in silence, the men followed him.

Up the valley trail they went, and, when near the home of Coffin Bill, they halted, while one of the number, who had long been an Indian fighter, crept forward to reconnoiter, and see if the two horses of the Bravo were in the little stable in the rear of his cabin.

If the horses were there, and the Bravo was known to have two splendid animals, then the master was at home.

The minutes passed slowly away to the anxious band, while they waited their comrade's return.

When half an hour had gone by and he did not return, they grew nervous, and Buzz Saw at last decided that it was best for all of them to go forward at once.

"We are seven ter one, pards, so come on, and no marcy is ter be shown Coffin Bill."

Then, as silent and merciless as Indians, the Buzz
Saw bravos crept on up the hill to do their deadly
work.

The crowd of men who had decided upon such a cruel end for Coffin Bill felt a trifle nervous at the

and it is not who had gone to the transmitter
the prices

...it was called, not because the man was
...it is the reason that he had been a teacher

...the ...
...the ...
...the ...

...we expected to have been the same.
...had not returned, therefore, was a
...condition had been...

...to be a good thing that something had gone wrong. It was a good thing that something had gone wrong. It was a good thing that something had gone wrong.

...the world would have been with us. The
...the world would have been with us. The
...the world would have been with us. The

I've wisely decided that all must go
I've decided that they were the

they advanced toward the coffin, talking

and saying that the warning was
and light

...just where it was, but we

are free before, through the Bureau
except visitors, and the interest of his

...to the doctors in and out

It was known that the stable was in the base of the cabin and...

... of the cabin and adjoining
... with murder in their hearts.
... put across the ocean...

...to the sheltering pines.

... or overhanging spot, with
... all in deep shadow

...ing over the rocks up the rap-
...the stream flowed swiftly by on the

...switched by on the

nonreturn of the man who had gone to reconnoiter the Bravo's premises.

Injun Al, as he was called, not because he was an Indian, but for the reason that he had been a trailer of redskins at one time, was known to be as cunning as a fox and as noiseless as a snake in his movements, so much was expected of him from his comrades. Why he had not returned, therefore, was a cause for the thought that something had gone wrong.

Had Buzz Saw requested another man to go, he was well aware that he would have met with a flat refusal, for not one would have dared venture alone where he might meet the dreaded Bravo.

So Buzz Saw wisely decided that all must go at once, and then he discovered that they were desirous of sticking very close together.

Cautiously they advanced toward the cabin, following the trail and regretting that the waning moon gave so much light.

The pines on the spur concealed the cabin from their view, but they knew just where it was, for several had been near there before, though the Bravo had never encouraged visitors, and the interior of his home was a *terra incognita* to the dwellers in and around Hallelujah City.

Still the place had been reconnoitered from a distance, and it was known that the stable was immediately in the rear of the cabin and adjoining it.

The seven men, with murder in their hearts, therefore, were glad to get across the open stretch of moonlight and reach the sheltering pines.

From there to the cabins was about two hundred feet, and the cliff or overhanging spur, with the sheltering trees, cast all in deep shadow.

A torrent falling over the rocks up the range was heard, and the stream flowed swiftly by on its way to the valley.

Otherwise not another sound broke the silence, and the solitude and stillness became awful in their guilty hearts.

Nearer and nearer they approached, Buzz Saw forced to take the lead, as the others hung back and gave him the place of honor with unanimous consent.

Just then he would have preferred to have some one else be the leader, but, having elected himself captain, he had to accept the dangers of the position.

Nearer and nearer they crept, until they were within a few steps of the cabin door, which was sheltered along the front by a shed roof.

Not a sound was heard, and the men halted.

The cracking of a revolver just then would have been music to their ears.

They stood in silence, waiting for their leader to speak.

Buzz Saw knew that he must act, and at once.

Injun Al was not to be seen, so what had become of him? Had he proven a traitor, and was there a trap set for them? Al's love of gold was well known, also the fact that he would commit any crime to get it. Perhaps, then, he had decided that the Bravo would pay him well to betray his comrades.

This thought made Buzz Saw break forth in profuse perspiration and profanity, and he dared not breathe his suspicion to the others.

At last he decided to advance boldly to the door, knock, and say that Lady Lou had been shot, and Kate Fenwick wished to have the Bravo come at once to the tavern, giving his name as Mustang Matt, the stable boy who cared for the horses of the two women. He whispered his plan to the others, and bade them take their positions with him, and all fire into the door when it was opened by Coffin Bill.

This plan was agreed to as a good one, and the plotters moved forward, to suddenly come to a halt.

There, before their eyes, within reach of their hands, was a human form. It was not standing up, for its feet did not touch the ground, but it was hanging from the limb of a tree overhead.

The men halted, as though turned to stone, while there came from the lips of Buzz Saw the horrifying words:

"Pards, it's Injun Al, and he hev been hanged!"

The plotters were too dazed for a moment to move, but only for an instant.

Then around each corner of the cabin resounded two most appalling, deep-mouthed howls, and, following them, came a series of wildest yells, as though a band of Sioux were rushing into battle.

With answering yells, only of terror, Buzz Saw and his comrades bounded away in flight, while around the corners of the cabin sprang two enormous black dogs, baying loudly and savagely, and following upon the track of the terrified desperadoes.

Down the steep trail they sped like mad, Buzz Saw nobly keeping up his reputation as leader, and their speed was increased as the deep-mouthed dogs ran close behind.

Like a human avalanche they went down the mountainside into the valley, and not until their tired legs weakened beneath them did they check their swift flight.

The two dogs had halted on the ridge, but kept up their loud baying, as though to urge the fugitives on.

As these slackened their pace, they did not speak, for they could not. They were panting like hard-run hounds, and walked along as best they could, resting from their race for life.

By a cross trail they at last reached the two large cabins where they made their home, and up to then no

word had been spoken. They were literally too full for utterance, too tired to talk.

Then candles were lit—for they seemed to want plenty of light—they all assembled in one cabin, the door was locked, and they threw themselves down upon benches, and gazed into each other's faces.

Buzz Saw at last broke the silence, and his words met with an affirmative response in the hearts of all.

"Pards, that man is the devil!"

The spell broken, they all began to talk, and for a moment no one understood what was said.

But order came when Buzz Saw asked:

"Did yer mind thet pack o' black dogs, pards?"

"Was thar more'n two of 'em?" one asked.

"Yas, I seen a dozen."

"They was black wolves."

"I thought they was b'ars."

"They was as big as buffaloes."

"Pards, Injun Al hev been lifted by a rope."

"Yas; he were dead."

"I jist got one look inter his face as a streak o' moonlight fell onter it, and it jist said ter me ter git."

"Yas; and we all got."

"We followed ther cap'n," one said, with a sly look at the crushed Buzz Saw. "Pards, it were awful!"

And so the conversation went around, and not until day dawned did the frightened plotters dare lie down to seek rest, and not then until a jug of rum had been drained to the dregs.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PARDS AT WORK.

After Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill left the Queen of Hearts Saloon, they decided to have a walk and view the valley camps by night. Their brains were busy coursing over the scenes of the night, and they wished to talk over their adventure.

"Well, what do you think of our friend?" asked Wild Bill, as the two walked along the broad valley trail.

"I think he's a little more man than any one I ever saw before, and that is saying a great deal, Bill, when I include you, Frank Powell, and Texas Jack."

"Yes, and I'll include one other—yourself, Cody, and make the same remark, for he's more man than I thought was running around this country at large."

"Did you see him pick that giant up and pitch him over into the corner?"

"Yes; and he had to handle two hundred and eighty or ninety pounds of solid man to do it."

"But he did it with the greatest ease. Who do you think he is?"

"I give it up," said Wild Bill. "He seems to run Hallelujah City, and he let me out of a row with that terror, Six-shooter Sam, for our talk was leading up to a better acquaintance, I was sure."

"So was I, and he was a dangerous fellow, too."

"I was sure of it, and you can bet I was watching him close."

"I saw that; but what made him get out so fast when the Bravo gave him the countersign?"

"The Unknown had him down fine, as he did Bruce the Giant also. Why, he just seemed to breathe upon them, and they wilted."

"But will they let him drive them from the camps?"

"That depends upon how much sand they have got."

"So I think. Quick! down among those rocks, for yonder comes a crowd, and if we avoid them we may save trouble."

The two scouts dropped out of sight among a pile of rocks upon the trail, and soon the crowd they had discovered came along, halting not ten steps from them.

It is needless to say that they were Buzz Saw and his comrades, and what they said was overheard, and revealed the fact of their destination.

Having decided to keep to the long trail up the valley, to reach the home of Coffin Bill, they passed on, and the scouts stepped out of their place of hiding and stood in silence on the trail for a minute.

"Buffalo, they are going to make it warm for the Bravo."

"I should think so, when they speak of setting fire to his cabin and burning him up in it, Bill."

"Can they do it?"

"Did you count them?"

"Eight."

"Correct! And did you know them?"

"Haven't that happiness, Buffalo."

"They are the gang that were at the saloon to-night."

"Right you are, and we must chip in, too."

"Yes, and take this short cut to the Bravo's cabin, and warn him."

"Somehow I have the idea that Coffin Bill would give those fiends a picnic unaided, but our duty is clear."

"Yes."

They were about to start upon their way, by the shorter cut up to the mountain spur, when the clatter of hoofs fell upon their ears.

They halted, and, as but one rider was coming, waited. He soon came in sight, and, seeing them, drew rein, while he said:

"Good evening, gentlemen. You are taking risks, as strangers, to be out alone to-night."

"It is lucky we concluded to take a walk, for we saw a party of eight men go by here just now, and overheard their conversation," said Buffalo Bill.

"Plotting mischief, I suppose?"

"Worse than mischief, for they took the main trail to your cabin to burn it down, and you in it."

"Ah!"

"They were the gang you held at bay to-night, the backers of Six-shooter Sam, and afterward of Giant Bruce."

"Yes, they will do anything; but there is nothing to dread now from either Six-shooter Sam or Giant Bruce, for they have left the valley."

"You think so?"

"I feel sure of it; but I must get on home to receive my guests."

"We were just going to warn you, taking this short cut, as we heard them say, when we saw you coming."

"You have my thanks, gentlemen."

"And we will go with you now and see you through," bluntly said Buffalo Bill.

"I really dislike to give you so much trouble, for I believe I can master the situation."

"The odds are too great, so ride on, we follow," firmly said Buffalo Bill.

"Thank you, and come right on this trail, at a quick pace, and it will bring you to my cabin half an hour ahead of those fellows, who will have over a mile farther to go.

"I will ride on and get my allies ready, if you will excuse me."

With this Coffin Bill rode on at a quick canter up

the trail, while Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill followed rapidly on foot.

"Who the mischief are the allies he speaks of, Buffalo?"

"I don't know; but guess we soon will."

After a rapid walk of a mile they came to the cabin and the Bravo, now on foot, came forward to meet them.

At his heels trotted two huge black dogs, one of which the scouts had seen that afternoon.

"Glad to welcome you, gentlemen, and to introduce you to these noble dogs—my faithful allies. You will find them friendly—to you."

The dogs seemed friendly enough to the scouts, and trotted at their heels as their master led the way up to the cabin.

"I find some one has been here before me to-night, though nothing has been disturbed. My dogs were in the cabin, and never give sign of their presence unless I am around. See there!"

"Great guns! it is a man hanging before your door!" cried Buffalo Bill.

"Yes, to that large limb, as you see," was the cool reply.

"Why did you hang him?" Buffalo Bill asked.

"I found him there where you see him now."

"He is still warm."

And Wild Bill caught hold of his hands, which were pinioned to his side by a lariat.

"Come, gentlemen, we will go to the rear of the cabin and thence on top, for I have a little fort up there, and when the visitors come we can give them a surprise."

And the Bravo led the way round the cabin to the rear door, and thence up through a trap to the roof, leaving the two dogs on duty below.

That Coffin Bill had killed the man whom they

found hanging before his cabin door both Wild Bill and Buffalo Bill felt assured. He had remarked that he had found the man hanging there when he arrived, that some one had been there before him, and yet the body was still warm, the victim having been dead but a very few minutes at furthest.

Why the Bravo had said what he did they could not understand, for he certainly was amenable to no law, and no one would hold him responsible there. It was another of his mysterious ways of acting, to deny having killed the man, they decided. And yet he looked like a man who would scorn to tell a lie!

When they ascended by a ladder to the roof of the cabin, they discovered that there was a dummy roof, as it was, or a false one perhaps it would be better to say.

From an outside view no one would suspect that a man could find shelter on the roof; but once up there the cabin logs were seen to extend above the regular roof so as to form a safe retreat and outlook.

From that position the cabin could be well defended, and the scouts could readily see how the intended assassins who sought to set it afire could be shot dead from above and held at bay, for the logs were a perfect protection from anything smaller than a cannon ball, and the overhanging cliff prevented an attack from that direction.

The Bravo had well chosen a spot for his cabin, and the latter had been built with a view to resistance and siege.

The two dogs were placed where they could hear a low command from their master, and the three men took up their positions, armed for the fray.

"If I can frighten them off without firing a shot it will be better and more effective, and I believe it can be done," said the Bravo, and the scouts wondered at his merciful intention.

They were not a minute too soon in gaining their position, for they beheld the crowd of desperadoes coming in a body. They had waited over half an hour for Injun Al, and as he did not return they were coming to the attack.

As they reached the swinging form and halted in terror, Coffin Bill gave a low whine, and instantly the two dogs broke forth in long, loud, dismal howls, which added to the terror of the gang.

Then the Bravo set the example by uttering a wild, unearthly yell, which the scouts added to with their thrilling war cries, and as has been seen, away went the appalled villains at breakneck speed down the hill, it being a wonder that some of them did not fall and kill themselves.

Had the desperadoes heard the laughter of the scouts at their flight they would have been mad enough to have returned and fought it out; but their ears were filled with the deep baying of the dogs, who pursued, yet, without orders from their master, had not seized upon the hindmost fugitives.

The brutes were too well trained to disobey a command, and Coffin Bill had said:

"After them, brave dogs, but don't take hold!"

Wild Bill fairly shook with laughter, and the Bravo said, as the dogs came trotting back:

"It was better than killing them, and there is but one in that band I wish for game, and his time will come."

"You had every right to kill them, as they came to take your life; yes, to burn you to death."

"Oh, yes, Wild Bill, but I never take life unless it is absolutely necessary, and fright did as well as bullets in this case."

"It did better, I guess, for we could not have killed them all, and they certainly were all nearly scared to death. My! how they did go!"

And Wild Bill again broke out in laughter.

"But what is to be done with that fellow?"

Buffalo Bill pointed to the form of the dead desperado.

"I'll bury him over in the pines in the morning, but will cut him down now."

And the party descended from the roof.

The body of Injun Al was lowered and placed in the stable, and then the Bravo unsaddled his horse, which he had only had time to put in his stall, after which he said:

"Now, gentlemen, though I have no idea that those fellows will return, I shall claim you as my guests to-night."

"Oh, no; it is not much of a walk back to the camps, thank you," said Buffalo Bill.

And, as Wild Bill also urged their return, the Bravo said no more, but got a flask of fine liquor and a box of cigars, which he placed before his guests.

Then, as they sat for a while chatting, Wild Bill asked:

"Do you expect to make your home here, pard?"

"For a while longer; until I accomplish a certain aim I have in view," and the Bravo spoke as though the question had called up unpleasant memories.

"I fear those fellows will give you trouble," Buffalo Bill suggested.

"No, I think not, for I will keep my eyes upon them."

"Can you tell me anything about the history of those two remarkable women in the camp?" asked Wild Bill.

"All that I have heard, yes," and Coffin Bill told the story of the lives of Louise Gray and Kate Fenwick, from their coming to Hallelujah City, and added:

"Now, they are remarkable women, and, somehow,

I believe they were known to each other before they came here. There is a cloud upon their lives in the past, of course; but here they are treated with marked respect, and woe be unto the man who would offer an insult to one of them, for the miners consider them under their special protection."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SCOUTS' WEIRD DISCOVERY.

Both Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill felt that the Bravo in Black was more of a mystery the more they saw of him.

But they yet had a suspicion that he might, after all, not be a man to trust, and they dared not let him suspect why they had come to Hallelujah City, much as they would have liked to have his aid. He certainly appeared to be friendly to them, and they owed to him their lives.

They had, as he had been glad to acknowledge, returned the compliments in their service rendered him, and he had just given them advice and warning.

But was it in good faith? They hardly knew, for the man was such a mystery as to be unreadable. He was going away, he had said. Where, and for what purpose?

"It would be our chance, Wild Bill, to take his trail."

"You are right, Buffalo. Maybe, by following his trail, it might lead us to what we wish to find."

"Ah! you still cling to the idea that the Bravo is in some way connected with the Toll Takers?"

"Well, if he is not, what is he?"

"I give it up," answered Buffalo Bill, and the two scouts walked on to the hotel to get supper.

Kate was in her little parlor, just after supper, and Lady Lou was preparing to go into the saloon and deal faro.

The scouts were asked to enter, and Buffalo Bill said:

"We have decided to go on a little prospecting tour, Mrs. Fenwick, but hope to see you again, and wish

to thank you for your kindness to us, and pay our score."

"Are you going so soon?"

"We wish to be in the saddle by dawn."

"I am sorry to have you go, for it is a relief to have some one around who is not lawless."

"You ought not to remain among such lawless lot, neither of you."

"Ah me! perhaps not; but I am making money, and hope to put it to good use some day, so I put up with much now for the sake of the future."

"As I do; but this life will not last always," Louise said, in an absent kind of a way.

"Well, we leave you a good protector in the Bravo, should you need one," Buffalo Bill suggested, as a means of getting them to say more of Coffin Bill.

"We see little of him, as he is away often; but we have no personal fears for ourselves, for, lawless as these men are, they consider themselves individually our protectors."

"Yes, I have observed that; but is Coffin Bill a miner, Mrs. Fenwick?"

"Like himself, his affairs are unknown," was the quiet reply, and neither Buffalo Bill nor Wild Bill could detect in the faces of the women that they knew more of the Bravo than they admitted.

Having paid their bills, the scouts asked that no mention be made of their going away, and that night they appeared in the saloon of the Queen of Hearts.

Kate was there, as usual, and Louise had her place at the faro bank, and was dealing.

A number of players were about the table, as neither of the two ringleaders of mischief, and invariable winners, Six-shooter Sam and Giant Bruce, were present.

Wild Bill began to play, and his bets were always

large ones. But he lost steadily, and after a while he said, with a laugh:

"You have my luck to-night, Mrs. Gray; but sometime I'll break your bank."

"Certainly, sir; but forewarned is forearmed, you know."

"I'll try a game with some gentleman present, if I can find one willing to play," said Wild Bill, looking over the crowd.

"I are thet gent every time, pard," Buzz Saw challenged, as he stepped forward.

"I play for big stakes, remember."

"I hev ther dust, so go ahead."

They sat down to a table to play.

Wild Bill's luck seemed to have left him, for he lost steadily, and the bets were as high as a hundred dollars upon the turn of a card.

Buffalo Bill knew Wild Bill's nature never to give up while he had a dollar, so he wished to give him a hint that their money might be needed, when up to the table glided the Bravo.

"Pardon me, Mr. Hickok, for interfering with your game; but how much have you lost to this man?"

"Are thet your business, Coffin Bill?" growled Buzz Saw.

"It seems I am making it my business, Buzz Saw.

"Will you answer my question, Wild Bill?"

"A trifle over eight hundred," was the reply.

"Well, of course, Buzz Saw will save trouble by returning you your money, for he has been putting up counterfeit bills."

"I say it's a——"

But the hand of the Bravo dropped upon the throat of the man with a force that made his teeth rattle; and he said sternly:

"You have received by the coach to-day a package of counterfeit bills to pass off in the mines for good

money on shares. Hand over the good money you won to Wild Bill, and give up the packages of counterfeits to me. Steady, gentlemen, don't draw on me, if you value your lives!"

The last remark was addressed to the comrades of Buzz Saw, who were threatening trouble.

"I am with you, sir, too, if they cause trouble," said Wild Bill. "Do you think there is no mistake about this man's money, for it looks genuine?"

"Oh, yes; it looks genuine, but is counterfeit.

"You have your money back?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Now, George Jessup, alias Buzz Saw, you are my prisoner."

"Your prisoner? You ain't no power ter take me. Show your warrant!" yelled the desperado.

"Here it is, all in good order—come!"

He flashed a revolver in the face of the man with one hand, while with a dexterity that was marvelous he slipped a pair of handcuffs on the wrists of his prisoner with the other.

"Say, pards, I calls on you!" yelled Buzz Saw.

"So do I, not to interfere!" came the stern rejoinder, and Buzz Saw was dragged out of the saloon, while the crowd who would have followed, shrank back under the ringing command:

"Back! All of you!"

"Coffin Bill shows another side to his character," remarked Hickok.

"Yes, one equally hard to comprehend. But listen to those coyotes talk now."

Buffalo Bill regretted his words, for instantly Wild Bill called out:

"Hold on, you cowardly coyotes, slandering a man behind his back, for I will not tolerate it!"

Buzz Saw's gang turned upon the speaker, but not to act, for there stood Wild Bill, smiling and ready.

with Buffalo Bill by his side, cool and unmoved. The scouts looked too dangerous, and the Buzz Saw gang subsided.

Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill were determined to slip away from Kate's Kitchen without the fact being known to other than the landlady and the man who stood guard in the stable. They had paid their bills, bidden farewell to their hostess, and, going to their rooms, had slept for several hours. Then they slipped out of the hotel, sought the stable and, having paid the man there a liberal fee, secured their horses, mounting and riding out of the rear way.

"Well, Buffalo, we have given the slip to them all?"

"Yes, but isn't that Man in Black a dandy?"

"He is, indeed; but what do you make of his arresting that man Buzz Saw to-night and putting handcuffs upon him?"

"Buffalo, I have thought over that matter until I am tired. That Coffin Bill positively wearies me trying to cipher him out," said Wild Bill. "He said that he was going away."

"So he did."

Confident that they had thrown their shadows off their track, they did not worry when day dawned, but took it leisurely and several times halted to cover their tracks.

They wished to enter the Shadow Valley at a certain point where they deemed there would be less danger of their meeting any of the Toll Takers, so camped early, determined to push on the next day on foot, when they had found a hiding place for their horses, as they had decided to take the advice of the Bravo about not going mounted, so as to leave no trail.

Could they find a good hiding place for their animals they knew they could leave them for twenty-four hours at least.

The place was found, at the head of a cañon, and

the horses were fenced into a space where there was good grass and water, the scouts cutting down small trees to serve as a barrier with hatchets which they always carried.

They then had supper and lay down to sleep until midnight, when they rose and started for the Shadow Valley.

They had gone but a mile when a light flashed upon their vision. The rays come from over a ridge, and they cautiously made their way to where they could obtain a look down into the cañon.

What they beheld fairly startled them, iron-nerved as they were.

They looked down into the head of a cañon, not unlike the one in which they had left their horses. There was a stream in it, a plot of grass, and some scattering trees. The ridge surrounding the cañon, and where they stood, was heavily fringed with trees. There was a fire burning in the cañon, and staked out were five horses, and two more were feeding without being secured. These latter were as black as jet, and a saddle and a packsaddle lay near them.

Not far from the fire, which cast a cheerful, ruddy glow through the cañon, lay two huge black dogs, apparently resting after a jaunt, and near them were some blankets spread down, showing where some one had made a temporary bed.

But this was not all, for in the cañon were five men. Two of them were Indians, two were men at work with pick and shovel, and each was digging a grave. The fifth was Coffin Bill, the Bravo.

The two scouts gazed at each other in the darkness, as though striving to read each other's thoughts at what they beheld.

The scene fairly startled them, as they gazed down into the cañon.

There were two Indians whom they never remem-

bered to have seen before, and these stood, rifles in hand, as though guarding the two white men who were digging the graves.

And those two gravediggers? The scouts did not long remain in ignorance of who they were.

The huge form of the one on the right could be no other than Bruce.

On the left was the man who had long been the terror of Hallelujah City—Six-shooter Sam.

Each Indian had his man under guard.

The two men did not work rapidly, but with a heavy manner, and from time to time they cast looks at their redskin guards, and then over at the stern, mysterious, silent man who paced to and fro, to and fro, not far from them.

The blazing fire cast its rays full upon him, revealing his splendid form clad in black, his top-boots with their glittering gold spurs flashing at every step, his closely buttoned coat, with the rather large sleeves, in which, the scouts now knew, were deadly revolvers of heavy caliber.

His broad-brimmed black sombrero partially hid his handsome face, except when he turned toward the firelight in his ceaseless walk.

Those two men, Six-shooter Sam and Giant Bruce, the scouts knew, had obeyed the Man in Black as their master. He had commanded them to leave Hallelujah City, and they had gone.

The scouts knew that it was their work that had strung the man up before the cabin of Coffin Bill, for the Bravo had told them as much.

At last Buffalo Bill said, in a whisper:

"Wild Bill, are those men calmly digging their own graves?"

"It looks so, Buffalo."

"It does, indeed; but they are two to three."

"You mean, they should fight it out?"

"Yes."

"But the Bravo is there."

"True, and that means you deem it useless for them to make the attempt?"

"Yes, and more."

"What more?" asked Cody.

"That man commands them by his marvelous force of will, his secret power over them."

"Do you think we should interfere?"

"Buffalo, what could we do?"

"Demand that he spare those men."

"This is not our funeral, old scout!"

"Granted," said Cody, with a smile.

"It might be, did we interfere."

"You surely do not fear the man, mysterious being though he is?"

"Don't you know that I never knew what physical fear was?"

"Yes, I grant that; but you spoke as though we would get the worst of it if we interfered."

"We might kill the Bravo from here, true; but those redskins have their orders, and would never allow those two to escape."

"Well, we can do nothing?"

"Why should we, for those men are two of the worst characters in the mountains? You heard their pedigree thrice told, and they have been merciless desperadoes."

"That is true."

"They were driven out of Hallelujah, and halted, as we know, to kill the Bravo, and hanged a poor devil by mistake for him."

"He sent those redskins after them, and they have got them fast."

"All true, I admit; but it looks cold-blooded to make them dig their own graves, and then kill them."

"That is an idea, and we guess at it from what

we see," said the king of scouts. "We will wait and discover how it turns out."

Again silence fell between the two scouts, and then Buffalo Bill suddenly asked:

"Bill, what about the man Buzz Saw?"

"Oh, yes, the Bravo yanked him off with him out of the Queen of Hearts Saloon."

"Yes, and where is he?"

"Buffalo, I'm too tired to guess. I suppose he has turned up his toes."

"Like as not, for they get lead, steel, and knife epidemics about Hallelujah, as we both discovered; but peace to his sawdust, if he has gone," said Buffalo Bill indifferently. "After we find the Toll Takers, I am going to camp on the trail of Coffin Bill until I know all about him."

"I'm with you, Buffalo, if from curiosity only; but, see, the graves are about finished."

The two desperadoes had ceased their work, and turned toward the Bravo, who halted in his walk, coolly looked at his watch, and said something in a tone that the scouts could not catch.

That the desperadoes were pleading with him, they knew, and they heard his voice ring out sharply:

"Don't be cravens! Die like men!"

The desperadoes knelt down in the graves, and the redskins stepped toward them, extending a small deringer to each, which the Bravo had handed to them.

Then, before the scouts knew what was to be done, two shots rang out in rapid succession, and Wild Bill cried aloud:

"By gad! they have taken their own lives, Buffalo!"

At his voice the two dogs sprang up and uttered a warning yelp, and in an instant the Bravo had leaped forward, seized the blankets from the ground, and, dipping them into the brook, threw them over the fire.

At once all was in darkness, and Buffalo Bill said: "Come, we must go to the cañon and head him off, for he must know what we have seen."

They reached the cañon within ten minutes, but no one was there, other than the two dead desperadoes.

CHAPTER IX.

KNOWN AT LAST.

Just as the two scouts were riding along on their way to the stage trail.

They had a set purpose, as the stage boss had let them know that a large sum of government money was coming through on Keen Kit's coach, and the scouts would be on the watch.

As they neared the spot fatal to so many, several shots fired in the distance.

One man, Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill spurred forward. They knew that Keen Kit's coach was in the distance. They did not care to count odds, and they opened the scene, with a revolver in each hand. There was the coach, and Keen Kit was fighting for odds.

He had an ally in Coffin Bill, the two Indians, and two enormous black dogs.

Every one was engaged in battling with Mephisto and the Toll Takers, two dozen in number.

"Take it," cried Buffalo Bill, and he threw his revolver and aimed at the outlaw chief, who was fighting upon Coffin Bill, who stood before him, with his side, yet entirely fearless.

That of Buffalo Bill pierced the outlaw chief's side and he fell dead, heavily striking Coffin Bill, dropping at his feet.

At the same moment, and, with revolver in each hand, Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill were in the middle of the conflict.

But coming won the fight, for with their chief fallen and knowing who the scouts were, the road was clear. But they were relentlessly pursuing Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill, one Indian, and the

CHAPTER IX.

KNOWN AT LAST.

As dawn came, the two scouts were riding along on their way to the stage trail.

They had a set purpose, as the stage boss had let them know that a large sum of government money was coming through on Keen Kit's coach, and the road agents would be on the watch.

Suddenly, as they neared the spot fatal to so many, they heard shots fired in the distance.

As one man, Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill spurred forward. They knew that Keen Kit's coach was in trouble. They did not care to count odds, and they dashed upon the scene, with a revolver in each hand.

There was the coach, and Keen Kit was fighting against odds.

But he had an ally in Coffin Bill, the two Indians, and his two enormous black dogs.

The party was engaged in battling with Mephisto and his Toll Takers, two dozen in number.

"I'll risk it," cried Buffalo Bill, and he threw his rifle forward and aimed at the outlaw chief, who was rushing upon Coffin Bill, who stood before him, with arms at his side, yet entirely fearless.

The shot of Buffalo Bill pierced the outlaw chief's brain, and he fell dead, heavily striking Coffin Bill, and dropping at his feet.

Another moment, and, with revolver in each hand now, Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill were in the middle of the conflict.

Their coming won the fight, for with their chief dead and knowing who the scouts were, the road agents fled in dismay. But they were relentlessly pursued by Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill, one Indian, and the two dogs.

Crowded back before they could reach their horses the outlaws, their number but one-third the force they had begun to fight with, they all cried for mercy.

They were quickly bound together with lariats and marched back to the coach.

There was Keen Kit, very slightly wounded, trying to aid Coffin Bill, for the bone of one arm was broken by a bullet, and another shot had disabled the other, without which he was helpless.

One of the Indians was dead, and the other was severely wounded, but the two scouts had escaped without a scratch.

"Glad to see you, gentlemen, and to acknowledge another life debt I owe to you. You were just in time. I was rash to attack such a force, for I thought I might drive them off; but they knew that Keen Kit carried a big sum of money, and Mephisto himself led them, so they fought like demons, though, with the driver's aid, my allies and myself did kill half a dozen of them, and you have finished the contract."

The Bravo spoke in a light strain, and Buffalo Bill replied:

"It was a wipe-out and ends the Toll Takers' gang; but we didn't expect to find you an outlaw hunter, pard."

"No? Well, I hope you didn't expect to find me an outlaw, for outlaw hunting is my trade, as I will explain later, for, with Mephisto dead, I have nothing now to conceal."

"But the Woman in Black is not here," said Wild Bill.

"Later I will account for her, also," answered the Bravo, with a smile.

Just then a high call was heard, and soon after up dashed Captain Taylor with a score of soldiers and the fort surgeon.

"Hello! this looks like a human slaughter here,"

cried the captain, gazing upon the scene. "Had hot work, Cody, and I missed it, though I rode hard, for Colonel Roy learned of the big money Kit was to bring through, so he sent me as an escort."

"Buffalo Bill and his pard saved the money, and us, too, after we were driven to bay," cried the Bravo.

"Yes, and our brave friend here is badly wounded in both arms, so look to him first, Surgeon Clark," Buffalo Bill responded.

An hour after this meeting the coach started upon its way, with Buffalo Bill driving, for Keen Kit had been shot in the shoulder, so he rode in the stage, along with the wounded Indian, while Captain Taylor, Wild Bill, and the surgeon went into camp to look after the wounded and dead outlaws, as well as the prisoners.

The Bravo, at his request, had been aided to a seat on the box with Buffalo Bill, and as they pushed out for the fort he said:

"Cody, I can now explain to you who and what I am. My name is Redwell—John Redwell; my home is in California, and I was raised on a large ranch, where I was captain of the Regulative Rangers, so my life was spent in hunting outlaws.

"In an evil hour a stranger came to my country, young and handsome, a fascinating fellow, and he had with him two friends of the same stripe, the three winning the love of girls there, marrying them, and taking them East to their homes.

"The first one I referred to you killed to-day when you saved me from death at the hands of Mephisto, the outlaw chief.

"One of the trio I shot some months ago, and the third I sent West in irons. He's known to you as Buzz Saw, but at one time he was a very different-appearing man.

"My only near kinswoman, my idolized sister, was

the one who, as she believed, married Mephisto, then known to us as a gentleman by the name of Carr Carrol, but now known to me as the one-time backer of a Mormon Danite band and cast off by his church and his people.

"You avenged my sister, Buffalo Bill, in killing him, and glad will she be, for she is now at home on my ranch, almost broken-hearted at finding the man she loved had a dozen wives, and was an outlaw as well.

"The other two women who suffered at the hands of Mephisto's friends were those you now know as Lady Lou and Kate Fenwick, and it was I who urged them to remain here and make a fortune as they are doing; but now they will go to their old homes, for I shall leave this part of the country also, my work having, with your aid, been finished.

"You see, I am a government secret-service officer, and I came here to wipe out this band of outlaws. I have had allies in my two Indian friends, whom I brought with me, and, let me tell you that I secretly joined a band of Mormon Danites and spotted all the members.

"Two of that band were Six-shooter Sam and Giant Bruce, and they deserted from it, the penalty being death by burning at the stake.

"Now you can understand my hold upon them, and why they left the camps at my command; but they thought to kill me later, so I captured them, and I forced them to dig their graves, and die by their own hands.

"I have been kept informed by spies and ferrets of all the movements of Mephisto and his band, and let me tell you that it was only by playing the part of the Woman in Black that I have been able to save the coaches at times, for I am the Woman in Black.

"Now, sir, you have my story, which you can make

known to Colonel Roy and Wild Bill, but to others I do not care to be known as a detective. I am ready to answer any questions you may care to ask, Mr. Cody."

"I have none, sir, for your explanation tells all," was the answer of the chief of scouts. "It was a desperate thing for you to undertake, the driving off of Mephisto and his band; but it all came out right in the end."

"My coffin act gave me a very weird hold upon those outlaws of Hallelujah, did it not?"

"It certainly did—it scared them terribly," replied Buffalo Bill. "But where do you intend to go, after our return to Fort Keo?"

"I'll have to wait there a while for further instructions," answered Redwell. "I have heard that a number of people at the fort are on the verge of an expedition to the mining country of New Mexico, and I may be directed to accompany them."

CHAPTER X.

FOES ON THE TRAIL.

As it proved later, Redwell's supposition was correct. Three days after he and the scouts had escorted Louise Gray and Kate Fenwick safely to Fort Keo, they were intrusted with a new and important mission.

It was an enviable service to be ordered upon, in spite of its dangers, and each young officer of the fort felt sorry that he had not been chosen as the fortunate man to command the escort for two pretty girls down into the distant mining country.

Lieutenant Brian Vald, a man with a romantic and mysterious life, had been the officer selected, with Buffalo Bill as the guide and scout, to escort the two girls—Jane Turpin, a daughter of a rich miner, and her devoted friend Mona Borden, the daughter of the colonel commanding the military district—upon their long and perilous trail.

Miner Turpin had written for Jane to join him at his mining home, and, urged by the young girl, and permission given by the colonel, Mona had been most glad to go with her.

It was also decided, after the colonel and Brian Vald had had a long conversation aside, that John Redwell should join them at their first night's camp on the trail, with a sergeant, corporal, and sixteen troopers as a guard.

In addition there was to be Mona's quadroon maid, a negro cook, and a couple of horse wranglers to look after the ladies' horses and pack animals, for a complete camp outfit was to be taken along for their comfort.

Both the young ladies had been satisfied with this

arrangement, as far as the officer in charge was concerned, but they made no comment upon the fact that Redwell was to join them the first night on the trail, and not depart from the fort with them.

The cavalcade started at the appointed time from the fort, Buffalo Bill in the lead, and at the camp, the first night out, they found awaiting them the handsome young detective who was to accompany the escort.

Buffalo Bill and the lieutenant had a long talk together, for both knew that the dangers of the trail were great, and they had a heavy responsibility upon them in the care of the two young ladies.

It was the morning after the second night's camp on the trail that Buffalo Bill was observed to be in a hurry to get away. He had noticed signs the night before which he did not like, and, though speaking only of his fears to the lieutenant, he appeared as serene as ever; he was really anxious, and neither he nor Redwell closed their eyes all night, while the sentinels were quietly doubled, so as not to give the ladies any alarm.

The night passed without any disturbance, but Buffalo Bill had the camp awake at the first peep of day, and his scouts got all ready to start by the time the sun was rising.

"Is there any danger, Lieutenant Vald?" asked Mona, who had quickly noticed that something had caused alarm.

"Buffalo Bill has discovered Indian signs, and is anxious to be on the march," was the reply.

As they got some distance away from the camp, Buffalo Bill went over a rise, turned, and looked back. As he did so, he distinctly caught sight of a form moving in the timber.

Quickly turning in his saddle, with his glass to his

eyes, he saw several horsemen riding into the deserted camp.

"Yes, they are on our trail, and I only hope they have not divided and gone ahead to ambush us.

"If they do, it means the ambush will be at Sentinel Pass," mused Buffalo Bill, and he rode on over the ridge.

Once out of the sight of the Indians in the deserted camp, he halted and beckoned to the sergeant to ride on and join him.

"Sergeant, there are redskins already in the camp we left, but how many I do not know, only I saw the tracks of fully a hundred ponies last night.

"Drop back and ask Lieutenant Vald to join me, and then tell Redwell to hang farther back in the rear and look to be closely followed."

"Yes, sir."

The sergeant rode back to obey his orders.

In five minutes Lieutenant Vald was with the scout, and asked:

"Well, Bill, more signs?"

"More than signs, sir, for I saw redskins in our deserted camp, just as I came over the ridge."

"A stern chase is proverbially a long one, Buffalo Bill."

"True, sir, but the trail I saw last night numbered a hundred ponies, and that means about as many warriors."

"And we need not have any fear, for we are twenty-one fighting men, with the two ladies, the two horse wranglers, and Black Bob to call on in a pinch."

"We are all right, sir, in the open country, or corralled; but I believe this is the same force we saw the trail of at our first night's camp, and if so it means that they are following us."

"All yesterday I steered clear of any place to ambush, so they may have come on to watch their chance

and catch us in a trap, for to-day there are several places where we can be ambuscaded, notably Sentinel Pass."

"Any way to avoid it, Buffalo Bill?"

"Yes, sir; I can avoid it by a ride of a dozen miles out of our way."

"You had better do so; we want no fight if we can avoid it, for bullets and arrows are no respecters of persons."

"True, sir, and to have either of those young ladies killed would just about break my heart."

"Mine, too; so we will only stand at bay as a last resort."

"I have no fear for the pluck of the ladies, sir, for Miss Borden, as you know, has been in half a dozen Indian fights, while Miss Turpin has burned powder and seen men die, too, so they have nerves that will stand the strain; only, as you said, bullets and arrows strike at random."

"You will understand, then, sir, if I branch off from the trail?"

"Certainly, and I will keep the command well closed up."

Whereupon, Buffalo Bill was left again alone at the head of the party. Redwell left camp, intending to make a detour in the surrounding country to discover the movements of the Indians.

