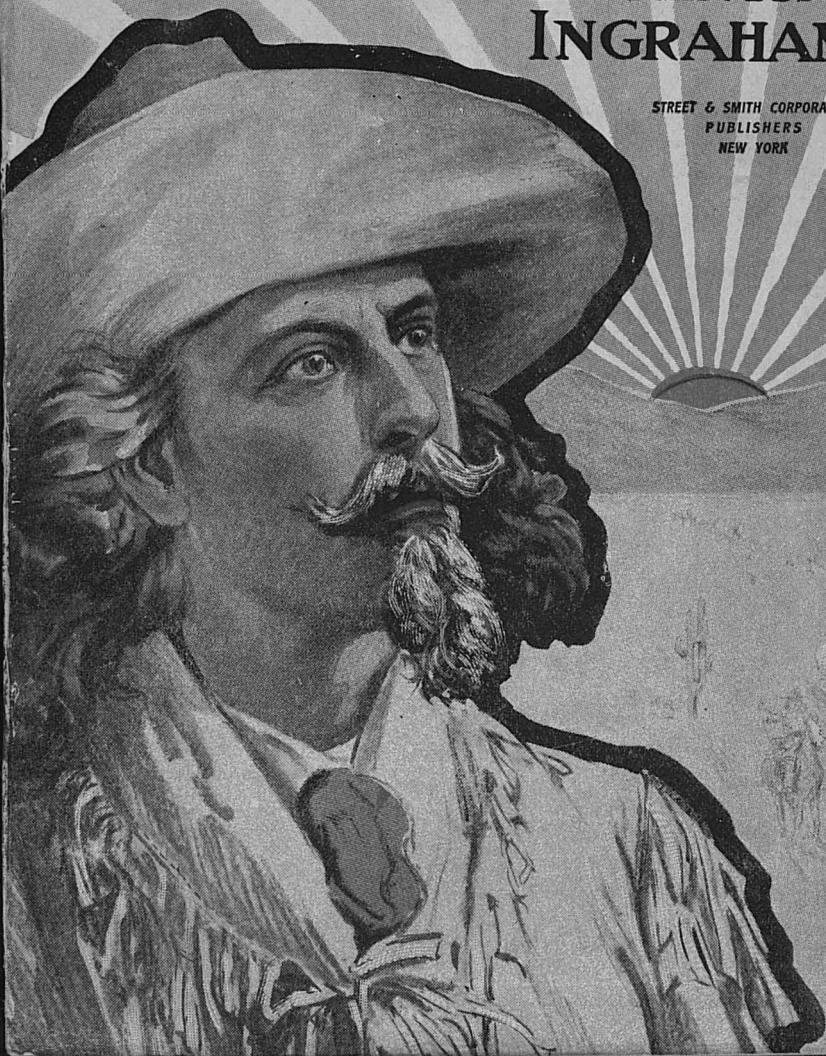


BUFFALO BILL BORDER STORIES No.21

# BUFFALO BILL'S DEATH TRAIL

BY COL. PRENTISS  
INGRAHAM

STREET & SMITH CORPORATION  
PUBLISHERS  
NEW YORK



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In order that there may be no confusion, we desire to say that the books listed below will be issued during the respective months in New York City and vicinity. They may not reach the readers at a distance promptly, on account of delays in transportation.

To Be Published in July, 1923.

- 165—Buffalo Bill's Yellow Guardian. By Col. Prentiss Ingraham.  
166—Buffalo Bill's Double "B" Brand, By Col. Prentiss Ingraham.

To Be Published in August, 1923.

- 167—Buffalo Bill's Dangerous Duty, By Col. Prentiss Ingraham  
168—Buffalo Bill and the Talking Statue,  
By Col. Prentiss Ingraham



### BUFFALO BILL BORDER STORIES

To Be Published in September, 1923.

- 169—Buffalo Bill Between Two Fires,  
By Col. Prentiss Ingraham  
170—Buffalo Bill and the Giant Apache,  
By Col. Prentiss Ingraham

To Be Published in October, 1923.

- 171—Buffalo Bill's Best Bet.....By Col. Prentiss Ingraham  
172—Buffalo Bill's Blockhouse Siege,  
By Col. Prentiss Ingraham  
173—Buffalo Bill's Fight for Right,  
By Col. Prentiss Ingraham

To Be Published in November, 1923.

- 174—Buffalo Bill's Sad Tidings.....By Col. Prentiss Ingraham  
175—Buffalo Bill and "Lucky" Benson,  
By Col. Prentiss Ingraham

To Be Published in December, 1923.

- 176—Buffalo Bill Among the Sioux,  
By Col. Prentiss Ingraham  
177—Buffalo Bill's Mystery Box.....By Col. Prentiss Ingraham

## THE WEST

Never, in the history of publishing, have there been so many stories of the West published in book and serial form. These books are even reprinted in England to be read there just as eagerly as they are sought after here.

Some of the best Western stories ever written are listed in Buffalo Bill Border Stories a list of which will be found on the pages immediately preceding this.

# Buffalo Bill's Death Trail;

OR,

## The Scout's Gambler Foe

BY

**Col. Prentiss Ingraham**

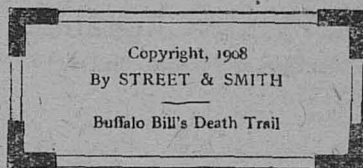
Author of "Buffalo Bill"



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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 DEATH-TRAIL.

### CHAPTER I.

#### A MIDNIGHT ENCOUNTER.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Buffalo Bill, stumbling over something on the walk and catching his footing just in time to save himself a bad fall. "For a city street, this beats any cañon I ever struck in the mountains. And black—why, it's as black as a pocket. I thought they had street-lamps in a town of this size. Ah, there's one! It's about as brilliant as a tallow dip."

Buffalo Bill was making his way from a train, on which he had just arrived, to a second-rate hotel known as the Plympton House. Whenever he struck a city, it was not the habit of the king of scouts to put up at a second-rate hotel, but old Nick Nomad was lodged at the Plympton House, and the scout had come to Durango to talk with his trapper pard.

The hour was hard upon midnight—too late, it seemed, for any sort of a vehicle to meet an incoming train and offer transportation to arriving passengers.

Only two passengers had left the train. One was the scout, and the other a man whom he had only seen dimly.

The stranger had started briskly off into the gloom, and, as he appeared to be going in the direction the scout was to take, the latter followed.



For perhaps two blocks, Buffalo Bill's keen ear kept tab on the footfalls of the man ahead. The sky was heavily overcast, a fitful wind was soughing through the open spaces, and the kerosene street-lamps had either been blown out, or had not been lighted at all.

The good people of Durango, the scout supposed, were all in bed. He met no one in the dark streets he traversed, and the only sounds of life to reach him were the *thump thump* of shoes on the walk ahead of him.

After covering two blocks, the footfalls ahead were suddenly blotted out. Buffalo Bill at first supposed they had been drowned in the noise of his own stumbling progress; but, as he paused after saving himself from a fall over a broken and displaced board of the walk, his ears assured him that the man had either come to a halt himself, or else that he had turned down another street, or gone into one of the houses that lined the way.

The feeble light which the scout saw on the corner ahead of him was like a guiding beacon, and he laid his course toward it.

That was not the first time Buffalo Bill had been in Durango. Aided by the light, he felt that he would be able to get his bearings and head for the Plympton House on the shortest tack.

With his eyes on the flickering gleam, which was tossed about by the wind and seemed constantly on the point of going out, he continued steadily onward.

Before he had covered half the distance separating him from the street-lamp, however, he saw a tall figure lurching toward it through the gloom.

"There's the other passenger now!" the scout muttered. "He must have been walking in the road, so that the ground deadened the fall of his boots. Why did

he take to the middle of the street? I wonder if he was afraid of footpads? Perhaps he heard me behind him, and thought I might be a footpad!"

The scout laughed at this surmise. Meanwhile, the tall form of the other passenger had drawn well into the circle of dancing light, had faced about in the scout's direction, and was standing sharply silhouetted against the glow behind.

"He's ready for trouble," chuckled the scout, "in case I attempt to make him any. Well, I'll set his mind at rest in a minute."

As the scout continued on, the sudden report of a firearm echoed out. The sound was caught up and scattered by the wind, and was instantly followed by a crash of glass and the snuffing out of the street-light.

Again the pitchy darkness lay over the street, and the tall form of the other passenger was shrouded from sight.

"Thunder!" said the amazed Buffalo Bill to himself; "what does that mean? Have the people of this burg been engaged in snuffing out all their kerosene street-lamps this evening? Or was it just a happenchance, and——"

He ceased talking to himself. Just at that moment he heard sounds of a fierce struggle coming from the direction of the corner. Out of the jumble of combat came the surprising words:

"It's Buffalo Bill, all right; he's disguised. Down with him—quick!"

The scout, naturally, could not understand this. Some men ahead, it seemed, thought that they had him in the thick of a set-to. A mistake had been made, although



how or why was more than the scout could figure out, at that range.

With a startled exclamation, he leaped forward, came close to the street-lamp, then stumbled again. This time he fell over a group of forms on the walk.

Some one struck him in the shoulder; an oath sizzled past his ear, and the point of a steel blade gouged into his sleeve.

These proceedings gave him something of a grasp on the situation. He began to feel at home at once, and his heavy fists shot out to left and right.

Fighting in such blank darkness has its disadvantages. The scout might be landing his blows on friend or foe, he could not tell; all he could do was to use his fists to the utmost and hope for the best.

He struck down one man—the wheeze that followed the fall of his flinty knuckles and the crash of a form on the walk assured him of that—and whirled to meet the attack of another. At that precise moment, two powerful arms caught him from behind.

"I got him, Culberson!" panted a hoarse voice in the scout's ear. "Now give 'im the dirk, an' hustle!"

The scout felt rather than saw a hand darting toward him, and he knew that the hand must hold a knife. With a lightninglike movement, he slipped to one side. He heard the blade fall, and immediately the strong arms that had encompassed him grew limp and fell away.

"Dash it!" groaned a voice, "ye've knifed me!"

"Confound this darkness!" breathed another voice. "Wait! I'll get him yet, if——"

A shuffle of feet interrupted the speaker, and a *thump*

as of a right-hander straight from the shoulder made itself heard.

"Take that, you hoodlum!" breathed a voice.

A cry of pain and a muffled oath followed the words. The scout sprang forward, came to arm-holds with some one, and began to wrestle.

The fellow, whoever he was, was strong, and Buffalo Bill was compelled to draw on all his skill and prowess to get the whip-hand of him. Finally, by using a maneuver technically known as the "grape-vine," he got his antagonist down on the walk.

"Who are you?" he demanded, holding the fellow's thrashing arms; "and what do you mean by attacking people in this murderous way?"

"That's fine talk for you!" panted the under man sarcastically. "First you put out the street-light, and then half a dozen of you, more or less, make a jump at me."

"Look here," said the scout, a sudden idea taking hold of him, "did you just come into town on the train?"

"You must know that, all right," growled the other. "If you didn't, why were you following me from the station?"

"There's been a mistake," went on the scout, releasing his grip a little. "I came in on the night train myself, and I was crossing town, to get to the Plympton House. You happened to be traveling in my direction. I wasn't following you."

"That'll do to tell," answered the other. "What's your name?"

"Buffalo Bill."

The man under the scout's hands appeared mightily surprised.

"Is that right?" he demanded.

"Of course. What object would I have in lying to you?"

"Then that little surprise was meant for you, and I got it. There's a big mistake here somewhere. Let go, Buffalo Bill, until we can have a heart-to-heart talk."

The scout, fully convinced that the man was straight goods, and that there had really been some sort of a mistake, withdrew his hands and helped the other man to his feet.

"You say," said the stranger, "that you came in on the train, and that you started for the Plympton House?"

"Yes."

"Well, I heard you behind me, and thought I was being followed."

"Have you done anything that leads you to expect pursuit?"

"Not on your life; but a man in my business must always suspect things like this—not particularly for what he has done, but for what he may be going to do."

"That statement is something of a puzzle, friend. What's your business?"

"Detective. I tell you because I know it will go no farther. Bratton is my name, Jim Bratton, of Denver."

"There shouldn't be anything but friendship, Bratton," said the scout, "between two law-and-order men like you and I. When you stopped under this street-lamp there was evidently a gang of ruffians lying in wait for you."

"Lying in wait for me," qualified Bratton, "thinking that I was *you*. It wasn't the work that called me here that led to the attack, but the work that brought you to the town."

"How could these scoundrels ever have made such a mistake?"

"Well, it's a pretty dark night. Mistakes come easy."

"But you were under the light at the time. Wait a minute, while I strike a match and take a look at you."

The scout drew a match across the wooden standard that supported the street-lamp, and held it in front of Bratton's face.

As the two gazed at each other through the flickering glow of the match, they each recoiled a step instinctively.

"By Jupiter!" exclaimed Bratton.

"Did you ever hear of anything like it?" muttered the scout.

"If I had on clothes like yours," said Bratton, "I'd almost think I was looking into a mirror."

"We're what they call 'doubles,'" laughed the scout, "and no wonder those hoodlums made a mistake. I'm sorry that your resemblance to me got you into trouble."

"Well, maybe my resemblance to you will help me, in the long run. You're going to the Plympton House, and so am I. Suppose we travel together? I want to talk with you for a while, and this is a good chance."

As well as they could, they looked over the street in the vicinity of the lamp-post. Failing to find any traces of the scoundrels who had made the attack on Bratton, they started for the hotel.

"Quite remarkable that neither of us got hurt during that squabble," said Bratton.

"That's right," answered the scout. "It was only a happenchance that we didn't hurt each other."

"Luck deals a man all kinds of hands," observed Bratton thoughtfully.



"You and I were certainly dealt strange hands to-night," said the scout.

"If we're perfectly frank with each other about the business that brought us to Durango, perhaps we can clear up the mystery of that attack."

"Perhaps."

"Well, with your promise of secrecy, Buffalo Bill, I will open the ball by telling you what sort of business has brought me here. To be brief, I'm looking for thirty thousand dollars."

"All in hard cash, Bratton?"

"All in bank-notes."

"That's a lot of money to go looking for with nothing more than a search-warrant."

"Oh, I have clues, and good ones, too. The money isn't hiding out by itself, you understand; it's on the person of a young fellow called William Brent, who jumped a cashier's job at Olathe, Kansas, and forgot to leave the money behind."

"This Brent is a thief?"

"Might as well call a spade a spade, I reckon. That's it, Buffalo Bill. This happened two or three months ago, and the Drovers' National, of Olathe, has been wabbling toward a receivership ever since. You see, thirty thousand dollars is a whole lot of money to some of these country banks. If that money, or the larger part of it, can be recovered, the Drovers' National will weather the storm; if the money can't be recovered, the bank will go under. The directors of the institution are so anxious to get back all, or part, of the funds that they will agree to let Brent go without serving a term, providing he can be made to give up all the money he has left."

The scout shook his head ominously.

"That's a bad course to take, Bratton. It's about the same as compounding a felony."

"Sure it is. I'm not in sympathy with the course, at all, and I intend to capture Brent and get the money without making any deal with him. Once he's in my grip, he'll take his medicine."

"That's the talk."

"Brent, however, was Olathe's model young man until he became infatuated with Nina Culberson. The girl seemed to have an evil influence over him, although she is as beautiful a girl as you could find in a month's travel, and, to all appearances, a perfect lady."

"Where did she come into the deal?"

"She appeared in Olathe, and posed as a wealthy young woman looking for a place to invest a little surplus cash. She had more or less business at the Drovers' National, and Brent went daft from her dazzling smiles. Then, one day, Brent and Miss Culberson disappeared, and Brent's accounts were found to be thirty thousand dollars short."

"Local authorities discovered that Miss Culberson is the daughter of a notorious gambler named Nat Culberson—'Nervy Nat' they call him in Denver. Assuming that the girl and Brent had gone to Denver, I was called into the case. A little looking around in Denver gave me the information that Culberson and some of his black-leg cronies had come to Durango. At the boarding-house where Nina Culberson stays, when in Denver, I learned that she had arrived in the city several days ago, and had also taken the train to Durango."

"Was Brent with her?"

"Not that I could learn."



"How old a man is Brent?"

"Twenty-two."

"Hardly more than a boy!" exclaimed the scout, with a sudden feeling of sympathy. "Mark my words, this Nina Culberson put him up to stealing that money."

"That's the way I figure it, Buffalo Bill."

"What sort of a looking fellow is Brent?"

"Slender, light hair, blue eyes, with a round scar on his right temple."

"I'm inclined to take back what I said about putting Brent through for his misdeeds," said the scout. "The first wrong step, if harshly dealt with, might send the young fellow on into a further career of crime, when, if the first fault was condoned, he might become a useful member of society."

"I'm looking upon Brent as a thief-catcher looks upon the ordinary criminal," said Bratton. "I'll have to admit, Buffalo Bill, that very little sentiment ever enters into my plans."

"Suppose," returned the scout, "I should offer to take a hand in the case and help you run down the stolen money——"

"I'd be tickled to death to have such a man as yourself associated with me!" burst out the detective enthusiastically. "With you to help, I should feel that the money is already as good as recovered."

"You're too sanguine," laughed the scout. "If I took hold of the matter, though, I should want you, in case we recovered the money, to let me deal with Brent. That is all the pay I should want, but it is a condition I would insist upon."

Bratton was silent. It was plain he felt as though

duty required him to put William Brent through for his criminal work.

"It may be," went on the scout, "that you can get your man and the money without any of my help; and it may also turn out that I will have no time to help you. The business that brought me here must be attended to."

"And that business," said Bratton, "is what inspired that attack upon me. Those who made the attack thought that I was Buffalo Bill, in disguise. The very notion that Buffalo Bill should come to this town of Durango in disguise proves that the business that brings him is highly important."

"It may be so," mused the scout, "but I haven't the slightest idea what it is, Bratton."

"What?" gasped the detective, coming to a halt.

"It's just as I tell you," continued the scout, catching his companion by the arm and pulling him along. "Two of my pards, Nick Nomad and a little Piute boy called Cayuse, came on here to Durango. hey've got mixed up in something or other, and sent me a hurry-up call to come on. What the trouble is, I don't know; but I shall find out as soon as I get to the Plympton House."

"I'd like to have you take hold of this thirty thousand dollar matter with me," said Bratton.

"On the condition I named?"

"On any condition. I'm here in Durango, going it blind, as you might say. You're an all-fired good hand at running out a trail. There'll be some money in it—a per cent. of the funds recovered—and——"

"If events shape themselves so that I can help you, Bratton," cut in the scout earnestly, "I don't want any money-reward. I have already told you that. What I want is a free hand in dealing with young Brent."

"You can have it."

"Shall we let the matter rest in that way, then?"

"I'm agreeable."

"Very well. What is the first move you intend to make?"

"My first move will be to find out whether Culberson is in town."

"And then?"

"Then I shall try and locate his daughter, Nina. If I can locate Nina Culberson, I shall try to find some trace of Brent; and, if I am so fortunate as to find Brent, my next move will be to get hold of the missing money."

"Of course, that money may have been already squandered."

"That's a contingency that must be faced. If Nerry Nat is back of the plot that induced Brent to run away with the money, however, I have hopes that the funds are still in Brent's possession. It has only been a few days since Nina Culberson left Denver and came here. Supposing that Brent followed her, Nat Culberson may not yet have had time to get his hands on the thirty thousand dollars."

"Your position is well taken," approved the scout.

By that time they had come close to the lighted entrance of a frame structure standing flush with the street. A lighted sign, stretching out over the sidewalk, bore the words, "Plympton House."

"Here we are," said the scout. "My old pard is expecting me, and I thought sure he would be at the train. You're going to stop at this hotel?"

"It's a second-class hang-out," answered the detective, "and a man can stop here without arousing any unpleas-

ant speculation as to his business. That's a good thing for me. When a man starts to run out a trail he can't take a brass band along with him."

"Not if he wants to have any luck at the end of the trail," added the scout.

They passed in under the flaring sign, and found themselves in a small, square office-room, odorous with stale cooking. A clock ticked lugubriously from a wall back of the clerk's counter, and its echoes mingled with loud snores. The night-clerk, bunked down on a cot behind the counter, was responsible for some of the snoring, but another man, sprawled in a chair, had a good big part in it. The man in the chair was old Nomad.

As the scout and the detective crossed the floor, the trapper gave a wheezy gasp, straightened up, and stared about him.

The first man his eyes rested on was Bratton.

"Buffler!" he exclaimed, springing out of the chair and making a grab for Bratton's hand. "Whyever aire ye wearin' clothes like them? Ain't ashamed ter w'ar yer plainsman's rig in a two-by-twice town like this hyar, aire ye?"

"Well, not exactly," grinned Bratton.

The sound of the detective's voice, so unlike the scout's, broke the trapper's spell. Turning with a bewildered air, he saw Buffalo Bill, and staggered back, digging his fists in his sleepy eyes.

"Blazes ter blazes an' all hands 'round!" he muttered. "Am I asleep an' dreamin'? Buffler! Which is you?"

"Here!" laughed the scout, and grabbed his old pard's hand.



## CHAPTER II.

### THE GAMBLERS' VICTIM.

While old Nomad gulped and stared, the scout and the detective aroused the sleeping night-clerk, registered, and were given rooms. The clerk went out with Bratton, to show him where he was to sleep, and Buffalo Bill turned to his old pard once more.

"What's ther answer ter this hyar riddle, Buffler?" asked Nomad. "You got er twin yer never told me of?"

"I've got a double, Nick," replied the scout. "They say that every man has a double. If that's the case, I have found mine."

"Who is ther feller, anyways?"

"A detective by the name of Jim Bratton," the scout answered, lowering his voice; "but you're to keep that to yourself. Where's Little Cayuse?"

"Waal, I hev'n't seen ther Injun sence Sanderson an' me had thet trouble with ther tin horns."

"Sanderson, eh?"

"He was a stranger ter me, up ter two days ergo. Now he's layin' in this hyar hang-out with er broken leg, an' I'm sorter lookin' after him. All on account o' them thar pizen kyard-sharps an' thet brace faro-bank they runs. Waugh! but et makes my blood b'il every time I thinks o' et."

"Is that the business you want me for, Nick?"

"Et is, Buffler."

"Sit down here and tell me about it."

### The Gamblers' Victim.

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They drew a couple of chairs close together in one corner, and Nomad began:

"I reckon, pard, ye wondered a heap why I didn't meet ye at ther train. Waal, I didn't want ter leave Sanderson. Them blacklegs seems ter hev et in for him, an' I didn't think et was safe ter leave this hyar hang-out. Cayuse not bein' around, I couldn't send him ter explain.

"Ye know why ther Injun an' me come on hyar ahead o' ye. I was thet restive I couldn't wait while ye was goin' through er lot o' red-tape bizness with ther gov'ment. Waal, thar wasn't nothing pertic'ler doin' hyar, when Cayuse an' me arriv', an' I come purty nigh bein' as restive as ef I'd staid erlong with you, at Fort Sill.

"Et's a fact, I reckon, thet when a feller's restive, an' with nothin' pertic'ler on hands ter do, he's li'ble ter hev a look in on places whar he shouldn't. Thet was me. Night afore last I drapped in on a lot o' gamblin'-sharks thet hev fixed up a swell chance establishment—not calcalatin' ter play, ye onderstand, but jest ter look on, in ther hope o' bein' diverted."

"What's the matter with you, old pard?" asked the scout severely. "It's bad medicine going up against a phony bank, even if you don't intend to play the paste-boards."

"Right ye aire, Buffler. When a feller ain't got nothin' else on hand, though, he's li'ble ter do things thet ain't advisable, an' aire dead ag'inst his principles. Waal, howsomever, I lighted in this swell gamblers' roost like a tired ole eagle, an' I hadn't no more'n settled down ter watch ther game when I spots Sanderson. He was a young feller, an' didn't look none too knowin'. On top



o' thet, he had er wad er the long green purty nigh as big as my arm, an' he was droppin' et right an' left. The sharks was trimmin' him good—jest nacherly eatin' him up alive. I seen how they was doin' et, so I moseyed over an' give ther young feller a tip.

"I was seen whisperin' to 'im, and the big high boy thet runs ther place went over an' spoke ter a couple o' his lookouts. Ther lookouts come ter me an' invited me ter leave ther place. My mad was up, though, an' I wouldn't leave. I wanted ter see Sanderson through, ye savvy. Thar was a fight. I was jest polishin' off ther last o' ther two lookouts, when ther young feller seen fer himself jest how he was being done. He put up a yell, and some o' the gamblers made a rush at him. At erbout ther same minute, some more of 'em made a rush at me.

"I was knocked down by ther pizen gang, tromped on, and throwed down-stairs, heels over head. Mebbyso I turned a dozen summersets gittin' ter ther ground floor an' out o' ther buildin'. While I lay thar, wonderin' jest how many brick buildin's had tumbled down on top o' me, I heerd some 'un groan. The groan come from ther dark, farther along ther side o' ther house, an' I got up an' went thar.

"Et was Sanderson doin' ther groanin'. The pizen tin horns had drapped him out of er second-story winder, breakin' his leg. Previous ter throwin' him out, ther robbers had taken all the money he had left, without takin' ther trouble ter make him put et through ther brace faro layout. Waugh, but et was a fierce propersition.

"I picked Sanderson up an' kerried him ter this hyar hotel. Then I wanted ter call ther perlice, but he wouldn't

stand fer et. Somehow, I mentioned ther fact thet I was er pard o' Buffler Bill's. As soon as Sanderson l'arned thet, he asked me, between groans, ter send fer you, an' ter hev ye come hyar quick. Thet's ther reason I asked ye ter come, Buffler. Mebbyso ye think I hadn't no bizness doin' et, seein' as how ye mebbly hadn't finished yer red-tape bizness at Sill, but Sanderson wanted ye so bad, I jest reckoned I'd take er chance."

"Glad you did, old pard," said the scout. "I had finished my work at Sill, anyhow, and was about ready to join you. This happened night before last, you say?"

"Thet was ther date—night afore last, erbout one in ther mornin'. Sence then letters hev come ter Sanderson tellin' him ter keep his mouth shut an' git out o' town, ef he knows when he's well off. Ef he stays hyar, ther letters say, somethin' is sure goin' ter happen ter him. Fer this reason, I been hangin' purty close eround Sanderson; an' thet was mainly why I didn't go ter ther train ter meet ye."

"Did the gamblers know you had sent for me?"

"Not from anythin' me er Sanderson hev said. Ther blacklegs, though, appear ter git next ter everythin' thet happens eround town. Like as not they know ye're expected."

The scout, from all this, was beginning to understand why that attack had been made on Bratton on the way from the railroad-station. The gamblers were back of the attack. And one of the gamblers, during the skirmish, had mentioned the name of "Culberson." Culberson was the fellow Bratton was looking for. Thus, at the very start off, the scout's business in Durango appeared to cross that of Bratton's.

"Where is Sanderson, Nick?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"Him an' me aire occupyin' ther same room," was the trapper's answer.

"Can I see him now?"

"He's hungry ter see ye, pard," said Nomad. "In fact, he made me promise ter bring ye right up ther minit ye got hyar. I reckoned, though, it 'u'd be best ter explain ther layout a leetle afore ye seen him."

"We'll go and see him at once," said Buffalo Bill, getting up.

The night-clerk had got back from showing Bratton to his room, and was again snoring on the cot behind the counter. Whether or not he had noted the resemblance between Bratton and Buffalo Bill was not apparent. If he had observed the likeness between the two men, he had been too sleepy to make any comments.

Taking the lead, Nomad conducted the scout out of the office, up a flight of dimly lighted stairs, and along a hall to a door. The door was unlocked, and the trapper pushed it open and walked into the room.

The room contained two beds. On a table, near an outside window, a lamp burned dimly.

"That you, Nomad?" asked a voice.

"Shore et is, *amigo*," replied the trapper.

"Has Buffalo Bill come?"

"He's right hyar along o' me."

A form started up on one side of the beds and stared toward the scout.

"Turn up the light, Nick," said the scout, stepping toward the bed.

As the lamp grew brighter, the scout studied the face of the young man who had been trapped by the gamblers.

"Buffalo Bill," said the young fellow, reaching out his

hand, "I'm mightily obliged to you for coming, but I couldn't bear to have any one else take a hand in this but you. My name is Sanderson, William Sanderson."

The scout clasped the hand, and noted that it was shaking slightly; then, drawing up a chair, he sat down by the head of the bed.

"You want me to help you?" he asked.

"Yes, if you will."

"And you will be perfectly frank with me?"

"Why not, if you are going to help me?"

"In that case," said the scout, "you are beginning wrong."

"Beginning wrong? What do you mean?"

"I mean," was the quiet response, "that you should have told me your name was William Brent."

The young man gasped and dropped back on his pillow, covering his face with his hands.

"Snarlin' catermounts!" mumbled old Nomad, passing his amazed eyes from his pard to the young man on the bed. "Et looks like ye'd made er bull's-eye, Buffler, but however was ye able ter do et?"

Buffalo Bill silenced Nomad with a significant look. The trapper, eagerly curious, drew back and continued to watch and listen.

"How—how did you discover my real name?" asked Brent, in a husky voice, slipping his hands aside and staring at the scout.

"It is not necessary for you to know that—now," the scout answered. "If the facts in your case prove to be what I think they are, I am going to be your friend. But you must be frank with me, Brent. That is the only basis on which we can get together."

Brent was silent for a moment.



"Do you know the whole story, Buffalo Bill?" he asked finally.

"I know that you used to be cashier in the Drovers' National Bank, at Olathe, Kansas; that you met Miss Nina Culberson; that she persuaded you to take your first step toward the penitentiary; that——"

"In Heaven's name!" pleaded Brent, holding out one hand appealingly.

"That you left Olathe with thirty thousand dollars of the bank's money," pursued the scout relentlessly, "and that it was this money of which you were mulcted at Culberson's gambling-resort in this town. Am I right, Brent?"

Once more the young man hid his face in his hands. A groan was wrung from his conscience-stricken soul.

The scout leaned over the bed and rested a kindly hand on the young man's forehead.

"Am I right, Brent?" he repeated. "I think I can understand something of this, and I want you to know that I'm your friend."

Brent caught the scout's hand convulsively in both his own.

"It's good to hear you say that," said Brent brokenly. "It seems years since I have had any one call me a friend. I can't tell you how much it means to me, Buffalo Bill."

"That's all right," said the scout deprecatingly. "What we want to get at just now is the method the Culbersons took to get the bank-money. What did Nina Culberson say to you in Olathe?"

"She told me," answered Brent, with a deep flush, "that she would never marry a poor man. She said that if I could get hold of twenty-five or thirty thousand, she would show me where I could double it. I told her I

didn't have that amount of money, and she thought it strange that a cashier in a bank couldn't 'raise' it. Well"—and here the young man shut his teeth hard—"I did 'raise' it; then, according to instructions from Miss Culberson, I went to Denver and waited there for her to come. I was in Denver more than two months, haunted by a guilty conscience and the fear that I should be apprehended at any moment and taken back East a prisoner. Then, when I was almost crazy with fear and anxiety, Miss Culberson came. I had kept her informed as to where I was staying, and she called to see me.

"The first thing she asked me was how much money I had. When I told her, she said it was not enough to swing the deal she had in mind. I told her it was what she had told me to raise, and she answered that she had been wrong in her first estimate, but that she knew of a way whereby I could make twenty thousand very easily.

"I was to come to this town of Durango, go at night to a certain number, and give my alias of Sanderson to a man who would meet me at the door. Miss Culberson said that everything would be arranged, and that all I would have to do would be to follow instructions."

A look of regret and sorrow crossed Brent's face.

"I—I trusted that girl, Buffalo Bill. She had a way with her that would make anybody trust her. Owing to her influence, I had made a fugitive out of myself; but I did not lay that up against her. When she said to come on to Durango, I came without question. It was only when I found myself inside the house at the address she had given me, and discovered that I was in a gambling-den, that I began to have a suspicion that all was not right.

"However, the man who met me had an oily and plausi-

ble manner. He said the game was going against the bank, that night, and that a fine opportunity to make something was ready to my hand, if I would only grasp it. He advised me how to play, and—I played. At first I won; then, carried away by my success, I began to plunge. From then on I lost. It was only when your pard, Nomad, came up to me and whispered in my ear that I began to think the game was not on the square. I watched for crooked work, and it was not long before I detected it. I protested, and was set upon, robbed of all the money I had, and dropped out of the second-story window.

"That's all of it," added Brent, drawing a deep breath.

"Here I am, penniless and a thief. My good name is gone forever. Officers of the law will find me, take me back, and—and send me to the penitentiary. I'm going to take my medicine like a man, though; but I would like, if there is a possible chance, to get that money back and return it to my former employers. That is what I want you to help me do."

There was a certain manliness about the young man which struck at the roots of the scout's sympathy.

"While you're laid up here and getting well," said he, "I will see what I can do for you. You must promise, however, to obey me implicitly. Will you do that?"

"Yes. Just get back the money, that's all I ask. As for the rest of it, I have done wrong, and am willing to shoulder the consequences."

"We'll talk about the consequences later." Buffalo Bill got up. "Keep to that alias of Sanderson, and don't let a soul know that you are William Brent. This is for you, Nick," the scout added, turning to his trapper pard, "as

well as for Brent. *Buenos,*" he finished, stepping to the door.

Nomad, astounded by what he had heard, had flopped into a chair, and was still staring from the scout to the defaulter.

After leaving the room, Buffalo Bill halted in the hall, took an old envelope from his pocket, and wrote on the back of it with a pencil:

"BRATTON: Important developments in that case of yours. Do not leave your room until you hear from me.  
"BUFFALO BILL."

He already knew that the detective's room was No. 18, almost across the hall from the one occupied by Nomad and the unfortunate Brent. Stepping to the door of No. 18, he slipped his message under it, went to his own quarters, and turned it.

Already it was in the small hours of the morning, but for a long time the scout lay awake, turning Brent's affairs over in his mind.

It was odd that the scout and the detective should look so much alike; odd that their trails should cross as they had done that night, and doubly odd that the man Nomad had befriended should prove to be the fugitive from justice.

The scout was deeply impressed with Brent's story. He saw how the young man had been made the victim of a designing clique of swindlers.

Nina Culberson was certainly an adventuress. Even her sex could not save her from the scout's scorn and contempt. By her wiles she had encompassed the cashier's downfall; and, now that he had made himself a felon and had been stripped of his money, the girl and



her father would abandon him and leave him to officers of the law.

How was the scout to go about it to recover the \$30,000? The gamblers had the money, and to enter legal process against them would have been worse than useless. In the first place, the first sign of any court proceedings would be Culberson's signal to clear out; and, again, court proceedings would involve Brent unpleasantly, and that was one thing the big-hearted scout wished to avoid.

Buffalo Bill never entered into any half-hearted friendships. Whenever he took a man by the hand and promised to stand by him, it meant that the two would stand shoulder to shoulder in the last ditch, if need be. The scout was determined to marshal all his resourcefulness and see Brent safely out of his difficulties. There was good stuff in the young man, and the scout thought it his duty to save him.

But whatever was attempted toward the recovery of the money must be done at once.

With the determination to proceed actively in the matter on the following day, the scout dozed off into a sound and refreshing slumber.

Several hours later he was awakened by a bluff rap on the door of his room. He opened his eyes with a start, and saw a beam of sun entering the dusty panes of the one window the room contained.

"What's wanted?" he called, sitting up.

"You're Buffalo Bill, ain't you?" queried a voice.

"Yes."

"Well, there's some one in the parlor wants to see you right away."

"Who is it?"

"She didn't give any name; just said her business was important, and hoped you could come down at once."

"She? Her? It's a woman, then?"

"Yes."

"Tell the lady I'll be down inside of ten minutes."

Footsteps receded along the hall, and the scout began making his toilet and getting into his clothes. "A lick and a promise" were usually enough for the scout's toilet, but, with a lady to interview him, he was a little more careful that morning in making himself presentable.

When he descended the stairs and turned into the shabby little room designated, by virtue of its function, as the "parlor," he was greeted by a slender, neatly gowned figure, closely veiled.

"Buffalo Bill?" asked the woman, stepping toward him.

"At your service, madam," he answered, with a bow.

The woman's voice was musical, and apparently one of refinement and culture. As the scout replied, the woman raised her veil, displaying a beautiful dark face, and wide, ingenuous eyes.

"Pardon me for getting you up so early," the woman went on, with the shadow of a smile about her perfect lips, "but the matter I wish to discuss with you is one of extreme importance. My name is Nina Culberson."

At once the scout began to harden. Here was the woman who had caused all of poor Brent's misfortunes. The indignation and anger he felt against her flamed up in his breast, although his features remained smiling and complaisant.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE WILES OF A TIGRESS.

"Glad to meet you, Miss Culberson," said the scout.

He noticed that his caller's eyes were appraising him covertly. Perhaps she wanted to see how he had fared in the midnight attack.

"I have come to you from my father, Nat Culberson," proceeded the woman, after a brief pause.

"I can't recall that I ever met your father," said the scout. "Not having an acquaintance with him, it seems strange that we should have any business in common."

The girl transfixed the scout with a swift, keen glance. If she had expected to read any telltale signs in his smiling face, she was disappointed.

"I shall not take up much of your time, Buffalo Bill," she went on; "but we might as well sit down while we do our talking. May I trouble you to close the door? What passes must be strictly between ourselves."

The scout closed the door. Meanwhile, the girl had seated herself, and the scout returned from the door and took a chair near her.

There was an attractiveness about Miss Culberson which the scout could not deny. He did not wonder that Brent had fallen a victim to the woman's charm. But the scout, more familiar with the ways of the world, saw that, like her beauty, her gentleness was no more than skin deep. She was a tigress masquerading as a fawn.

"I presume," pursued Miss Culberson quietly, "that you

#### The Wiles of a Tigress.

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have been called to Durango by your old pard, Nick Nomad?"

"Possibly," smiled the scout.

"And that you have come to avènge certain wrongs which your old pard thinks he has suffered?"

"My old pard, Miss Culberson, is quite able to take care of himself."

"My father"—the girl's lip quivered with what had the appearance of passing emotion—"is a—gambler, Buffalo Bill. It is the one sorrow of my life, for, believe me, I was brought up by a mother who looked upon any sort of gambling with horror. But"—and here she heaved a deep sigh and lowered her eyes resignedly—"we must take matters as we find them, and I cannot forget that my father is entitled to my filial love and protection."

"Very noble sentiments, Miss Culberson," said the scout, but not with any great degree of warmth.

"That is my nature," admitted the girl, with a flush.

After remaining pensively silent for a few moments, she flung up her head, her beautiful eyes beaming with sudden animation.

"Throughout the West," said she, "the name of Buffalo Bill stands for all that is brave and chivalrous. While you have been a stranger to me, personally, yet for years your fame has aroused my admiration. It is because I know you to be generous in helping those in distress that I come to you now."

The scout was not to be blinded by flattery. The claws of the tigress were hidden in velvet gloves, but he knew they were there, and that they were sharp.

"You are very kind to say all that, Miss Culberson," said he. "How can I help you?"

"You can help me save my father from the conse-



quences of a great wrong which was perpetrated in his gambling-rooms a few nights ago. A young man from the East lost a large sum of money, and was brutally treated by some of my father's assistants. Your pard, Nomad, I understand, helped the Easterner. Now, with your aid, I am sure I can set this matter right, and save my father from any trouble."

"What am I to do?"

"Have a talk with my father to-night. If I am not wrongly informed, you have a list of the men who are here in Durango, and who are said to comprise a gamblers' syndicate. You can use that list as a threat in making my father do what is right in this matter of the Easterner's money."

"There can be no harm in having a talk with your father, at all events," said the scout, somewhat in the dark regarding the "list." "Where can he be found? And at what time am I to call?"

A flash—it might have been of satisfaction—crossed the girl's handsome face. It was but a moment in passing, and barely perceptible, but it did not escape the eagle eyes of Buffalo Bill.

"He can be found at his gambling-rooms, Buffalo Bill," said the girl. "Any one can tell you where Culberson's place is. If you will be at the street door at eleven o'clock, I will meet you and conduct you to a private room, where you can have the interview."

"At eleven o'clock to-night?"

"Yes."

"I'll be there. Furthermore, Miss Culberson, I'll not deny that I know something about this young fellow, Sanderson, and I'll state further that he interests me."

The girl's eyes wavered an instant.

"He interests me, also," said she, "but my father's welfare interests me more. What do you know about Sanderson, Buffalo Bill?"

"Well, if it transpires that he is a young man whose sole fortune consisted of thirty thousand dollars, and that he came West to invest it, you will understand that my information is correct."

The girl peered at the scout for the fraction of a second, and there was an expression of relief in her face.

"That is the same story that came to me," said she, "and I hate to think the young man has lost his money at a gambling-game—all the money he had in the world. Between the two of us, however, I believe the wrong can be righted. My father, though, is a hard man to deal with, but he has already learned that you have been called into the deal, and it has made him anxious over the outcome. A threat of trouble, backed up by that list with the names of the gamblers comprising the so-called syndicate, will probably be sufficient to make him give up the young man's money."

"Thirty thousand is quite a sum," said the scout. "Rather than give it up, I should suppose your father would get away from Durango."

The girl's upper lip curled scornfully.

"He is not the man to run away from danger, Buffalo Bill," said she. Then, rising, she put out a small, gloved hand with a frank smile. "I may depend upon you?"

"Certainly," he answered, taking the hand.

"To-night, at eleven o'clock, then," she said. "You will find me waiting. It is very good of you to come, Buffalo Bill."

"Not at all, Miss Culberson. I am as anxious to come as you are to have me."

With a musical "Thank you," and another smile, Nina Culberson opened the door and passed from the room.

The scout did not follow her, but dropped down in the chair from which he had recently risen, and gave vent to a low laugh.

"The wiles of a tigress," he said to himself, "and she thinks she has pulled the wool over my eyes finely; but if Culberson and his whole gang can trap *me*, they are welcome to try. Before I am done with the game, I'll make it a case of the trappers trapped, and——"

His reflections were brought to a sudden termination. A couch stood at one side of the room—a common, horse-hair sofa of an old-fashioned type. Just at that moment a sound came from under the sofa, and a form rolled out and came to a stop almost at the scout's feet.

It was a lithe, slender form, nude to the waist, and the lower limbs clad in buckskins. The raven hair of the head was shiny with bear's grease, and an eagle-feather arose from the scalp-lock.

This form picked itself up quietly and faced the scout, as imperturbable as though such an intrusion into the room was nothing out of the ordinary.

"Well!" exclaimed the scout. "What in the world were you doing under that couch, Cayuse?"

"Me watch um black-haired squaw," replied Little Cayuse. "She come here from gambling-house. Cayuse follow. Get into room and under couch while she ask Yellow Eyes in office for Pa-e-has-ka. Ugh! Heap bad medicine."

Cayuse went over and closed the door which the woman had left ajar; then he came back and stood erect in front of his paleface pard.

"Heap bad medicine, eh?" queried the scout.

"Wuh! Black-haired squaw all same catamount, all some act like coyote. Pa-e-has-ka go to place she say to-night, Pa-e-has-ka die. Me know. Ugh!"

"Cayuse," said the scout, "you're the same resourceful boy in the white man's town that you are in the Indian country. What you say interests me, and I want to hear more. Sit down, pard, and let's have the whole of it."

The Piute was a lad of few words. Usually he preferred the hand-talk to oral speech, and indulged in neither when it was possible to avoid it. In order to draw him out, and get at the gist of the matter, the scout had to train a series of questions upon the important points.

"Where have you been since Nomad brought Sander-son to this hotel, Cayuse?" the scout asked.

"Me watch um place where Yellow Eyes rob with the cards—ugh! and without the cards."

"Nomad didn't tell you to do that, did he?"

"Him no tell Cayuse—Cayuse do um because mebbysso he think he find out something. White man's town heap quiet. Cayuse like stir around, you *sabe*."

"Yes, I *sabe*," and the scout's smile was broad.

"When Pa-e-has-ka 'round, plenty doing; when Pa-e-has-ka no 'round, we go hunt um trouble."

"Well, you watched the gamblers' resort. Were you inside or outside, Cayuse?"