For Cody himself, he was a man to love the ring of weapons, the shouts of a fierce combat, and he gloried in a combat unto death; but with two such fair charges along, his brow became clouded as he dreaded the fate that might befall them. He, therefore, kept well ahead of his command, and thus held on until the noon halt.

Not another sign of an Indian had been seen, but Buffalo Bill was too experienced a scout to believe they had drawn off, so the closest watch was kept,

and one of his assistant scouts named Carrol was given his dinner and told to camp back a mile on the trail.

The foresight of the scout was soon shown in this, as, just as dinner was completed, Carrol was seen afar off on a hill, signaling wildly.

The camp was at once in commotion, the horses being bridled and saddled, and all made ready for a retreat, just as Carrol's rifle went to his shoulder, and began to ring out shots rapidly.

A moment after, he was seen to spring into his saddle and came dashing toward the camp.

Buffalo Bill was as cool as an icicle now, and Lieutenant Vald as serene as a May morning, while neither Mona nor Jane showed any signs of fear.

"We will push on at a good pace, sir, until the Indians come in sight and show their numbers," said Buffalo Bill, and, as Kit Carrol neared them, suddenly over the ridge where he had been posted dashed a number of mounted warriors.

"Fifty," said Buffalo Bill quietly, as he counted them, and added:

"We may look for fifty ahead, for these are only intended to drive us into ambush."

Kit Carrol told how he had discovered the Indians coming along on the trail, and seemingly in no hurry until they sighted him, though they knew there was a force not far ahead he felt most certain. He had stood his ground, after signaling, until they came within range of his repeating rifle, and then, aiming deliberately, had opened fire with good result.

The Indians came on with a rush, as though to drive the soldiers into a run, or bring them to a halt. Lieutenant Vald and the rear squad of troopers halted and opened fire when they came within range, while the others, with Buffalo Bill ahead, continued on their way at a steady pace.

The fire of the corporal and his eight men, with the repeating rifles of Lieutenant Vald and Scout Carrol, brought down several ponies and emptied a couple of saddles, a check which brought the Indians to a halt, for their rifles carried little better than their arrows.

"We are all right now, for they will keep at a more respectful distance," said the officer, and he followed on with his men.

All the feints of the Indians failing to bring the soldiers to a halt, or to put them in rapid flight, they contented themselves with following at a distance just out of range, singing their war songs, interspersed occasionally with wild yells.

As the party neared the range ahead, in which was Sentinel Pass, they came to a valley thickly timbered, and here Buffalo Bill rode back and joined the lieutenant.

"I wish to say, sir, that we can branch off here to the left, along the banks of the brook and not be seen by any lookout on Sentinel Pass, or by those who are following us."

"You know best, Bill."

"You see, sir, we can guard the approach here easily, and they can be made to believe we have gone into camp for the night."

"Yes."

"By following the stream you will come, after a ride of half a dozen miles, to the foothills, and there you can halt for our coming, for I will remain here half an hour with the sergeant and one squad of men. Kit can go on with you, sir."

"All right, Bill."

"The Indians, when they believe we have camped for the night, will signal, with smoke, to their comrades at the pass, and they will quietly await our coming to-morrow."

"And you really believe that there are more at the pass?"

"Yes, sir, the rest of the one hundred whose trail we saw."

"We have seen no trail left by them."

"They flanked to get there, sir."

"Well, Bill, I am too old an Indian fighter myself not to look for anything they might do, so I feel that you are right."

"I will continue on with the party, and await you at the foothills."

"Yes, sir; the rest here now will benefit our horses, and the halt at the foothills will help yours, and I do not believe we will be closely followed by those now in our rear."

So the party rode on, leaving Buffalo Bill, the sergeant, and eight men in the rear.

The nature of the ground prevented the Indians from seeing the party divide, and, as the scout at once had camp fires built and placed sentinels, it gave the impression that a halt had been made for the night, at a point which could be well defended.

As soon as the sentinels had been placed upon positions where they could be seen by the Indians, and at the same time have the protection of the rocks, Buffalo Bill set to work to use a little strategy.

Two extra uniforms were taken and stuffed with leaves, a face was made of a handkerchief and a hat put on a manufactured head.

Two of the soldiers had carved an imitation carbine from the dead limb of a tree, and when the dummy soldier was all ready, a squad marched to the two sentinel posts, as though relieving guard, and placed them on duty in the place of the live sentinels.

The two men just put there had been told not to move on their posts, and, knowing that the Indians were watching them, though not visible, as they

camped beyond a ridge, the "dummy sentinels" were left on post.

The camp fires were then replenished with wood, and Buffalo Bill made a short scout toward the redskins to see that there were none of them very near.

He turned by the posts of the sentinels, stopped as though for a few minutes' talk with each, and then returning to the camp, mounted his horse and led the soldiers on the trail after their comrades, all enjoying greatly the strategy of the scout to keep the Indians from immediately following them.

"They will discover the cheat after night comes, when they creep up to pick off the sentinels, and then they will be mad clean through," explained Buffalo Bill.

After a ride of six miles they came to the foothills when the sun was just an hour above the western horizon, and their comrades enjoyed also, when told of it, Buffalo Bill's strategic joke upon the redskins.

Having disposed of supper, they started on their climb of the mountain, with Buffalo Bill in the lead, for he had thus avoided Sentinel Pass on previous occasions, and so knew the trail.

CHAPTER XI.

THE ATTACK OF THE INDIANS.

Buffalo Bill rode to the front like a man who took life as it came, and yet he full well appreciated the great responsibility upon him of saving those for whom he was acting as guide and scout. He felt full confidence in his commander, for he knew that he could be depended upon and would yield to him when he knew the situation demanded it.

Kit Carrol he knew as a thorough scout and a man who would die by his side bravely if it came to that, while the sergeant and the soldiers had been picked as old Indian fighters and men of nerve and pluck.

With the two maidens not easily frightened, and also able to lend a hand, as were also the two horse wranglers and Black Bob, the cook, if called upon, Buffalo Bill felt that in an open fight he had no reason to fear the hundred Indians who were, he was sure, determined to capture his outfit.

He led the way over the mountain by a trail which many a man would have shrunk from following, and yet he heard not a murmur, saw not the slightest hesitation in any one who was following his lead.

As he had hoped, he got over the worst part of the trail before night came on, and the descent of the range on the other side was begun while the glimmer of daylight yet lingered.

The scout felt certain that he had left the Indians deceived as to their having gone, and that those who were at Sentinel Pass would only discover their escape from their trap when too late to do more than pursue. He saw that the horses were feeling the hard ride, the climb and descent of the mountain after a good

day's journey, but he was anxious to reach a clump of timber some miles away, where he had camped before, and where he knew there was good water, grass, and a position easily defended as well.

He did not doubt that the Indians would follow, when they discovered that they had been outwitted, but as pursuers he had much less to fear from them, and was sure that they would not go a great deal farther away from their own country than their present location.

It was ten o'clock when the plain was reached on the other side of the mountain, and so, without resting the horses, Buffalo Bill urged on the flight for the camping place he had in mind.

An hour's hard riding brought them to the timber, which the scout boldly penetrated just before going in with the command.

The place was as silent as a grave, and fires were soon lighted, the tents pitched, and supper was being prepared, for all were tired out and hungry.

The horses had been quickly stripped and staked out near at hand, and the sentinels were placed out upon the plain beyond where the horses were feeding, while Buffalo Bill and Kit Carrol scouted around for a while to see that there was no danger lurking near.

Before retiring, just what should be done in case of a surprise was arranged. Buffalo Bill and Kit Carrol were to divide the night between them in walking the rounds of the camp some distance farther out than the sentinels.

It was just at dawn when John Redwell cantered into the camp and aroused the sleepers.

"I heard a sound far off on the plain that must be caused by the fall of many hoofs," he cried. "The Indians must have discovered your escape sooner than you expected, and are coming on, for they know we

must ford the stream at this point, so do not have to follow our trail."

"It will be well to call the horses in, sir," said Cody, "and station the men so we can give them a surprise, for, believing that we consider ourselves safe, they expect to surprise us."

"I will get everything ready at once," answered Lieutenant Vald. He went the rounds of the camp, ordered the horses brought in and corralled and the men to stand ready to give battle.

Buffalo Bill had awakened Kit Carrol, and the two had gone back together on the plains, nearly half a mile from the camp. Redwell also went forth to keep a sharp eye on the enemy.

The sound that attracted the attention of Buffalo Bill was louder now, a dull, rumbling sound like far-away thunder.

"They are coming, chief, and there are lots of 'em," said Kit Carrol.

"Yes, the sound indicates a heavier force than a hundred horses, so I judge another band came up and pushed right on to run over our camp, found it was deserted, and then went on to the pass."

"That's just about it, chief.

"Do you think we had better light out?"

"No, for there is not another good place to stand them off within twenty miles. We can check them here, and if we have to retreat will make a running fight of it, for they cannot head us off."

As the sound grew louder, and Buffalo Bill knew that the Indians were not far off, he sent Carrol back to the camp to tell the lieutenant he had better advance a few hundred yards with his men and take position in the first group of rocks.

Just then the shadowy outline of many horsemen coming toward them became visible.

It was a certainty that the Indians were sure that

those they sought had continued their flight through the night, or were so sure that they would not be pursued they would not be particularly watchful, for they came on as though with no dread of discovery.

"They are going to halt at these very rocks and maneuver from here. When you fire, sir, let the men retreat quietly by fours, and they will still think you hold this position," said Buffalo Bill. "When daylight reveals to the contrary, our guns can reach them from the timber, while they cannot reach us. Now, sir!"

Buffalo Bill pointed to the shadowy horsemen just visible in the gray of dawn, and within range.

"Ready, men! Fire!" cried Lieutenant Vald, and eighteen carbines and three repeating rifles crashed together, bringing the redskins quickly to a halt and revealing the fact that their foes had been brought to bay.

The moment that the volley rang out, the soldiers were ordered to retreat rapidly and take up a position in the timber, the lieutenant, Buffalo Bill, and Carroll remaining with their repeating rifles, which they continued to empty at the redskins.

The latter hastily retreated out of range, but they had suffered loss in both braves and ponies, and there was little doubt but that they had been taken wholly by surprise, when they had expected to surprise their foes.

Having emptied his rifle, Lieutenant Vald also retreated to the timber at the suggestion of Buffalo Bill, leaving the two scouts alone to hold their stand among the rocks, and not at the timber.

The redskins could only await the rising of the sun, which would reveal the situation completely, and the palefaces even more anxiously awaited the coming of light, that they might behold the strength of the enemy.

At last the first rays of the rising sun fell over the plain. All seemed quiet in the timber and among the rocks.

The Indians were a quarter of a mile beyond the rocks, and had taken their dead and wounded with them, but half a dozen ponies lying upon the grass was proof that equally as many warriors, if not more, had fallen, for the carbines and rifles had been aimed high, to strike human targets.

The first glance of the palefaces showed that Buffalo Bill had been right in his surmise that the Indians had been reinforced, for they could count now over two hundred warriors in full view.

The reinforcements had evidently come up with the party awaiting near the camp of the day before, and, confident in their numbers, had advanced, hoping to drive the soldiers upon their force in ambush in Sentinel Pass.

This had shown that the enemy had flown, and a fire had revealed the direction the trail had gone.

So they followed over the mountains, after sending a courier to bring on the party from the pass, and all had united and come directly toward the ford, knowing that the enemy could only cross there.

Feeling assured that the palefaces had moved steadily on in their flight during the night, the Indians had been taken wholly by surprise when fired upon.

Such was Buffalo Bill's idea of what had been their movements, and it was the correct one, but, to his regret, he found that they had more than doubled in force, so were all of eight to one against the soldiers.

When the dawn revealed the position of the soldiers in the woods, a very secure spot for defense, where water and grass were at hand, the Indians broke forth in a shrill yell of triumph.

The expression of Buffalo Bill's face did not change but he said quietly:

"They do not know but that we met other soldiers here, Kit, so go back and say to Lieutenant Vald that it would be a good idea to move the men about in the timber, in squads, and singly, so that we can appear to have three or four times the force we have."

"It's a good idea, sir," answered Kit, and he was starting off, when Buffalo Bill called out:

"Tell the lieutenant that he can cut sticks, and with the lariats and a couple of logs make a dummy cannon."

"A cannon, sir?"

"Yes, the soldiers can soon rig up a dummy that will look like a cannon, and haul it into a position where the Indians will see it, for you know they are more afraid of what they call the 'wheel guns' than anything else."

"That's so, sir."

"But they must get the ladies to cut up a red blanket, and stripe their uniforms with it, as well as alter their hats to caps, for you know redskins are cunning, and know that red trimmings mean the artillery service."

Kit laughed and replied:

"You are a dandy, chief!"

"You might tell them to rig up two dummy guns, and by making a show of artillery and force, they will think we have at least a hundred men, and you bet they won't charge us with those guns in sight."

So Kit Carrol hastened back to the timber, and finding Lieutenant Vald breakfasting with the two young ladies, he told him of Buffalo Bill's ruse. All laughed at this conceit, but the officer at once set out to carry it into effect, while Mona Borden and Jane Turpin went to work cutting up a red blanket for the men to put the stripes on their uniforms to aid the deception.

In a few minutes a dozen of the troopers came dashing in on horseback. They had stolen off quietly

to a considerable distance, and looked as though they were fresh cavalry just coming in.

Ten minutes after, twenty men marched the rounds of the timber, as though placing guards; and squads of half a dozen were seen going here and there.

The horses were led about, too, and the strip of woods, a couple of acres in size, seemed to be alive with men.

The Indians were carefully watching every movement of their foes, as was Buffalo Bill from the rocks. The scout smiled grimly as he muttered:

"They are playing the game well, for I could swear that there are a hundred men in that clump of timber—ah! there comes the artillery into position."

As the scout spoke four horses were swung up to the edge of the timber with what certainly appeared to be a light gun and limber, with the artillerymen in attendance, and a short while after a second "gun" moved up from another point, and was placed for service.

The effect upon the Indians was electrical, and the stern face of Buffalo Bill broke into a broad smile as he saw the success of his ruse, for the redskins quickly fell back beyond the ridge for safety from the "wheel guns" that looked so threateningly at them from the shadows of the timber.

CHAPTER XII.

A FEW SECRET POWERS.

While Buffalo Bill was busy regarding the dummy guns through his glass, Carrol cantered up to him, saying:

"We did it, chief."

"Yes, and well, for I could swear that there was quite a force in the timber. We must build a dozen different fires for breakfast, so as to keep up the deceit."

"There is not a redskin in sight," said Kit. "They want you to come to breakfast."

"I'll go now, and you remain here. I do not think we will be attacked now, but they will lay a siege to starve us out."

Buffalo Bill went back to the timber. He was congratulated for his successful ruse by both the lieutenant and the young ladies, and, as he looked at the "guns," he could not but see that they had been most skillfully made, for yellow blankets had been fastened around logs to look like brass guns, and the wheels had been made of sticks and saplings, bound securely with lassos.

The men had the red stripes on their uniforms, and when Buffalo Bill suggested the building of a dozen fires, it was quickly done to add to the appearance of numbers.

"What do you think they will do now, Mr. Cody?" asked Jane, as she handed the scout a cup of coffee.

"Thank you, Miss Turpin; I am indeed honored—why, Miss Borden, this is breakfast enough for a grizzly bear," he said, as he took from Mona his well-filled plate; but, answering Jane's question, he said:

"As I look upon you young ladies as aids to the commanding officer and know that you possess nerve enough for any men, I'll tell you frankly that I believe the Indians will set in to starve us out."

"But we have plenty of provisions."

"Yes, but they can surround this place, getting to cover from a quarter to half a mile away."

"Now, the grass within our range will last the horses about two days, though water is plentiful; but we do not wish to remain here besieged, so it is for Lieutenant Vald to say what is to be done, for I can run the gantlet of their lines and go to the fort to the southward sixty miles after aid."

"That means perhaps three days before aid comes, Bill, and seeing you depart would be an evidence of weakness, so that the Indians might make an attack, and if so, it would show that our guns were useless and our force small."

"You are right, lieutenant, and I suggested the other course only in case you felt you could hold out here."

"You have another plan, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let us have it, then, for you know how thoroughly I rely upon you for aid, Buffalo Bill."

"Thank you, sir, for the compliment. My plan would be to move out after dark, well spread out, to show a larger force than we have, and to rig the guns so that we can carry them along."

"We can head for the fort, and by dawn be forty miles away, and then camp for the day, so as not to show our weakness, and I hardly believe the Indians will charge us, from fear of the supposed guns. If they do, we must fight them off as best we can."

Lieutenant Vald made no reply, and all gazed anxiously upon his face.

As he remained silent so long, Mona said:

"You do not approve of this second plan, then, Lieutenant Vald?"

"It is the best, I believe, with one exception."

"And that is?"

"I will see what I can do to drive those redskins off."

From this remark it seemed as though the lieutenant had lost his head with vanity, and Buffalo Bill was the only one who did not smile at his words.

"Now, if you know any way in which you can stampede these redskins, lieutenant," said Mona, "I beg you to try it."

"Yes, and we will pray for your success in this world and salvation in the next," added Jane, with a smile.

"I am not sure of success, but I will do my best, young ladies. If I fail, you have a good commander to depend upon in Buffalo Bill," and Lieutenant Vald rose and walked over to where his packsaddle was.

They saw him take something from the saddlebags. What it was they did not know. He ordered his horse saddled and brought to him.

The two girls and Buffalo Bill watched him closely. He waved his hand pleasantly and said:

"You are in command, Buffalo Bill, until my return."

"Yes, sir," and the scout saluted as the officer rode away.

Leaving the timber, he rode directly toward the ridge, yet avoiding the rocks where Carrol was on guard.

Every eye was upon him, and as he neared the ridge they saw him make some movements with his hands and arms, and remove his hat.

Then above the ridge appeared scores of feather-bonneted heads, as Indians watched him approach, so daringly, right into their midst.

Nearer and nearer he went, until he ascended the ridge, and not once looking back toward his own camp, went out of sight, just as the Indians gathered around him in scores.

"That man has some secret power, some hold upon them, as I have always felt he had," muttered Buffalo Bill.

"Buffalo Bill, what do you mean?" asked Mona, as she stood watching the strange scene that had taken place—an army officer riding boldly into the midst of a band of hostile savages.

"Yes, what *can* it mean?" asked Jane.

Every soldier's eye had been upon the lieutenant as he rode away from the timber.

They were completely mystified as to his actions.

They had seen the Indians come upon the ridge and receive him, and he had not been shot or dragged from his horse.

In fact, he seemed to have been received not as a foe.

Answering the questions of the two maidens, Buffalo Bill said:

"You may have heard that Lieutenant Vald is friendly with the redskins?"

"Yes, apparently their friend, yet their foe, and I have heard it explained that he, having been a physician by profession, once rendered them great service when an epidemic was ravaging their villages. But these are not Comanches, you know."

"Very true, but you recall that he has saved your party by his knowledge of the country and the friendship the Comanches hold for him."

"True, but, as I said, these Indians are Sioux."

"But there exists among all tribes a sign language and they all know the signs when made in token of peace."

"And you think that Lieutenant Vald knows these signs?"

"I am sure of it, else he could not have gone among them as he has; and if they withdraw, then you need no further proof."

"No; yet why do you think he knows their secret signs, known to the Indians alone?"

"Well, he cannot believe that brother of his, an outlawed brother, has been killed, as all reported, and he told your father that he felt sure that the outlaw had given some sign that protected him from death. When asked if he also knew the signs, I noticed he gave an evasive answer to the question."

"Ah!"

"That convinced me that he does know the secret power, or signs, to exert over the Indians. Now, I am sure that he has taken the chances, taken his life in his hands, to see what power his knowledge of the secret signs will have over the Indians."

"He is a brave fellow, and Heaven grant that he be not harmed."

"The way he was received by the redskins did not look to me as though he would be harmed, but only the greatest nerve can save him."

"And that he possesses," Jane remarked.

"To a wonderful degree," said Mona.

"Yes, to a most remarkable degree," added Buffalo Bill, and he cast his eyes anxiously over toward the ridge.

At last Buffalo Bill walked out to where Kit Carrol was still on watch.

"What does it mean, chief?" eagerly asked the scout.

"I have always felt sure that Lieutenant Vald knew as much about Indians as they did themselves, and now I am convinced of it, for he has gone among them to try his secret signs on them."

"If it was his brother, the outlaw, then he would rule the roost; but I don't know what hold Lieutenant Vald has on them," said Kit.

"Nor I, but had he not felt that he did have power he would not have gone. But he is plucky and took the chances."

"You bet he did."

"You saw his advance better from here than we did."

"Yes."

"What did he do?"

"It struck me that he put something over him in front, face and all, and then waved his hands in a peculiar way."

"Yes, but the Indians did not appear hostile toward him?"

"Not in the least, as he went over the ridge."

"Well, Kit, keep your eyes open, and at the first sign of trouble break for the camp, for they may come with a rush, you know."

"I'll be wide awake, chief," answered Kit Carrol, and Buffalo Bill walked back toward the camp.

"Well, what does Carrol say?" asked Mona, as he came back and joined them.

"He is as much mystified as we all are."

"It is certainly time the lieutenant should have returned," Jane said anxiously.

"Yes, though redskins are very deliberate in their councils, and take a long time to decide what they will do, quick as they are in doing it, after their minds are made up."

"Ah! there he comes now," cried Mona, and as she spoke a group of horsemen were seen mounting the ridge.

"It is Lieutenant Vald, and he is surrounded by Indians," said Buffalo Bill, and his voice rang out in a command to stand ready to resist an attack.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SACRIFICE.

The lieutenant was certainly coming back, but then he was accompanied by a dozen redskins, two of whom wore the feathered bonnets of chiefs.

They rode toward the rocks, where Kit Carrol was stationed, and, seeing this, Buffalo Bill moved out of the timber toward them, making the remark:

"They are coming for a powwow. If necessary, to show a force of officers, the sergeant and corporal, and two or three of the men must be rigged up with shoulderstraps and all you can lay hands on to look like captains and lieutenants, and grouped where they can be seen. I will see what it means, for they are not nearer than the rocks."

"Be careful, Buffalo Bill, for we cannot lose you, too," said Mona.

"I don't wish to be lost, either!" was the smiling reply, and Buffalo Bill continued on toward the rocks, where Kit Carrol still held his position.

The party of redskins, with the lieutenant in their midst, halted within revolver range of the rocks, and Brian Vald called out:

"Hello, Carrol, tell Buffalo Bill to come here—ah! here he is now."

Buffalo Bill advanced quickly to the rocks, halted there an instant for a word with Kit Carrol, and then boldly advanced beyond, his repeating rifle across his arm.

"Buffalo Bill, you speak Spanish, I believe?" called out the lieutenant.

"Yes, sir, after a fashion."

"I will speak to you in that language then at times, for I have an idea that several of these braves speak English fairly well.

"Yes, sir."

"I went among them with signs of peace, which they understood, and asked them to allow us to go on our way unmolested."

"But they refused?"

"They wish pay for it, and I have told them that they should have it, though they demand ten thousand dollars."

"Promise them a million, sir," said Buffalo Bill quickly.

"Yes, but it has to be paid, and yet I will pay it, as I am able to do upon my return to the fort."

"But now, sir?"

"That is the question, for they demand that I remain with them as a hostage until the amount is paid, for they have a renegade white chief among them, and it is his doing."

"I see, sir; I thought as much."

"He demands that the sum be brought, within thirty days, to the battlefield, where I joined you, and they give their pledge not to harm the bearer, but to put me to death if a force comes."

"They'll do it, too."

"Yes, the renegade chief wishes to kill me now, but they, having honored my signs of peace, will not allow it, so there is nothing to be done but to go on to the mines, and, returning to the fort, send out the money, which, tell Colonel Borden, I will refund. I will be then set free; but I wish you to send out now my pack horse, and you can then go on your way unmolested as soon as we depart, for I will get them away first, so as not to reveal your small force."

"I don't half like this sacrifice on your part, Lieutenant Vald."

"Don't mind that, old pard, for I do not."

"If those ladies were not along I'd fight it out, once I could get you back in the lines again."

"It would be madness, for there are two hundred and fifty of them, and they are enraged now at the losses we inflicted upon them. You must do as they say, so go back and get my pack horse, rifle, and belt of arms."

"I can but obey, sir, but I do not like the sacrifice you are making at all."

"Don't mind me, for I am at home among the Indians; but go, now, so as to delay no longer and not let them change their minds."

The scout shook his head ominously, but at once turned and walked back to the rocks, where stood Kit Carrol, who, also understanding Spanish, learned during his scouting life along the Rio Grande, had heard all.

Back to the camp went Buffalo Bill, and as he was met by Mona and Jane he said:

"We are all right, but the lieutenant must run the risk, for it is a case of a renegade white chief of the Indians, who demands ten thousand dollars, and he must remain until it is paid."

"Then return to the fort at once, for my father will gladly pay it," said Mona.

"No, go on to the mines, and my father will pay it," generously remarked Jane.

"No, the lieutenant has the money, or can get it, he says, though, of course, he will not be allowed to pay it all, and I am to go back to the fort after taking you ladies to the mines, and meet a messenger at the battlefield and pay over the cash. I have thirty days in which to do it."

"This is a shame, and to think of the sacrifice Lieutenant Vald makes," said Mona.

"It is better than to sacrifice us all, and I rather like the terms, except for his captivity, though I do not believe they will harm him."

"We can only agree to the demand then?"

"Yes, and I will lose no time."

"Convey our deepest gratitude to Lieutenant Vald, and tell him how we all appreciate his noble sacrifice," said Mona, and soon after Buffalo Bill left the camp, leading after him the pack horse.

Buffalo Bill's face was very pale and stern, as he walked back toward the outpost, leading the pack horse of Lieutenant Vald. He was agreeing to terms he was forced to accept, having no alternative; but could he have gotten hold of Lieutenant Vald again, nothing could have forced him to yield, for he would have fought to the death rather.

He went past Kit Carrol with the remark:

"Keep your eyes open for treachery, for it may be a game of trick after all with those redskins."

"Yes, chief, and if they make a break, the first to go under will be those two chiefs on the spotted ponies," was Kit's response.

The group of Indians had sat silently upon their ponies, while Buffalo Bill had gone after the pack horse, and Kit had not heard them utter a word, nor had the officer spoken. He was in full view of Kit Carrol, sat with one foot thrown over the horn of his saddle, and his face was unmoved by the danger he was in, the sacrifice he was making for others.

When the chief of scouts was seen approaching again, the Indians uttered a few low tones, for they beheld the pack horse.

It was evident that they feared the two dummy guns, and felt that the soldiers were nearly one-third their own force, at least.

"I am back again, lieutenant, having obeyed your orders," said Buffalo Bill, halting some hundred feet from the group.

"All right, Buffalo Bill. In thirty days send the money to the place appointed, and I'll be a free man once more," said the officer cheerily.

"Will you come forward and get the horse, sir?"

"No, I'll ask one of the chiefs to do so." He turned and addressed one of the chiefs, speaking now in English, and the one he spoke to rode toward Buffalo Bill, yet very cautiously.

The scout handed him the rifle and belt of arms, placed the lead line in his hands, and remarked:

"I'd just like to raise your scalp, redskin!"

That he believed so, the chief showed by not delaying an instant, and Buffalo Bill called out:

"I'll be on hand with the dust, lieutenant, and the young ladies wish me to say they more than appreciate your sacrifice, as all of us do, sir."

"Present them my regards and thanks. Now, good-by, old pard, and if I should go under, I know you will have a scalping tournament to avenge me. Adios, amigo."

And, with a wave of his hat, the lieutenant turned and rode away, surrounded by the Indians.

Buffalo Bill watched them until they went out of sight over the ridge, and then, with Kit Carrol, started back to the camp.

"A brave man that, Kit! Well, I believe we are safe now, so we will push on for Moonstone Mine to prevent the temptation of treachery."

"Yes, but the lieutenant said after they had gone."

"Yes, that is so, and we can see them if they pull out."

"They are doing that now," said Kit, turning as they reached the timber.

"You are right," was Buffalo Bill's reply, as he gazed about the horizon and saw that the Indians were really raising the siege, or at least appearing to do so.

They had crossed the ford early in the morning, and had been seen taking up positions in every direction around the clump of timber on the distant ridges.

Now they were moving in single file toward a common point, the fort, and, watching their movements, Buffalo Bill counted them, to see that there was no treachery intended, for he had a slight dread that they might be leaving a small force behind them from each party that had taken up positions. It was noon when they at last disappeared, having joined forces, and the column of nearly three hundred warriors was seen slowly moving back toward the mountain range in the direction of Sentinel Pass.

In their midst the glasses had revealed at the head among the chiefs the form of Lieutenant Vald, leading his pack horse. He was watched until the column looked like a large black snake, winding its way over the plain.

Dinner having been disposed of, the party, now under the command of Buffalo Bill, mounted their horses and started once more upon the trail, though with saddened faces at the fate that might yet befall the brave officer who had offered himself as a sacrifice for their sake.

Having had a good rest, with plenty of grass and water, the horses moved briskly, their riders anxious to get beyond all chance of a change of mind on the part of the Indians as soon as possible. Before camp was pitched at nightfall, fully forty miles had been covered.

CHAPTER XIV.

MOONSTONE MINING CAMP.

Moonstone Mining Camp was located in a wild spot in the mountains, just across the line of New Mexico.

It was in the midst of beautiful scenery, and the cliffs that overhung the camp had the appearance of being bathed in moonlight, hence the name given to it.

The camps extended for many miles from the cliffs, and there were hundreds of miners within half a day's journey of what was known as "Mascot City," a bevy of camps in which, like Hallelujah City, saloons were more numerous than gold mines, and where there were several stores, a blacksmith shop, a stage office, for there was a coach running once a week to Santa Fe and back, and several scores of cabins.

It was in Moonstone Mine that Hugh Turpin had struck it rich, having gone there three years before, accompanied by his little daughter Jane, in whose honor Mascot City had been named.

There was no more popular man in the mining country than Hugh Turpin when he went to the mines, and Jane but added to his popularity, and became the idol of the miners.

It was with deepest regret the miners had seen her depart for the East to be educated, feeling certain that she would forget all about them and Moonstone Mine.

Returning several years after to settle up his business in the mines, Hugh Turpin had shown himself the same good fellow he had always been, and, though he had become a very rich man, he was not in the least spoiled by his successful ventures, but treated

all his old chums with the same generous spirit that he had always shown when a poor miner.

As he would be compelled to remain much longer than he had anticipated, and the miners were wild to see his daughter, who had won their admiration and regard, Hugh Turpin had decided to have her come to him, especially as he knew how anxious she was to revisit the scenes of her girlhood, which she had loved so well.

In the old days she was wont to go dashing along the valleys at full speed upon her swift pony. She would hunt all day in the mountains, and always bring home game, and every miner had regarded her as his especial pet.

The camps had changed since those days, for many strange faces were there, a number of new cabins had been built, other "finds" been made, and Mascot City had added several hundreds more to its population.

Many miners had made fortunes and gone away, and new ones taking their places, Hugh Turpin had soon found that there were half the people there who knew him in name only.

When he decided to have Jane come there, the miners were delighted, and, holding a council, it was decided that they must do all in their power for her comfort.

Moonstone Valley was a cañon of picturesque beauty, and the end of it nearest the mountain was the sole property of Hugh Turpin.

Here, in a beautiful grove, bordering a swift-flowing stream, was the miner's cabin, a sunny little home of three rooms, and from which a grand view could be obtained.

But this would not do for the fair mascot of Moonstone Mine, it was quickly decided, and, knocking off work in their mines, the men set to work to build a cabin that would be a home worthy of Jane.

Many hands make light work, and trees were soon cut down, the logs hewn and drawn to the hilltop, and a cabin of four rooms put up in front of the other one, while by voluntary gifts from the old friends of the mascot, and the purchases of Hugh Turpin at the country stores, the new home was made most attractive and comfortable.

In the letters he had received from his daughter Hugh Turpin had been told of her devotion to Mona, her schoolmate, and several times she had written him to the effect that she would dearly like to visit him and bring Mona with her, as the latter would gladly come if the opportunity offered.

It, therefore, struck Hugh Turpin that it was possible that Mona might accompany his daughter, and, to be on the safe side, he had, in making his preparations, arranged for her also.

That there was great danger in the trip the miner did not believe, when Buffalo Bill was the guide and scout, and he had asked Colonel Borden to kindly allow his daughter an escort.

"Waal, Turpin, yer is all ready fer yer darter now, and ye c'u'dn' hev did more if she were a queen, and she's deservin' of it; but we is all afeerd she has been a leetle spoilt in her notions, sence she were here," said Ben Bronson, an old miner who had pegged industriously away for years in the mines, but still had his fortune to find.

"Wait and see her, Ben, and judge if she is not the same girl you knew—ah! there comes a party on horseback far down the valley, and I am sure that Jane is coming, for they are soldiers."

At Hugh Turpin's words Ben Bronson gave a war whoop of joy.

As the miners in Moonstone Valley were aware of the coming of Jane all were awaiting her arrival with a keen anticipation of pleasure.

It was about the middle of the afternoon when Buffalo Bill, some hundred yards in the lead of his party, entered the gap that led in from the plains among the mountains in which were the various mining camps of Moonstone Valley.

The old familiar scenes came back to Jane Turpin with a flood of remembrance at the life she had led there when a girl just entering her teens, and she pointed out to Mona various points of interest that they came upon.

Halting for the others to come up, Buffalo Bill said:

"Well, Miss Turpin, you are once more in your old training ground, so I am under your orders now."

"We will go right up to the old home, Mr. Cody, for there is a fine camping place near for the soldiers," answered Jane, her face radiant with pleasure, and, as they moved on once more, she continued:

"There is Eagle Cliff Mine and Hangman's Cañon, where so many poor fellows have met death, while Vigilante Rock is that black cliff ahead. That clump of trees you see up on the mountainside is called Jane's Folly, for I once risked my life to climb up there, and from the remembrance of that day I think it was properly named. Now we are going to turn into the valley, for yonder rise the Moonstone Cliffs."

Jane pointed out the line of cliffs that gave the valley and mines their name, and the sight of which caused Mona to exclaim:

"Oh, how beautiful! And how strange the effect!"

Just then several miners were seen, and, upon discovering the party, they dropped their tools and ran out to the trail, cheering as they waved their hats.

"The mascot has come!"

"Welcome to the Moonstone Mountains!" came the cry, and it rang through the valley, notifying the others of the arrival of Jane Turpin.

Crowds began to run toward the trail, and as the party rode along they were greeted with the wildest cheers of welcome.

Buffalo Bill was known to some of the miners, and he also came in for a welcoming cheer, as did Uncle Sam's boys in blue.

Jane returned the salutes by waving her hat, and yet now and then was forcibly halted and had to shake hands all around with a group more enthusiastic than the others.

"How is yer, little Jane?"

"Hooray for ther mascot!"

"Welcome home, leetle gal!"

"You bet we is glad ter see yer."

"Then yer ain't forgot us, Miss Jane?"

"We is right down tickled ter see yer."

"And yer pretty pard thar is welcome."

And so on went the expressions of welcome, as Jane rode on up the valley with Buffalo Bill in the lead, Mona Borden by her side, and the soldiers and others following in close order, all amused and pleased with the welcome the miner's daughter was receiving.

A few expressions made the girls laugh heartily, for one miner cried out:

"Ther sight o' you is good fer sore eyes!" while another frankly confessed: "I git drunk in yer honor, miss, this very night."

The noisy welcome brought all the miners out along the trail up the valley, and cheering and hat waving, with a fusillade of revolver shots as a salute, continued until the party reached the cabin of Miner Turpin.

As she leaped from her saddle her father greeted Jane, and then gave a most cordial welcome to Mona, to whom he said:

"I hoped, yet scarcely dared believe, you would come."

"Oh, yes, I came along as guardian for Jane—I never in my life saw a girl with so many lovers, Mr. Turpin, as Jane has," responded Mona.

Buffalo Bill was also warmly welcomed by the miner, as were also the soldiers, who were directed to a grove on the stream near by, where there was fine grass for their horses and wood for camp fires.

The scout declined Turpin's invitation to become his guest in the cabin, saying that he would camp with the men, but take his meals at the cabin, and he led the way to the camping ground, while Jane said:

"Father, we owe everything to Buffalo Bill, noble fellow that he is, for he has saved us from death or capture by the Indians, and the only thing that mars the pleasure of my coming is that we left Lieutenant Vald as a hostage among the redskins."

"May I ask, my daughter, if it was the brave officer who passed through here with Buffalo Bill, on his way to the fort, for I know his story, or his brother's."

"It was Brian Vald, father, and a brave man he is, and he must not pay the amount of ransom which a renegade white man demanded, for you must pay it and deduct it from my wedding present."

The miner laughed and asked:

"What, are you to be married, then, Jane?"

"Oh, no, no! I meant when I got the chance to marry," cried Jane, blushing.

"You are worth to me all the ransom any renegade will demand, so it will be my pleasure to pay it," was the generous response, and he led the maidens into the cabin to show them all that the miners had done for their comfort, and said:

"They are as glad to see you, Jane, as though you were their own child, while all feel highly honored at Miss Borden's coming with you."

CHAPTER XV.

THE DESPERADOES' "NEST."

Buffalo Bill knew that Lieutenant Vald had secret orders from Colonel Borden to remain some time in the mines, apparently to rest his cattle, but in reality to hunt for several deserters from the army, who were suspected of being there, lured to desert by the hope of digging out fortunes, and also particularly to hunt down half a dozen or more desperadoes who had made themselves liable to the military law of the department.

Of course, in these still hunts Buffalo Bill was to be the real mover, but the orders had been given to the lieutenant in Mona's presence, and upon the trail she had asked the scout if the officer had made him acquainted with what he was expected to do in the matter.

A negative reply caused Mona to say:

"I suppose that he intended to tell you later, but, as he is a prisoner now, and I heard it all, I will tell you what it was, and I can even give you the names of the deserters and the desperadoes referred to.

"I tell you this, as I deem it my duty, for I know my father expected more of this expedition than that it should be an escort party merely, and, but for the fact that Lieutenant Vald had instructions for you, he would have given them to you personally. So if you carry out his wishes, it will be a service that will be appreciated, and it will win fame for you as well."

"I thank you most kindly, and will receive my orders from you the same as from Lieutenant Vald, who, doubtless, forgot to tell me, or could not do so, when captured," answered the scout.

This conversation occurred upon the trail, and when

the party had arrived safely at the miner's home, Mona sought, the next morning after breakfast, an interview with the scout, at which Mr. Turpin and Jane were also present.

"Mr. Cody and I had some talk over a matter on the trail, which I happen to know Lieutenant Vald had orders to ferret out, Mr. Turpin, and I wish you to hear what it was," said Mona.

She then went on to explain just what the instructions were that were given Lieutenant Vald by her father, and added:

"Knowing the miners as you do, sir, you may be able to put Mr. Cody upon the right track, for I have written down the names of the deserters. Here also are the names, as given by my father, of several noted lawless men and desperadoes."

And she handed over the list, which Buffalo Bill read aloud.

There were the names of five deserters, with the regiments they belonged to, and a description of the men and the time of desertions. The next list of names Buffalo Bill read as follows:

"Mike Terhune, charged with several murders and being an all-round bad man.

"Red Rand, a dandy of the frontier. His left hand reddened by a birthmark extending to the wrist. Is left-handed, a dead shot, is wanted for numerous murders, while there is a price offered for him, dead or alive, by the governor of California."

Then followed the names of several who belonged to a band of desperadoes known as the "Outlaw Owls." This list ended with:

"Dick Kasher, a gambler who always seeks personal difficulties, and is a dead shot, defying justice and right—the most dangerous man in the mining country, and one who is the mortal foe of soldiers."