"Outside, first; then me find way and crawl inside. Me hear um black-haired squaw talk with gambler chief. Gambler chief he say: 'Pa-e-has-ka reach town; Pa-e-has-ka die, or we no make any more money this grass. You get um Pa-e-has-ka here to-night. We fix um.' Then black-haired squaw she say: 'Ai,' and hit trail for hotel. Cayuse hit trail, too. Get here; watch, listen. Pa-



e-has-ka almost fall into trap. Cayuse save um. Cayuse heap glad."

"What sort of a wigwam have the gamblers got, Cayuse?"

"Him wood, three-story big. Heap fine. Rattle-boxes second floor, card-maps on table."

"Roulette and faro on second floor, eh? And what's on the first floor."

"First floor fire-water place."

"What's on the third floor?"

"Third floor him empty."

"How did you get into the building?"

"Climb one-story teepee, then climb two-story teepee, then get to top of card-house. Heap easy."

"Could you take me that way?"

"Wuh."

"Very good, Cayuse. Don't forget that you and I have an appointment for to-night. Now go and tell the clerk, out in the office, to send breakfast for two up to room eighteen; then tell Nomad to come to room eighteen. After that you can eat your own breakfast and rest up for our work to-night."

Little Cayuse darted away to carry out his orders. The scout returned immediately to the second floor of the hotel and rapped on the detective's door. Bratton, fully dressed and with a curious look on his face, admitted him.

By daylight, the detective's resemblance to the scout was even more striking than at night.

"I can't understand," said the scout jokingly, "why a detective wants to wear his hair long."

"I used to be a plainsman like yourself, Buffalo Bill," replied Bratton, "and that's where I got the habit."

"How do you work it when you want to disguise yourself?"

"Why, I stuff the extra hair up into the crown of my hat. But, say, why did you ask me not to leave this room until you talked with me?"

"I've got a little play up my sleeve—a sort of a ruse, you understand—and it might spoil my plans if you were to show yourself too freely."

"What's the object of the ruse?"

"Getting back some thirty thousand dollars belonging to that Olathe bank."

The detective gave a jump.

"Then you have finished your work," he cried, "and are ready to help me?"

"I haven't finished my work, Bratton. As a matter of fact, your work and mine seem to have been cut off the same piece."

Bratton stared.

"You've got me guessing," said he.

"And that's where I'm going to leave you until we get that money away from the Culberson clique. By the way, have you a list of the gamblers associated with Culberson in this Durango graft?"

"Who told you about that?"

"Miss Nina Culberson."

Bratton reeled into a chair and ran his fingers dazedly through his hair.

"Do you mean to say you've talked with Miss Nina Culberson, Buffalo Bill?" he demanded.

"Not only that, Bratton, but I have made an appointment to meet her at her father's gambling-establishment at eleven o'clock to-night, and have a talk with Nery Nat, the prince of card-sharpers—"

A set of knuckles drummed on the outside of the door.

"Come in!" called the scout.

Old Nomad entered.

"Cayuse jest blowed in ter my room, Buffler," said the trapper, talking to the scout, but peering wonderingly at Bratton, "an' said ye wanted ter see me."

"Nomad," said Buffalo Bill, "shake hands with Bratton, the detective. We're hooked up for a short run together, so, for the time being, we've all got to be pards."

"Glad ter meet up with Buffler number two," grinned the old trapper.

"Number two isn't half so good a man as number one," said Bratton, "but he's mighty proud of his looks, all the same."

"What I want you to do, Nick," said the scout, "is to go over town somewhere and buy a costume to match mine. Understand? I want a rig as near like the one I have on as you can get."

"Thet's me," said Nomad, "though what ther pizen reason is gits past my guard. Howsumever, hyar goes. Kinder keep yore ears skinned fer any noise acrost ther hall, will ye?" he finished, at the door. "Sanderson is alone in thar."

"We'll keep track of Sanderson, Nick," the scout answered.

The door closed on the trapper, and the scout resumed his conversation with Bratton at the point where it had been dropped.

"As I was saying, Bratton," he continued, "Miss Nina Culberson asked me to talk with her father. I agreed. According to program, I am to be at the front door of the gambling-house at eleven o'clock to-night. Miss Culber-

son is to meet me, and take me to the place where I can see Nervy Nat. It's a put-up job. Nervy Nat and his blacklegs don't intend to let me leave their gambling-den alive. How much nerve have you?"

"Give it up. I've always thought I had plenty. Why?"

"Well, I accepted Miss Culberson's invitation for you."

"For me?"

"Exactly. The gamblers mistook you for Buffalo Bill last night. I want to see if they will make the same mistake under the electric lights. I have sent Nomad after an outfit similar to the one I have on. When he returns with it, I want you to get into it, and, while I lie low in this room during the day, you're to parade around as Buffalo Bill. To-night, at eleven, you will walk into the little trap the gamblers have laid for me at their headquarters."

"What's that for?"

"That's my ruse. I won't be far away from you, and, when the proper time comes, the gang will have *two* Buffalo Bills to contend against instead of one."

Just then a man came up with a tray containing the morning meal. Buffalo Bill opened the door and took the tray, not permitting the man to see Bratton.

While they were eating, the scout gave the details of his conversation with Miss Culberson, leaving out of his report everything that had a bearing on Sanderson. He did not intend to let the detective know who Sanderson really was until after the money had been recovered. These tactics kept Bratton a little in the dark on some of the main points of the case, but he was willing to take Buffalo Bill's word that they were driving onward in the right direction.

The scout also gave an account of what Cayuse had



said, and told what he and the Indian had intended to do while Bratton was closeted with Culberson.

"The thirty thousand we're after is really the Olathe bank funds, is it?" queried Bratton.

"Yes."

"How did this fellow Sanderson happen to have anything to do with the money?"

"That will be explained to you later. All you've got to do, when you find yourself with Culberson, is to threaten him with prosecution unless he hands over the money. Tell him you'll give up the list containing the names of the members of his robbers' syndicate if he will hand the money over to you. You'll not get the money. On the contrary, the scoundrels will try to put you out of the way. The minute they attempt that you may count on hearing from me."

"We'll have the whole outfit swarming about our ears, Buffalo Bill."

"That's what I expect. All we've got to do, though, is to keep our heads and have our guns handy."

"If you should fail to get into the gambling-house by that route taken by your Indian pard——"

"I'll not fail. Once we get into the house, and find ourselves under the same roof with the Olathe money, we'll have only ourselves to blame if we fail to get away with it."

"The money may not be there."

"If Culberson is there you can bank on it that the money is with him."

"It might be a good plan," ruminated Bratton, "to get Culberson to show me the money."

"If you can, yes. That's a good play. I'm not at all sanguine, though, that it will succeed. Culberson has got

this matter sized up pretty clearly. He knows that Brent, who stole the money, will not allow Sanderson to take the matter up with the police, for the reason that Brent is as much afraid of the police as Culberson is. The only way to recover the money is by beating the gambler at his own game. If we get into that gamblers' roost together, we'll secure the money if we have to take it by force."

"We will!" averred Bratton, bringing his fist down on the table with a vim that made the dishes rattle. "It would be a master stroke, Buffalo Bill, if we could recover this money in one night."

"Strike while the iron is hot, is my motto. Quick action always brings quick results. I would rather——"

A wild cry for help came from the direction of the hall, interrupting the scout and bringing him to his feet with a quick jump.

"Blazes!" exclaimed Bratton; "that must be Sanderson now! Some one——"

Both the scout and the detective had started for the door.

"Don't show yourself, Bratton!" ordered the scout. "Stay right in this room. I'll see what has gone wrong."

Without waiting for Bratton's reply, Buffalo Bill dashed into the hall, slamming the door behind him.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE SILVER PIN.

The door of the room occupied jointly by Nomad and Brent was standing open. As the scout crossed the hall toward it, he heard a sound of rapid movements in the room beyond.

Flinging into the chamber, he saw Brent sitting up in bed with a trickle of red flowing down over his cheek from his forehead. The young man, paralyzed with fright and unable to speak, could only point toward an open window.

The scout sprang to the window and looked out. The window opened upon an alley, and the scout thrust his head through it just in time to see a form vanishing around the side of the hotel; but he was unable to see who the man was, or make out anything of his appearance.

"What happened, Sanderson?" Buffalo Bill asked, snatching a towel from the wash-stand and folding it into a bandage for Sanderson's head.

"A man sneaked into the room and tried to knife me!" the young man explained. "I was lying here in a half-doze, when I suddenly heard some one beside the bed. The man was a tough-looking scoundrel, and held a knife in his hand. I grabbed the fellow's arm and let out a yell. The knife caught me a glancing blow on the side of the head, and then the man jerked away, and dropped out of the window."

Just then, Spiegel, the day-clerk, came into the room, followed by a man whom the scout had not seen before.

## The Silver Pin.

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"What's the trouble here?" Spiegel asked, watching while the scout placed the towel bandage around Brent's forehead.

"Some one tried to commit a robbery," the scout answered. "Sanderson woke up just in time to give a yell and scare the thief away."

"My name's Brown," said the man who had come with Spiegel, "and I'm a deputy sheriff. What sort of a looking fellow was the thief?"

"He looked like a hoodlum," Sanderson answered, "and that's about all I can tell you. He jumped from the window before I had got the sleep out of my eyes sufficiently to take a good look at him."

Brown stooped and picked up something from the floor beside the bed.

"Je-ru-sa-lem!" he breathed, staring at a glittering object he held in his hand. "Where'd this come from?" he added, casting a look of suspicion at Brent.

"What is it?" the scout asked, drawing closer to the deputy's side.

"A silver pin—a badge of authority between a gang of thieves, thugs, and card-sharpers who have been raising Cain in Durango. Every member of the gang wears one of these."

The pin, as the scout could see, was small, and represented a clenched hand holding a dagger.

"It must have been dropped by the fellow who tried to rob Sanderson," said the scout. "Certainly it could not belong to Sanderson, or to my old pard, who shares this room with him."

The deputy looked serious and thoughtful.

"If there is a gang of thieves and thugs in this town,"



went on the scout, "why don't the authorities clean the rascals out?"

"For the simple reason, Buffalo Bill, that the authorities can't get a line on them," Brown replied. "It's a mighty close fraternity, and just who the men are who wear these pins is something none of us know. We believe, however, that Nervy Nat Culberson is at the head of the gang, and that his robbers' roost on Juakin Street is the gang's headquarters. There are mysteries connected with Culberson's hangout which the police authorities of this town would give their eye-teeth to know."

"Haven't they ever tried to get into the place?"

"Dozens of times, but only one officer ever succeeded."

"Didn't he discover anything?"

"If he did, he forgot it. He was found wandering about town in a dazed condition, the day after he had set out to probe the gamblers' rendezvous, and it was a week before he got over the dope that had been given him. When he regained his senses he couldn't remember a thing about the house in Juakin Street. Personally, I wouldn't go into that place on a bet. I'll take this pin, however, and see what I can do toward locating the man who made this attack on Sanderson."

The scout did not care to have the authorities tangle up with the case, but he could not very well prevent Brown from taking the pin and doing what he could to locate the man who had lost it.

When Spiegel and Brown went away, old Nomad got back. He came into the room carrying a large bundle, and was not very much surprised when the scout told him about what had happened to Brent.

"Ye kin see how et is, Buffler," said Nomad darkly,

"Them pizen blacklegs aire detarmined ter nail Sanderson, ef they kin. They ordered him ter leave town, and ter keep his mouth shut, an' he hasn't done et. How they expect a feller with er busted leg ter git out o' Durango on short notice is one too many fer me. Sanderson couldn't go, but thet don't count with them card-sharks. They're goin' ter put him out o' bizness ef they kin."

"Stay right with him, Nick, and watch him," returned the scout. "Did you get what I sent you for?"

"Had more luck than what I expected," grinned the old trapper. "What I found is purty nigh a dead ringer fer what ye got on."

"All right. Keep mum about what happened here, both of you," and, with that, Buffalo Bill took the bundle and went back to Room 18.

Bratton was sitting in the room, smothering as best he could his eagerness to learn what was going on. The scout told him of the attack on Sanderson, of the finding of the silver pin, and repeated what Brown had said about the gang whose members wore the pin, and about the gamblers' resort.

"All we hear about that vipers' nest," observed Bratton, "only makes me the more anxious to go there to-night. If there are any secrets in the place, we'll find 'em."

"And we'll get back that Olathe money," added the scout; "that's the main thing."

Old Nomad had done well in securing a duplicate of the scout's costume. The clothes were not identical with the scout's, but nearly so, and there was no doubt but that they would pass muster.

When Bratton had put them on, the resemblance be-

tween him and the scout was certainly marvelous. The two took each other's sizing with whimsical eyes, and then instinctively clasped hands.

"I hadn't any idea I was such a fine-looking man," laughed Bratton.

"We'll let that pass," countered the scout. "It isn't often we're able to see ourselves as others see us, but that appears to be the case just now. During the rest of this day I'm going to occupy your room, Bratton, and I want you to get your hand in by going about town as Buffalo Bill. You're supposed to be under the weather a little, you know, and that will account for your keeping to your room."

"I reckon I can manage my end of your ruse without spoiling the game," said Bratton, picking up his hat.

His last move before going out was to thrust two bulldog revolvers into his hip pockets.

That was a long day for Buffalo Bill. With sleeping, smoking, thinking, and reading, however, he contrived to reach the end of it. Little Cayuse brought him his meals, which prevented possible discovery at the hands of any of the hotel employees.

At ten-thirty that evening Bratton came to the room, and announced that he was about to go over to Juakin Street.

"Did you strike any snags while you were moving around town?" asked the scout.

"Nary a snag, Buffalo Bill, although I attracted a good deal of attention. People I had never seen before, and whom I didn't know from Adam, stopped me, called me by your name, shook my hand, and wished me luck. Say, you're mighty popular. It takes a game like this

to make an outsider realize that. You'll trail along pretty close behind me, will you?"

"I'll be in Culberson's hangout all the while you are there."

"That's enough for me. Shoulder to shoulder with a man like you I could face anything."

Bratton examined his revolvers carefully, replaced a couple of empty shells with two that were loaded, and went away.

His footsteps had hardly died out along the hall when Little Cayuse presented himself.

"Pa-e-has-ka ready?" he asked.

"All same," smiled the scout. "Staying all day in a room like this is worse than a jail sentence—for me. How's Nomad?"

"Like um bear with sore head, Pa-e-has-ka. Him got jail sentence, too; heap mad because him no can take a pasear with Pa-e-has-ka and Little Cayuse."

"Nomad may have something to do later—you never can tell in a deal of this kind. You go down through the office, Cayuse, and wait for me in front of the hotel. I'm going to leave by the rear door."

The Piute glided away. A moment later the scout followed him, but descended by a rear stairway and got out by a door close to the kitchen.

Joining the Indian boy in front of the hotel, the two laid a straight course for Juakin Street.



## CHAPTER V.

### IN THE VIPERS' NEST.

The scout recognized Juakin Street as the thoroughfare in which he and Bratton had had their midnight encounter with Culberson and his men. In fact, the corner where the street-light had been shot out, just before the struggle, was only a block from the dark, forbidding building which Cayuse indicated as the gamblers' hangout.

The building was in the middle of the block, and the only lights shown came from screened windows on the lower floor, where the drinking-resort was located.

The first building in the row was an old-time adobe—long, rambling, and one story in height. In the alley behind the adobe was a pile of empty boxes which the Piute had heaped up there at the time he made his way over the roofs to the vipers' nest.

The boy climbed the boxes first, and the scout followed close after him. Traversing the roof of the adobe, they came to a two-story building, the side of which was climbed by means of a water-pipe.

On the top of this second structure occurred an incident which well-nigh proved disastrous to the scout's plan.

As Buffalo Bill, treading softly, followed his little part toward the roof of the gamblers' rendezvous, Cayuse suddenly turned and, with the swiftness of lightning, hurled himself against the scout. The latter was overthrown, and plumped down on his hands and knees. At

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the same instant, something darted through the air above him, leaving a shimmering trail of light in the semidarkness.

Without pausing to explain, Cayuse sprang after a dark form that had emerged from behind a chimney and was hurrying toward the side of the building that contained Culberson's hangout.

The scout understood what had happened without any explanation on the Piute's part. Culberson had posted a man on the roofs, the man had seen the boy and the scout approaching, and from behind the chimney had launched a knife in the scout's direction. But for Cayuse's quickness, the point of the knife might have found its mark.

Regaining his feet, Buffalo Bill hastened after Cayuse and the fleeing form. Before the scout could come anywhere near the boy, the man he was pursuing had started up a ladder leading to the top of the higher building.

The man was half-way up the ladder by the time Cayuse reached the foot of it. Cayuse did not attempt to climb after the man, but grabbed the bottom rung of the ladder, and pulled it up from the roof, causing it to slip from the edge of the wall.

The lookout dropped with the ladder, but sprang up instantly and started back across the roof. From the way he moved, the scout judged that he had been half-stunned by his fall, and made ready to head him off.

A struggle on the roof would be almost certain to attract attention, even if the noise already made did not cause an alarm. The scout, it may well be supposed, was far from pleased by the turn events were taking. He prepared, nevertheless, to bring the prospective strug-

gle to as quick and quiet a termination as possible, and one blow from his fist did it.

"Ugh!" muttered Little Cayuse, halting in amazement and staring at the prostrate form.

Whether the man was dead or not the scout could not tell. The light of a match glimmered upon some object pinned to the man's vest, and closer inspection proved the object to be a silver trinket identical with the one found in Brent's room at the Plympton House.

"He's one of the thugs, all right," muttered the scout, getting up.

He listened for a moment to discover whether the noise already made had attracted attention. This did not seem to have been the case.

"We can't stop here, Cayuse," he whispered. "Bratton is in the rendezvous, and there's no telling how long it will be before he needs us. Set up the ladder and we'll get to the top of the next building."

"Ladder heap fine, Pa-e-has-ka," said Cayuse. "When me come other time, me throw rope over chimney on big lodge. But rope all same gone."

"The gamblers found the rope, I suppose, and suspected that some one was coming to their place over the roofs. No doubt that's the reason they put that fellow on guard."

By then Cayuse had set the ladder upright. To reach the top of the next roof took only a few minutes, and the scout ended the operation by drawing up the ladder.

The skylight, through which Cayuse had entered the rendezvous on the occasion of his previous visit, was found to be open. Without pausing a moment, he and the scout let themselves into it and descended a steep flight of stairs into blank darkness.

Taking the scout's hand, at the foot of the stairs, the Piute guided him onward through what seemed to be a narrow passageway. After a few yards of progress they came to a door, which the boy softly opened. Beyond the door they halted and listened. Not a sound reached their ears from anywhere, and not a ray of light struck across the ominous gloom.

"Use um fire-stick," Pa-e-has-ka," whispered Cayuse. "Make um light so we see."

The scout struck a match on the sole of his boot. By its light they discovered that they were in a small, square room, in one corner of which lay a broken faro-table and two or three broken chairs. A door, opposite that by which they had entered, offered a way into unexplored territory.

When the match had flickered out, Cayuse opened the door, and he and the scout passed on.

In this second room a pencil of light shot upward through the darkness, coming through a round hole in the floor. The scout crawled to the hole and looked downward. As he bowed forward, his right hand touched an intricate mechanism of wires and keys, but not with sufficient force to cause much noise.

Ignoring the wires and keys, for the time being, he gave his attention to the room beneath.

What he saw through the hole was a small, luxuriously furnished apartment, with a table in the center and chairs grouped around it. The chairs were unoccupied. At the end of the room, however, there were other chairs, and six sinister-looking men, silent and immovable as though carved from stone, were occupying the chairs and apparently waiting.

Waiting—for what?



There seemed to be no gambling going on in the establishment that night. Perhaps Culberson had reserved that particular night for the work he had on hand with Buffalo Bill. At any rate, there was something weird about those half-dozen silent, determined-looking men—the thews and sinews of the nefarious syndicate. They were there for a purpose, that was evident; and it was almost as evident that the purpose had something to do with Culberson's black designs against Buffalo Bill.

The frieze of the room below was formed of painted playing-cards. Resting a finger on one of the keys at his side, the scout saw one of the cards in the frieze change from the ace of clubs to the jack of diamonds. The change was made without the slightest noise of working mechanism.

A light dawned on the scout.

A man posted at that hole in the floor, above the heads of the players at the table, could read a victim's hand, touch the keys and convey an exact duplicate of the hand to the frieze—for the benefit, of course, of one of Culberson's sharpers.

"A fine layout Culberson has here," thought Buffalo Bill grimly. "This, I reckon, is one of the 'mysteries' of the place which Brown was talking about. And I'm supposed to be talking with Culberson this minute, trying to browbeat him into giving up some of his ill-gotten gains!"

He laughed inwardly at the folly of trying to get at a man like Culberson, there in his own hangout, with his men in waiting, by such empty things as threats.

Quietly the scout got to his feet and laid a hand on Cayuse's shoulder.

"Lead on, boy," he whispered, "and go carefully."

There are six men in the room below us, and one false step would precipitate all kinds of trouble. We must find the place where Bratton is talking with Culberson."

"Him heap hard to find," answered the boy, in the same low whisper.

"Where did you overhear Culberson talking with the girl?"

"Bymby we find um stairs. Down-stairs, close by, we find um door with curtain. On the other side curtain Cayuse hear um black-haired squaw talk with gambler chief."

"Well, lead me to the stairs. I've got to get down them and see what's back of that curtain."

Two more doors were opened and closed, and, after passing the second, they came out into a blinding glare of light, which ascended to them through an open stairway.

From the head of the flight they could look down into a richly furnished hall. This hall was lined with curtained openings. But still there were no sounds anywhere of voices or of the movement of human forms.

"Deuced queer we can't hear something of what must be going on," murmured the scout. "The members of the syndicate seem to crawl about and do their evil work like so many snakes. Which curtain hides the room where you discovered the girl and her father talking, Cayuse?"

The Piute leaned out over the banisters and pointed.

"You stay here," said the scout. "I'm going down and see what I can discover. We have been a long time getting into this den, and there's no telling what may have happened to Bratton in the meantime. Be ready to

bear a hand in case I stir up more trouble than I can take care of."

"Cayuse ready," whispered the Piute; "him always ready, Pa-e-has-ka."

"Right you are, my boy; you never failed me yet. Just remember, though, that we're after money—dinero—thirty thousand dollars of it. Whatever happens, we must get that."

Without waiting for the boy to answer, Buffalo Bill stepped out on the stair-landing, and passed noiselessly down the padded steps to the bottom.

Crossing the hall from the foot of the stairs, he was on the point of reaching out, catching the swinging damask curtain and pulling it aside, when it was abruptly brushed away, and a form stepped out into the hall and confronted him.

It was the form of Nina Culberson, and she was carrying a small Boston bag in one hand.

The girl gave a quick start of surprise, and seemed on the point of uttering a scream.

As for the scout, he drew back, undecided what to do next, but making himself ready for whatever was to happen.

"Why—what—what——" The girl did not scream, but began to speak in a faltering way that proved how much she had been taken at a loss. "What are you doing here, Buffalo Bill?" she asked, getting the whip-hand of herself. "I thought you were talking with my father?"

"He left me for a little while," replied the scout, taking his cue from the girl's words, "and I started to look around the place. Where's the room I was in a while ago? These curtains all look alike to me."

The girl's black eyes snapped with suspicion as she peered into his face. The suspicion vanished suddenly, and she gave an amused laugh.

"The last room on the left," said she, pointing along the hall.

"Much obliged," said the scout, starting away.

He turned to the curtain that closed the entrance to the last room on that side of the hall, he looked back and saw the girl watching him. At the moment he turned, she faced about hastily, and mounted the stairs toward the upper floor, where Cayuse was waiting.

"Cayuse is booked for as big a surprise as I had," thought the scout. "I hope he'll get out of it as well."

The course events had taken made it very clear to the scout that the sharp eyes of Nina Culberson had been completely deceived. She believed that the man she had just come across in the hall was the same one whom she had met at the entrance to the gambling-den and conducted inside for a talk with Nervy Nat.

That the girl was shrewd, the scout, who was a proficient reader of character, knew very well. He did not wonder that her eyes had fooled her judgment, but he *did* wonder that her ears had not detected the trick. There was a pronounced difference between the scout's voice and the detective's.

That Nina Culberson had allowed this vocal discrepancy to pass unheeded proved one of two things: either she was in a state of nervous excitement that made her wits less keen than usual, or else she knew more than appeared on the surface, and was playing a part.

These inferences flashed through the scout's brain during the brief interval he stood before the damask curtain,



ready to push it aside and undertake his part in that little drama of the spider and the fly.

Dismissing the girl from his thoughts, he listened for sounds from beyond the curtain. He heard no voices, but the fall of feet on thick carpet came to his ears.

Stealthily the scout drew aside the curtain and stared into the apartment before him.

It was a magnificently furnished room that met his eyes, replete with wall-mirrors, potted palms, and rich hangings. Rugs lay over the polished floor, and a heavy, sensuous odor, not unpleasant, filled the apartment.

In the center of the room stood a table. Beside the table sat Bratton, head bowed forward on his arms.

Near Bratton, eying him much as a terrier would watch a cornered rat, stood a stout man in evening clothes. This man was undoubtedly Culberson.

Culberson's back was partly turned toward the scout. Unaware of the latter's presence, the gambler continued, for a space, to stare at the silent form of the detective.

On the table, in front of Bratton, lay something white that looked like fragments of a broken egg-shell.

While the scout watched, Culberson took from his pocket a silk handkerchief and carefully dusted the white fragments from the table. Having finished this small task, he thrust the handkerchief back into his pocket, and leaned forward until his lips brushed against the detective's ear.

"Buffalo Bill!" he murmured, in a hissing whisper.

No response came from Bratton, and he did not make a move to indicate that he had heard the words.

Culberson straightened up, and in the mirror facing him the scout saw a look of mocking triumph cross the gambler's face.

The next moment the blackleg had bent down again, and had thrust one hand into the breast of the detective's coat. For a few moments the hand groped there, then slowly withdrew itself with a long, folded paper clasped in the fingers.

Undoubtedly that was the "list" which Nina Culberson had said her father was so anxious to obtain.

Pushing the curtain farther back, the scout stepped into the room and reached the gambler in two strides. The next moment he had grabbed him by the shoulders.

"So that's your game, Culberson?" hissed Buffalo Bill. "I'll trouble you for that paper."

Had a lighted bomb suddenly exploded in the room, the gambler could not have been more startled. For once, at least, Nervy Nat had been caught at a decided disadvantage.

As he whirled about, Buffalo Bill caught the folded paper deftly out of his hand.

If Culberson had been surprised at the sudden interruption of his nefarious work, he was doubly surprised when his eyes rested on the scout.

An oath fell from his lips, and he staggered back against the table.

"Who—who are you?" he demanded.

"My name is Cody," returned the scout, conjuring a revolver into his hand with a quickness that defied the eye; "but I am better known, perhaps, as Buffalo Bill."

There was a brief period of silence, during which Culberson's nerve returned to him.

"Then," said he, indicating Bratton with a gesture, "who is this man?"

"Buffalo Bill number two," laughed the scout.

"Ah!" and Culberson showed his teeth in a snakelike

smile, "then you have attempted to work a hogus-pocus on me to-night?"

"We took this course to call your bluff, that's all."

"Bluff?" The gambler elevated his eyebrows. "I don't understand you."

"If you don't," was the curt response, "you never will."

"How did you get in here?"

"That's a useless question. The important point is that I am here. Careful!" The gambler's white hand had darted toward the breast of his black coat. "Keep that hand at your side, Culberson!" the scout added threateningly.

The hand dropped as Buffalo Bill's revolver was lifted and leveled.

"I'll have no shooting here," scowled Culberson.

"There'll be none," said the scout, "if you prove to be in an accommodating mood. What happens here to-night, Culberson, depends largely upon yourself."

"Just what do you mean by that?"

Culberson's eyes narrowed with suspicion as he asked the question.

"You'll understand later, when—— Now, what do you mean by that?"

The last demand was made because of a fluttering of the gambler's right hand. It was a stealthy, almost imperceptible movement, but it did not escape the scout.

"What have I done?" queried Culberson innocently.

"You made a signal of some kind."

The scout was standing with his back to the curtained doorway. By looking into the opposite mirrors, he was able to command a good view of the curtain without taking his eyes off Culberson; but, in order to be on

the safe side, he shifted his position so that his back would be to the wall.

"If anything further goes wrong here, Culberson," he went on, "you'll find that this trigger works on a hair. I couldn't miss you at this range."

"If anything further goes wrong?" asked Culberson. "You talk like a human puzzle. What has gone wrong, so far?"

The scout nodded toward Bratton.

"My friend there doesn't seem to be as chipper as he was when we separated, at ten-thirty, this evening. What have you done to him?"

"He's all right," answered Culberson coolly, "a little indisposed, that is all."

"I don't intend to become 'indisposed' in the same way," said the scout grimly. "What we want of you, Culberson, is the thirty thousand dollars stolen from Sanderson. Hand that over, and we'll get out."

"This is a hold-up, then?" sneered the gambler.

"Yes, if you want to call it that. We won't haggle about the terms you use. I'm not in a very amiable mood just now, and the environment here is not to my taste. Where's the money? Fork it over, and I and my friend will get out. Meanwhile," and his eyes glimmered dangerously, "if one of your six ruffians tries to butt in here before I get that money, I'll turn this gilt-and-tinsel palace of yours into a morgue."

"I haven't got the money by me, Buffalo Bill," parried Culberson. "I'd be a fool to keep so much money in these rooms."

"You'd be a fool if you let that money get out of your hands, considering the circumstances. I want it."



If you haven't it about your clothes, send some one to get it."

"I tell you I——"

"Is your life worth thirty thousand dollars?" The scout's voice was like velvet, but it cut like steel. "That's what it means. You tried to get me last night, while I was walking from the railroad-station to the Plympton House. The result of that skirmish left me a trifle savage. If you know when you're well off, you'll——"

Something happened then—something against which it would have been impossible for the scout to guard himself.

A white object dropped downward. The glimpse the scout had of it was transitory and elusive. So far as he could gather, the object was small and globular in shape.

Striking upon the revolver he was holding, the object burst into fragments with a slight crunching sound, and immediately an overpowering odor was released. The stifling smell arose in the scout's face, and sent him, half-strangled, reeling back against the wall.

It was the same odor, intensified by a hundredfold, which he had detected upon pushing aside the curtain of the room for the first time.

Realization that the fumes were those of a narcotic of tremendous power ran through the scout's numbing brain. He made a desperate attempt to pull himself together, but found that he had lost control of his limbs. Slowly he crumbled downward, his blurring eyes fixed on the figure in the evening clothes standing in front of him. Culberson had taken the silk handkerchief from his pocket, and was pressing it over his nose and mouth.

This much the scout saw, and then a heavy blackness rolled over him, and he lost consciousness.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE STONE CELL.

Buffalo Bill opened his eyes to find himself engulfed in a deep gloom which his sight could not penetrate. His limbs were not bound, however, and for this small concession he was properly grateful.

His brain felt dull and heavy, and there was a sensation of nausea at the pit of his stomach—no doubt, the after-effects of the drug that had overpowered him so suddenly and completely in the lighted room.

His hands fluttered about his waist. His revolvers were gone, but that was no more than he had expected. It would have been folly in Culberson to leave the scout in possession of his weapons.

The folded paper had also vanished. After discovering this, the scout sat up, to make a more thorough examination of his pockets.

The stir he caused brought a hail from somewhere near him in the darkness.

"Hello! Who are you?"

It was Bratton's voice.

"Can't you guess, Bratton?" returned the scout, with grim humor.

"'Pon my soul if it isn't Buffalo Bill!" exclaimed Bratton. "Why, old man, I was just lying here wondering how long it would be before you showed up and snaked me out of the place."

"I was just making a try for the money, with the intention of getting both of us clear afterward, when

some one overhead dropped a shellful of dope down on me."

"Ah! The same thing happened to me. Say, pard, this ruse of yours seems to have gigged back on us."

"So far, Bratton," was the cool response, "we have certainly had the worst of it; but the last card hasn't been played yet. We'll have our innings before long."

"I wish I knew when! Whoever heard of such a heathen way of putting a man down and out? Eggshells loaded with dope! When one of the shells is smashed in front of a man, the stuff inside goes right after his five senses, and wipes them out. Powerful stuff, all right."

"Something new in the line of narcotics, I reckon. The stuff doesn't smell like any drug I ever encountered before. Its quick action is one of the most surprising things about it. Are your feet and hands free, Bratton?"

"Yes."

"And your guns gone?"

"That's the way I stack up. That folded document I had in my pocket is gone, too."

"I know something about that. As it happened, I entered the room while Culberson was taking the paper away from you. When he took it he took it from me."

"Much good it will do him!" muttered the detective. "It was a faked-up list. The correct list was left in my room at the Plympton House."

"Good! But I don't think the list amounts to much, anyway. You can probably remember the names on it."

"Unless I'm mightily mistaken, Buffalo Bill, all Culberson wanted of the paper was to find out how much of a line I had on him and his pals."

"That was probably the reason he was so eager to get hold of the paper, Bratton. Have you any idea where we are?"

"Not the slightest. My wits were wool-gathering when I was brought here."

The scout hunted in his pockets for his match-case, but it had vanished along with some more of his personal property.

"Got any matches, Bratton?" he inquired.

"No; Culberson stripped me clean of everything I had in my pockets."

"Same here," went on the scout, getting to his feet. "If we find out anything about this place, it will have to be by the sense of touch. We've got to get out of here, if it's a physical possibility; and before we lay our plans we'll have to find out what sort of a room we're in. Grope around the walls, Bratton, and see what you can discover."

They began their blind groping, finally tracing the circuit of the chamber and coming together in the middle of one of the side walls.

"We're in a stone room," announced the detective.

"A room with an iron door," said the scout, "and the door is as fast as a steel bolt on the outside can make it."

"In the basement, aren't we?"

"Undoubtedly. You would hardly find stone walls in any other part of a frame building like this."

"And they aren't necessary here, except as they help out the gamblers in some of their lawless doings."

"It must be that Culberson had these walls put in here for his own purposes. The floor and sides seem solid



enough. I wonder how the ceiling will bear examination?"

"If we're in the basement, Buffalo Bill, we're under the floor of the saloon. Get upon my shoulders, and find out what the floor is like."

Mounted on Bratton's back, the scout passed his hands over the ceiling of the prison chamber, and found it to be covered with metal, presumably sheet-iron.

"We're hard and fast here," muttered the scout, as the detective let him down, "and we might as well take things easy and await developments."

They sat down on the hard floor, Bratton giving vent to an exclamation and changing his position almost as soon as he was seated.

"What's the matter, Bratton?" asked the scout.

"I sat down on something." As he spoke he was fumbling around with his hands. "A piece of hose," he added, "coming out of the floor in the corner and lying across the flagging."

"Hose!" repeated the scout. "What's that for?"

He examined the bit of hose for himself, and found it to be about three feet long and an inch in diameter. He tried to pull it out of the floor, but it was securely fastened between the corner stones, and refused to come away under his hands.

"We'll watch that piece of hose, Bratton," said the scout. "Unless I'm wide of my trail, it is going to form the basis of some new deviltry leveled against us."

Taking up as comfortable a posture as he could, and leaning his back against the stone wall, the scout remarked:

"We might kill time while we're awaiting develop-

ments by telling each other of our experiences in this den of thieves. What happened to you, Bratton?"

"Well," returned the detective, "I met the girl at the front entrance, and she led me up a stairway into a dark hall. I heard her rap three times in a peculiar manner, and a light appeared suddenly. Then I saw a door in front of us with a little panel that slid back, leaving an opening just large enough for a man to look through. A pair of eyes took us in, the door swung ajar, and we entered that luxuriously appointed hall, lined on both sides with doorways and swinging curtains.

"The girl was very pleasant in her talk, and did not seem to detect any difference between me and the real Buffalo Bill. I knew my voice was the one thing that would give me away, so I used it as little as possible.

"I was conducted to a room, and in a little while Nat Culberson showed up. He wore a dress suit, and, in the black clothes, looked more like a big, fat, overgrown spider than anything else. He had spun his web, and I suppose he thought he had me fast.

"He said he was glad to see me, but was sorry I had come to Durango on a fool's errand. My old pard, he said, had got somewhat obstreperous, in his place, and had to be dragged out, but it was nothing that ought to bring the enmity of Buffalo Bill down on Culberson and his outfit.

"I told the gambler that it wasn't Nomad who was bringing me there, but Sanderson, and that I wanted the money that had been unlawfully taken from Sanderson. If he didn't give it up, I threatened to lay the matter before the police, swearing out warrants against the men whose names I had on that list.

"That made Culberson squirm; but I reckon, from

what took place afterward, that he was only putting it on. Holding all the trump cards, as he did, it wasn't possible for him to be stampeded.

"He begged and blustered, and you would have thought, to hear him, that he was caught in my trap, instead of I in his. Finally he said he would make a deal with me. I was to turn over the list to him, and agree not to proceed against him, or any of his pals, and he was to give me the thirty thousand dollars. I asked him where the money was. With that, he clapped his hands, and Nina Culberson came in, with a Boston bag in her hands. At his request, she opened the bag and pulled out thirty packages of one thousand dollars each. You can bet, pard, my mouth watered at the sight of all that money, and I got the foolish idea that, perhaps, in spite of what your Piute pard had discovered, we were really going to get our hands on the Olathe funds.

"Having shown me the money, Culberson told the girl to put it back in the bag, and to go away and wait until he called her again. The girl left, taking the bag with her, and Culberson stood in front of me, haggling over the terms of our prospective trade.

"And it was then and there that something dropped. I only saw the thing for a second, and it looked like an egg falling from the ceiling. When it hit the table it smashed into fragments, and a wave of brain-paralyzing fumes struck me full in the face.

"The last I saw of Culberson he was standing in front of me, with a silk handkerchief over his mouth and nose, his eyes glittering like a wolf's; then the lights went out, and I took a trip to the land of Nod. When I revived I was down here with you."

Buffalo Bill was deeply impressed with the detective's

recital. To the scout, the most important thing was that Boston bag. When he met the girl in the hall, if he had known that bag contained the money, he would have laid a far different course.

Where had the girl gone with the Boston bag? She had started up-stairs toward the third floor with it. But why?

While the scout was thinking over this phase of the question, a low, taunting laugh reechoed through the stone room.

"What's the matter with you, Bratton?" demanded the scout, thinking his companion had given vent to the incongruous ripple of mirth.

"That's just what I was going to ask you, Buffalo Bill," answered Bratton. "Wasn't that you?"

"Certainly not! Probably Culberson——"

"Right you are," came a voice through the gloom; "it was Culberson, otherwise Nervy Nat, the gambler. The two Buffalo Bills have just fifteen minutes to live. Is there anything you would like to say before you cross the divide?"

Where Culberson's voice came from was a mystery for a few moments. It seemed to be in the room, so distinct and clear were the spoken words, but the scout and the detective knew this could not be the case.

"Where are you, Culberson?" asked the scout.

"Near enough to talk with you," was the response, "yet far enough away so you can't get at me. You're a pair of easy marks, you two, and you made a bad mistake when you thought you could go up against my game and beat me out. But I'm not so foolish as to think I could turn you loose, after what has happened, without having my syndicate experience a lot of trouble. As I



just said, you two will cross the divide in fifteen minutes unless——"

The voice hesitated.

"Unless what?" asked the scout.

"Unless each of you takes a solemn oath, if set free, that he will drop Sanderson and that thirty thousand dollars, not make use of the knowledge he has obtained, and not make a move against me and my men, or cause such a move to be made. Will you men take an oath?"

"No!" came decidedly from both the scout and the detective.

"I didn't think you would," came coolly from the gambler, "and so all preparations have been made for your taking-off."

While the last words were echoing through the room, Bratton had reached out excitedly, caught the scout's arm, and drawn him forward. At the same time, the scout felt the end of the rubber hose brushing against his hand.

The voice of Culberson was coming through the hose! Bratton had made the discovery. The hose was nothing more or less than a speaking-tube.

The scout gave a short laugh as he took the hose in his hands.

"Why don't you come in here and talk with us face to face, Culberson?" he asked.

"I know when I'm well off," was the curt rejoinder.

"And so you use a speaking-tube!"

"I'm using the pipe as a speaking-tube, but that isn't what it was designed for. Have you anything to say before you cash in?"

"Nothing, except that I shall live to bring you to book for all your villainy. Don't forget that for a minute."

"Talk is cheap!" sneered Culberson. "You have picked out your fate, and on your own shoulders rest the responsibility!"

"That kind of talk is cheap, too. What did you take our matches away from us for?"

"It will be dangerous for you to use matches in there after a few moments—dangerous to this building and the furnishings it contains. Good-by."

"Wait a minute!" called the scout. "What has your daughter done with that money which——"

The words died away on his lips, and he dropped the end of the hose with a gasp. A wave of the same sense-destroying vapor from which he had suffered a while before had leaped from the end of the tube. The vapor was not so strong as that released from the shell, but it was strong enough to fling the scout back dizzily against the wall. Bratton likewise detected the insidious odor of the deadly fumes.

"Culberson is filling this room with that poisonous vapor!" he exclaimed.

"That's his game," returned the scout. "Shut up in here as we are, it won't be long until the room becomes filled. In a small quantity, I suppose, those fumes merely act as a narcotic, but in larger quantities, and breathed for any length of time, no doubt they will prove the end of us."

Again catching up the hose, the scout tried desperately to compress the end of it and prevent the escape of the vapor. In this he was only partly successful. The mouth of the hose could not be entirely closed, and the fumes, forced through it from some reservoir, under pressure, hissed sibilantly out into the chamber.

"The infernal assassin!" ground out Bratton, between

his teeth. "Before I will save my life at the expense of what I believe to be my duty, I will let him smother me here, like a rat in a trap. But he will be called to account. No fiend like he is can long walk the earth without being called on to pay the penalty of his evil work."

Suddenly the scout had an idea. It forced itself upon him while he was holding the hose and trying to compress the end of it with his fingers. Instantly he started to carry the plan out.

His groping hands had already made an extended examination of the iron door leading into the stone cell, and he knew there was a narrow space at the door's bottom.

Creeping to the door and pulling the hose along with him, he thrust the end of it under the bottom edge of the iron barrier. The hose, he found to his satisfaction, was long enough to reach from the corner, where it entered the room, to the doorway, and to extend for a few inches beyond the door.

Thus, with the hose in its new position, instead of emptying its poisonous vapor into the room, it released it *outside*.

With a long gasp for breath, the scout threw himself over against the wall, face down and lips to the floor. The air was clearer at the bottom of the cell.

"What have you done, Buffalo Bill?" asked Bratton feebly.

"Whisper," cautioned the scout huskily; "don't talk in a loud voice. I have gained a little time, Bratton, and perhaps we can pull off another ruse and win our freedom. The hose was long enough so I could push the end of it under the door. That's where it is now,

and the vapor is emptying itself into another part of the basement."

"Jupiter!" muttered Bratton, "that was a thought for your life."

"It may have been a thought that will save our lives, Bratton. There's quite a little poisonous vapor in the room, but not enough to knock us out. The fact that the room has tight walls will keep the vapor away from us."

"What a 'plant' this is!" growled the detective. "Culberson and his men seem to have every facility for committing any crime from theft to murder. But what's your other ruse?"

"We must let Culberson, who is undoubtedly listening somewhere to all that goes on in here, think we are being overcome. Sprawl out on your back and begin to groan. Put your heart into it, Bratton, and see that your groans become feebler and feebler. Let us see how good an actor you are."

Thereupon the detective fell over and gave vent to a despairing wail.

The scout seconded his efforts. Crawling to the iron door, Buffalo Bill beat on it with his hands.

"Culberson, Culberson!" he gasped chokingly, "it can't be that you are such a fiend as to kill us like this! Open the door! Open the door! Let us out!"

The scout's imitation of a man in the last throes was remarkably well done. As a proof that it filled the bill, Culberson's taunting, triumphant laugh came through the tube with the fumes. The voice seemed more distant than before, but the words he spoke were quite distinct:

"You have chosen your own fate, now make the most



of it! This is what it means to cross the trail of Nat Culberson!"

For several minutes the farce proceeded, the groans and cries of the two men in the chamber becoming weaker and weaker by swift degrees.

"Now," whispered the scout to the detective, "give a loud gasp, roll close to the door, rise to your knees, and become silent."

Bratton put his heart into one last, tearing groan, then floundered to the scout's side. Then, together, without sound of voice or movement, they waited.

Distant footsteps were heard outside, stealthily approaching.

"Thunder!" exclaimed a voice, plainly that of the gambler, "that stone chamber must be chuck full of the stuff. It seems to have seeped out and spilled all over the cellar. I thought the room was tighter than that."

"It came from around the door, Nat," answered another voice.

"Well, move quickly, Hammersmith. Mind you don't strike a match. With the cellar full of the stuff, we'd have an explosion and a fire here in half a second."

The voices and footsteps had been approaching steadily.

Culberson and Hammersmith gained the door, on the outside, and the scout and the detective could hear one of them fumbling with a bolt. The scout's hand closed tensely on his companion's arm.

"When the door opens," he breathed in Bratton's ear, "you jump for one of them, and I'll take the other. Quick work will be necessary if we carry the day. There

are at least five more desperate men in this place who will come to Culberson's aid as soon as the fight begins."

Bratton did not reply orally, but pressed the scout's hand, to signify that he had understood instructions, and was eager to begin carrying them out.

"Hadn't we better hold our hands a little, Nat?" came the voice of Hammersmith, from outside. "We ought to be sure they're done for before the door is opened."

"We can't wait," answered Culberson. "If we stay here long, we'll be in the same condition they are. I'm going to swing the door now."

Suiting his action to the word, he pulled the heavy door open. The scout and the detective, who had risen to their feet, could just make out two figures by the aid of the light at the head of the cellar stairs.

As they leaped forward, the scout at Culberson and the detective at Hammersmith, wild shouts of amazement and alarm burst from the two gamblers.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE FIGHT IN THE DEN.

Small wonder that Culberson and Hammersmith were astounded. They had expected to find two men who were breathing their last; instead of that, they were set upon by a pair who leaped at them with all the desperation of cornered wildcats.

One echoing shout was all the gamblers gave. Hardly had that passed their lips before tense, steellike fingers had closed about their throats, and they were overborne and dashed to the hard floor of the cellar.

The two gamblers struggled, but the advantage in every way was with the scout and the detective. A few blows, well delivered, took the fight out of each of them.

From the breast of Culberson's coat the scout pulled a small, nickel-plated revolver; and from Hammersmith's hip pocket Bratton secured a similar weapon.

"These will help," said the scout sententiously.

"What are we going to do with the scoundrels?" asked Bratton. "They ought to be bound and gagged, but we haven't anything to do it with, and there isn't much time to hunt for material."

"Throw them into the stone room and bolt the door," said the scout. "They hadn't ought to object to taking a little of their own medicine."

"Bully!" approved Bratton.

The half-unconscious gamblers were dragged into the chamber, and the door closed and bolted on them.

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This done, the scout turned to give further attention to his surroundings and the perils that still threatened.

The cellar was evidently—apart from the nefarious use to which Culberson put it—used as a storeroom for the drinking-resort on the first floor. Kegs and barrels could be faintly seen in the distant darkness.

A stairway, off to the left and against the side wall of the basement, led upward to a door. As the scout's eyes mounted the stairway, a man showed himself, outlined against the lighted background.

"Hello!" the man called.

"Hello yourself," answered the scout, masking his voice with husky gruffness.

"Was that you let off that yell, Nat?" asked the man.

"No. What would I be yelling for? Who's with you?"

"All of us who were waiting in the poker-room—excepting Hammersmith. He went down with you, didn't he?"

"Yes. Come on down here, you fellows."

Bratton wondered why the scout had said that, when it would have been just as easy to send the men away.

As the scout spoke, he caught the detective's arm and jerked him against the wall.

"When they get down here," he whispered quickly in Bratton's ear, "and the stairs are clear, we must bolt for the floor above."

The detective understood then why the scout had called the men down. He wanted to clear the upper floors of enemies, so that he and Bratton would be free to make the move they thought best.

But the fellow who was doing the talking had already



detected a difference in the voice of the pretended gambler.

"You're not Culberson!" the fellow shouted. "That voice can't fool me!"

The men, with one accord, took flying leaps from the stairs. In less time than it takes to tell it, Buffalo Bill and Bratton were assailed from all sides.

It was another fight in the dark, and perhaps with some of the very same scoundrels who had shot out the street-light and attacked Bratton before. And, as before, the darkness favored the scout and the detective to a great extent.

It was a fist-fight almost entirely. Right and left the two escaping men swung their clenched hands, struggling through the desperate forms by which they were surrounded and slowly gaining the stairs.

To the scout fell the task of settling the interference of the last man to retard their progress toward the upper floor. Bratton was already half-way up the stairs, and Buffalo Bill, at hand-grips with the most persistent of the gamblers, jerked Culberson's revolver from his pocket and gave the fellow a stunning blow with the butt of it.

The man tumbled backward, and the scout whirled and dashed after Bratton. At the top of the steps they slammed the door and shoved a bolt.

"Safe—for a while," puffed Buffalo Bill. "The rascals will get out of the cellar, all right, but it will take them a few minutes. We must make the most of those few minutes, Bratton."

"To get away?" returned the detective. "I reckon we can do that, with ground to spare."

"To get away, yes—but we must get the money first!"

"The longer we stay here, the more risk we run," demurred Bratton. "I wouldn't go through what I have again for thirty million, let alone thirty thousand! We don't know anything about the traps and pitfalls that fill this robbers' hangout, or——"

"Skip, then, if you want to," cut in the scout; "but our work and peril will all count for nothing if we leave here without that money. I'm going to have a try for it, no matter what happens."

"But the girl had it in that satchel," went on Bratton, "and the girl is probably a good way from here by now."

"We don't know that, and it is something for us to make sure of."

Steps could be heard on the cellar stairs.

"The handy boys down there are waking up," announced Bratton. "In half a minute they will be breaking down the door."

"This way, then, if you're going with me!"

The scout whirled and raced along what seemed to be a hall. Presently he came to an outside door that looked upon Juakin Street.

"Jupiter!" muttered Bratton, who was tight at his heels. "This is where Nina Culberson met me when I came to the hangout."

"Then lead the way up-stairs," said the scout. "Stop at the door where the man looked at you through the panel."

The hallway was dark, but Bratton, remembering the course along which the girl had conducted him, climbed the carpeted stairs hurriedly, and stopped a few yards from the head of the flight.

"Here's the door," he whispered, "and it's open."

"That's the way those men must have left it when

they heard Culberson and Hammersmith give those yells in the basement. They were in too much of a hurry to get down-stairs to close the door after them. It's a good thing for us. Lead on, Bratton. Quick on it, man! We've a lot to do and not much time to do it in."

Holding to the scout's arm, the detective pushed into the room occupied by the lookout. Groping for the knob of another door, he turned it and pushed open the door.

Instantly a glare of light burst on their eyes, and they found themselves in the long, luxuriously appointed hall with the curtained openings.

"Here we are again," said the scout grimly, "but the circumstances are somewhat different. We'll look in every room for the girl, and, if she isn't on this floor, we'll look on the floor above. When I saw her last she was climbing toward the roof."

They saved time in their search by dividing their labors. One took one side of the hall, and the other the other side.

It sufficed merely to push aside the curtain of each room and give a hasty glance within. All the rooms were brightly lighted, and if the girl had been in any of them she could have been instantly seen.

No success attended this searching of the rooms. When success struck them, it came so suddenly as almost to take the scout's breath.

Working rearward along the wall, the two men suddenly paused. At the foot of the stairs leading to the loft above, but screened a little from sight by an intervening couch, lay the girl they were searching for.

She was prostrate on the thick carpet, the Boston bag

beside her, and a scattering heap of white shell-fragments all around her.

"Well!" muttered the astounded detective. "This shell-game seems to work both ways."

"Cover your nose and mouth," warned the scout, "or we'll have the shell-game working three ways."

He lifted his coat to his face, and stared down at the girl, who was plainly unconscious.

"How do you think that happened, Buffalo Bill?" asked Bratton, his voice coming in smothered tones from behind his handkerchief.

"I pass."

"She must have been carrying some of the loaded shells, and tumbled down-stairs with them."

"Perhaps; but this is the thing we want." The scout stooped and picked up the satchel. "It makes little difference how it got into our hands, so long as we have it."

"Luck!" jubilated Bratton, watching while the scout sat down on the couch and took the Boston bag between his knees. "Cody-luck, that's what it is."

With one hand Buffalo Bill opened the Boston bag, then he dropped it like a hot potato.

"Empty!" he muttered, with a blank look at the detective.

"Empty?" gasped the other.

"That's right, Bratton. Are you sure the money was in the satchel?"

"I'll take my oath, it was!"

"And that's the same satchel?"

"If it isn't the same one, it's an exact mate to it. I don't—"

The detective was interrupted in startling fashion. A



cry came down from the third floor, and brought both Buffalo Bill and Bratton to their feet with a jump.

"Pa-e-has-ka! Come——"

The voice ceased as though the speaker's throat had been sharply compressed.

"It's Little Cayuse!" cried the scout, leaping for the stairs. "After me, Bratton!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE THIRTY THOUSAND DOLLARS.

Little Cayuse, it will be recalled, had been left at the top of the stairs leading to the third floor of the ill-omened house. While the scout went down to look for Bratton, the Piute boy was to remain in hiding on the upper floor.

Cayuse watched the scout descend to the second story, and he was still peering through the banisters when the scout had his unexpected meeting with Nina Culberson.

For an instant the boy held his breath; then, seeing how readily the quick-witted scout had turned the meeting to his own advantage, the boy muttered his satisfaction under his breath.

Pa-e-has-ka was the idol of the little Piute's heart, and whenever he did a particularly clever or brave piece of work, admiration swelled in the boy's breast.

When Nina Culberson started for the stairs with the evident intention of climbing them, Cayuse withdrew quickly into the darkness. Some empty boxes stood in one corner of the room, near the top of the stairs, and he crawled among them.

In view of what happened, it was well that he took this precaution.

The girl came up the stairs slowly. As soon as she had reached the room at the top, she ignited the lamp and flooded the bare apartment with light.

Peering out from among the boxes, Little Cayuse could see that the girl was tremendously excited about some-

thing. Probably, the boy thought, it was the meeting with Buffalo Bill.

Crossing the room to a door, the girl pulled it open.

"Yank!" she called, in a hissing whisper.

Some one stirred in the room beyond the open door, and presently stepped out into the light at the girl's side. The man was tall and lanky, and had a villainous face. In one hand he carried a small basket containing half a dozen round white objects. He handled the basket very carefully.

"What's wanted?" he asked, in a low voice.

"You've been looking down into the room where dad was talking with Buffalo Bill?" the girl asked hurriedly.

"Sure."

"Well, did dad leave the room, and did Buffalo Bill go out into the hall?"

Yank stared blankly at the girl.

"Answer!" murmured the girl, with nervous impatience.

"Why, neither of 'em has left the room," said Yank. "I dropped one of the knockout-balls onto the table in front of Buffalo Bill just a minute ago, and he's in a trance by this time."

The girl started back, her beautiful face twisting into a tigerish look.

"There's something wrong going on," she said. "Buffalo Bill is trying to double-cross us. I just met him in the hall."

"Ye couldn't have met him in the hall," declared Yank bluntly. "It isn't likely he could be in two places at the same time, and I *know* he is out of his wits, down there in the old man's private room."

The girl stamped her foot.

"I met him, I tell you!" she declared.

"Well, what's the answer, then?" asked Yank. "I'm no hand at guessing such puzzles."

"The answer is that there are *two* Buffalo Bills loose in the hangout."

"Go on! You're looney."

"I'm not. Dad called me into the room to show the money, then I went out into the faro-room, to wait until he had got through with his work. Thinking he had had time, I left the faro-room, and met Buffalo Bill just on the point of coming into it. It gave me a jolt, I can tell you! Buffalo Bill said that dad had left him for a little while, and that he had walked out to look around the place, and had got mixed up, and didn't know how to get back again. I told him where to go, and then came up here to talk with you. Some kind of a game is being worked against us, but I've got the money here in this bag—and they'll not get it away from me."

"Thunder!" growled Yank. "The king of scouts is a hard proposition to tackle. I told Nat that some time ago, just after that old trapper was thrown out of here—"

"He may be a hard proposition," cut in the girl incisively, her eyes snapping; "but he's not too hard for Nat Culberson. Go back into your room. Dad may want you to use another of those white shells. I'll go back down the stairs, and see if I can help any from the hall. I don't like the looks of things, Yank!"

"Nor I, either. A couple of these will be enough, and I'll leave the rest of 'em here. If I'd slip and fall on that basket, it would put me out of business."



Yank set the basket down on the floor, and took out two of the white balls.

"Haven't heard anything from Yount, have you?"

"Not a thing. He'll watch the roof, keen enough, and if any one tries to come on us from that way, he'll report, all right."

"How that other man got into this building is what surprises me," murmured the girl, moving back toward the stairway with the satchel.

Yank vanished, and softly closed the door behind him.

Having heard all of this conversation, Cayuse, being a lad of nimble wit, had drawn many inferences from it.

The man Yank was on the third floor, to help out in Culberson's villainous plot against Buffalo Bill. It was pure luck that had kept the scout and the boy from entering the room where Yank was hiding. The room lay beyond the head of the stairs, and to this alone was the scout's and the boy's good fortune attributable.

Cayuse also inferred from what he had overheard that Bratton had already been captured, and that Buffalo Bill himself would soon be set upon by the wily Culberson.

The references to the round, white objects puzzled the Piute. Yank had called them "knockout-balls," and had told of dropping one of them into the room where Bratton was and putting him out of business. Yank also had handled the basket very carefully, and had said that if he happened to fall on it he himself would be put out of business.

If the white balls were "big medicine," Cayuse wondered why he could not use them himself. Nina Culberson was going to give her father aid against Pa-e-has-ka. If Cayuse, in some way, could hold her back, he would be helping Pa-e-has-ka just that much.

The girl was hurrying noiselessly down the stairs, and whatever the boy did he must do quickly.

Gliding out from among the boxes, he ran to the basket and took out all the white balls that remained in it; then he went on to the top of the stairs.

The girl had reached the bottom, and was standing there in a listening attitude. Lifting the white balls, Cayuse flung them at her, and ducked back out of sight.

He heard the slight crunching of the shells as they broke, and a sound as of some one falling. Then he ventured to take a look, and was astounded to see the girl lying prone upon the carpet, motionless and silent.

Ai, there was no doubt about the white balls being big medicine!

Cayuse was as full of superstition as an egg is of meat, and a feeling of panic stirred in him. But he bravely overcame the feeling, and darted down the stairs.

The Boston bag, which lay beside the unconscious white girl, was the thing that claimed his attention. He had prevented the black-haired squaw from going to the aid of the gambler chief, and this had been a good stroke for Buffalo Bill. Now his thoughts traveled to the money which, the scout had told him, must be recovered at any cost. The girl had told Yank that she had the money, and if she had spoken truly, then it must be in the satchel.

Cayuse caught up the grip, opened it, and his eyes grew big at the sight of the wealth it contained. Closing the bag, he started to remount the stairs with it; then his native cunning asserted itself. He would take the money, but he would leave the bag. If the girl recovered soon, she would find the bag and might take it for granted that the money was still in it. Such an idea on the girl's part might prove a good thing for Cayuse.

Sitting down on the lower step of the stairs, the boy pulled out one packet of bills after another and crammed them into his medicine-pouch. The pouch was not more than half the size of the satchel, and was swelled to ball-like proportions when the money was all inside of it.

Having done this much, Cayuse snapped the satchel shut, flung it down beside the girl, and raced up the stairs.

Pa-e-has-ka had told him to stay around the top of the stairs until he heard sounds of trouble, and Cayuse was always the boy to obey orders.

As he darted into the room at the head of the stairs, Fate started in to play even with him for the good luck just sent his way. He collided with somebody just within the entrance to the room.

An oath was jolted out of the man. Cayuse, falling back in momentary dismay, was able to see, in the glow of light that came up the stairs and through the open door, that the man was Yank.

Yank was even more astounded by this unexpected encounter than was Cayuse. Getting a grip on his wits, the boy whirled with the intention of going back down the stairs. But Yank caught him by the hair from behind before he could carry out his plan, and gave him a rough jerk that laid him on his back.

The boy was on his feet almost as soon as he was down. Yank, with an oath, struck a swinging, savage blow at him. Cayuse ducked under the big fist and fled back through the darkness toward the stairs leading to the roof.

Having secured the money, Cayuse decided that he would take no chances of losing it.

Yank started in pursuit, and the Indian led him a chase

through room after room, and, finally up the stairs, through the skylight and onto the roof.

At the open skylight Yank halted and surveyed the roof cautiously. From behind a chimney Cayuse kept a pair of keen bright eyes on him.

Suddenly Yank drew back his hand and flung it forward. A white object darted across the intervening space, and crashed against the chimney.

But Cayuse, who had conceived a mighty respect for the white shells, had rolled well out of the way before the shell touched the chimney.

Yank, with an oath of disgust, withdrew, closing the skylight after him.

For an hour or more Cayuse sat on the edge of the roof, watching the skylight for some sign of Yank's return. But Yank did not return.

Then, cautiously, Cayuse approached the skylight and tried to open it. It was locked on the inside, and resisted his efforts.

Sounds of slamming doors reached him from the regions below, proving that something unusual was going on. Was Pa-e-has-ka at the back of the excitement?

The boy was excited and eager to find out what was taking place. After a moment's hesitation, he knocked out one pane of the skylight with his moccasined foot, reached in, unfastened the catch that secured it, lifted the hinged frame, and got in on the stairs.

By that time the doors had ceased to slam, but his quick ear detected muffled sounds of people stirring around. Pushing back over the route which he had so recently covered with Yank at his heels, he came at last into the room at the head of the stairs.

Just as he entered it, some one grabbed him by the arm



—some one who had been lying in wait—and, of course, this person could have been none other than Yank.

"Pa-e-has-ka!" yelled Cayuse, thinking of the treasure in his medicine-pouch far more than he did of his own danger, "come——"

With an angry oath, Yank dropped the boy's arm and caught him about the throat.

By main strength the man forced the boy to the floor, and held him there, steadily and relentlessly strangling him.

In the nick of time, when the blood was roaring in the little Piute's ears, and he felt as though his last moment had come, a fierce blow descended upon Yank's bowed head, and he dropped sidewise, as though struck by a sledge.

"Cayuse!" exclaimed a voice, while a form knelt down at the boy's side.

"Pa-e-has-ka!" gasped Cayuse.

The scout had heard the boy's call, and had reached him just in time!

"What happened, Cayuse?" asked the scout.

"Heap plenty," answered the boy, sitting up on the floor and rubbing his benumbed throat.

"Who is this man?" the scout went on, indicating Yank.

"Him all same gambler. Him drop white medicine-balls. Ugh!"

"Why, sure," spoke up Bratton, whom Cayuse could now make out, in the faint light drifting through the open door from the stairway, standing just back of Buffalo Bill. "There had to be some one up here to drop those things, pard. It couldn't have been the girl, could it?"

"No, for I met the girl down-stairs just a little while

after you had suffered from the effects of one of the dropped shells. The girl came up here just after I went down-stairs, didn't she, Cayuse?"

"Wuh!"

"What did she do?"

"Black-haired squaw make um powwow with white man. Her ask about Bratton, ask about Pa-e-has-ka; tell white man go back drop medicine-ball on scout. Ugh!"

"Where did the girl go then?"

"Her go back down-stairs. White man take two medicine-balls, leave more in basket. Me take um medicine-balls from basket, throw at white girl when she stop down-stairs."

"What do you think of that!" interjected Bratton. "The little redskin is certainly up to snuff, all right."

"Always," returned the scout calmly; "that's Little Cayuse's caliber. He's the boy on the job whenever there's anything doing. After you had thrown those medicine-balls at the girl, Cayuse, this man heard you, and came out and tried to capture you?"

"Wuh!" went on the boy. "Me make um run for roof; him follow. Stay on roof one hour, mebbysso. White man throw medicine-ball at me, me dodge. Bymby white man leave glass door in roof and go 'way. Then me hear um noise down below, smash in glass, open roof door, go down this far, and white man grab me. Then me yell, and Pa-e-has-ka come. Pa-e-has-ka always come when pard in trouble."

"It's good to be able to come, my boy," answered the scout. "I'm glad I was able to show up here in time to save you from this scoundrel."

The scout turned to the man who, having recovered

from the stunning effects of the blow, was sitting up under Bratton's watchful eye and nursing his right temple.

"Who are you?" the scout demanded.

"I don't know as that cuts any ice," was the cool rejoinder.

"Him named Yank," said Cayuse. "Black-haired squaw her call um Yank."

"That pin on your vest," said the scout, catching the flash of the syndicate's badge, "proves that you're one of Culberson's men."

"What of it?" asked Yank aggressively.

"Nothing, only it shows what sort of man you are. You were over the room where Culberson was talking with my friend, were you, and dropped the white shell on the table?"

"That's what! And I dropped the white shell on your leveled revolver. I guess something happened to you then, eh?" Yank finished with a throaty chuckle.

"Look here," said the scout, "Nina Culberson had some money in that satchel she was carrying. Do you know what she did with it?"

"Ain't it in the satchel now?" Yank was genuinely surprised—the tone in which he spoke proved that.

"No; it was not there, or——"

"Pa-e-has-ka," interrupted Little Cayuse eagerly, "me know 'bout um dinero."

The scout and Bratton turned quickly on the boy.

Before they could ask him anything further, however, a terrific explosion came from below—an explosion that shook the building in every part. Frenzied yells followed the crash, and running feet could be heard.

"Jupiter!" exclaimed Bratton, moving toward the stairway; "what's that?"

"Somebody has struck a match in the basement," answered the scout quickly. "That poisonous gas is highly inflammable, if what Culberson said is true, and——"

The scout, paying no further attention to Yank, had bounded toward the stairway after Bratton. When the two gained the head of the flight, a wave of fire came rolling along the luxuriously furnished hall, lapping at the damask curtains and reaching its red arms toward the upper floor. The smoke, beating in the faces of the scout and the detective, caused them to reel backward.

"The fumes of that gas are all through the building," cried the scout, half-choked with the vapor that surged about them. "This robbers' rookery is doomed!"

"It's time for us to hike," put in Bratton excitedly, "but we can't get out along the hall."

"We'll have to get out by way of the roof," answered the scout; "first, though, we must get that money—if we can."

"Bother the money!" roared Bratton. "Our lives are worth more than a little ready cash. Which way do you go to get to the roof?"

"Me got um dinero, Pa-e-has-ka!" cried Little Cayuse. Standing where the light of the flames were dancing all around him, the boy caught and lifted his medicine-pouch.

"You got the money, you say?" the scout demanded hoarsely.

"Sure, me got um! Took um from satchel."

"That's enough for us, Buffalo Bill!" exclaimed the detective. "Come on; it's getting too hot for comfort here. First thing we know this floor will go down, and we'll be going down with it. The building is a raging furnace below."



This appeared to be the fact. The flames had seized upon the structure like so much tinder, and the roar and crackle that came to their ears was accentuated, now and again, by the explosion of a cask of spirits, whose contents further fed the flames.

The scout whirled to accompany Cayuse and Bratton to the roof. Suddenly he came to an abrupt halt.

"The girl!" he muttered. "She's lying down there in the hall, unconscious!"

"And Culberson and Hammersmith are locked up in the stone room," added Bratton; "but what's that to us? They tried to trap us, and now their hangout is proving a trap for *them*. Come on, Cody! We've got to hurry."

"I'm going after the girl," flung back the scout, darting for the flaming stairway.

Bratton tried to catch him, but the scout struck away his restraining hands. The next moment, Buffalo Bill had vanished in the seething smoke.

"That's the biggest fool thing Buffalo Bill ever did!" shouted the exasperated Bratton. "Come on, Injun! We'll save ourselves, anyhow."

"Me wait for Pa-e-has-ka," answered Cayuse, stepping toward the top of the stairs.

"Give me that money, then! Don't take any chances with *that*."

"Me keep um money; save um, too. Mebbysso you squaw, then you go on. Buffalo Bill come here to be with you, now you go leave him. Ugh! Bratton heap coyote!"

The taunting words came out of a swirl of smoke and flame. Bratton, carried away for the time by the excitement and danger, had not been himself; but now, all at once, his better nature leaped to the surface.

"You're right, Piute!" he declared, turning back. "I'd sure be a coyote if I left Buffalo Bill now. You're all right, kid. We'll wait for him, even if this old rattle-trap tumbles in with us."

Minute after minute passed without bringing the scout. The flames roared louder and louder, and high over the unnerving sound could be heard the wild clamor of a fire-bell.

"Cayuse!" called a distant voice, from below, where the fire waves were leaping their wildest.

"Pa-e-has-ka!" shouted the Piute, pushing farther and farther into the chaos of smoke and flame.

The scout had lost his sense of direction, and the boy's quick answer to his call had set him right. A few moments later he came staggering out of the smoke with the girl in his arms.

"Take her, Bratton!" he gasped, "and hurry on to the roof. We have not much time."

The detective caught the limp figure out of Buffalo Bill's arms and strode after Cayuse, who had taken the lead.

All the doors had been left open, and there was a draft through the doomed building from basement to skylight. The smoke swirled through the third story as through a chimney, and in the murky tide the little party of fugitives was caught. Coughing and choking, the scout, the detective, and Little Cayuse staggered onward. Closing the doors after them as they went, the scout was able to make their avenue of escape more bearable.

In due course they reached the skylight and clambered through it to the roof. Here their position was hardly bettered, because of the dense smoke and flame that arose from the burning wooden walls.

"The ladder, Cayuse!" called the scout.

The Piute, bending his head downward, dashed into the whirling fog of smoke. By the time the scout and the detective, reeling along and carrying the girl between them, had reached the edge of the roof, Cayuse had the ladder in place.

The descent to the roof of the two-story structure was safely but barely accomplished, for no sooner did the friends find the firm footing under them, than the walls of the gamblers' resort collapsed with a mighty crash, throwing a column of sparks and firebrands high into the air.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE PRISONER, YOUNT.

It was not necessary for Buffalo Bill, Bratton, and Cayuse to climb down to the lower roof with their helpless burden. Men had reached the scene; and had raised ladders to the roof of the two-story building. Down one of these ladders the friends descended, reaching the crowd that had collected in Juakin Street, in front of the burning resort.

"Je-ru-sa-lem!" exclaimed a voice, while the scout and the detective were carrying Nina Culberson through the crowd, "if it ain't Buffalo Bill! No, by thunder, *two* Buffalo Bills! Well, well! Have I got the blind staggers, or what?"

"Hello, Brown!" cried the scout. "Come along with us, will you?"

"I sure will," answered the deputy, "if for nothing more than just to find out if you're twins, and how you happened to be in Culberson's place."

Having passed the crowd, Brown secured a horse-blanket from some place, and stretched it on the walk. The girl was then laid on the blanket, and a doctor, who happened to be in the crowd, came forward and proffered his services.

"Which of you is Cody?" asked the puzzled Brown, when the scout and the detective had turned away and left the girl in the doctor's charge.

"I am," replied the scout.

"And who's your friend?"



"Bratton, of Denver," spoke up the detective.

"Je-ru-sa-lem!" breathed Brown. "I've heard of you, Bratton, but I never heard you were such a dead ringer for Buffalo Bill. Why were you in Culberson's place? Not 'bucking' one of his brace-games, were you?"

"That's exactly what we were doing," said Buffalo Bill coolly. "In other words, we were looking for the men who wear the hand-and-dagger pin."

"I see! You were trying to locate that fellow that made an attempt to rob Sanderson. Did you find him?"

"We did; but I reckon all the rest in that building have got away by this time."

"If they haven't," said Brown, "they'll never get away. Best thing that ever happened for this town—the burning of that gamblers' hangout. We've got one of 'em, anyhow," he added. "Maybe he's the fellow that tried to rob Sanderson?"

"Where is he?" queried the scout.

"This way."

Brown led Bratton, Buffalo Bill, and Cayuse to an alleyway. Here there was a man in charge of an officer—a man whose face wore a dazed look.

"Well!" muttered the scout, instantly recognizing the fellow as the one who had thrown the knife on the rooftop, and who had later run against the fist of Buffalo Bill.

"Is he the fellow?" asked the deputy, noting the scout's air of interest.

"He's not the one who tried to kill Sandersan," the scout answered, pointing to the silver pin on the man's vest. "That fellow, you remember, lost his badge."

"Right you are," agreed Brown. "I hadn't thought of that."

"What's your name?" asked the scout, bending over the prisoner.

"Yount," was the answer.

The man was so shaken by his recent rough experience that he did not seem inclined to keep anything back. The shock had broken his reserve. When he recovered entirely, his reserve might return, and the scout determined to make the most of the gambler's present condition.

"Why were you on the roof, Yount?" pursued the scout.

"Nat sent me there," replied the man, passing one hand nervously across his face.

"What for?"

"On account of the rope we had found hanging from the chimney."

"He's off his trolley," put in Brown, "and he hasn't a notion what he's saying."

"Did Culberson have his own gas-plant in that building?" the scout went on.

"That was a Chink racket," said Yount. "A Chinaman he picked up in 'Frisco showed him how to make the dope-balls and manufacture the gas. There was a tank in the basement, and that's where the Chink got in his work. Those dope-balls were great stuff. Smash one of 'em within a foot of a man's face, and in half a minute it's a cinch the man won't know anything."

"What about the stone room, in the basement, and the rubber hose, and all that?"

Yount gave a start.

"Look here," he said, apparently realizing that he was being "pumped," "who the blazes are you, and what are you asking me all these questions for?"

story was done. "This young man fell into the hands of a siren, and, through her wiles, he turned his back on his previous good record and took the bank's money. Here is the money"—and the scout picked up Little Cayuse's medicine-bag from the table and tossed it to the detective—"every cent of it. The money is returned to you, as representing the bank officials, and I claim the right to demand Brent's freedom. He has had a lesson he will never forget, and from now on he will be a useful member of society."

Bratton, his face wreathed with exultant smiles, was pulling the bills out of the buckskin bag and counting them.

"As you say, Buffalo Bill," said he, when the counting was done, "the money is all here. On Brent's behalf, you have earned the right to do with him as you will. Personally, I think the young fellow should have another chance. The bank people told me I could use my own discretion, if I captured him and got the money back, as to whether I should send him back to Kansas or leave him where I found him. Because of your help, I am going to leave him here, in your hands."

Bratton got up, with the money in his hands, and stepped to the side of the bed.

"I wonder, Brent," said he, "if you realize just how good a friend you have in Buffalo Bill and Nick Nomad?"

"I do!" declared Brent, with feeling.

"But you don't know all that Buffalo Bill went through to help me get this money—and he went through it all for the sole purpose of keeping you from behind the bars. Remember that, my lad, if you are ever again tempted to go wrong."

Without pausing to speak further, the detective turned and left the room.

The scout, drawing up a chair by the head of the bed, had a long, earnest talk with Brent.

The young man had no parents, or other relatives, and what he had done had cost him the friendship of all the people he had known in Olathe.

"You can't go back there, Brent," said the scout, "but just as soon as your leg is well enough so you can travel, I'm going to get you a good place, working for a mine-owner friend of mine. The mine is a long way from here, in a place called Sun Dance Cañon. You will be well treated, and only my friend shall know a thing about your past. There is good stuff in you, I am confident, and if you show that there is, your future will be safe. What do you think of the plan?"

There were tears in the young man's eyes as he thanked the scout.



## CHAPTER X.

### THE SON OF JAMES BOWIE.

"Buffalo Bill?"

"My name."

"I'm Ned Bowie, son of James Bowie, of——"

"Jim Bowie! One of the heroes of the Alamo!"

The king of scouts sprang from his chair and caught the other's hand in a cordial grip.

"My dear sir," he went on, "your father's name has always been held in especial reverence by me. James Bowie not only never provoked a quarrel in his life, but prevented a great many. That, sir, is a mighty big recommendation for a man in this Western country. On top of this, he had, to quote the fine phrase of President Jackson, an ample supply of 'that desperate courage which makes one a majority.' Judging from your appearance, Ned Bowie, you are a chip off the old block, and I'm proud to shake hands with you."

The other laughed lightly, although it was plain that he was highly pleased by what the scout had to say about his father.

The scene was Jefferson Barracks, a United States military post on the Mississippi, below St. Louis. In times past, this had been the most extensive military establishment in the West. From a large cavalry-school located there, mounted troops had been supplied to every part of the frontier.

The king of scouts had been lounging on a bench on the river-bank, overlooking the river, when the slender,

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agile man of perhaps thirty, who had introduced himself as the son of the famous Bowie, came forward and accosted him.

Both sat down on the bench. The scout offered Bowie a cigar.

"I have wanted to meet you, Buffalo Bill," said Bowie, "ever since I heard that you were here. Last night I learned of something that made me doubly anxious to meet you. Do you object to my talking business?"

"Not at all, Bowie. It has been several days since anything like business has entered into my calculations, and it will be a relief to feel that I am in the way of being useful to some one once more."

Bowie studied the burning tip of his cigar for a moment.

"As I heard it in St. Louis, Buffalo Bill," said he, "you and your pards are fresh from Colorado, where you had some rarely exciting entanglements with a gambling syndicate headed by a notorious blackleg known as 'Nervy Nat' Culberson?"

"There are a good many stories floating around about that mix-up," returned the scout, smiling. "Like all such stories, they gain a little in the marvelous with every telling. However, Bowie, what has that to do with your business?"

"Just this: Culberson and some of his pals got away from you and your pards and left Colorado. Would you like to tangle up with them again? Would you like to block another game which they are trying to pull off? The syndicate is after bigger stakes than those in Colorado, and Culberson has laid his plans with his usual cunning."

"I have never looked upon my account with Culberson

as squared," said the scout quietly. "I knew that, sooner or later, our trails would cross again. If I can hurry the occasion, and, at the same time be useful in another way, I should welcome the opportunity."

Again Bowie fell silent, watching the tenuous smoke of his cigar wreath upward in the still air.

"A friend of mine," he went on finally; "a young planter by the name of Holbrook, who lives near Natchez, married and went North on his wedding-trip. A number of merchants and planters in his neighborhood asked him to collect for them some accounts that were owing in New York.

"In some manner, the gamblers' syndicate got wind of this, and Culberson was told that, if properly handled, Holbrook would prove an easy mark. Culberson and his blacklegs have been watching Holbrook carefully. Two of the syndicate went to New York and made his acquaintance, learning that he would return south by way of Pittsburg, where he proposed to board a steamer for Louisville, visit in that town for a few days, and then take a New Orleans packet for Natchez.

"One of the gamblers, who had made Holbrook's acquaintance in New York, joined him on the boat at Pittsburg, greeted him heartily as an old friend, and introduced him to two other men, who were really part of the syndicate, but who claimed to be Louisville planters, and made themselves highly agreeable. Cards were introduced in the gentlemen's cabin in the evening, and Holbrook was allowed to win small sums.

"Holbrook and his bride are now visiting in Louisville, but they intend to leave there to-morrow on the packet *General Houston*, on their way to Natchez. Culberson will board the boat at Cairo, and then the old game

of 'three-pluck-one' will be carried to a finish with a vengeance. Unless something is done, Holbrook will go ashore at Natchez a ruined man."

The scout had listened to all this with interest and surprise.

"You are sure it is Culberson's syndicate, are you, Bowie?" he asked.

"There is absolutely no doubt on that point," answered Bowie positively.

"From whom did you learn of the plot against Holbrook?"

"From another friend of Holbrook's, and of mine, who came down the Ohio with the gamblers and their intended victim."

"In what way did this friend learn of the plot?"

"He overheard a conversation between the two supposed planters and the man who had met Holbrook in New York."

"Well!" exclaimed the scout incredulously; "if this friend had such a line on Culberson's operations, why didn't he tip off Holbrook?"

"In order to understand that you would have to understand Holbrook. He comes from one of the best families in the South; he is high-spirited, has a quick temper, and will brook no interference. Besides, he was allowed to win on the way down from Pittsburg, and he thinks he is a complete master of the game of twenty-card poker, and the full equal of any of his opponents. He laughed at my friend, when the latter tried to warn him, and declared that he would clean up on the gamblers if they tried to run in any rhinecabooos on him.

"It was impossible to do anything with him. My friend came on to St. Louis, met me, and we have been wonder-



ing what we could do. Our first thought was to find Culberson, and warn him that his plot was known. If we do that, however, and Holbrook finds out about it, I and his other friend will both be challenged to a duel. That's the sort of a man Holbrook is. He's as hot a spark as you'll find anywhere on the river.

"When I learned that you were here, and when I remembered that you had recently had a 'go' with this same clique of blacklegs, I made up my mind that I would lay the entire case before you."

"How much money has Holbrook with him?"

"Seventy-five or eighty thousand."

"In cash?"

"Yes."

The scout gave a long whistle.

"No wonder Culberson is making a dead set to get that money!" he exclaimed. "Mighty foolish of Holbrook to have so much cash in his clothes."

"He thinks he is able to take care of himself, and that's where the trouble comes in. If Holbrook loses that money—as he certainly will if some one does not interfere—he will be a ruined man. He would not be able to stand the disgrace, and would probably take his own life."

The scout bowed his head thoughtfully.

"To be perfectly frank with you, Bowie," said he, looking up, "I have less sympathy for Holbrook than I have for his bride. If the plot is worked out, as you say it will be, Holbrook's young wife would find herself in a terrible situation."

"She would, indeed!"

"If your information is correct, I shall take a hand in

the game, not alone on Mrs. Holbrook's account, but quite as much because of the chance it gives me to settle my own score with Culberson."

"I had an idea, Buffalo Bill," said Bowie, "that you might look at the matter in that way."

"I will drop down the river to Cairo, and when the *General Houston* comes along, I will get aboard with Culberson."

"But Culberson knows you! If he sees you in Cairo, and if he knows when you take the boat——"

"If he sees me in Cairo he won't recognize me," said the scout, with a short laugh. "When are you going down the river, Bowie?"

"Well, I had thought of going to Cairo myself, and seeing the game through to a finish."

"You might travel with me, then. There's a down-river boat due at this landing in two or three hours, and, unless you have to return to St. Louis——"

"I don't," interrupted Bowie. "It will be a pleasure to travel with you, Buffalo Bill, and we will take that down-river boat together."

"Where's Holbrook's other friend—the one who gave you this information about Culberson?"

"He's a civil engineer, and has gone on urgent business to Council Bluffs."

"Sorry for that, for I should have liked to talk with him personally."

"It is doubtful whether you could learn any more from him than you have learned from me," Bowie got up. "I shall have a few preparations to make, Buffalo Bill, and I presume you have, also. I will be at the landing when the packet whistles."

"Very good, Bowie," returned the scout, also rising. "Good-by until then."

They separated, the scout returning to the headquarters of the commandant of the post. Dropping in on Colonel Hays, in his office, for a moment, the scout put to him a question:

"What do you know about James Bowie, colonel?"

The colonel whirled around in his chair.

"I know, Cody," he laughed, "that James Bowie did not invent the knife with which his name is coupled. The knife used by Bowie, in his famous duel on the river-bank opposite Natchez, was a hunting-dagger, made by a blacksmith out of a worn-out file. It had a double edge and a curved point, and was afterward patented and manufactured in Philadelphia—but the knife was nothing like the thing we call a 'bowie' now. What started you to asking about Jim Bowie, anyway?"

"Just curiosity," the scout answered indefinitely. "How many children did he leave when killed in the Alamo?"

"None."

The scout looked up with a start.

"Is that right?" he asked slowly.

"It's exactly right, Cody."

"But Bowie was married."

"Yes," said the colonel; "he married Maria Ursula, the beautiful daughter of Don Juan de Verimende, of San Antonio, and had two children. During the cholera epidemic of '33, however, Bowie's wife and children died. That was a bitter blow for Bowie, and he became reckless of his life and eager to lead forlorn hopes. Had it not been for that cholera epidemic, James Bowie would never have been knifed, on his sick bed, at the time of the burning of the Alamo."

The scout arose thoughtfully, and started away.

"Where are you going, pard?" asked Hays.

"To Cairo on the next packet," was the reply.

Then, with a parting salute, and still wearing his thoughtful air, the king of scouts left the colonel's office.



## CHAPTER XI.

### ON THE "GENERAL HOUSTON."

"Waugh! I don't like ther looks o' this pizen bizness, Buffler, an' thet's er fact."

It was about 9 o'clock at night, some three days after the scout had had his talk with "Ned Bowie" at Jefferson Barracks. The two pards were taking the air and smoking on the guards of the big side-wheeler *General Houston*.

"What is it you don't like about it, Nick?" inquired the scout.

Buffalo Bill was dressed in black clothes, and wore a long frock coat. His long hair was brushed upward and concealed under the crown of a black slouch-hat. It was startling what a difference this change of clothes made in his appearance. Such a disguise, of course, could not conceal his identity from a close observer, but he was beginning to think there was not much occasion for any sort of disguise.

"I'll tell ye what I don't like, pard," answered Nomad, speaking only loud enough to make himself heard above the splash of the paddle-wheels, "an' thet's ther underhand game this hyar Ned Bowie seems ter be playin'."

The scout was silent.

"James Bowie never had any sons," pursued Nomad, "an' thet nails er lie onter him, fust clatter out o' ther box. Then, too, he didn't meet ye on the landin' at Jefferson Barracks, an' ye ain't seen him sence ye had thet

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tork with him. Whar is he, an' what sort of er game is he tryin' ter work? I'm puzzled a heap, I am so."

"I'm puzzled, too," replied the scout.

"Looks ter me like Bowie was tryin' ter git ye inter ther hands o' Culberson an' his gang of assassins."

"I'm willing to get into their hands, pard"—and the scout's jaws closed with an ominous snap—"that's my principal reason for being aboard the *General Houston*. Holbrook, the young planter, is on the boat; and Culberson and at least three of his gang are also here. They're having a game, now, in the saloon. So, from all this, it seems that Ned Bowie told me the truth. The gamblers' syndicate is going to make a victim of Holbrook—that much is certain. Why Bowie lied to me, and said he was the son of James Bowie, and why he did not come to Cairo with me, is more than I know; but here we are, Nick, on the same steamboat with our old enemies, and it was the information given me by Bowie that brought us here. Suppose we take things as we find them, and let well enough alone?"

"Thet's me, pard, with both feet," agreed the old trapper, "on'y I kain't help bein' in a takin' erbout this hyar man, Bowie. Et's er fact, though, thet he's steered us straight against Culberson and his gang, an' thet he's put us next ter a purty leetle game o' three-pluck-one. Thar's somethin' crooked back o' ther reason why he done et, but, as you say, Buffler, we'll let well enough alone. The question is, what aire we goin' ter do?"

"We'll lay low, Nick, and let developments govern our actions."

"Goin' ter do anythin' ter save Holbrook?"

"Not at present."

The old trapper gave a start of surprise

"Ain't they in ther saloon, skinnin' ther planter both ways?"

"Yes."

"An' ye don't intend ter interfere with ther robbery?"

"If I do anything, Nick, it will be in the way of beatin' Culberson at his own game." The scout dipped down into his pockets and pulled out two rolls of bills as thick as his wrist. "You see," he added grimly, "I have come prepared."

"Waugh!" exclaimed Nomad. "Ye got money enough thar ter open er Fust National Bank. Ef ye ain't goin' ter help Holbrook, what ye goin' ter do with all thet dinero?"

"I didn't say I wasn't going to help Holbrook, Nick. What I want is to be sure, before I do anything for him, that he is really being victimized, and is not playing a part. Bowie's actions have made me look on Culberson's plot against Holbrook with suspicion. The gamblers' syndicate may be playing a farce, just for the purpose of getting us to interfere, and giving Culberson a chance to sponge us out. I'm going to make sure Holbrook is straight goods before I do much for him."

"As per usual, Buffler, yer head is plumb level," agreed old Nomad. "Mebbyso this hyar Bowie man was in cahoots with ther Culberson crowd, an' thet ther gang is makin' a the-ay-ter play on this hyar boat, jest ter git We, Us & Comp'ny ter interfere. How ye goin' ter find out whether Holbrook is ther clear quill er not, pard?"

"That part of it I'm going to leave to you."

"Keno; but still I no savvy. Show me ther trail, Buffler, an' I'll foller et."