"They are a sad lot, and the mines will be the bet-

ter for their removal, for they are suspected of crimes that cannot be proven on them here. I can point the desperadoes out to you, Bill, but am not sure of the soldier deserters," said Mr. Turpin.

"No, it will only get you into trouble, sir, and I can pick them up by degrees in a quiet way.

"I have heard of the Owls, and also of Mike, Red Rand, and Dick Kasher I know, for we have a little debt to settle between us. He killed Scout Sykes, a dear pard of mine."

"I am sorry to be the one to put you upon a red trail, and one that must prove fatal to some," said Mona, "but then I know how anxious my father is to put down this lawless element, and he feels that with the picked soldiers sent along, and Lieutenant Vald and yourself, he has the very ones to strike a blow that will be felt, and which the commanding general has been urging."

"I shall be glad to go upon the trail, Miss Borden, a red one though it may be, and do my duty as I understand it, and I know that in the sergeant and his men I have the best of allies," answered Buffalo Bill, and he added: "I'll take in the city to-night for pointers."

Finding themselves most comfortably located, enjoying the serenade of the miners given them during the night, and their warm welcome, with unsurpassed scenery about them, and a fascination in the wild life of a mining camp, both girls were glad that they had come, and were determined to enjoy their stay, though they could not but dread that there was great danger to Buffalo Bill in the red trail he was to start upon that night.

Buffalo Bill was a man of the calmest demeanor even when aroused. He was in no sense of the word a bravado, and, though many stories had gone the rounds concerning his personal difficulties, some told

by those who should have known better, he was not a man to seek trouble, but rather to avoid it.

When brought face to face with an encounter that must prove fatal, he never shrank from death, but met a foe as a brave man should; always taking great chances, rather than be thought of as taking an advantage.

A man of herculean strength, quick in his movements, cool and determined, he was a most dangerous adversary to meet, and when in the discharge of his duty shrank from no danger, however great.

A better man to have gone upon the desperado-hunting mission could not have been found, and Colonel Borden was glad to have such a cool and daring person as Buffalo Bill in command in the hazardous work of running down deserters and outlaws, while the sergeant, corporal and the men had been picked for their courage, coolness, and ability—the ablest aids possible to their leader.

Having "done themselves proud," as they expressed it, in their welcome to Jane Turpin and her guest, the miners wished to taper off their enthusiasm with a little spree, and the second night the saloons were more than usually crowded, while the gambling tables were well filled.

The presence of Buffalo Bill and the soldiers camped in the valley had a depressing effect upon quite a number of miners who loved lawlessness, and who were only a detriment to the good of the country.

Men branded with crime had no love for keepers of the law, and those were the ones depressed by the presence of the noted bordermen and the soldiers.

Why they did not at once start back upon their trail to the fort they could not understand.

They had done their duty as an escort, so let them return, they argued.

Then came the rumor that they were to remain

until the miner Turpin left, and escort him, his daughter, and their fair guest back to the fort, for it was whispered that the miner would carry back with him a very large sum in gold dust.

Unmindful of what was said, Buffalo Bill rode through the camps, apparently greatly interested. He enjoyed chats with several miners, and when night came, wended his way on foot with Sergeant Dean to Mascot City.

They dropped casually in at the different gambling saloons, and at each one Buffalo Bill played a few games of chance, without any good fortune attending him.

He was asked to play by several men who made gambling their trade, but said he would be glad to do so some other night, but he was only trying his luck then with small sums.

It was late, however, when he walked back to the camp with the sergeant.

As they got clear of the cabins, Buffalo Bill said:

"Well, sergeant, what luck?"

"I picked out three, sir."

"And I two."

"Let us see if we hit upon the same men."

"Mine were all infantrymen, sir."

"Good! One of mine was a cavalryman, the other belonged to the artillery, so that makes the very five the colonel wanted."

"Yes, sir."

"You don't think they suspected you?"

"They knew me, sir, but they felt safe in their change of appearance, for a full beard, long hair, and miner's dress, with a couple of more years added to their lives, makes a great change from a smooth-shaven, short-haired soldier in uniform."

"You are sure of your men, then?"

"I am, sir, for I remembered them perfectly, and had what proof I needed."

"And I am sure of mine, for they deserted from McPherson, and were bad men."

"Now, to get hold of them."

"It will raise a row, sir."

"Oh, of course, there will be pards to take up for them, but that don't scare me. I wish to be safe, though, so as to get the whole five at one haul, so we must decoy them."

"How can we?"

"I'll tell Turpin who they are, and find out from him what fellow I can get as a decoy duck to get the five of them together at a certain place, where we can capture the outfit."

"A good idea, sir," commented the sergeant, who seemed pleased at the prospect.

When he went to breakfast at the cabin in the morning Buffalo Bill told Miner Turpin just who the deserters were, for he had got the names by which each was known. Mr. Turpin at once said that, though they were gold diggers, they had bad names in the mines, and he knew one man, who, for pay, would entrap them in some way.

This man Buffalo Bill at once went in search of, and found him taking his "eye-opener" at the bar.

"Drink with me, pard," he said, and cigars followed at the scout's expense also, after which the two had a little game of cards together, in which Hank Hall, as he was called, won a little money.

The game, with a couple of more drinks, made the two apparently good friends, and Buffalo Bill said:

"You have a lead, I believe?"

"Yas, pard, it's up beyond your camp, but it pans out so trifling, I has ter do other work fer a honest livin'."

"See here, do you really wish to do some honest work?"

"Try me."

"I will give you some dust, and you can put it in your mine, as though you found it there."

"Then go and ask five men I will give you the names of to come there and see it."

"Yer is after lassoing somebody?"

"Yes."

"Maybe I'll git bored."

"No, I'll lasso you, too, as you call it, to prevent your being suspected, and have others afterward to prove you are not the man I want, so will let you go."

"Good! What's ther job worth to yer, pard?"

"Just one hundred dollars."

"I'll do it. Who is yer game?"

"I'll tell you, and you can have your men there at four o'clock this afternoon."

"I'll go yer," was the emphatic response.

It was just four o'clock when five rough-looking men passed up by Miner Turpin's house and halted under the cliff half a mile beyond, at a spot where some work had been done on a gold find.

This was up a narrow cañon in the cliff, and there stood Hank Hall to welcome them.

"I tell yer, pards, I have struck it rich I knows, so I kin sell out quick and make no noise about it, as I doesn't like those soldiers in ther valley, for all ther time I has cold chills chasin' each other up and down my back, fearin' I is wanted, yer see, so I'll sell cheap and git out o' here on ther jump."

"Here are ther yellow dirt jist as I find it, when I struck my pick in thar, so make me a bid, and when t'others come I has axed, I'll let her go to them as wants it most and has ther cash down ter pay."

Such was Hank Hall's little introductory to the

sale of his mine under the pretense of having that morning unearthed quite a rich find of gold.

The men looked at the dirt and one grumbled:

"If it holds at this, it's rich dirt, Hank, but I ain't got much cash ter give."

"Me nuther, though I kin rake up a leetle."

"Me, too, for I keeps a few hundreds handy about me."

"I'll chip in with some also."

"Count me one-fifth buyer," said the last of the five.

"That's the talk, and it's why I asked the five of you, as I knowed yer allers had cash."

"Now, I could sell to Miner Turpin mighty quick, only I thought I'd give poor men a chance."

"I tried it on ther sergeant of ther soldier outfit, but he said he wasn't buyin', but would tell Buffalo Bill, and maybe he had some cash ter spend—there they comes now."

"But we takes yer mine, so call it sold, for we ain't lingerin' here to powwow jist now."

"Durn 'em; what did yer tell them hawks fer?" exclaimed one, and the five men looked uneasy and were turning to go, just as Buffalo Bill and Sergeant Dean came into the narrow cañon.

"Hold on, gentlemen, don't be in a hurry, for it's my treat—"

"Hands up, all of you!"

The scout's two revolvers, one in each hand, were leveled at the men, and each one of the five seemed to feel that the muzzles pointed directly into his face.

They were all armed, quick to draw, and were bad men when they held the advantage, but they stood now so that not one could take refuge behind the other, a movement of a hand would be a signal for a death shot, and the scout's deadly aim was well known, as well as the fact that he was not one to count odds.

It seemed also that Hank Hall was wanted, as well, for he had quickly raised his hands at the stern command of Buffalo Bill.

"What ther devil does yer mean?" growled one of the men, yet he had his hands raised over his head.

"I'll explain later."

"Sergeant, present those six gentlemen with a pair of your extra fine steel bracelets, with snap locks."

The sergeant also had his revolvers drawn, but, replacing one in his holster, he took from his pocket six pairs of steel manacles, and stepped up in front of the nearest man.

"Pards, must we put up with this?" asked one.

"It is lead or steel—take your choice," said Buffalo Bill, and the men shuddered at his words, and click of the spring as it snapped upon the hands of the man the sergeant had put the manacles upon first.

"Don't be fools, pards, for our friends will soon set us free," said one of the men, and he held out his hands for the manacles.

"That's so," said another cheerfully, and the others were quickly ironed and disarmed, Hank Hall among the rest, and who seemed to take it most to heart, judging by his actions.

"What has we done, pard?" he whined.

"I arrest you as deserters from the United States army," was the reply.

Instantly the face of Hall brightened, while he said:

"Then I ain't in it, pard, for I never were a sojer in my life."

"No more was I," growled one of the others.

"No doubt you are all innocent; but I happen to believe I have the right men, and when you get to the fort and meet your old comrades there, then you will be able to prove whether you deserted or not."

"Now, sergeant, march these men off to the camp, and keep them under guard."

The sergeant at once ranged them in line, slung their belts of arms over his arm, and started off.

As they came out of the valley there was some low whispering among them, for they caught sight of several miners, and one of the men broke out in a wild cry:

"Ho, pards, ther bluecoats has got us.

"To ther rescue, comrades!"

The cry rang loudly down the valley and reached many ears, for a dozen men at once appeared in sight.

"Repeat that cry any one of you, and I'll send a bullet through your heart," sternly said the scout, as he came rapidly after the prisoners, and, seeing that the call was being responded to, he continued:

"Come, double-quick, march!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A DUEL TO THE DEATH.

The miners who had heard the cry of one of the deserters saw the cause as they looked at the six men marching along in charge of the sergeant and Buffalo Bill.

Who these men were they did not know at a glance, but the call was for help, and, shouting to others to follow, they came at a run toward the scene.

It was a quarter of a mile to the military camp, and from its position it was not in sight. Buffalo Bill had made a clever capture of his prisoners, and was anxious to get them under the protection of the soldiers, so gave the order to double-quick.

The men at once came to a standstill, refusing to move, but the scout drew his bowie knife, sprang behind the rear man, and, pressing the point against his back, ordered:

"Now, double-quick, march!"

"For God's sake, boys, obey, for the knife is cutting into my back," cried the man threatened with the bowie, though the point had not touched his flesh.

Thus urged, the men obeyed, and went off at a steady double-quick, which only training could have accomplished, all except Hank Hall, who could not keep the step. He was at once dragged out of his place, and put in the rear, with the remark of the sergeant:

"He never was a soldier, sir."

"I believe you are right, sergeant; but there come the rescuers."

"Halt!"

The halt was made, and up dashed a man of almost giant size, with a red, evil face.

"Hold on there, pard, you is a trifle previous," he shouted.

"I know my duty, sir. These are deserters from the army, and I have arrested them," was Buffalo Bill's reply.

"And I know my pards, and that means I says they is miners, and you can't come no grab game on them and me."

"Do you intend to interfere?"

"I do."

"Better think better of it, and not do so."

"I'm a-goin' ter set them men free—ain't we, pards?"

He turned toward the score of men now gathered there, and saw with pleasure others quickly coming upon the scene.

At his question a number of voices answered in the affirmative.

"Gentlemen, I am in discharge of my duty as a government officer, and I warn you to keep hands off," said Buffalo Bill. "These men are deserters, and if they can prove that they are not, that will set them free."

"I say they go free now, and what I say goes," the big man remarked, while one of the crowd said:

"Better let 'em go, Buffalo Bill, for that is Harry Watts, and he is no man to fool with."

"Thank you for your advice, friend, but if Harry wants these men he'll have to fight for them," was Bill's quiet rejoinder.

"Is that yer game?" roared the big fellow savagely.

"I seek no trouble, but if you attempt to rescue these men, why you and I will come together, that is all."

Buffalo Bill kept his eye upon the big fellow, for he could see that he was a dangerous man, and he was ready for any move upon his part.

It was well he was watching him, for the bully suddenly dropped his hand upon his revolver, yet before he could show it the scout had him covered.

"Don't do it, for you love life, I know," said Bill Cody, in the calmest tones possible.

"I do love life too well ter throw it away," said Harry, "and yer is quicker than greased lightnin', but I come here ter set them men free, and, says I, if yer wants 'em, fight for 'em."

"I will, if I am forced to do so!"

"Will you have it out with me squar'?"

"Do you mean that I am to fight you a duel?"

"Just that."

"I have no quarrel with you, and I seek none. I am in the discharge of my duty, so I warn you off," said Buffalo Bill.

"Then yer backs down?"

"I fear no bully such as you are, so stand aside, for I pass on with my prisoners."

Buffalo Bill stepped toward the man as he spoke, still holding him covered.

The Hercules did not move, did not dare drop his hand upon his revolver.

The scout reached him, and then, with a rapid movement, which even the quickest eye was unable to follow, he had dealt the bully a blow in the face with one hand, while with one foot he tripped him, hurling him to the ground with a force that half stunned him.

The spectators could not believe their eyes at seeing their Hercules thus easily done for, and they gazed at Buffalo Bill in wonder, while he said:

"Now, sergeant, we will move on."

"No, you don't!" roared the fallen man, staggering to his feet, revolver now in hand, and firing as he bounded forward.

With a shriek of pain, Hank Hall fell dead in his

tracks, for he stood just behind the scout, and mingling with his cry was the sharp report of a second shot.

This time it was Buffalo Bill who fired, and his aim was true as ever, for his bullet crashed in between the eyes of Harry, who fell his length at the scout's feet, a dead man.

"I hope this killing will have to go no further," said Buffalo Bill, as he glanced over the crowd, many of whom were now beginning to show a very ugly spirit toward him.

"It's got ter go further, Buffalo Bill, for no man shan't come inter this mining camp, arrest our comrades, and kill a pard of mine, and I not hold him responsible."

The speaker was a small, wiry man, dressed in top-boots, and a suit of black clothes.

A glance showed Buffalo Bill that the man must be Mike Terhune, for he looked like the man described to him as bearing that name. He did not wish more bloodshed, but was not a man to be driven from his duty, though he saw now that a number of the crowd were ready to back the man.

"See here, pard, don't be a fool, for the fool killer is around to-day, and you don't wish to be singled out by him."

"Aire yez the fool killer yez speaks of?"

"If I have to kill you, yes, for you are chipping in where it is not your game."

"I chips in when I sees fit to do so, and ef ye've killed Harry, I ain't afeerd of yez."

"Well, play your hand, for life's too short to fool away time."

"Will ye set them men free?"

"Not in a thousand years."

"I'll play yez a game for 'em."

"Then step out of the crowd and draw."

"I mean with cards."

"And I mean with revolvers, for sixes are trumps, and I hold a full hand. Do you pass?"

Mike saw that the laugh was upon him. He had challenged for a game, and the scout had taken him up, but with revolvers instead of cards.

His look over the crowd showed that he must make a bold stand or lose his prestige.

The fate of Harry Watts had cowed many into submitting to the will of the scout, and they were surprised when Mike had chipped in, game as he was known to be.

Now it looked as though he would stand a bluff.

But Mike was a man with unbounded confidence in himself, and he would not back down before men who had always feared him; so he said:

"I don't pass, but orders you to let them men go."

"And I refuse, while, to give you a hole to sneak out of, I warn you that you are interfering with a government officer in the discharge of his duty."

"What does yer arrest them for?"

"As deserters from the army."

"Has yer ther proof?"

"I have."

"Show it to me."

"I recognize these two men, and Sergeant Dean knows those three."

"What does they say?"

"We denies it," came in chorus from the five men.

"I take their word."

"Well, what are you going to do about it, Mickey?"

"Pards, are you with me?"

Mike glanced over the crowd.

There were fully a hundred men in the crowd now, and, though some of them felt that Mike was weaken-

ing in calling for aid from the crowd, yet a number were determined to stand by him.

There were others present, the law-abiding men, in the crowd, who wanted to back up the scout.

They felt that in the loss of Harry the camps had suffered no misfortune, that Hank Hall would be missed by no one, and that it had been a lucky thing that he had been in the way of the bully's bullet aimed at Buffalo Bill.

If Mike was killed by the scout, no crape in token of respectful regrets would be hung to the latchstrings of any of the cabins, but instead there would have been a fervent delivery of thanks that another brave had passed in his chips.

But, seeing that in that particular crowd the worst element predominated, the better class of men kept in the background. It seemed to them that Buffalo Bill had developed a remarkable capability of taking care of himself.

Mike's question had to be answered, for he had glanced around the crowd, his eye falling upon those whom he knew would hardly dare decline—some of them would respond from sheer love of seeing more killing, others from fear of being held to account by the desperado if he escaped death.

"I says, pards, is yer with me in pertecting our friends?" repeated Mike, in a louder and more threatening tone.

A chorus of voices answered in the affirmative, and the crowd came closer.

But Buffalo Bill's face did not change in expression, unless it was that a grim smile hovered about his mouth, and his voice was firm and distinct, as he said:

"You make a mistake, gentlemen, for I have the right to arrest these men, and I shall shoot to kill, if I am driven to it."

"We kin shoot to kill, too, Buffalo Bill, and Mike says so," yelled the crowd.

That another moment would have brought on a deadly encounter all knew, for Buffalo Bill's face now showed the spirit of a man determined to do and die right there, and the crowd wavered to give way for those who meant to engage in the deadly conflict.

But as they wavered, into their midst glided a slender form, and the clear voice of a woman cried:

"Cowards! do you dare fire on me, too, for I take sides with Buffalo Bill?"

It was Jane Turpin who spoke, and hardly had she uttered the words when Mona Borden glided up to the other side of Buffalo Bill.

Both girls had repeating rifles in their hands ready for use. They had just come in from a hunt down the valley and in the mountains, and the negro cook was taking the game they had brought back with them, when he said:

"I think somethin' is goin' wrong up the valley with Bill Cody."

"Why, what is it?" Jane gazed up the valley, where the crowd surrounding Buffalo Bill and his prisoners were in sight. "Come, Mona, for Mr. Cody is surely in some trouble there," she cried, and, turning to the negro, she continued:

"Run down to the troopers' camp and tell them to mount quickly and come on up the valley."

The two girls dashed away at the full speed of their horses.

They were compelled to leave their horses before reaching the spot, on account of the uneven nature of the ground, and Jane said, as she threw her rein to her friend:

"Here, Mona, you wait here, please, for I'll stop that trouble!"

She glided forward as she spoke, overheard the

words, saw the situation at a glance, and appeared upon the scene, her presence unsuspected until she faced the crowd, rifle in hand, as she placed herself by the side of the scout.

The coming of the two young women in the way they did caused a surprise like the fall of a bomb-shell among the miners, and every atom of fight was taken out of them.

The lawful men of the crowd greeted them with a rousing cheer, which was soon joined in by the others.

As for Mike, he was glad to see a chance of escape, though Jane evidently recognized him as the leader, and her eyes flashed defiance upon him.

Thinking that he now saw his chance to get out of a bad scrape with some degree of honor, he said:

"We cannot go against you, so we pass."

"You are wise. But what did this attack mean? It has not been a bloodless one, I see."

Jane glanced at the dead bodies of the unfortunate Hank Hall and Harry Watts.

"It means that I arrested these deserters from the army," said the scout, "acting under orders, and that the men now dead sought to rescue them, while Mike, not profiting by their experience, still pressed me. He should thank you for saving his life, for, had you not come, he would have been a dead man now, though I, too, might have gone under, so you have done me a great service."

"Well, there will be no more trouble, for here come the soldiers, and my father is with them, I see. Mike, you make a great mistake to bully a government officer."

"Beg pardon, but I didn't want to see the boys taken off to be hung, maybe."

"It is about all you can do to take care of your own neck," was Jane's retort.

Just then up came Turpin, with the soldiers at his

back, the corporal by his side, for they had dismounted from their horses.

"Men, if you are not satisfied, if these ladies will retire, we can settle the question of my right to arrest deserters right now," said Buffalo Bill, facing the crowd.

"Who disputes your right, Buffalo Bill?" cried Turpin hotly.

"It seems no one now, sir, for these young ladies have stampeded the fighters," was the answer of Buffalo Bill, and he laughed as he saw Mike and his immediate backers getting out of view behind the now thickly gathering crowd.

Miner Turpin was a power in Moonstone Valley, and his coming had a quieting effect, equaled only by the arrival of the girls, and the presence of the soldiers also poured oil upon the troubled waters for the majority, no matter what a few hotheads might wish to do.

"Take your prisoners to camp, sergeant, and keep two men on duty constantly—one over these five men, the other to watch the camp.

"I will walk back with Turpin as soon as I have arranged for the burial of these bodies," said Buffalo Bill.

"Leave that to Vaughan, Bill, for he will see to it, won't you, Vaughan?" said Turpin, addressing one of the men, who answered:

"Oh, yes, sir, I'll see 'em planted O. K., but, sergeant, you'd better unchain Hank Hall now, for he'll not get away," and the sergeant quickly removed the handcuffs from the dead man.

"You have done the camps a great service, Buffalo Bill, in killing Harry, while few will mourn for Hank Hall, for he was a bad one. But how did it all happen?" said Miner Turpin, as they walked along back

to the cabins, accompanied by the two maidens, one of the soldiers leading their horses.

Buffalo Bill told the story of the affair in his modest way, and the miner said:

"Let me warn you to look out for Mike, for he will strike you in the back, if he can.

"He is one of the desperadoes on your list, and Harry was another, for he was the leader of the Owls, and Hank Hall was one of his gang, so you have done a fair day's work, I think; but look out for Mike, for he is a bad one, and I heard several say you backed him down squarely, and that means he will seek revenge."

CHAPTER XVII.

A CHALLENGE ACCEPTED.

Mona felt blue over the outcome of her having told Buffalo Bill what her father's orders had been to Lieutenant Vald. It had already resulted in the death of two men.

Being the daughter of the commandant, however, and frequently aiding him in his work, answering letters and dispatches, she had learned much of what duties he was expected to perform. For years it had been the desire of the government to check desertion, when the temptation of the mines was at hand, especially as the men who deserted were the worst element in the army and became outlaws almost invariably.

Mona knew, too, that there was a renegade element among the Indians that the commanders were anxious to lay a violent hand upon, as they urged the hostiles on to greater deeds of devilry than they would otherwise be guilty of.

The desperadoes of the mining camps and settlements were also another bad lot, so that, having heard her father's talk and instructions to Lieutenant Vald she felt justified in telling Buffalo Bill what that officer had expected to accomplish on his visit to Moonstone Valley, the going with troops as an escort being the nominal work for which they were sent there.

The miner told her, as did also Jane and Buffalo Bill, that she had only done her duty in telling the latter what had been the orders of Lieutenant Vald, as that officer had not been able to inform the scout, and hence she should not feel blue over the fatal results.

The scout had said to her, in his quiet way:

"You don't know what precious lives you may have saved through my putting Harry out of the way, for

he has a long list already to answer for, and if he killed Hank Hall with a stray shot, from all accounts, it was a good deed to get rid of him, too.

"Now you know that we men of the border have to carry our lives in our hands, and in the discharge of duty must take big chances of being killed, and stand ready to kill, too, though wanton killing is to me the basest of crimes.

"Let a man kill a few desperadoes in the discharge of his duty and to save his own life or the lives of others, and before long he is branded as a man-killer—a name that no one who has a true heart cares to bear. Like the official executioner, he must stand ready to take life when the occasion demands it."

"You are right, Bill, and your argument is a good one, for you have been one to suffer by just such reports," said Hugh Turpin.

"Yes, and will have to do the same thing again and again, as long as I lead this wild life," said Buffalo Bill, in a tone of sadness; but in an instant his manner changed, and he added:

"No, no, Miss Borden, don't you feel blue over the death of any man whom your telling me my orders caused me to kill, and who was, really speaking, tree fruit, from the crimes he was guilty of. Now I must go up to the city and look around."

"You will take some of your soldiers with you?" asked Jane.

"Oh, no, for that would surely cause trouble, as it would be said that I was afraid to go alone, and was looking for a fracas. Why, they'd doubtless tell me to come and get you to protect me!"

The scout smiled, while Miner Turpin said:

"You are right, Bill, it would cause trouble to take your men, for there is a very ugly element in these mines, and this afternoon's arrest has started the fire."

Buffalo Bill soon after left the cabin and wended his way on foot up to Mascot City.

The "city" was in full blast, for the occurrences of the afternoon had caused all the miners to assemble in the various saloons, at the Stagecoach tavern and in knots, discussing the affair.

The discussions, fired by liquor, ran hot, and when Buffalo Bill dropped into "The Exchange," as the main gambling and drinking saloon was known, he found that there had already occurred one killing scrape and another in which a participant had been badly wounded.

The "hero" in each case was Mike, and he was enjoying a game of cards when Buffalo Bill sauntered into the saloon.

Flushed with his deeds, and half full of liquor, the moment his eyes fell upon the scout he dropped his cards and called out, in a voice that silenced all noise:

"Ho, Buffalo Bill, you have come to have out your quarrel with me, I suppose?"

"I have no quarrel with you, unless you see fit to make one," was the calm reply.

"Well, I do see fit to demand an apology for your insulting me this afternoon, or give me satisfaction."

"I have no apology to offer, but all the satisfaction you may desire."

The trouble which had ended in Mike killing one man and wounding another had originated in the fact that several miners had criticized his interfering with the arrest of the deserters.

They upheld the scout, and said that he had done just right in killing Harry, and added that but for Jane Turpin's timely arrival the scout would have killed Mike.

The moment he beheld the tall form and handsome, stern, and cynical face of Buffalo Bill, it aroused

the Satan in his nature, and he had hurled down a challenge for an apology or a fight.

When Buffalo Bill entered, every eye was upon him, and many drew a long breath, for they felt that another tragedy was to be enacted.

"Why had not the scout stayed away?" some asked.

Yet, why should he hide himself in a free country, and was he not entitled to go where he pleased?

The truth was, Buffalo Bill had gone in the discharge of his duty. He was on the trail of the desperadoes Lieutenant Vald had been given orders to hunt down. He wished to find them, to shoot them, to track them, so that when the time came to act he could do so.

The crowd became breathless with expectation as Buffalo Bill replied to the challenge of Mike Terhune, and all eyes were upon him and the desperado.

The latter at once attempted to draw his revolver, but he was covered with a quickness that brought a cheer from the crowd.

How Buffalo Bill did it, no one saw or knew, but Mike had a revolver leveled at his head in a twinkling of a second, while the scout called out sternly:

"Hold! no game of life and death here in this crowd, for, like another cowardly bully of your stripe, you will wound or kill an innocent man."

Cheers greeted this announcement, and Mike turned livid with rage, while he said fiercely:

"You said you would meet me, and now back down because you have the drop on me."

"You are a liar, for I do not back down, but say that if you wish to meet me it must be fair and square, so choose your seconds, and, as I have no friend here, I must ask a kindness on the part of some one."

Another cheer greeted the words of the scout, and

it was very evident that Buffalo Bill's stock was rapidly rising above par.

Cornered as he was, by his challenge, and its prompt acceptance, Mike called out:

"Drop your revolver from covering me, and I'll talk to you."

"Don't trust him," came in a chorus of voices.

"I will trust him, for I have confidence that there are too many honorable men about me not to kill him on the spot did he shoot me down."

Loud rang the cheers at this trust in the crowd, and many voices called out:

"You bet you can trust us, and he shall act square."

Buffalo Bill, on this pledge, which seemed to have come from two-thirds of those present, at once lowered his revolver and said:

"I thank you, gentlemen. Now who will act for me?"

A score of men sprang forward, but recognizing one he knew to be a friend of Miner Turpin, the scout said:

"Thank you, I will accept your services, so please find out what the pleasure of Mike is."

"He has taken Red Rand for his second, and says that he will meet you to-morrow some time," was the answer.

"He has also asked Dick Kasher, the dead-shot duelist of the mines, to help Red Rand," reported another miner.

"Then I will ask you also to aid my friend here, and I shall be pleased to see both the seconds you name, but the fight shall take place at once, for I am the challenged party."

In vain did Mike try to put it off until the morrow, but Buffalo Bill would not hear to it. The outlaw was forced to come to the scout's terms as the challenged party.

It was no easy task to bring Mike to terms, for he had hoped, as it was to be a duel and not an encounter on the spur of the moment, to put off the meeting until the morrow.

That there was some trick in this all who knew the desperado felt assured, and every one hoped that Buffalo Bill would not yield.

Mike had first selected one second, Red Rand; and just at that moment Dick Kasher had entered the saloon, and he also was chosen.

These two seconds were as well known in the mines as Mike, and even more to be feared. They also had a "record" as man-killers, and an encounter with them was always regarded, as in Mike's case, as fatal to their adversary.

It was Red Rand who approached Buffalo Bill and said in his most courtly way:

"Pardon me, sir, but I come from my friend Mike Terhune to learn your wishes for this meeting to-morrow with him."

"You are misinformed, sir, for the meeting is for to-night, and I refer you to my friend here," coolly said Buffalo Bill.

"But, sir, my friend with the diabolical Irish name insists upon to-morrow."

"You are known as one of the desperado duelists of the mines, I believe, for I have so heard you spoken of?"

"I have that honor, sir."

"Then you should know that the challenged party has the right to appoint time, weapons, and place of meeting."

"You are right, sir; but, here in the mines, we are not sticklers for such fine points of etiquette in the duello."

"I am a stickler for justice, and I shall insist upon

my rights, knowing the kind of a man I have to deal with."

"I will consult my brother second, sir," and Red Rand walked away.

Going apart with Mike Terhune and Dick Kasher, the three held a whispered conversation for some time, and then the latter came up to the saloon where Buffalo Bill was waiting.

"Pardon me, you are Buffalo Bill, the scout, I believe, sir?" he said, in a gentlemanly way.

"You are well known to us, sir, and I honor a brave man; but just now I represent Mike, and he demands that his meeting with you should be put off until to-morrow."

"As the party who has the right, I decline, sir."

"May I ask why, sir?"

"I sought no quarrel with your principal; I was interfered with by him when in the discharge of duty, and coming here to-night he deemed himself insulted and demanded an apology. Now, stop this delaying matters, arrange with the two gentlemen here who represent me, and let the matter be settled at once; otherwise I shall take affairs in my own hands and settle it to please myself."

There was no doubting this way of putting the case by Buffalo Bill, so Dick returned to his comrades, and after a few minutes more came back to the scout's seconds and arranged that the meeting should take place right there in the saloon.

Buffalo Bill was wholly unmoved in appearance, chatted quietly with those about him, and turned to his seconds when they announced how all had been arranged.

"We have decided that each one of you stand apart the length of the saloon, facing the wall, the distance being fifty paces, and the lamps hanging along the center from the roof will give you light to see how

to aim," said one of Buffalo Bill's seconds, while Terhune's representatives stood by. "I have won the toss-up for the word, and I will call out as follows:

"Ready! Right about, wheel! Forward, march! When you have both advanced ten paces, I will give the word: 'Fire!' From that moment you can advance, firing at will. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly."

"The crowd will range themselves upon either side, and should be in no danger certainly, for this saloon is sixty feet wide."

"Is this satisfactory, sir?" asked Rand, in a tone so insulting that all noticed it and awaited Buffalo Bill's answer.

It came with the calmness natural to him when deeply moved:

"I could only ask one greater joy, Reddy!"

It was a cut at his red hair, his red hand, his crimes, and it was meant and understood, for the desperado flushed and asked quickly:

"And what is that, scout?"

"That you were in Mike's place."

The shot told, and the men cheered, while Red Rand turned white, but made no reply. He had called forth an attack by his insulting manner toward the scout, and he had been very quickly silenced.

When the principals were in position, facing the wall, and with their backs to each other, the two seconds nearest to them stepped back to the line of the crowd.

Then came the call of Buffalo Bill's second, standing by Kasher:

"Ready! Right about, wheel! Forward, march!" The two men obeyed promptly, Buffalo Bill with military precision, and as the steps were told off to ten, bringing them within thirty paces of each other, amid a silence that was deathlike, the second called out:

"Fire!"

Mike had anticipated the command by a second or more, and his revolver was leveled by the time the word was uttered.

Buffalo Bill halted at the shot, and before a second pull on the trigger by Mike he answered.

When the puff of smoke cleared from the muzzle of Buffalo Bill's revolver, he saw the desperado lying upon his face, while quickly turning him over, as he ran to his side, Kasher called out:

"Dead! Shot between the eyes—a magnificent shot, indeed!"

The board roof rattled as these words brought forth a roaring cheer, which was at once followed by hisses and groans from Mike's admirers.

"Don't cheer at a man's death, pards," came in Buffalo Bill's calm tones, and he spoke reprovingly, while Rand was seen coming quickly toward him, and a cry of warning arose.

But if the desperado meant to open fire, he was checked when he saw the ugly looks about him, and that Buffalo Bill was on his guard, so he said savagely:

"Now, scout, I am ready to step into Mike's place and meet you."

"Is this a challenge?"

"Certainly, for it means your life or mine."

"I am willing—let the same terms govern us," said Buffalo Bill sadly.

But before another revolver could be forced upon Buffalo Bill, the doors at each end of the saloon were thrown open, and into one came Mr. Turpin, the corporal, and eight soldiers.

"Hold, men! Our mines shall not be disgraced by your murdering a government officer and my friend. Red and you, Dick, I arrest, and call upon all good

men to back me up, and the desperado leaders here will be out of the way," said Miner Turpin.

Covered by the repeating rifles of the soldiers, the two desperado leaders surrendered, and the sergeant quickly had them in irons, where they were led off to the soldiers' camp.

There it was proved that Jane and Mona were guarding the five deserters while Turpin went to the rescue of the scout.

Several days after, Buffalo Bill and the soldiers set out upon the return to the fort with their prisoners, and Turpin insisted upon sending along the ransom for Lieutenant Vald.

After a week on the trail, Buffalo Bill and his party reached the fort, and the prisoners were in safe hands, and later suffered punishment for their crimes.

At the time agreed upon Buffalo Bill, having the ransom money, went to an appointed meeting place, and there met the renegade chief, the lieutenant, and a score of redskins.

The money was paid, the officer released, the renegade keeping his contract, and the lieutenant and the scout started upon their return to the fort.

On the way Brian Vald said:

"My good friend, I have found out that my unfortunate brother is really dead, for he died of his wounds in the Indian village. We were twin brothers, but he seemed to be born bad, and dogged my steps continually, causing me no end of unhappiness and trouble. Once, when I had a cattle ranch, he captured me and held me a prisoner for two years, to force my property from me, having squandered his share of our inheritance. It was there that I learned the Indians' secret signs, and I used them for protection. It was to see if he was dead, if he was really in the grave of those killed after the big fight six months ago that I went ahead of our party. He was not

then, but died later, as I said. Now, we will drop the remembrance of my poor brother."

Moonstone Mines became quite a respectable place after what was called "Buffalo Bill's Clean-out" of the toughs; but Turpin decided to sell out his claims and move East, and Buffalo Bill, Lieutenant Vald, and a squadron of cavalry escorted the miner and young ladies to the fort. Thence, after several days, the king of scouts went north to another disreputable mining town called Goldeena.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MAKING AN ENEMY.

"Down on your knees and apologize to this young lady, or the sun shines through you!"

This order was backed by a large revolver in the fist of Buffalo Bill, who had been in Goldeena only a few hours when the encounter took place.

The man so menaced looked but once, and his knee joints relaxed.

As he was obeying, a young girl who was the cause of the altercation, clasping her little white hands, stared with surprise at finding herself the center of this sudden and terrible scene.

To her the street of Goldeena was as odd as one of Japan. With its blue or red flannel shirted miners, its few Chinamen, an Indian or two, blanketed and plumed, and the gamblers in broadcloth, the finest of linen, and the brightest of diamonds, it was thrilling to her, fresh from the East. She had come out of the Goldeena House, where her father was recruiting after a long stagecoach journey, to see the town.

Separated mysteriously from her French maid, her attendant, and bewildered by being about the only one of her sex in the motley and noisy crowd, she was suddenly accosted by one whom she had known briefly in the Eastern cities.

This was he who cowered under the frontiersman's gun.

Baron Chillturn, as he had styled himself while pretending to be an English nobleman, had vanished when his swindle was unmasked. He must have followed her, though, when her father came West to speculate with his capital in these Western mines.

He had been assured by a correspondent in whom

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he believed reliance could be placed to any amount, but who was in collusion with Chillturn, that tin had been found in the place, and some Welsh miners, familiar with the way to work it, were on the spot to develop it.

How else would the British baron have appeared in her path and taken advantage of their being face to face to repeat his odious offering of a love which she would have spurned, even if she had still believed him a peer.

She had no time to more than rebuke him, for, prompt as the eagle to swoop, one of the bystanders had struck him and literally brought the cowardly insulter to her feet.

"I—I am not a stranger to the lady," stammered the latter, with a face more red with baffled spite and rage than pallid with fear. "I—I am sorry I have made a mistake. I humbly apologize to her——"

"Oh, I do not want your excuses," said Cody haughtily. "It is a good thing for you that you did not get worse."

And by the frown on his handsome face the hearers knew that he was speaking the truth.

"Lave-ho!" said the famous hunter, then seeing that the tenderfoot did not understand the old mountaineer's cry to rise, he added in the same tone of careless contempt, "Get up and dust! In spite of your headlight pin and fine ruffles, you're a low-down cur! And no muttering, or I may be goaded into mopping the gutter with you!"

Baron Chillturn slowly rose, flushed with shame, for the bystanders did not spare their laughter. He darted a baleful glance on the borderman and on the girl, and his lips muttered a threat including both.

"Swallow your venom, or I shall hurry you on!" said Cody. He seemed to regret that he was letting off this genteel ruffian so lightly.

But a light hand was laid on his arm.

"Please do not make any more of this," begged the girl. "He is sufficiently punished."

"Not to my measurement, but—he has gone. Never mind, little girl!"—a young lady of eighteen was a girl in Cody's eyes—"if ever he hovers around you again you mention Buffalo Bill as wanting to see him, and continue this conversation."

Then seeing that the pretty lips were framing a phrase of thanks, which he detested for an act of natural gallantry, he hastened away. He was glad to spy an acquaintance in a saloon doorway.

"You will have to excuse me, miss," he said hurriedly, with kindness in his voice, so gentle when addressing women. "My friends wait. Oh, no thanks, please."

And making a sweeping bow with his sombrero, he mingled with the departing crowd.

The young lady was joined by her maid, who began her apologies for having been lured into parting company with her young mistress. She spoke with a nimble tongue, but with a false glance.

The girl cut her maid's apologies short with a sharp "That will do! Follow me to the hotel!" and as the mixed assemblage made way with the double respect for one so beauteous and good, and for whom the king of the plains had intervened, she briskly returned to the house which she ought not to have quitted under treacherous guard.

In the meantime, the wretch who had been chastised for his insolence had shrunk into the first doorway.

A man was standing in this doorway.

It was the place known among this medley of pine shanties and portable frame houses as the Dobie House, because it was made of sun-baked bricks. It was a gambling and drinking den of the worst species. Its rival was the Robbers' Roost, the flaunting tent

halfway down the same block nearer the center of the town. In the Dobie they robbed the customers; in the Roost they murdered them, too.

These two men looked hard at each other.