"The plan is simple enough. Go to the saloon and hang out in the background. Don't let Culberson or his

men see much of you. Watch Holbrook. I'm pretty sure you can tell by his actions whether he's a fair shake or a fake. It wouldn't do for me to show up just now, Nick. If Culberson is handing out a lot of dope, he wants me to butt in—and I'm going to fool him. On the other hand, if Holbrook is really a lamb with a heavy fleece, and the gamblers are busily shearing, Culberson won't want me to interfere—and that's where I hope to fool him again. *Cumtux?*"

"I *cumtux* like er house afire, Buffler. Holbrook is on his honeymoon-trip, an' his wife is with him. Et don't seem ter a hard-headed ole coyote like me thet he'd be lendin' himself ter any skullduggery, with his bride erlong. Howsumever, ye kain't most allers tell. Ef Holbrook is one o' ther gamblers, he's ekal ter anythin'."

"And his supposed bride," added Buffalo Bill, "may be Nina Culberson, Nervy Nat's daughter. Have you been able to get a good look at the lady?"

"Nary. Ladies an' me ain't got much in common, so I side-steps when they're around. Hevn't set eyes on her, pard."

"Well, go in, Nick, and see how matters are progressing. Find out all you can concerning Holbrook—use your eyes, but keep in the background."

"Whar'll ye be when I come with a report?"

"Right here, ready to take a hand if your report calls for action."

"Kerect."

Nomad turned sharply and disappeared toward the stairway leading up to the deck above.

The scout, drawing out a chair, sat down and lighted a fresh cheroot.

He was as little pleased with the situation as was his



old pard. The fact that Bowie might be playing a double game complicated matters.

If Holbrook was really being victimized, the scout was determined to befriend him; on the other hand, if the apparent robbery by the gamblers was only a farce, he was equally determined to leave the supposed young planter to his own devices.

The siren bellowed its hoarse warning, while the scout sat on the guards with his cigar, and the boat rounded in to a wharf-boat, where a number of passengers disembarked. Then, once more, the *General Houston* thrust her nose down the river and chug-chugged her way through the shimmering moonlight.

An hour passed. For some time a piano had been making itself heard in the ladies' cabin, but the strains stopped suddenly, and a deep silence fell over the boat. Only the splash of the paddle-wheels broke the stillness, the breathing of the exhaust-pipes or the tinkle of the bell through which the pilot communicated with the engineer.

On that part of the boat the scout seemed to be entirely alone. Evidently all the passengers who were not in the saloon had gone to bed.

The scout was just thinking it was about time for Nomad to present himself, when he heard a quick step from somewhere among the shadows cast by the deck overhead. Getting up, he drew off a little in the darkness. Standing by one of the posts that supported the upper framework of the boat, he saw a man hurry out on the guards and stand there in the moonlight.

It was not Nomad.

At the very edge of the guards the man stood, looking upward at the clear, star-flecked sky; then, abruptly, a low groan burst from his lips, and he flung aside his hat.

Bracing himself, he jerked a piece of glimmering steel from his pocket and raised it to his temple.

Swift as a dart the king of scouts leaped forward, caught the hand that held the revolver, and jerked the weapon away.

"None of that, Holbrook!" said he sternly. "What ails you, man?"

Buffalo Bill had recognized the young man on the guards as Holbrook, the planter. And Holbrook, standing on the deck's brink, had been on the point of putting a bullet into his brain and dropping headlong into the Mississippi!

Surely if anything could prove that he was not in league with the gamblers, it would have been such a move as this.

Nevertheless, in playing such a deep game, the scout was cautious. Had Holbrook known that the scout was on the guards, he might have engineered the spectacular act for the purpose of giving the scout the impression that despair had taken hold of his heart, and that he wanted to die. This was a remote possibility, but the scout thought of it just as he thought of everything else when engaged in a bit of dangerous work.

Holbrook struggled to free himself from the scout's grasp.

"Let me go!" he whispered huskily.

"You're not going to make way with yourself, Holbrook," said the scout curtly; "at least not to-night. Sit down there, and try and be a man."

With the last words, Buffalo Bill forced the young planter into a chair, and stood over him. There was a silence of brief duration, during which Holbrook's head bowed forward and his hands covered his face. A deep

groan came through his trembling fingers—a groan that reflected genuine feeling and went far toward making the scout believe in his misery.

"Why were you trying to take your life, Holbrook?" inquired the scout, a touch of pity in his voice.

The planter looked up.

"You know me?" he breathed.

"I have heard about you. I know you went north on your wedding-trip, that you collected certain accounts for some friends, and that you have been gambling with the money. I know, also, that your wife is in your state-room, and that it would be the act of a coward for you to kill yourself and leave her to face your disgrace alone. From what I have heard of you, Holbrook, I do not believe you to be a coward. Brace up now, and just remember I'm your friend, and that I will stand by you."

"What good are friends?" mumbled Holbrook dejectedly. "I'm a thief, and I have robbed my friends—the friends who trusted me to collect their accounts in New York. I—I am ruined!"

He made a move to hurl himself from the chair, but the scout caught him and held him in a grip of iron.

"Do you want me to put a rope on you?" said the scout sharply. "Do you want my friendship?"

"What can your friendship do for me?" panted Holbrook. "I am a disgraced and ruined man, I tell you, and have lost \$75,000 that does not belong to me. How can you help?"

"Buffalo Bill is generally able to help his friends," was the answer.

Holbrook sat back in his chair and stared into the face above him.

"Buffalo Bill!" he exclaimed. "Are—are you the king of scouts? The man of whom I have heard so much?"

"Yes. If you have heard anything about me, Holbrook, you must know that I always stand by my friends, and that my word is as good as my bond."

"But how do you happen to be here on this boat? And how is it that you come to my aid in such a time of need?"

"Principally because the men who have robbed you of your friends' money are enemies of mine. In helping you, I shall be playing even with them. I have been following the scoundrels, and have been on the same boat with them ever since they left Cairo."

Holbrook seemed to take heart. The magic of the scout's personality plainly filled him with hope.

"How did you find out about me?"

"We need not discuss that."

"What do you know about me?"

"I have told you something of what I know; enough so that you ought to understand that my information is authentic. As for the rest, you came down the Ohio from Pittsburg, and began your gambling on the Ohio boat. You won some money. Encouraged by that, you continued to play, and are now fleeced of your last dollar. Can't you see how you have been nursed along and inveigled into this business? A gamblers' syndicate is back of it."

"Suppose a gamblers' syndicate is back of it? I'm not the sort of man to do the baby act and make a row when I am beaten—even though I have been cheated."

"I do not want you to make a row, as you call it. I'm equal to that."

"But I don't want you to make a row on my account,



and force those men to give up what they have got at the point of a gun."

"No fear on that score," said the scout grimly. "Guns may figure in the play, but I'll go after them with the cards first, and get back over the gambling-table what you lost. Twenty-card poker is a fascinating game, although I never make a business of playing it. I think I know more about 'cross-lifting' and the other fine points than you do. I'll get your money back just as you lost it; then, if there is to be fireworks, the gamblers will find that I'm right at home."

"You—a stranger—will do this for me?" gasped Holbrook, reaching out his hand.

"No," was the reply, "not for you, Holbrook. What I intend to do is partly for your wife, and partly because I am anxious to show the gamblers' syndicate that they have me to reckon with. Before I take your hand, you have got to show me that you're a man."

"How am I to do that?"

"First, by putting every thought of self-destruction out of your head; and, next, by accompanying me to your stateroom and staying there with your wife until I have made my cleanup. Following this, you must promise never again to touch a playing-card."

"I'll agree to all that."

"Good! Come on, then."

Taking Holbrook by the arm, the scout assisted him from the chair, and, still holding to him, mounted to the main deck and on up to the deck above, where the ladies' cabin was situated.

The ladies' cabin was deserted, and Holbrook led the way to the door of his stateroom. The scout was about to retire, until Mrs. Holbrook had opened the door and

admitted her husband, but the planter clung to the scout's arm.

"Wait a minute," said Holbrook huskily. "You must see Nellie. You are doing this for her, and it is right that she should know you." As he finished speaking, his hand dropped on the panel of the door.

"But," the scout demurred, "if Mrs. Holbrook is——"

Evidently Mrs. Holbrook was waiting, for, before the scout could finish, the stateroom door opened and a beautiful young woman, fully clothed and evidently waiting for her husband, stepped out into the cabin.

Mrs. Holbrook's face was pale, and her eyes red as with weeping.

"Oh, Phil," she murmured, catching her husband's hands, "you have been a long time coming! Have you finished playing with those men? Are you going to play any more? I have been so miserable, waiting here for you."

"Nellie, I am never going to play cards again," said Holbrook. "I have given my promise to this gentleman here"—and he turned and waved a hand toward the scout. "He is my friend, and he must be yours. Nellie, this is Buffalo Bill, of whom everybody has heard. Buffalo Bill, my wife."

Mrs. Holbrook turned slowly, like one dazed. The sudden decision of her husband to quit gambling brought a joy and surprise which she could not express in words.

The scout removed his hat and bowed low. He made his acknowledgments, told Holbrook to tell his wife everything when they were alone together, then whirled and hurried away before Mrs. Holbrook had recovered sufficiently to speak to him.

No, Mrs. Holbrook was *not* Nervy Nat's daughter,

Nina. This in itself was another proof—if any more proofs were needed—that Holbrook was not playing a part for the purpose of forwarding Culberson's scheme of vengeance against the scout and Nomad.

On the guards Buffalo Bill found old Nomad walking back and forth, and waiting.

"Whar ye been, Buffler?" inquired the trapper.

"Saving a man's life," was the grave reply.

"Whose?"

"Holbrook's. A few minutes ago he rushed out on the guards and tried to blow out his brains. I grabbed the revolver away just in time."

"Waugh!" grumbled Nomad. "Thet feller ain't got any brains ter blow out. Ther way he was skinned out er his last *soo markee* was er caution. Blamed queer ter me why Holbrook, ef he had any sense, couldn't see how he was bein' 'done.'"

"How did he act?"

"Like er schoolboy; plays ther game like er dough-head. He knows poker erbout as well as I knows ther Chink lingo; an' ther way he wasted his roll got onter my narves a heap. He's er fool, thet's my private opinion; an' he's a bigger fool than I thort he was ef he come out on ther guards an' tried ter kill hisself. Waugh! I wouldn't help no sich mark as him, ef I was you."

"Nevertheless, Nick, that is precisely what I am going to do. His wife appears to be a nice little woman, and, if I'm able to read the signs, her honeymoon hasn't been a particularly happy one. I'm going to mix things up with the gamblers right now. Is Culberson himself in the game?"

"Yes, an' ther blackleg they calls Yount—the feller thet nearly got done up in Durango, and was let off by the

perlice bekase no case could be made out ag'inst him. I reckon thar's some more o' ther gang lookin' on. Whatever ye do, ye'll hev ter do in a hurry, kase the outfit intends gittin' off ther boat at ther next landin'."

"They'll not do that," said the scout grimly. "I'll do the playing, Nick, and you'll keep in the background with your guns handy. If Culberson and Yount can do their cross-lifting game on me, they're welcome. I'm satisfied that Holbrook is not in the combine, and that Bowie, however else he has failed, did not fail to give us the right of Holbrook's affair. Here and now is where we open our private war on the syndicate."



## CHAPTER XII.

### CODY NERVE—AND LUCK.

The packet, *General Houston*, was built differently from the steamers of later days, the gentlemen's cabin being on the main deck, immediately under the ladies', and, instead of round wheel-houses, those of the *General Houston* were square, with a flat top, which rose within two feet of the hurricane-deck, with a distance of about thirty-five feet between the two houses.

When Buffalo Bill pushed into the gentlemen's cabin, the card-game appeared to have been closed. Half a dozen men were clustered about the bar, but neither Culberson nor Yount was to be seen.

For a moment the scout was tempted to believe that his prospective work was going to fizzle out; nevertheless, still hoping against hope, he walked up to the bar and drew a big roll of money from his pocket. Stripping a hundred-dollar bill off the roll, he quietly handed it to the barkeeper and asked for change. The barkeeper, unable to make change, referred him to a snaky-eyed man, who was sipping a glass of brandy and soda.

"With pleasure," said the man with the brandy and soda, his snakelike orbs lighting up at sight of the scout's tempting bundle of bills. "Won't you have something to drink?"

"Don't care if I do," answered the scout, getting his change and a glass of mild spirits at the same time.

As he set down the glass and pocketed the money, he remarked:

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"I'm going to get off the boat before morning, and I reckon it's hardly worth while going to bed. No more cards for to-night?" and he cast a quizzical glance at the deserted gambling-table.

The man who had made the change for him tipped a wink to another individual in a high white hat. In the mirror back of the bar the scout saw the wink, and it pleased him mightily.

"I don't care to go to bed, either," said the man in the white hat. "Let's play another game."

They sat down at the table, the man in the white hat calling loudly for the bartender to bring a fresh deck.

The scout knew at once that he was in the hands of two members of Culberson's syndicate, but they were members whom he had never seen before. The man who had changed the bill for him had disappeared rather mysteriously.

The scout understood very well the methods of the river sharks. In calling for a fresh pack of cards, the bartender—who had been previously instructed and tipped—would bring out a pack of "readers" previously deposited with him by the syndicate.

To all appearances Buffalo Bill was perfectly guileless. He made no objection to the use of the marked cards. On the contrary, he lighted a fresh cheroot, leaned back in his chair, and smiled urbanely, while the man in the white hat tore away the wrapper of the pack.

"This isn't going to be a two-handed game, is it?" the scout asked. "Where's the gentleman that made change for me a moment ago?"

"He'll be back in a minute," replied the other smilingly. "Ah, here he comes now! His name's Grinder," he added confidentially, in a low tone, "and he runs a store in

Natchez. A good fellow, and likes the cards, only he's mighty unlucky."

Grinder came up to the table, just then, with the gambler, Yount—whom the scout at once recognized—following along after him.

"I'm for bed, Doubleday," said Grinder to the man in the white hat, "but here's Tom Silver. He says he don't care a rap for sleep when there's a lively game of draw in prospect. He'll stay with you until your friend has to get off the boat. Happy times, gentlemen, and good night."

Grinder turned away, leaving Yount at the table edge.

Yount undoubtedly recognized Buffalo Bill in his unusual make-up, and quite likely if Grinder had told him the scout was in the game, Yount would not have got into it; but, as the matter had been brought about, it was impossible for Yount not to take the vacant chair that was ready for him. He pretended not to recognize the scout.

"What name?" he asked, leaning toward Buffalo Bill. "I never like to play with a gent when I don't know his name."

"Dunn," smiled the scout, "Uriah Robertson Dunn, of Baton Rouge. I'm not for Baton Rouge this trip, however, but for a nearer landing. All I want is diversion until I get there."

"We'll try and supply the diversion," said Doubleday, with a low laugh.

The rest in the room clustered about the table and watched a game that was to become historic in the annals of Mississippi gambling.

The game played was twenty-card poker; that is, with no cards in the deck below the ten. It was an excellent game in which to hold high and inspiring hands, and in

which the favorite cross-lifting trick of the gamblers can be brilliantly employed.

"Three is a bad number," demurred Yount, otherwise "Silver," bracing back in his chair. "I say, Grinder," he called to the man who had just left and was already at the door of the cabin, "come back here. You can't get out now. You've got to stay and help make this game an interesting one."

Grinder hesitated, and then came slowly back.

"I'm not the night owls you fellows are," he grumbled. "Still, you know I'd rather play poker than eat or sleep, so you put temptation right in front of me. If you insist on it, though, here goes."

Everything was working smoothly. The gamblers now had three men in the game, and were all ready for the famous process known as "three-pluck-one."

For several rounds Buffalo Bill—as he knew he would be—was allowed to win some bets. That was for the purpose of "drawing him on." He made the most of this to familiarize himself, as well as he could, with the marked cards. He learned a few things about the card backs, but, naturally, he was nowhere near as well equipped in this knowledge as were the three against him.

After the gamblers had allowed the scout to win as much as they thought advisable, the dealer gave him a hand which would induce him to bet to the limit.

The ante was \$5 and the blind was \$10; the next man put in \$20, and the scout put in \$40. This was followed by \$130. Then they went on "raising" each other in the usual fashion, except that the hundreds jumped rapidly into the thousands, and the few onlookers developed a breathless interest.

At last \$100,000 was stacked up on the table, and the



dealer and one of his confederates had dropped out. Yount, the man who made the blind, and Buffalo Bill remained in the game, looking into each other's eyes, the former with a flushed face and the latter pale, vigilant, but cool, as if napping in church.

Buffalo Bill, although his manner would not have suggested it, was exceedingly wary. He was waiting for the critical moment when the dealer would slip a card to Yount.

Suddenly that moment came. Under the startled eyes of the three gamblers, and those around the table, a revolver appeared as if by magic, and was seen in front of the scout, the butt conveniently to his hand.

At the same instant Buffalo Bill's manner became imbued with the tensest kind of life. His eyes glimmered dangerously, his well-knit body drew itself compactly together, and he arose and dropped his cards face upward on the table.

"Four kings and a ten take this pot," said he serenely. Then, like lightning, he seized Yount by the wrist.

"Show your hand as it is!" he went on hissing. "If it contains six cards, it proves you a thief!"

There was a depth of purpose in the scout's words which sent a tragic shiver through the nerves of gamblers and bystanders.

With a twist of his powerful hands, the scout caused Yount's cards to drop from his fingers.

There they lay upon the table top—six cards—four aces, a queen, and a knave.

Following a moment of deathlike silence, some of the onlookers began to mutter angrily.

The man called Grinder, and the other who had given

his name as Doubleday, reached downward under their coats.

"Stiddy, thar, ye pizen whelps!" came the voice of old Nomad.

The trapper was behind, and to one side, of the scout, his revolvers in his hands and his eyes flashing.

"Ye've run inter a blockade with yer leetle skin game," he went on, "and if ary one o' ye makes er move ter pull any hardware, I'll drap him whar he sits."

"Who in the fiend's name are you?" yelped the baffled Yount.

"U. R. Dunn," answered the scout, with a mocking laugh, flinging the gambler's hands from him and jerking off his hat. "That isn't my real name, of course," he went on, sweeping the bank-notes into the crown of the hat with one hand, "any more than your real name is Silver. When you're in Colorado you call yourself Yount, and when I'm on my native stamping-grounds they refer to me as Buffalo Bill."

The bystanders, at mention of the scout's name, began to feel an added interest in him.

"What's in a name, anyway?" asked the scout humorously; "a river shark, by any other name than his own, is just as tricky;" and with that he clapped the hat on his head and picked up his revolver.

"I thought I knew you!" shouted Yount, in a rage, leaping to his feet.

"And I knew you all along," returned the scout, picking his revolver from the table and fanning it from one side to the other as he retreated toward the cabin door with Nomad.

"You'll have to fight me for this," bawled Yount, shaking his fist.

"With pleasure," replied the scout. "What weapons?"  
"Six-shooters."

"Arrange the affair with my pard here. I've got a little business to attend to, but I'll be back in fifteen minutes."

Reaching the door, the scout lowered his weapon, whirled away and started for the ladies' cabin.

The scout went to the door of Holbrook's stateroom and tapped on it softly. It was opened almost immediately, and the young planter stepped into the light.

"You have failed!" he exclaimed, his searching eyes on the passive countenance of the king of scouts. "Well, it is all right, Buffalo Bill. The promise I made you holds. You saved me from a rash act, and I am a hundred times more grateful to you for that now than I should have been for returning the money."

Before the scout could speak, Mrs. Holbrook ran out of the cabin and caught his hand impulsively. There were tears in the eyes she raised to his.

"If a woman's gratitude counts for anything, Buffalo Bill," said she, with deep feeling, "rest assured that you have mine."

The scout was touched. Not knowing that he had recovered the money, both Holbrook and his wife were thanking him for saving Holbrook from his own rashness.

"It has been a pleasure to serve you," said he, withdrawing his hand from Mrs. Holbrook and giving it to her husband. "After all, my friend, you are the man I thought you were. But not so fast," he added, smiling, as he lowered his head and carefully removed his hat. "Your money is here, Holbrook, along with several thousand that belong to me. Take out what is yours and keep

the rest until either I, or my pard, Nick Nomad, call for it."

"The money!" gasped Holbrook, holding the hat in his limp hands, "here!"

"That's right," laughed the scout. "I beat the scoundrels at the same game they used in robbing you."

Then, without waiting further, he hurried away, leaving the overjoyed couple staring into the crown of the slouch-hat, and almost doubting the evidence of their senses.

Nomad was waiting for the scout on the guards, in the place where they had had their previous talk.

"Nothin' but yer life'll satisfy them sharks, Buffler," growled the old trapper.

"Then they're not going to be satisfied," returned the scout grimly. "What arrangements did you make?"

"Waal, ye agreed ter fight afore ye left ther cabin, so——"

"Certainly. Yount is Culberson's right-hand man, and when Yount came into that cabin to play, he had Culberson's winnings from Holbrook with him. Yount was stumped a little when he saw and recognized me, but he had gone too far to back out of the game. As the matter stands, Yount has lost the syndicate's money, and the only possible way for the syndicate to get that money back is by killing me and then bulldozing Holbrook. I'm pretty sure Holbrook is too much of a man to be bulldozed, even if anything does go wrong with me——"

"Waugh!" yelped the trapper. "Nothin' ain't goin' ter go wrong with ye, Buffler, not ef I kin help et!"

"And furthermore," continued the scout calmly, "if Yount's aim proves more accurate than I think it will, you're to get from Holbrook what money is coming to



me, and see him and his wife safely to Natchez with the rest."

"Then—then ye're goin' ter fight this hyar duel?"

"Certainly. Yount is a black-hearted scoundrel. You know that as well as I do. I shall spoil his right hand for him in such a way that he'll never again be able to manipulate a pack of cards. All I wish is that Culberson was to stand in front of me, instead of Yount. However, it will be something to make his best bower a useless member of this nefarious syndicate."

"While ye're takin' off a finger o' Yount's," muttered the discontented Nomad, "he'll hev his bullets primed fer yer heart. I don't like ther pizen bizness, an' thet's right."

"Have you made arrangements?" queried the scout.

"I hev. Yount's second is Doubleday, an' we fixed ther thing up tergether."

Nomad threw little spirit into his talk. Instead of fighting a duel with one of the gamblers, he would rather have faced the entire syndicate, shoulder to shoulder with his pard, and chased them over the side into the river.

"We're to go ashore and have it out there?" asked the scout. "Is the captain agreeable, and will he hold the boat?"

"Ther cap'n's asleep in his cabin," answered Nomad, "an' they say ye couldn't wake him with er cannon. At ther next landin' ther roustabouts'll hev ter get a snag er wood aboard, an' thar'd be plenty o' time ter pull off this hyar set-to while ther black boys is workin'. Thet's what I wanted, but Doubleday had another propersition, an' I had jest enough pride erbout me not ter back down on et."

Nomad's voice took on a gruesome tinge as he added:

"But I no like um, Buffler, not me."

"Well, well, old pard, what's the arrangement?"

"Ye're ter fight right now."

"On the boat?"

"Thet's whatever. Thar ain't nobody ter interfere. I understand thet differences like this hyar ain't so uncommon as ye might guess."

"I'm agreeable," said the scout lightly. "Whereabouts on the boat are we to have the clash?"

"Waal, ye're ter stand on one o' ther wheel-houses, an' Yount is ter stand on t'other 'un. Ye're ter blaze away at each other acrost erbout thirty-five feet o' space."

The scout stepped closer to the water and cast a speculative eye upward at the clear sky.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "There are no clouds, and the moon is bright. Where's Yount?"

"He's on the port house, waitin' with Doubleday."

"Then we'll go up on the starboard house."

The scout started, but Nomad grabbed his arm and held him back for a moment.

"Remember thet duel ye had oncet with Yellow Hand?" he asked.

"What has that to do with this affair, Nick?" asked the scout.

"Nothin', on'y I'd ruther fight ther hull Sioux Nation than er pizen whelp like thet thar Yount. Why, he ain't no more'n half ther man an Injun is—an' hyar ye're torkin' o' jest takin' off a finger. Why don't ye do ther world a sarvice, Buffler, by puttin' Yount out o' et?"

"I have already made up my mind as to what I'm goin' to do, pard," said the scout shortly.

"Grinder is ter be on ther hurricane-deck," pursued

Nomad, "an' he'll count, 'one, two, three,' then say, 'fire' an' 'stop.' Between ther words 'fire' an' 'stop,' you an' Yount aire ter do yer shootin'. Ef Yount fires before he's told to, or arter he's ter quit, I'll nail him with one o' my own weepins, an' et won't be a finger he loses, nuther. On t'other hand, Doubleday says thet ef *you* side-step Grinder's orders, *he'll* open up. Mebbyso"—and here Nomad brightened up a little—"thar'll be a fight all eround."

"Don't bank on it," said Buffalo Bill. "Just watch Grinder, and don't let him begin counting while either Yount or I have the moon in our eyes."

"I'm wise ter thet, pard."

Then, very carefully, the two pards made their way to the wheel-house.

Thirty-five feet away, on the other wheel-house, arose two dark forms—those of Yount and Doubleday. The big smokestack arose between, and cast a heavy shadow thwartships of the hurricane-deck, but did not interfere with the trajectory of the duelists' bullets. Midway between the wheel-house stood Grinder, with a white handkerchief in his right hand.

The "slap" of the paddle-wheels, the chuff-chuff of the exhaust, and the tinkle of the engine-room bell, were the only sounds that broke the stillness.

"Are you ready?" came in a low voice from Grinder.

An affirmative came from both Buffalo Bill and Yount.

"Then," proceeded Grinder, "if the terms are understood, the affair will begin. Principals please step forward, and seconds to one side."

Nomad withdrew, and Buffalo Bill advanced a step. The same movement occurred on the other wheel-house.

Grinder raised his handkerchief.

"One, two, three——"

Before the handkerchief had dropped, or before the order was given to fire, a bullet leaped spitefully from Yount's six-shooter, tearing a hole through the shoulder of the scout's black coat.

"Ye pizen Flathead!" cried Nomad, conjuring a weapon into his hand with the speed of thought. "Hyar's whar I nail ye fer——"

Buffalo Bill grabbed Nomad's arm and forced the revolver downward.

"I'll take care of *him!*" said the scout, in a tone that restrained his old pard's ardor. Then, to Grinder, he added: "Better try that count again. If your nervous friend gets in too much of a hurry, next time, I will also forget the rules of the game. Now!"

Neither Grinder nor Doubleday offered any excuse for Yount. Once more the count began, Yount lifting his weapon and pointing it, at the first word, while the scout held his own at his side.

"One, two, three, *fire!*"

*Crack, crack!* The two reports sounded almost as one, so closely together did the shots come.

"*Stop!*" barked Grinder.

The word was hardly necessary. Buffalo Bill heard a bullet whistle past his ear, and, while its baffled death-song was still echoing in his brain, a yell of pain broke from Yount, and he keeled over toward the edge of the opposite wheel-house. Doubleday caught him just in time to keep him from plunging into the river.

At that moment, three dark forms scrambled up the steps to the hurricane-deck.



"What's going on here?" demanded a husky voice.

"Nary a thing, mate," exulted Nomad. "Et's all over by now."

And with that the old trapper grabbed his pard's arm and hustled him down to the lower deck.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE GRATITUDE OF NINA CULBERSON.

"I'm done with this suit of black, old pard," said Buffalo Bill grimly, a few minutes later, when he and Nomad had reached their stateroom. "That bullet of Yount's spoiled the shoulder, anyhow, and, besides that, I'm tired of wearing a disguise that isn't really any disguise at all."

"Wonder ef ye sp'iled Yount's hand?" remarked Nomad, as he climbed into the upper bunk.

"Did you ever know me to miss a target when the chances favored straight shooting? If Yount is on this boat to-morrow, you'll find him with his right hand in a bandage."

"We wouldn't hev got off without er fight with Double-day an' Grinder ef them deck-hands hadn't showed up. I was expectin' et right erlong. Did Yount's bullet graze ye, pard?"

"It never left a scratch. I wonder where Culberson was all the time?"

"Hidin' his hand an' hatchin' up some other deviltry in case Yount failed ter git ye. Yount had two chances at ye, pard, an' ye on'y had one at him. I'm plumb satersfied ther way ther thing come out. But we'll hyer from ther gang ag'in—don't ye never fergit thet."

"I hope we will, Nick. Now that Holbrook has got his money back, all that's left is for us to keep right after the syndicate."

The scout, divested of boots and coat, crawled into the lower bunk after turning out the light. For several min-

utes he could hear his trapper pard chuckling to himself, and then he fell into a sound sleep.

How long he slept he did not know, but was suddenly awakened by a tapping on his stateroom door. At first he thought he must be imagining the unusual sound. Nomad's snores were rattling through the little room, and the splash from the paddle-boxes also contrived to make him less sure of what he had heard. A few moments of listening, however, caused him to lay his doubts aside. Certainly some one's hand was drumming on the panels of the door—not loudly, but softly and persistently.

The door led out on a strip of deck along the port side of the steamer, so that, at that time of night, a person could very easily come unobserved to the entrance.

Swinging his feet over the side of the bunk, the scout partly dressed, at the same time wondering if this nocturnal summons was a ruse on the part of his enemies. Even if it was, he concluded, it should never be said that he hesitated to go half-way in meeting any of Culberson's plots.

Taking a revolver from under his pillow, he stepped to the door in his stocking feet, threw the bolt, and pulled the door open quickly.

In the faint light outside, he saw the form of a woman reel backward against the steamer's rail. His astonishment, as he stood in the open door, revolver in hand, was intense.

For a full minute he and the woman stared at each other through the gloom. The woman had a shawl over her head, and suddenly she dropped it about her shoulders.

"Buffalo Bill!" she murmured. "Don't you know me?" "It is a little too dark for me to see you distinctly," the

scout answered, "but I am sure you are not Mrs. Holbrook."

"Come out here where you can see me closer," the woman went on. "You need not be afraid of me, for I am here to warn you and not to do you any harm."

"A peculiar place and time for a warning," muttered the scout.

The next moment he had stepped out on the deck and halted within arm's reach of his strange caller.

"Nina Culberson!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," breathed the girl; "Nina Culberson, whose life you saved in Durango, Colorado—Nina Culberson, the daughter of Nerry Nat, the gambler. Owing you my life, as I do, I have come here to balance the account by saving yours."

"What is it you have to tell me?" he asked.

There was not much friendliness in the tone he used in asking the question, for Nina Culberson was too much of a tigress ever to appeal to him. He had saved her life, it was true, but that had been through a motive of mere humanity, and not because the girl was otherwise entitled to the service. Even now, with her expression of gratitude upon her lips, he distrusted her, and felt that she was playing a trump-card in her father's scheme of vengeance. Nevertheless, to hear what she had to say might prove of benefit to him.

"You have crossed Nat Culberson's path again, Buffalo Bill," said the girl, "and at a time when he least expected it."

"That is the proper way to cross the trail of a man like Culberson."

"You have taken from him a big stake which he has been planning to secure for several weeks."



"I have saved Holbrook's life and good name—which your father had all but taken from him. What I have done, Miss Culberson, was worth the price."

"You have not yet paid the price, and you do not know what a terrible price it is to be. The syndicate have decided that you shall never leave this boat alive."

"That," laughed the scout, "is what you might call a snap decision. I think I have shown Culberson that I am able to take care of myself."

"You may not be," whispered the girl. "Nat Culberson hates you down to the gorund; he hated you for that Colorado affair, but he hates you doubly now, since you have fooled Yount out of the Holbrook money and maimed two of Yount's fingers so that he will never be able to use them again."

"It was your father's fault that I had to go after the Holbrook money; and it was Yount's fault that he lost his two fingers."

"Well, however that may be," went on the girl, after a short silence, "I have come here to tell you some of my father's plans in order that you may guard yourself. If my father knew what I was doing, he would kill me."

"You should not take such chances, Miss Culberson."

The girl struck her hands together convulsively.

"You don't believe in my sincerity!" she murmured; "you think my father has made me come to you! Buffalo Bill, do you believe me incapable of gratitude?"

"What I believe, Miss Culberson, is beside the matter. I am here, and I am listening. What have you to say?"

The girl heaved a deep sigh.

"I will tell you, then," she went on, "whether you choose to believe me or not. About 10 o'clock to-morrow morning this boat is due at the Carver Creek landing.

There is an old wharf up the creek where a trader by the name of Planet has anchored a house-boat. For a while that house-boat is to be the headquarters of the syndicate. They will leave the *General Houston* at Carver Creek and join Planet."

"This man, Planet, and your father are friends?"

"Yes, of long standing."

"What has Planet and his house-boat got to do with me? Are you telling me this so I can go up Carver Creek and settle my account with your father?"

"No, no," answered the girl. "Before this steamboat reaches Carver Creek you are to be done away with."

"Now we're getting at it," said the scout. "How does your father propose to do away with me?"

"A negro roustabout and a redskin are to do that."

"Redskin? On this boat? There are plenty of negro roustabouts, but I haven't yet seen a redskin."

"The Indian is on the boat, nevertheless. His name is Casco, and he has often helped my father in his schemes. The negro is Mose Trotter, and he shipped aboard the *General Houston* at Cairo, just to be handy by in case my father needed him."

"I see. Your father has plenty of strings to his bow, Miss Culberson. But I should like to know how the negro and the Indian are going to get the best of me. If the syndicate has been unable to do that, how can it be expected a black man and a red one will succeed?"

"There is a plot to have you on the guards to-morrow morning, and there, in broad daylight, Casco and Mose are to creep upon you and throw you overboard. Nervy Nat and his confederates would never dare go to Carver Creek without first putting you out of the way. My father and his white confederates will not take the risk

themselves, for such an act, in broad daylight, would be hazardous."

"I should say so!" chuckled the scout. "Whether Casco and Mose succeed, or whether they fail, they are likely to get themselves into a peck of trouble."

"My father has promised to stand by them and see them through their trouble, besides paying them liberally for putting you out of the way."

"That's very generous of Nervy Nat," said the scout sarcastically.

"You won't believe me, you won't believe me," murmured the girl, wringing her hands.

In truth, the scout did not believe her. Such a high-handed proceeding as she had told him about seemed altogether too wild for even an audacious man like Culberson. Then, too, Nina Culberson was a good actress, and could easily profess a gratitude and simulate emotions she did not feel.

"What am I to do?" asked the scout, drawing the girl on in the hope of finding out something of real importance.

"Look well to yourself to-morrow morning!" exclaimed the girl; "keep an eye on a negro and an Indian."

"If I escape Casco and Mose, your father and his syndicate will not go up Carver Creek?"

"They would not dare."

"And if I am thrown overboard they will go?"

"Yes."

"What are they going to do up Carver Creek? They wouldn't go to that out-of-the-way place unless they had some object in view."

"What they are going there for I will not tell you. I have given you information for the purpose of saving

your life, and I have told you all that you need to know, running a great risk in order to do it. You will heed my warning or not, just as you think best. That is all."

And with that the girl turned and glided off along the deck, finally vanishing among the shadows.



## CHAPTER XIV.

### THE SCOUT'S PLAN.

During the scout's interview with Nina Culberson, the old trapper had not been aroused. While his pard still slept and snored, Buffalo Bill stepped back into the state-room, locked the door, and regained his berth.

He thought no more of Nina Culberson and her warning that night, but while he was dressing in the morning, his thoughts returned to the subject and evolved a determination.

Nomad, hearing his pard move around, awoke and leaned over the side of the upper berth.

"Howdy, Buffler? Wonder how Yount is feelin' this mornin'?"

The old trapper's words were replete with a huge satisfaction, and his face was wreathed with good-natured smiles.

"I'm not bothering much about Yount," answered the scout. "What concerns me, just now, is how I can play the black and the red."

Nomad stared curiously.

"Play the black an' the red?" he repeated. "What ye tryin' ter git at, Buffler?"

"Well, I had an interview with Nina Culberson last night, and——"

"Nina Culberson? Snarlin' catermounts!"

"I don't take much stock in what she told me, although there's a chance that she spoke the truth."

"Whar'd ye see her, Buffler?"

### The Scout's Plan.

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The scout explained how he had heard the rapping on the door and had gone out on deck for the interview.

"Waugh!" growled Nomad, "wouldn't thet jest nacherly rattle yer spurs? I didn't think thet gal had any more feelin' than a hyener. What did she tell ye, pard?"

"Among other things, she told me of a trader by the name of Planet who has a house-boat up Carver Creek. Planet, she said, is a friend of her father's, and that her father and the rest of the syndicate intend to join Planet to-day, providing they can first put me out of the way."

"Whyever do they want ter put ye out o' ther way fust?"

"Miss Culberson said the syndicate would not dare go up Carver Creek and leave me free to follow their trail."

"Thet sounds reasonable, Buffler. Whar is this hyar Carver Creek?"

"The *General Houston* is due there at ten this mornin'."

"An' ye're goin' ter be put out o' ther way afore ten, hey?" laughed Nomad.

"Yes, if the red and the black get in their work."

"Thar's ther red an' ther black ergin! Who aire they, Buffler?"

"An Indian by the name of Casco, and a negro by the name of Mose Trotter. They are in the pay of Culberson, and Culberson, according to Nina's story, has engaged them to throw me overboard."

"Consarn their pizen picters!" breathed Nomad darkly. "Jest let 'em try et!"

"I think I shall," said the scout serenely.

"What?"

"I think I shall let them try it, and let them think they have succeeded in putting me out of the way."

"What's thet fer? Whatever's ther use o' takin' any chances like thet?"

"It's this way, Nick: The syndicate is not going up Carver Creek for the fun of the thing. It's dollars to dimes they have some big deal on, and that this man Planet is going to help them carry it out. It's a great chance to catch them red-handed. So far, the gang hasn't done a thing for which its members could be brought to book. What we want is to nail them at some unlawful undertaking, then run them in and see that they are sent over the road. This Carver Creek business may give us a chance. If Nina Culberson is to be believed, however, the syndicate will not touch the Carver Creek business unless they are sure I have been put where I will not interfere with them. That's what I mean when I say I think it would be a good plan for me to play the red and the black, let them think they have sent me across the divide, and that the way is clear for the syndicate."

"Me no like um, Buffler. Heap dangerous!"

"Things that are worth while, Nick, rarely come easy," answered the scout.

"Tally! But, in this hyar case, Buffler, ye're jugglin' with yer life. Then, too, ye don't know whether ther gal was givin' et to ye straight er not. She may not be wantin' ter help you so much as ter help her dad."

"I have thought of that, and, while it is very possible all this talk about Planet, the house-boat, and Carver Creek has been made up out of whole cloth for private reasons on Culberson's part, still there may be some truth in it. We want to make the most of the story if it is true, Nick. Have you seen an Indian on the steam-boat?"

"Nary, Buffler. I kain't imagine how an Injun could go wider o' his trail than by bein' on er steamboat."

"Well, whatever happens, we'll lay our plans just as though Nina Culberson had told the truth. If Casco and Mose attempt to throw me overboard in broad daylight, I shall let them do it; then I'll swim ashore and make for Carver Creek and Planet's house-boat."

"S'posin' Casco an' Mose knock ye on ther head afore they throw ye overboard?"

"Make no mistake on this, Nick. If I go overboard, it will be because I want to go, but I shall not allow myself to be hammered on the head. I'll need all my wits, and all my strength, and I expect to keep them about me. The thing to be considered, if this trick is worked through, is how you're to act."

"I'll go overboard with ye!" declared the old trapper promptly.

"No, you won't, pard. You're to stay on the *General Houston* until she reaches the next landing, and all that time you'll be hunting for me, and wondering where I could have gone. Stir things up on the boat. You might even face Culberson and accuse him of underhand work in the matter of my disappearance. Of couse, he'll deny everything, and laugh at you. You'll have to act your part well, old pard."

"I reckon I'll act et, all right," said Nomad, "seein' as how I won't know but thet ye aire really in ther bottom o' ther river."

"You will also see Holbrook, and get back from him the money belonging to me. I left all of it in his possession when I went up on the wheel-house to take a peck at Yount."



"Count on me ter do my level best, Buffler," said Nomad, "only I'm hopin' I won't hev ter."

The scout discarded his black suit, that morning, and got into his usual plainman's costume. He and Nomad were ready for breakfast at the first sound of the gong.

Holbrook and his wife entered the dining-room about the same time that the pards did, and their greeting of Buffalo Bill was friendly in the extreme.

"I've got your money for you, Buffalo Bill," said Holbrook, in a low voice, when they sat down at the table. "Do you want it now?"

"No," answered the scout. "Some time this forenoon my old pard will call on you and get it."

The talk in the dining-room, that morning, was mostly about the duel. What the passengers knew about it did not amount to much, and captain and crew seemed but little better informed.

Culberson, Doubleday, and Grinder came to their meal, but Yount kept himself out of sight. A bandaged hand would have offered proof that he had been one of the participants in the fight.

The gamblers paid no attention to the scout or the trapper. For all any one could tell to the contrary, each party might have been strangers to the other.

Following the meal, Buffalo Bill dismissed Nomad and set himself to the task of playing into the hands of Casco and Mose.

Strolling from point to point, and keeping an eye out for "signs," he was not long in discovering that a negro was slouching after him wherever he moved.

This negro, undoubtedly, was Mose. In order to give Mose every chance, the scout selected the guards on the

side of the boat where there were fewest people, pulled a chair near the edge, and sat down.

There were two or three people near him, lolling in chairs and smoking. The scout noticed that these people had formed part of the group of onlookers during the game in the gentlemen's cabin the night before.

An hour passed away, and the scout looked at his watch, and found that it was 9 o'clock.

Nine o'clock, and the boat was due at the Carver Creek landing at 10! If Casco and Mose got in their work they would have to be in a hurry about it.

Certainly they would not attempt their high-handed proceeding under the noses of the others on the guards, and, as these men seemed to have settled down for the forenoon, it began to look as though Culberson's men would have no chance to carry out their designs.

But Culberson's guiding mind was equal to the emergency. A few minutes after he had consulted his watch, Buffalo Bill saw Mose, the negro, approach those who were with him on the guards and say something, in an undertone, to each of them.

The scout's quick ear caught something about "game o' kyards in de cabin last night," and "de cap'n wants tuh see yuh."

Here was a ruse for getting the men away, and it was a very good one. One by one those not concerned in the plot got up from their chairs and started to find the captain, leaving Buffalo Bill alone.

Nerving himself for what was to come, and determined to make things as easy as he could for his enemies, the scout got up from his chair and stepped nearer the edge of the deck.

Standing over the waters churned up by the wheel, he

allowed his eye to wander shoreward, figuring over his prospects for an under-water swim.

Out of the tail of his eye he caught a glimpse of an Indian, stealing toward him from behind a pile of boxes and barrels.

The Indian was a treacherous-looking scoundrel, and wore a pair of old army trousers, secured at the waist by an army belt. The upper half of his body was nude. Buffalo Bill could not see the negro, but was very certain he was not far away.

Suddenly there was a rush of feet, the sound of an overturning chair, and the scout felt himself caught from behind in two pairs of powerful arms.

He dropped his head quickly just in time to escape a terrific blow from a black fist; then, with irresistible force, he was propelled outward.

Not a cry escaped Buffalo Bill. Apparently taken at a disadvantage, he flung out his arms and dropped toward the churning waters.

The scout struck the water behind the big wheel on that side of the boat. Had he dropped off in front, the paddle-blades would certainly have caught him and pounded the life out of his body.

Even by falling into the river behind the wheel, he had a difficult time of it in the troubled waves. He was thrown about like a cork and dashed with fearful force against the side of the boat. But he was a strong swimmer, and in the very pink of condition.

He withstood the buffeting well, swam with powerful strokes until he was clear of the side of the boat, and then, with a long breath, went under the surface and laid his course for the nearest shore.

His hat came off and he arose and caught its brim in

his teeth. Shaking the water out of his eyes, he gazed down-stream and saw the *General Houston* puffing along toward a bend. There was not a trace of excitement anywhere about the boat's decks.

Incredible as it seemed to the scout, the little drama that had recently been enacted upon the guards must have escaped the attention of every person aboard not concerned in the plot.

This was almost better than the scout had dared to hope. Naturally he did not want to be seen, since he would have been picked up, and his elaborate counter-stroke must have been frustrated.