The Englishman looked younger than his thirty years, for he was fair, and his light hair was rather golden than auburn. His mustache was heavy and well kept. His blue eyes showed cunning. His nose was too sharp, and, with his bold glance, now he had recovered from the humiliation, he reminded one of a bird of prey. He could fascinate as well as overawe. He wore an English traveling suit of tweed, with gloves of tan, and fine leather boots. In spite of this attire he seemed fit for athletic feats.

The more the other studied him, the deeper he was surprised that he had submitted to the correction.

And yet "Fly Frank, the Gambolier Sharp," would himself have yielded when the antagonist had "the drop on him."

On his side the pretended baron regarded the gaming expert closely. He saw a slender, alert, graceful man, rather showy than solid; evidently powerful, though nicely proportioned. A prize fighter would not have cared to grapple with him, for it would be like an elephant fighting a tiger. Neither might win, but both might die of death wounds.

The man was attired in black of the best quality. He glittered with diamonds, the real thing, with a sort of taunt among his villainous associates of "Take if you dare!" Ah, nobody felt like tackling Fly Frank for a jewel or two. He was the quickest man with the knife, Mexicans not barred, in Goldeena.

"Come to size you, sir," said Frank, all of a sudden, as the other seemed to dilate to his right dimensions under the searching gaze, "it licks me how you let Buffler Bill tread you down in the dirt, as a fellow might say. I suppose it was because you were not

well heeled. Well, there is sound hoss sense in that. It is not a mossel of use carrying pistols unless you are lightning to use them as these Injin fighters, like Buffler, and his pal, Texas Jack yonder, to say nothing of our marshal, Wild Bill, who is eying us suspicious from over there. They do not drink much, they fight shy of professionals at throwing the bones or fumbling the pasteboards, but they can shoot some."

The Englishman said nothing, but in his eyes, as he turned them to where his late punisher was talking with his friends and the high constable of the town, was an excess of hate which made Frank hot all over.

"I see I have not mistaken you. Well, you are a rarity to take that sass from any man, and bide your time to sarve it back scorching. Say, mister, were you ever in Sain' Loo?"

"Saint Louis? Perhaps. Why do you ask?"

"'Cause I thought you might want to buy the bowie knife I offered you there in Bartlemy's Gilded Parlor, in '82."

"Eh?"

"Just what I am saying. I am the broken sport whom you lent a cool thousand to when you was asked, on the pledge of a fancy toothpick, inlaid with gold and dotted with rubies—it was a keepsake of mine, and I would not lose it for anything. Here, do you remember it, though not me?"

The British baron glanced at the magnificent dagger knife which the gambler showed, and nodded.

"I recall you now," he said. "I wish you had slipped that into my hand a minute ago."

"For what good? Buffler would have pistoled you straight. Besides, you and I could not have run the town, for he is among mates here—I mean in the village—with Wild Bill the marshal, and Texas Jack just come to town."

"I still wish you would lend me your arms."

The two villains exchanged a bright look. They understood each other.

"Come in. Out in the open is not healthy," said Frank, and he pulled the stranger, not reluctant or frightened now, within the gaming house, not in full blast this early hour.

Frank drew his old acquaintance into a corner farthest from the street.

"Friend," began Frank, in a low voice, "you staked me when I was pumped out among them Mississipp' sports, and I am just yourn body, boots, and soul, see? I am pooty well tired of these mountain men, and these plainsmen spoiling the fun in the towns. Why don't they stick to shooting Injin, and buffler, and antelopes—and leave gents to the gentleman's games? Fust thing they know, they will be cleaned out, and think themselves lucky to have the prairie dogs' holes to creep into."

"You are talking," said the Englishman, "as though you had a couple of hundred men at your back."

The gambler darted a quick glance all around, even at the brick wall where they stood, and suspicious as a catamount, he suddenly drew the long-bladed knife which he had shown to his companion.

Reaching out, he darted the steel-armed hand, lithe and taper as a lady's, in at a crevice in this wall.

"Ouch—guard me, oh, I am stabbed!" whined a voice in Spanish on the other side.

They both heard the retreating steps of some man.

"That was a spy," remarked the gambler calmly, as he withdrew the knife and looked at the reddened point. "Luke," he added to the bartender, who roused up from behind the counter at this cry of pain, "you are letting your customers git crowded. Send a man round to see who sneaks up to listen in your corral."

Two of the servants sallied out to search the premises for the wounded eavesdropper.

"To resume," went on the gambler, unruffled. "You are right. I have got at least a hundred, who are worth the average five hundred when properly handled."

"Then you are——"

"Just a sporting gent here, but a little out yonder on the high land they call me the King Bird of the Buzzards."

"The Buzzards of the Boneyard?" said the other, turning more pale than he did when under Buffalo Bill's revolver. He had the name correct.

He need not have been in Goldeena long to know the reputation of the bandits, of whom Fly Frank proudly proclaimed himself the captain. The Boneyard was the name given to the gulch to the southeast of the town. An abandoned surface working where a Wajaja Indian first discovered gold in the '60's, and showed the Shining Stone to Nelson the Squawman—so many dead bodies were seen bleaching in its dark bottom that it was shunned by all.

At first, perhaps, these grim piles were believed to be the remains of men and mules, who had misstepped on the old road called Dead Mule Trail, along the mountainside. But soon, as the ruffians flourished in the saloons and showed trophies remembered as belonging to missing miners, the whisper ran that they were the corpses of the murdered.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE POISONED BLADE.

Well might Baron Chillturn shiver at the mention of the Boneyard and this new friend's avowal that he was the master of the villains who carpeted its hollow with the ghastly relics, unrecoverable from such depths.

Frank smiled with glee. He judged that his hearer would not be so impressed by a common horror.

"Good!" said the Englishman, overcoming a disgust which, after all, would be out of place; "I think—as I have plenty of dollars and so only need your help—we shall strike a bargain."

"You have only to lead—I will follow on. I do not want your gold. I will aid you to my level best for the hatred I bear Buffler Bill and his companions of the plains and sierras. Do you know, they have talked about our jig being up, and that they were twisting the ropes for us?"

In spite of his nerve, Chillturn felt a cold shudder run round his neck.

"Wild Bill said that he was only waiting for the call of his friends. But decking the telegraph posts with live men is a game two can play at. I bet that my Buzzards can git the pull over them honest gamblers in a tug of war."

They went to the bar together like brothers. A little more, and they would have drunk out of the same glass. Before they had emptied a bottle they were concocting a scheme to be revenged upon their mutual foes, all the honest men who blocked their way to running the town on their own lines.

"Mark this," said the Englishman gravely: "That girl's father, Mr. Mountrose, is enormously wealthy.

He can be held to ransom among the five figures in dollars, and I have a little scheme to lower the tide of his golden flood, which I will describe to you hereafter. And another thing I want to lower—that is, his daughter's pride. I offered her my hand once, and she refused me. So she shall yet go down on her knees and beg to me, more abjectly than I was made to do to her. That was my weak moment such as all have once in a life. I shall weaken no more. Then, there is another thing."

He lowered his voice, and continued in the other's ear:

"You waste your time picking off these gold scrapers one by one. Why not wait till the Deadwood coach has all the month's clean-up aboard and swipe in the entire lot?"

"A good idee," exclaimed the King Bird of the Buzzards, with his eyes sparkling.

"It is simply to waylay it on the road; I noticed plenty of good ambushes along the road hither; and, though I do not pretend to the woodcraft of Texas Jack, with whom I hunted and camped down South, I am not a fool when turned loose on the plains for all that. No more nibbling at the outer edge—let us bite deep. In one swoop we may gather in the gold for the Omaha Bank, the girl and her father shall be——"

"It is a go," cried Frank, delighted. "But first of all——"

"First of all, our revenge on these self-appointed regulators of our morals, and on the whole town that grinned at my being bulldozed into excusing myself to that girl."

"On the whole town? Is not that a large order?" questioned the fly one, aghast at the other's audacity.

"I would fire it from end to end if I have to run through it with the torch in my own hand."

"Bravo! that is the talk! You are fit to be my lieutenant."

And the bandit leader, melted by the liquor, clapped the Englishman on the back.

"Your lieutenant, old man!" cried the other, as if proudly, but under his breath he muttered, as they clinked glasses: "Waiting to be your chief."

"Hear me! Here is confusion to Marshal Wild Bill and all the other Bills who oppose the lovers of fun! As for the Jacks, we shall turn them down."

While these two worthies were plotting arson and murder, to say nothing of kidnaping and highway robbery, the objects of their scheme were talking about them.

"Where did he drop into?"

"That varmint?" queried Texas Jack, looking round from where the three bordermen stood. "Skulked into some congenial hole, I reckon."

"He got into tow with the Gambolier, Fly Frank," answered the marshal of Goldeena. "Birds of a feather, you know."

"Aye, they may hang together in the strongest sense of the word," remarked Cody. "I ought not to have let him go so free. If we let these scalawags hook decent folks in such fashion, we should have no one coming out to the West."

They were interrupted by a man who ran up to them eagerly. He had a swarthy complexion, and he was a New Mexican—Marcial, by name. He had half his face swathed in a fresh bandage, and he was in pain, but his eyes had not lost luster.

"What is the matter, Mart?" questioned Wild Bill.

"Hear the report first," gasped Marcial, with an effort. "The man from the East, whom Buffalo Bill made knock under, is taken up into the arms of Fly Frank—and do you know what I have heard? Frank boasts that he is the captain of the Buzzards of the

Boneyard. He and the Englishman are now leaguers, and they are going to fire the town."

"You mean this? Why, all we were waiting for was to learn who was the head of the scoundrels' ring," said Wild Bill hastily, and his hand ran straight to his shooters in his belt.

"I mean it," said Marcial—then suddenly: "The Virgin show grace to a sinner! They have nailed me! Oh, how that slash burns! Ah, it was not an ordinary cut——"

With a yell extorted by fierce pain, he tore the linen from his face. A knife had cleft the cheek and injured the left eye. It was no common wound, and terribly inflamed.

"The miscreant!" continued he. "The steel was poisoned. I am a dead man—avenge me!"

As he reeled and fell, his companion on many a trail along the Pecos caught him in his arms. All these veterans in wounds looked with apprehension on this gash, fiery red, with the swollen and turpid veins running to it empurpled.

"I was spying them in the adobe house, when Frank darted his stick through a crack. He fetched me! I made light of the cut. I returned to the listening place, when I ought to have washed the gash. But I heard the plot. Yes, they are going to burn the town and take revenge on Buffalo Bill. Be ahead of them—remember Marcial, who was ever an American, though some sneered at him as a greaser. Get the first blow in!"

Texas Jack had lowered the speaker's head on his bent knee, but already the muscles of the neck were shaken by spasms, more short and severe at each attack. Rolling his great black eyes, the New Mexican died at the feet of his friends.

"Revenge?" repeated Texas Jack, flinging down his hat and kneeling by the body. "He's gone up—that

soul of his was white, boys! He dragged me across the Frio, in the inundation, on a raft of cane when the Navahos were hotfoot at our heels."

"Fire the town?" mused Wild Bill, full of pride at having the safety of the settlement under his care.

"He bade us strike quick!" said Texas Jack.

He and Wild Bill took a forward step toward the Dobie House, but with a hand on one shoulder of each, Buffalo Bill detained them.

"Hold on—play cautious," said he. "This Frank is no slouch. He is not there now, waiting to be picked off. He who uses poison knives is treacherous as a wolf. Let us not be hasty lest we give him and his gang the hint to scoot. What I want is the whole lot in the net. All their necks wrung by the same noose would not repay the community the loss of one true man like this."

And he bowed to the remains of Marcial, whom, at a gesture from the marshal, two of his posse removed to the sheriff's office.

"Let us spend the night in gathering evidence and marking down the Buzzards. Then, in the morning, we will sound the alarm bell and lug the entire collection of the rogues' gallery of Goldeena before the justice. On the cold heart of Marcial, the murdered, I swear that they shall have justice meted out to them."

Any sympathizer with the robbers who heard this threat, spoken with calm decision, must have sneaked away with fear that the Buzzards would croak joyously never again.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BAD OMEN.

It was midnight.

The drink and gaming saloons were in full blast.

Texas Jack and Wild Bill were receiving the reports of agents who had gone the rounds to order the members of the Good Citizens' League to be ready for rough work in the morning. Cody was making a tour to see if the Buzzards were on the alert.

But never were the streets—Goldeena had three, the main street and two parallel streets, or alleys—more deserted and quiet.

Only a couple of men with the watering cart were going up and down the back street, sprinkling the heavy dust of the dirty roads, which made life a burden when the wind threw it up in whirls. But if the watchers had been less intent on seeing if the rovers of the worse sort were up to mischief, they might have noticed the queer antics of these scavengers.

Besides, instead of being the low-type Huns who usually slaved in the night amid the refuse, the cartmen were white men, merely disguised in soiled rags. And had one forgotten to hold the nose in approaching the cart, they would be surprised to inhale, not the reek of decayed vegetables, but the unmistakable smell of coarse kerosene.

At certain places, too, where a house was so hushed that one might be sure the inmates were reposing, these men, instead of taking away anything, left a bucket of the oil.

In short, the Buzzards, acting on the fiendish suggestion of the British baron, zealous like all new hands to show his mettle, were scattering the inflammables about the hurrah town. Pine plank and canvas

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would scarcely need this anointing to kindle at a touch of fire!

Convinced that Marcial had heard wrong, or that the bandits shrank from assailing a place so well guarded, Marshal Hickok and his friends came from the miners' supply store, which was the headquarters of the Regulators.

"My impression is that they have taken to flight," said Wild Bill, listening, without catching one alarming sound on the cool night air.

"Good!" cried Jack. "But here's for the finish. I have some dust in my pouch—I will buck the tiger for a clean-up."

"I am not playing cards any more," said Buffalo Bill.

"Still, Cody and I will look in upon you later on, if only to bring you a run of luck," said Wild Bill.

Jack went on to the Robbers' Roost, while the others returned to the store.

Meanwhile, the men with the explosive oil had discharged their errand and their cargo.

"This village was too previous," muttered one, whom those who knew would have recognized as Fly Frank, who had put his own shoulder to the wheel. "It is time it went up, like Elisha's car. All fixed, boys. Git out lively after touching off the fireworks, and come back with the band, ready to sail in and take advantage of the uproar to pillage."

His men nodded, and he walked on, a little in doubt what to do with himself. Then, throwing off the rags, he showed that he wore a suit of velveteen and furs, such as the Scotch-Canadians sport in the Northwest, and sometimes startled the natives with below their border. He donned a pair of red side whiskers and a sandy mustache, and being able to patter broken English with a French-Canadian accent, he expected to palm himself off as a stranger.

It was hazardous, for he was going right into the Robbers' Roost, where he was a nightly patron.

"Nothing venture, nothing win," he muttered, without misgiving. "That new pard of mine is to meet me there. I am much off the track if he does not turn out a very fiend incarnate. What nerve to stand that set-down from William F. Cody! It makes my blood boil to think of it—I would eat the heart of the galoot that downed me like that."

He looked round, but on the sky was not the least red glimmer, so that he might rely on it that his men had not untimely set the torch to the doomed buildings. He then entered the gambling saloon.

Two lusty fellows at the door eyed him sharply—they were not the usual guards. Wild Bill had replaced them by followers of his own. But the disguised gambler was not to be identified in his change of countenance.

"Let the sucker pass," muttered one. "This is the last grab game these fakers will play."

Frank looked round like a stranger, but any one could tell that he was not bewildered, or interested in the motley throng.

Men of all nations jostled one another to get near the tables, where different games went on with but one identical feature; they won in the long run against all players.

Most of the notorious criminals, the men with a record for crime, were absent. The rumor that the Goldeenians were going to kick had flitted about.

Fly Frank was set back by this. But after a while he remarked a peculiar movement which escaped the others. Now and then a man who came up to the board to lose a little pile, drew back with an expression of displeasure, and as if trying to find his way out by the back entrance into the corral behind, disappeared up a low flight of steps.

Frank recognized these men as adherents, or, at least, those who had winked at the carryings-on of his fellows. He knew, too, that by this exit any one could go up to the one story above the saloon.

"It is a meeting," he thought. "It has been arranged by this English deep one. He said that he would not want for helping hands. But where has he stowed himself?"

Not among the customers of the green cloth or the bar. Nobody like Chillturn was seen. But after a time, having stared everywhere else, the gambler perceived that old Schwearin, the saloon keeper, had reinforced himself for the night hours with a young man of his nationality.

At least, this stranger wore a bland face, a shaggy yellow mustache, thick and heavy, and his light eyes seemed sky color in the crossing rays of the dozen oil lamps illuminating the El Dorado, as Peter Schwearin called his den. He had the German's silent tongue, too, but he served mixed drinks—all from the same cask of whisky—with the dexterity of the champion bartender of a leading hotel.

"That's my man or he's not here," thought Frank.

He was not left to doubt, for on his going up to the bar for a drink, the suspected one, in handing him the decanter for him to take a gentleman's drink according to his delicacy, touched his fingers after the manner he had taught Chillturn to use at need.

"Yes," thought the King Bird of the Buzzards, "he is a sight more cute than I bargain for. He will do."

He was confirmed in this opinion by now noticing that those who went out of the saloon by the other door exchanged a glance with the false bartender. The latter, with a wary toss of the head, indicated the upstairs room where were assembling no doubt the recruits he had so soon engaged.

Still further, to assure Frank that he was in full

touch with him, the masquerading Briton made a sign that he was to wait and not play cards.

Not play? A gambler not play, while the board was wallowing in gold?

It had its irresistible fascination to Frank. He gradually sidled up to the principal table where the game was being run. The next thing he knew he was playing.

It was a game of red and black; a simple layout which enthralled the miners. Frank was only killing time, but his fever grew when he discovered that he was losing hand-over-fist, as a sailor, drifted from San Francisco, rudely blurted out. And that, in the same degree, one of the players was raking in the spoil.

It was Texas Jack. He was killing time also, waiting for his friends to appear.

Reckless and cool, the hero of the Rio Grande and the staked plains offered a direct contrast to the disguised gamester. Fly Frank did not understand this game, at which presided new faces. With the noise that the Buzzards were threatened, the gambling fraternity had taken wing. Those who remained were unknown to Frank, and they seemed to his excited fancy in a plot to break him.

Heated by his drinks, and nervous about the incendiary scheme, Frank staked on the colors at random.

Every time he lost, and Texas Jack won.

The bystanders laughed at the supposed Canuck when it was evident that he had come down to his last dollars. He had to scrape and rake in the corners of his secret pockets to get a last stake.

This went the way of the others. But again, at the same time, Texas Jack, smiling quietly in a way most provoking, took his winnings off his opposing color.

Frank turned partly away, but a laugh of derision

at his defeat checked him. It also made him blind to the certain sign from the pretended bartender that he was to play no more.

He fished up from a pouch in his hip a chamois leather bag, and triumphantly poured from it a quantity of pure gold in spangles, large scales, and grains.

Chillturn, leaning over the bar, as much attracted as the rest at this kind of duel between Texas Jack and the false Canadian, looked aghast. This bag of dust was stolen from him—his new partner had picked his pocket while vowing good fellowship! Who should be trusted since murderers and pillagers deceive their pals?

But this was not all—the loss of the gold he could overlook, considering the King Bird of the Buzzards offered alliance.

The bag contained more than gold.

For the stuff, the sallow cashier gave three sums in coin. Two of them were lost when, suddenly, Texas Jack, who had been looking at the leather pouch in a more and more inwrapped manner, thrust out his hand. It was not so much to grasp it as to shield it from another hand, even the player's, as he cried:

"You purport to hail from the Nor'west, sir? Don't ye? Then tell me how come you to pour out the dust so free from this bag? Look at the stamp on it all, gents."

And on the yellow lining, stamped in black, appeared the label in a circle:

"First National (Houston) Bank of Taos."

"Well?" exclaimed several bystanders, suspecting some revelation of deadly import, since the Canadian turned pale.

"Three months ago," said Texas Jack, "this bag was the property of an English nobleman, Baron Chillturn, whose guide I was to the Giant Cañons of the

Colorado. Speak, how did this fall into your trembling hands?"

Frank was, indeed, in a tremor. How could he confess that he had stolen it from the man who no doubt owned it legitimately, but who, as his confederate and foisting himself on this honorable crowd as the bartender from Germany would—if willing to own up—be taken as a liar of his own stripe, desirous to whitewash him.

"I expect you slew him?" continued Jack.

No answer.

"Where else did you get it?"

"Well, silence gives consent. We are making a haul of your sort, and I propose to begin with you."

Jack's hand rose from the bag, and was thrust toward the gambler's shoulder.

"What do you interfere with me for?" he faltered, looking over to the bar for a hint on his course, and at the same time more than ever wishing he could hear the alarm of fire.

"I arrest you on suspicion——"

The hand closed on the mock Canuck's shoulder, and he felt the bone ache in the clutch which had choked a panther before now. He was giving himself up for lost, when, his eyes rolling upward after having vainly appealed to Chillturn, he perceived in an opening in the ceiling several faces, not a bit strange, and muzzles of steel to support their threatening expression. He had forgotten that the Buzzard's allies, engaged by Baron Chillturn, had been collecting over the heads of the players.

Grinning with revived hope, he turned sharp round upon Texas Jack.

"Suspicion nothing," he yelled, shaking off the grip with energy, though the fingers still retained a fragment of the cloth and one of the whiskers.

"Fly Frank! The Buzzard King Bird!"

So rose the cry of those who recognized him as the borrowed feathers were plucked.

"Yes, and I am the owner of that purse," shouted the bartender.

With a powerful spring he leaped over the bar, smashing a tray of tumblers.

"It is Chillturn—my British lord," exclaimed Texas Jack, drawing his pistol like an alarm hammer striking; "I thought so. Hyar, you are my mark. Old scores to settle before running up new ones."

But the Englishman did not heed this challenge.

Landing lightly for his stoutness, and dexterously by the two principals in this scene, he put a pistol in the hand of Frank, and, cocking its mate, he added in a roar, which was audible throughout the shanty above and below:

"Lights out, lights out, that we may see the fire!"

At this signal, before the gambler could take aim, several shots rang out. The lamps aimed at by the concealed desperadoes above were extinguished. Their smoke and that of the guns commingled.

Chillturn had already shot out two of the lamps when his companion was just recovering from his stupor at this turning of the tables.

Not one by one, but by groups, the lights were thus put out. The horrified and startled mob gazed at the last one or two, and as they suffered the fate of the rest, fell away from the center where Texas Jack was trying to get a shot at Frank and his friend.

Some tumbled toward the door, some to the rear, but here the stairs were cumbered by the men who had begun the shooting. They rushed down to the call from Chillturn:

"Buzzards, on deck!"

The shooting grew hotter, but as all the lights were out, the bullets flew about after the light in men's bodies.

Texas Jack, in the flashes of the powder, reached out with the left hand for the shadow which he imagined to be Chillturn. But all he grabbed was the false blond mustache.

Chillturn and Frank had clasped hands in the darkness, and were rallying their followers by their secret grips and calls.

They soon presented a compact, well-armed front to the mob, frightened and dazed, who prevented Texas Jack from doing anything against them.

But in the height of the riot, a new turn was given to the commotion.

They had complained of the want of light. Now they would have more than they wanted.

A flaming wad from a carbine fell upon a pool of oil from a broken lamp. In an instant it flared, the flame spread, and all the players were involved in a sheet of radiance.

But as they moved with one impulse to the street doorway, a vast red glare made them stand.

In this glare they saw two stalwart figures running toward the center of the town.

Two vigorous voices alternated with each other, shouting:

"Rouse, rouse! the robbers have fired the town."

The men were Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FIRE FIGHTERS.

"Here, I have them!" roared Texas Jack, like a wounded lion, as he recognized in the alarmists his brothers of the rifle and bowie.

In another second, afraid of being burned, Buzzards, wounded and scorched, players, strangers, all were hurled into the street by an explosion. The fire had penetrated the dugout which Pete Schwearin styled his wine vaults, and ignited a barrel of spirits.

Usually a fire in such a town of cloth and plank is difficult to cope with. But when the frail habitations were saturated with rock oil, salvation was impossible.

Over Goldeena more red flare than smoke was rising, and the stars paled their silver. Around and about the burning houses, demons were rushing, leaping up into the shattered windows and emerging by the broken-out gaps above, with arms full of plunder. They yelled like drunken Indians, and flourished reddened knives and smoking firearms.

The Buzzards and the additions whom Chillturn had found for their ranks were holding revelry.

In their natural desire to save their property, the citizens at the first disobeyed the summons of the marshal.

Thus the two Bills and Texas Jack were almost alone to abide the onset of the wretches who had rushed out of the Dutchman's saloon.

But in the open, having torn their coats off and bared their arms for the fight, they breasted the human breakers with their old and undying vim.

The Buzzards recoiled. They had lost seventeen killed and others wounded, had been hurled into the

sparkling and spirit-spurting ruins of El Dorado Hall.

Commonly a high wind comes off the high land every night, and is so cold as to make a fire desirable—that is, in the chimney place. This time, to increase the woes, the blast was bitter as out of the mouth of Jack Frost himself.

Many of the citizens were hurriedly clothed when roused by the outcries of Buffalo Bill and their marshal.

The straggling lines of hovels and huts were half consumed, and the rest seemed doomed.

Alone, the Dobie House resisted the conflagration, a lesson that the old Spaniards knew a wrinkle about building.

Its next neighbor was the largest—the general store. It was also the League's main post. It contained extra arms and ammunition.

"Volunteers to save the powder," shouted Buffalo Bill.

"I am with you," said Wild Bill simply. "Just wait till I tighten this rag."

He was seamed with a pistol ball across the chest, and was adjusting a bandage. He was grimed with charcoal and darkened with smoke. The excitement had enlarged his eyes, and he was now the lion in activity. The terrifying expression of his daunting eyes had made the banditti recoil and feel glad to be just on the edge of pistol range.

Thrilled by his bravery, three men, though tired and one wounded by a falling roof-tree, joined the two bordermen.

The crowd looked on as the five vanished in the swirls of smoke enveloping the store.

The Buzzards for a space refrained from the long snapshots to learn the issue.

"What, backing out?" said Buffalo Bill, running

up and standing in the open space where the Buzzards' bullets commanded none to cross. "Are you to stand by and let others save the supplies that should carry you through the winter?"

"But it is powder, Bill," said an old man, appealing with a gesture for him not to enter the circle of peril.

"Powder be blasted! I——"

A new spirit seized the citizens, and made the craven bold—the exhausted spirited. Man and boy, old and young, they set to work, and Buffalo Bill, who had seen many a border city go up like a cracker, led them intelligently.

The best shots and those who had ammunition were detailed to keep the Buzzards back, and, if possible, drive them out of the town.

All the others hunted for water and wet blankets, filled buckets and tried to stop the spread of the fire.

Already a great pile of the stores was placed on a bare lot of ground, and covered with blankets streaming with water; these provisions would be available.

Seeing the heap of saved stores rise into a mound, and the powder being brought out which might be soon used against him and his, Frank the Fly foamed at the mouth.

"If they save them, we are lost. If we destroy their eatables and the cartridges, they must abandon the camp town, and we can pick and choose for our home in the ridge. See?"

Yes, his scoundrels saw clearly. They nerved themselves for a charge. As for Chillturn, who had shot every charge off, he was drunken with bloodshed.

"I am coming along, Frank," he said. "Let us annihilate the pack. I feel my breath oppressed while that braggart who humbled me struts among these half-baked cakes."

With a handkerchief tied round his head, with his

eyes shining in their blackened sockets like a maniac's, and his shirt front smeared with gunpowder, he looked a Satan, and, more than their leader, he had kept the ruffians up to the front in their skirmishing with the citizens. On seeing him so wrapped in slaughter, these men had given him a new name.

"Britisher baron be dashed!" the lieutenant, Tom Turmoil, had said, in an interval in the riot. "He is a boss blood-spiller, and don't you forget that."

The blood-spiller boss was at the height of popularity among these rovers. And when he supported the captain in his proposal for a conclusive raid they clustered about him.

With the command to rush, given by a whisper and a sign with the hands armed with pistol and knife, the brigands advanced through the smoke down the devastated street.

There was a lull. The fire fighters were congratulating themselves on what they had snatched from destruction. They panted and stretched their limbs as they looked on the pile of salvage and had almost forgotten their assailants, particularly as the latter's dropping shots had ceased to pester them.

When the Buzzards made their rush, they had the surprised citizens at their mercy, and ten or fifteen dropped under lead and steel in a twinkling.

"They are rushing us," shouted Buffalo Bill. "Rally, rally, and breast them!" and he jumped forward while the rest were retreating, and happening to meet Fly Frank face to face, as though he had singled him out, he stood the shot from his revolver full in the bosom. But he outstretched his tireless arm, and, catching the bandit by the neck, he hurled him to the ground, saying between his grating teeth:

"One of you snapped off, anyhow. Who is next?"

"I!" said Chillturn, leaping over the leader's rolling body, and dealing a thrust with a scythe blade

which he had picked up after emptying his revolver from the mass of implements raked out of the store and strewing the street.

It was a deadly aim, and Buffalo Bill must have been pierced but for the chance of the battle hurling a young man between them. It was this unfortunate who was run through and fell, bleeding to death.

"That's young Boston down," said Bill, firing a double-barreled pistol square into Chillturn without any impression. "What, is this devil owner of a charmed life?"

"Like yourself," returned the boss blood-spiller, glaring hate. "I wear armor."

And he laughed insultingly.

It was a fable from Buffalo Bill's narrow escapes, that he wore a secret jacket of steel plate.

"I, such a coward as you?" retorted the scout, exasperated. He tore with a fevered hand the strips of burned linen and cloth off his breast. "I am not a coyote cub."

"Mind my bite all the same," said the Englishman, chaffing at the hunter keeping him from following the bandits on their rush.

For Bill had taken up the first weapon handy, one of those iron-shod oxgoads such as the old farmers used to wield and the Mexicans still know, and with this he parried the other's substitute for a sword.

"Kill, kill!" yelled Chillturn, to the bandits, feeling that with their late captain dashed to earth by Buffalo Bill and kept down by feet trampling to and fro that he was the chief.

"I guess," interrupted Buffalo Bill, beginning to thrust with his short pike, after having warded off a couple of sweeping strokes, "I guess that I can supply you with all the killing you will want."

Their combat went on with the singular weapons

with even more vigor and fury than all the other hand-to-hand conflicts combined.

In the steam, smoke, and fumes of the petroleum, the fighters seemed imps in the place below. Imps struggling with human souls to hurl them into the furnaces.

For some time the grazing of metal upon metal was heard, disturbed only by a chance popping of firearms, which seemed but toys in the more savage and deadly clash of the rude swords and spears.

The fighters staggered on the dirt soaked with blood, and cumbered with the fallen. Oaths and groans were heard oftener than shouts and rallying cries. But such duels were too ferocious to be long maintained.

The bandits, infuriated by the loss of their chief and emboldened by success on the whole rewarding their audacity, returned from sweeping the street as far as the Goldeena House.

At the doors of that building, which the fire had spared, they had made prizes.

Several of the guests, standing there to see the conflagration and the affray, were dragged into their midst. Among them were included Miss Frances Mountrose and her father, a gray-bearded, stout gentleman. Reared in the East, kept out of all street scuffles by his dignity, he had contemplated the fire and the riot with the amazement of a man dropped from a comet.

To him, these brave men repelling the ruffians were savages.

The bandits had not recognized the girl as the cause of their present commander being humiliated. They had snapped them up. To bandits they were born their prey.

But when Chillturn saw them return with these captives, he gave a shout of infernal happiness.

"Tom Turmoil, you are a full-jeweled 'hunter,' eighteen karats fine, and I am your best friend right for'ard. Hold 'em tight. They are just what I have hungered for."

"Don't hustle for more till you can keep what you have got," said Bill, redoubling his attacks.

"You, the handful for me?" sneered the Britisher. "Lay on, boys—with this one laid low, the town is ours."

Buffalo Bill was in the center of a group of the bandits who had made a set on him, and were trying to crush him by numbers.

Then the others, obeying those who guarded the captives, and ordered them to help the new chief, added their forces to the few who had sustained Chillturn in his duel. They drove Wild Bill and his helpers to the wall of the store. There, backed to it, wielding their weapons with tired muscles, for they had been fighting the fire before coping with the villains, they lost hope. They seemed to see unavoidable death hovering over their drooping heads.

They warded and they hit out, with splintered clubs and pistols reversed to become billies, like machines. They had lost the alertness and spirit of men.

Suddenly, Marshal Bill dropped on one knee. It was not wholly to shun the stab of the scythe blade, but from sheer weakness in a tired muscle. The steel dug deep into the planks over his head, and for a minute held the bandit's hand, entangled with blood crusted on the handle, so that he and his opponent glared—their brows all but touching.

Maddened by disappointment and at appearing to weaken, Bill groped with one hand—the other was helpless—for a weapon knocked out of a dying hand on the dented soil.

"Now, I have got you!" screamed the Englishman, with a laugh following, full of mean delight.

"I'll see you hung yet, first!" hissed Wild Bill, meeting his gaze unflinching and trying to rise.

Chillturn had plucked the stuck blade free. The point was turned, and, with a smack of it on a stone, he straightened it, such was his coolness.

"Now, sir—you die."

"Heaven forfend that I should die thus," muttered the marshal, who saw the steel point approach, unerring and relentless as fate.

"Hold!"

It was the voice of Buffalo Bill, clear again from the excess of emotion.

All eyes, even to the vindictive pair of Chillturn, moved in the direction of the sound.

The scene was startling. At first glance, you would have said that at last Goldeena was in the grip of the bandits. For in one group they held the captives from the hotel, in another they half surrounded poor Marshal Bill, while yet another engirt Buffalo Bill, at whose feet lay Fly Frank, ready with his poisoned knife to stab him in the knees, which he could reach. As for Texas Jack, the robbers had hauled him out of a mass, and were apparently about to cut his throat.

But a new turn was given when they saw Buffalo Bill was holding a keg of powder in his hands. He lifted this right up at arms' length, although it seemed heavy and the effort was palpable.

"Look here," he said, in a lower tone, but the same incisive voice. "Into the fire this keg of powder goes, and in a second we shall be quit of ye all, though we go, too. Do you draw off—or shall this send all to doom?"

He strode out of the group two steps, beyond the astonished Frank's reach, and held the keg within the doorway. As if to emphasize his threat, a gust

of fire lit up all the inside and shone with weird glory on his inspired visage.

"He'll do it, durn his hide," grumbled Tom Turmoil, and, without waiting for orders he shoved from his hands the girl and the guests of the Goldeena House to one side. She fell into her father's hands, but if he heaved a sigh of relief, she did not sob or weep.

"Yes, we get out," added Chillturn suddenly, as he drew back his improvised sword from menacing Wild Bill. "This hand is yours, but I shall have your scalp yet."

The two forces separated, and faced one another with baffled spite and ill-suppressed hatred. In the clear space between Buffalo Bill stood master of the position. No one doubted. They knew that he would rather remove those villains from the earth at the cost of these better lives than see them sack and pillage as rulers of the town.

As the robbers were slowly withdrawing, while fascinated by the keg which contained death for the multitude, Bill smiled.

In the confusion, it was not noticed that Texas Jack, insensible from a blow on the head, must have been borne away by the brigands.

On the other hand, their leader remained at the feet of the savior of the town.

With a last effort before he was fully overpowered, Frank had thrown his knife toward his men, retiring. It was the token of captaincy in the band, and, as such, Chillturn gladly picked it up.

"The villains," muttered Buffalo Bill. "Oh, that ever we were unable to stay them——"

"All the worse," said the marshal, binding a scarf about his strained knee, "that they have carried away Texas Jack with them."

"Then we follow," said Bill, with renewed anima-

tion. "Let's arm and make a start on the trail. Texas Jack among those devils, with that head devil the Englishman——"

"Bill," broke in a voice from one of the bodies on the ground, "you will have to strike many a blow, but with no good. If you had all the sogers and all the government scouts you led into battle at Birdwood Creek, you will not enter the cave of the Buzzards."

It was Fly Frank, and he wore a grin of exultation as he hurled his threat.

With a reaching out of his hand, Buffalo Bill caught him by the collar and dragged him into a sitting position by the heap of stores nearest.

"You have said too much and too little," cried he. "It don't take me long to remember how you Buzzards got possession of that natural fort. When the Nez Perces were chased right through here with old Chief Joseph, a band ran for that hole in the summit and fought off the scouts on their track. No one could find their way in, but it appears you scoundrels have another kind of luck than honest men. You took the stronghold by guile or strength, and—you hear me speak? you must deliver the pass to us."

"You are too fast, Buffler. You may remember well how we rustlers got into the Buzzards' Nest, but forget that it is prisoner for prisoner, and that your pard, Texas Jack, is in the cold grip of my merry men."

"They dare not harm a hair on his head," replied Buffalo Bill contemptuously. "But as for you—the pass, or we pass you on to the Judge whom nothing man offers can bribe."

"You have got a killing line on to me, Bill, I allow," said Fly Frank; "but we are sworn above all not to betray the secret entrance. I won't speak."

"Then you shall swing, with all the prisoners of your gang who have a gasp in them," interrupted

Wild Bill. "There will be a day of execution in Goldeena such as man's eyes never gloated on since Slade and his twenty pulled the ropes tight in Virginy City."

"I expected to dance in air, Bill," replied the gambler, with the calm of the reckless Western sport. "Swing and be durned! I carry the secret with me, and it will cost you an army to get home with the Buzzards. You hear me!" and he chuckled.

The citizens had gathered round. The fires had burned out. The morning light gilded the mountaintops. On Dule Trail they could see the shadowy forms of the successful bandits, filing over the height.

"Hark ye, Frank," said Buffalo Bill, "nothing but your holding the pass to your cutthroat's lair saves you on a narrow chance. Lead us to the inlet and you shall have a horse, a gun, and cartridges, a day's grub and water, and twenty-four hours' law. After that, count on it that Wild Bill and I are camping on your trail."

"I am mum."

"Say you so?"

But as he glanced round, such was the firmness with which the robber shut his jaws that he and the rest lost confidence that they could put a screw on.

White faces, and black, brown, and yellow, all wore a thwarted look.

Unconsciously, Bill let his vexed glance wander and it stopped at a face which alone smiled feebly but with a different expression.

It was that of a half-breed Crow and Pawnee, a second thief, who might have attained eminence as a government scout, but was too fond of the Fool's Water, or strong drink.

"Tawatsee," said Bill, with home in his heart, as the red man's smile broadened a little. "Speak, Good Heart—for you are a chief, and are invited to the

council of captains. I have not seen the Crows since you went on to the reservation in the Judith Basin, but my brother is a brave and he speaks wisdom."

The Indian had helped in the fire fighting as became a man.

"Very good, this is very good," said he, gratified at being singled out from the crowd, as all eyes were bent upon him. "Chief, you are right. Your red brother brings the means to make this enemy of white and red alike speak about the way in. There is a hidden way in. It is a talk of the lodges."

Frank lost color as the Indian spoke. He knew their cunning in tortures. And not three days before he had jostled this man aside, as he was intoxicated and called him a dog.

"Chief, he must be made to speak," said Buffalo Bill. "Go right ahead with handling him. He is too tough for us."

The Crow-Pawnee pointed to the two tall pine staffs which ornamented the plaza or square of the town. On high days and holidays, they flew the flag of the State and that of the United States. The fire had not hurt even the halyards as it streamed over them.

"Bring them down in a bow, each," went on the Indian; "tie to each foot of the silent dog, and before he will let them be cut loose to rend him in twain, as the lightning splits the cedar, he will tell the word of the pass."

"Do this," said Buffalo Bill.

Two light men shinned up the poles, and secured the halyards respectively to the tips. Twenty men hung on to the ropes, new and bearing the strain well, so as to bend one after another. While bowed, the rope was made fast in each instance to the other mast.