Swimming in his full outfit of clothes was a hard task, and it was all the more difficult because the scout felt it necessary to keep under the surface. He had no doubt but that sharp eyes were watching the wake of the steam-boat, and he knew that if the gamblers saw him swimming ashore they would immediately conclude that their desperate plot had failed.

Therefore, the moment he had taken a good long look at the boat, and had got his hat between his teeth, he flung up his dripping arms and sank downward.

When he arose the second time, a floating log was close to his hand, and he manipulated matters so that he got it between him and the boat.

With one arm over the log, he supported himself, and slowly paddled shoreward.

Five minutes later the *General Houston* made a wide sweep around the bend, and slowly vanished behind a bluff.

After resting for a while on the log, the scout cast loose from it, and was soon safe ashore.

Throwing himself down on the sand, he pulled off his



soggy boots and emptied the water out of them; then he removed his guns, ammunition-belt, and the personal property from his pockets, and laid them in the hot sun to dry.

In preparing for his watery experience, he had taken pains to secure his loose property against spilling out of his clothes, and he was pleased to discover that his safeguards had proven effectual.

The spot where he had landed was barren and deserted—just the sort of place he would have chosen could the selection have been left to him.

Stripping away his clothes, he wrung them out and spread them on the hot sand.

His plainsman's gear had passed through many a hard experience, and was proof against such a small disaster as a drenching.

While the clothes were drying, he sat in the sun thinking over recent events.

Nina Culberson had not deceived him. He was surprised and gratified to find that this had proven the case. If she had told him the truth regarding the work to be done by Casco and Mose, it was probable that she had also done so regarding Planet, the house-boat, and the design of the gamblers to go up Carver Creek.

The scout's success, so far in his dubious undertaking, put him in amiable mood.

"Culberson," said the scout to himself, "isn't going to side-track himself in this part of the country unless there is something here to make it worth his while. What's his game? It can't be a gambling game, for this is hardly the place for green-cloth operations. It is something bigger than he has yet tackled, for he would hardly give his attention to anything outside of the cards if it

was not. Well, it remains for me to find out what the work is, and then to backcap it. I am supposed to be at the bottom of the river," he added, with a chuckle, "and that leaves a clear trail ahead of me."

As soon as his handkerchief had dried, he made use of it in carefully cleaning his revolvers.

By the time he had finished with the guns, his clothes were ready to be put on.

Perhaps it was high noon when he turned from the sandy shore and started inward.

As already stated, the river, a little below that point, described a bend around a high bluff. By moving away from the river, the scout hoped to cut off the bend, escape the bluff, and come out on the water, once more, some distance down-stream.

Buffalo Bill was sure he could not be far from Carver Creek. The steamboat was due there at 10 o'clock, and it had been after 9 when he had gone overboard. He felt that he could walk the distance separating him from the creek in an hour or so, and there he would meet Nomad, providing the latter had followed instructions. And that Nomad would do this was a foregone conclusion, unless the gamblers found a way to interfere with him.

As the scout drew farther and farther away from the river, the country grew less desolate and more inviting. Grassy levels began to show themselves, and small groves of timber came into evidence.

"Tennessee," thought the scout. "I'm not far from Davy Crockett's old stamping-ground. There's inspiration in the thought. This was as wild a region, in Crockett's day, as the far West is in mine. Ha! here's a turn-

pike—not very heavily traveled if appearances count for anything, but it leads in my direction, and I'll follow it."

The road angled south by east, and the scout struck into it and strode rapidly onward.

After something less than a half a mile, the road dipped into a shallow swale, and here the scout found a ruinous old log cabin, with a white-haired darky sitting out in front, smoking a pipe and sunning himself.

"Hello, uncle!" said the scout, coming to a halt in front of the old negro.

"Howdy, marse," answered the darky respectfully.

"How far is it to Carver Creek?"

"Dat depends, marse. If yo' was on a haws like Thunderbolt, den yo' kin git t' de creek almost befo' yo' start. If yo, was on a mu-el, den yo' mout be an hour. If yo' is on yo' feet, an' a good trabbler, Ah reck-ons yo' kin git dar in less'n an hour. Yo' from de Norf, marse?"

The old darky's eyes traveled speculatively over the scout.

"From the West," the scout answered.

"Bettah set down on de bench an' rest yo'se'f. Yo' looks kinder frazzled."

The odor of burning, home-grown tobacco made the scout hungry for his pipe. His own tobacco and cigars had been spoiled by the water, and he had thrown them away.

"If you can spare me a pipeful of tobacco, uncle," said the scout, "I'll sit with you for a few minutes."

"Ah kin spare yo' all de terbacker dat yo' want, marse," answered the negro. "Make yo'se'f easy while Ah goes an' gits it."

Buffalo Bill dropped down on the bench in front of the cabin, brought his pipe out of his pocket, and made himself comfortable. A moment later the negro appeared with a dried tobacco-leaf in his hand.

"Squeeched up in yo' hands, marse," said he, "dan ram hit into yo' pipe. If hit ain't de sweetes' smokin' yo' evah tried, den mah name ain't Nicodemus Trotter."

The scout had reached for the tobacco, and was just "squeeching" it between his palms, when the old negro spoke his name. He looked up quickly.

"Trotter?" he repeated. "Is that your name, uncle?"

"Hit sholy is, marse."

"Got any family?"

"De ole woman done died an' left me ten y'ars ago, but I got one boy, Mose. Mebby yo' has heard about dat Mose? Huh? He's been ridin' race-hosses at Loueyville—ridin' fo' Marse Bowie, up at de plantation. Marse Bowie has got a monsus fine haws in dat Kaintucky thoroughbred, Thunderbolt. Everybody knows dat. Thunderbolt done win ever' prize at Loueyville, an' de folks say Marse Bowie has been offered a heap o' money fo' dat 'ar haws. Mose he rode Thunderbolt!"

The old darky threw back his woolly pate and rolled up his eyes in pride.

As for the scout, he was overwhelmed by his unexpected discoveries. While deliberately filling the pipe and getting it to going, his mind was busy.

Mose Trotter, Culberson's roustabout assistant, was a jockey. He had been riding for a man named Bowie at the Louisville races. Nicodemus Trotter was Mose's father.

Here was stroke of luck number one.



"Mose rides for Bowie, eh?" queried the scout. "What Bowie is that?"

"Dar ain't mo' dan one Bowie in dese parts, marse," returned Nicodemus Trotter, "an' dat's Marse Ned Bowie, who lives at de big house on de plantation above hyeh. Marse Bowie raises a lot ob fine hawses, but he ain't nevah gwine raise another like dat 'ar Thunderbolt. Ah've heerd tell dat he was offered a hunnerd t'ousan' dollahs fo' dat Thunderbolt." Nicodemus threw back his head and cackled sarcastically. "Jes' 's if he'd sell Thunderbolt! Not him. Marse Bowie wouldn't evah sell dat haws."

A strange thrill shot through Buffalo Bill's nerves.

Rarely, indeed, had matters ever fallen out so luckily for him.

He was close to the place where Ned Bowie, the man who had presented himself to him at Jefferson Barracks, had his home.

Mose Trotter lived in that section; not far away on Carver Creek was the trader, Planet, with his house-boat; and in that vicinity, also, the gamblers' syndicate was to rendezvous.

What did this complication mean?

The scout felt as though he was coming close to the secret purpose that was bringing Culberson and his blacklegs into that part of the country.

But, as yet, the tangle was too complicated for him to unravel.

## CHAPTER XV.

### A LITTLE LIGHT.

"My name's Hillsdale, uncle," said the scout, after a period of smoking and reflection, "and I'm a tobacco-buyer. Got any tobacco to sell?"

"Ah only raises enough fo' mah own smokin'," said the negro. "Ah'm gittin' along in yeahs, an' hoein' in de field comes monsus ha'd on a ole niggah lak me. Marse Bowie done keeps me in co'n an' bacon. Powerful fine man Marse Bowie is!"

"Where is Bowie now?"

"Done gone Norf, but dey's expectin' of him back mos' any time."

All this tallied with what the scout knew about the Ned Bowie who had introduced himself at Jefferson Barracks.

"Bowie was at Louisville during the races?"

"He was dar part ob de time," answered the old negro, with a broad grin; "jes' long enough tuh rake in a scad ob money on dat Thunderbolt haws. He went from Loueyville tuh Saint Louey, an' he'll be back home by any down-river packet now, so some niggahs from de big house done been tellin' me."

"Where's Thunderbolt?"

"He's up at de plantation. He was fotched back right atteh de Loueyville raees. Thunderbolt goes tuh New Awleens next, Ah reckon."

"When's Mose coming back?"

"Ah 'spect him any time. Heerd a boat whistlin' dis mawnin', an' didn't know but dat he mout be on dat."

If Mose came to the old man's cabin direct from the landing, it would not be long before he arrived. And, when he did arrive, it would be well for the scout to be somewhere else.

Borrowing another pipeful of tobacco, Buffalo Bill bid the old negro good-by, dropped a badly crumpled dollar bill into his yellow palm, and fared onward.

Beyond the swale the road ran through a grove. In the middle of the grove the scout heard some one whistling around a turn in front. The sound was steadily approaching, and the scout sprang to one side and dropped behind a thicket of bushes.

The whistler was Mose. The scout had thought it might be when he had taken to the brush.

For a jockey, and a successful rider at that, Mose was rather large.

He was on foot and swinging along toward the swale, carrying a bundle tied in a red cotton handkerchief.

Mose must have been a particularly hard character, or he could not have whistled so blithely after knocking a man into the river, and, for all he knew to the contrary, killing him.

As soon as the youth had passed, Buffalo Bill emerged from the bushes and followed.

Mose proceeded straight to the cabin, and was effusively greeted by his father.

By exercising considerable care, the scout was able to creep through the swale close enough to hear what passed between the two negroes.

Mose dropped down on the bench, and was doing the talking when the scout arrived within ear-shot.

"Kain't stop hyah long, ole man," Mose was saying. "Ah done got tuh go up tuh Marse Bowie's an' git dat Thunderbolt haws."

"Whaffur yo' gwine afteh de haws, Mose?" asked his father.

"Dar's a man down at Carver Creek dat wants tuh look at de haws tuh buy him."

"Whaffur doan' he go tuh de big house if he wants tuh see de haws?"

"How yo' t'ink Ah know dat? All Ah knows is dat Ah got a lettah in mah pocket from Marse Bowie askin' de oberseer at de place tuh le' me take Thunderbolt down tuh Carver Creek tuh show 'im off."

"Monsus queer dat Marse Bowie wants tuh sell dat Thunderbolt!" said the old negro, shaking his head. "Ah done heerd him say hisself dat he wouldn't sell Thunderbolt at no price. An' now hyeh yo' come with a lettah askin' de oberseer at de plantation tuh let yo' show him off at Carver Creek. Say, Mose, what yo' gwine do when Thunderbolt is sold? Huh? How yo' gwine make a libin'?"

"Ah's gwine tuh ride fo' de man what buys Thunderbolt, dat's how Ah's gwine tuh make a libin'."

"Sho' yo' kin do dat, Mose?"

"Da's whut Ah is, ole man. Wull, Ah'll be swingin' erlong. Got tuh git Thunderbolt down tuh de landin' dis aftehnnoon so'st de man dar kin see him durin' de daylight."

"Den you'll be home tuh stop wid me tuh-night, will yuh?"

"Ah doan' know; Ah mout, an' den ag'in Ah moutn't. Anyways, ole man, Ah'll see yo' befo' Ah leave. Dar's



ten dollahs fo' yo';" and Mose took a roll of money from his pocket and handed a bill to his father.

The old man's face fairly shone as he greedily grabbed the money.

"Whar yo' git all dat, Mose?" he asked, nodding his woolly pate toward the green roll in his son's hand.

"Ridin' de races," flared Mose. "Whar yo' s'pose Ah git it?"

"Ah dunno, Mose. Ah jes' hopes yo' is hones', dat's all."

"Ob co'se Ah's hones'. Ain't Ah always been hones'? Whut yo' take me for, anyhow?"

And, with that, Mose started off up the road giving an angry fling to his shoulders.

The scout was fairly sure that Mose had got his money from Culberson, and that he had earned it by his dastardly work on the *General Houston*.

Making his way back across the swale, Buffalo Bill once more took to the road and plunged into the grove.

Some light had been shed on the situation, but not enough to clear up the complication.

Mose Trotter had landed at Carver Creek, along with Culberson and the rest of the gamblers; and Mose was now on the way to Bowie's plantation with a letter, ostensibly from Bowie, asking the overseer to let him have Thunderbolt in order to show the animal to a prospective buyer at the landing.

If Thunderbolt was a hundred-thousand-dollar horse, as the old negro had asserted, Bowie was taking a long chance on Mose by ordering the overseer to let the young negro take the animal to Carver Creek.

Was there some crooked work on hand, with Thunderbolt at the bottom of it?

The scout had got that far in his reflections when he heard some one else ahead of him in the road. Who the person was, he could not see.

Fearing it might be one of the gamblers, he repeated the tactics he had used in Mose's case, and slipped out of sight in the undergrowth that edged the road.

If the gamblers were back of Mose's play to get Thunderbolt away from the plantation, then it was very possible that Culberson would send one of his trusty confederates to make sure that the negro carried out his instructions to the letter.

While the scout crouched cautiously in the bushes, a man came into sight, walking rapidly.

A smile crossed the scout's lips, and he rose to his knees and parted the bushes wide in front of him.

"Halt, you old cimiroon!" he shouted, when the man had come abreast of his place of concealment. "Where are you going, and who are you looking for?"

"Buffle! Buffle, er I'm er Piegan!"

And, with that, Buffalo Bill leaped from among the bushes, and the two pards clasped hands.

"Whistlin' whipperwills!" murmured the delighted old trapper. "Et's shore good ter feel ther tech o' yer hand ergin, pard."

"Didn't you think I was able to work through that trick without losing my scalp?" asked the scout humorously.

"I know ye gin'rally do whatever ye set out ter try, but this was sich er all-fired desp'rate thing I was plenty worried. What happened ter ye?"

"Tell me, first, what happened on the boat," said the scout. "That is more to the point. While you're talking," he added, "we'll proceed toward Carver Creek."

"I was lookin' when yo' went overboard," said Noma, striding off at the scout's side, "an' ther way ye done et was shore ace high in ther actin'-line. Ye never let out er whimper, an' I thort shore ye had been struck on ther head. I wasn't the on'y one thet was watchin' ye, nuther, kase Culberson an' Doubleday was on ther hurricane-deck, and I know they must hev been lookin'.

"Fer quite er spell I didn't see nothin' of ye, an' my ole heart went right down inter my boots. I was jest goin' ter tell ther cap'n ter put back an' look fer ye, when up ye come, only ter toss yer hands and sink like er shot. Then I was in another takin' until I saw thet log. I reckon I savvied ther log, all right, although I couldn't see ye anywhars nigh et. Bumby we got eround ther bend, an' then I commenced ter do some actin' myself.

"I rammed eround thet ole kettle like er ternader, askin' whar was Buffler. No one knowed. Ye had been seen last on ther guards. I saw Culberson, smilin' in thet snaky way o' his, an' I accused him o' dealin' out foul play ter ye. I reckon somethin' would hev happened, then, ef we hadn't come alongside ther wharf-boat at Carver Creek.

"Culberson, Doubleday, Grinder, and Yount went ashore. A minute arter they crossed ther plank, Nina Culberson hurried arter them. The gal was pale, Buffler, an' looked as though somethin' er other had got on her narves. 'Course I follered ther outfit. They left the wharf-boat right off, but I waited on et, an' watched 'em trail off up ther creek. Then, all to oncet, I seen the nigger, Mose, an' ther Injun, Casco. They must hev slipped off'n ther *General Houston* unknown ter ther

cap'n. Leastways, they didn't come acrost ther gang-plank, er I'd hev seen 'em.

"Howsumever, I wasn't thinkin' much erbout Culberson an' his gang, jest then, but more erbout Pard Buffler. I was worryin' a considerable. As soon as ther way was clear, I left ther wharf-boat an' started along er road thet led back up ther river.

"Say, fer an ole hardshell like me, thet's used ter hevin' er saddle between his legs, walkin' is somethin' fierce. Feet was made fer stirrups, an' not ter travel with on hard ground.

"Notwithstandin' thet, I nipped erlong right smart, as they say down hyar. When I got above thet bluff at ther bend, I was goin' ter turn from ther road and hustle fer ther river. But I didn't hev ter do thet. Meetin' you, like I done, was a mighty big relief ter me. Waugh! Buffler, I don't want ye ever to drop off'n er steamboat ag'in!"

"I hope I'll never have to, Nick," smiled the scout. "If I hadn't done that, however, and if the syndicate did not feel pretty certain I'd never trouble them any more, Culberson and the other blacklegs would not have come ashore at Carver's Creek."

"What's ther comin' ashore goin' ter amount ter, anyways?"

"A whole lot, if I'm any prophet. There's a big deal on of some kind, Nick—a shady transaction that will enable us, I hope, to wind up the dangerous gang and so settle our account with them."

"Got any idee what ther shady transaction is?"

"Not yet, although I have been able to find out a few things that have startled me and got me mightily interested."



"Been findin' out things, hev ye? Thet's you, chaps, taps, an' latigoes. Not only hev ye saved yerself rom drownin', but ye've also found time ter go nosin' arter information. Don't hang fire any longer, pard. Kain't ye see how I'm champin' ther bit?"

The scout thereupon recited his experiences at Trotter's cabin, detailing his conversation with the old man as well as what he had overheard between the black and his son.

"Waugh!" exulted Nomad, with gleaming eyes. "Thet's how Cody-luck jumps right in front o' ye an' hits ye between the eyes. Thar ain't nothin' like et! Fust clatter out o' ther box ye run onter Mose's dad, an' find out things erbout Mose an' erbout this Bowie. Say, I'm some stumped as ter Bowie. I am, fer a fact. Ef et wasn't fer ther way he acted, at Jefferson Barracks, I'd think he mout be straight goods, arter all. Owns a racin'-stable, hey? I'd shore like ter visit at his place, although I don't reckon he's got a hoss on his hull plantation thet kin ekal Bear Paw er Hide-rack. Pietcin' tergether what ye heard, what do ye make out o' ther puzzle?"

"Nothing, as yet, Nick," replied the scout. "Whatever happens, I suppose, will take place at the house-boat of this trader, Planet. When we reach the creek, we'll follow it up carefully until we reach the house-boat; then we'll hide out and await developments."

"House-boat! What is a feller doin' eround hyar in er house-boat?"

"This shanty-boat business is quite a feature of the Mississippi, Nick," explained the scout. "Mostly, they hail from the Allegheny and Monongahela region, and from towns on the Upper Ohio.

"A shanty is built on a scow, and the owner lays in a stock of provisions, chiefly salt pork, flour, potatoes, molasses, and coffee, and sometimes a lot of truck to be traded with natives along the river-banks.

"The boat floats down-stream with the current, and the people aboard take life easy. But the traders, while they represent almost every trade under the sun, are a disreputable set, and always on the lookout for a chance to turn a dishonest penny.

"The shanty-boatmen do trapping occasionally, and they're not above running off the hogs belonging to backwoodsmen and farmers.

"The fleet of shanty-boats begins to reach New Orleans in the spring. The people aboard sell the skins of the animals they trapped coming down the river, dispose of their other property, and sell their boat for firewood; then they purchase lower-deck tickets on an up-river boat for Cairo, Cincinnati, or Pittsburg, and so get back to the place they started from. The following year the experience is repeated."

"Pizen mean way o' gittin' a livin'," growled Nomad. "This feller, Planet, is one o' thet kind er fish, is he?"

"I suppose so. Nina Culberson said he was a trader, and that he owns a house-boat. That puts him in the class I've mentioned. Planet is a shady character, I think, without any doubt. The fact that he is a friend of Culberson's isn't anything in his favor."

"I reckon *not*! But what has Planet, Culberson, an' the rest got ter do with this hoss, Thunderbolt?"

"That's for us to find out. Ah, here's the creek, and a path leading through the woods along the bank. Did the gamblers follow the path, Nick?"

The pards, during their talk, had come to the wooded

banks of a small, deep stream. The path to which the scout referred was a narrow way stretching through the woods. It came from the direction of the landing, and followed the bank of the creek.

"This is ther way they went, pard," said Nomad.

"Then that's the way we'll go. If we probe to the bottom of the syndicate's business here, we'll have to find the house-boat and watch the gamblers."

"Jest er minit, pard," interposed Nomad. "Ye ain't hed nothin' ter eat sense breakfast, so I reckon ye're 'most as hungry as what I am. How erbout goin' ter ther wharf-boat an' gittin' er snack ter eat?"

"It won't do," said the scout. "I'm supposed to be at the bottom of the river, and can't show myself too recklessly. Then, again, this business is important, and can't be put off."

"Right ye aire, pard. Heave ahead."

Buffalo Bill struck into the path and hurried along it. He was careful to use his eyes and ears as he went, so that he might dodge out of sight in case any one came upon them from the direction in which they were traveling.

It was well that the scout was thus cautious. He had not covered a mile before he heard voices in the distance.

Whirling on Nomad, he motioned him to follow, and backed out of sight among the bushes.

Two men came down the path presently, and passed them. One was Yount, and the other was Doubleday. Yount's right hand was bandaged and suspended in a sling from around his neck.

"If I'm any judge," Yount was saying, as they passed,

"they'll have a mighty poor brand of whisky and cigars on that wharf-boat."

"All whisky is good," laughed Doubleday, "only some is better than the rest. Besides, Yount, you need it."

"I do," answered Yount. "This pesky hand has made me as weak as a cat. I won't be able to do much in the old man's work to-night."

What Doubleday answered the pards could not hear, for, by that time, they were out of ear-shot.

"We're on the right trail, all right," remarked the scout, as he stepped back into the path.

"Ther tinhorns aire visitin' ther wharf-boat fer supplies," commented Nomad. "Yount is still groggy from the effects o' thet wound."

"Hist!" warned the scout. "It is just as well for us to be silent now as well as watchful."

After that the old trapper held his peace, and watched the scout's heels gliding along ahead of him.

A few minutes later Buffalo Bill halted, and turned to his old pard.

"Here we are, Nick," he whispered.

"Kin ye see ther boat?"

"Look for yourself."

As the scout spoke, he pulled Nomad forward and directed his eyes through a break in the timber.

Just ahead of them the creek described a wide curve. Nestled against the bank, on the inner side of the curve, was a roughly built flatboat, some twenty feet long by twelve feet wide.

Almost the entire deck of the flatboat was taken up by a primitive shanty, a door at each end, and windows along the side.

On a strip of deck at one end of the shanty sat a lean,



red-headed, lantern-jawed man. His chair was tilted back against the end of the house, and he was smoking a pipe and strumming a banjo.

On the bank, a few yards away, Culberson and Grinder were walking back and forth, talking in low voices.

"There's our outfit, pard," murmured the scout.

"Red-head, thar, must be Planet, hey?" returned the old trapper.

"Undoubtedly."

"He looks like he had er few notches," said Nomad. "I'd hate ter give him two-bits an' send him eround ther block fer a handful o' seegars. Small-fry thief—thet's ther way I size *him* up."

"And you're not far wrong, judging from the cut of him, and the reputation of shanty-boatmen in general."

Nomad was about to speak again, when a movement of the two men on the bank claimed his attention and the scout's.

Crossing a plank to the strip of deck where the red-headed man was picking at the banjo, Culberson and Grinder came to a halt.

"It will be some time before Mose gets back here," said Culberson, "and Grinder and I are going into the shanty and lie down. We had a rough time of it last night, and we need rest for what is to happen this afternoon. Have you got an extra cot, Planet?"

"Sure I hev, Culberson," the red-headed man answered.

"Then I wish you'd get it."

Culberson and Grinder went through the door in the end of the house, and Planet put aside his banjo and lifted a trap-door in the deck in front of him.

Descending through the hatch, he fumbled around for

a little while, and then shoved out a cot. Reappearing, he picked this up and carried it into the house.

Buffalo Bill, on the alert, as always, for opportunities, turned quickly to Nomad.

"You got that money from Holbrook?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, hang onto it. You stay here and watch from the outside of the boat. There's a chance for me to get into the bottom of the scow, and I'm going there——"

"Ye're goin' right inter thet nest o' reptyles!" demurred Nomad. "They'll nab ye, shore!"

"I think not," returned the scout resolutely. "Planet has left the hatch open, and, while he's fixing the cot, I can get through and into the bottom of the boat. I can find out more there about the work this afternoon than I could here. Hide out, old pard, and keep your eyes peeled for trouble. A little daring work now and we'll have this game right in our own hands."

Before Nomad had a chance to protest further, Buffalo Bill had leaped lightly off along the path.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### TREACHEROUS WORK.

In order to reach the shanty-boat, Buffalo Bill was obliged to cross a cleared stretch of bank, and make his way over the plank that connected the boat with the shore. It was possible for those in the house to see him from the windows, and if he made the least noise it would have been impossible to avoid discovery.

But Buffalo Bill, trained in the art of silent movement, crossed the bank and the plank with the noiseless tread of a panther. Under Nomad's staring and apprehensive eyes he gained the hatch and disappeared under the deck of the scow.

Not a moment too soon was the feat accomplished, for hardly had the scout vanished when Planet came out of the cabin, closed the open trap-door, and resumed his banjo-playing.

The scout, with the closing of the trap, found himself in Stygian darkness. The hold was foul with the stored skins of mink, raccoon, and skunk, and Buffalo Bill, almost stifled and overcome, began to think he had made a bad move in getting aboard the boat.

He was in for it now, however, for to get away from his unpleasant quarters was out of the question.

His supply of sulfur matches had, of course, received a bath in the river, but he had dried them, and they were again serviceable.

Scratching one against the side of the boat, he took a survey of his surroundings.

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The hides were piled along the sides of the hull, and, in addition to them, there were steel traps, boxes of tinware, tubs of brine containing salt pork and mackerel, and various other collections for food and trade.

Lighting his way with matches, the scout crept forward, using his eyes as he went.

About midway of the hull he came to another trap overhead. This, he reasoned, must open into the cabin. It was a smaller trap than the one in the deck, at the end of the boat, and was, no doubt, used as an easy means of communication from the galley.

Sitting up on a box, to keep himself out of the dirty bilge water, Buffalo Bill fought with the foul air and tried to make himself as comfortable as the circumstances would permit.

Although he listened anxiously, he could hear nothing but the muffled twang of Planet's banjo mingled with subdued snores coming from the region immediately overhead.

The minutes dragged by, and an hour passed. At the end of that time a stir was caused by the return of Yount and Doubleday. From the noise the two men made, it was quite evident they had imbibed of liquid refreshment on the wharf-boat.

"Stow that clamor!" Buffalo Bill heard from Culberson. "If you fellows don't want to sleep, you might at least give some one else a chance."

"You don't want to sleep now, Culberson," said Doubleday. "The nigger is back, and he has brought the horse."

The creak of a cot was heard, followed by the sounds of feet falling heavily on the deck.

"Is that right, Doubleday?" demanded Culberson.



"Look out of the window toward the bank."

Evidently Culberson looked, for, a moment later, he exclaimed:

"Mose has brought somebody with him!"

"The overseer," pursued Doubleday. "Orders or no orders, he wasn't going to let a roustabout nigger come off alone with a valuable horse like Thunderbolt."

"Maybe," interposed Grinder, "the overseer suspected that letter ordering him to let the nigger bring the horse down to the creek wasn't genuine."

"Maybe," assented Culberson, "but I can imitate a man's fist in pretty good shape, when I take the notion. I'm going out to look at the horse—or, rather, to make a bluff at looking at him. I saw all I wanted to of Thunderbolt at the Louisville races. He cost me twenty thousand in that handicap. There's sharp work ahead of us, men, so mind your instructions."

All this talk the scout had heard very plainly—so plainly, in fact, that he had been able to distinguish the speakers by the sound of their voices.

As Culberson finished, a general movement was heard throughout the cabin. One by one the scout heard the gamblers leave by the end door, cross the plank and gain the bank.

Buffalo Bill was now regretting very much that he was cooped up in the hull of the scow. He wanted to see what was going forward on the bank. The only way he could carry out his desires was by lifting the trap under the cabin, climbing through it, and looking out of one of the windows.

This plan might be feasible. From the movement shoreward, he believed that all on the scow had left to help Culberson carry out his plots against Thunderbolt.

Desperately willing to take a chance, he raised up and pushed at the underside of the trap-door. It swung upward, and he thrust head and shoulders through the hole and stared around him.

The trap, as he had surmised, led into the kitchen part of Planet's floating establishment. The room, naturally, was small, and a rough partition separated it from the rest of the cabin. The scout was pleased to find that the kitchen was empty, and he climbed out and peered through a window commanding the nearest bank.

Planet, the gamblers, the negro, and the overseer were grouped about a horse—a clean-limbed, Kentucky thoroughbred. Never had the scout seen a finer animal. Built for speed and bottom, the scout's eye told him, at a glance, that Thunderbolt was a smasher of records, and could be nothing else than a winner.

"Mr. Bowie is away from the plantation," said the overseer, in a voice which came clearly to the scout, "and I haven't any authority to negotiate a sale. This order, which Mose brought me, is a little irregular, anyhow. We are not sending Thunderbolt out in the sole care of an irresponsible nigger. That's why I came along."

"Glad you came along, Hildebrant," said Culberson. "What does Bowie want for the horse?"

"Didn't he tell you that?" asked Hildebrant quickly.

"We had some talk about it, but no terms were decided on."

"I have already told you," and Hildebrant cast an uneasy glance around him as he spoke, "that I have no power to negotiate a sale. Mr. Bowie, I have been told, was offered a cool hundred thousand for Thunderbolt after he had won the handicap at Louisville."

"Where is Bowie now?" queried Culberson.

"St. Louis, I suppose. He was to have been back at the plantation to-day, and I can't understand what's keeping him."

"Then, by coming down here, we have had all our trouble for our pains," said Culberson, in a tone of anger. "Is that it?"

"If you want to buy Thunderbolt you will have to wait and talk with Mr. Bowie."

"We'll not wait and talk with Mr. Bowie, because Mr. Bowie won't come here until I give the word," cried Culberson, casting aside the mask and showing himself as he really was.

"What do you mean?"

Hildebrant braced around and passed a hand swiftly toward his hip.

The hand was grabbed by Doubleday. Hildebrant began to struggle, and Mose and Grinder went to Doubleday's aid.

Between the three of them the plotters soon had the unfortunate overseer on his back on the ground.

"A rope, Planet!" called Culberson. "Bind him and gag him, and then put him in the bottom of your boat. We'll drop him into the river, just as we did Buffalo Bill."

"I'll have none o' that!" cried Planet, hurrying forward with a rope. "This man ain't goin' aboard the scow. It's jest as safe ter leave him here, gagged an' tied ter a tree. I won't hev him on my boat, I tell ye! If ye're bound ter take him there, I'll cut loose from this game here an' now."

"Tie him to a tree, then," ordered Culberson, scowling. "He'll not be found until we're well away down the

river. Take the horse, Planet. Better blindfold him—he'll lead better."

The scout, staring spellbound through the window, had seen and heard this much. The scheme of the gamblers was now plainly before him, and his first thought was to dash from the boat, call Nomad, and give Culberson and his gang a warm fight. As he turned to the nearest door, however, it opened in his face, and Nina Culberson appeared.

The girl staggered back with clasped hands, barely stifling a scream.

Quickly recovering himself, Buffalo Bill started toward the girl, bent on passing her and reaching the bank while there was yet time to do something to backcap the gamblers.

The girl's wits returned almost as quickly as did Buffalo Bill's. She closed the door behind her before the scout could pass through, then stood in front of it, her face pale and her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Don't speak above a whisper!" she commanded. "If you do you will never leave this room alive. Why are you here? In what mysterious way did you come?"

"That is my business, Miss Culberson," said the scout, quietly but firmly.

Her eyes fell on the open trap in the floor, and a flash of understanding passed over her face.

"You were under the deck!" she murmured. "When my father and the rest left, you came up through the trap. You saw what was taking place on the bank?"

He nodded.

"Where were you going when I opened the door?"

"Going ashore to help the overseer, Hildebrant."



She peered at him with slowly narrowing eyes—eyes which could hardly conceal her rising admiration.

"I think," she said in a slow, deliberate whisper, "that you're the most reckless man I ever knew. But there is something in your audacity that I like."

There was a purring adulation in the voice that gave the scout an inward shudder.

"Whatever I do can hardly mean anything to you," said he, casting a quick glance from the window in order to keep track of what was going on outside. "Are you trying to detain me here until your father and his black-leg friends force a fight with me?"

"If there was a fight," she retorted coolly, "you'd be killed. That is what I am trying to prevent. You wouldn't take my advice last night, on the steamboat, but you will find you had better take it here."

The scout remained silent.

"You found out that I was not lying to you last night," she went on, "and you came near losing your life. I thought you *had* lost your life, and when I opened the door and saw you, you—you startled me."

The scout smiled grimly.

"If you had not interfered," said he, "I could have passed through that door, reached the bank, and made a getaway. Now, in order to leave the boat, I shall have to take more desperate chances."

"You could not have escaped, Buffalo Bill," she answered. "Casco, the Indian, is guarding the end of the boat. You would have been shot down before you got through the other door."

"Is Casco there now?"

"Yes."

"And all the rest of them will be here in a few min-

utes," said the scout, taking another glance through the window. "What are they going to do?"

"Steal the horse," was the laconic answer.

"Stealing a hundred-thousand-dollar horse isn't so easy."

"Yes, it is—for Nervy Nat Culberson."

"They are going to bring the horse onto this boat?"

"They are; and then they are going to drop down the river, get off on the Arkansas side, and make for the West. Nat Culberson has plenty of schemes; whenever he is tripped up on one, he has another to fall back on. He was planning this horse deal at the same time he was making that try for the Holbrook money. If he hadn't thought you were out of the way, he'd never have come here."

"You told me something of that sort last night."

The girl had a quick wit, and, during her talk with the scout, she had been putting two and two together.

"You fell into that plot purposely this morning!" she muttered, looking him straight in the eyes. "You wanted to make father and the rest believe the negro and the Indian had succeeded. And you did all this because you wanted to block Nervy Nat's game here!"

"Well?" returned the scout calmly.

"I—I never saw such a man!"

"What are you going to do now? Tell Culberson what you know?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because, if you are going to give me away, I'll make a prisoner of you and keep you in here as a sort of hostage for my safety."

"You couldn't do that," she said, with a shadow of a

smile playing about her lips. "This kitchen is to be turned into a stable for Thunderbolt."

She bent forward and took a look through the window for herself. What she saw on the bank caused her to quicken her talk.

"It won't do for you to go back into the hold, and you can't leave the boat—now. You will have to wait until the boat reaches the river, and then watch your chance and go over the side. I will do what I can to help you get away with your life. You are a pretty tall man, but perhaps you can squeeze into the bottom of that cupboard."

She pointed toward a boxlike structure built near the rickety stove. Half-way between the top of the cabin and the floor the cupboard was divided.

"What's the matter with the hold?" asked the scout.

"They are going to put hay down there for the horse. If you were in the hold, when they did that, you would be discovered."

Steps were heard crossing the plank.

"Quick!" she hissed; "the cupboard!"

While she was closing the trap in the floor Buffalo Bill swung open the lower doors of the cupboard.

Then, without another moment's delay, the scout crawled into the cupboard and crouched there, his knees up to his chin. The girl swung the doors, and the scout was again in hiding.

In one respect his position was more comfortable than it had been in the hold. He had not the nauseating odor to contend with, but his quarters were even more cramped.

Some of the men were on the boat, and he could hear others apparently urging the blindfolded horse across the

plank. It was the voice of Mose, the treacherous rider for Bowie, that probably accomplished the purpose and got Thunderbolt on the scow.

The rocking of the crazy boat told the scout that the horse had been loaded, and the tramping of iron-shod hoofs told how the animal was being brought through the cabin and into the kitchen.

There was a good deal of clamor and considerable excited talk before Thunderbolt was finally secured.

"That's a good job done," came the exultant voice of Culberson. "Now, then, Planet, get out your sweeps and work this craft of yours down the creek and into the river. Mose, you stay here and take care of the horse. The brute knows you, and will be less restive if you are around. Get back into the other part of the cabin, Nina. Race-horses, of the mettle of this one, are liable to use their heels when they get excited."

Sounds of quick movements resounded through the boat. The scout heard the gangplank pulled in, and felt the boat's motion as it was pushed away from the bank and slowly gathered headway in the current of the creek.

His thoughts went back to Nomad. What was his old pard doing?

Of course he would release Hildebrant as soon as the scow and the gamblers got away, and more than likely the two of them would hurry to the mouth of the creek and try to stop the scow before it got out into the river. But there were seven men in the gambler's party, and what could Nomad and Hildebrant do against seven?

Under the pressure of the sweeps the flatboat careened, throwing the horse with crashing force against the side of the cabin.



The next minute Thunderbolt began to use his heels, and loose stuff flew about the kitchen like cannon-balls.

Mose did his utmost to quiet the animal, and finally succeeded. The scout, when affairs had calmed down, ventured to push open one of the cupboard doors an inch or so and to look out.

Thunderbolt was standing lengthwise of the small room, his head secured in the open doorway at the rear. Riding-gear had not been removed from the horse. Mose did his placating from the strip of deck that bordered the rear of the house. He was safer there than he could possibly have been in the kitchen.

From his position in the lower part of the cupboard the scout could look through the window opposite and see the tops of trees on the creek-bank. From the rapidity with which the trees were moving past, he knew that the shanty-boat must be proceeding at a lively gait.

In a little while the passing trees gave way to an open space, and then the top of the wharf-boat could be seen drifting to rearward.

The gamblers were getting into the river, and Nomad and Hildebrant had not yet appeared to try and stop them!

The scout felt as though it was up to him to do something. But what could he do?

To run the risk of leaving the cupboard and dodging Thunderbolt's heels in an attempt to get through the rear door would have been an easy dare for him, but he hated to leave the scow without taking Thunderbolt along.

He wanted to get away, but he wanted to get away with the horse. If he could foil the gamblers to that extent, he would feel satisfied.

As he turned the matter over in his mind, a daring idea presented itself to him.

After listening and making sure that the gamblers and their confederates were all in the forward part of the cabin, or on the strip of deck that ran around it, he pushed both doors of the cupboard wide open, and got up slowly beside the horse.

The animal started to thrash around, and pushed the scout so closely against the cabin wall that he was in danger of having his ribs cracked. A few soothing pats of the hand on the horse's glossy hide, however, caused him to quiet down.

As Thunderbolt stepped away from the wall, Buffalo Bill pushed steadily toward the open door.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### ANOTHER PLUNGE IN THE MISSISSIPPI.

Before he reached the door, the scout drew his knife from his belt and held it in his hand, ready for use.

As he ducked under Thunderbolt's head and came up outside, on the open deck, he met the glassy stare of Mose Trotter.

Mose was so frightened he was paralyzed. No doubt he believed in ghosts—most darkies are superstitious—and quite possibly he thought he saw one in the person of Buffalo Bill.

Yet, be that as it may, the fact remained that his ebony face went gray, his knees began to knock together, and his lips moved, but without uttering any sound; then, after staring at the scout for a full minute, he whirled, gave vent to a fearsome yell, and toppled into the water.

The time had come for the scout to act, and, if his daring plan was to be successful, he would have to act quick.

Two slashes of the knife cut the ropes that secured Thunderbolt's head in the doorway. The horse was still hoodwinked, and the scout caught the bits and led the animal forward until his forehoofs were at the brink of the deck. This left the saddle just clearing the door.

To spring into the saddle took but a moment, and the scout found himself mounted on a spirited race-horse, at the rear of a crazy, careening flatboat in the Mississippi, with vigilant enemies all around him.

The yell given by Mose when he flung himself into the

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river had been heard. At first it had been thought that the negro had dropped into the river, but now that the scout was on Thunderbolt's back, his head could be seen above the top of the cabin, and some reason besides carelessness was suggested for the negro's mishap.

That the man on the horse's back was Buffalo Bill, those on the forward part of the boat could not at first believe.

Planet, jumping to the top of the house, started rearward over the roof. Culberson ran around one side, and his daughter around the other.

The Indian, Doubleday, and Grinder started through the cabin. Yount remained where he was, which, considering the useless condition of his right hand, was perhaps as well.

All the men on the boat were armed.

"It's Buffalo Bill!" came the startled yell of Doubleday from the cabin.

"Aye, Buffalo Bill!" roared the king of scouts, leaning forward and jerking the bandage from Thunderbolt's eyes. "Jump, boy!" he added, snatching off his hat and slapping it about the racer's neck; "*jump!*"

Thunderbolt, startled into frenzy by his unusual situation thus suddenly revealed to him, snorted and drew back.

From the corner of the house Culberson fired a shot at the scout. The bullet missed by a fraction of an inch, but the snap of the revolver was enough for the high-bred racer.

"Go!" yelled Buffalo Bill, digging in with his heels.

Hunching himself together, Thunderbolt suddenly propelled himself from the boat, rose high in the air, and



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then dropped into the river with a mighty splash, submerging both himself and his rider.

Only a moment were horse and rider lost to sight. Presently they arose, dripping, and Thunderbolt stretched out his head toward the river-bank.

The clatter of six-shooters behind the scout was suddenly drowned by a roar of heavier arms, and a yell of panic from the house-boat.

Shaking the water from his eyes, the scout looked around.

A rowboat containing five men was being pulled rapidly from the direction of the landing. Two of the boat's occupants were using the oars, and the other three were using repeating rifles.

"Hooray, Buffler!" shouted a familiar voice from the rowboat. "Swim ashore with ther hoss an' leave us ter take keer o' them tin horns."

One of those in the rowboat was Nomad, and another was Hildebrant.

Tossing a look over his shoulder, the scout saw that all those on Planet's boat had retreated into the cabin. From this shelter they were making what use they could of their revolvers, but their fire was directed entirely at the approaching boat, so that the scout's ordeal was practically at an end.

There was nothing for Buffalo Bill to do, situated as he was, but to leave the finish of the affair to his pard and Hildebrant.

Thunderbolt got him ashore safely at the mouth of the creek.

Climbing to the top of the bank, he ran his arm through the loop of the reins, and, all dripping as he was, continued to watch the clash in the river.

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A boy came running from the wharf-boat with a pair of old-style field-glasses.

"Yeh kin see better with these hyar, mister," said the boy, drawing off for an admiring look at the water-soaked scout as soon as the glasses had been taken from his hand. "Gee, but that was a nervy thing fer a man ter do!"

"What?" laughed the scout; "swim ashore on a horse as good as Thunderbolt!"

"Naw, jumpin' from the boat like you done, with bullets buzzin' all around y'u. So ye're Buffalo Bill, huh? Ye're all right, an' don't y'u fergit it. Ye're the bank that gits my gilt."

Through the glasses, the dramatic events in the river were brought clearly before the scout's eyes. He could see Nomad, Hildebrant, and another armed man firing their rifles with rapidity and precision.

Glass crashed. Planet, stricken at a window, had fallen half-out of the cabin, and was hanging, head and arms down, in the window opening. Grinder lay on his back on the strip of deck at the end of the house-boat, which was twisting and turning in the sluggish current.

Still the relentless bullets sped from the repeating rifles, piercing the walls of the house like paper.

Only one pair of oars was driving the rowboat now, for one of the oarsmen had been wounded. There was a reddened handkerchief bound about Nomad's left wrist, and Hildebrant's hat was gone, and he had a bandage about his temples.

In spite of all this, however, the man who continued at the oars was driving the rowboat steadily nearer the scow.

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"Pard Nomad won't give up till he takes the whole bag of tricks!" muttered the scout.

"He's your pard, is he?" asked the boy.

"Yes."

"He's all right, too; by gee, if he ain't! Ye're both of ye all right. Dad didn't like the looks o' them well-dressed fellers when they got off'n the *General Houston*. I heerd him say ter my brother, Cal, that he bet they was up ter some crooked work. They stole Ned Bowie's Thunderbolt, didn't they?"

"They tried to, my lad," qualified the scout.

"They'd hev done it, if it hadn't been fer you."

"Possibly. Mose Trotter dropped overboard. Did you see what became of him?"

"He swum ashore."

"Where did he land?"

"Below here a ways. Gi' me a gun an' I'll go down the river an' bring him in."

"No, we'll take care of Mose later. Ah! the rowboat has been laid alongside the scow. Pard Nomad is calling on those aboard to surrender."

"An' they're surrenderin'," jubilated the boy. "Some 'un has come out on the back stoop with a white handkerchief. Gol! It looks like a woman."

"It is a woman," said the scout. "There! Nomad is climbing onto the flatboat, and Hildebrant is trailing right after him. The fight's as good as over, and I reckon I can go to your wharf-boat and wring out my clothes for the second time to-day. Much obliged for your glasses, son," and he handed them back to the lad.

"Ye're welcome to all we 'uns got on the boat," said the boy hospitably. "Any feller that kin do what you did ort ter be given a medal. As dad said ter my brother

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Cal, 'Cal,' he says, 'that there Buffalo Bill kin do more things in less time than any other——' " The boy broke off suddenly, his eyes in the direction of the road. "By gee!" he exclaimed; "see who's comin'!"

The scout's eyes followed the boy's. A horseman was turning from the road toward the landing. The horseman was riding slowly, and was driving no less a person than Mose Trotter ahead of him, at the point of a revolver.

"Buffalo Bill, by all that's good!" shouted the horseman.

"Bowie!" exclaimed the surprised scout.

"Well, well," muttered Bowie, reining in his horse and reaching down to take the scout's hand, "I never expected to meet you again, Buffalo Bill!"

"It's horse and horse, then," laughed the scout, "for, certainly, when you failed to come down the river with me to Cairo, I felt sure our trails had forked for good."

"You can't most always tell about these things. I see you've got my horse. From the appearance of both of you, you must have been in the river."

"We were," said the scout, "and only a little while ago."

"I got off a boat that only came down as far as Rodney, at noon. When I reached the plantation I heard how Mose had brought a letter from me saying that he was to be allowed to take Thunderbolt to Carver Creek to show him to a gentleman who thought of buying him. That letter was a rank forgery! Of course, I knew that some underhand game was being played, and that Mose, there, was mixed up in it. Without getting down from my saddle, I rode on here. A little way back on the road I saw Mose, and I took him in. So far he has do-



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clined to tell me anything about Thunderbolt. What happened, Buffalo Bill? And where is my overseer, Hildebrant?"

"He rode on to Carver Creek with Mose," replied the scout.

"So I was informed. Evidently he thought that letter, purporting to have been written by me, was bogus. But go on, Buffalo Bill, and let me hear the whole of it."

"Suppose we hitch the horses and go onto the wharf-boat? That's a more comfortable place to talk."

"I reckon you're right."

Bowie swung down from the saddle, and his mount and Thunderbolt were turned over to the boy from the wharf-boat, who led them off to a shed and made them secure. As soon as they were comfortably seated on the wharf-boat—if the scout in his bedraggled condition could be called comfortable—the conversation was resumed.

"First off," said the scout, "it was Culberson and his gamblers' syndicate who concocted the plan to run off your thoroughbred."

"Culberson and his gang of thimble-riggers! Well, that staggers me. Didn't they get Holbrook's money?"

"They did, but——"

"Well, I should think that would have been enough for them, for one trip."

"They got Holbrook's money, Bowie, but I got it back for him again."

"Bully! Holbrook, I reckon, was properly grateful?"

"Yes, and so was his wife. He has promised never to touch another card. After the gamblers lost that bunch of money, they were more keen than ever to get your

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horse. They did not want to tackle the job, however, until they were sure that I was out of the way."

"You couldn't blame them for that," returned Bowie humorously.

"I led them to believe that I *had* been put out of the way, and the syndicate went up Carver Creek to the shanty-boat of a trader called Planet. My pard, Nick Nomad, and I reached the shanty-boat before Mose got there with the horse, and I succeeded in stowing myself away aboard. When Hildebrant and Mose arrived with Thunderbolt, Culberson and his men captured the overseer, gagged him and bound him to a tree, and took Thunderbolt onto the house-boat.

"When the boat got into the river, I climbed into Thunderbolt's saddle, and we took a dive into the water and swam ashore. That's about all. While we were coming ashore, we passed a rowboat containing five men, all armed, and going after the gamblers."

"You tell so much, and tell it so quick, Buffalo Bill," said Bowie, "that my wits can hardly keep up with you. You have done some wonderful things, and I shall expect you to go into them more extensively after a while."

"There are one or two things," observed the scout gravely, "that I should like you to go into a little extensively for me."

"What are they?" asked Bowie, quick to catch the seriousness in the scout's tone.

"I have been told that your father had only two children, and that they were swept away by a cholera epidemic when they were quite young."

"That's the received tradition, I admit," said Bowie, "but I still maintain that I am the son of James Bowie, in spite of it. When I was old enough to know anything,

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I was told by the black mammy who brought me up, that my father was James Bowie, the man who died in the Alamo, fighting for Texan independence against the Mexicans.

"The cholera epidemic carried off my mother and sister, but spared me. That was the story I was told, and it is the story I firmly believe. I resemble my father in a great many ways, and I have, at my home near here, many articles which formerly belonged to him, and which have come down to me.

"I am sorry, Buffalo Bill, that I did not explain all this to you at our first meeting. I am afraid that you have heard things which inspired a doubt of me."

"It wasn't so much that that inspired a doubt," returned Buffalo Bill, "as your failure to meet me and come on to Cairo."

"That was something that could not be helped. I met with foul play—and I am only now beginning to understand the cause of my misfortunes."

"Foul play?" echoed the scout.

"Exactly that. When I went back to my hotel to get ready to take the packet and come with you to Cairo, there was a note awaiting me asking me to meet the writer at a lonely place on the river-bank, where I would hear something to my advantage. I was curious, and, as I knew I should have time to get to the landing when the whistle blew, I went to the place indicated. There I was set upon by three ruffians, knocked down, bound, gagged, and carried to a deserted house.

"I was kept in the house for three days, and my captors would tell me nothing about the reason for it all. Finally, some soldiers from the barracks came along, my captors fled, and I was found and released. The

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first boat I could catch only descended as far as Rodney. I took passage, got off at Rodney, and, as I have already told you, got a horse and rode out to my plantation, where I discovered what had been happening."

"You think that some of Culberson's men waylaid you and were holding you a prisoner?"

"That must have been the way of it. Culberson wanted to make sure that he would have time to send the forged letter to my plantation by Mose, secure Thunderbolt, and get away with the animal, and do all this before I should reach home. Doesn't it sound plausible?"

"It does," averred the scout. "Culberson must surely have been back of your misfortunes. Your explanation, Bowie, clears the matter up. But how does it happen that Mose is mixed up with Culberson?"

"That's a hard one for me to answer. Mose's father is a man who worked on my Belleville plantation in slavery days, and I have always taken care of him. At his request, I took Mose into my racing-stable as a jockey, and he made good in superb style at the Louisville races. To think that he should have turned on me like this is something of a blow."

Mose had been brought to the wharf-boat by Bowie when he and the scout had come there, after leaving their horses. He was now sitting sullenly between the scout and the planter, listening to their talk but not trying to take any part in it.

"Haven't I always been a friend to you, Mose?" asked Bowie.

"Dat's what yo' has, Marse Bowie," replied Mose.

"Then why did you turn on me like this?"

"Kase de gemmen dat yo' calls Culberson he promise tuh gib me a t'ousan' dollars if I does what he wants."



"And so, for a thousand dollars, you agree to help him steal Thunderbolt! Is that it?"

"Ah dunno, marse. Ah jes' allows dat I'll do what he says if he gib me de money."

"Where did you make that arrangement?"

"At Loueyville, marse."

"You have been in Louisville ever since the races?"

"Yasseh."

"When did you come down the river?"

"Ah come down wif Culberson on de *Gin'ral Houston*, shippin' on de boat as a rouser, an' breakin' away when de boat gits hyah. Culberson gibbs me de letter, an' tells me dat Ah's tuh go tuh Marse Bowie's an' git Thunderbolt. Dat's what Ah does. Den Culberson an' his men dey done steal de haws, an', ob co'se, I has tuh go along wid de haws an' do what dey says, in ordah tuh git mah t'ousan' dollars. Dat's all ob hit, marse."

"Not quite all, Mose," spoke up the scout. "Culberson told you and the Indian, Casco, to throw me overboard from the steamboat, didn't he?"

"Yasseh."

"And you did it?"

"Ah t'ought Ah did it, but I been t'inkin' diff'rent sence. Ah reckons you-all fooled dat Injun an' me, Buffalo Bill."

"I reckon I did, Mose," laughed the scout. "But, to all intents and purposes, you were willing to commit murder for Culberson."

"Ah had tuh do what he said in ordah tuh git dat t'ousan' dollahs."

"Mose hasn't any more sense than the law allows, Buffalo Bill," said Bowie. "He's a good rider, and knows horses, but when you say that you say it all. So far as

I am concerned, your work has prevented his treachery from hurting me, so I'm willing to cry quits so far as his betrayal affects my affairs. But this attempt on your life cannot be dismissed lightly. Mose will have to suffer for that."

"When I tell you all the circumstances, Bowie," said the scout, "you will understand how Mose's bungling attempt on my life made it possible for me to come to Carver Creek and play even with Culberson and his gamblers. So, like yourself, I am quite ready to cry quits and let Mose profit by his lesson without going to jail."

"What you say merely makes me the more anxious to get all the details of your work, and to——"

Bowie was interrupted by a craft of some kind bumping against the wharf-boat. Jumping to their feet, the planter and the scout went out of the cabin, and found that Nomad and those with him had returned. They had towed the shanty-boat behind them, and the current had given them a hard pull of it.

Dusk was just settling over the river as the redoubtable old trapper climbed up on the wharf-boat.

"How's this fer high?" he exulted. "Say, Buffler, we've wound up ther syndicate, an' I reckon et'll be quite a spell afore they goes gunnin' fer boodle er race-hosses ag'in."

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE CAPTURED GAMBLERS.

"Who got hurt, Nick?" asked the scout.

"Cal Evarts, son o' ther man thet takes keer o' ther wharf-boat, got pecked purty hard in ther shoulder, Hildebrant got gouged in the temple, an' I got my left wrist in front of er bullet. Thet's all, on our side, an' Hildebrant's hurt an' mine ain't nothin' more'n scratches. Cal Evarts' is wuss, on'y not pertic'larly serious."

"How about the other side?"

"Waal, thar's an Injun gone ter ther happy-huntin' grounds, an' a trader by ther name o' Planet thet has took ther same trail. Grinder got teched up a bit in ther ribs. Doubleday, Culberson, and Yount, together with the gal, aire all pris'ners in ther shanty-boat."

"The girl?" returned the scout quickly. "She must not be held a prisoner."

"I reckoned ye'd feel thet way, Buffler, but we didn't dare ter leave her loose, fearin' she'd help the gamblers ter make a gitaway."

Hildebrant, following Nomad up to the deck of the wharf-boat, got his eyes on Bowie and hurried toward him.

"Well, Mr. Bowie," said the overseer, "I'm glad to see you back, but you came pretty near finding the plantation minus a hundred-thousand-dollar thoroughbred."

"Not through any fault of yours, though, Hildebrant," returned Bowie quickly, taking his overseer cordially by the hand. "I have nothing but congratulations to offer

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you. What you have done is something I shall not soon forget."

"That's like you, Mr. Bowie," said Hildebrant gratefully, "and I am much obliged."

"Bowie, Bowie," muttered Nomad, staring through the dusk at the planter. "Buffler," he added, turning to the scout, "is this hyar ther same Bowie ye met at Jefferson Barracks, an' who said he'd come with ye ter Cairo, and then changed his mind?"

The scout laughed.

"Mr. Bowie could hardly help changing his mind, Nick," said he. "He was captured by three of Culberson's men and held a prisoner for several days, just to give Culberson a chance to deliver a forged letter and have Mose Trotter ride off to Carver Creek with Thunderbolt."

"Thet p'int's settled, then?"

"Yes."

"An' t'other 'un erbout Bowie not hevin' any children? Is thet p'int cleared up, too?"

"It is, and to my entire satisfaction."

"Thet's good enough fer me. Mr. Bowie"—and the old trapper turned to the planter—"toss us yer fin. Buffler says ye're all right, an' I'd cotton ter anybody on sich a showin'. But ye had us guessin', fer a spell, as ter whether ye was ther real goods or a false-alarm."

"I don't blame you for guessing," replied Bowie. "I should have explained part of what you failed to understand at the time I met Buffalo Bill at Jefferson Barracks. However, just as soon as we get through with our business here, you are going with me to my plantation for a few days' rest. During that time we'll have many a talk, I hope."



Cal Evarts was helped out of the boat by his father, and into the cabin on the wharf-boat. Bowie, who had some medical skill, made an examination, found that the wound was not very serious, and dressed it.

While he was doing this, Buffalo Bill and Nomad went onto the shanty-boat.

Mose and a man from the rowboat had taken off the slain trader and the Indian, and laid them on the deck of the wharf-boat. Grinder had recovered from the first shock of his wound, and was able to walk and help himself.

Doubleday, Culberson, and Yount were left with their hands bound, just as Nomad and Hildebrant had secured them, but the scout lost no time in cutting the ropes from Nina Culberson's hands and feet.

"We're not making war on women," said the scout, "and I feel very sure, Miss Culberson, that you had nothing to do with the theft of the horse, nor with the stealing of Holbrook's money."

In the light of the lantern, which Nomad carried, the girl flashed the scout a grateful glance.

"The girl," spoke up Culberson, his voice pulsating with pent-up wrath, "had nothing whatever to do with our work, either against Holbrook or against Bowie. It is only a matter of justice, Cody, that she should be set free. You and your pard are on top this innings, but there'll come a time, and before very long, when the tables will be turned."

"We'll shift the cut on you," scowled Doubleday.

"You have tried that several times already," taunted the scout, "and your success hasn't been what you would call brilliant. When the law is through with your syn-

dicate, I don't think you'll have a chance to shift the cut on anybody for some time."

"No law was ever made that can get the best of me," snarled Culberson.

"You'll have a different story to tell before long," returned the scout.

"What I want you to remember is this," snapped Culberson: "You have butted into my personal business for three times, hand-running, and that's something I never forgive nor forget. The world is too small for the two of us. Before many days, one or the other of us will have to get out of it."

"If that's the way you feel, Culberson," said the scout, "you'll be the one to go. If I had wanted to, I could have picked Yount off the top of that wheel-house as easily as I could snuff a candle. But that wasn't my plan. What I was after was to fix him so he couldn't stack the cards, deal from the bottom, shift the cut, or do any of the other little tricks that make a successful professional gambler."

A distant whistle was heard from up the river. Looking out of the shanty-boat's cabin, the scout saw that Evarts had fixed his light to signal the approaching steamboat to stop.

"I say, Buffalo Bill!" called Bowie, coming to the edge of the wharf-boat.

"What is it, Bowie?" the scout answered.

"There's a down-river boat coming in, and I think it would be well to take all the prisoners to Memphis. They can be kept safely there, and we can deal with them at our leisure. I've got three men—Bill Evarts, Simpson, one of the men who went out with your pard in the

rowboat, and Hildebrant—to go with them. What do you think?”

“It’s a good idea,” answered the scout promptly. “We could send Cal Evarts down, too, if you thought he ought to have better medical attendance.”

“Cal will get along, all right; besides, he’ll have to stay here with Jimmie and look after the wharf-boat while Bill is away.”

Simpson, Hildebrant, and Bill Evarts got the prisoners out on the wharf-boat; then, while the steamer was coming alongside, the scout had a few final words with Nina.

“Look out for father,” whispered the girl. “When he said no law was ever made that could take care of him, he meant it.”

“I have no doubt he meant it, Miss Culberson,” returned the scout, “but he hasn’t had much to do with the law. After he gets acquainted with it, I think he’ll change his mind.”

“He’s my father,” said the girl, “and, of course, I want him to get free; but, if he does get free, you’ll find he’s like a wolf on your trail.”

“I’ve lived in the West a good many years, and the wolves have never been able to bother me very much.”

“Well,” sighed the girl, “I have tried to be your friend, and to warn you. I hope you understand now that I am not all falsehood and deceit.”

“You could be a fine girl, Miss Culberson, and do a lot of good, if you would only be different.”

“I’m going to be different!” declared the girl.

“You’ll never be anything more than what you are so long as you remain with your father.”

“I can’t desert him, now that he’s in trouble.”

“Certainly you can’t. For your own welfare, I hope

he gets a good long sentence in the penitentiary. That will take him out of your life long enough to get you away from his influence.”

Just then the steamboat hove alongside the wharf-boat, and the gangplank was run out.

Nomad and Bowie helped conduct the prisoners over the side, and when they returned, the three who were to go with them to Memphis had the rascals under safe surveillance in the gentlemen’s cabin.

Nina Culberson had gone aboard with her father, and in the dusk, as the steamboat moved away, Buffalo Bill glimpsed a fluttering speck of white.

The girl was waving her handkerchief to him in a parting salute.

“That daughter of Culberson’s is a queer girl,” said Bowie.

“I thought, when I met her first in Colorado,” said the scout, “that there was no good in her at all, but——”

“Well?”

“Well, recent experiences have changed my mind. Nina Culberson has been a good friend of mine during these Mississippi River experiences.”

Before the scout and the trapper left the landing to accompany the planter to his home, they saw to it that Planet, the trader, and Casco, the Indian, were respectably interred on the heights above the river.

Nothing was found about the trader that would indicate who his relatives were, or whether he had any.

“There is some value to the property he has left,” said Bowie, “but the court will have to decide what’s to be done with it. For the present, the shanty-boat can be left here.”



Having settled the matter in this way, the three friends started for Bowie's plantation.

Buffalo Bill rode Thunderbolt, Bowie rode the horse that had brought him from Rodney, and Nomad got astride the animal left by Hildebrant.

"Goin' over ther road this time, pard," remarked Nomad, as they galloped toward Bowie's plantation, "I rise ter remark thet I feels a heap diff'rent than I did when I was trampin' over et last. Then I was lookin' fer Buffer, an' didn't know whether I was goin' ter find him alive er not."

"You generally win out, don't you, when you jump into a case like the one you just finished?" queried Bowie.

"Gin'rally," said Nomad, with emphasis, "but this was sort of er double-header. We started in ter save Holbrook's money, an' wound up by savin' a hoss. Still, et's all in ther day's work, an' et was ther hoss part o' et thet enabled us ter saw off squar' with ther Culberson gang. I ain't got no kick comin'. Hev you, Buffer?"

"I won't have—after I eat," laughed the scout.

When the pards rode along the graveled drive leading to "the big house" occupied by Ned Bowie, evening was so far advanced that they could not see much of the place; but they could see enough to indicate that it was a fine establishment, and in a most prosperous condition.

A negro took their horses at the door, and the scout and Nomad were shown to two richly furnished rooms. A change of clothes was provided for the scout; they were Bowie's clothes, and just a shade too small up and down, and across the shoulders. Nevertheless, they were most comfortable.

Half an hour after the pards had arrived at the house

with Bowie all three were sitting down to a bountiful supper in a fine old dining-room.

Bowie was a bachelor, but a negro woman presided over his culinary establishment, and, as Nomad expressed it, "she sartinly knowed how ter cook chicken."

This, it will be recalled, was the scout's first meal since breakfast. It was supper, of course, but a very late one.

Nomad had skipped his dinner, just as the scout had done, so both pards did full justice to the meal.

When the meal was over, and the three friends sat back in their chairs over their cigars, Nomad wagged his head and looked fondly at the empty dishes in front of him.

"Buffer," said he, "ye don't know how I hated ter see ye git inter thet thar shanty-boat. I thort yer daredevil natur' was crowdin' ye inter a fix thet Cody-luck wouldn't be able ter pull ye out of."

"'Course, though, I couldn't do a thing but stand an' watch, like ye told me ter. When I heerd Yount an' ther other gambler comin' from ther wharf-boat, I ducked inter ther bresh. When they got by, I ducked out ag'in, an' seen thet nigger, Mose, on ther bank, along with Hildebrant. The gamblers come off ter look at Thunderbolt, an' then, fust thing I knowed, they had the overseer down an' was tyin' him. When they left they had him agin' a tree, gagged an' roped fer keeps."

"Nacherly, I couldn't pike off an' leave the overseer, even though you was on ther shanty-boat with ther stolen hoss. Fust thing I done, as soon as ther coast was clear, was ter cut the ropes off'n Hildebrant. He was some stunned, an' et took me fifteen or twenty minutes ter bring him to, but he was shore lively enough when he got his wits back."

"He knowed erbout ther rowboat, an' knowed jest whar ter git ther men ter man et. As fer them rifles, Evarts had 'em at ther landin'. We hustled fer ther landin' as quick as we could, got out ther boat, tumbled in our men an' guns, an' pushed out inter ther river.

"We could see yer, Buffler, standin' on ther rear o' ther boat, cutting the ropes that tied Thunderbolt ter ther door. We hadn't no idee, though, what ye was intendin' ter do. Et was on'y when ye took ter ther water, like ye done, hoss an' all, thet we realized what yer plan was.

"Then we opened up with our rifles. Et was a neat leetle fight, as long as et lasted, but Culberson an' his gang didn't hev nigh ther sand I thort they'd show. They wilted purty quick arter Planet an' ther Injun went down."

"That is only part of the yarn, Nomad," said Bowie, "and I want to hear it all." He turned to the scout. "Buffalo Bill," he went on, "can't you start in at the beginning and reel it off to me?"

The scout felt in an obliging mood, and, besides, he thought Bowie was entitled to all the details, inasmuch as it had been his information that had started the excitement.

Bowie listened attentively, and for a full hour the scout was engaged with the details. When the recital was finished, Bowie slapped his hands delightedly, and sat back in his chair.

"Gentleman," said he, "the biggest compliment I can pay you is to say that what you have done reminds me of some of my father's exploits. In more ways than one, Buffalo Bill, your character reminds me of my father's. He was—and my information is derived from a thousand sources—a man of singular modesty, with a great rever-

ence for women, an extravagant fondness for children, and a calm readiness to protect the weak. Some people would have me think that there was a little of the ruffian in him, but I assure you there was not. As you said, when we met on the river-bank at Jefferson Barracks, Buffalo Bill, James Bowie not only never provoked a quarrel in his life, but he prevented a great many."

"And," said the scout, "as I also told you at Jefferson Barracks, Bowie, I have always been an ardent admirer of your father. I am proud to have you couple my feeble exploits with his, and to say that there is something about me that resembles him. That is, indeed, a compliment."

A brief silence followed the scout's words, during which all three of the friends were thoughtful, although thinking of different matters.

Nomad was first to speak.

"Comin' down ter brass tacks, as you mout say," said he, "what aire they goin' ter try Culberson and the rest o' the gamblers fer at Memphis? Not fer takin' Holbrook's money?"

"That wouldn't do, Nomad," answered Bowie, looking up quickly. "Holbrook wouldn't stand for that a minute. Then, too, I doubt if any charge on account of the gambling could be made to stick. A man that gambles is generally supposed to take his medicine."

"Ye ain't goin' ter hev 'em tried fer thet attempt ter kill Buffler by tossin' him overboard?"

"I wouldn't stand for that," said Buffalo Bill, "any more than Holbrook would stand for the other charge. I was only too glad to have the black man and the red one try the trick. It was that that enabled us to nab the syndicate in their horse-stealing."



"That's the charge!" exclaimed Bowie, slapping his knee. "Stealing Thunderbolt. It's a charge, gentlemen, that means almost as much in this part of the South as it does in the far West. Then, too, you must not forget that Thunderbolt is a hundred-thousand-dollar horse. The judge and jury will give the scoundrels the limit. They'll go over the road for a long term—there's not the least doubt of it."

"Their past records will probably be considered," said the scout, "and that will help on the good work a little."

"Ther gang will be wiped out fer good!" remarked Nomad, with intense satisfaction. "A better thing than that couldn't happen ter the kentry."

"Mose is about the only one who is to get off scot free," said Bowie. "I hope he isn't too much of a fool to appreciate his good luck, and to profit by his narrow escape."

"Will you take him back into your employ?" asked the scout.

"Well, I don't know. He's a good rider, although he's getting a trifle heavy. I believe I would take him back, if it would not have the appearance of placing a premium on treachery."

"That thousand dollars Culberson offered him was too much for him to withstand."

"I should say so! Mose would have sold his soul for that. Probably I shall have a call from old Nicodemus, Mose's father, to-morrow. The old man is very religious, but his pride in Mose is a good deal bigger than his love for the 'Mefodis church.' Nicodemus will want me to take Mose back, and he'll hang around here for days until I promise to do it. That's a small matter, however, and

need not concern us very much. You saw Mrs. Holbrook, did you, Buffalo Bill?"

"Yes," answered the scout, "and a fine woman I think she is."

"You've got that right, I can assure you. She—she had the pleasure of turning me down to accept Holbrook."

"Ye don't say!" exclaimed Nomad.

"Is that right?" asked the scout.

"Oh, I'm not entering a protest," laughed Bowie; "I'm just telling you the facts, that is all. Holbrook is a good deal younger than I am, and——"

"There's no understanding a woman's logic," muttered Buffalo Bill.

"Right ye aire, Buffler," said Nomad. "I got turned down once myself—by a biscuit-shooter in an eatin'-house on the ole Hannibal and St. Joe. She married a drummer instid o' me, an' the drummer left her inside o' six months, an' I put up the money ter kerry her back ter her folks in the East. Logic? Women ain't got none. Ef they had, Bowie an' me wouldn't be single. Hey, pard?" and the old trapper turned to the planter with a laugh.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE HELIOGRAPH CORPS.

"Dot, dash, dash, dot—— Begorry, Kline, *they're* tellin' us ut's a foine day. Just shoot back a bunch o' flashes t' say ut's not only a foine day, but hot as blazes, an' thot av they haven't annything betther to say, we're goin' t' creep into a patch av shade an' cool aff fr a shpell."

Sergeant O'Rourke, in charge of the heliograph squad on a hilltop of the Cafitan Mountains, near Fort Sumner, New Mexico, followed the dazzling flashes as Kline manipulated the handle of the screen.

They were communicating with a double-mirrored Begbie heliostat, and their messages were all coming from Fort Sumner, forty miles away.

The skies in that part of New Mexico are rarely obscured by clouds, and this, of course, made that section an excellent place for heliograph work.

O'Rourke, with three men under him, horses to ride, and a mule to carry the equipment, had come to that part of the Cafitans in the early morning, and had got their instruments mounted on the hill.

The hill crest was bare and sandy, but there were rocks below, and a small gully, which the rocks overshadowed. The mule and the horses were hitched in the gully, where there was a spring and mesquit-bushes for forage.

But the men had to remain on top of the elevation, and the meridian sun was slowly stewing them.

"Py kolly," puffed Schneider, a German "rookie" with

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too much weight for comfort, "I feel like I vas goin' to melt und run away. Vyefer do dey vant to practise mit der heliokraffven ven der sun iss hot enough to melt der kvicksilfer on der lookin'-glasses? Tell me dot!"

"It's sojerin'," grinned "Stumpy" Bowles, his red face dripping with perspiration. "We gits the enormous sum o' thirteen plunks a month fer doin' this."

"Shut up, you fellows," called Kline. "I'm gettin' a message from the T. C. himself."

The T. C. was the Top-cutter, otherwise "Shorty," otherwise the colonel in command at Sumner. The fact that he was sending a heliogram personally, drew the instant attention of the entire squad.

All four of the party watched the dazzling gleam as it broke up into short and long flashes.

"What has Shorty got t' say, Kline?" asked the sergeant, mopping his face on a cotton handkerchief. "Faith, I thried t' rade ut mesilf, but me eyes is blistered that bad I couldn't."

"He says to crawl off into the shade for an hour, but to keep an eye out for flashes," replied Kline. "He says there'll be an important message from Buffalo Bill along here in a little while."

"Buffalo Bill is ut?" murmured O'Rourke. "Bedad, I didn't know thot game ould fighter was in this neck av th' woods. We'll look out fr th' message; but we'll be afther watchin' th' heliograph from th' gully. Slide fr th' shade, b'ys."

Schneider, Kline, and Stumpy needed no second order. Five minutes later they were sprawled out in the shade of the rocks, smoking their pipes and taking all the comfort they could.

Their comfort, however, was of short duration. While



they looked lazily upward, through a fog of tobacco-smoke, at the tripod on the hill, the muzzle of a rifle slid noiselessly over the rim of the gully and drew a bead on O'Rourke. The sergeant, oblivious of the threatening muzzle, puffed languidly at his brier and kept his eyes on the hilltop.

As silently as the first had shown itself, another rifle point was laid across the rocks, then another and another, until there were four, all told. Each gun was leveled at one of the signal-corps.

"Throw up yer hands!"

That was the first intimation O'Rourke and his men had of what was going on.

To say that they were surprised would state the case too mildly. When they started up, each man found himself looking into a muzzle that seemed as big as the Hoosac Tunnel.

The corps, to a man, being engaged in peaceful labor, and not having the slightest idea that there were enemies around, had laid aside their guns with their riding-gear. Consequently, they were at the mercy of the threatening muzzles.

"Whoosh!" yelled O'Rourke, gaining his feet with a startled jump. "Who in th' fande's name are ye?"

"Easy, dere, on dot trigger, you feller vat's aiming ad me!" cried Schneider.

"What ails you handy boys, anyhow?" demanded Stumpy.

"If it's a hold-up," said Kline sarcastically, "you've come to the wrong shop. We're only doughboys, and pay-day is two weeks off."

"Hold up yer hands, I tell ye!" went on the unseen speaker.

Four pairs of hands went into the air obediently.

"Now, listen," continued the leader of the gun-men. "We don't want ter hurt ye, an' we won't, if ye obey orders. Try ter turn on us, though, an' we'll pump ye full o' lead. Strip off yer regimentals!"

"What?" shouted O'Rourke.

"Peel off yer duds, every man Jack o' ye."

"Why is dot?" fluttered Schneider.

"Because I tell ye! Hump yerselves."

The four astounded soldiers got out of their army gear, laying hats, trousers, blouses, and belts in four separate heaps on the ground. Their every movement was followed by one of the threatening muzzles.

When the disrobing process was completed, and the heliograph squad stood in only their underwear and boots, the rascals behind the guns began to file into the gully, over the rocks. There were six of them. Four were respectably dressed, and wore handkerchief masks. The remaining two were of a rougher sort.

"What sort of a game is this?" demanded Kline, sizing up the ambushing-party with keen eyes.

"Never you mind what sort of er game it is," answered the leader, a tall man, square of frame but quick as a cat in his movements. "Down on yer faces, now, every one of ye."

O'Rourke groaned.

"It's th' divil's own way av tr'atin' th' army," he muttered.

"The army better be thankful it isn't treated any worse," returned the leader grimly.

The two rougher members of the ambushing-party were equipped with ropes and gags, and went about their work

of securing O'Rourke and his companions with methodical precision.

Clearly, the capture of the signal-corps had been planned a long time in advance, and every preparation made for bringing the surprise to a successful issue.

When the four soldiers had been roped hand and foot, and gagged, their horses were brought up, they were thrown across the animals' backs, and the two ruffians led the horses away.

The four better dressed of the attacking-force remained in the gully.

"Now, then," said the leader briskly, putting aside his rifle, "make a quick change, you fellows. I hope the clothes will prove a passable fit. The sergeant's, I reckon, will do for me."

"I'll about fill the Dutchman's outfit," spoke up a second, with a grim chuckle. "He's about the same height, and about as broad as I am."

The remaining two took what clothes were left, and presently the entire party had been transformed into what, to all outward appearances, was an overworked, sweaty, and begrimed signal corps.

The civilian clothes which the highwaymen removed, were hidden away among the rocks.

Barely was all this accomplished when the short, thick-set man, who had put on Schneider's frayed outfit, gave a sudden exclamation. His eyes were on the heliograph, on the hilltop.

"What is it, Dorn?" queried the leader of the gang.

"They're flashing something from the fort, Doubleday," replied Dorn.

"Up the hill with you, then, on the double-quick. Re-

member, I'm the sergeant. Throw back your shoulders and act like troopers—everything may depend on it."

The bogus soldiers scampered up the hill like so many jack-rabbits. Dorn posted himself where he could read the flashing dots and dashes.

"They're calling for O'Rourke, Doubleday," said he.

"Then hand him an answer," ordered Doubleday. "And just remember, for the present, that my name is O'Rourke."

Dorn grinned, saluted, and replied: "Very well, sergeant."

Then, grasping the lever of the screen, Dorn began to flash back his response, over forty miles of sand, to the other squad at Fort Sumner.

"What did you tell them?" asked Doubleday.

"I told them, sir," replied Dorn, "that we were ready for the next message. Ah," he added, a moment later, "here it comes."

Then, as the flashing message was received, Dorn spelled it out aloud:

"Take — this — message — down — in — writing — and — give — to — Buffalo — Bill's — pard — Nick — Nomad — who — will — call — at — your — station — for — it."

A jubilant laugh escaped Doubleday's lips as he pulled a sheet of blank paper and a pencil from his pocket.

"It's all working out according to schedule," he said. "Go on with the reading, Dorn. I'll take the message down."

Dorn proceeded, concentrating every faculty upon his work so that he might not make any mistake:

"Buffalo — Bill — proceeds — at — 6 — to-night —"



to—Bonita. Nomad—will—go—at—once—to—Jicarilla. This—will—complete—the—ring."

"What the blazes!" scowled Doubleday, looking at Dorn with amazed eyes. "'Ring?' What 'ring'?"

"Give it up, sergeant," answered Dorn.

"Is that all of the message?"

"Not a ray more. I can ask for an explanation, if you think——"

"No, you don't. That would be a dead give-away on us. 'Ring!' Deuce take it all. I'd give a thousand this minute to know what that means."

"There's a horseman coming," announced one of the others. "It's Nick Nomad, I think."

"Pull yourselves together, then," warned Doubleday. "If we can fool the eyes of that old fox, we'll pull off all that we came here to do."

Old Nick Nomad, mounted on his big, rawboned horse, Hide-rack, was loping at an easy gait out of the misty blue hills to the west.

The trapper must have been feeling in prime spirits. As he drew closer, those about the heliograph could hear his husky voice rumbling out a song:

"I once knowed a gal, in the year o' sixty-nine,  
A harnsome young thing by ther name o' Car-o-line;  
I never could persuade her fer ter leave me be,  
And she went and she took and she ma-r-r-ied m-e-e."

"The old cimiroon is singing!" laughed Dorn.

"We'll have him and his pard, Buffalo Bill, singing a different tune from that before we are done with them!" scowled Doubleday.

He was busily writing and making a copy of the message just received from Fort Sumner.

"Buffalo Bill," remarked Dorn thoughtfully, "leaves Sumner for Bonita at 6 to-night."

"He'll never reach Bonita," snapped Doubleday. "We have taken long chances to secure that message, but we have won out."

"And Nomad is to go to Jicarilla," went on Dorn.

"He'll get to Jicarilla, all right, but he'll be nabbed right in the settlement. Pecos and Spink have their orders to trail him. I'll add to their orders before they leave, and see if I can't get them to find out something about Buffalo Bill's 'ring.' That word is bothering the life out of me."

"If Nomad catches onto the fact that we're bogus doughboys——"

"He won't, providing you fellows have your wits about you. Brace up, and work through the trick for all you're worth."

"Why not down him here, right on this hill?" queried Dorn, his eyes flashing.

"No, it won't do. He's as slippery as an eel, and, if he got away from us, the fat would all be in the fire. Besides, if Pecos and Spink follow him, and use their eyes and ears, before they take Nomad in they may be able to learn about this infernal 'ring.' Buffalo Bill has something up his sleeve, and we've got to get next to it."

"Maybe your right, Double—I should say, sergeant, but in dealing with an old warrior like Nick Nomad, it strikes me it would be the proper caper to catch him at a disadvantage, while there are four of us against him. Still, if Spink and Pecos can find out anything about the 'ring,' it will probably be a good plan to hold our hands."

"Here's where our syndicate makes or breaks," muttered Doubleday. "If Buffalo Bill and his pards win out

against us, this running, we might just as well put up the shutters and take to the woods. Silence, now! Nomad is nearly here."

Doubleday folded up his copy of the message from Sumner and thrust it into his pocket.

Dorn and the other two men slouched down on the sand and gave corroborative detail to their assumed characters by filling and lighting some stumpy pipes. Doubleday walked a little way down the hill in the direction of Nomad, who, leaving Hide-rack at the foot, was puffing his way up.

"Howdy!" shouted the old trapper. Then, sighting the pair of diamonds on the sleeves of Doubleday's blouse, he added: "Sergeant, I wonders ef ye knows who I am?"

"Faith," laughed Doubleday, perfectly master of himself, "yez stack up somethin' loike ole Nomad."

"Which is me, chaps, taps, an' latigo straps! Waugh, but et's some hot on this hyar hill. Put 'er thar!"

The trapper stretched out his hand and took Doubleday's, at the same time peering into his begrimed face.

There was nothing Irish about the face, but Nomad did not seem to take any account of that. Doubleday's hand, however, was white and soft as a woman's. As Nomad let go of the hand, he looked at it wonderingly.

Doubleday, on the alert for the slightest detail, cursed his thoughtlessness in not begriming his hands as he had his face.

"Et don't look like ye'd been campaignin' very long, sergeant," said Nomad.

"Right yez are, Nomad!" laughed Doubleday. "Sure a Pache bullet put me in hospital f'r all av two months, an' this is th' first duty I've had since th' doctor turned

me loose. But come up t' th' heliograph. Th' b'ys have all been expectin' yez."

"I kin on'y wait till I git a message from Sumner," said Nomad. "When I gits thet, it's me fer ther high places. Bizness on hand, sergeant, an' when Pard Buffler gits ter champin' ther bit, et means all hands on their toes."

"I've got a message f'r yez, Nomad—it came no more'n ten minutes since."

"Hooray! Thet bein' ther case, I won't hev ter tarry, much as I'd like ter hang out hyar fer a while an' pass ther time o' day with ye. Gi' me ther message, an' I'll prance back down ther hill an' git inter ther saddle."

As a matter of fact, Doubleday was only too anxious to keep Nomad away from the rest of the bogus soldiers. Nevertheless, he voiced his empty regrets while handing over the message from Sumner.

The trapper, scarcely hearing what Doubleday was saying, took the paper and studied the writing.

"Buffler leaves Sumner at six ter-night, hey, an' goes ter Bonita? An' et's me, on ther jump, fer Jicarilla! Hoop-a-la, but et reads fine."

"D'yez undershtand it, Nomad?" asked Doubleday warily. "The m'essage says something about a 'ring,' an' we was all puzzled t' know whether 'r not we'd made it out right."

"Ye did," grinned Nomad, stuffing the paper into his pocket. "Et's Buffler Bill's ring, eighteen karats, an' all ter ther good. Et's what they calls an 'engagement' ring, kase I'll be some surprised ef a mighty hot engagement don't come out o' et."

Nomad, about to whirl and descend again to his horse



at the foot of the hill, turned and looked up at the three men about the heliograph.

"Howdy, ye ole sockdologars?" he cried. "Sorry I kain't come on up thar an' spend er leetle time chinin', but I got ter hit ther breeze. My regards!"

With a wave of the hand, in answer to the chorus of yells that floated down to him, Nomad descended, reached his horse, swung into his saddle, and galloped off in the way he had come.

A burst of what might, in some circumstances, be called melody, floated back after him:

"I once knowed er gal, in the year o' fifty-three—  
A harnsome young thing by ther name o' Em-i-lee;  
I never could persuade her fer ter leave me be,  
And she went and she took and she mar-r-ried m-e-e."

The instant Nomad had got out of sight behind a hill, Doubleday made a rush for the place where Spink and Pecos were sitting their horses, impatient to be on the trail.

"He's heading for Jicarilla," explained Doubleday. "The message received from Sumner says Buffalo Bill is going to leave the fort, at six to-night, and go to Bonita. The message also says something about a 'ring.' Trail Nomad to Jicarilla, find out, if you can, what is meant by that word 'ring,' then follow out previous instructions regarding the trapper. You know what they are."

"Bet yer life," answered the man known as Pecos.

"We're the boys on this job!" added Spink.

Then, whirling their horses, the two scoundrels started at a fierce pace after the trapper.

The place where Doubleday had met the two men was among the rocks, in a sort of natural basin. Here the

captive soldiers had been placed, and their horses tethered. In the basin were also four other horses, belonging to Doubleday and the men who had helped him carry out his coup.

Before Doubleday could leave the basin, Dorn and the men with him had hurried down from the hill.

"That was easy," laughed Dorn. "The old cimiroon never came close to us."

"He came as close as I cared to have him," answered Doubleday. "As it was, he saw my hands, and I knew he thought they weren't the right sort for a soldier. I explained that this was my first duty after two months in hospital."

"Did he swallow the yarn?"

"Seemed to. Well, get the rifles from the gully, and bring our clothes. We'll shuffle off this doughboy rig and strike for the trail that runs between Sumner and Bonita. If we fail to get the scout on that trail, Culberson will raise Cain with us."

"What's to be done with the swatties?"

"We'll leave them here. There'll be more flashing from the fort, and when no answer is returned from this part of the Cañitans, the men there will suspect that something is wrong."

"They'll send over here!"

"Of course."

"And they'll release these men, and the men will tell them what happened."

"Sure; but, at the earliest, these men can't be released before to-night, some time. By then, we will have pulled off our game on the Bonita trail, and it will be too late for any of Buffalo Bill's pards to intertere with us."

Dorn and the other two left the basin. They were back, presently, with the rifles and their clothes.

For the schemers to change back to their original attire took but a few minutes; then, without a word to their helpless prisoners, they swung up into their saddles and defiled across the edge of the basin, and southward in the direction of the trail leading from Sumner to Bonita.

A startling stroke of cunning and treachery had been accomplished—cunning and treachery aimed against the king of scouts and his pards.

## CHAPTER XX.

## THE DEATH-TRAIL.

At 2 o'clock in the afternoon of this day, when heliograph-signaling was going on between Sumner and the station in the Cafitans, Buffalo Bill rode into the fort and turned his horse over to an orderly; then he paid his respects to the little colonel, who was tilted back in his chair in the shade of his office.

As has already been stated, it was a hot day, and Colonel Tolliver was stripped of his coat and fanning himself with a palm-leaf. At his elbow stood a table, with a bottle of fizz-water, another bottle of some brown liquid, a bowl of cracked ice, a plate of sliced lemon, a supply of fine sugar, and two tall-stemmed glasses. Colonel Tolliver was doing his best to be comfortable.

He scrambled out of his chair to give Buffalo Bill his hand and a warm greeting.

"Good heavens, Cody!" he exclaimed, manipulating the lemon, the sugar, the brown bottle, the fizz-water, and the glasses. "What sort of a day is this to be traveling?"

"Duty, colonel," replied the scout, dropping into a chair, "takes no account of the weather. Is your heliograph squad in the Cafitans waiting for my message?"

"The beggars have pulled out into the rocks to cool off—it must be hot as Tophet out in those barren hills! But they're on the lookout for your message, and while they rest in the shade they'll watch their heliograph. Terrible land for dust, ain't she? Here, down this. It will



wash the alkali out of your throat and make you feel better."

The scout sipped at the draft the colonel had made ready and handed to him. There was a thoughtful look in his eyes, and the colonel was not slow to divine that business of importance was claiming his caller's attention.

"What's to pay, anyhow, Cody?" queried Tolliver, lowering the contents of his own glass in time with the scout.

"It's that gamblers' syndicate that I and my pards tangled up with," replied the scout slowly.

"I remember that," said the colonel, with brightening eye, "but I thought you had cleaned them up."

"So did I," replied the scout, smiling, "but two weeks ago I learned that Culberson and Doubleday had escaped from the Memphis jail—some one on the outside helped them—and that the two were getting a crowd together for the purpose of wiping my pards and me off the slate. All the gamblers in New Mexico are helping Culberson, for I am supposed to be a menace to the entire blackleg fraternity."

"So you've got a pack of tinhorn wolves after you?"

"That's the way it stacks up. Culberson and his gang are now hunting *me*"—the scout smiled as he said it—"and that saves me a good deal of trouble hunting for him. As soon as I understood Culberson's game, I gathered together my own pards and headed for this section, where I expect to bring the private war between myself and the blacklegs to a finish."