When this was done in both cases, the spars crossed near the axes, and were held so; within the pole the shape was of a pointed arched window.

"Swap ends," said Wild Bill, alluding to Fly Frank.

The willing citizens held up the gambler-robber, inverted him, and in this upside-down position, now superintended by the Crow, fastened a leg to each rope in such a way that, when they should be severed below where he was attached, the masts would be released. By their spring, the man would be torn asunder.

"You see," said Wild Bill, as he looked on the bandit, "any one can walk into a village, but the thing is to get safely out."

"Speak," said Buffalo Bill sternly.

"This is playing low down on a white man," muttered Frank, unrelenting.

"Stand by to cut free," said Wild Bill, and two men, each with an ax, prepared to let the poles take their spring into the old upright position.

The gambler threw a despairing look around. Not a regretful eye met his; he had robbed, murdered, and swaggered too long.

"Once—twice——"

At three times the ropes would be parted, and the gambler dismembered.

But his pale lips were glued together. He meant to die firm to his blood-cemented oath to the Ring of Crime.

Wild Bill, like a judge confronted by a prisoner "mute by malice," was about to order the execution when an unexpected interruption came.

Miss Mountrose, breaking away from her father, who wanted to shield her from the horrid sight, sprang between the dealer out of wild justice and the culprit.

"No," she pleaded, in her sweet voice—woman's voice was such a rarity out there then that it sounded strangely on those ears. "You have all shown yourselves so brave and noble to-night that I cannot bear to think that the day shall be branded by an act of cruelty. Spare him. Try him before a court for what

he has done; but do not, I pray you, treat him with the inhumanity which, no doubt, he has exhibited to others. Not the law of 'An eye for an eye' is now ruling in our country—but 'Forgive us as we forgive others.'"

It was a brief sermon, but none the less effective.

"All right," said Buffalo Bill, the first to recover from his change of feeling.

"No, it ain't all right," interposed Fly Frank. "I am not wuth this fuss over. But she has melted the lump of ice that I called my heart. I am loath to go back on my pals, but, after all, they have had their glut in raiding this settlement. It won't be quits till you have a fair bout with them. But, mind you, it will be a hard knot to chop—grappling with them on their own grounds. Here goes—let me loose, and I will lead you to the inlet. The rest consarns yourselves. Man can't put it no straighter, I judge."

"You put it square, Frank," said Buffalo Bill, making a sign for the axmen to set down their tools and untie the prisoner.

They were not sorry; like the two Bills, this bit of Indian practice was repugnant to their hearts.

Once again the gambler-robber's empurpled face whitened out into a natural color. He looked glum as the Crow himself, for one does not walk toward death with a blithe heart.

"A close shave," he muttered. "Them angels always come in handy for a man in distress, bless 'em."

"If it were not for you, miss," he said, raising his voice as Miss Mountrose, her act accomplished, shrank back to her father's side, "I should be dead."

"Silence!" said Buffalo Bill. "Attention, for we are not going to allow Jack to stay long in your companions' bloodstained hands. After arming and getting a bite to eat, on the quickstep we make for the

mountains. Deliver the entry to us and you go, as promised."

The King Bird of the Buzzards bowed his head.

But it was as much as anything to conceal a singular smile which flitted across his countenance.

The Crow chief looked at the men unrigging the flagstaves of the ropes so they should fly back into the up-and-down position, with a sour grimace.

"A snake," he mumbled. "He will be no good till crushed."

He armed himself for the warpath. He went after the marshal, and said:

"Chief, me chief—me want to go on the path to the Buzzards' Nest."

"Tawatsee, you are welcome. Keep an eye on that man. I have no stock in him, in spite of his submission."

The Crow slapped the handle of his gun in a meaning way.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TRAITOR'S PORTION.

Fly Frank acted his deception well.

No one could find a flaw in his behavior as he conducted the party, with Buffalo Bill, to the deliverance of Texas Jack, unless he had been sacrificed for those bandits perished in the difficulty with Goldeena's citizens.

The order of the march was good; from the Sierra, if the robbers had sentinels posted, it must have looked hard to beat.

Besides, the special guard over the prisoner who had turned guide, another surrounded a cannon, bought to celebrate national holidays and carrying a six-pound ball. For the convenience of carriage, as soon as they rose above the foothills the ordnance was taken to pieces; four men carried the gun, two each wheel, and four more the carriage and ammunition.

While they were dismembering the cannon, there was a slight alarm.

The lookouts repeated the warning of Tawatsee that an enemy was in their path. But this lone man approached steadily in spite of the threatening attitude of the volunteers.

When within call he declared himself a friend.

"Oh, it is only Slim Sim!" said a prominent citizen, not a bit sorry that this individual was no herald of the enemy's corps.

Slim Simson was a peddler, who kept a little store where he sold goods at extravagant prices, but on time, to the miners. Nobody but Frank knew that this rogue was a receiver of the bandit's pillage. He used to go down on the line in construction, the Missouri

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Pacific, Denver, and Omaha, and sell jewelry and odds and ends, which might be identified in Goldeena, to the workmen of the contractors.

Not a soul suspected this double-dealing. But Buffalo Bill was not prepossessed by his hatchet face, deep, small eyes, thin, firm lips, sly look, and slender frame.

The dealer in notions fell in line with such good grace that it would break one's heart to refuse him.

His explanation of his being in the gulch was satisfactory. He asserted that he had not seen anything of the robbers, although hinting that at least one suspicious character had hovered round the entrance to the ravine as though in hiding.

Buffalo Bill seemed to guess who this might be, for he cut short further questioning of the recruit, and, the gun being dismounted, he ordered the forward move again.

Frank led them along the new coach road toward the south, but abruptly diverging, he tracked back to the mountain.

The trail gradually rose. A path led almost straight upward. At the point of its meeting with the crest a pine rose to a good height.

"It is a watch post," remarked the guide; "let one climb up, and, as there is none of the Buzzards in it, as sometimes happens, he can make certain that they suspect no danger from this quarter."

This seemed fair play. The Crow, whose sight was not yet impaired by whisky bibbing, ran up the path, though almost perpendicular, without his breath being distressed.

On reaching the divide, he paused to scan the neighborhood. All was serene. He made some signs which Bill interpreted to the force.

"All is well. All quiet. At a distance on the plain,

he spies something alarming—but that does not concern us. He is going to climb the tree to learn more."

So far the bandit had spoken the truth.

Tawatsee climbed the tree easily after reaching the first boughs by using a short rope, twisted on the spot from a vine, and forming a loop around both his body and the pine trunk; thus he could not fall, but might rest by leaning outward to its full extent.

Not a sign of man on either of the cañon sides. The Dead Mule Trail was lonesome. But down the plain he discerned the objects spied on the hilltop. He leaned out amid the branches, and dropping a pebble which a high wind had lodged in a crotch to call attention at the feet of Buffalo, he made the sign of cutting his throat and of clasp hands.

"He says that he sees Sioux Indians, and that he cannot be mistaken."

In fact, the Indian had made the sign of "the Sioux" in two ways, and, lastly, as the Dakotas, or Brothers.

Looking down into the deep cleft between the piles of granite, jasper, and sandstone, held together by bunch grass and artemisia, he descried a solitary man deviously winding his way by wading up the bed of the water. It filled the dalle, or trough, and only a stout and experienced trailer would have adopted this course.

Only such as Buffalo Bill and this Indian could have recognized the face at this distance.

"Wild Bill—good—he is not creeping along like a water duck for nothing. The robbers will be surprised," he chuckled, for there was no one to hear him.

This discovery he did not signal to Buffalo Bill, as he knew the two to be brothers, and he supposed that Wild Bill had not come with the party for good reasons.

Stare as he might, he could see no way over the gorge to that other side where the bandits had their retreat. Then he descended.

When on the ridge, he caught sight once more of the wanderer in the torrent, who made a sign to him that he had seen his head outlined on the edge. He waved an arm and sank down.

"Well?" questioned Bill, knowing that the scout would not report without demand.

"No sign. But I have seen a brother in the deep." This was uttered in the ear of Bill, so that the guide could not hear a word.

The captain of the party nodded. The marshal was acting in concert.

"But the way over and in?"

The Indian shook his head. There was no shame in being beaten. Frank grinned.

"Go on," said Bill, and the Crow took his place at the head of the line, with the gambler next, under the leader's rifle. He was sure to fall dead, if he darkened its sight.

They went on for a mile, skirting the side of the ravine. The path ran along a beach, for the most part, as level as if laid out by man.

All at once Bill and the red man gave a start at the same time. They had perceived, before the citizens, two or three threads like cobwebs, stretched with an elegant curve across the abyss.

"The way," said Frank calmly.

In fact, on approaching, they saw that the thin threads were ropes rudely made. They formed a foot-path; two other ropes, a yard above them, and about the same distance apart, served as guide lines. But looking from one end across the chasm, bridged thus frailly, those who were not used to heights, such as the plainsmen and Indians, might be pardoned for rating the crossing by such means foolhardy.

Near where the cords terminated over there, a mass of ivy formed a curtain. The rock was smooth, quartzlike, glittering with gay color, but it was likely that it was cracked or artificially pierced with a hole.

"Our cave lies in the heart there," observed Frank. "Say, have I not done my part?"

"It *looks* square," returned the captain, with a kind of reluctance. "But the contract is to lead us up to the door."

"It is in the rock, under that green mantle," was the traitor's reply. "I ought not to be made to risk my neck by crossing that bridge. I have never used it myself."

"You must go on."

Bill had a tone in saying "must" which would bend a steel rod.

"You might as well have torn me in half that time," the scamp growled, but it was clear that he yielded.

The Indian would go with him, preceding as before; he began to make ready by taking off his army brogans, worn without socks, of course, which he carefully placed in a hole in the bluff. With his naked feet, he could hold on the rope. To have his hands free for the side ropes, he suspended his gun by its strap over his shoulder and behind his back. But he drew his butcher knife and meant to carry that between his strong teeth as he proceeded.

Buffalo Bill was bound to guard the near side and regulate his men as well as direct the firing of the cannon.

"Who was to be the rearguard to the guide?"

No answer. To walk on that single rope and balance by the breast ropes was all very well for savages and prairie hunters, but not for citizens, more familiar with the wheelbarrow track and the plank behind the store. They looked at one another with a frown, and

glancing down into the chasm, which gave the vertigo, and up to the bluff edge, where marble blocks peeped over, they shuddered.

Still, there was one coming forward.

"Hooray for the old trapper! good boy, Hossley!"

So shouted the citizens in their glee at having a representative. He was a curious codger, old Docked Hossley. He was called Docked because he had lost a hand and leg by frost bite. He came forward to cross the rope, but if he liked the task his soured, grim face did not show it.

But, first, the bluff overhead had to be explored.

The stillness and absence of traces of man perplexed Buffalo Bill.

The inlet to the bandits' cave must be very strongly blocked, for not a sentry to be posted hereabouts.

Hossley picked out three friends like himself, spry and able to climb the steep, and they set out.

From the ledge where the party had halted, and the gun was set on its carriage, and the wheels fastened on, the only way was a goat's path. It wound so as to lead from one natural shelf to another, and only by degrees reached the summit.

The docked one knew the top. It was a hill, with an immense view of nearly a hundred miles. When they got upon it, it was deserted, even by the vultures which sometimes held a gorging party on the verge.

The old trapper took a good survey, and bade his companions return.

"All's well," he reported to Buffalo Bill impatiently awaiting. "Nary sign of Injin or rustler. The place is as lone as when Adam was a little boy. And hot! Jerusalem, how scorching hot! Declar' to high heaven that the sun has sucked up the Lookin'-glass Lake, as the gals I showed up here two years ago put the name to it, so that you could not moisten the tongue of a lizard."

"Well, how was he to know, since he had not looked properly for footprints, that the bandits had emptied the pond. They had, under the astute directions of their new chief, carried out all the water and poured it on the thirsty soil among the marble in a half-circle. The horns of this half-moon line ended at the verge of the cliff. The crescent comprised a good slice of land, and as the bluff was scooped out under by the north wind, it projected over the ledge on which the robber hunters were now gathered. The sunbeams had dried the surface again and no one could guess that deviltry was at work.

Thus reassured, and the cannon planted to command the bridge, Bill ordered the crossing.

First, to be certain that a door of some sort did exist behind the creepers forming a screen over against them, he ordered four men, who had placed chain shot in their guns, to fire a volley at this green veil.

The chain shot were rudely made by linking split balls with fragments of an old steel watchguard in pairs. They had the effect wanted. Where they struck the vines, they cut the stems and down came a spread of some yards, not wholly detached. But pretty soon the mass fell by its own weight, and hung.

In the clear air, at that height, the shots sounded sharp and died away with little or no echo.

It did not appear that any hostiles were in hearing—not a show was made on the other side, any more than this.

The Goldeena party felt like cheering, but refrained.

Where the mantle of vegetation had been was disclosed a recess in the basalt stone, hard as steel, with a door of clumsy but solid make. As Frank had described it, it seemed proof to musket balls. It was

well, therefore, that they had brought the big gun along.

The veil of verdure which they had shot off hung down over the hollow beneath the ledge where this door barred the way into the cave, if there was one. A few unparted vines held it from falling all the distance into the bottomless pit.

At a touch, though, it would go. But it could do no harm, unless it crushed Wild Bill. He was, still unsuspected by the citizens, making his way up the stream, hidden by the depth and gloom.

The Crow went down on the rope and tested it with his foot. It was firm at the farther end as at this. It had not been tampered with. Indeed, next to go on it, Fly Frank stepped out with an unfaltering foot.

Not so with the dauntless trapper. Old Hossley blanched, and all of a sudden complained that his false foot was not made to play the trade of a rope dancer.

"Never mind," said Buffalo Bill, "we see what ails you. You had better take the back track. If you were not crippled, I should take your gun away, turn your coat inside out, tie your hands, and pack you home as a coward and deserter."

The fact was the peep down into the depth which one had to cross on that thread was sufficient for the trapper.

"Sure, you are not far wrong," observed one of the band consolingly, as Hossley did not resent the rebuke but gladly left them, "no man alive could trid on that bit of shtring, barrin' he wor a bird."

The docked one departed without any one wishing him Godspeed.

If they had stood in less terror of Buffalo Bill's indignation, one or two more would have showed the

white feather, too. He looked at them, inquiring for a substitute for the delinquent.

Ashamed at the backwardness in coming forward, one presented himself, while the Crow and the gambler were waiting on the rope bridge.

"Bravo, Slim Sim."

This the crowd murmured delightedly.

It was the unpromising recruit picked up on the march.

Never would Buffalo Bill have looked to see him jump out for a forlorn hope.

But this was no time to swap horses—Bill had to accept the new volunteer. The fellow had the good point that he was an excellent pistol shot.

Besides, he went upon the rope with a steadiness which no one could have beaten. One might have thought—as Frank knew—that he had passed over it before.

He drew a pistol, and examined the cap with an expert eye. He meant to keep this ready in one hand, using only the other to hold on by in the crossing.

"It is well," said the captain. "Get on."

The file of three advanced, more and more slowly and cautiously as they reached the middle. The ropes had relaxed. The least push outward rendered the guide ropes useless as they opened out and would only drag the venturers to one side or the other and cause their fall. The main rope also sagged tremendously under the triple weight. Perhaps it was intended to be crossed by but one person at a time.

Tawatsee walked unhurried, with the confidence of one who was on safe ground. With his knife between his lips, he wore a fiendish grin, and while his eyes searched all the crevices of the rocks in front and all the holes in the vines, his ears were listening to what went on behind him.

No white man, save such as had slept at his camp

fire, like Buffalo Bill and his friends, did he trust. He was not mistaken. Frank and Slim Sim were equally unreliable.

They had got to the middle of the rope without a sign to reward a doubter.

Here the curved rope took the upward bend. It is, in rope walking, the hardest part of the task.

It gave the bandit some excuse to go slower still.

At a certain moment, indeed, Slim Sim, who almost fell up against him, had to prod him with his pistol and urge him on.

Those on the bank behind heard him say:

"Make haste!"

But they did not hear the added sentence:

"Will our friends inside draw the latch?" It may well be understood that it was thus worded to prevent the Crow chief, whose knowledge of English was not so deep, from suspecting collusion.

Fly Frank, joyful at this proof that his guard was a friend at his back, did not trust his tongue. He bowed his head in assent.

Taking advantage of this lowering of the only object which intercepted his firing on the Indian, the artful Simson pulled the trigger. It looked to those on the bank that he was firing on the prisoner who, perhaps, had revolted.

But it was the redskin who was struck. He gave a yell, muffled, because he kept his teeth closed on his knife, and they saw him half turn as though to face his slayer. But the wound was too severe, or his strength failed him. He let go the hold on the side ropes. He pitched forward clean off that which his toes had clutched. They lost sight of him in the veil of green, vine and leaves, shot loose and hanging, as stated, from the verge of the shell before the ever-closed door.

It was not held by enough tendrils to support this

accession of weight. The green bonds snapped all together—the mass slid off, no doubt enveloping his body with its serpentine twiners, as he caught it with a death clasp. Down, down, it fell, with accelerated speed, till it landed on the bank of the torrent. Not in the water, for they heard no splash, but on the stones, with a dull smash—from which resulted echoes, as the cannon had boomed.

Simson and Frank scrambled together to the ledge, but as they reached it, the ropes parted with their mad leap and simultaneous landing. They hung there, with toes dug in and fingers driven like spikes into the crannies of the rocks. Their backs, exposed to the Goldeena party, were fair marks which the hitter of a barn door with an old army gun could not miss at twenty-five yards. But so far, although the Indian had been slain, it looked as though Sim had only mis-shot in trying to punish the guide for treachery.

The shot and the crash, again, had wakened nobody on the sides reached by them. The door seemed sealed up. Not even an eye gleamed at the wicket, which enabled one within to reconnoiter who knocked at it.

Of this Bill was sure. He had his unerring rifle raised, and he would have made him sightless who thus peeped.

If the two men purposed trickery, they were under fire and could be punished.

They might be punished by Heaven, for there they clung over a precipice of two hundred feet, unable to climb up for fear of dislodging the stones they scratched into, with nail and tooth. All held their breaths to see them, as we see such situations, in nightmare, and all sighed as the pistol, with which Slim Sim had shot the Crow chief, left his hand, wanted to strengthen his precarious hold, and fell so far that its reaching ground was not heard.

"Stay where you are," thundered Buffalo Bill, never long in coming to a conclusion. "If you rise, off go your heads."

He pointed the brass gun at the door; he was going to fire over the men on the brink, and hoped to smash in the cover to that ingress.

If the loaders had shoved in a few musket balls to reenforce the stone used for ball, Heaven help the pair!

Only veteran soldiers can bear to have cannon fired over them.

"Fire!" said Bill.

In the midst of the roar a high, mad laugh of joy from the spot aimed at seemed to hurl defiance. The ball struck the door and burst off one plank—the inner one, crossing it, was of hemlock, and though splintered, resisted its penetration. The ball remained imbedded there like a huge bolt of iron.

At the discharge, Sim had been frightened; he trembled so that he lost his hold—he made an attempt to get a fresh one, but he slipped. He came down to the niche where his companion in the fix was more securely nestling.

"Help!" he gasped.

"Go to the devil!" said Fly Frank, believing that he was about to try to oust him from his place.

He reached out one leg and dealt a kick on the other's side.

"After what I did for you—oh, you ungrateful hound—may your end—be—more dreadful—than mine——"

The last words were uttered in space, for Simson was dropping. He turned twice, being such a light weight, within sight of the spellbound watchers before he disappeared in the darkness of the gorge bottom.

The crash was but slight.

Those on the other ledge heard it not. A sound more appalling engrossed them. Behind them, in the bluff, shaken by the concussion of the great gun, a mysterious crackling and grating was going on. The water, seeking its level, had trickled downward by a thousand apertures. Like the cleft by a large saber, it had detached the face of the cliff. Already overhanging and top-heavy, such a disruptive cause was equal to an earthquake. With a sudden shriek of the grinding stone and the gravel, the vast mass toppled forward.

"Down flat and let it pass over," shouted Buffalo Bill.

This sage warning—the only practical counsel—was spoken too late. The pile collapsed right upon his hapless comrades. He himself at the margin had just the time to drive the muzzle of his rifle into the ground where he stood to anchor himself.

Upon him came the edge of the earthen wall—on the others, the bulk of it. He bore the brunt well, but it blinded him and made his head bend. He was smothered in dust, scribbled with sand in every pore, brought to his knees. But the rifle barrel had held.

Two beside him were less shielded. They remained on the crumbling margin, cracking with the blow, but they were smothered—the weight had deprived them of breath. In the ruins the rest were buried.

For a moment, as he tried to collect his senses and clear his eyes, he believed that all had perished of his command. But presently a head and hands appeared here and there wounded with the jagged block of marble, which their blood veined with red, powdered with sand. Dazed, moving like figures of machinery, these wretches pulled themselves out and staggered blindly down the mountainside. It was by pure instinct that they thus fled homeward.

Buffalo Bill dared not recall them; what could he

offer them now whom he had led into this death trap? What an oversight to trust the reconnoitering of this undermined ground to the sap-headed trapper, Hossley?

He was alone with the dead under that pile of stuff, which it would take a corps of sappers and miners to remove.

Alone? Not entirely, for a sneering voice came from over the abyss:

"We fight in our own way, Mr. Cody."

He looked, shaking the dust out of his long hair, and beheld Chillturn.

Flushed with gladness at this wholesale destruction, he had the aspect of the brigand chief in all respects.

CHAPTER XXIII.

JACK ROPED.

"Villain, kill me, undefended, as suits such fighters as you," almost pleaded Bill, humbled by this crushing blow.

"I probably shall," was the quiet and heartless reply. "But before we proceed to business, let me finish with this whimpering cur at my feet."

Silenced by the enormity of the ruin wrought to the party which he had falsely piloted, Fly Frank, still clinging to the brim whence he had kicked his partner in misery, had in a low voice appealed to Chillturn from the time when he had seen him come out of the cave through the shattered door.

The Englishman advanced to the frail border, and without a twinge gazed on the wretch whom he had superseded.

"What do you want of me?" said he.

"Nothing," returned the gambler, frozen by the tone, "only life. Lend me your hand——"

"I am too content with the berth you placed me in. It enables me to revenge myself splendidly on my enemies. I had no idea that out here one might reign a king on the Sierra, or, 'pon my honor, I should have traveled into the West long before."

"But I lured those fools into this trap. I knew you would be warned of our coming by Slim Sim."

"Just so. He brought us word in time for the proper preparations to be made for their reception. I owe him something for that. They would not have broken into our fort, in spite of their howitzer, without extreme loss, but, thanks to this trick of the cave-in, they have been more cleanly repulsed. I believe that they who crawled out of the rubbish—looking

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like ants whose hill has been kicked to pieces—will never return to storm the Nest of the Buzzards."

He laughed so savagely that the gambler had barely the strength to say hoarsely:

"Help me up—my hands are opening—I will be your servant, your slave—I know so many dodges—I——"

Gambler Frank felt the ground splitting up, the stones loosening, and the fibers of the plants snapping on all sides. In those careless eyes above him he read not a word of humanity.

"I am lost," he muttered. "What it is to take a snake to your bosom. May all the curses——"

At this moment the Englishman drew back, but with a final kick. A yard of the soil was pushed outward.

Fly Frank was beginning the descent which he had hurried Slim Sim into taking just as selfishly.

"Thief, you stole even your name—Fly Frank, why do you not fly?"

And laughing at his own brutal and stupid jest, he did not try to trace the gambler's fall by the sound of his touching the jutting rocks and that of his reaching the boulders.

"I am the chief, indeed," was all he said.

Disgusted by this cold-blooded murder, Buffalo Bill stooped to catch up the disabled rifle which he had thrown down in spite, to hurl it at the miscreant.

"Stop!" shouted Chillturn, "or you die! I am not, perhaps, your equal in long shooting, but at this short range I can drop you. I want you to see the piece which I kept for your pleasure. Who is there? Bring forth Texas Jack?"

"Jack? Oh, great guns!" groaned Bill. "I had forgotten that Jack was in that hellhound's jaws."

He let the gun fall again, and, clasping his hands, wrung them in the intensity of his distress.

At the same time, the doorway of the cave was blocked by five or six bandits. In their midst, pinioned carefully, so afraid were they, even with a score against Texas Jack, was this poor friend of Buffalo Bill. He looked round, dazed for an instant by the coming out into the light from the underground dark.

By the magnet of true friendship drawn to the object on the heap of fallen matter opposite, he recognized his old pard.

"Bill?" he said; "I knew I should see you once more before I went through."

"Yes, and shall see him through the halter," said Chillturn.

Then, making signs which the bandits comprehended with a sharpness that showed how well he had already drilled them, they carried them into execution without delay.

Above their heads, probably used as a crane when the rope bridge was thrown across the gulf, a pine tree slanted. Time and a cut or two with an ax had lopped off most of the boughs. It stuck out like the jibboom of a ship. It was not difficult, though dangerous to one who was not a seaman, or a muleteer accustomed to heights, to go up and out to its end. Hanging over the chasm, a Mexican adjusted the end of a hide lariat to the tip of this spar. He let the noose hang down, and by swinging it to and fro helped one of his fellows to catch it and draw it in. In another minute while he descended, the noose was placed round the neck of Texas Jack.

They pushed him to the broken edge. It was plain that nothing on the level where the group stood could rescue the doomed one. That anything would stay the hanging, he who looked at the smiling, inflexible face of the boss blood spiller might never expect.

"At the word, push him off," said the bandit chieftain.

Two men stood ready to push Jack off the fragile footing. He would drop ten or twelve feet from the slack of the lasso, and, with his neck broken, swing in the gulf at the end of the attachment to the projecting tree, like the bob of a gigantic pendulum.

Bill exchanged a farewell look with him. Then he let his disheartened vision fall to a lower step.

What was his amazement—he dared not feel any relief yet—to catch the unique glitter of an Indian's glassy eye. Yes, under the feet of the bandits, impossible for them to divine his presence, in a niche of the cliff, Tawatsee was crouching. When the vines fell he had not been dragged to death by them. He was there, whole in bones and heart, with his scalping knife in his hand, and his gun unfired at his back.

Bill read what was in his soul.

"At least they may hang Jack, and they may riddle me with bullets—but one shot of the chief will revenge us. He is going to kill that cursed rascal, if he has to follow him till their locks are gray."

He looked up so lightened and invigorated that the enemy was startled.

"Oh, your turn next!" he said. "Push!"

The two bandits united their efforts. Jack was unable to resist the shove, but he had his foot sufficiently in command to deal one blow for revenge. The man on his right, hacked in the shin by the boot, doubled up with exquisite pain, and, losing his balance, tumbled over the bluff just before Jack followed him close.

At the same instant, Buffalo Bill saw the Indian toss him the gun, and seem to leap after it.

The gun, tossed longwise, not hurled, would have alighted on the shelf at Bill's foot, so dexterous was the cast, but he was afraid to lose it, and that the

shock might explode it. He stooped and caught it in both hands. Then he arose, armed.

Not one of those on the opposite shelf had observed this singular act.

But they had seen the Crow spring out of the ambush. Mad fellow that he was, he caught the rope which was tightening as Jack dropped, not with his hand, but with the edge of his trenchant knife. He severed it clean, and passing forward with the impetus of his leap, they heard the echoes of the cañon awake with the war whoop of the Crow.

"Whoo-oo-ee!" yelled Buffalo Bill, in answer. "By the great horn spoon, you have done it clean! He may be smashed or drowned, but he'll not die hung."

The bandits shrank from the fatal edge where one of their number had been precipitated to avenge the victim. Alone, spite of the rifle which he now perceived, as by magic, in the grasp of Buffalo Bill, their leader stepped to the rim.

Just then the two bodies fell. That of the red man, for he had calculated the curving fall like a scholar, went straight into a pool where the torrent temporarily widened and no doubt deepened. He splashed into the pellucid basin and was gone.

But it was not in him that the baffled Briton was interested.

Texas Jack, bound and trussed, was falling into the torrent, too, and he could not hope for the escape which might reward the redskin for his fearless plunge. In fact, he fell like a lump.

"Curses on them, all!" cried the lookerout. "A friend was in waiting—he has saved him."

It was true. Wild Bill, having a clew to the approaches to the cavern, had set out to get up to it by following the bed of the torrent threading the gully. When he arrived, the fall of the vine instructed him that affairs were likely to be lively above. He en-

sconced himself in the rocks, and anxiously abided the subsequent incidents.

In the bandits he took no interest. He did not offer his shoulder to break the shock of either Slim Sim, Frank, or the bandit whom Jack had tripped. But it was a different matter when he saw the chief leap out from the hiding place, and cut Jack from the lasso. The Indian came up, unhurt from his dive, but Texas Jack, bound, would have remained at the bottom but for the plunge which Bill took to fish him up.

Half an hour after, Buffalo Bill stood in the black depth of the cañon, and grasped the hands of his red and his white friends.

"You should have seen them slope," he said, "when I stood with the gun that would work in my fist. Pah! if you had better cartridges, chief, for yours were not fit—I should have killed every man of the herd crowding in at that cave door. Worst of all, the head man got away. He only stayed to exchange one shot, and then I winged him. I forgot that the dog wears a steel shirt, and I ought to have plugged him in the head."

The Crow took back his rifle with pleasure, and patted it with his brown paw, as he reloaded the magazine.

In three hours they had returned to Goldeena. They were given up as lost, for Docked Hossley had preceded them and the other fugitives, who could tell no intelligible story, with a tale that the bandits had annihilated the entire outfit.

The real relation was dispiriting enough. In vain did the marshal try to put pluck into them. This disaster after the fire had demoralized the town. They would not have mustered three strong to repel an invasion of Digger Indians.

"We cannot attack the bandits' fort," said Buffalo

Bill reluctantly, "till enough brave hearts lope along, but we can make them keep watch o' nights."

"Well," said Texas Jack, speaking hoarsely, for his throat was chafed, "if we were inclined to let the thieves severely alone, it is not the same there. I heard enough of their projects in that den, which, half carried out, will stir up this section like a wagon-load of yellow jackets' nests."

"Against the varmint, then, we go on the warpath," said Buffalo Bill.

"I resign being marshal over such counterhoppers," added Wild Bill; "take my war stick into the bundle."

"I shall never draw an easy breath till I handle that brute who wanted to hang an honest scout like one of his own gang," said Texas Jack.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SIOUX ARE OUT.

A goodly body of horsemen were speeding to strike the coach road, and would do so at the little station where the horses were sometimes refreshed after the dreary, stifling pull over the alkali desert. It bore the name from old times before a white face reflected the ardent sun of Medicine Rock.

The riders went in double file like military. But they were surely not regular cavalry. Their accouterments were more to the taste of each individual, and the weapons were varied and inlaid with precious metals as well as studded with native gems.

All of a sudden, Tom Turmoil, who was riding just a half length back of his captain, to whom he was already thoroughly devoted, pressed on to be cheek by cheek.

"Can you see that smoke column?" he inquired, with the respect which they all felt for the energetic and unscrupulous Chillturn.

"Can't say I do," was the reply, for, while the newcomer's sight was as good as his neighbor's, he had not long prairie experience.

"Well, it rises there on the road by the Medicine Rock."

The word ran down the lines. Some winced; they guessed it was a signal smoke. Perhaps Indians.

"They said that some bad Indians were out, crossing from one reservation to another to stir up mischief—is it they you see?"

"No see Injin? That is just what you can't see until too late. I hope, sir, that they have not struck our coup."

"What, stopped the coach to Deadwood? If they

interfere with our schemes, so help me, I will add some lead to their ballast, which will make them sail steadier for the future."

The troop went on at a hard gallop, a trifle less swiftly than before, as caution might be needful.

Tom rode in the van, as he was the best scout.

"They have set fire to something," he called out, returning to the troop. "It is the station or the coach, or both."

"They have gone," said Captain Chillturn, using his pocket field glass, "they have set fire to the hut, which burns slowly, and retreated."

"Be wary, sir," said the ever-prudent Turmoil Tom. "The red beggars always retreat—they fight best when going back'ard."

"Bah!" said the Englishman, eager for a brush, "come on, lads. And you, Tom, nobody's holding you back."

Indeed, all clapped the cruel spurs to the horses, and rushed like an avalanche upon the scene.

It was one of bloodshed and pitiful misery.

Before the fired log-and-frame house lay two butchered bodies. One was that of Guthrie, the station agent. The other was an Indian.

Guthrie was dead, stuck full of arrows. The Indian, with the catlike hold on life of his race, still breathed, but his wounds, with shot and knife, were mortal. Though not merciful usually, Chillturn, who had never before seen scalped victims, waved his hand for one of the men who had dismounted to blow out the palpitating wretch's brains.

"Put out the fire next thing," he ordered.

The fire put out, a couple explored the simple interior from which the plunderers had taken out every stick. A few keepsakes which Guthrie had brought over from old Scotland were wantonly smashed and disfigured.

"Burn an Injun, anyhow!" said Tom. "I on'y wish they had stayed round convenient, so we could have fired into them."

While his men were digging, with an old spade and their knives, a grave for each of the victims, and one, a Mexican, whittling off the broken fence crosses to mark the places, Tom, as the expert in Indian lore, scrutinized the ground.

"They are Sioux, mostly," continued Tom, not sorry to show that he was useful to have about the band; "see how careful they were in stepping about when they tortured the poor fellow, not to break the burning sticks. That would be a bad omen."

He left the spot, and went all round the house. At the north side he stopped and examined some marks made by a knife and smeared with blood.

"Here you are, captain, plain as books——" and he pointed to a sort of picture.

"This is the main body, but there is a party or two also out, which are to call here to see how they are getting on. This tells who were here and whither they are next going."

"Who are they, then?"

"Well, just what I said, Sioux. The chiefs are old Prairie Bear, Martotinta, and his adopted son, Running Eagle. They call Bear the Old Woman, Wem-seena, because he has been paralyzed since scalded by fat spilled over him in a drunken shivaree at a soldier feast. They have to tie him in the high Mexican saddle, and I could show you that a horse was led up to the council, and that one on foot stood at the bridle. Without alighting, then, he presided at the discussion and the torture."

"And the precious scamps over whom Running Eagle and this cripple reign?"

"Oh, they are a bad lot, refugees, wild young men, fugitives from all tribes, who have not accepted the

reservations. They have grown to form a race by themselves, the Bad People, and, you bet high, they are a bad crowd to knock elbows with, out here or in the foothills."

The lieutenant spoke solemnly, and his captain had no desire to gibe, for all the bandits' countenances were likewise grave.

"In fact," said Fly Frank's successor, "no one will dig their graves if we collide with them?"

"Nary, a grave, captain."

"All right, we will take back any plunder they may carry, if we meet. Where do you cipher out they have gone, for I would rather we had the course clear for our stopping the Deadwood coach?"

His lieutenant studied the picture once more.

"They have gone south and east, but— Ah, this indicates they will return."

"Look at that, now," cried the leader, so that all the rustlers could hear him, "they will ride into our lines. If they return, laden with plunder, why, we will pluck them of every feather; and it will be our policy, for this Territory is not wide enough for two of a kind to cavort within."

For the first time, the robbers did not wear a glad air.

At present, though, the coach was to be waylaid. A third of the party might hide in the shadow of the little-injured hut; another detachment could hold off at a distance, ready to gallop at a signal; while the remainder could ambush at a hundred yards in a clump of planted cottonwoods.

Tom and his captain remained by the house.

"The coach is late," said the latter nervously; as he consulted a watch, which he had smuggled into the country. "We shall look fools if the Indians have gone farther along and cut us out of the job by going through it."

"I cannot say," returned Tom, using the other's field glass; "but lay low, fellows, here are the Injuns."

It was in vain that the Englishman stared and with the glass, also; he saw absolutely nothing on the line of desert and sunny sky.

"Well," he said, after a pause, "the wind is getting up." I see the sand spinning to the southeast."

"Yes, the Sioux are doing all the spinning; they are kicking up that dust. The coach is grinding along in the dust, and they are trying to conceal themselves behind it in an imitation of a sandstorm. But if old Clint Burdsall is drivin', as is likely, they won't throw no dust into his peepers—he will see through that they are hostiles. Then he will put the bronchos through at a hill-to-split gait."

Not only did a long, streaming cloud of sand arise, but a more dense and rounder one as well; this to the novice might have been taken for one of those dust spouts which career over the plains and disperse as mysteriously as they are raised and hurried on by a sudden blast.

"That rolling cloud is the coach," said Turmoil. "It is a race now betwixt and between the Sioux and the stage. We hold the casting vote. Are we to let the men of our color go under, and drive off the winners, or sail in and knock spots out of the reds?"

In a moment Chillturn had resolved on the course.

"Tom, and boys," he said to those within earshot; "I take it that you all know my game. To pile up some wealth and go on a grand hurrah. To pile up in these days, one must be very lucky or very plucky. We must be unsparing to all but those of our band. Buzzards do not eat buzzards, but they devour all other living things. Let the reds destroy all in that coach and enjoy what they appreciate. Then we will come in for our share—the coach."

"The coach?" repeated Tom, thinking the other

had gone mad. "Are we going to run the stage line for a living?"

"One trip, my dear boy," said Chillturn, laying his hand on the other's shoulder familiarly and looking him in the eye. "Surely we have one of us who can drive as well as Burdsall, and several to personate the passengers? Let them go on to Goldeena and Deadwood, picking up passengers in addition, and the effects—perhaps some express packets of value, and, on the road again, we will overhaul it. With our men 'inside the fort,' they cannot resist—we clean them out lovely."

The men in hearing grinned.

"That is all right. But those Sioux? They will not agree to let us stand in."

The Britisher smiled contentedly.

"I have not your knowledge from practice of our red brother," he said quietly; "but I am not totally ignorant of their little peculiarities. Such a band as you describe must have their battle flag, the possession of which gives the holders a sway of the band."

"Better than that, the Old Woman chief has the sacred totem of the Brules—the Burnt Thighs, as they call themselves—the brand with which the initiation mark is burned. Ah, if we could lay hand on that, they would have to put their necks under our foot."

"You see how we can get them." He spoke triumphantly.

"But it is guarded—whoever heard of seizing the totem in the teeth of the fighting men?"

"We are going to do things never heard of, my dear fellow," replied the leader calmly.

"But he would lose his life who attempted it—to touch the sacred emblem is death—though they had to live on his trail for ages."

"Then he must die," responded the Briton, with

the same deadly calm. "My dear Tom, you will not live three days more."

"Eh? Oh, what a poor joke!"

"I speak the cold-drawn truth, my poor Tom. That cut on your foot, received in the fight with the Goldeena people, and which you make such light of because it had healed—it is sure death."

"That cut?"

"You complained, not of a pain there, but in your leg and this morning up your other side. Well, that cut was made by the poisoned bowie knife of that great knave, the late unlamented Frank Messiter, alias the Fly One—and you are as dead mutton as he."

"It is true if—that—— Do you, sir, who are learned, say that I have no hope?"

"Not a morsel, my poor Tom. I had taken so much affection to you that I held back from hurting your feelings, but I prepared for the worst. Dusenbury, look here?"

One of the rustlers rode forward from the side of the house.

"What did I direct you to do, four days ago, when you rode to Hot Springs?"

"I don't care to say before Tom," stammered the man, a black-bearded giant, but who was abashed as a schoolboy.

"Well, I will tell it, since it was my errand. He slipped into your letter to your good old mother in the Lehigh Valley, who tells her neighbors that her boy is prospecting for gold out West, a bank draft on the National of Philadelphia for a thousand dollars. I kind of knew that you were sickening with that venom, for which there is no cure, and I hate to have a woman suffer."

"You did this, captain, onawares?"

"He did that, Tom," said Dusenbury, and then,

surprised at his own emphasis, he retired to the ambuscade without waiting to be dismissed.