"How much of a force has Culberson got?"

"Anywhere from thirty to fifty men, all gamblers or ruffians in the gamblers' pay."

Tolliver gave another whistle.

"You are positive about the number, Cody?" he asked.

"I am, for my estimate comes from reliable sources."

"Then," said the colonel, putting his glass back on the table, "it looks like a case where you would have to call on the military. Every man at Sumner is at your command."

"I'm obliged to you, Tolliver," returned the scout quickly; "but, as I just said, this is a *private* war. I'm going to carry it through on my own account, and without the aid of Uncle Sam's forces."

"But fifty men! Great Scott, they could swamp you!"

"Hardly that," smiled the scout. "All I've got to do to end this war is to lay Culberson by the heels. Nervy Nat Culberson has taken what he is pleased to call a 'death-trail.' In other words, either he or I must never leave New Mexico alive. I might just as well tell you now that I have no intention of allowing myself to be put out of the way by Culberson."

"But what are you going to do? With fifty gamblers and border ruffians against you, death will lurk in every bush you pass, skulk behind every rock, or"—and here the colonel gave a startled look around—"it may even be hiding about this parade-ground, in barracks, stables, or officers' row. Jupiter! I wouldn't stand in your boots for a million."

"When a man's time comes," said the scout coolly, "he's going to go—and not till then. Cody-luck is with me, and when I take the long trail, Tolliver, it won't be a gambler's bullet that gives me the start. Culberson has laid his plans, to be sure, but I have laid a few myself."

"What are you going to do?"

"Make a surround."

"A surround? How?"

"Culberson is hiding out in Carizozo. The railroad is building toward Carizozo from Coyote, but it is still a good many miles away. Just now, Carizozo is a small, isolated camp, where every other man you meet is a gambler and, consequently, hand-and-glove with Culberson. I have made a ring around Carizozo, hemming Culberson in. As soon as I get to Bonita, and as soon as I send my old pard, Nomad, to Jicarilla, I shall have every trail from Carizozo guarded. Culberson will not be able to leave the camp without running against some one of my pards. Pard Hickok is at Coyote, Little Cayuse is at Nogal, and Dell Dauntless is at Capitan. There are ten to help us—all tried men and true, and not one of them gun shy."

"I like your nerve, anyway," breathed the colonel. "There'll be warm doings in these parts before long, if I'm any prophet. But here's a point: You say your private war will be over as soon as you bag Culberson. By the same token, won't it be over if he should happen to bag *you*?"

"Not so long as Nomad, Wild Bill, Cayuse, and Dell Dauntless are in the field! But you forget that I said I was not going to be 'bagged.'"

"Nervy Nat Culberson is shrewd and long-headed," parried the colonel. "Everybody agrees to that. Cody, Culberson is the most unscrupulous and most desperate gambler in the Southwest."

"He's a plain thief and assassin, colonel, and you never yet saw a thief and assassin who did not have a yellow streak in him somewhere. I'm going to Bonita, and from

there, if my plans do not miscarry, I shall pay a personal visit to Carizozo."

"What! You'll put your head in the lion's mouth, so to speak?"

"If I do," laughed the king of scouts, "the lion won't close down on it. There's a whole lot of satisfaction in beating a man like Culberson at his own game."

"Who are the ten men you and your pards have with you?"

"Five of them are Apache bucks—the best of their kind, and all friends of Pa-e-has-ka, the Long-hair. The other five Hickok picked up somewhere, but whenever Wild Bill selects a man for a dangerous piece of work, you can rest assured that the man is ace-high in all respects."

"On my soul, Cody, I wish you luck."

"Thank you, colonel. Where's the Summer end of this heliograph line?"

The scout got up as he put the question. The colonel grabbed his hat and got out of the chair.

"Come on," said he, "and I'll show you."

A quarter of an hour later Buffalo Bill was sending his message. After that, he sat out the afternoon with the colonel, had supper with him, then saddled up and started for Bonita just as the sunset gun was booming its signal and Old Glory was fluttering down from the tall staff at the head of the parade-ground.

Two hours later, while the colonel, in the bosom of his family, was taking the evening air on his vine-covered porch, the heliograph squad from the Capitans galloped in through the post-gate.

O'Rourke, the instant he got inside the square, climbed at a gallop for the colonel's quarters.



The condition of the squad at the other end of the heliograph line had not been discovered by any one at Sumner. No messages had been flashed from the Cafitans, but those at the fort had supposed merely that something had gone wrong with O'Rourke's apparatus, and that communication would be reestablished in the morning.

Therefore it was something of a surprise to the colonel to see O'Rourke, on a lathered horse, under the oil-lamp in front of his sidewalk.

The sergeant dismounted, ran along the walk and met the colonel at the head of the porch steps.

"What's the matter, sergeant?" asked the colonel. "You and your men were not to come in until to-morrow evening."

O'Rourke saluted.

"Throuble, sir," he reported. "Th' squad was captured, shtripped av their clothes, an' tied an' gagged by a passel av blackguards, who put on our outfits, took Buffalo Bill's message, gave ut t' Nomad, an' then left t' head aff the scout an' do somethin' to him—th' fande only knows what. Kline used his teeth and gnawed the ropes from me hands, then I freed mesilf an' th' rest, an' we plugged along here as fast as our horses could bring us. Has Buffalo Bill left?"

"He's been gone more than two hours," muttered the colonel, deeply worried. "Find Captain Weedon, and send him to me at once. After that, you and your men take your horses to the stables and go to your quarters. You can ride back to the station in the morning."

In an hour a detachment under Captain Weedon, with orders taking them post-haste to Bonita, filed out through the post-gate and galloped along the Bonita trail.

Doubleday's coup, in the Cafitans, had brought him under ban of the military authorities. Colonel Tolliver was not sorry that the turn of events made it possible for him to take a hand. He might not be able to help Buffalo Bill, but he could at least do something to avenge him in case the worst had happened.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE PIT IN THE TRAIL.

Being firmly convinced that the capture of Nervy Nat Culberson, the leader of the gamblers, would bring the "war" to an end, the scout had made up his mind to trap the man at any costs. Hemmed in by a ring drawn about Carizozo, Culberson could not escape from his rendezvous without passing some of the scout's pards.

Culberson had so strong a force that, had he so desired, he could have massed his men and fled from Carizozo, in spite of the scout and his pards.

It was of this move that the scout was afraid. At any time Culberson might learn of the net that was being drawn about him and make a desperate dash through it. Before this could be done, Buffalo Bill wanted to reach Bonita and lay his plans for a personal visit to Carizozo.

Nervy Nat felt so secure in Carizozo that the scout believed it would be possible to snatch him out of the town, and from under the very noses of the gamblers.

As may be supposed, a daring move of this nature appealed powerfully to the scout's high spirit. The tang of peril gave the undertaking a zest that pleased him intensely, and, apart from that, there was the lure of success that often awaits a bold and desperate stroke.

Bonita was twenty-five miles from Fort Sumner, the trail, for most of the way, running among bleak hills. On leaving the fort, the scout struck into the trail at a brisk gallop. His horse, Bear Paw, had freshened

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wonderfully under a few hours' rest, and would keep his present steady gait clear to Bonita camp.

But this was not to be. Five miles out on the trail Buffalo Bill drew sudden rein and leaned forward over his saddle-horn, staring ahead of him through the wavering shadows.

At first glance, what he saw was insignificant enough—merely a good-sized boulder beside the trail. But that boulder lay among sand-hills, where stones of any sort were rarely met with.

The scout's revolver leaped into his hand, and he gave a low whistle.

That whistle was the signal for the apparent boulder to change form. It was a dun-colored blanket, sprinkled with sand, and it heaved upward, dropping away and revealing the upright form of an Indian.

"Pa-e-has-ka!" exclaimed the Indian, shaking the sand from the blanket and laying it across his shoulders.

"Charley!" returned the scout; "Charley Two-sticks, Apache, playing understudy to a piece of granite! That was a bad move, Charley, in a place where boulders are as scarce as they are in these hills."

"Pa-e-has-ka all same fox," grunted Charley, coming closer to the scout. "'Pache no fool um Pa-e-has-ka."

Two-sticks was a friendly redskin, and was in the scout's service for this final skirmish with the gamblers. It was Two-sticks' business to watch the country around Carizozo and keep informed of Culberson's movements.

"Found out anything, Charley?" asked the scout, throwing one knee around the pommel of his saddle and gazing keenly at the redskin through the gathering dusk.

"Tinhorn chief do something, me no sabe what," answered the Apache. "Heap many tin horns ride to Cari-



zozo, ride *muy pronto* back to hills. Plenty trouble, Pa-e-has-ka—me no *sabe* what."

"Which way are the tin horns riding?"

"Cafitans."

The scout's first thought was of the signal-station. He did not think, however, that the signal-station had been interfered with, but rather inclined to the belief that old Nomad was the object of the gamblers' movements.

"When did the gamblers ride for the Cafitans?" he asked.

"Make um leave Carizozo after last sleep."

"How many?"

Two-sticks held up six fingers, thrusting them close to the scout's face, so he could see.

"Half a dozen," ruminated the scout. "They're after Nomad—Wolf-killer, you understand. Any time my old pard can't take care of himself against half a dozen tin horns, I'm ready to scratch his entry in this race for scalps. How about Nervy Nat, the tin horn chief?"

"Him at Carizozo."

"Lot of tin horns with him?"

"Ugh! Got um plenty, Pa-e-has-ka."

"Where did you come from last, Charley?"

"Bonita."

"You came from Carizozo to Bonita?"

"Ai."

"When did you leave Carizozo?"

"Me follow men who ride to Cafitans; trail um two hour, then ride to Bonita. Me know you go to Sumner, so me start for Sumner. Hear um some one come along trail, so me hide, find out who comes. All same Pa-e-has-ka. Me think, mebbys, rider all same tin horn."

The scout laughed softly.

"It's always a good thing to be on the safe side, Charley, but don't make a rock out of yourself in a country where boulders are scarce. Where's your pony?"

The Apache waved his hand toward a hill.

"Leave um cabyo on other side."

"Well, get your pony and ride back to Carizozo. Don't stop at Bonita on the way. I'm going there, and, if I hear nothing in the camp to change my plans, I will be close to Carizozo to-morrow afternoon. Meet me a mile out from the town on the Bonita trail. *Sabe?*"

"Wuh."

Two-sticks whirled away and started at a run up the hill. The scout watched him for a moment, then squared about in his saddle and used his spurs.

"Whatever the tin horns are up to," he thought, as he galloped, "they couldn't interfere with that message I sent to Nick; and I'll gamble a blue stack they won't interfere with Nick, either. Long before this he has been to the signal-station, got my message, and ought to be pretty close to Jicarilla by now."

As evening deepened the trail grew darker in the shadow of the uplifts. It was a good road, beaten hard by cavalry and freighters from the post, and Bear Paw's steel-shod hoofs clattered musically as he galloped.

The scout had planned his "ring," or surround, more with the view of keeping track of Culberson, in case he should happen to attempt to make a getaway from Carizozo than with any hope of capturing him if he fled from the camp in force. Then, too, with plenty to watch, it might be possible to catch Culberson alone, or at a time when he had only a few with him, providing he fled from his rendezvous before the scout had time to get to the place and put his own desperate plan into execution.

In the eyes of the military, it was a tactical error to divide a small force in the presence of an enemy of superior numbers.

This, however, was an error which it was necessary for the scout to make if he was to watch every avenue that led away from Carizozo; and to play a waiting game, to watch and to strike quickly when opportunity offered were the trump cards in the scout's hand.

From what Buffalo Bill could learn, all the gamblers in New Mexico had made Culberson's cause their own. The king of scouts, turning temporarily from the usual warfare of the plains, had become a sudden menace to the blackleg fraternity. Nothing will arouse a gambler's temper so much as having an outsider interfere between him and an intended victim. Culberson had sworn to remove Cody from his path for all time, or to lose his own life in the attempt.

The leader of the gamblers had marked out his "trail of death," and certainly there would be a tragedy of some sort at the end of it.

Buffalo Bill turned these thoughts over in his mind as he rode among the darkening hills toward Bonita. He had not the slightest idea that his enemies had planned a trap for him, or that they even knew in what part of the country he was. Every move the scout made was carefully hidden, and he believed that his visit to Fort Sumner, and this proposed visit to Bonita, was known only to those on whose loyalty he could depend.

When it dawned on him that his movements were known to the gamblers, and that a snare had been spread, the knowledge came with the swiftness of a lightning flash.

He was perhaps half-way from Sumner to Bonita, in

a part of the trail where the sand-hills rose steeply on each side, throwing his course into heavy gloom, when the unexpected happened.

A sudden crash smote on his ears, and he felt the apparently solid earth giving way beneath Bear Paw's hoofs.

The crashing was of brush and small timbers—materials which had no proper place along that military road, as there was not a bridge in the whole extent of the trail.

Bear Paw struggled to extricate himself from a tangle of limbs and poles; but, in spite of his efforts, he sank downward, pitching sidewise and hurling the scout from the saddle.

The scout had barely time to realize that a pit had been dug in the road, and had opened under the weight of him and his horse.

Together they dropped downward, half-buried in the debris that had formed the trap. Struggling with the brush and earth and timbers, the scout endeavored to avoid the thrashing heels of his frightened horse, and to get into a position favorable for defense.

Hampered as he was by the mass of loosened material that surrounded him, he found it impossible to do this. The heavy darkness rendered his eyes of little use.

Objects at which he grabbed to steady himself proved unstable under his clutching hands, and he was thrown backward against the kicking heels of Bear Paw.

The horse, thoroughly frightened, paid no heed to the soothing commands of the scout, and while the latter was still endeavoring to placate the animal, and to get one of his revolvers in position for use, one of the steel-shod hoofs struck him a glancing blow, and he crumpled



down on the wreckage that had covered the pit, senseless and at the mercy of those who had laid the snare.

Buffalo Bill was not long in regaining consciousness. To a man of his endurance and strength, even the blow of a horse's hoof could not obscure his senses for long. Nevertheless, he had come through an experience that might have cost him his life. That he had not succumbed was, no doubt, due to the quickness with which his captors had removed him from the pit.

His first sensation was that of a warm trickling down the side of his face. Bear Paw's shoe had gouged his temple slightly, and blood was trickling from the wound.

He then became aware that his hands and feet were bound. He was lying on his back on the ground, and four men were standing around him. He had been carried away from the trail, into a sort of valley between the hills, and the darkness was so deep he could not distinguish the faces above him.

"Who are you?" were the scout's first words.

"Buffalo Bill's enemies," said one. "That's enough for you to know."

"Doubleday!" muttered the scout, recognizing the gambler's voice.

Doubleday gave a mocking laugh.

"The king of scouts isn't such a hard man to capture if you go about it right," he observed caustically. "We had a hard time digging that hole in the trail and getting it covered, but luck was with us. There wasn't a traveler either way on the trail while we were at work, and then you came along just as we got nicely through."

"It was a cowardly trick," said the scout, between his teeth; "just the sort of contemptible game I'd expect a lot of thieves and blacklegs to pull off. There are four

of you, and you hadn't the nerve to face me, man to man, in the trail."

"What's the use of taking chances when you don't have to?" spoke up another of the quartet.

"That's right, Dorn," approved Doubleday. "We're in this game to win, and to risk our own scalps as little as possible. Bring up his horse, Carnforth," he added, turning to one of those who stood near. "We've got to snake him out of this before the soldiers take a hand."

While Carnforth was away after Bear Paw, Buffalo Bill gave a little thought to Doubleday's last remark.

"Why should the soldiers take a hand?" he asked.

"Because we captured the signal-corps in the Cafitans and stole your message to your old fire-eating pard, Nick Nomad," chuckled Doubleday.

Buffalo Bill was startled.

"You captured the signal-corps?" he repeated.

"Ain't I telling you? Captured the whole squad, put on their clothes, and were running the heliograph when they flashed your message from the fort."

The audacity of this move claimed something of the scout's admiration. He could appreciate a bold ruse like that, whether worked by a friend or an enemy. Supposing they had everything their own way, the gamblers were disposed to boast of their success.

"Some one of you knew how to operate the heliograph?"

"Dorn, here, is familiar with the Morse code. As for running the heliograph, that's only child's play if you know the dots and dashes."

"Simple as A, B, C," put in Dorn.

"You left the signal-corps bound?" continued the scout.

"Yes, and gagged," said Doubleday.

"Well, my old pard was to call at the signal-station for the message. He probably found the captured signal-men and released them."

"Not much he didn't," laughed Doubleday. "We waited on the hill till your old pard arrived, and then I gave him your message, and he started for Jicarilla."

"Nomad knows you as well as I do, Doubleday," said the scout. "Didn't he recognize you?"

"I was too cunning for him. Besides, a soldier's rig makes a lot of difference in the way a man stacks up. He went to Jicarilla, with two of our men hot on his trail."

"What are those two men going to do with Nomad?"

"Just what we did to you—capture him."

"Then what?"

"Just what we're going to do with you. You'll find out what that is before sunup."

Carnforth came forward at that moment, leading Bear Paw. It was some satisfaction to the scout to see that his horse had apparently escaped from the trap without serious injury.

At a command from Doubleday, the scout was laid across Bear Paw's back and roped to the saddle. The position, head and heels down, was far from comfortable, but the scout's comfort was not a thing the gamblers were considering.

Having got their prisoner in readiness, the gamblers swung into their own saddles and rode off along the valley, at right angles to the Sumner trail, Doubleday leading Bear Paw.

For an hour the party rode through the hills, the scout's head throbbing with the pain of the blow dealt

by Bear Paw's hoof, and the blood dripping into his hair and eyes.

At last, when the scout felt as though he could not stand the torture of his position another minute, the riders came to a halt. The prisoner was untied from the saddle, pulled roughly to the ground, and carried into a house. Here he was tossed in a corner, as unceremoniously as though he had been a bag of meal.

The scout's eyes were blurred, but he could see dimly that there was a light in the room.

Presently some one dashed a little cool water in his face, wiped away the dried blood, then lifted him to a sitting posture against the wall.

With his sight cleared, the scout saw that the man was Dorn.

The gamblers had made camp in a Mexican *jacal*, or hut. It was a poor enough dwelling, with ruinous adobe walls and roof scantily thatched with tule.

Behind the scout was a place where the adobe had broken away, leaving a breach in the wall. Through this breach the cool air entered, and did much to cool the scout's feverish brain and give him command of his faculties.

Doubleday, smoking a cigar, sat on a bench by a table. A candle flared and guttered beside him, in a bottle-neck.

Dorn stood looking down on the scout for a moment, a gourd dipper in one hand and the scout's handkerchief in the other.

"That'll fix him all right for now," said Dorn, dropping the handkerchief and turning away, to let the gourd drop into a water-pail that stood close to the opposite wall.



"And you didn't find anything worth while in his pockets?" inquired Doubleday.

"There wasn't anything in his clothes that would do us any good. You've got his guns."

Doubleday coughed, took the cigar from his mouth, and scowled at the tip of it.

"I was in hopes you'd find some paper, or something, that would tell us about that confounded 'ring.'"

"Quit racking your brain about that 'ring.' Now that we've got Buffalo Bill, what does it matter how many 'rings' he has?"

"Can't help it, Dorn—that 'ring' business bothers me. I've heard of poison rings—hoops of gold that emit a deadly poison which, sooner or later, brings death to the wearer. There wasn't anything like that in his pockets, was there?"

"No, nor on his fingers. You're going daffy, Doubleday. He'd be the last man to carry a thing of that sort around with him."

Only Doubleday and Dorn were in the *jacal* with the scout. The other two men were probably on guard outside.

Buffalo Bill's thoughts were busy, even as he saw and heard all that was going on about him.

The gamblers had worked a clever dodge in the Cafitans, and had secured the message sent to Nomad. From that they had learned that Nomad was to proceed to Jicarilla, and that the scout himself was to start, at 6 o'clock, from Sumner for Bonita. This information had been used to put two men on Nomad's track, and to trap Buffalo Bill on the Bonita trail.

Naturally, it could not be long before the men of the captured signal-corps released themselves and reported

at the fort. That would be Colonel Tolliver's signal to send out a detachment for the purpose of apprehending the miscreants. Would the detachment find that *jacal* and rescue Buffalo Bill? This was the point that claimed the scout's earnest attention.

Extended reflection did not offer him much hope of a rescue by the soldiers. The gamblers would be clever enough to pick out a refuge not easily accessible, and they would be still more careful to blind their trail in proceeding to the refuge. Doubleday and his pals knew that the soldiers would be after them before long, and they would be wary in hiding themselves away.

Dorn went over to the table and sat down beside Doubleday. They engaged in conversation, but pitched their voices so low the scout could not hear what was said. With heads close together, the two gamblers became so absorbed in their talk that the scout was able to strain at his bonds in a fierce but ineffectual attempt to free his hands.

Knowing only too well what fate was in store for him, and feeling that he had only himself to depend on, the scout continued to work at his bonds, unheeded by his captors.

Suddenly he felt a pressure on his shoulder from behind. At first he thought that one of the gamblers, who had been posted outside, had discovered him working at his bonds, and had reached in through the break in the wall.

The next moment the scout found that this was not the case. A hand and arm had been thrust into the room through the broken wall, but they were not the hand and arm of a gambler.

The hand was a reddish brown, and across the back of it was an old scar.

As the scout looked, the hand lifted, gave his shoulder a reassuring pat, then vanished through the wall.

It was the hand of the Apache, Charley Two-sticks!

"Buffalo Bill," came the voice of Doubleday, "you are close to the end of your trail. Have you anything to say before you cash in?"

## CHAPTER XXII.

### THE FER-DE-LANCE.

The scout knew very well how it chanced that Two-sticks was at hand to befriend him. The Apache, in proceeding toward Carizozo from the point where he had talked with the scout, would have had to follow the Bonita trail for a short distance. In following the trail, he had witnessed the trapping of Buffalo Bill, and had made after the gamblers and their captive when they pushed for that refuge in the hills.

While this explanation of recent events flashed through the scout's mind, he was turning and facing Doubleday and Dorn. The two gamblers were giving him their full attention.

"Cash in?" muttered the scout; "who's going to cash in?"

"You are," proceeded Doubleday, "and before very many minutes. This death-trail of Culberson's is almost run out, so far as you are concerned. We had thought of waiting until Culberson got here from Carizozo, but have just decided that it won't be safe for us to do so. With a slippery customer like you to deal with, the quicker we can hand you your finish the more certain we are that you'll get it. Make no mistake, Cody," and here Doubleday's eyes narrowed and flashed, "there's no bluff about this. You've led the syndicate too hard a chase, and only your scalp will satisfy us."

"I always knew you were a gang of trimmers and assassins," said the scout coolly. "If I hadn't found that



out, you'd never have experienced any trouble from me. I don't ask anything at your hands. If our positions were reversed, and I had a grip on you, some of you would go back to Memphis and wind up in the penitentiary."

"Glad you feel that way," said Doubleday grimly. "In that message you sent to the *Captans* you said something about a 'ring.' I'm a little bit curious to know what you meant by that. You have nothing to gain now by keeping the knowledge back."

The scout smiled sardonically.

"You'll discover what the 'ring' means," said he, "before you are many hours older—even if I am not here to help in the demonstration."

Doubleday scowled disappointedly. Reaching into his pocket, he took out a small vial. As he held the vial in front of the candlelight, the scout saw that it was filled with a reddish fluid.

"I can make it worth your while," pursued Doubleday, "to tell us about that 'ring.' For instance, three drops of this poison will give you as quick and easy a passage across the divide as any man could ask for. Tell us about the 'ring' and you shall drink this draft with your own hand. Refuse to tell us what we want to know, and death in a form that will shake even your iron nerves will be meted out to you. Choose!"

The scout laughed defiantly.

"That 'ring' of mine has already got you to worrying," said he. "Go ahead and do your worst—you'll get no information out of me."

Doubleday pushed the vial back into his pocket, and turned to Dorn.

"Tell Carnforth to bring in the fer-de-lance," said he.

Dorn got up and immediately left the hut.

While he was gone, which was only a few minutes, Doubleday pulled moodily at his cigar. The scout, with a fierce effort, succeeded in twisting to his knees, his back to the wall and his bound hands within a few inches of the opening through which the hand of Two-sticks had fluttered a little while before.

Presently Dorn returned, bringing Carnforth. The latter carried a small box, which he handled with great care.

"We've got to use the reptile," said Doubleday, in answer to a questioning look from Carnforth.

Thereupon Carnforth set the box down on the floor and drew back.

"Get the candles, Dorn," said he.

Dorn pulled a package from his pocket, unwrapped it, and displayed three candles. Each man took a candle and lighted it from the taper on the table. As soon as these preliminaries were finished, Carnforth, holding his candle in front of him, went to the box, stooped down, and laid a hand on the sliding door at the end.

"Just a minute, Carnforth," said Doubleday. "Buffalo Bill," he added, to the prisoner, "you have still time to change your mind, and select a fate more in keeping with what a brave man's end should be. What's the last word?"

"Go ahead with your murderous business," the scout answered. "I'll face the music now, and you'll face it later. For whatever you do here to-night you'll be called on to pay to the uttermost."

"Pull the cover, Carnforth," ordered Doubleday, "and don't forget to use the candle."

Carnforth slowly pulled out the cover and flung it to one side; then, still bending, he passed his candle-flame back and forth over the top of the box.

From the depths of the box the scout saw two eyes that glistened like diamonds. Another moment, and a yellowish, lancelike head had issued from the receptacle, followed slowly by three feet of yellowish, sinuous body.

A serpent, with a horny spine for a tail, lay on the beaten earth floor of the *jacal*. It was the horrible fer-de-lance, the most deadly of reptiles.

Where the gambler had secured the serpent, which was native to the northern part of South America, was a point which did not concern the scout just then. His peril was too imminent to permit of his thinking of anything else. Perhaps his cheek blanched a trifle as he pressed back against the wall.

A hoarse laugh came from Doubleday.

"You had your choice, Cody," said he. "It may not be too late yet to get the reptile back into the box."

The scout gave no heed to the suggestion of the gambler's remark. He was watching the fer-de-lance thrashing its spiny tail on the floor.

The snake tried to turn toward Carnforth, but the candle-flare, passed rapidly back and forth in front of its eyes, caused it to turn in a new direction. Doubleday and Dorn, armed with their candles, pressed forward, and, posting themselves in a half-circle, swept their flares in such a way that the three candles made a sputtering crescent.

Foiled in its attempt to get toward the center of the room, the fer-de-lance took the only course that lay open and glided toward Buffalo Bill.

There was something terrible in the very movements of its yellowish body, in the swaying of the lance-shaped head, in the ominous darting of the red, forked tongue. Angered by the gleam of the candles, the reptile glided on toward the helpless scout.

"Is this your idea of a fight?" gasped the scout huskily. "Four to one—and you've got to use a snake to help you! You're worse than a lot of Apaches!"

Not one of the gamblers answered a word. The scout, his vigilant eyes on the fer-de-lance, suddenly felt an edge of cold steel at his bound wrists.

Two-Sticks, thrusting in his hand, was driving a knife through the cords at the scout's wrists! It was impossible for the gamblers to see the knife, or the hand that wielded it, because of the scout's body which was in the way.

Hardly had the knife done its work, and the Indian's hand been withdrawn, when the fer-de-lance made a vicious strike. The scout avoided the strike by hurling himself to one side.

The serpent struck against the wall, and fell back at the foot of it, coiling itself and thrashing its horny tail furiously.

Buffalo Bill, realizing that his time had come for desperate work if he was to save himself, rolled over and flung his arms about Dorn's feet.

"He's broken the ropes about his hands!" yelled Dorn.

Doubleday and Carnforth were instantly thrown into a spasm of excitement, but it was impossible for them to do much to help Dorn while the fer-de-lance was loose and threatening them all.

The reptile began darting back and forth, and Double-



day and Carnforth had to spring this way and that, bending low and waving their candles.

Meantime, Buffalo Bill had pulled Dorn down to the floor, and had snatched the candle out of his hands.

Dorn attempted to draw a revolver, but the scout's right fist struck him a terrific blow on the side of the face, and he straightened out by the wall, temporarily stunned.

Having no knife with which to free his feet, Buffalo Bill thrust the candle-flame against the rope and watched impatiently while the fire bit into the hemp and charred it.

*Crack!*

A bullet whistled past the scout's ear. Doubleday had drawn a weapon and fired, but he was so busy watching the fer-de-lance that his aim was poor.

With a wrench of his ankles, Buffalo Bill burst the charred rope in twain, tore away the coils of cord, and leaped to his feet.

"Shoot him!" cried Doubleday desperately; "don't let him get away!"

In the light of the moving candles the scout saw the two gamblers retreat shoulder to shoulder toward the open door; and he saw, also, the fer-de-lance wriggling toward him like a yellow streak.

Springing toward the snake, he caught it on the toe of his boot with a quick movement, and kicked it toward the two who were barring his path to freedom.

Three feet of wriggling death sped through the air. Doubleday and Carnforth saw it coming, and hurled themselves to right and left. Carnforth, however, was a fraction of a second too late.

The sinuous body of the fer-de-lance struck the ill-

starred gambler on the shoulder, and head and tail wrapped instinctively about his throat.

A shriek of fear and despair escaped Carnforth's lips and echoed fearfully through the room.

The king of scouts, without pausing a second, plunged for the doorway and out into the night.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### WEEDON AND THE SOLDIERS.

Two strides beyond the door, the scout encountered the fourth of the quartet who had been his captors. The man was hastening into the *jacal*, drawn to the hut by the terrified shrieks of Carnforth.

The scout, in his haste, collided with the gambler, each falling back and nearly losing his footing.

As soon as he discovered who the fleeing man was, an oath burst from the gambler's lips. He had a revolver in his hand, and lifted it to fire.

Before the weapon could be discharged, Buffalo Bill was on the man like a thunderbolt, had wrenched the weapon from his hand, and had struck him a fierce blow with the butt of it.

A hoarse groan escaped the gambler, and he crumpled to earth as though some one had suddenly knocked his feet out from under him.

"Pa-e-has-ka!"

It was the voice of Two-sticks, floating to the scout from somewhere in the gloom.

"Here!" answered Buffalo Bill, turning in the direction from which the voice had come.

"*Muy pronto*, Pa-e-has-ka!" called the Indian, riding out of the shadows on his pony and leading Bear Paw behind him. "Plenty more tin horns come—heap close. We make um getaway, we ride fast. *Pronto, pronto!*"

With a spring, the scout landed in his saddle.

"Which way to the trail, Charley?" he asked.

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"Me show um way, Pa-e-has-ka!"

With that the Apache headed through a dense chaparral, which lay in front of the *jacal*, and forced his pony to the best pace possible.

"You say there are more of the gamblers coming?" queried the scout, as he plunged through the brush after his redskin companion.

"Heap more," answered the Apache.

"From which way are they coming?"

"All same from creek, no come by trail. We ride away from um. Hoop-a-la! Injun git plenty fun this grass."

The Apache's idea of "fun" and the scout's differed essentially. There was little fun for Buffalo Bill in tangling up with four desperate gamblers and a fer-de-lance.

"You followed me along the Bonita trail from the place where we had our powwow, eh, Charley?" inquired the scout.

"All same."

"And you saw me trapped at that pit in the road?"

"Ai."

"Then you followed me to that adobe?"

"Me follow, find um hole in wall, reach through so Pa-e-has-ka see um hand. Ugh! When me cut um ropes from Pa-e-has-ka's wrists me go for cabyos. When me git um cabyos, see more tin horns coming from up creek. Make um quick ride, find Pa-e-has-ka in front of lodge. Heap fight for no scalps."

"I'm glad enough to get out of that scrimmage and save my own scalp, Charley," returned the scout. "If it hadn't been for you, I'd have been down and out by now." The scout shuddered at thought of the fate which



would have been dealt out to him if it had not been for the Apache. "How far are we from the trail?" he asked.

"Trail heap close now," replied Two-sticks. "When we git through um chaparral, we reach um trail *may pronto*."

The refuge of the gamblers appeared to have been cunningly selected. The chaparral was dense, and, from what the scout could see, must have spread itself out on all sides between the *jacal* and the trail. A creek—the one along which Two-sticks had discovered the approach of the gamblers' reinforcements—lay behind the cabin, and, no doubt, offered a hidden path through the tangle of scrub.

After five minutes more of scrambling and plunging, the riders emerged from the chaparral into a barren valley. With Two-sticks still in the lead, they galloped onward to the point where the valley debouched upon the trail.

Here Two-sticks pulled in his horse sharply, slipped from the animal's back, and laid his ear to the ground.

Then starting up quickly, he faced the scout.

"Cabyos!" he breathed; "me hear um, off along trail."

"How many?" queried the scout.

"Heap many."

"Are they coming this way?"

"Ai."

"Then we'll wait right where we are until we learn more about the party."

"Mebbyso some gamblers, Pa-e-has-ka."

"Mebbyso, Charley. Tinhorns are thicker than coyotes in these parts just now."

Two-sticks climbed back onto his pony and pulled a revolver from the belt about his naked waist. The scout

still had the weapon he had taken by force from the gambler, in front of the *jacal*. Thus armed and ready, the two waited.

Presently the scout was able to hear the sodden fall of hoofs in the trail.

"Those horses are shod, Charley," he announced.

"All same," agreed the Apache. "Tinhorns' cabyos shod, huh? Pa-e-has-ka no think um Injun cabyos?"

"No. You'd scarcely find such a large bunch of reds so near the fort at a time like this."

Leaning forward and straining his eyes through the dark, Buffalo Bill continued to watch and wait.

A few minutes later a mass of horsemen, like a moving blot, showed up against the darkness of the trail. It was a long blot, and moved with some semblance of order.

"Faster, boys!" called a voice, "and keep your eyes skinned for more of those holes. It won't do to cripple our horses or ourselves by——"

The scout had heard enough.

"Hello, there!" he shouted at the top of his lungs.

"Halt!"

The moving blot came to an abrupt stop, horses restive and wheezing.

"Who called?" asked the man in the trail who had been speaking at the time of the scout's interruption.

"First, who are you?" queried the scout, bent on making assurance doubly sure.

"Captain Weedon, with a detachment from Fort Sumner," was the prompt reply. "And who are you? Quick, man, for a dozen carbines have you covered."

"Buffalo Bill," answered the king of scouts. "A red-

skin is with me. Drop your guns, *amigos*, until we can come closer."

"Hooray!" jubilated Weedon. "This is far and away better than I had hoped. It's Cody himself, and, from the sound of his voice, he's worth a dozen dead men yet. This way, old Thunderbolt!"

Weedon rode forward, and he and the scout met stirrup to stirrup and clasped hands.

"Who sent you out, captain?" asked the scout.

"Tolliver himself. The signal-corps rode in from the Cafitans, and reported that they had been captured, bound, and stowed away in a basin while a lot of your enemies put on their clothes and worked the heliograph. When they had done their work, the rascally intruders changed back into their own clothes and rode off—probably intending to do you some hurt. As soon as the colonel heard that, he sent us along the trail, with directions to go clear to Bonita, and, if possible, find you. We were also, if we could do it, to put a crimp on the gang that treated O'Rourke and his signal-outfit in such a high-handed manner. Tolliver didn't expect that we'd find you alive, Cody, so this will prove an agreeable surprise for him."

"That I find myself alive is something of an agreeable surprise for me, too," said the scout, with a short laugh.

"What sort of trouble did you bump into?"

"I can tell you that as we ride. You want the fellows who captured the signal-corps, don't you?"

"The worst kind!"

"Perhaps we can get them." The scout turned to Two-sticks. "Lead the way, Charley—back through the chaparral to the gamblers' hang-out."

"Wuh!" grunted Two-sticks, whirling his pony and heading back up the valley.

"The red is going to lead us to the place where the men are?" asked Weedon.

"Where they *were*," qualified the scout. "They may be there now, and they may not. We can't tell about that until we investigate."

The captain gave his orders, and his detachment of fifteen men single-filed up the valley after himself, Two-sticks, and the scout.

Briefly, as they rode, Buffalo Bill told of the pit and the covering of it which had given way under Bear Paw's feet; then he finished with a concise account of what had taken place at the *jacal*.

"What do you think of that!" exclaimed Weedon, aghast. "Those gamblers must be a lot of bloodthirsty fiends to go after a man with a snake like the fer-de-lance! They've certainly got it in for you, Cody."

"That's why I'm here in these parts," returned the scout. "This is a show-down between Culberson and me. The man with the poorest hand is going to camp out under a tent of earth, here in these New Mexico sand-hills."

"I don't think that man will be you, Cody, when you're able to win out by such a scant margin as you did to-night."

While the talk was proceeding, the Indian, the scout, and the troopers had been floundering through the chaparral. Two-sticks, turning abruptly, counseled as much silence as possible, and the palaver ceased.

A little later Two-sticks, Weedon, and the scout debouched upon the little clearing that lay in front of the *jacal*. The door of the hut was open, and candles



could be seen still burning within. But a deathly silence lay like a pall over the hut and the clearing.

"They've vamosed!" muttered Weedon disappointedly.

"Looks that way," agreed the scout. "However, captain, we'll investigate, and make sure. We'll leave our horses with the men and go forward on foot."

Two-sticks, Weedon, and the scout gave up their mounts to some of the troopers and pushed hurriedly to the open door of the *jacal*.

The scout was in advance, and as he paused cautiously and peered inside, he saw that the hut had been deserted by the gamblers. Only one of their number had been left, and that one was Carnforth.

With his face purple and horribly bloated, Carnforth was lying on the earth floor, silent and motionless.

"Come on," said the scout to Weedon and Two-sticks. "The fer-de-lance may still be loose in the hut; so be on your guard. Scotch the snake with a bullet the instant you see it."

With that, the king of scouts entered the *jacal* and passed cautiously to the side of Carnforth.

In his passage from the door to the side of the stricken gambler, the scout did not see the fer-de-lance. Sinking to his knees, the scout bent over the puffed and discolored face of Carnforth, and called his name.

Carnforth could not open his eyes, but a slight movement of one hand proved that he had heard his name, and that a little life and consciousness were still left in him.

"Do you know who I am, Carnforth?" asked the scout.

"Buffalo Bill," muttered the gambler through his swollen lips.

"Where's the fer-de-lance?"

"Don't know. The snake has done for me, and, if it was to bite me again, it couldn't make my condition any worse."

"Where did the snake come from?"

"What's the good of talk?" mumbled Carnforth. "I'll be out of the game in a few minutes, and it's an effort to talk."

"Where are the rest of the gamblers? You ought to tell us that."

"They were afraid you'd come back with the soldiers, so they hiked."

"Why did they leave you?"

"There's no help for me. The bite of the fer-de-lance means death."

"If we could take you to the fort at once, and put you in the hands of the doctor——"

"No use; I'd be dead before you got me there. I'm dying now. Can't you see it?"

"Who were the men who came just as I was getting away?"

"Culberson and a few more from Carizozo."

"They went back to Carizozo?"

"As fast as the nation would let them!"

"Who planned the capture of the signal-corps in the *Casitans*?"

"Culberson."

"He knew I was going to send a message to my old pard?"

"Yes."

"How did he find it out?"

"He bought the information from one of your redskin helpers. The *Pache* sold you out."

The scout drew down his brows angrily.

"Who was the Indian?"

"The one you call Pedro. You're not a man who talks with two tongues, Cody, and I believe you'd take me to the fort and try to save my life if I thought it worth while. That's why I'm using my last breath to talk with you, that's why I give you the name of the red."

"I haven't anything against you, Carnforth," said the scout. "You joined Culberson lately, and this is the first time our trails have crossed."

"I'm from Albuquerque," went on Carnforth, "and I came down here with Culberson because he said that, if you were not cleaned out, gambling was going to be a dead proposition in this Territory. Culberson got us all on the run with his yarns."

"How level-headed men could believe such talk is what beats me!" exclaimed the scout. "They're wide of their trail if they think one man could deliver a telling blow to dishonest gamblers in a Territory as big as this. Whereabouts in Carizozo does Culberson have his hang-out?"

"Jim McGregor, who runs the Alcazar honkatonk in Albuquerque, had the fer-de-lance on exhibition in his front window. Culberson bought the reptile, and had me bring it along when I came down here. I didn't suppose he wanted it for——"

"Carnforth!" exclaimed the scout, bending lower over the stricken gambler, "whereabouts in Carizozo does Culberson make his headquarters?"

"McGregor got the snake from a man who brought it from the West Indies. They brought the fer-de-lances into the West Indies to kill off the rats on the plantations, and found the remedy worse than the disease."

Whether or not Carnforth heard the scout's question was difficult to determine. He might not have cared to answer it, or it might have been that the deadly poison with which his body was infected had reached his brain, and rendered him light-headed.

"No use asking him any questions, Buffalo Bill," said Weedon. "He has passed the point where he can understand."

At that moment Carnforth, who had been mumbling inaudibly, suddenly threw out his bloated limbs and gave a stertorous gasp. His head fell back, his limbs relaxed, and he lay as quiet as before.

"He's gone," said the scout, rising. "You heard what he said, captain, about the yarns Culberson told to get him to come here and help in putting me out of the way?"

"Buncomb!" muttered Weedon. "Gamblers are superstitious, and I suppose Culberson worked on that side of Carnforth's nature. You'd have to be in a good many places at once, Buffalo Bill, if you covered this entire Territory and wiped out all the dishonest gambling."

"Even then I couldn't do it. From what Carnforth said, there is little doubt but that the fer-de-lance was brought here for my own particular benefit."

"Then this is a case of what they call 'poetic justice,'" said Weedon. "The snake that was to have killed you has done the business for Carnforth."

"It would have been more in the line of 'poetic justice,'" asserted the scout, "if it had done the business for Culberson, instead of the man he had inveigled into this fight to help him."

"What are we going to do?" asked Weedon. "Leave Carnforth here, like this, or put him away decently? It



seems to me that common humanity would suggest that we take him outside and give him a grave in the clearing."

"Well spoken!" agreed the scout, stooping to lift Carnforth by the shoulders.

Weedon bent over to pick up Carnforth by the feet, but, just as he started to lift the prostrate form, a yellow streak darted out from under the gambler's body.

"The snake!" exclaimed the scout, starting back.

Weedon stood like a man entranced, held as by a horrible fascination by the glittering eyes of the fer-de-lance.

"Jump, man, *jump!*" cried the scout, seeing that the reptile was making ready to strike.

Weedon, however, did not stir. He raised one hand to his eyes, and the next moment would have received the deadly fangs in his leg had not Two-sticks picked up the bench and brought it down with crushing force on the thrashing serpent.

With a gasp, Weedon started back.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, staring wildly from the Indian to the scout, "what a close call for me!"

"Close is no name for it," returned the scout. "You owe your life to Charley, captain. Why on earth didn't you jump when I yelled?"

"Couldn't; something seemed to hold me. The reptile must have been coiled up under Carnforth all the time you were kneeling beside him. You had rather a tight squeak of it yourself, Cody."

"That was my second escape," said the scout.

Two-sticks carefully withdrew the bench, and pounded the lancelike head into a pulp with the end of it.

"Umph!" he grunted. "Him no bite any more."

With the point of the revolver taken from the black-leg at the time of his escape from the *jacal*, Buffalo Bill straightened the sinuous yellow form out on the floor.

"Ugh!" shuddered Weedon. "Three feet of yellow death, that's what it is. I'm glad that brand of serpent isn't native to this country. If we had that kind of vermin here——"

The captain was interrupted by a revolver-shot from outside the house. He and the scout exchanged a startled look and leaped for the door.

"What's to pay now?" Weedon muttered, as he dashed out into the darkness.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### ALARMING NEWS.

Half a dozen troopers were thrashing around in the brush, when the scout and the captain reached the place where they had left the detachment. The rest of the men appeared to be in the dark as to the cause of the disturbance.

"I don't know nothin' about it, cap'n," said one of the troopers to whom Weedon applied for information. "One o' the lads close to the brush fired the shot, an' then rushed inter the chaparral, with some more tagging after him, but what the hull blessed rumpus is about is more'n I can tell."

The cause of the "blessed rumpus" was soon settled when a tall trooper strode out of the bushes dragging an Indian by the scalp-lock. Behind the trooper were some of his comrades, prodding the redskin along with the muzzles of their carbines.

"Who's that, Pinchot?" asked the captain, stepping close to the tall trooper and staring at his struggling captive.