Tom turned eloquent eyes on his commander, who showed himself in an entirely new light.

Chillturn knew well how to handle these men, who were rough and hard, and bad, too, but had some weak spots in their hearts. He held out his hand, and, as Turmoil gripping it, bent over it, he fancied a hot tear fell on the back.

"What's your orders, captain?" said Tom, rising and drawing himself up in the saddle, like a soldier ready to charge on a desperate mission.

"I want to make myself solid with those Indians, for the coach, which they would cut to strips, and, perhaps, burn, is useful to a conceit of mine. I want to carry out of Goldeena in it the girl whom you saw in the affray, pleading for the life of Frank. Much good that did him—a villain who carried poisoned steel, by which the loss of so useful a man as you has come about."

He paused as if hesitating to confide too much of his secret, even to one who, he said, was about to die. But assured, he went on:

"To buy the prize from the reds, I am wanting to ask you to lay down your life where it will do us the most good. You must die, Tom—and what matters a sun shining on you one day more or less?"

"Not a jot. You have made my mother's old age serene, and here goes for a dash at the red devils—I will snatch the totem from the sacred guard, and you shall have it."

"This is the plot, then: Let them stop the coach, and kill all upon and in it—it will be butchers' work spared us. As they are all engaged, it will be easy for you to ride at the reserve where the tribal emblem is held. As you bear it away, we will ride after and

between you and those who chase. We will recover it, and bargain for its return."

"If I have the strength in me, I will do it," said Turmoil quietly. "The fact is, I feel worse since you told me what was the matter."

"That often happens. I swear that if my heart's blood would heal you, they might stab me and inject it into your veins. You are a trump, Tom, and I hope Dusenbury, who is some kin of yours, will prove to be of your bone and blood also."

"Dolph is my father's brother's son, and a brick. I have been out here three years longer than he, and so he is not my mate for prairie sign, but he will learn. Let me speak to him about home and mother before I pass in my checks."

The captain held his field glass before his eyes as the men conferred.

"How I play with these fools," he said to himself. "The man was likely to live longer than I. But I have scared him into being a hero of self-sacrifice to the band. Without a little artifice, the Buzzards would go all to pieces."

He was interrupted by a call from his men. The two sand clouds had broken into three—two coming on to flank the central one. Out of this emerged the moving specks, which were the six horses drawing the Deadwood coach.

"They come, they come!"

"I am ready for the dash," said Tom, jumping down to tighten the girths and almost instantly springing up again. "I shall leave my mark on some of them before I am rubbed out."

CHAPTER XXV.

ON THE REVENGE TRAIL.

From the south Buffalo Bill's band approached the party of Bad People returning to overtake the Deadwood coach and repeat by the little station on a larger scale the murders of that morning.

The hunters saw the coach pass on the dusty road before they came on the unmistakable traces of the redskins.

The Crow was to the fore, as his race can see farther and read changes in the natural features even better than our hunters.

After crossing the creek and the Cheyenne, he fell back, and by signal called in the others, who were fanned out.

"We can go no farther," he said, illustrating by laying twigs of willow on a flat rock. "A band is in our path. The others have gone on, and I should not wonder if they do not intend to strike the coach at the halting place in the long stretch of desert."

"Guthrie's?"

"Yellow-hair Bob's, yes," said Good Heart. "This band has spare horses, stolen or brought along, to put women prisoners on."

"Oh, you think they know of ladies in the stage? That is odd, for, except that foolish Judge Mountrouse bringing his daughter out here, I should not look for other women to be risked."

"Maybe some singers for the saloons in Deadwood," said Marshal Bill dryly.

"What is it, chief?" asked Buffalo Bill, seeing that the Crow had not said his say.

"The spare horses are what we want."

"He is right. Here goes then for this band, and

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to mount ourselves. Certainly, we have no chance set afoot with the whole of that regiment on good nags."

They kept nigh the coach road, and now and then crossed it when it took a circuit.

"These fellows have been not at all backward in showing their trail," remarked Bill, pointing to a broad trail of mounted men.

"And look, where one of them has been thrown, and they have not troubled to pick him up," said Texas.

"Him dead," said the Crow.

All hastened to the spot where a man and his pony were stretched dead; but the white men receded in disgust.

The man was a slender youth, stripped to his under garments, and his head had not only been taken off with a clumsy stroke or two of a coarse knife, but replaced by that of his horse—that animal's neck was adorned with the human head.

"What mockery! the red devils! What harm had this boy done them?"

"Look!" exclaimed the Crow chief, pointing to white objects intermingled with blue and yellow ones, strewn the sand. "The papers which talk."

"Letters," said Texas Jack, running to pick up some of the scattered envelopes, which had been broken open, but in cases which retained the letter within.

"It was a pony rider," said Buffalo Bill, with a sharper pang than his companions, for he had been in that arduous and dangerous business when a boy. "Even the Buzzards and road agents let a pony express go by without a shot. It is only these remorseless fiends who would not only waylay the harmless rider, but spread the loving messages on the wind."

The leather satchel was turned inside out.

Coming from the mines, some of the letters homeward bound had contained specimen gold spangles.

The greedy plunderers had burst all the wrappers to get at these, of which they knew the value at the unscrupulous traders' counter window, but they had scorned the drafts of Fargo, and were, on the whole, baffled in ideas of gain.

They had vented their spite by exchanging the heads of their victims, thinking that would exasperate any white men who discovered the remains.

The white men collected the papers, and replaced them in the satchel. They would hang this up in plain sight on the first telegraph post or tree, where it would be descried from the road.

"Some came from Goldeena, remarked Texas Jack.

"Very likely, though they do not pan out well on education there."

They went on, more under Bill's guidance than before, as he had an excellent field glass, and the plain was so level. Only two swells of it afforded cover, and at the second they saw the mounted Indians disappearing over it. They were so much lower afoot that the advantage was on their side in dogging them.

These fellows kept at the same distance from their friends, as the latter returned to the station. The smoke there had ceased to rise. One could not tell that the murder and pillaging had taken place that morning.

The scouts hastened on to the rise, and this time felt that the first stage of their undertaking was done. The rearguard had come to a halt. They were signaling to their friends by reflections, and seemed commanded to rest where they were.

Unsuspecting of the bandits' nearness to the house on the road, the main body fearlessly began the open chase of the coach.

From the windward, the scouts could see them and the heavy vehicle under the sand clouds which they stirred up.

"They are bunched, boys," said Buffalo; "we have got them. You may shoot, for the others are galloping on and will not hear a forty pounder on this butte."

Nevertheless, they all relied on their small arms and slung their rifles by the straps to their backs. Their knives they tried to be sure they played loosely.

They dropped at the rounded crest, crept up a few yards to the very edge, and looked over and down, with their heads enmeshed in the bunch grass. Covered with dust they were gray as the sage, and no one could have espied them.

But the red rascals, glad of the repose, were not looking for trouble in this quarter. Three or four had alighted to sprawl on the grass, but they held the reins of their ponies. All but one of the others, a dozen all told, had American horses, some with cavalry brands and trappings, and they thought too much of them to dare to get off.

"Ready?" asked Bill, in a whisper.

And without waiting for an answer, for he knew his men—he darted down the slope.

The whites went at the reds in silence, but the Crow, always losing control at this exciting instant, uttered a yell as he leaped at the first Sioux down in the grass.

Bill rushed at another, and held him from moving as he blew a hole in his side. At the same time, Wild Bill, who was no laggard in such a race, brought down his pair as they started to ride off, with a pistol in each hand.

Leaving Jack and the Crow to finish those who had been dismounted and unsaddled by this vigorous onset, the two Bills ran after the horsemen and popped them off as they were strung out by the flight.

One alone bade fair to escape, as he was not seriously hurt. But, luckily, one of his comrades dying,

called him to save his scalp, for he knew the Crow's war whoop had meant "hair," though the whites might despise such trophies. He wheeled and galloped back, but a discharge from Buffalo Bill's revolver killed his horse as well as himself. He pitched off, and, falling on the one he had returned for, knocked the last breath out of his body.

Another horse, entangled with a fallen rider, had also to be shot, as it was hurt.

The others were captured by Texas Jack, who mounted one and circled the flyaways so as to round them and head them back.

Being American horses, they had no fear of the white men like the mustangs, and were thus made prisoners.

They were ready to go. The Indian wavered, and finally said:

"Go on. Let me destroy the weapons. It is the rule to leave no weapons on the line of retreat."

When he joined his companions, he had some fresh scalps at his belt. He still had blood in his eye, and no one passed any remark.

They had a bigger task yet on hand.

CHAPTER XXVI.

RUN DOWN.

Buffalo Bill's force was not a large one, but a picked one. It had been picked from the best men in Goldeena for a trail of revenge.

The Buzzards had run off all the horses, many laden down with plunder, and the three scouts, the Crow Indian, and the volunteers had to all go on foot.

But they had taken the trail of the Buzzards from their cavern and followed it for a couple of days, Buffalo Bill cutting off miles here and there through his knowledge of the country.

When the Indians had left their horses to capture the stage coach the scouts had quickly gotten possession of the animals, as has been seen.

These horses mounted all of the trailers, and, led by Buffalo Bill, the charge was made, and just in time to save the coach.

The Indians were struck with amazement.

The attack on their own horses was so wholly unexpected in the very minute of their success, the fire of the scouts so terrible, the charge, led by Buffalo Bill, so irresistible, that the Indians were shot down by dozens. The few who survived the charge scattered in all directions while the coach rolled past in a cloud of dust.

In the meantime the Buzzards, led by Chillturn, were approaching at a rapid pace.

Their leader did not know what to make of the new turn affairs had taken, and before he could distinguish anything in the cloud of dust he was close upon the great scout and his followers.

"Get that coach on its way, for there are women in it," cried Buffalo Bill to his Goldeena allies.

"We've got the redskins going, so there lies our game," he cried, pointing to the outlaws. "Come, men, and no mercy!"

Like a whirlwind, the avengers, with Buffalo Bill leading the center, Wild Bill the left, and Texas Jack the right, were upon the amazed Buzzards, who were taken by surprise and were seized with terror at beholding those whom now they had every cause to fear.

There was a fearful crash, the deadly rattle of rifles and revolvers, clash of steel, cries and shouts, and the battle was won.

It was a red end for the outlaws, and they covered the ground all about, dead and dying, only a few escaping death.

All their horses and booty were captured, and the victory was complete.

The stage, with its passengers, drove on in safety, and in it were Miss Frances Mountrose and her maid, for Mr. Mountrose had very quickly decided to leave the burned town and its misery, bloodshed, and horrors far behind him; so he had taken the first coach eastward.

Buffalo Bill searched the plain for the body of Baron Chillturn, the Demon Man-killer, as his outlaw band had named him. But, wounded, or dead, Chillturn was not found, and Buffalo Bill said in a voice strangely revengeful:

"Some day I will find him, for he cannot escape. Yes, when he dies I will be there!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DOG DETECTIVE.

The vow was spoken in deadly earnest, but a long time would elapse before Buffalo Bill could fulfill it. Meanwhile, fresh duties soon called him far afield, into a scene which was a peculiar one.

Five men were crouching in the midst of a dense forest in the mountains.

In their midst was a huge dog—a bloodhound with deep jaws and long, overhanging ears.

The leader of the group, Buffalo Bill, chief of scouts, was on a secret mission with a band of five of his most reliable and experienced bordermen.

A robbery had been committed in another mining camp near the Moonstone Valley.

Two men, tenderfeet, from the East, who had come to the country a year before, had struck it rich, staking out a very fine claim on their first venture, and had been killed and robbed.

Dave Smith and Sam Jones—those were the names given by the two men on the frontier, although the probability is that in the East they were known by other names—had worked hard for a full year at their rich claim.

Every day, from morning to night, they had plied the pick and shovel industriously, and as time grew on the bags of buckskin, in which they kept their gold dust in their little cabin, increased in weight.

They had just decided that they had gathered together enough gold to enable them to go East again and open negotiations for the sale of their mine to some capitalist when the robbery and murder occurred.

Their cabin was broken into, both men were killed

—one shot through the head and the other stabbed to the heart—and the bags of gold dust were taken away.

It was evident to those who discovered the murdered men that Dave Smith, the one of them who had been stabbed, had not died without a struggle.

His garments were torn and disarranged, and in one hand, clasped in a death grip, was a piece of rough cloth which he had evidently torn in his dying struggle from the coat of his assailant.

Buffalo Bill was one of the first to enter the cabin after the discovery of the murder. He had been acquainted with both men, and his countenance grew grave and stern as he looked upon their dead forms.

Taking the piece of torn cloth from the hands of the dead Dave Smith, he hurried from the cabin.

An hour later he was at the head of a band of picked scouts.

In their midst was a huge bloodhound—a dog that had once been presented to the scout by a boy pard whom he had defended.

Grip was the dog's name, and his grip meant death to any one upon whom it was fastened.

The noble hound had been given the piece of cloth to smell, and then taken to the cabin of the murdered men. The scent was still hot, for, with a low whine of delight, the great beast started straight across the prairie, closely followed by the scouts.

Mile after mile the hound ran on until at length Buffalo Bill and his party entered a tract of country partly covered with forests.

The dog went more slowly now, and at length stopped for a moment.

The scouts dropped from their horses and looked forward through the trees.

There was a faint glimmer of yellow light to be

seen in the darkness, for night had come on while the party were still on the trail.

The dog, followed by Buffalo Bill on foot, went slowly forward.

There in a little clearing was a man working by the light of a lantern, digging a hole in the ground with pickax and shovel.

In a moment the bloodhound sprang at him, and the man was borne to earth.

The scouts ran forward with cries of horror and dragged the animal from his prey, but before they had succeeded the man was dead—from fright at the sudden attack of the hound. He had merited his fate, however, for the man was clearly the murderer of Dave Smith and Sam Jones.

The bags of gold dust which he had stolen lay on the ground beside him, and he had been digging a hole to bury them in when he had been caught in the act.

The scouts seized upon the pick and shovel, and soon the murderer was buried in the grave he himself had started to dig.

Then gathering up the bags of gold dust, which were to be sent to the relatives of the dead men in the East, the party started back to the fort.

Buffalo Bill had accomplished a disagreeable task. It was the last he was to do in that part of the country for some time, for on his return to the fort he found a letter which necessitated his going to the Mexican frontier.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WILD KID, THE TERROR.

"They mean mischief from their actions, for they seem to be preparing to ambush some one. I'll get a closer look at them, for I suspect that they are some of the band of the Rio Grande Roughs."

The speaker was a youth of about eighteen, with a fine physique and a face that was a study, so much was there in it of deviltry, indomitable pluck, and recklessness.

It was a clear-cut, handsome face, scorched brown by the Southern sun, but illumined by eyes that were large, lustrous, and full of expression.

Looking alone at the eyes, one would say that the youth possessed a noble nature, but in the reckless expression of the mouth, with its cynical smile, young as he was, something that contradicted the almost pathetic look which haunted the upper part of his face.

His dress was an odd mixture, but picturesque, for he wore fringed buckskin leggings stuck in the tops of high-heeled boots, on which were ringing spurs; a red silk shirt, black scarf knotted sailor fashion under the broad collar, a velvet Mexican jacket, profusely ornamented with buttons, while his hat was an embroidered sombrero.

His hair was dark, worn long, but scrupulously well cared for, and he was armed with an ugly-looking knife and pair of revolvers.

Apparently having just awakened from an afternoon siesta, he had risen from a handsome serape spread upon the ground beneath the shade of the live-oak tree, when his eyes had fallen upon three horsemen halting a mile away, just where a trail across the prairie entered the hills.

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Upon a lofty range himself, he looked down upon the three riders, and having decided by their suspicious actions that they were intending mischief, he gathered up his serape and was turning away, when his vision rested upon a horse and rider coming across the prairie at a canter, and following the trail which led to where the trio the youth was watching were now in ambush.

At sight of the lone rider coming across the prairie, the youth started, uttered a surprised exclamation, and bounded back over the ridge.

A short distance down the slope was a spring and a plot of meadowland, where the grass grew luxuriantly, and here a pony was staked out.

Of the hardy and fleet race of Texas ponies, this one possessed extraordinarily good points, for he was as clean-limbed as a thoroughbred racer, and had indications of being very fleet and enduring.

Lying near were a handsome silver-mounted saddle and bridle, much lighter than was the customary equipments of that kind, and a long lariat hung to the saddle horn.

Quickly the pony was bridled and saddled, the serape rolled up tightly and strapped to the cantle, and the youth was ready to mount.

But before doing so he took his lariat from the horn, saw that the coils were not entangled, and then looked carefully to his weapons.

Mounting, he showed that his carriage in the saddle was perfect—that he was at home there.

As he turned his pony down the slope in a direction that would bring him around the range toward where he had seen the three horsemen dismount and go into ambush, where the trail entered the hills, he muttered:

"Now, Lucifer, you have got to make two miles to another's one, for I am needed over yonder, and you must get me there."

Then, while a look of intense recklessness passed over his young face, he continued:

"If I count odds now, I am not the daring devil men call me, and I must keep up my reputation."

With this, having reached the valley, he put spurs to Lucifer and went flying along the trail at a tremendous speed.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CAUGHT IN THE COILS.

There was no more beautiful girl in the ranchlands of Texas than was Marie Brasher, daughter of one of the richest cattlemen along the Rio Grande.

Where other ranchers had cattle and horses by the hundreds, Major Donald Brasher owned them by the thousands.

Where the homes of other ranchers were comfortable, the major's was luxurious, at least, for that far, unsettled, wild land of the frontier.

Where the daughters of other ranchers were pretty, Marie Brasher was beautiful and accomplished, and easily won the title of "la bella Maria," as the Mexicans called her.

To one who saw Marie as she was cantering along over the prairie, mounted upon a beautiful black mare, that arched her neck proudly, as though conscious that she bore the loveliest girl among the ranches, she would indeed have been considered beautiful both in face, form, and carriage. She wore a becoming riding habit of blue serge, an embroidered sombrero, and her saddle and bridle were worth a small fortune.

A lariat hung at one saddle horn, and in a holster upon the other side was a revolver.

Her face was cast in a perfect mold, her eyes being large and expressive. Her hair, in two thick braids, was coiled around her head and tied with a blue ribbon.

On went her pretty mare in a swinging lope. The expression of the young equestrienne's face was earnest and anxious, as though she was bent upon some special mission.

"Father would be angry, I know, if he ascertained

that I went to Wild Kid's cabin to see him; but would I be doing right to resist his urgent call to come to him, now that he is wounded and perhaps may die?

"No; I'll take the consequences, for I have not forgotten that he risked his life to save mine, the day the Indians shot my pony and raided the trails.

"I'll try and get back before nightfall, but if I do not I will frankly tell father where I have been."

She had now reached a part of the trail where it wound from the prairie into the hill country, and drew her horse down to a walk.

Ahead a few hundred yards was a cut through which the trail ran, the ridge on either side covered with small trees.

"I am not suspicious, but I do dread passing through Death Pass, especially alone, for so many times have men lost their lives there. I can see half a dozen graves yonder now," and she glanced to the left, where was a little vale.

In full view were a number of those little mounds, never to be mistaken, and about which a weird interest ever hovers, even to the most callous observer.

As she rode into the cut, the banks of which were now fifteen feet in height, there suddenly shot out into the air three small, dark clouds.

They were coils of lassos, which, aimed true, and spreading out as they flew forward, settled down upon their victims, for the horse was caught in two, the maiden in the third noose.

With a snort of fright the animal had plunged forward, to be brought up with a grip that could not be shaken off, while the coil settling over the shoulders of Marie Brasher, had pinioned her arms close to her side.

A startled, indignant cry broke from the girl's lips, and her face paled as she glanced upon the banks to see who had thus captured her.

Three forms instantly sprang into view, and two of them, slipping down into the cut, seized her horse and quickly slipped the fair rider's revolver from its holster to thus disarm her.

"How dare you seize me?" cried the indignant girl, as she glanced from one to the other of her captors, seeming to realize as she did so that she was in merciless hands.

"Gold is the reason, for we were paid to catch you, my beauty, and we've earned our pay," answered one of the men, whose face Marie could not see, for all three wore red handkerchiefs tied over their heads, with holes cut through for the eyes.

"You are some of the lawless gang about El Monte, I know, but who is the master you serve?"

"That our master, as you call the one who pays us, will or will not make known to you as he pleases; but now, you go with us, and it will be a long, hard trail I take."

The words were prophetic, for, as he ceased speaking, a bullet crashed through his brain and he started upon the long, hard trail of death!

CHAPTER XXX.

WILD KID CHIPS IN.

"Hold 'em under sight, pards! We've got 'em corralled! I'll drop down!"

These words followed the shot from the banks on the right, and down into the cut came a human form, landing upon his feet as nimbly as a cat, and with a revolver in each hand.

At the first shot and the fall of their leader, the two others, hearing the words which indicated that others were above, had dashed through the cut with the speed of deer, firing, but at random, as they ran.

The one who had dropped into the cut was the youth who had been taking an afternoon siesta on the mountain, an hour before, and from his point of lookout had seen the three men go into ambush.

His handsome face was lighted up with an angry flash in his eyes, and his reckless mouth indicated that he was there to take all chances with the odds against him.

Released from the grasp of the men upon her bridle rein, the spirited and frightened horse of the young girl darted forward with a bound, but the severe Texas bit was drawn upon hard, and the animal, thus reined to a halt, wheeled about, and, on a run, passed the spot where the youth stood.

"I guess she's frightened of me, too, though she oughtn't to be," muttered Wild Kid, as he saw the horse bound away with its fair rider, and a bitter smile passed over his face.

But, with a smile, he turned to the fallen desperado, and, bending over him, snatched the handkerchief from his face that had served as a mask.

As he did so he saw that Marie Brasher was com-

ing back, and turned to meet her, his face lighting up with pleasure as he courteously raised his sombrero.

"Bud Poisal, I believe you thought I had deserted you, but it was my mare's fault, for she nearly ran off with me, she was so frightened."

"And you were not frightened, though they had you in a close place?"

"Indeed I was! But when I saw the man drop dead by my side, from your shot, and recognized you, I forgot my fear. See, I have their three lariats"—and she pointed to the trio of ropes, one about herself, the other two around the mare's neck.

"Well, this fellow will not need a rope again, and the other two will get theirs yet—around their necks, for I think I know them, though I will wrong no man by accusing him until I am sure."

"I have seen that man before, Bud," said Marie, gazing down into the upturned face.

"He is coyote food now, but he was El Monte Ned, who was one of the worst toughs about El Monte, and that is saying a great deal."

"Yes, I have heard of him, and seen him, too. But, what do you think was their motive in seizing me, Bud?"

"To make your father pay big to get you back, maybe; or, perhaps, to kidnap you for one of your many lovers."

The last words were uttered half in earnest, half in a joking tone.

"These are not the days, Bud Poisal, when a man wins a lady's love by force, but rather by deeds of nobleness and daring. But now, let me thank you for your gallant rescue of me, at the risk of your own life, for you took no count of the odds against you."

"Would I be half a man if I didn't do so, when you needed my aid, Marie?" he said, with an earnestness that caused Marie to quickly remark:

"Do you know where I was going when they halted me?"

"For a run over the prairies?"

"I was going to see you."

"To see me?"

"Yes. Half-breed José came to the ranch early this morning and hung about until he saw me, when he told me that you had been dangerously wounded at El Monte, but had been taken to your cabin and begged that I would come to see you.

"I could not refuse, Bud, owing you my life, as I did; but knowing my father would be angry if he found out where I was going, I slipped away from home and was on my way to your cabin when those three men held me up, so now I know it was a plot to kidnap me."

"You bet it was! And don't you mind any more such calls, for I don't intend to hand in my chips for many a long day, for something in my heart and brain tells me I will not.

"I'll trail this plot to the end, and I only wish I had some good pard I could rely upon to help me, to be my friend, for, to all about here, I am only Wild Kid, the Terror, as you understand, and many think I ought to have cloven hoofs and horns, I'm so bad! But I don't care what they think," he laughed recklessly.

"I know that you are not what you are painted, Bud Poisal, though I do not doubt that you are wild and something of a terror in your way,

"Why not trust Doctor Delmar as your friend, for he likes you and always speaks well of you?"

The face of the youth flushed, and he said earnestly:

"No, not Duke Delmar! I hate him, he is no friend of mine! But you had better ride back home, as your father will be angry with you for going out alone, and

as I have no idea where those two men are, I'll go with you a short distance.

"The major will send out, I guess, and bury what's left of El Monte here."

"Oh, yes, father will see to that."

Gathering up the lariats, searching the body, and telling Marie that he would meet her at the end of the cut, Wild Kid clambered up the steep bank, got his pony waiting a short distance away, and, mounting, dashed on, to find that the young girl had come upon the horse of El Monte, the others having left him behind in their flight.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE OLD MISSION.

Wild Kid accompanied Marie Brasher within sight of Idlerest Ranch, and then left her, declining her urgent invitation to go on with her and let her father and mother know that he had again served her so well.

"No, your father and mother don't like me, for they believe I am all bad, and I won't go where I'm not wanted. Why, the major wouldn't let me join his company of Texas Rangers, and when I warned them of danger one night he said I knew more of the Comanches than an honest man ought to, and only went to the camp and told them of the Comanches lying in ambush for them to keep from being run out of the country.

"Yes, he even offered to pay me for saving you that time from the Indians, and that made me mad clean through."

"I know that my father distrusts you, as many others do; but I have faith in your good intentions, Bud, and I hope some day you will show your enemies how wrong they were. Remember, I am your friend, and ever will be. Good-by."

She held out her hand, which the youth grasped, and as he rode on his way, murmured to himself:

"Now I've got more sense than to fall in love with a girl older than I am, and so far above me—she, beautiful, accomplished, and an heiress, and I a waif of the prairie, an outcast. But, something draws me to her in a way I cannot understand, and I just vow she shall not be sacrificed to any one of half a dozen fellows I know her father would marry her to—the old fool!

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"No, indeed! She can't marry a dead man, and it will come to that if one of those I have in mind is selected by the major, for she does not love any of 'em, I have reason to think, from what I saw one night.

"Now I'll take the trail of those two men from where they ran off, and ascertain just where it leads, and so learn what this raid means."

With this he rode back to the scene of the tragedy, took up the trail of the two masked fugitives, and followed it at a canter over the prairie.

In half a dozen places efforts had been made by the two to cover up their tracks, but the young trailer lost no time in searching for the trace where he lost it, for he seemed to know just where to go to pick it up again, and did so, skipping at times the distance of a mile.

"I thought so," he had to say. "They wish to give the idea that they are going to the Indian country, but they are not, for, as they came this way, they are bound for old Carlos Trego's hacienda; so I'll go right there, for it's getting too dark to see the trail now."

With this he urged his horse into a canter, and mile after mile kept the pace up across the great green plain. He seemed to know the country perfectly, and to have directed his course unerringly, for, after an hour's ride, there loomed up before him a long, low structure, spreading over several acres of land.

There was one building rising higher than the rest, and this proved to be a chapel.

Once the place had been an old Spanish mission, strongly built of stone and adobe, where the padres of a century before had had their home.

But now the old mission was but a ruin, and only one wing of it was occupied by a Spaniard, his wife, and son, who owned a few cattle, tilled a score of acres of land, with the aid of several peon servants, and dwelt there seemingly satisfied with their humble lot.

Some said that old Carlos Trego was a Spanish noble, exiled for reasons which he kept to himself; but, whether true or not, he lived in the old mission, and was never seen in the settlements, his son Juan going after supplies when needed.

Travelers visiting at the mission were always most hospitably treated, and the rangers, on their marches, found a welcome whenever they camped there.

Wild Kid did not approach the mission from the two trails leading to it, but toward a light that shone in one wing. He passed through the old burying ground of the padres, and, as he rounded the wing, drew rein just beneath the window from which shone the light.

Rising to his feet in his saddle, he peered cautiously into the narrow open window, and, as he did so, he heard a voice say sternly:

"I tell you that your guest is Buffalo Bill, the great scout, Señor Trego, and he has come to this country on a secret mission, of which I have been informed by letter, and you must do as I say—never allow him to leave this old ruin alive! Yes, this night he must die!"

CHAPTER XXXII

FOREWARNED.

Standing upright in his saddle, Wild Kid was able to see all that was in the room into which he looked through the narrow window.

Above him loomed the dark walls of the mission, and around him were the gravestones marking the resting place of many who had passed away generations before.

The window looked out upon this gruesome abode of the dead, which was surrounded by a wall half crumbled down in places, and which Wild Kid's pony had leaped, as his rider was determined to see in that window, and had an idea he would be high enough by standing up in his saddle to do so.

Wild Kid thought he would like to see just who was at the mission before he asked for shelter, for if there were two strangers there he did not doubt but that they were the intended kidnapers of Marie Brasher.

As they were masked he could not see their faces, but he had noticed their general outline before he had fired upon their leader, and he had studied well the tracks of their horses, which he had also seen, before he sought his position of attack.

If those horses were in the corral, and two men answering the description of those he had seen at the kidnaping were there, then he would not seek shelter in the mission that night, but lie in wait for them the next morning, and try and hold them up single-handed, and, taking them back to the ranches, turn them over to the band of Texas Rangers, whose duty it was to protect the scattering settlement from raiders across the Rio Grande, the Comanches, and bad characters in general.

But Wild Kid saw more than he had anticipated when he looked through that open window in the mission. He had heard more than he had expected to hear, when he listened to the threat to kill Buffalo Bill, a man of whom he had heard much, and who was his hero, but whom he had never seen.

There were four men in the room, which was large and furnished only with a table and chairs. He recognized old Señor Trego, gray, grizzled, and stern looking, and sitting next to him was the man who had uttered the dire threat against Buffalo Bill.

Wild Kid knew this man well, as a hanger-on about the settlement town, as El Monte was called. He was called "Captain," as it was said, upon his own authority, that he had once been an army officer, and he had an erect military bearing, but a face that was evil, sinister, and cruel.

His intimates called him "Panama," and he was a desperate gambler and known to be a man-killer, for he had established such a reputation in El Monte and was greatly feared.

The other two men in the room were, Wild Kid was sure, the game of whom he was in search. One was short, the other tall, and they were dressed as the two kidnapers had been. They were unmasked, now, and the youth recognized them as two more of El Monte's tough citizens, known as Mustang Matt and Half-breed José. Nominally, they were cowboys, but they spent most of their time in gambling and idleness.

The four men were within fifteen feet of the youth, some ten feet below him, and he could see them distinctly and hear all that they said.

Fortunately, a vine half obscured the window, giving shelter to his face as he peered through.

Like men who were cautious, from being in daily danger, the men talked in low tones, but each word Wild Kid heard.

It was Panama who had made the threat against Buffalo Bill, and in response "Don" Trego, as he was continually called, asked:

"Are you sure that he is alone, captain?"

"Yes, for he always travels that way, for I know him well."

"You have seen him before, then, señor?"

"Do you see this scar on my forehead?"

"Yes, captain."

"Well, he gave me that, and he thought he had killed me, but I have as many lives as a cat and hold on well."

"I tell you that he has come to Texas on a secret mission, and if we do not check his career right here, a number of us will stretch hemp, for I can pick out scores of men who are now dodging the gallows in El Monte alone."

"What crimes sent you hiding here, Don Trego, is none of my business, but I live here because I would die East, and Mustang Matt and Half-breed José are about in my category."

"But Buffalo Bill is chief of scouts up at the line of forts, and he has left them on a mission which means death to more than one man in El Monte."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE PLOT TO KILL.

"Now, I got this letter by coach this morning, and it was just in time, for Buffalo Bill has traveled fast.

"The letter is from a lifelong pard, a soldier who is well trusted and a square man, but he owed me his life on more than one occasion, and he did not care to see me hang, so when he overheard that the scout was coming to El Monte he decided to find out all he could and warn me.

"So he played eavesdropper, and heard enough to know that Buffalo Bill was on a special man hunt.

"I was not mentioned, for I am supposed to be dead, but he warned me. He heard Buffalo Bill go over with the general his intended trail to Texas, and the latter told him to stop here at this old mission one or two nights, and he might glean some information about the El Monte settlement before going there.

"So I came at once to post you, and blow my soul if the man is not here ahead of me, for when I saw him I could hardly believe my eyes, and lucky I am that he did not see me."

"I never allow my guests to see each other until I know it is proper, señor captain," said the don.

"You are wise, don; but tell me of Buffalo Bill's coming."

"He came this afternoon, mounted upon a splendid animal, and with its match following with a pack-saddle. He told me he was on his way to El Monte, but wanted to rest a day or two, and gave his name as Fred Williams, a government courier."

"Yes, his real name is William Frederick Cody, and he has twisted his Christian names to suit, for he dared not let it be known that he was Buffalo Bill.

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But I know him, and forewarned is forearmed, as he shall know to his cost."

"I am to consider, señor captain, what you say about the general telling him to stop here, at my mission.

"It must be General Carr, who commanded this district some years ago, and knows of me and the mission, and so it would be bad for his courier to meet his death here."

"Bah! he has come there through an Indian country, and who could follow his trail after a couple of days? Who would know that he ever reached here? I tell you, don, you are as deep in the mire as the rest of us, and when I got my soldier friend's letter I came at once to you.

"I was sure that with your aid, and your son Juan's, we could easily cut short the career of Buffalo Bill; but here I find Mustang Matt and Half-breed José, two more to aid us, for they are of our kind; and so I say, down with the scout this very night! He's got money, which goes to you, don; his horses and traps Matt and José can have to sell, and I claim only his life. Now, Don Trego, do you intend to desert a pard in need?"

"I'm not that kind, señor captain, but this man, Fred Williams, as he called himself to me, came here to claim my hospitality. You say he is a man hunter, and will kill you, and others at El Monte. Self-preservation is the first law of nature, so as you know that he is going there, you will be prepared for him and can fight him, for all know what you are."

"And you show your ignorance by not knowing what and who Buffalo Bill is. Why, that man carries a charmed life, and no one dare face him, hoping to be on equal terms, for he is quicker than lightning, his aim is as true as death, and he is wholly devoid of fear.

"No; trap him, and we can kill him, but attempt to

face him and we will die, and he will go on his way serenely. He is here in your home, and Matt and José here will help me, so you can stand aloof and let us do the work. Only tell us where you put him for the night, and we'll do the rest."

"Señor, I obey. He is at his supper now, but he will sleep in the little meeting room off the old chapel, for there is where I put strangers."

"The river runs under the window, just outside of the wall, and a body dropped into it would be quickly carried away."

"You know the old mission well, señor captain, so make yourself at home, and with Señores Matt and José breakfast with us, for I suppose the stranger will not be here."

"No, he will not."

"Spread your serapes here, if you wish to sleep, and Juan will care for your horses. Good night, señores."

Don Carlos Trego left the room, and Panama and his pards went on planning just how they would cut short the career of Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FOREWARNED.

An hour before sunset a horseman had ridden up to the gate of the ruined mission, where Don Trego made his home, amid the memories and the graves of bygone generations. He was splendidly mounted, thoroughly equipped, had a repeating rifle, revolvers and bowie, with a pack horse trotting obediently along behind him, and carrying a well-stocked packsaddle, apparently for a long journey.

The horseman was one who could not go unnoticed anywhere, for he was tall and possessed an athletic and graceful form, while his dress showed the frontiersman, with the top-boots, buckskin leggings, hunting shirt, and broad-brimmed sombrero.

The face of the horseman was one to command instant respect and admiration, for, added to its being a handsome one in a marked degree, it was stamped with indomitable pluck, character, and will, while his manner of addressing Carlos Trego, who met him at the massive doors leading into the plaza of the mission, was gentle and courteous.

"Señor, do you speak English, for I have little faith in my Spanish?" he said, with a smile, recognizing at a glance that if the don was an American he was of Spanish or Mexican birth.

"I speak English, and would know how I could serve the señor?"

"Is this the old Mission del Monte?"

"It is, señor, what is left of it."

"I was told by army officers who knew of its hospitality, if I came here and found Don Carlos Trego still the ranchero, I would receive good treatment at his hands, and I desire to rest for a day or two, after

a long journey, and before continuing on to El Monte, the settlement some forty miles south of here, I believe."

"Your friends told you the truth, señor, for I have a good garden, fruit trees, domestic fowl, with a well-supplied larder, and game for the shooting, fish for the catching.

"You are welcome; but may I ask the señor's name?"

"Frederick Williams, and army courier is my present occupation.

"I thank you, señor, and will look myself to my horses."

The stranger had then been shown where he could place his saddle and pack, in his room, one connected with the old chapel, and then had led his horses to a bit of meadowland on the stream, where he had staked them out.

He had found his room more like a prison than a chamber, but there was a cot, table, and chair there, and he had no reason to complain.

A youth of twenty, with a darkly handsome face, had been called by the don and told to go off and catch some fish and kill a deer for supper, and then the don had shown the stranger through the old ruin, he seeming much interested in it.

After looking it over the stranger had decided that but six persons dwelt in a structure that at one time must have accommodated half a thousand, and these half dozen were the don, his son, and his wife, a woman of forty, with a face that held traces of former beauty and refinement, and with eyes in which lurked a world of meaning.

The señora had seemed impressed with the handsome stranger, and at once set the peon servants, a man and a woman, to work preparing supper. The sixth dweller there, also a peon, was sent to guard a

small herd of cattle and ponies down in the meadowlands.

With a glance at the garden, the domestic fowls, and having heard the orders given Juan, the stranger had thought his chances for a tempting supper were excellent, and went to his little room to look over his traps, as Don Carlos received a signal that other visitors were coming.

They were two horsemen, and the stranger, observing them at a distance, had seen them engage in excited conversation with the don, who led them away out of sight.

Soon after another arrival had come, and he was also seen to hold an earnest conversation with the don, and was led away toward the living rooms of the family.

But when night fell and the stranger had been called by Juan to supper, he had felt surprised to see none of the other arrivals there. He saw the señora, who appeared to have dressed up for his especial benefit, and Juan was there, with two of the peon servants ready to wait upon them. But the don and the three men whom he had seen arrive were not there.

The absence of the former was then explained by the señora saying that the don was away with the cattle, but nothing was said of the others.

"This is a mysterious household, and I must keep my eyes open," muttered the stranger.

But the food set before him was of the best, from the coffee and hot biscuit to the broiled venison, bacon, and eggs, and he ate heartily, enjoying everything, and asking many questions about the surrounding country and its people, little dreaming that in an old isolated wing of the ruin four men were then plotting to kill him.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE USE OF A LASSO.

Wild Kid had heard enough. He cautiously lowered himself from his standing position in the saddle, dismounted, and led his horse silently away through the old burying ground to the shelter of some mesquite trees a few hundred yards distant, growing near the bank of the river.

There was good grazing there, and in a sheltered spot the pony was staked out.

Then, with his lariat in hand, for Wild Kid was an expert in its use, and would have as soon left his belt of arms behind as it, he made his way back under the walls of the old mission.

"I must save that splendid man I have heard so much about. If I can't, I know who will be the ones to hang."

With this brave determination in his mind, he skirted around the walls, looking for some place where he could enter. He well knew the danger he ran, for Don Trego had a pack of the largest and most ferocious dogs in the country, five of them, and they were turned loose in the grounds about the mission at night when the family retired.

With several strangers there that night, Wild Kid hoped they would be kept in their pen until late, but at any rate he would take all chances.

The outer walls here and there had crumbled half down, but the inner inclosure about the mission proper, the plaza, garden, and canal, had been well kept up.

Getting within the outer wall, Wild Kid searched in vain for a break.

The wall had been built for safety, and was all of fifteen feet in height, while no tree had been allowed to grow alongside of it.

The Use of a Lasso.

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Wild Kid suddenly paused and glanced upward. He was not looking at the stars, however. Standing under the shadow of the rear of the chapel, his eyes had fallen upon the stone cross upon the apex of the roof.

It was nearly forty feet above him, but his ingenious mind had hit upon a way to get into the mission yard: He would depend upon his lariat. In a word, he would lasso the cross.

Stepping backward, he measured the distance critically, then swung his lariat around and around his head and launched it upward.

It did not go up to the cross.

Throwing a lasso upward was harder than in a straight line on a level, he found.

Again he made the throw.

The coil fell with a heavy thud, which he feared would be heard within the living wing of the mission, a hundred yards away.

Again he threw and failed.

But he was not discouraged, a thought came to him, and he darted away.

At the river bank he halted, and he dropped the long lariat into the water to make it heavier.

Then he returned and made another throw. He nearly reached the cross this time.

A second time he threw, but it did not quite reach.

With all his might he threw it a third time; but it hit the base of the cross. He needed about five feet more to encircle the top with the noose.

Again he darted away. But within ten minutes he was back again, leading his pony.

Placing himself in position, he went slowly to work to see if the extra height of some six feet would not help him reach the goal.

But could he throw upward from his saddle as from the ground? That was the question that bothered

him. But soon he was ready, and with a strong effort the coil went sailing upward.

It struck the cross fairly, but two feet below the top.

Again he tried, and this time it went over one arm of the cross and hung there. But, drawing upon it, Wild Kid found that the noose had not caught.

Nerving himself for another effort, he once more launched the lariat toward the cross.

The stars shone brightly, and he could see fairly well.

Eagerly he watched the dark coil in its flight, saw it soar above the cross, hover there an instant, and settle down. Then he gave the lariat a slight pull.

It held.

Then he pulled hard, and it remained fast. He had been successful at last!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

IN LIGHT AND SHADOW.

Wild Kid could hardly restrain a shout of triumph as he felt that he had been successful in his effort to lasso the cross.

But he wisely forbore from doing so, and rode his pony back to his grazing ground. He was soon back again under the shadow of the chapel, and, grasping the lariat firmly, swung his weight upon it.

It held firm. Then he took off his boots and tied them about his waist.

His next move was to seize the lasso firmly and begin to walk up the chapel wall.

The idea struck him that he might pull the stone cross over on top of him, but he grimly muttered:

"I guess it would bury me and give me a tombstone all in one. But I'll take the chances."

Soon he reached the cross and caught his feet upon the apex of the roof. There he stood a while to rest, one arm clinging around the cross.

With his hard efforts in throwing the lariat and his climb, he was tired, tough as a pine knot though he was. But he soon was rested, and, drawing up the lasso, began to let himself down the steep roof.

Reaching the edge, he saw a light streaming out of an open door beneath him.

"It must be from the chapel room which they've given to Buffalo Bill," he thought. "But I must make no mistake. It would not do to find that it is a room occupied by Panama or the two men I tracked here."

The dogs might have been turned loose, but he knew he must risk that. So he climbed up the roof again and went down the other side.

All was dark there, but the lasso was long enough to reach the ground, and so he lowered himself.

Arranging the end, in case he came back to it in a run, he slipped cautiously along the wall of the chapel, came around in front, halted under the shadow of the tower for a moment, and looked about to get his bearings.

He soon discovered that he was in one end of the large plaza, the chapel standing aloof from the mission house proper.

To his right, a hundred yards, was the main entrance; in front of him, across the plaza, was the night corral for the horses and cattle, and to the left he saw a light shining from an open door.

These he knew were the living quarters of Don Trego and his people, for Wild Kid had been to the mission half a dozen times before, several times passing a night there.

"The wing where those precious toughs are is right yonder, and they have put out their light; but they command a view of the room over here by the chapel, so I must go slow, as they may be on the watch."

So saying, he kept along under the shadow of the chapel until he drew near the stream of light that came out of the open door at one end.

There was a window also, a narrow one, out of which the light shone, and a form passed between the light and the door. Was it the scout?

Again the form darkened the light in the doorway and remained there.

Then the youth glanced down upon the pavement, and he beheld the shadow outline of the one who obscured the light. It was plainly photographed in black upon the pavement—a slender, upright form, with long hair falling below his shoulders and a broad sombrero upon his head. It could but be the scout, and the boy, crouching in the shadow of the chapel, whispered distinctly:

"Buffalo Bill, don't move, but listen to me."

There was a slight start of the shadow, the outline of a hand and arm bending toward a revolver in the belt was seen, and then came the low-uttered words:

"Who are you?"

"Are you Buffalo Bill?"

"You appear to know that fact, and I am not one to deny my identity."

"Other eyes than mine are upon you, and your life is in danger. Pretend to prepare for bed, and put out your light, for I dare not be seen. When it is dark in your room I will come there."

"I will do as you tell me; but, in light or darkness, I am able to defend myself," was the cool reply of the scout.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

WILD KID MEETS BUFFALO BILL.

There was a movement of the shadowy form, the broad sombrero was taken off, the belt of arms unbuckled; a movement as though the high top-boots were being removed, and then the light went out.

As it did so, Wild Kid glided from the shadow of the chapel to the door of the little room.

Entering, he heard the low-spoken words:

"Now, pard, friend or foe, I am ready for you, for I have you covered."

The scout was not to be caught napping! This thought pleased the Kid, and he laughed lightly and whispered:

"Good! You are wide awake, I see."

"I always am, when not asleep. Now, who are you?"

"Your friend."

"So I would judge from your coming here as you do; but appearances are deceitful."

"That's so; but you are Buffalo Bill?"

"Are you guessing?"

"No."

"Why do you ask?"

"I do not wish to help the wrong man."

"So you are here to help me, are you?"

"Yes, to save your life, for there is a plot to kill you to-night."

"Ah! Now you are talking business."

"I'm dodging death about half the time, myself."

"I cannot see you, but I rather like you, pard."

"I hope you will like me when you know me better; but I reckon I had better not preach too long, but get down to business."

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"Fire away."

"You came here from the upper country, where you are chief of scouts at the frontier forts, and you are in Texas on a special mission, but did not give yourself away, but told Don Trego that you were a government courier, and your name was Fred Williams."

"Ah! you are Juan, the don's son."

"If I was I'd expect to be hanged, and for a good reason; but, though I may die with my boots on, I won't hang."

"Who are you?"

"A boy, an outcast, prairie waif, good-for-nothing, terror, or what you will, christened by the toughs of El Monte Wild Kid, but at camp meeting called by the parson Bud Poisal, which name I answer to quick if anybody would say Bud Poisal would lie or steal a horse."

"Now, you've got my family history, I being the entire family outfit, and, though it's too dark to see me, I'm here, and to help you."

Buffalo Bill was decidedly impressed by this short and to-the-point explanation of the youth, and he felt at once drawn toward him, though he could not see a feature of his face.

"My brave young friend, I appreciate what you have told me, and also that you are here to aid me to escape some threatened danger. What is that danger, may I ask?"

"I'll tell you by a short trail. Three men tried to kidnap, this afternoon, the noblest girl in the State of Texas, the only one who thinks I'm not as black as they paint me; but I saw their little game, chipped in, and sent one of them, the leader, El Monte Ned, to round-up cattle in the happy hunting grounds, and the other two got away."

"Good for you!"

"I rode nearly home with Marie Brasher—and then

I went back to trail the two men who were with El Monte Ned. I tracked them here, and I came up to the mission on the riverside, where there is an old graveyard.

"I saw a light, and, standing up in my saddle, I took a peep into the room, in an old wing of the old ruin.

"There I saw Don Trego, the two birds I was after, and a man who had just arrived, and who they call captain, as he was once an army officer, he says, but I doubt it, though he may have been a bad soldier.

"His pards call him Panama, and I heard him tell the don, and the others, for they all belong to the same gang, that he had a letter to-day from a friend at a northwestern fort telling him to beware, as you were on your way to El Monte to look up certain men."

"Indeed, he is well posted."

"He seemed to be; but you know best.

"Then Panama pointed to a scar on his head and said you gave that to him, and he was supposed to be dead; but if you saw him you would know him, and there were other men about El Monte you wanted."

"He knows it all."

"Then it's time for him to die, as he can learn no more," was the laconic response, and Buffalo Bill laughed, while Wild Kid resumed his story.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE COUNTERPLOT.

"Now, what must I call you, for I want a handle for my tongue to get a grip on?" asked Wild Kid in his frank way.

"I am plain W. F. Cody, chief of scouts, nicknamed Buffalo Bill."

"Then Chief Cody goes with me, for as there are no misters around this country I'm not used to the name.

"But let me push on along my tracking trail, for I wish to tell you that Panama said the only way for him to escape, and the others, too, whom you wanted, was to call in your chips."

"I see."

"He wanted the don and his son Juan to go in with him, but Don Trego backed out for the boy and himself, yet did not say they should not do the work, for he's a bad one I've had my eye on for some time, only it's catching before hanging, you know."

"Yes, like making a rabbit stew—you first catch your rabbit."

"Sure. But the other three—Panama, Mustang Matt, and Half-breed José, all hard ones from El Monte, plotted to come over here when you were asleep and open fire on you, as they said you would naturally keep the door open, and thus they would down you.

"At the wall a couple of hundred feet from here, is a stone room, the don said, with a window overlooking the river, and they could drop your body out there and the stream would carry it far away."

"You heard all this?"

"Oh, yes. I got it all down fine, and then I plotted to help you out."

"How did you get in?"

"Well, I'll tell you. I got in by a way which will enable you to say that you were saved by the cross."

"I don't understand. Are you a traveling missionary?"

"Not to any alarming extent; but as I could not get over the walls I lassoed the cross on the chapel, shinned up the side and down the roof, and I'm here, aren't I?"

"You certainly are in evidence, though I do not see you distinctly."

"And now you are here to help me fight out this battle or aid me to escape—which?"

"See here, chief, I could help you to escape, but I've got an idea you could do more good fighting it out; in fact, I've an idea."

"Let me have it, then."

"If Panama is really posted you've got work ahead of you in these parts."

"True."

"Now, I'm not curious; but if you are playing a lone hand, but would like to have some one be pards with you, I'm with you for keeps."

"You are just the one I need, from what I've seen of you."

"You haven't seen me yet, only heard me, and maybe when you do get a sight of my picture by daylight you won't like it."

"I'll take chances on that."

"Then I'll do the same."

"Now, my idea is to go around the chapel, get my lariat and hang the end over this side, so that I can be here with you in the fight, and then skip at a quick-step outside of the mission walls—I mean after the three men have passed in their chips."

"I'll be on hand should Don Trego and Juan, with the peons, take a hand against you; but my idea is

that they will not; but, as I said, they'll hear something drop from the chapel roof if they do."

"Well, so far, good; but I think you'd better play that the three men must have followed you here to kill you, that they came from the Northwest, not from El Monte, and make believe you think Don Trego is all right."

"He'll catch at that bait the same as a catfish will at a nigger's toe, and he'll pretend not to know the men at first; but then come out and say they are from El Monte, and asked for shelter for the night, which he gave them, little dreaming that they were here to murder you."

"I know the don well, and he'll be glad to get out of it, while if you recognize the man Panama, you can give a reason for his attack on you, stating that in some way he knew of your coming."

"When I see all is serene I'll skip, and nobody will know me in the affair, only I'll have to borrow your lariat so as to tie it to mine, so I can draw them over after I am outside, as it would not do to leave mine fast to the cross."

"That's my game, chief."

"And it's a good one, and we'll play it to the end, be the stakes what they may," was Buffalo Bill's stern response.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

WAITING.

Buffalo Bill felt that he had one to aid him, who, if a boy in years, was a man in pluck and experience.

It was a novel situation for him, he who had done so much to aid others, to save other lives, standing there in the dark in that old ruin, following the advice of a boy to save himself from death.

Yet there was a ring in the youth's tone that was sincere and true, and he trusted him implicitly, so said:

"Well, Wild Kid, when do you think our friends will come to the ball?"

"Not until they are sure that you are sound asleep, so I'll go after my lariat, for that will take me a little time; but if they should come while I'm gone, I'll get a shot or two in from somewhere to help you, and be about until I know all is quiet, only don't sleep too sound there."

"I never do, for my ears are on the watch when my eyes are closed."

"Good for the ears; but when you leave in the morning take the river trail to El Monte, and I'll be somewhere along the way."

"Now, I'll take a break."

With this the boy glided out of the room, passed close along under the shadow of the chapel wall, and soon reached his lariat where it hung on the other side. He climbed up to the roof, passed along the ridge to the cross, and tied Cody's lariat to his own, passing them simply over the stone arm, and carrying the two ends down upon the other side.

This time he landed in a dark corner of the chapel and the wall, and not fifty feet from the room where Buffalo Bill was waiting.

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There he arranged the ends of the lariats so that he could get hold of them in a hurry, and could, by pulling upon one end, when outside of the wall, drag the other over the cross after him.

This done, he moved gently forward to the door and whispered:

"All serene?"

"So far. Have you arranged your means of escape?"

"Oh, yes, and I've only got to crawl upon the wall, sit there in the shadow of the rear buttress of the chapel, and wait to see how the cards are played by the don. If the game goes square I'll drop over on the other side, pull the lariats off the cross, and glide out through the graveyard to where my pony is feeding."

"You are not afraid of ghosts, then?"

"I've been a long time hoping to see one, but it seems that only those that are afraid of ghosts see them, for I can't, and I've often been around dead folks in my time, so I guess when the spirit leaves the body it doesn't go fooling around any more. That's my opinion; but then, I'm only a kid, and so green the cattle chase me!"

"All cats are gray at night, so I can't see the green line you speak of," replied Buffalo Bill, much amused at the way Wild Kid had of expressing himself.

"It's just twelve o'clock," said Wild Kid after a moment, glancing out of the door.

"How do you tell?"

"I study the stars every night, for I'm out as much in the darkness as daytime, and I get to knowing pretty well."

"Yes, you are a close observer, I see, and I'm lucky to have found such an ally, for I needed one, and hoped to find two older gentlemen to be the ones to aid me."

"Who are they?" came the blunt question.

"Do you know Major Donald Brasher?"

"You bet I know him! It was his daughter I saved from the kidnapers to-day, and a year ago I saved her from the Indians; but the major hates me, though I'm not growing thin over it. He's a good man, or he would be, if a certain fellow who is trying to marry his daughter would let him."

Buffalo Bill listened to what Wild Kid said with great attention, but making no comment, asked:

"Do you know Duke Delmar?"

"I guess so, and he knows me, but our friendship don't pan out to any alarming extent, though I did keep Rip Fait from putting a bullet in his brain once."

"How did you prevent it?"

"Killed Rip, of course. That was the only way to stop Rip, and he was on the warpath for scalps, was blind for gore, and I pulled my gun on him when I saw that he had Duke booked to kill."

"And yet Duke Delmar is not your friend?"

"No; nobody is, except Marie Brasher, and she's the only one who doesn't think I'm the devil on a round-up."

"Well, I'll be your friend, and I'll show it."

"Don't, it will ruin your reputation even with El Monte toughs; besides, if you want me to help you down here, I can do more for you by not appearing to know you. But I think death has started on the trail, for I saw something moving over yonder, sure, though it might have been one of the don's savage dogs."

"He would hardly let them out of the pen with strangers here."

"You are right, I never thought of that; but I see now that what I saw move was not dogs."

"No, I see them—they are men, three of them, and they are coming this way."

"They better stop to pray a little," was the quiet comment of Wild Kid, as he held his revolver ready for use, Buffalo Bill standing by his side, a weapon also in his hand.

CHAPTER XL.

PLAYING A DEADLY GAME.

If Buffalo Bill had had any doubt of his young ally, he could do so no longer when he saw three dark forms creep out of the shadows of the old mission and come silently toward the little adobe structure adjoining the chapel, where he had been placed to sleep.

The youth was as cool, the scout noticed, as though he were simply waiting for a deer to come within range of his weapon.

Within the room it was intensely dark, but Buffalo Bill had placed the little lamp and matches where he could get at them readily when needed.

Bound upon a most important mission, after hearing the boy's story of the three men, and knowing that the don, his son, and two peons, if not in league with them, might be prevailed to join them when he showed resistance, Buffalo Bill's plan would have been to simply escape with Wild Kid, as he had entered, and come back with a force of ranchmen to gain his own and secure revenge.

But Wild Kid had urged otherwise, and in a way that convinced the scout that his plan was best.

If he could down his three foes, and convince Don Trego that he thought him wholly innocent and that the men had tracked him there to kill him, it would be best, for then he would have material to work on in the future against a man whom he knew had been trusted by General Carr and other army officers.

Explaining to the don that he had not slept, and saw the three men advancing toward him, he had protected himself, thus not letting it be known that he had been warned, or that Wild Kid was interested in

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the affair, the scout felt that he would hold a secret that would be to his advantage for future action.

"I'll halt them first, pard, for I don't wish to fire on a man without a warning, if he is coming to assassinate me."

"All right, sir; that's my style, never to pull trigger unless the other party knows I am in the game. But don't hold 'em up until they get so close that none of the three can get away."

"Oh, yes, I mean to kill if I have to, but I'd like to catch the man Panama alive to find out just who he is."

"Can you pick him out?"

"He's the tallest of the three."

"Do you intend to fire also?"

"Well, it's your picnic, but if I'm needed I'll chip in and it won't cause me to lie awake nights if I happen to kill Half-breed José, for he has tried the coward act on me several times."

"He's the little fellow on the left."

The three men were now within thirty feet of the building, and advanced side by side on tiptoe. In the center was the taller of the trio, the youth had said was Panama.

It was bright starlight, and they were distinctly visible now, for they were in the open, well out of the shadows of the mission walls, and nearing those about the chapel and its annex.

There was no doubt but that the men were coming directly toward the open door, for, as Wild Kid whispered:

"There was no other place for them to go in that direction, except to the chapel to pray, and I guess prayer time hasn't come yet."

Another moment, and the three men halted near the door and listened.

Buffalo Bill breathed heavily, like a man in a deep slumber.

The men seemed reassured as they heard the breathing, some low order was given, and they separated, those on each side stepping some fifteen feet apart from the center one.

Instantly Wild Kid seized Buffalo Bill and drew him to one side of the door.

The cot was just in front of the open door, but the men had separated so that they could fire from three directions into the room, and thus make sure of wounding, if not killing the scout, before they rushed in on him.

Wild Kid seemed to anticipate their act, and so drew the scout to the shelter of the wall between the door and the window. He had hardly done so, when three shots came together, almost as one, and the bullets sank into the cot.

Then came a second discharge, and the three men ran toward the door, firing as they did so.

But two answering shots flashed from the darkness of the room, and Half-breed José and Mustang Matt dropped dead, while the form of the scout leaped from the door and his iron grip was upon the throat of Panama, who was hurled to the ground with stunning force, while he heard the stern command:

"Resist, and I will kill you!"

"I give up," cried the half-dazed man, and he was dragged by the scout into the room, his weapons torn from him, and hurled upon the floor, the door was closed, and Buffalo Bill stood at bay by the window, his foot upon the prostrate prisoner's breast, while he waited for the coming of the don, for voices were heard over by the mission, and forms were coming quickly to the scene.

As for Wild Kid, he had glided away like a ghost when he saw his chance to do so.

CHAPTER XLI.

AT BAY.

Buffalo Bill was glad to see that his young pard had skipped out so quickly, he feeling sure that Panama had not seen him.

As he stood by the narrow window, a revolver in each hand, and his foot upon his prostrate prisoner, whom he had told that a move would be the signal for his death, he saw four forms coming toward the chapel.

Of course, they were the don, his son Juan, and two of the peon cowboys.

Determined not to let the don make the mistake of firing, if he could head him off, the scout called out:

"Don Trego, I have been attacked by men who must have trailed me here. Two of them are dead, and I have the third a prisoner."

The words were uttered slowly and distinctly, and were heard and understood, for the don called back:

"Oh, señor! It is terrible! And in my home, too! I will hang the one you have made a prisoner."

The don then came running on to the scene, while Buffalo Bill called out:

"Hold, señor! I have been attacked, as I said, and I wish to be sure that those with you are not also my foes."

"Ah, señor, never! They are my son Juan, and my peon cowboys, Pedro and Antonio. We are your friends and will defend you, for it makes me sad that they should have attacked you, my friend."

The don and the others were now outside of the door, which Buffalo Bill had not yet opened, for he asked:

"Who are these men?"

"Three men from El Monte, señor, who came late to-night and asked for shelter, even saying that they were friends of yours, but would not disturb you.

"They must have trailed you here, señor; but the vigilantes of El Monte will deal with the prisoner quickly, and I will guard him myself until daylight, and go with you to El Monte on the morrow and see him hanged."

"Thanks, Don Tergo, but I never allow another to do that which it is my duty to attend to, so I will guard the prisoner myself," and the scout opened the door, and then continued:

"The lamp and matches are on that table, don, so please let us have some light."

The don's hand trembled as he lighted the lamp, and Buffalo Bill, who was watching him closely, saw that he was very pale.

The failure of the attack, and fear of being suspected of complicity in it had quite unnerved the don.

But, appearing not to notice his fright, Buffalo Bill said:

"Of course, don, you are not responsible for your guests, but it came very near being a close call for me.

"As I had not been asleep, I saw them coming, felt their movements were suspicious, and prepared for them.

"When they fired into the room and then rushed forward, I met them with my revolver, and as the other two were quickly out of the game, I made this man a prisoner.

"Hand me my lariat off of my saddle, please, don, and after I have secured him I'll have a look at his face, for perhaps that may tell me why I have been dogged here—ah!" and Buffalo Bill sprang forward and seized the prisoner by the throat with one hand, while he wrenched from him a letter he had seen him trying to tear up.

The act of the scout showed the don and the others that Buffalo Bill was a man of giant strength and tiger-like quickness, for Panama, they knew, justly boasted of his wonderful prowess.

But in the hands of the scout he was but as a child.

Thrusting the letter into his pocket, Buffalo Bill proceeded to search the prisoner, all the time looking fixedly into his face, until at last he said, in a puzzled kind of way:

"I don't believe in the grave giving up its dead until they are called officially at the bugle call of Gabriel; but if you have not been numbered with the shadows, I am greatly mistaken, for I will take oath that you are North Adams, deserter from the army, and murderer of Sergeant Fair four years ago.

"I thought I had killed you, but it seems I was mistaken—yes, you are North Adams, and you escaped my bullet to die on the gallows."

CHAPTER XLII.

ON GUARD.

The scout could not but note the startled look of the prisoner at his recognition of him, as also his appealing glance to Don Trego and Juan. He also caught the nod of response the don quickly gave, but, pretending not to notice it, said:

"You need not appeal to the don and his son for help, for they are honest men, and are on my side; but even if they were not I would fight them to keep you, and they would have to answer to the soldiers who are following on my trail if I disappeared."

The shot told, for the don hastened to say:

"Yes, señor, we are honest men, and, though we know this man, we never suspected him of being the wretch he is. He came to our house last night with his pards, as I have told you, but he came to kill you, and thus get me into trouble. But I will put him in irons at once and guard him until morning for you."

"No, don, I will ask you to guard those two dead men instead, and this man I will keep here, for he cannot escape when I have secured him—my lasso not on my saddle horn, you say? Well, there is one on my packsaddle, so hand me that, please."

It was given to him, for Buffalo Bill had forgotten that Wild Kid had his lariat when he asked the don to hand it to him.

Those who watched the scout tie the prisoner felt that he had had experience in that kind of work, and that Panama's chances of getting free were very slim.

But the don, though appearing to side with the scout, and against Panama, was only too anxious to aid the latter to escape. He knew that he dare not refuse to aid him, as Panama would avenge himself by betraying

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him; and, little dreaming now that the scout was playing a waiting game in pretending to trust him, Don Trego said:

"Now, señor, I insist that you shall not watch the prisoner, for you have already suffered enough under my roof."

"Leave him to me and I will guard him, while you seek the rest you need."

"Señor, I'm as wide awake as an owl at midnight, and I will keep the prisoner here. He is securely bound, as you see. I will draw my cot across the door, and sleep serenely until I am called to eat the tempting breakfast I know your good wife will have for me."

"But, señor——"

"I am determined, don, so that ends it."

"I hope the señor does not fear to trust me with the prisoner," said the don reproachfully.

"Why should I? Are you not an honest man?"

The sudden questions staggered the don, and he gave the prisoner a quick glance, and Buffalo Bill saw it, as well as a sign in return.

That the don understood the sign was evident, for he argued no more, and, bidding Buffalo Bill good night, was going to the door, when the prisoner asked:

"May I have my blankets to rest on?"

"Oh, yes; for I would not have you uncomfortable," responded Buffalo Bill.

The don himself brought them, and insisted upon spreading them, while Buffalo Bill, though pretending not to heed, heard the words slowly spoken by the prisoner:

"Juan and the peons on the trail to-morrow."

The don nodded, and left with his son and the peons, removing the bodies of the two dead men as they did so.

Instantly Buffalo Bill blew the lamp out.

He would take no chances of a shot in the dark, and, closing the stout door, he bolted it.

Then he drew his cot under the window, where he could raise his head and look out.

"Now, North Adams, I'll take a nap, and I advise you to forget yourself in slumber, also."

"I am not North Adams."

"Why lie, for your letter will prove that, as, though addressed to Captain Palos Panama, I noticed that it began, 'My dear North.'"

"Then, too, Adams, I recognize you, and remember that you bear a scar on your head I gave you, and thought the wound was fatal, as it knocked you off the cliff into the river, but you escaped in some way, and so we meet again."

"Now, go to sleep, for you cannot escape, and you know me well enough to understand that the don and his outfit could not take you from me if they even felt inclined to do so."

Whether convinced or not, Panama said no more, and the scout was soon asleep, though he was on the alert even in slumber.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE TWO TRAILS.

When Buffalo Bill awoke the sun was up.

There lay his prisoner, secure, as he had left him.

Going to his packsaddle, the scout took out a pair of steel manacles, and these he put upon the prisoner with the remark:

"The lariat binds you, I see, but these will be comfortable."

"Understand, Adams, that I shall allow no nonsense, so obey me."

"I will, Buffalo Bill."

The scout smiled, and asked quickly:

"You have betrayed yourself, for why did you call me Buffalo Bill? My name is Fred Williams, you know."

The prisoner bit his lip viciously, for he felt that he had made a mistake.

The don now appeared and told the scout the señora had breakfast ready, and he would guard the prisoner while he ate.

"No, don, I'll take him with me," was the reply, and this was done.

The señora was all smiles and congratulations when Buffalo Bill appeared, and, turning to the prisoner, said reproachfully:

"And to think he has been our guest, and would treat you thus! For shame, Panama! I fear the vigilantes will hang you when you reach El Monte."

But her kind heart enabled her to heap the plate of the prisoner with a good breakfast, and the don's offer for his wife to guard the prisoner while he and the scout went out to get the horses ready being declined, Panama was taken along also to the corral.

"My son is looking up a stray horse of his, and the peons are guarding the cattle," explained the don, without being asked, and Buffalo Bill made a mental note of the fact, as also that the three were missing.

The scout's two horses were saddled, that of the prisoner also, and the don refused decidedly any pay for the night's lodging he had given, but seemed most particular in his directions to Buffalo Bill as to the trail he should take.

Telling the don that he would pay the peons for burying the two dead men, upon his return, he bade a courteous farewell to the señora, shook hands with his host, and rode away with his prisoner upon the trail the Spaniard had directed him to take.

But Buffalo Bill was not to be caught napping, and he recalled that Wild Kid had told him to be sure and take the river trail.

That certainly was not the one he was then on, he felt sure, so he asked the prisoner if the other trail was not the shortest.

"No, the longest," said Panama shortly.

"This is the direct one, then?"

"Yes."

"The other lies yonder, does it not?"

"No, in this other direction."

That agreed with the advice given by Wild Kid. So he said, while he watched the prisoner closely:

"We will take the other trail, then."

Buffalo Bill had observed looks pass between the don, the señora, and the prisoner, which he felt were intended to convey to the prisoner certain information. He now saw that his avowed intention of taking the other trail caused the prisoner to start and grow anxious.

"You will have a hard ride of it, if you take the river trail, and are just as likely as not to run upon a band of redskins that way," urged Panama.

"I've met redskins before, and I am pretty well armed and mounted, so I can run if I cannot fight, and your horse is a good one, too; but should I have to leave you behind it will save you from being hanged, as you certainly will be, North Adams."

The prisoner was white-faced now, and brought forward several strong arguments of why the scout should not take what was known as the river trail, as it followed along the stream for several miles, and, crossing it, recrossed after some distance, rendering it considerably longer than the one that ran directly across country from the old mission.

But Buffalo Bill was determined to go his own way, and turned out of the trail to cross country a mile or two to the other one.

The moment he did so the looks of the prisoner showed that the scout had saved himself from an ambush and kept Panama from being aided in an escape.

A muttered imprecation in Spanish from the prisoner told how deep was his disappointment at the action of the scout in regard to the two trails.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A SIGNAL AHEAD.

Buffalo Bill soon came into the other trail, and turned in the direction he had been going on the first one. He was sure that was the right one, as Panama told him it was not.

"I'll chance it," he said, with a smile.

Then he was bothered as to his meeting with Wild Kid on the trail.

The youth had said he would meet him, but nothing had been said of having the prisoner along.

Would Wild Kid think it wise to show himself while Panama was along?

That question Buffalo Bill determined to leave to the boy to decide. He would naturally see him, and that he had a prisoner with him, before he allowed himself to be seen, and so would know best how to act.

So the scout continued on his way, watching only that he was not surprised by any one on the way, as he did not know but that the don's people might have guarded both trails.

Then, too, the prisoner might have been right in his dread of meeting a band of Indians.

Some ten miles from the old mission the scout came upon a little prairie, a mile across, and with a range of hills in the distance.

There the trail crossed the river and wound along the banks, which the scout's knowledge of the lay of land in general convinced him that the river must wind around and run along at the base of the distant hills. He asked his prisoner, but the latter was in a mood not to reply. It was evident that Buffalo Bill had taken the wrong trail—for Panama.

The river was easily forded, the trail followed down

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the bank, and as the hills were approached the trail seemed to lead away from the stream.

As the slope was reached Buffalo Bill's eyes were upon the trail ahead, going among the hills, and his keen eyes caught sight of a form ahead, appearing for a moment, and then gliding out of sight.

"I think I shall reconnoiter on ahead alone, Adams, but I'll see that your horse does not run away with you," and Buffalo Bill proceeded to tie the animal ridden by the prisoner securely to a tree.

The prisoner was already bound securely to his saddle.

Riding on ahead, Buffalo Bill advanced with caution, though he felt sure the form he had caught sight of must be the Wild Kid.

If mistaken, then it would be man against man; but great odds never disturbed Buffalo Bill to any alarming extent.

After several hundred yards the trail wound into the timber belt along the range of hills, and as he was lost sight of to the sharply watching prisoner, he beheld ahead the Wild Kid, for it was the youth he saw.

There he stood in the trail, upright, handsome-faced, and eagerly waiting.

The scout was at once impressed with the appearance of the youth, just such as he would expect to find his friend of the night before to be.

"I'm the Wild Kid, Chief Cody," informed the youth, with a smile.

"Yes, I am sure of that, for, though I did not see you last night, you are just about what I pictured you, and I have kept a searching lookout along the trail to find you."

"I saw you several miles back, but dared not signal, as I perceived that you had company, so I came on here and took the chances.

"It is Panama you have, I suppose, but did he see me?"

"No; and I simply explained that I would reconnoiter on ahead."

"Good! Now, you were going to El Monte with your prisoner?"

"Yes, he really is North Adams, a deserter from the army, and a double murderer and thief. I thought I had killed him, but was mistaken."

"So I heard you say last night to him."

"You heard me?" in surprise.

"Oh, yes; for I was on the roof and heard and saw all.

"You see, I didn't know just what the don and his layout might be tempted to do, so I lay low until nearly dawn, and I know that Juan and the peons went out before day to ambush you on the other trail.

"I, therefore, kept near, and was glad when you took my advice and followed the river trail, for you missed the ambush. But if you had been attacked Wild Kid would have been in the game for all I was worth."

"You are a true friend, Wild Kid, as I have had the best of proof."

"Then take the advice I now give you. If you do not you'll get into big trouble."

"I'll do it, for I feel that I can trust you," was Buffalo Bill's earnest reply.

CHAPTER XLV.

WILD KID'S ADVICE.

"Now, Chief Cody, I don't know what your business at El Monte is, but you are a brave man to come alone, though I heard your bluffs to the don last night about soldiers following."

"You are a keen one."

"If you needed soldiers here you'd get them from the fort, sixty-five miles south of here, and where I wish you to go now."

"Why?"

"Well, the prisoner you have is a deserter, you say?"

"Yes."

"Down here he is a gambler and a secret member of a very dangerous band.

"I am not dead sure, but I think the don is in the gang also, but by pretending not to suspect him we can catch him in a trap, is my idea."

"The very thing, Kid."

"Now, if you take Panama into El Monte, brave as you are, and a man to face any danger, he will be taken from you, for his gang is a strong one, and the good men there will not put their lives in jeopardy, and their homes, too, by taking sides with you.

"You might kill half a dozen, but a bullet will kill a buffalo, and you are but human."

"You are right, Wild Kid."

"So I say to you to skip this trail right here, follow the range right along. I'll sketch you a map of the country and trails, and get into the fort as quickly as you can.

"Leave your prisoner there, and make your way back to this point by day after to-morrow noon, and I'll be on hand to join you."

"I'll go into El Monte and hear what story the don has sent in of the affair, and see just how the humor of the men stands, for they think I am a bad one, and so will talk freely before me.

"I'll see how matters stand, too, about the attack on Miss Brasher, and when you return I'll take you for the night to my layout and put you on the trail for the homes of Duke Delmar and Major Brasher, whom you say you have letters to, though I would advise you not to tell your business here to either one of them, for I'll say flatfooted I do not trust the doc a little bit, and if he has not got the major on a string I'm willing to be licked for lying."

Buffalo Bill laughed, and then said:

"Well, my young friend, I will take your advice and deliver my prisoner for safe-keeping at the fort.

"Then I will return and meet you here, and, after all you have done for me, I will be guided by you in regard to my future actions, for you know the country, the people; good and bad, and I do not believe you are half as bad as you paint yourself."

"Give a dog a bad name, and he'll soon begin to think he's the meanest cur in town, for, except Marie and four boy pards who will tie to me to the end, I've got no friends; but they say even that we boys are road agents and all that is bad, though the vigilantes have never been able to catch us in a single lawless deed.

"We call ourselves Boy Rangers, and though we've fought the Indians and Rio Grande Renegades hard, several times warning the ranches of trouble, they won't believe we are honest, simply because I am said to be a young terror.

"Why, the ranchers keep a closer count on my cattle and ponies than I do myself, to see if I don't add to them by stealing splithoofs and mustangs."

Buffalo Bill eyed the youth fixedly as he was speaking, and seemed to dwell upon every word he uttered.

"So you have a little ranch of your own?"

"Yes, a couple of hundred longhorns and thirty-odd ponies."

"And you have some pards?"

"I've got a young Mexican pard, Rico Sanchez, though he's a year older than I am, living at my layout with me, along with Sable, a negro boy I picked up, whose heart is full of good blood, if he has got a bad face.

"Then, on a little ranch below El Monte, I've got two boy pards whom I can call on when I need them, and that is all.

"You see, Rico Sanchez had to leave Mexico or be killed, and was followed across the Rio Grande and wounded; but I happened along and helped him out, and took him to my ranch, while Sable was stood up for a target one day in El Monte by a desperado, and I took his part, so he's stuck to me ever since.

"The other two boys I also helped out of a scrape, and when I call they'll come; but folks will call me a terror, and maybe I am, in a quiet way."

"Well, pard, you are just the one I want to help me, you and your Boy Ranchers, and when I return from the fort I'll tell you my business at El Monte."

Buffalo Bill warmly grasped the hand of the "Young Terror."

CHAPTER XLVI.

NOT FOR SALE.

After talking together a short while longer, and the scout receiving from the youth a pencil-sketch map of his way, the two parted.

Buffalo Bill at once returned to his prisoner, who was anxiously awaiting him, wondering if Juan Trego and the peons, finding that they had not taken the trail they were expected to take, would run across to still ambush them. He knew well that if he did not, his only chance would be to raise trouble in El Monte, and have his comrades free him from the power of the scout, who he feared might make sure of him by killing him.

He could not blame Don Trego, for he felt that he had acted as best he could; but Panama was not one to be taken back a prisoner by Buffalo Bill to the fort from which he had deserted, no matter what the cost might be to others.

So when the scout returned he eyed him closely and asked:

"Did you find anything suspicious?"

"Yes."

"Indians?"

"No."

"What then?"

"Enough to make me leave this trail."

"Ah! I told you so, and you can go back to the other by a five-mile ride——"

"I know the way."

"Thanks, but I do not need your aid, nor will I go back to the other trail."

"Then you return to the Mission Ranch?"

"No."

"I don't know what you'll do, then."

Buffalo Bill had now untied the prisoner's horse and the pack animal, and, taking them in lead, to the surprise of Panama, he turned short off of the trail to El Monte.

"Where in the name of Satan are you going?" cried the prisoner.

"I thought I would go to Fort Rio," was the calm reply.

Buffalo Bill saw the start given by the prisoner, and that his face became the hue of death.

"This is not the way to the fort," he faltered.

"I think it is."

"It's over a hundred miles."

"More or less, as you will see when we reach there by night, for I shall push along rapidly."

"Man, don't take me there."

"It is just what I intend to do."

"You accuse me of being North Adams, but I am not."

"Quit talking, Adams, for I know just what you are, and that you killed the sergeant who arrested you for robbing the paymaster's quarters, and then shot the guard over you and made your escape."

"As I reported when I followed you that I had killed you, and I believed it to be true, that ended the matter; but as it was my mistake, I will now be glad to atone for it by returning you to General Carr, and to do so, I will take you to Fort Rio for safe-keeping, for I know what to expect should I carry you a prisoner to El Monte. Come, we must quicken our pace."

Panama groaned, and then gave vent to a string of oaths in English and Spanish.

But Buffalo Bill paid no heed, but kept the horses at a steady trot for several hours, following the direction in which he should go with an exactness that sur-

prised the prisoner, who knew he was a stranger in that part of the country.

At noon Buffalo Bill halted at a small stream for rest. The grass was plentiful, the water clear and cold, and there was wood in plenty for a fire; but the scout contented himself with a cold lunch from his supplies, the prisoner eating sparingly.

After a rest of nearly an hour, as Buffalo Bill began to saddle up, preparatory to starting on, Panama said:

"See here, Buffalo Bill, every man has his price—what is yours?"

"I haven't got anything for sale just now, Adams."

"Nonsense! You understand me well."

"If you carry me to the fort you'll have me safe."

"Now, nobody knows that I am alive save you, and I will pay you a clean two thousand dollars in gold if you will let me go."

"It is not enough."

"I'm not rich, but I've won some money with cards and trading cattle——"

"And cutting throats."

"I didn't say that."

"No, but I did."

"Well, then, I have that much more reason to wish to escape, so if two thousand will not buy you, name what will, and I'll try and meet your price."

"Call it as many millions as you did thousands, and I guess I'd surrender."

"Bah! Do you think I am a fool?"

"Oh, no, and neither am I for sale, Adams," and the journey was resumed.

While resting, Buffalo Bill had glanced over Wild Kid's map, and saw that he had made no mistake, and if he continued on a couple of hours more he must get into the trail leading from the south to Fort Rio.

This he did, and, pressing on, just as the sun set he caught sight, in the distance, of the Stars and Stripes fluttering down from the flagstaff at Fort Rio, and heard the sunset gun echoing among the hills.

But what was a great satisfaction for him was despair for his prisoner.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE MASKED PURSUERS.

When Wild Kid saw Buffalo Bill return to his prisoner he watched until they had turned off along the range and disappeared from sight.

Then he moved up to where the scout had halted his prisoner, while he came forward on the trail to speak to him.

"I'll just halt here for a while, for Juan and the don may come along in pursuit, and I can chip in if needed," he said.

So he waited for an hour or more, and then, as no one appeared, began to ride along toward the old mission. He had gone about a mile, when his pony, which he had named Scamp, pricked up his ears.

"Some one is coming—yes, I hear hoofs, and they are in a hurry, and more than one."

The next moment there dashed into sight four masked men.

They were riding hard, and their horses showed that they had been kept at a speedy gait for some distance.

"The don and his imps—masks don't fool me a little bit," muttered the youth.

A moment more and they had halted, while one called out:

"Oh, Wild Kid, did you see two men pass along this trail?"

"Yes, Don Trego. One was Panama, and the other was a large, splendid-looking man."

"You call me don?"

"Yes, for I'm on to you, and Juan and the two coppers. Masks don't go with me, Don Trego, and I didn't know you sported them. Thought only bad men did that."

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"We had a purpose for wearing them, for that fine-looking man you speak of has killed two men at my ranch and has Panama a prisoner."

"Pan did look tied up."

"How far ahead of us are they, Kid?"

"Well, I should say too far for you to catch them, for it's been over an hour since I met them, and the big man was pushing his hoofs for all they were worth."

"*Caramba!*" ejaculated the don, and Juan echoed the oath, while Wild Kid said innocently:

"If it is so important for you to overtake him, don, I'll lend you my pony, for he's fresh, and your horse could never do it."

"We took the wrong trail, and had to cross from the other one to this, and have pushed our horses too hard. Juan, we must give it up, for they'd reach El Monte before we could head them off. But you, Wild Kid, can do something for me if you will," said the don.

"You bet I will, for I have not forgotten the good suppers the señora gave me when I stopped at your ranch, don."

"All right. Come when you will, for you are welcome. In fact, Wild Kid, I'm anxious to have a talk with you some time, for there is money in it for both of us."

"Don't forget me in the deal, don. But what can I do for you now?"

"Go on to El Monte and tell Brimstone Bill that Buffalo Bill, the great scout of the Northwest, is the man that has Panama a prisoner, and that he is not Fred Williams, as he calls himself."

"Gee! but I'd like to see Buffalo Bill!" cried the boy, with enthusiasm.

"You did see him, for he was the one you met with Panama."

"But how was I to know it then?"

"Well, you'll see him at El Monte, and you tell Brimstone Bill that I sent you to say that Buffalo Bill stopped at my ranch last night, as did Panama, Mustang Matt, and Half-breed José.

"They had a row of some kind to settle, and Buffalo Bill killed Matt and José, and took Panama a prisoner.

"Of course, as I knew Buffalo Bill was a government officer, I could do nothing, but you tell Brimstone Bill who he is, and that he is in this country for scalps, but to keep it dark, for if they don't know who he is they won't know him as an officer of the army, and so if Fred Williams gets killed it will be his own fault for not saying who he was.

"Do you understand, Kid?"

"You bet I do, and I'll tell Bill."

"All right; but remember you tell no one else but Brimstone Bill that I sent you."

"No one else but Bill, don't?"

"Well, if you have any big news to report come out to-morrow or next day to the Mission Ranch and let me hear it, for you will not forget it."

"You bet I won't."

Wheeling his pony, Wild Kid dashed back on the trail in a sweeping gallop.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE THREAT.

Wild Kid's expression would not have pleased the don, could he have seen it, as he rode back on the trail.

The youth kept up his rapid pace as long as he was in sight of the don and those with him, and then drew rein, going at a walk.

When he reached the hills he halted and waited. He wished to see if the don would change his mind and go on to El Monte himself, or send Juan. But he soon felt convinced that he had left the mission wholly in his hands. Then he mounted and rode slowly away to the right, muttering to himself:

"Well, it's about time I had something to eat, for yesterday's dinner was my last wrestle with grub.

"Now I'm glad I headed that gang off, for they'd have seen that the trail they were on led to the fort and guessed why, and maybe they could have headed Buffalo Bill off somewhere by hard riding, knowing the country as they do.

"Now I'll go to Ranch Lookout and tell Rico and Sable just what has happened, and when I've made up for lost time in eating, I'll mount Skip and make for El Monte to tell Brimstone Bill. Oh, yes; I'll tell him all the don told me, but in my own way, and I know a Bill I'll tell in the right way."

With this he urged his pony into a canter and kept him at it mile after mile.

At last he turned from the prairie toward a wooded ridge, and just after noon came upon a little house nestling away under a cliff that ended abruptly at the prairie that spread out like the ocean from its base.

There was a log cabin of two rooms, stoutly built, and with a stockade corral behind it.

Along the front of the house was a brush shelter forming a piazza, and from there the country around could be seen from three sides for miles.

On the prairie the other side of the ridge were a herd of a couple of hundred cattle feeding and two dozen or more ponies.

Lying before the door of the cabin was a huge dog, that arose as the youth rode up, while upon the cliff, fifty feet above the little home, was a match for the savage brute below.

The latter seemed to be on watch, for he kept his eyes continually roving around the country, and though the youth had come along the base of the range, the point of lookout had enabled him to see him when a long distance off.

"Ho, Catchem, where are Rico and Sable?" said Wild Kid, as he dismounted at the corral gate.

But as he spoke a dark-faced, slender youth came from behind the cabin and called out, with a slight Spanish accent to his English:

"Ho, Kid, I'm awful glad to see you, for we were getting anxious about you.

"Watch signaled you coming half an hour ago, and Sable will soon have dinner ready."

"I'm glad, Rico, for I have had nothing since I cooked my own dinner in the mountains yesterday, but I won't complain, for I'm loaded to the muzzle with news," and Wild Kid turned his horse loose as he spoke, while the young Mexican, who had a handsome face, that only his black mustache kept from being effeminate, said:

"And I have news for you, for Major Brasher, Delmar, and half a dozen cowboys, from the latter's ranch were here after you this morning."

"What did they want with me, Rico?" quietly asked the youth.

"They said that you had put up a game to pretend to

kidnap Miss Brasher, so you might gain favor by a supposed rescue, and pretending to kill one of the men, while the other two escaped."

"Is that the latest lie against me, Rico?" asked the youth, while a bitter smile crossed his face.

"Yes, and they came after you, they said, to take you to El Monte and have the vigilantes take you in charge."

"I'm going to El Monte to-night, so they can find me if I'm wanted, Rico."

"I told them that you were away, had gone to Hacienda del Norte day before yesterday, with some ponies to sell, and should have been back last night; but that if you had met the Señorita Brasher and rescued her from kidnapers, it was no sham rescue, as I would vouch for."

"What did they say then?"

"That they wanted you to know they were aware of your trick to win favor with the señorita and her father, and they would drop the matter with a warning that you would get into trouble if you ever went near Idlerest Ranch, or spoke to her again.

"It was Doctor Delmar who did all the talking and threatening."

"I thought so; but I should have thought the dead man, El Monte Ned, would prove that it was no sham rescue."

"Doc Delmar said no one was killed, that he and his men went to the scene and nobody was there, and that the man fell at your fire, pretending to be shot, while, of course, he said that I was in it with you, and our two ranch pards, Merton Calder and Ham Goldsby."

"Rico, I'll tell you now that Texas is not large enough for that Duke Delmar and me to live in. One of us must quit," said Wild Kid, with deep feeling.

CHAPTER XLIX.

EL MONTE AND ITS PEOPLE.

Ere more was said between Wild Kid and the young Mexican, a negro youth came from behind the cabin, whence an odor of broiling venison and coffee had been wafted for some time.

The negro was of stout build, had an intensely black face, teeth as white as milk, and large, expressive eyes. He seemed fond of dress, for he wore a Mexican jacket, buckskin leggings stuck in top-boots, and a sombrero embroidered in silver and with a stuffed rattlesnake around it as a cord.

"Lor', Mars' Kid, I mor'n glad to see you back, for we was beginnin' ter worry 'bout yer. But dinner is all ready, and I guesses you is hungry, so come right along, for I knows señor is ready, and I allers is."

Wild Kid grasped the hand of the negro boy and they went to a sheltered nook behind the cabin and under the cliff, where a fire burned, and a rude table and seats were set beneath a shelter.

Wild Kid needed no urging to eat, and the appetite he had brought with him was a surprise to both Rico Sanchez and Sable.

But provisions were plentiful in Lookout Ranch, and Sable was only too glad to see Wild Kid eat, helping him bountifully.

The story of the youth's adventures, from his returning from the Hacienda del Norte, and rescue of Marie Brasher, to his leaving the don and his party, whom he had turned back from the pursuit of Buffalo Bill, was all told to his Mexican and negro pards, the two listening with the deepest interest.

"Well, Kid, you have had a time of it, and I only wish I had been along, for I would so have liked to

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see Buffalo Bill, whom you have served so well, and of whom I have heard so much."

"You'll see him before long, Rico, for he will come by here with me day after to-morrow, when I meet him."

"But do you really intend to go to El Monte to-night, Kid?"

"Yes."

"Better not, Mars' Kid, for I recomember what dem fellers is there—I doesn't like 'em a little tiny bit, and they don't like you."

"That's all right, Sable, but I wish to go particularly, to get on the trail of certain things I have in mind, and which I'll call on all of you to help me in when I am ready to act."

"I had better go to El Monte with you, Kid."

"No, Rico, it will be best for me to go alone, especially as I bear a message from Don Trego to Brimstone Bill, and I'll start pretty soon."

Ten minutes after, mounted upon a fresh pony, and one equally as good as Scamp, he started off on his ride of twenty-five miles to El Monte, the settlement made up of a few stores, a couple of blacksmith and wagon-repair shops, a dozen drinking and gambling saloons, a combined schoolhouse, courtroom, church, and public hall, which had been the scene of deadly encounters, with a score of log-cabin houses and an alleged hotel.

The regular dwellers in El Monte numbered some three hundred souls, the "floating population," of wagon-train people, emigrants passing through, ranchers and cowboys, with a mingling of itinerant gamblers and fugitives from justice more than doubling the number of those who were proud to call themselves El Monteites.

With half a hundred ranches within a radius of as many miles, and employing from two to twenty cow-

boys each, El Monte had a large number to draw upon in the way of frequenters of its saloons, and they were wont to make things lively there at times, and keep the place "on the jump," so to speak, from noon until daybreak.

It was Wild Kid's wish to reach El Monte after nightfall. He considered it safer, as just then he was anxious to avoid trouble. He was never before afraid to go there at any time, for Wild Kid was not one to avoid danger, and he had made his mark even in such a community as that of El Monte.

Who the boy was no one there knew, and he often said that he did not himself know; that he was a product of the prairie, like a weed, and just grew, but whether he told the truth in this nobody could say. He had been known in El Monte for four years, stopping there with a number of people from a wagon train that had been terribly cut up in a fight with Indians.

The boy wrote a good hand, was bright, quiet, and got work in the hotel as clerk, being cashier of a gambling saloon at night.

His first display of "border talent" had been when a couple of roughs tried to rob him, and he shot one dead and held the other up, the vigilantes hanging him an hour after.

Then he had distinguished himself by taking the part of Sable, the negro boy, whom some desperadoes were torturing for fun, and in the stand-up fight that followed the boy won the admiration of all by his nerve and deadly aim.

On another occasion he took sides with two youths, Merton Calder and Ham Goldsby, who had come to Texas to seek a fortune, and he helped them out of a very ugly scrape, as afterward he aided Henrico Sanchez, whom he called Rico.

Giving up his clerkship, he had gone off beyond the

border of the settlement proper and started a ranch, with Rico Sanchez and the negro Sable as his pards, and he had prospered.

Thrice had he warned the settlement of a raid by the Renegades of the Rio Grande, and again saved the ranches from being surprised by Indians, for he was constantly on the trail, being a devoted hunter of large game.

Ever ready with his revolver if imposed on, a sure winner if he gambled, utterly fearless, suspected of many crimes he was guiltless of, Wild Kid gained the name of a young terror and desperado, and those allied with him, and who called themselves Boy Ranchers, were regarded by many as no more than a band of young outlaws.

It was just as dark had set in that the Boy Rancher saw the lights of El Monte loom up ahead, and soon after he rode into the corral of the Lone Star Hotel.

CHAPTER L.

AT GOLD MINE SALOON.

El Monte was in full blast when Wild Kid rode into the corral of the Lone Star Hotel, the latter being a rambling structure of adobe, which at one time in the dim past had been a mission house.

About it was a thick growth of timber, evidently planted by the good padres of generations before, and scattered along the one street, or trail, that ran through the place were the stores, saloons, and cabin homes of the citizens.

Off on the prairie on either side were the stockade corrals where horses and cattle were kept for sale, and upon the stream that ran around the hill or mount, upon which the settlement was located, and from which it took its name, were the ruins of a fort built by the United States troops back in the fifties, and here was the camping ground of army and emigrant trains passing through.

The story had already been told in El Monte of the attempted kidnaping of Major Brasher's beautiful daughter, and her rescue by the Wild Kid, but following upon the news had quickly come the report that it was a fake affair gotten up by the Boy Rancher to win the girl's regard.

There were some who believed the report of a fake rescue, others who did not, for be the faults of the Wild Kid what they might, he was not one to seek cheap notoriety.

El Monte Ned, a rough citizen of the place, was said to have been killed by the boy, but yet if it was not true, the man did not show up, though his friends said he had gone northward with a large herd of cattle.

It was certain, however, that the body of the man

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said to have been killed could not be found, nor could his horse, while the two with him were not known.

What Marie said of the affair could not be learned, though Doctor Delmar asserted that Miss Brasher believed that the man who fell at Wild Kid's shot was playing possum, the others running off to carry out the boy's plot, to get the credit of a daring rescue.

It was while the affair was still being discussed in the "Gold Mine," the most popular gambling den in El Monte, that Wild Kid appeared, strolling into the crowded place in his free-and-easy way, and glancing about as though anxious to find some one.

"There's the fake hero now, doc," said a large man, with long, fiery-red hair and beard falling to his waist, who was standing by a table where two others were playing cards with a large pile of money up as the stakes.

One of these men was a Mexican who was said to be an army officer and very rich, and who often crossed the river to visit El Monte to gamble. He had a dark, refined face, and seemed to enjoy playing, which was a passion with him, though he almost invariably was a loser. He was known in El Monte as El Capitan, but at Major Brasher's ranch, where he visited when coming across upon Texan soil, he was called Captain Miguel Munoz, and, if Doctor Duke Delmar was not his rival, many thought that he would be the favorite suitor for the heiress' hand.

His companion now at the card table, and to whom the red-headed and bearded man had spoken when Wild Kid entered, was Doctor Delmar. He was one who might more readily be taken for a clergyman, for his handsome face was clean shaven, his hair clustered in short ringlets about his temples, he wore gold-rimmed eyeglasses and dressed in black broadcloth, well-polished top-boots, with silver spurs and a slouch hat.

His frock coat was open, however, and beneath it was a belt of arms, and he had more than once shown that he knew how to use them. He was a fine surgeon and physician, and generally popular, while he owned a large ranch and was rich, for he added to his income by being a most successful gambler.

Though rivals, the doctor and Captain Miguel Munoz were devoted friends.

Glancing up at Wild Kid when Brimstone Bill, the man with fiery-red hair and beard, attracted his attention to him, he said:

"I'll see him later. Now I'm playing for big money."

CHAPTER LI.

SHOT FOR SHOT.

Something of a hush fell upon the room as Wild Kid entered. All felt that he had made a mistake in coming there, for he would be accused of putting up a fake rescue, and he was not one to submit to ridicule.

Brimstone Bill was known as the friend of El Monte Ned, whom, it was said, Wild Kid had either killed or bribed to play possum for his sake, and the afore-said William had justly won the prefix of Brimstone to his name. He was the most dreaded man in the settlement, and one who was a dead shot and full of nerve.

When Wild Kid caught sight of him, he walked straight up to him and said in a low tone:

"I've got a message for you, Brimstone Bill."

The man had never liked the youth, and he now said with a sneer:

"From my friend Ned, whom you claim to have killed, I s'pose?"

"No; it is from your friends Mustang Matt and Half-breed José," was the cool reply, and the boy looked quickly from the face of Brimstone Bill to that of Doctor Delmar. He saw the start of the former and the quick look that Doctor Delmar gave, followed by a sign that no one else caught.

"All right, young feller, I takes mighty leetle stock in you, but if my pards has sent you to me I'll hear what yer has ter say."

"I don't ask you to take any stock in me, Brimstone Bill, and don't care for your love or hatred; but I was sent to you, and if you care to hear what I have to say you can follow me outside."

"I'll go over."

Another strange look passed between Brimstone Bill and Doctor Delmar, the latter urging the man to go, as Wild Kid interpreted it.

"Do not go, Señor Beel, for he weel you assassinate," called out Captain Miguel Munoz, in a tone that all heard, and a silence followed the words.

Instantly Wild Kid faced him, and said:

"El Capitan, none but a coward would give such an insult!"

The Mexican sprang to his feet, drawing a weapon as he did so, and, with a savage oath, upsetting the table and spilling the money, while the crowd scattered in all directions out of the line of fire.

Wild Kid did not move, and even at such a moment he seemed to see the ridiculous side of the affair in the men tumbling over each other, and laughed.

But, as the Mexican got to his feet, revolver in hand, Wild Kid had his weapon ready, and, seeing that the man intended to kill him, he touched the trigger a second in advance of his foe.

It was enough, for it saved his life, his shot striking the Mexican in the left side, while the latter's bullet cut through the rim of Wild Kid's hat.

Doctor Delmar caught the Mexican in his arms as he staggered back, and cried:

"You have done for him, boy! I'll see you later."

Again came the boy's reckless laugh, and then the words:

"So you said before, doc! No time like the present."

"Whatever Doctor Delmar would have done, a quickly whispered word from Brimstone Bill checked him, and he called for aid to carry the wounded Mexican to his room in the Lone Star Hotel.

Wild Kid had replaced his weapon, but stood his ground, until Brimstone Bill grasped him by the arm and whispered:

"Come with me, boy, or the vigilantes will hang yer up."

"No; the vigilantes may make mistakes now and then, but they don't hang a boy for killing a man who insulted him, and fought a fair, stand-up fight."

"He did start it, that's a fact. But yer wants ter see me, yer said?" Brimstone Bill seemed a trifle nervous.

As Wild Kid moved toward the door some one shouted out that he had only defended himself, and called for a cheer, and Brimstone Bill joined in the rousing shout that followed.

"Now, boy, what has yer from Mustang Matt and Half-breed José for me?" asked Brimstone Bill, as the two walked away out of earshot from any one near by.

"Don Trego sent me to tell you that they were both dead."

The man almost staggered under the blow, and cried, in a hoarse voice:

"What kilt 'em?"

"Buffalo Bill, the great scout of the Northwest," was the quiet response of the boy.

CHAPTER LII.

WILD KID LEARNS SOMETHING.

The words of the youth seemed to impress Brimstone Bill strangely, for he muttered to himself over and over:

"Dead! and Matt knew the secret only. I've been a fool, for El Monte Ned is dead!"

"Yes, Brimstone Bill, I killed El Monte Ned, as you know; but he was masked, as were also Matt and José, and all I saw were three men with their hands on Miss Brasher, so I acted just as you would have done if you had not then known how it all was, and was not in the secret of who they were, and supposed they were raiders from over the Rio Grande.

"But when I saw who El Monte Ned was, then I did not understand just what to do; after seeing Miss Brasher home, I came back to take their trail, thinking from all I knew, they had gone to the Mission Ranch.

"And they had, and Panama, too, and they found there Buffalo Bill, and he was on his way to El Monte."

"Coming here?" cried Brimstone Bill, in alarm.

"Yes," and in the same manner, feeling his way for points and trying to trap Brimstone Bill, Wild Kid continued:

"They planned—Panama, Matt, and José—to down Buffalo Bill, whom they had not seen, but they knew he was there. You see, Panama, who had been a soldier in the Northwest, recognized him, and they planned to catch him asleep; but he didn't sleep, and saw them coming, so killed Matt and José, and took Panama alive."

"The deuce he did!"

"I would not believe any man alive, not even Buffalo

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Bill, could get the best of those three men." In his excitement Brimstone Bill had dropped his dialect and incorrect way of speaking.

"Well, he did, and he's gone off with Panama to the fort."

"Can he not be headed?"

"No; for I tracked him, and he's there now."

"And he'll come back with a troop of cavalry to back him?"

"No, I guess not, for, you see, he goes as Fred Williams, and was only recognized by Panama. He has come here on some secret service, and will come into El Monte alone, you bet!"

"Then he goes under right here, for we can fix it."

"You see, I was with the don, Juan and the peons on his trail, and the don sent me on to tell you.

"But Major Brasher and Doc Delmar were hunting me, so I had to keep in hiding and was late; but I determined to put you on your guard against Buffalo Bill, as the don asked me to do, so I braved trouble with the doc and came here to-night, and yet I got into it with both feet, for I could not let Captain Munoz say what he did to me, and he did not know I was one of you, I guess, or Doc Delmar, either, and he says he's got to settle with me after a while."

"No, he won't, for I'll go right in and have a talk with him, and tell him you come from the don, who vouches for you."

"I guess the doc would like to have a talk with you, for we want you, boy, and we didn't just know how to take you and your gang."

"What made the doc say that was a fake rescue of Miss Brasher, and cart El Monte's body off to prove it?"

"Had to, Wild Kid, had to; but the doc didn't think you could be trusted then, you see."

"Well, I can."

"I should think so; but I'll go in and see Doc Delmar and tell him the news you bring, for he knows Buffalo Bill, as I do, and we don't want to see him until we know just what to do."

"Well, you just tell Doc Delmar, if he's got anything against me, I'm in the Gold Mine Saloon and we can have it out; but I'm not going to let him or any other man put me up for a fool."

"You bet you won't, boy; but I'll fix it, and I guess the doc will want to see you. But Lordy! how you did scatter the money in yonder, and call on El Capitan to hand you his chips—for I guess he's cashed 'em in."

"But I'll see the doc, but don't get into another row, for we need you, Wild Kid."

"All right."

While Brimstone Bill hastened to the Lone Star, Wild Kid sauntered into the Gold Mine, where all was in full swing once more, as a tragedy in their midst made but little impression on the men gathered there.

"I guess I've learned something, and I'm on the trail to learn more," muttered Wild Kid as he entered the saloon, where he was greeted with a shout by some of his admirers and a scowl by those who did not like him.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE DYING MEXICAN.

Refusing a score of invitations to "take something," for Wild Kid never drank anything, in spite of his wild life, he walked up to a table where a half dozen men were gambling heavily, and took a seat that gave him equal command of the two doors, in case Doctor Delmar should return to carry out his threat to "see him later."

He had not been there very long before Brimstone Bill entered hastily, and called out:

"Here, boy pard, I want you. No, gents, this ain't no fight, but business, for a dying man has got something to say to the Wild Kid."

The crowd seemed disappointed, while Wild Kid walked quickly to the door, and joined Brimstone Bill, who said:

"I seen Doc Delmar, and it's all right. He wants to talk with you later, Kid; but just now El Capitan is crowdin' along on his last trail, and he has got something to say ter yer, he says, and there's no time ter lose. Yer see, I thought he wanted ter kill yer, but he ain't got er weapon, and it's something he wants ter git off his mind, so as ter let him lie easy in ther grave."

Brimstone Bill had hastened Wild Kid along to the room where El Capitan had been taken, and there lay the dying Mexican upon a cot. Doctor Duke Delmar, the landlord and his wife, by his side.

As the two entered the room, Brimstone Bill called out cheerily:

"Hold on, El Capitan, he's here."

The Mexican muttered a prayer in Spanish, and Doctor Delmar stepped forward, and extending his hand said in a low tone:

"It's all right between us, Wild Kid; we are pardos."
"If you say so," was Wild Kid's response, and the next instant he stood by the man whom his bullet had brought down.

The pallor of death was already creeping over the face of Miguel Munoz, and he said, as he raised his hand with an effort:

"I brought it upon myself, Wild Kid, and I forgive you, as I hope you will forgive me, for I meant to kill you—I had a reason more than others knew."

"Don't mention it, señor, for I never hold ill will—you played your card, and I held a winning hand."

"What can I do for you?"

"I wish to be alone with you."

Doctor Delmar led all from the room, and, seated by the cot, the youth heard what the Mexican had to tell.

It was a long story of crime, of a man born to riches and good name, who had gone wrong because he lost the woman he had loved, and who had sought to kill his rival, an American officer, who married the fair Mexican, who had discarded him, her cousin, Miguel Munoz.

Dismissed from the army, he had gone from bad to worse, until he had become an outlaw, and was then chief of the Mexican band of the Renegades of the Rio Grande.

But he had sought revenge upon his rival through his son, who had been kidnaped in youth, discovered after years to find his mother dead and to be told also that his American father had cruelly deserted his Mexican wife.

But Miguel Munoz had not then ended his revenge, for the boy, taking his mother's name, had been falsely accused of the crime of which he—Munoz—was guilty, and he had been forced to fly from Mexico.

That boy was then with Wild Kid, known as Hen-

rico Sanchez, and the confession of Miguel Munoz, with the proofs he would give Wild Kid, would enable the young man to return to Mexico and claim his just inheritance.

But there was more to tell, and that was that the American officer had not deserted his Mexican wife, but had been led to believe that she had deserted him, all through the plotting of Miguel Munoz, and that he had learned of her death and soon after married an American lady.

But Miguel Munoz still dogged him with his revenge, for the two children of the American officer by his second marriage had been kidnaped from a fort on the Rio Grande, and the sorrowing parents had never been able to find them since, nor could Munoz give any clew to them or their fate.

Such was the confession of the dying Mexican, and Wild Kid promised that he would seek the American officer, then a colonel in the United States army, and stationed in the Northwest, and place before him the papers and proofs of the story told, and also let Henrico Sanchez know of the fortune in store for him.

Calling Doctor Delmar and the others into the room, Wild Kid resumed his seat by the dying man, and there remained until the spark of life had fluttered away into boundless space.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE MEETING.

If Wild Kid was impressed by the remarkable scene through which he had passed with the man he had killed, his face did not show it.

There rested upon his countenance the same determined, reckless, half-bitter look natural to him, and he turned from the dead Mexican to have a talk with Doctor Delmar.

With the latter he felt his way as cleverly as he had with Brimstone Bill, and from what he got out of the latter, then from the dying Mexican, and last from Doctor Delmar, he felt that he had material enough to act upon, and act he would. He first expressed his determination to return to the don, according to promise, and tell what he had done, as requested, and bear back the news of what the doctor and Brimstone Bill intended to do as regards Buffalo Bill's coming to El Monte.

A long talk was held, and then Doctor Delmar said:

"Tell the don of the death of Munoz and how the killing of El Monte Ned, Mustang Matt, and Half-breed José, and the capture of Panama cut us down to himself, Juan, and the peons at the old mission, Brimstone Bill—four men here and myself, in El Monte, and you, Wild Kid, for I do not suppose we can count on Sanchez, now he is an heir, and there is no time for you to get Calder and Goldsby to help us.

"But Brimstone and his men will go with me to head off Buffalo Bill on his return from the fort, and we will ambush him in Black Rock Cañon.

"If we miss him, why, we will come on to El Monte, and the don, and Juan, and you must meet us here two nights hence, and we'll show that the great scout can be killed as easily as any other man.

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"Now, you will start back to-night, of course?"

"Yes, Doc Delmar, at once; and if Rico Sanchez does not get the big head when he hears of his fortune, he'll come with me, ready for business. If you don't down Buffalo Bill on the trail at Black Rock, why, it can be done in El Monte."

"It must be, for that man knows enough to hang half of the men in El Monte," was the emphatic reply.

Half an hour after, having had a midnight supper, and with his pony well rested, Wild Kid was dashing along directly for his ranch.

He arrived before dawn, his advent being signaled by the barking of the two dogs. What he had to say was the cause of three horsemen dashing away from Lookout Ranch in the early gray of dawn, leaving the dogs only in charge, for the three were Wild Kid, Henrico Sanchez, and Sable.

There was a led horse along, a splendid animal, who carried not even a saddle.

The ride was a hard one, no halt being made, and several hours after sunrise they had ridden twenty-five miles and drew rein at a secluded spot on the trail from Fort Rio to El Monte.

There the horses were stripped of their saddles, as soon as Wild Kid had closely examined the trail, and the party partook of a cold breakfast.

Hardly had they finished when hoof falls were heard, and soon after a horseman appeared in sight, riding at a canter. It was Buffalo Bill. He was ready to fight the instant he caught sight of the three youths, but, recognizing Wild Kid, he came on.

"I'm behind time, Kid, for I was delayed by a brush with redskins a few miles back; but this is not where you were to meet me?"

"It's a better place, as six men are lying in ambush for you at Black Rock Cañon, half a dozen miles ahead.

"But I've got lots to tell you, as soon as you know that this is my Mexican pard, Henrico Sanchez, and this is Sable, the boss of all the darkies I ever crossed the trail of. We are all here to fight it out with you, if you say the word, or to do just as you think best, for we are in it to stay."

Buffalo Bill smiled, shook hands with the young Mexican and Sable, and said:

"I think it is for you to say, Kid, from all I have thus far seen of you. Now, what is the racket? Spit it out and I'll know what to do."

CHAPTER LV.

THE FIGHT TO THE FINISH.

Buffalo Bill listened attentively to the whole story Wild Kid had to tell, of his meeting with Don Trego and his party, and how he had played his cards; of the visit to his ranch and ride to El Monte; of the duel with Captain Miguel Munoz, the dying confession, and his talk with Brimstone Bill and Doctor Delmar, ending with:

"Now I told you, Chief Cody, not to trust Doctor Delmar, and I meant it, for I've long had an idea he was playing a double game, though I could not spot him.

"The major is not bad, I think, but the doc has a pull on him of some kind, to make him do as he says.

"Doctor Delmar, in my opinion, is chief of the American band of Renegades of the Rio Grande, with Brimstone Bill as his right-hand man, Don Trego and his gang as allies, and four men in El Monte as members, Panama being secured, and El Monte Ned, Mustang Matt, and Half-breed José having passed in their chips.

"The doc, Brimstone Bill, and four others are laying for you, and if they miss you the don and his gang are to meet them in El Monte and do you up there, so my idea is that you go home with us, send Sable here on this led horse to the fort for a troop to come to El Monte, arriving at a certain time. We will all be on hand to go in with them and bag the game."

"Right you are, and I'll write a note at once for Sable to carry to Colonel Gibbons, at Fort Rio; then we'll meet the troop and just take El Monte in tomorrow night."

The note was written, Sable saddled up the led

horse, and with his own following for a change, started with all speed for Fort Rio.

After his departure the scout and his two boy backers mounted, and under the guidance of Wild Kid they started for Lookout Ranch.

Leaving the hills, they were crossing the prairie, when suddenly they saw a party of horsemen dash over a rise.

Both parties halted, and Wild Kid said coolly:

"It's all up, for it's Doc Delmar and his gang, six of them, and they see us."

"They were late in getting into Black Rock, which lies four miles west of them."

"Then it's a fight at two to one, boys—or is it a race?" asked Buffalo Bill, with a smile.

"I'd rather fight than run any day," Wild Kid remarked.

"I've fought odds all my life, chief," said Henrico Sanchez.

"Well, then, young pards, we'll make forts of our horses and fight it out. Here they come!"

With a word and a touch on the legs, Buffalo Bill's horse dropped down flat on the prairie. Cody had left his pack animal at Fort Rio, as his base of operations.

The ponies of the two Boy Ranchers obeyed the command of their riders, and lay down also, and the three dropped behind the horses, resting their rifles over their saddles, for the six men were coming rapidly forward now, having recognized Buffalo Bill, and also that, as they meant to fight, Wild Kid had trapped them.

Buffalo Bill was upon the right, Henrico Sanchez next to him, and Wild Kid on the left, as they waited their coming foes, two to one against them.

The attacking party began to fire at long range,

their rifles, however, doing no damage, but when Buffalo Bill leveled his weapon he said quietly:

"I'll reduce the majority, boys."

With the crack of his rifle Brimstone Bill fell from his saddle, and as the party, finding the superior range of the scout's weapon, turned to fly, a second shot brought down Doctor Delmar's horse, the death-stricken animal rearing, and falling backward upon his rider.

"Up, Boy Ranchers, and at them! It is our time to strike now!" cried Buffalo Bill, as he saw that the doctor did not rise.

Even as he uttered the words there came a shout in their rear, and there the three beheld Sable, guiding a troop of cavalry.

Instantly the troop deployed into a long line, and the four outlaws found themselves hemmed in; but, trying to break through, were at once shot down.

"Colonel Gibbons was anxious about you, Cody, so sent me with my troop to follow you to El Monte, and, meeting your black courier, as your letter was open, I read it, as he led us right back on your trail," explained Captain Plummer, as he met Buffalo Bill.

"You were in time to catch the whole outfit here, sir, for I killed one, and Doctor Delmar is badly hurt by his horse falling upon him, I see; but these, my Boy Ranchers, will guide you to Don Trego's Mission Ranch, where four more of the outlaws await capture," said Buffalo Bill.

Doctor Duke Delmar was found to be mortally hurt, but he would utter no word other than curses upon Wild Kid, who appeared not to heed them in the least.

An hour after he had been crushed by the fall of his horse he died, and with the other dead man was taken on to El Monte, while Captain Plummer, led by

Wild Kid and Henrico Sanchez, and accompanied by Buffalo Bill and a dozen soldiers, went on to the Mission Ranch, where the don, finding the game was up, shot himself.

Juan, being absent with one of the peons, escaped, and the other peon was killed, while the señora, professing ignorance of her husband's and son's evil life, declared she would remain still at the ranch with the Indian woman.

CHAPTER LVI.

CONCLUSION.

The soldiers camped that night at the Mission Ranch, and, for the sake of the woman, the don was decently buried, Buffalo Bill promising to send out from El Monte a couple of cowboys to care for the cattle and place.

On the way to El Monte they halted at Lookout Ranch, and saw how the Boy Ranchers lived, Sable exerting himself to set before the party a splendid dinner.

From there the troopers were sent on into El Monte, while Captain Plummer, Buffalo Bill, Wild Kid, and Henrico Sanchez started for the ranch of Doctor Delmar.

That the doctor was all that was bad—that he was leading a double life, they had ample proof of from what Wild Kid knew, but no one at his home seemed to be aware that he was other than he professed to be.

The home was a comfortable one, well stocked, and he had there everything to make him contented with life if he had not possessed a heart of evil.

Among his papers were found documents which proved that he had always led a wild and sinful life, and had fled from his boyhood home on account of forgery and other crimes, though he had graduated in medicine high in his class, and would have made an honored name for himself but for the streak of bad he had in his nature.

Enough was also discovered from his papers to show that the hold he held upon Major Brasher was one of fear. The major had killed a man long years before, under circumstances of justifiable homicide, but with only one person to prove this.

That one was the father of Duke Delmar, and, hating the major, for some cause, he allowed him to become a fugitive.

The elder Delmar's papers fell into the son's hands, and thus Duke Delmar held the secret, and thus compelled the major to consent to his attentions to his daughter, the beautiful Marie.

That the major knew Doctor Delmar as he really was, all felt sure was not the case; particularly was Wild Kid convinced of this fact.

Captain Plummer and Buffalo Bill were glad to learn these facts, as Major Brasher had once been an honored officer of the army.

From the Delmar ranch they rode over to Idlerest, Wild Kid acting as guide.

It was a surprise to Major Brasher, to his wife and daughter, when they saw Wild Kid coming to the ranch, accompanied by the splendid-looking scout and an army officer. They were in ignorance of the happenings of the past forty-eight hours, and the major looked suspiciously at Wild Kid, while both Mrs. Brasher and Marie stepped forward and greeted him warmly.

Nothing abashed, Wild Kid did the "introduction act," as he called it, and presented Captain Plummer and Buffalo Bill to the major and the ladies.

Buffalo Bill was well known to all by name, while Captain Plummer was known to be a distinguished young officer at Fort Rio, so they received a warm welcome.

It fell upon Captain Plummer to tell of the late happenings, and all noticed the start of pleasure Major Brasher gave as he was informed of the death of Doctor Delmar.

As for Marie, she did not change countenance—a proof that she was not in love with the wicked man.

That it was Doctor Delmar who had planned the

kidnaping of Marie, to force her into a secret marriage with him, came out, and also that the proofs existed of the major's having killed the man he had slain purely in self-defense.

Then it was Buffalo Bill's time to say a word, and he reported that he had letters to the major and also to Doctor Delmar—that he had come to Texas upon a double mission, one being to track certain deserters from the army guilty of other crimes, and that in Panama, Brimstone Bill, and Mustang Matt he had found the men he sought.

His other mission was to look up the children of Captain Poisal, stolen in their younger years. One of them he was sure he had found, from all he could learn of him and his past, in the waif of the prairies, known as Wild Kid, the Texan Terror. The girl he had yet to discover.

With a glance at his wife, Major Brasher then spoke:

"I must tell the truth, sir, for the daughter of Captain Poisal is before you, in this young lady, supposed to be our own child. We bought her from a Mexican woman when she was a very little girl. She had a little brother, as we then knew, but we took only the girl, and now a resemblance that has often struck us is explained, for Wild Kid, there, is Marie's brother, beyond a doubt."

It would be hard to tell of what followed, all being excited save Wild Kid, who presently remarked:

"If Captain Poisal was Marie's and my father, then Rico is our half brother, for his father bore the same name and was first married to a Mexican lady, Señorita Rita Sanchez, as Captain Miguel Munoz told me in his dying confession."

It was not hard to induce the party to remain all night at Idlerest Ranch, and a very pleasant evening was spent, the sister and two brothers, so strangely

met, getting acquainted, while handsome and young Captain Plummer was congratulating himself that the Boy Ranchers were really the brothers of the beautiful Marie.

The next morning the party of men all rode to El Monte, and the story of the doctor's double life and the fate of the Renegades of the Rio Grande became known.

El Monte at once put on an air of virtue, and, when the troop, under Captain Plummer, started for the fort, there was talk of sending for a parson to come and do missionary work there.

As Henrico Sanchez was in no hurry to claim his fortune, he consented to return to the Northwest with Buffalo Bill and Wild Kid, and the three set off together one fine morning.

There at the fort, where Buffalo Bill was chief of scouts, the boys found their father and he was, in truth, very much pleased to hear Cody's good story of them, and said, upon their return, he would go with them to Texas.

This he did, and the meeting between father and daughter was, as we may well infer, an affecting one, and it was decided, as the colonel was a man of ample means, that Marie should remain at Idlecree Ranch until he had gone East and found a home for them all, as he intended to retire from the service and enjoy his later years in the society of the children from which a cruel fate had so long kept him apart.

While he went East, Kid Poisal, junior, as we must now call Wild Kid, and Henrico Poisal went to Mexico together, where the latter received his inheritance without a word being raised against it.

So it was that a year after the meeting of Buffalo Bill and his Boy Ranchers, the scout again crossed their trail, this time in the elegant home of Colonel Poisal, to which the great scout had been invited as a

special guest for an especial occasion—which was the marriage of Marie to Captain Plummer. Previous to this event, in the fort on the Western plains, Jane Turpin had become the wife of Lieutenant Brian Vald, at the same time that Mona Borden was wedded to a handsome young aide on her father's staff; and Buffalo Bill sent, as wedding gifts, a valuable lot of border souvenirs to each bride, with best wishes for all happiness through life.

THE END.

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To be published in February, 1925.

- 39—Ted Strong's Treasure Cave.....By Edward C. Taylor

To be published in March, 1925.

- 40—Ted Strong's Vanishing Island.....By Edward C. Taylor

To be published in April, 1925.

- 41—Ted Strong's Motor Car.....By Edward C. Taylor

To be published in May, 1925.

- 42—Ted Strong in Montana.....By Edward C. Taylor

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