"Pass the ante, cap'n," replied Pinchot. "I heard this red skulking in the underbrush, spyin' around like, it looked to me, an' I yelped out ter him ter throw up his hands and come over ter me. He didn't come wuth er cent, so I shook a load out o' one o' my Colt's arter him, an' run him down. He fought like a heathen—but there he is. I was some disapp'inted when I found he was red."

### Alarming News.

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The scout struck a match on the sole of his boot, and held the flickering light in front of the redskin.

"Well, Pedro," said he grimly, "what does this mean?"

"Ugh!" snarled Pedro. "Pony-soldiers make heap big mistake. Me all same *amigo*."

"*Amigo!*" scoffed Pinchot. "Purty sort of er *amigo* you are, skulkin' around like ye was, an' runnin' t'other way when I told yer ter come in. Whoosh! Ye're more kinds of er liar than I kin lay tongue to."

"Strip him of his weapons, Pinchot," said the scout quietly, "then let me take him in hand. I've got business with Pedro."

There was a knife, hatchet, and old-fashioned pistol in the Apache's belt. Pinchot took these weapons, and the scout, revolver in hand, drove Pedro into the *jacal*.

"Pa-e-has-ka make heap big mistake, all same pony-soldiers," declared Pedro, considerably on his dignity.

"Who are you working for, Pedro?" asked the scout curtly.

"Pa-has-ka," answered Pedro. "Charley Two-sticks him know me work for Pa-e-has-ka. Huh, Charley?"

Two-sticks, however, had heard what Carnforth had said about Pedro, and he merely scowled and showed his teeth.

"Pedro all same coyote," said Two-sticks. "Him make heap trouble for Pa-e-has-ka."

Pedro answered hotly in his own tongue; the reply won an equally hot retort from Two-sticks, and the two red men would have come to blows had not the scout stepped between them.

"Two-sticks is right," said Buffalo Bill sternly. "Pedro is a coyote. He talks with the double tongue, and says one thing to Pa-e-has-ka and another thing to the



tinhorn chief. Pedro has told Pa-e-has-ka's plans to Culberson, and Culberson has paid him for it." The scout leaned forward and rapped Pedro's dangling medicine-bag with the muzzle of his revolver. "Listen!" added the scout, as the bag jingled. "Gold! Gamblers' gold."

Pedro stood back against the wall, folded his arms, and glared defiantly. From the scout, his eyes wandered to the form of the gambler on the floor, and to the crushed body of the fer-de-lance. He must have guessed the source of the scout's information, for he lifted his eyes suddenly, and there was a baffled light in them.

"Pedro *sabe*?" queried the scout.

"Ugh!" grunted Pedro.

"Pedro tell Culberson Pa-e-has-ka send message to pony-soldiers in Sasitans for Wolf-killer," went on the scout, staring into the traitor's face.

Pedro made no reply, but looked toward the door, as though he intended to bolt. The scout flourished his revolver significantly, and Pedro stopped looking at the door. Two-sticks, with a scalping-knife in his hand, went over to the entrance and posted himself there.

"What do you want to do with him, Buffalo Bill?" asked Weedon. "Take him to Sumner?"

This question of the captain's caused Pedro to assume a look of extreme dejection.

"I suppose," said the scout, weighing his words for the effect they would have on Pedro, "that we could send Pedro to a government prison for what he has done, eh, captain?"

"Easy enough," answered the captain promptly.

"No like um," muttered Pedro.

"If he would tell me what he knows about Culberson,

however," went on the scout, "I should feel disposed to let him go."

Pedro plucked up heart at this.

"Me tell um Pa-e-has-ka what he want to know," said Pedro, with alacrity.

"Why were you skulking around in the chaparral, Pedro?" queried the scout.

"Culberson him say so."

"Where did you leave Culberson?"

"Him and other tinhorns run along trail back to Carizozo like jack-rabbit. Heap 'fraid Pa-e-has-ka and pony-soldiers. Culberson say for Pedro come back, watch for pony-soldiers, then come to Carizozo to-morrow night an' make powwow at broken oak on Bonita trail."

This sounded reasonable. The scout knew of the broken oak close to the camp of Carizozo.

"What time, to-morrow night, is Pedro to be at the broken oak?"

"'Long first part of the sleep."

"Is that the truth, Pedro?" the scout asked.

"Injun no lie. Pedro heap good Injun," and Pedro thumped his breast by way of emphasizing his words.

"Listen," said the scout. "Pedro is to go to Sumner with the pony-soldiers. If his words prove true, then, in a few days, he will be set free. If they do not prove true, then Pedro will be made to pay for his crooked tongue."

Pedro never flinched.

"Me speak with straight tongue, Pa-e-has-ka," he returned. "Me know more."

"What else do you know?"

"Wolf-killer him captured by gamblers at Picarilla."

"What?" asked the startled scout.

"Wild Bill him captured at Coyote."

"Wild Bill, too! This is growing worse and worse."

"Pa-e-has-ka's yellow-hair squaw paid her captured at Capitan."

"Dell Dauntless!" murmured the scout, more amazed than he cared to show. "Is this a cock-and-bull yarn you are springing on me, Pedro?"

"Pedro use straight tongue, Pa-e-has-ka," answered the Indian calmly.

"Where did you learn all this?"

"Me hear um palaver when me ride this way with Culberson and tinhorn braves."

"I wouldn't take it much to heart, Cody," said Weedon, noting the expression of alarm that had crossed the scout's face. "The chances are the news is not true."

"Him true," averred Pedro; "all true. Tinhorn chief him say so."

"Culberson may have said so," persisted Weedon, "but that doesn't make it true. Culberson may have been talking for effect."

"Whether it's true or not," said the scout, "I don't see how I can do anything about it at the present time. The principal object I want to accomplish is the capture of Culberson. That done, this war of his will go to pieces in a hurry."

"That's a mighty large order, Cody," observed Weedon.

"No doubt, but it is an order that's going to be filled."

"By whom?"

"By myself and Two-sticks."

The captain stared incredulously.

"By now," said he, "Culberson and those who fled

with him from here are miles away on the road to Carizozo. It would be impossible to overtake the outfit."

"I agree with you, there."

"Then how do you and Two-sticks intend to capture Culberson?"

"That involves a plan which I think best that Two-sticks and I should keep to ourselves."

"If you are thinking of going to Carizozo and picking Culberson bodily out of the camp, you'll run up against a more deadly danger than the one that threatened you from the fer-de-lance."

"Perhaps."

"No perhaps about it," said the captain warmly. "Why, man, Carizozo is almost a gamblers' camp. There's a lot of blacklegs there, and they're all true-blue to Culberson. They'd fight to the death for him."

"I reckon they would," returned the scout calmly. "If Two-sticks and I go near Carizozo, we shall have to use a good deal of tact."

"You'll have to use a detachment of the United States army, if you expect to go there and get away alive!"

"I think not, captain."

"Well, it's your game, and I don't want to butt in, but I should hate to hear of your being massacred by a lot of measly tin horns."

"You'll not hear of it."

The captain tossed his hands hopelessly.

"What do you want me to do, Cody?" he inquired.

"First off," replied the scout, "outfit me with a couple of army Colts."

"That's easy," and the captain drew his own revolvers and presented them to Buffalo Bill.

"Thanks," smiled the scout. "Next, I want you to



take Pedro, here, to Sumner and keep him in the guard-house until you hear from me."

"That's easy, too."

"Then," went on the scout, "if you care to take care of all that's left of Carnforth, it would be a humane act. Two-sticks and I, though, won't be able to stay and help you. We have business elsewhere."

"We'll attend to that. What will I say to the colonel when we get back to the post?"

"Tell him that I'm still well and hearty," laughed the scout, "and that I am proceeding with my work. If you hear anything further regarding Dell Dauntless, Wild Bill, and old Nomad, a messenger will reach me at Bonita as late as to-morrow afternoon."

"If they've heard anything at the post, you may rest assured that a messenger will be sent to you."

"That's all, then, captain," said the scout, reaching out his hand and clasping Weedon's. "You know just enough to think I'm foolhardy. If you knew more, you'd understand that I'm not taking so many chances as you think."

The captain shook his head forebodingly.

"You have the reputation, Buffalo Bill," he answered, "of knowing your business and attending to it strictly. I'm of the opinion, though, that you're up against a knock-out proposition if you attempt what you say you're going to try."

"That remains to be seen," laughed the scout, starting for the door. "This way, Charley."

Followed by Two-sticks, the scout left the *jacal*, mounted Bear Paw, and then turned to the Apache, who had likewise mounted.

"Lead me to the trail along which you saw the gamblers coming to the *jacal*, Charley," said he.

The redskin listened impassively, then whirled his horse and rode around the cabin. The last they heard from Weedon, he was calling a couple of troopers into the *jacal* to take care of Pedro.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### BONITA.

As the scout had surmised, the trail at the rear of the cabin followed a creek that flowed through the hills. The trail was a blind one, and very difficult to follow, but the Indian and the scout, trained in the ways of plainscraft, were able to keep to it in spite of the darkness.

For two hours they traveled, without a word passing between them. At last the scout reined in his horse.

"This trail, Charley," he remarked, "does not lead to Bonita."

"Ugh," grunted Two-sticks. "Him lead to Carizozo, mebbysso."

"Well, we're not going to Carizozo to-night, but to Bonita. If we turn from the trail here, and strike south, we ought to run into the military road."

Two-sticks agreed with this reasoning, and they left the difficult path, crossed the hills, and finally emerged upon the beaten course used by the military.

In the small hours of the morning they came to grazing-land, watered by a stream, and lying close to the outskirts of Bonita.

Here, at the scout's suggestion, they went into camp, picketing their horses close to water and forage, and stretching themselves out in their blankets.

About sunrise they broke camp and rode into Bonita, reaching the one adobe hotel the place contained in time for breakfast.

### Bonita.

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Two-sticks had no idea what the scout was about. As a matter of fact, Two-sticks did not consider it necessary to know. In a hazy way, he understood that some important business was in the making, and that sufficed.

The scout had called his Apache helpers, in the present clash with the gamblers, from redskin scouts who had served the government. Some of these scouts Buffalo Bill knew, and others he had taken upon the authority of Wild Bill.

Pedro, it may be stated, was one of the Indians selected by Wild Bill—and, in that selection, it was evident now, Wild Bill had made a mistake.

Two-sticks, on the other hand, was a scout whom Buffalo Bill had known during his previous visits to that part of the country. And, from what he had seen of Two-sticks since his present campaign against the gamblers had begun, Buffalo Bill was certain that he could be trusted fully.

Following breakfast, and while waiting for a possible messenger from Sumner, the scout passed most of his time in a chair, following the shade cast by the adobe walls of the hotel.

Wild Bill, Nomad, and Dell Dauntless were a good deal in his thoughts.

If what Pedro had said was true, and all three of the scout's pards had been captured at the various points around the ring where they had been posted, then it followed that Culberson had secured the information which had so baffled Doubleday.

How could Culberson have learned about the "surround"?

Certainly not from Pedro, for the maneuver had been



kept from every redskin, with the exception of Little Cayuse, who was watching the gap at Nogal.

In what way, then, had the information leaked out?

The only explanation the scout could give was by assuming that Culberson had gathered his news from his gambler contingent, who, presumably, were keeping track of events at Capitan, Jicarilla, and Coyote.

Nomad's capture, quite possibly, had been effected by the two men who had followed him from the Capitan—the two rascals whom Doubleday had detached from the party that had captured the signal-corps and stolen the message for Nomad.

Nevertheless, it was difficult for the scout to believe that his old pard would allow himself to be taken in by only two of the gamblers.

As for Wild Bill, keen-eyed, sharp-witted, and versed in all the wiles that might be brought to bear against him, it was equally as impossible for the scout to believe that *he* had been taken.

On the other hand, Dell Dauntless was only a young woman, albeit a brave and clever one, and there was a possibility, in her case, that the gamblers had effected a counter-stroke.

This thought worried the scout exceedingly. Capitan, where Dell had been stationed, was not deemed a very important point. To escape from Carizozo through Capitan, Culberson would have had to flee in the direction of Fort Sumner, and it was hardly conceivable that he would do this. For this reason, Dell had been sent to Capitan.

Now, if Pedro's report was to be relied on, disaster had overtaken the girl even at Capitan!

The scout was chafing to get more news of his pards—

news that would either shatter the story told by Pedro, or certify to its truth. Consequently, he watched the trail to Sumner with eager eyes, hoping for a messenger to come with fresh intelligence from the post.

Noon came, but without bringing the messenger. The scout and his red-skinned companion ate their noon meal, and immediately afterward the scout went back to his chair in the shade.

Two-sticks, rolling numberless cigarettes, sat on the ground, with his back to the wall of the hotel, and kept covert eyes on the scout.

It was about 4 o'clock in the afternoon before the scout broke the shell of his silence. Before he spoke he made sure that there was no one around to hear what he was about to say to Two-sticks.

"We'll hike out of here pretty soon, Charley," said the scout, "and it will be just as well for you to understand what your part of our desperate game is to be. You remember what Pedro said about spying upon the soldiers at the *jacal*, and then riding to the broken oak on the trail near Carizozo?"

Two-sticks nodded.

"You also heard what he said about Wild Bill, Nomad, and Yellow Hair being captured?"

Again Two-Sticks nodded, this time more gravely.

"Well," proceeded the scout, "the quickest way to bring this fight to a finish is by capturing Culberson. I deem that of more importance than rescuing my pards—in case they have really been captured by some of Culberson's gamblers. After we capture Culberson we will settle the matter as to whether Nomad, Wild Bill, and Yellow Hair are prisoners or not. If they are pris-

oners, we will do our best to rescue them. *But we must get Culberson first.*"

"How we git um, Pa-e-has-ka?"

The scout leaned closer to Two-sticks.

"By riding to Carizozo."

"We go to Carizozo camp?" queried Two-sticks, his black eyes glittering.

"We go close to the camp. You will go to the broken oak and meet Culberson."

"Tinhorn chief him look for Pedro. Two-sticks not Pedro."

"It will be dark when you meet Culberson, Charley. In the dark, you *sabe*, Culberson will not know you are not Pedro—at least, he will not find out the difference for some little time, providing you play your part at all well."

"Me make um gambler b'leeve me Pedro?" queried Two-sticks, a cunning light darting into his eyes.

"That's the ticket."

"Bymby Culberson find um out. No fool um for long."

"Before Culberson detects the trick, Charley, he must be captured. I will be at hand to help."

"Pa-e-has-ka heap fox!" chuckled Two-sticks. "But, mebbys, Culberson him come with plenty tin horns—heap more tin horns than Pa-e-has-ka and Two-sticks can fight. What we do?"

"There's where the difficulty comes in, Charley. Culberson may come alone to the broken oak. If he does that, he's ours, easily enough. If he brings any other men with him——" The scout paused; then, his eyes flashing, he finished: "Well, we've got to make him ours, anyhow."

A flicker of savage joy crossed the saturnine face of Two-sticks. The scout's words aroused, as nothing else could have done, all his primitive, warlike instincts.

"Mebbyso we take um plenty scalps," he remarked.

"We're not after scalps," said the scout sharply; "we're after Culberson."

"Where we take um if we git um?"

"To Sumner."

"We ride to Sumner with um? Pass through Bonita? Ugh! Gamblers lay for us."

"We'll not go to Sumner through Bonita if we are so fortunate as to get our hands on Culberson. We'll give this town a wide berth, and do our best to dodge every gambler in these parts. Are you ready to try your part in this desperate game?"

"What Pa-e-has-ka give um 'Paches?"

"A hundred dollars in gold—if we win."

"Mebbyso we lose?"

"If we lose, then Two-sticks and Pa-e-has-ka no keep their hair. What good is money to a scalped Apache?"

A shadowy grin stole around Two-sticks' thin lips.

"No good," he grunted. "Apache save um hair, Buffalo Bill save um hair; Apache git um hundred pesos."

"That's the way to look at it," approved the scout. "Now go and get the horses, and we'll ride. I don't think there are any of Culberson's men watching us, but we'll ride out of Bonita as though we were going to Sumner. When we are safely away from the camp, we'll leave the trail, ride around the town, and come into the trail again well toward Carizozo."

This was the scout's daring plan for capturing Nerry Nat and turning the tables on him.

It was a dangerous plan, and its success hung upon



many contingencies, but it was the only possible course Cody could map out that seemed at all promising.

Following his designs, the scout led the way from Bonita for two miles in the direction of Fort Sumner; then, leaving the road, he and Two-sticks doubled back, gaining the trail to Carizozo well to the westward of Bonita.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

## AT THE BROKEN OAK.

It was 10 o'clock that evening before the scout and the Indian covered the distance that lay between Bonita and Carizozo and reached the vicinity of the broken oak. Well to the east of the oak, they left the trail and held a brief council.

"Culberson," said the scout, "will probably be expecting you to appear from the direction of Bonita, so you can pike along at a leisurely pace until you get to the oak. If Culberson isn't there, dismount and wait."

"Me sabe," said Two-sticks.

"I rather doubt your ability, Charley, to pump any information out of Culberson; still, if you can get him to say anything, don't forget that I am in the bushes, listening."

"Wuh."

"What I am anxious to discover is something regarding my pards."

"Mebbyso Culberson no say anything to Two-sticks; after him captured, mebbysso he talk to Pa-e-has-ka."

"Don't make any mistake on that point, Charley. Culberson is of a different caliber from Carnforth. He'll say nothing after he's captured. Ride on, now, and don't ride too fast. I shall have to follow you along the trailside, and must travel cautiously."

Two-sticks started along the trail, and Buffalo Bill rode into the brush beside it, and worked his way onward among the shadows.

There was no moon that night, but most nights are cloudless in that section of the Southwest, and the stars are of rare brilliancy. This feature of the situation did not please the scout. Culberson was sharp-eyed, and if he discovered that a different Indian from Pedro was riding toward the oak, he might drop Two-sticks with a quick shot, or whirl around and take to his heels.

So far as the scout's advance was concerned, it was well screened by the shadows of the bushes and low-growing piñons. He was able to keep almost abreast of Two-sticks, and when he halted he was within a dozen yards of the broken oak, and in the very edge of the chaparral.

For a distance of thirty-five or forty feet around the base of the oak the ground was sandy and bare. This gave the scout an excellent opportunity to stand at his horse's head and watch what took place around the foot of the tree.

The oak held a gruesome importance in the annals of Carizozo. Up to the place where the winds had riven it in twain, it measured some forty feet. Twenty feet from the ground there was a stout branch, and many a riata had slid over this branch, with brawny hands at one end of it and a dangling form at the other.

The broken oak had been the scene of many a lynching, and this, in part, must have accounted for the absence of undergrowth about its base.

So far as the scout could see, there was no one near the foot of the tree when he took up his position at the edge of the chaparral.

Two-sticks, cantering leisurely along, turned from the trail and drew his pony to a halt. Hardly had he done

so, when, from the edge of the chaparral opposite the scout's position, there came a rustling of bushes.

"Pedro!" called a low voice, husky and evidently disguised.

"Wuh!" answered Two-sticks.

A horse and rider disentangled themselves from the shadows and rode toward the Indian.

Under the oak the semigloom made it impossible for the scout to see very distinctly, but he was, nevertheless, able to watch the movements of both the Indian and the gambler.

The latter, by a lucky chance—for the scout—took up a position between the scout and Two-sticks, about fifteen feet between the two.

"You saw the pony-soldiers and Buffalo Bill at the jacal?" asked the gambler.

Two-sticks was silent.

"Why don't you talk?" demanded the white man angrily.

"Me come make palaver with Culberson, tinhorn chief," answered Two-sticks. "You not Culberson."

The voice of the gambler lost its huskiness as he answered:

"I might have known you'd find that out. I'm not Culberson, but I was sent here by Culberson to hear what you had to say."

"Who you?" demanded Two-sticks suspiciously.

"My name's Doubleday."

"Where Culberson, huh?"

"Culberson has made a change of base, and is riding for Coyote. He doesn't like the way we tangled up with that signal-corps in the Casitans, got the military down on us, and bobbled things with Buffalo Bill. It was



you, Pedro, who gave us the information concerning the scout's plans with the signal-corps. That's what put the syndicate on the run."

"No *sabe*," grunted Two-sticks.

"I reckon you don't, Pedro, but that's the how of it, anyway. What about the soldiers and Buffalo Bill?"

"Me tell um Culberson," was the Indian's dogged response.

"You can't tell Culberson, I tell you. He sent me to hear what you had to say."

"You take um Injun to Culberson."

"I can't do that, either. Culberson and ten men are hustling toward Coyote. I'm to overtake them on the slope of Medicine Mountain, where the track-layers have left the end of the railroad. You can't go there with me."

"Culberson vamose from country?"

"He's going to get away from the Fort Sumner soldiers and dig through the ring of men Buffalo Bill has thrown around him. But, look here, Pedro, I didn't come to this place to give up information to you, but to have you give me what you could. *Sabe*? Get down to cases now, for I've got to be moving in the direction of Medicine Mountain."

"Why Culberson scared of ring? Me hear um say, when we ride to *jacal*, that Wild Bill captured, Wolf-killer captured, Yellow Hair, Pa-e-has-ka's squaw, captured——"

"Pass it up!" cut in Doubleday sharply. "What you heard doesn't count, but what you've got to tell me. Did the soldiers come to the *jacal*?"

"Ai."

"Buffalo Bill was with them?"

"Ai."

"What did they do?"

"Pony-soldiers go back to fort."

"Did Buffalo Bill go back to the fort, too? That's the important point. If he went back to the fort, then it lengthens Culberson's chances for getting away by using the railroad and a construction-train."

The scout felt that he had heard enough. Dropping the bridle-reins of his horse, he stepped quietly out into the open space, glided up behind Doubleday, and grabbed his arm.

"No, Doubleday, Buffalo Bill did not go back to the fort," said he. "He came on here, and now he's going to make a prisoner of you, and——"

For an instant, surprise held Doubleday rigid in his saddle; then, realizing in a flash what had happened, he swore fiercely and struck at the scout with his quirt.

Grabbing the thongs of the quirt as they whizzed past him, the scout gave a brisk pull. The quirt was attached by a thong to Doubleday's right wrist, and the scout's pull toppled the gambler out of the saddle.

When he fell, it was into the scout's arms, and there was a sharp but brief struggle. In the end, Doubleday was turned on his face, and his hands bound at his back and his feet at the ankles.

"Heap easy," grunted Two-sticks.

"You double-dyed red traitor!" breathed Doubleday malignantly. "Who can trust a 'Pache, anyhow? You sold out Buffalo Bill to Culberson, and now you've sold out Culberson to Buffalo Bill. If I had the free use of my hands for a second, I'd put a bullet into you!"

"You're a little bit wide of your trail, Doubleday."

said the scout. "This Indian isn't Pedro; he's more loyal to me than Pedro, and his name is Two-sticks."

"How in the fiend's name did you know Culberson was to meet Pedro here?" demanded Doubleday.

"I have neither the time nor the inclination to explain. Tie my handkerchief between his jaws, Charley," the scout added to Two-sticks, "and then we'll get him across his horse and fasten him there."

"What are you going to do with me?" demanded Doubleday, just before the gag was drawn between his teeth.

"Turn you over to Colonel Tolliver, at Fort Sumner," answered the scout. "He's anxious to lay hands on you because of your work in the Cafitans, and you and I also have a bone to pick on account of that fer-de-lance."

Doubleday would have liked to speak further, but the twisted handkerchief slipped between his jaws, and a knot was snugly tied at the back of his neck.

He was then lifted across his saddle and secured there. When this had been accomplished, Two-sticks waited passively for further instructions.

"Here, Charley," said the scout, "is where our trails fork. You are to go back to Sumner with Doubleday. I think you can get him through all right, as we appear to have Culberson on the run."

"Wuh! Where you go, Pa-e-has-ka?"

"I'm for Medicine Mountain and the end of the railroad-track," said the scout.

"You go ketch um Culberson?"

"I intend to do what I can."

"Heap plenty tin horns with Culberson."

The scout made no answer to this, but walked into the bushes, mounted Bear Paw, and rode out.

"When you get to Sumner, Two-sticks," said he, "wait there until I come."

"Ai."

Without further words, the scout rode one way and Two-sticks, leading the horse with Doubleday, rode another. Each had his work cut out for him.



## CHAPTER XXVII.

### AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

The information developed by Two-sticks was of the utmost importance to the scout. That the information was reliable there could not be the least doubt.

Culberson and his followers, frightened by the success of Doubleday in holding up the signal-corps and by his failure to settle accounts with Buffalo Bill, were hastening out of the country to escape the soldiers.

The gamblers would have had to make a run of it to escape the military, even if their plot against the scout had succeeded, but they would have had more heart for their retreat had they known that the king of scouts was no longer in the field against them.

Many long miles separated Buffalo Bill from the end of the railroad-track on the slope of Medicine Mountain, but Bear Paw's endurance was something the scout had banked upon many a time, and never yet had it failed him.

With brief intervals for rest, the scout traveled throughout the night. About 2 o'clock in the morning he reached the graded section of the railroad.

This railroad was a private enterprise, and was being built as an adjunct to several gold and copper-mines in the vicinity of Coyote and Carizozo. Owing to some disagreement on the part of builders and employees, work had stopped for the time. Grading had been left midway between Coyote and Carizozo, and track-laying

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had been given up on the northern slope of Medicine Mountain.

Doubleday had spoken of Culberson getting away from Coyote on a "construction-train." In the present status of the road, construction-trains were not running, and if the fleeing gamblers were to get away by train, it would have to be by a "special," and rolling-stock was scarce.

About 5 o'clock in the morning, Buffalo Bill had halted midway up the northern slope of Medicine Mountain. The graded roadbed ran through a gap on the mountain's top.

While Bear Paw browsed among the bushes, the scout sat at the bottom of the railroad embankment, studying the gap.

Climbing the mountain was a hard job. He was half-way up, and it seemed to him that if he could go around the mountain and come out at his present level on the northern side, he would reach the end of the track at the place where Doubleday was to have joined Culberson, and the ten men with him.

This would not only save the steep climb to the gap, but would gain an hour or two in time.

Having decided to attempt the short cut, Buffalo Bill was on the point of rising, pulling up his saddle-cinches and making off, when a muffled sound from the other side of the embankment struck on his ears.

He listened intently for a moment. The sound he had heard was not repeated; nevertheless, he was positive that there was some one on the other side of the oblong mound of earth and stones.

This person might be a man spying in the interests of Culberson and his followers. To let the spy reach the other side of the mountain in advance of him would

have spelled disaster for the scout's plans, if not for himself.

Instead of proceeding to the place where Bear Paw was tethered, the scout began climbing the embankment. Fifteen feet of a climb brought him close to the top. Pausing just under the brink, he removed his hat, put it on the muzzle of one of his revolvers, and raised it into sight.

Well was it for him that he took this precaution. A sharp report echoed out, and a bullet cut into the hat's crown, rang against the muzzle of the revolver, and glanced off into space.

Barely had the ringing echoes of the shot died away when a sound of scrambling came from the opposite side of the embankment. The sound was accompanied by hearty maledictions in a voice that struck a familiar note in the scout's ears.

Jumping up quickly, he leaped to the top of the embankment, ran across it, and looked down. Then, throwing back his head, he gave a roar of laughter.

The man who had put a couple of bullet-holes through the crown of the hat had, in some manner, lost his footing on the steep side of the embankment, and was slipping and sliding to the bottom, grabbing at the flinty earth as he went.

Finally, reaching the bottom, the man turned a startled glance upward at the hilarious scout.

"Cody!" he whooped. "Cody, by all that's good!"

"If it ain't Wild Bill!" returned the scout. "What do you mean, Pard Hickok, by putting a bullet into my hat?"

"By gorry, Cody," came the chagrined answer, "I thought you were one of the Culberson outfit."

"I'm flattered. Didn't you recognize the hat?"

"Recognize nothing. I heard you over on the other side of the embankment, and, naturally, I wasn't expecting to find you in this vicinity. If reports are to be believed, you ought, at this moment, to be well away on the long trail that leads to the happy hunting-grounds above."

"You startle me," smiled the scout. "Come up here and tell me where you got such a report as that."

Wild Bill got up, gathered in his hat, and mounted to his pard's side. They shook hands and stared at each other humorously for a moment.

"Look at this, Cody," said Wild Bill.

With that he pulled one of the scout's revolvers out of his belt and offered it for inspection. It was a weapon easily identified as Buffalo Bill's, inasmuch as it had the letters "B. B." carved on the hand-grip.

"Where did you get that?" asked the surprised scout.

"Found it at the door of my room in the Coyote Hotel, yesterday afternoon. There was a note with it."

"What was in the note?"

"Enough to make me crazy for trouble! The note was signed by Nervy Nat, and informed me that you had been waylaid and wiped out, and that the gun was sent to me as proof. Also, that I was the next man on the list."

It was a long way from the pit, on the Bonita trail, where the scout had lost his weapons, to that hotel in Coyote; yet some emissary of Culberson's must have carried the weapon to Coyote, along with the note.

"What did you do after you got the weapon and the note?" the scout asked.

"Hiked toward Carizozo," replied Wild Bill. "What



was there for me to do but to believe that what the note said was true? I wanted revenge."

"Didn't you leave any one in Coyote to keep watch for Culberson?"

"Sure—Hank Pierson and Scrim Oliver. My revenge was to be a one-man job, and I was going straight into Carizozo and wipe out every gambler there single-handed."

"That would have been the wildest kind of a move, even for Wild Bill. When did you leave Coyote?"

"At four o'clock yesterday afternoon."

"Then, by dead reckoning, you should have reached Carizozo some time last night—unless you're traveling afoot."

"Did you ever know me to travel afoot? A man's legs were made to grip saddle-leather, and not for walking. My horse is hitched behind that ironwood," and Wild Bill waved one hand toward a scrubby tree a little way from the embankment. "No, Cody, I didn't get to Carizozo, because I ran into gambler 'signs.' A lot of blacklegs passed me in the night, on this side of the mountain, and I've been skirmishing to find them ever since."

"How many were there of them?"

"Ten or a dozen—I couldn't just make out the number."

"They're the fellows I'm after."

"Who are they?"

"Culberson is one——"

"By gorry! is that right?"

"I'm sure of it. Get your horse, Wild Bill, and we'll ride around the mountain. On the way I'll explain

things to you, and then you can draw your own conclusions."

Hickok hurried after his horse, and the two pards began making their way around the mountain.

"Have you heard anything about Nomad?" the scout asked, before proceeding with his explanation.

"Not a thing."

"Nor about Dell, or Little Cayuse?"

"Nary a word, pard. The only man I heard anything about was you, and that news was anything but soothing. But reel off your experiences. I surmise that your 'ring' has been smashed into a cocked hat, from the questions you're handing me about Nomad, Dell, and Little Cayuse."

The scout told of the coup of the gamblers in the Capitans, of the intercepting of the message, the trouble caused him on the Bonita trail, his escape from the fer-de-lance, the information given by Carnforth and the treacherous Pedro, and the capture of Doubleday.

"Whoosh!" muttered Wild Bill, brushing a hand across his face. "You're the king pin, this trip, Cody. While the rest of your pards have joined hands in a game of ring-around-a-rosy, you've been in the middle of it, and doing things. Great snakes, what a time you must have had!"

"Well," went on the scout, "the point I'm getting at is that the men who passed you, in the night, were undoubtedly Culberson and the ten who are helping him make his getaway. Culberson is in mortal fear of the soldiers. At this very moment, if we are to believe Doubleday, Culberson and his ten are at the head of the track on the other side of the mountain. Can we cut him out and snake him over to Sumner?"

"We can!" averred Wild Bill, with jubilant confidence. "We'll have to play it pretty fine, if we do. It's neck or nothing with the gamblers, and we're close to a show-down."

"Who can play it finer than the two Bills? We've won success on many a long trail together, and we'll have the tin horns wild and buffaloes before they're two hours older. Let's hustle around the mountain and close in."

The slope of the mountain grew difficult, so that "hustling" was a hard matter, and talking impossible. Buffalo Bill rode ahead and picked out the easiest going, and Wild Bill scrambled along behind.

An hour and a half of breakneck struggle was necessary to bring the two pards to a place on the northern slope of the big uplift, where they could see the graded railroad descending steeply through patches of timber.

As soon as he came within sight of the roadbed, the scout pointed his horse the other way, and drew rein.

"If we are right in our calculations, pard," said he, "we should be close to the place where Culberson and his men are waiting for Doubleday. It would be well, I think, to leave our horses here and scout forward on foot."

"Keno, Pard Cody," answered Wild Bill, slipping promptly from his saddle. "Whatever you say goes."

The horses were secured among some low-branching trees, and the two pards crept forward, screening their advance and making the best use of their eyes and ears.

Without getting a glimpse of the gamblers, they came, finally, to the head of the track, or, rather, to a place from which they could peer out at the end of the rails.

At this point a sort of switch ran out for a hundred

feet at right angles with the grade. This put the switch on level ground.

Half a dozen flat cars, loaded with ties, stood on the switch, and, with its wheels almost touching the rails of the main track, there was also an ordinary hand-car.

A deep silence reigned all around that part of the mountain.

"Fooled!" whispered Wild Bill in the scout's ear. "Either Doubleday didn't know what he was talking about, or else Culberson and his gang were so scared they decided not to wait for Doubleday to join them. What's the next move, Cody? Shall we mount and ride to Coyote, or——"

Suddenly the scout gripped his companion's arm as in a vise. What he saw was likewise visible to Wild Bill, and both men stared and marveled at their luck.

Culberson, flashily dressed, but with a face showing signs of worry and apprehension, had stepped out of the timber on the other side of the main track, and was coming along the switch by the loaded flat cars. With him were three other men, one roughly dressed and plainly a hired mercenary.

"What do you think?" asked Wild Bill, his voice husky with excitement.

"I think that this is a chance which would not come to us once in a hundred times," returned the scout. "Follow me, Hickok! Quick work, now, and Culberson is ours!"

Turning to the left, Buffalo Bill began a cautious but hurried movement through the undergrowth, with the design of getting as close as possible to the four men before making the attack.



## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### THE CLASH AT THE SWITCH.

Culberson, and the men with him, halted close to the hand-car. The roughly dressed scoundrel had a crowbar, and was pulling spikes to open the switch.

The scout, moving as quickly and as noiselessly as possible, succeeded in getting across the embankment unseen, and gaining the shelter of the loaded flat cars on the side opposite the place where the gamblers were standing. Wild Bill was close to the scout's heels when he reached the flat cars.

"Something has sure gone wrong with Doubleday," one of the gamblers was saying. "If he was all right, he'd have been here long ago."

"It looks that way, Dorn," came the voice of Culberson.

"Then what's the use of waiting?" growled Dorn.

"I want to find out, if possible, what Pedro discovered at that *jacal*. It may mean a lot to us. Where's Buffalo Bill? What are the soldiers doing? Hang it, Dorn, can't you understand how necessary it is for us to know all that?"

While this conversation might ultimately have developed considerable information that would have proved useful to Buffalo Bill, still he could not wait to hear it out. There were six more men, somewhere in the vicinity, and if Culberson was captured, it must be accomplished while only this small force was there to make a resistance.

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Getting down on his hands and knees, Buffalo Bill began crawling under the flat cars. Wild Bill, with another expedient in mind, began crawling to the top of the ties with which one of the cars was loaded.

Wild Bill, as it happened, reached the top of the ties at about the same moment the scout emerged from under the cars.

The roughly dressed man had pulled all the spikes that had closed the switch, and had laid his crowbar on the hand-car. The noise he had made had drowned that accompanying the movements of Cody and Wild Bill, so, when the two pards drew their revolvers and covered the four men, their shout of "Hands up!" came as a complete surprise.

Culberson and his men whirled to a startled about face, only to stare into four gaping muzzles. For an instant a deep silence reigned.

"Didn't you tinhorns hear Pard Cody's order of hands up?" inquired Wild Bill pleasantly from the top of the carload of ties. "Better push your hands into the air. Time is scarce, and we haven't any to waste."

"What does this mean?" mumbled Culberson, peering shiftily about him, but slowly lifting his hands.

"It means," continued Wild Bill, "that you and your outfit are double-crossed. This is the end of your 'death-trail,' Culberson, and it finds Pard Cody and friends well and hearty, thank you. How it finds you, depends on the way you obey orders."

It seemed too good to be true, the way in which luck was playing into the hands of the scout. And it was too good to be true, as the next moment made manifest.

Wild Bill was balancing himself on the ties. If the tie which formed his main foothold had been secure, this po-

sition would have been all right. But the tie had become loosened, and a second after he had finished speaking, the tie slipped, and Wild Bill slipped with it.

Down came the heavy, squared piece of oak, thumping on the ground. Wild Bill, hitting the hard earth on his knees, toppled against Dorn, and overthrew him. Dorn fell against Buffalo Bill, hurling him backward against the side of the flat car, and, for a few moments, Culberson and the roughly dressed man were left to their own devices.

Quick of wit, as the chief of the gamblers was, it may well be supposed that he made the most of the period of grace allowed him.

"Hankins!" he yelled. "The hand-car—get it out on the track!"

While the two Bills were seeking to get into position for recovering lost ground, Culberson and Hankins pushed the hand-car out onto the main track.

Inasmuch as the main track was steeply down grade, the car began moving off of its own volition.

"Get to the car, Cody!" whooped Wild Bill, springing to his feet and making a desperate jump in the direction of the moving car.

Dorn, however, flung himself in front of Wild Bill and grappled with him. The fourth of the quartet attempted to stop the scout, but a blow of the scout's fist hurled the fellow out of the way.

With a quick run and a flying leap, Buffalo Bill gained the bed of the moving car, which, with swiftly accelerating speed, was starting down the mountain.

"Get off!" yelled Culberson fiercely.

He was on his knees and had drawn a revolver.

Hankins, crouching on the swaying platform, was likewise fumbling for one of his weapons.

The scout's position was precarious in the extreme. Not only was he faced by two armed and desperate foes, but the unstable planks beneath his feet were every moment making his foothold more and more insecure. As the car gathered headway in its shoot down the mountain, it bobbed and bounded like a restive bronco.

While the scout swayed to meet the lurching of the car, Culberson essayed a shot. To fire with accuracy was out of the question, and the bullet went wild.

Dropping on the planks before another shot could be fired, Buffalo Bill gripped Culberson's revolver hand, and shook the weapon out of it; then, with one foot, he pushed the bit of hardware over the side.

"I'll have your life, Cody," yelled Culberson, mad with baffled hate, "or neither of us will reach the end of this trip alive!"

The shriek of the rusty wheels, and the rattle of the car, made a fitting accompaniment to the gambler's fierce words.

"We'll think about that," shouted the scout, "when we reach the end of the trip. We're on even footing here, such as it is. It's something of a rarity to have only two of you against me, and—— Put down that gun, you!" he finished, facing Hankins suddenly and drawing a bead on him with one of his own revolvers.

Hankins had succeeded in leveling a revolver, but the scout's merciless eye caused him to hesitate before pulling the trigger.

"Throw it overboard," commanded the scout. "~~Throw~~ I tell you!"



The weapon was thrown by the disconcerted Hankins with a fierce oath.

Meanwhile, during the time the scout's attention had been focused on Hankins, Culberson had struggled to his feet. For an instant, he seemed to be debating the point of escape from the car by a death-defying leap. Before he could decide the point, the car rumbled upon a trestle, and the sight of dizzy depths below caused Culberson to turn inward with a shudder.

The scout, starting up, caught Culberson, and the two closed in a struggle which, every moment, threatened to precipitate them over the side of the car.

Out of the tail of his eye, while battling with the leader of the gamblers, Buffalo Bill saw that Hankins had likewise staggered erect. Armed with the crowbar, he was evidently watching his chance to strike a telling blow with it.

Occupied as he was with Culberson, and doing his utmost to keep both himself and the gambler on the bounding car, the scout could do absolutely nothing to defend himself from an attack by Hankins.

The scout's fight with the gambler was bringing them both perilously close to the edge of the car, when Hankins, believing the right moment had come, lifted the iron bar above his head in a murderous, whole-armed swing.

The scout, in order to save a fall into the gulf below the trestle, pulled himself sharply backward.

At that instant he heard a sickening *thump*, followed by a clatter of the crowbar on the planks. Hankins lurched against him, overthrown by the swaying of the car and by the fierce impetus which he had put into the blow.

Flat on the planks he fell, then, with a shriek of fear and despair, rolled over the side. The scout, suddenly freed of the gripping hands of the gambler, reached out to save the ruffian, but the sleeve of the man's coat rippled through his fingers, and the twisting form vanished below.

Dazed and breathless, Buffalo Bill clung to the leaping planks, wondering what had happened to Culberson that he had so suddenly given up the fight, as well as how it was that Hankins had lost his foothold and plunged over the side.

Would the car hold to the rails in its mad flight, or would it leap from them and ditch itself beside the road-bed?

The rumbling ceased suddenly, and the scout, lying sprawled face downward on the platform, knew that the trestle had been crossed.

Slowly he arose to a sitting posture. They were close to the foot of the mountain now, and he could see the huddle of buildings that comprised the town of Coyote.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### COYOTE.

"What do you think about it, Cayuse?"

The question, asked in a voice that throbbed with anxiety and apprehension, was directed at Buffalo Bill's little Piute pard. Dell Dauntless was the questioner. Her face was pale and her eyes reflected the fear she felt in her breast.

She and Little Cayuse were sitting on a pile of ties close to the railroad-track in Coyote. The boy's face, as he listened to the girl's question, was heavy with foreboding.

"No like um," said he curtly.

"It can't be that the gamblers have got the best of Buffalo Bill," went on the girl.

"You got um gun owned by Pa-e-has-ka, huh?"

"Yes, but that doesn't prove that Buffalo Bill has lost his life, does it?"

"He lost um gun, anyway. You git um paper-talk with gun?"

"Yes."

"Paper-talk him say Pa-e-has-ka killed, and that you *vamos*, or you'll be killed, too?"

"It is easy to say such things on paper," said the girl tremulously.

"When you git um gun and paper-talk, you leave Capitan, come to Nogal. There you tell um Cayuse, and we both come to Coyote to find um Wild Bill. Wild Bill not here. Ugh! Mebbysso Wild Bill killed, too."

### Coyote.

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This was the way the presence of the girl and the Piute was to be accounted for in Coyote. Receiving one of the scout's weapons, and a note—both similar to the ones sent to Wild Bill—Dell Dauntless had become alarmed on the instant. She knew that Capitan was not of much importance in the "ring" the scout's pards had described about Carizozo, and she had mounted her horse, Silver Heels, and started at once for Nogal. There she showed the gun and read the "paper-talk" to Little Cayuse, and they decided to ride to Coyote and acquaint Wild Bill with latest developments.

What they wanted was Wild Bill's advice.

When they reached Coyote, however, an hour before they went to the railroad-track to discuss the situation, they discovered that Wild Bill was not in town. He had left Coyote, they were told, the afternoon of the preceding day.

The disappointment of Dell Dauntless and Little Cayuse was intense.

Contrary to the scout's instructions, they had left their posts on the "ring." This, if their alarm for the scout's safety was unfounded, was a breach of duty which might have far-reaching results.

Thrown on their own resources, they did not know what to do. If they could have found Nomad, he would have advised them, perhaps, better than Wild Bill; but the old trapper had been given instructions by heliograph, and his whereabouts was a mystery to Dell and Cayuse.

"Mebbyso," hazarded the Piute, "you go back to Capitan, me go back to Nogal. Huh? We wait."

"I can't do that," said Dell, "when Buffalo Bill's fate is not settled. Suppose I go to Fort Sumner and see what can be found out there?"



"Him long ride, Yellow Hair," demurred the boy; "you no get to Sumner 'fore night. Take um big risk. Pa-e-has-ka no like his girl pard take such risk. Ugh! Heap hard question. Mebbyso I go to Sumner?"

Even as Little Cayuse finished his talk, the rails of the lately laid track began to hum. The boy threw up his head and listened.

"What is it?" asked Dell.

"You hear um iron trail begin to sing? Mebbyso train on track."

"There's no train to run on the track, Cayuse," answered Dell.

"Something make um sing," persisted the boy, directing his eyes toward a curve of the up grade.

The humming was growing louder and louder. Dell, likewise filled with curiosity, allowed her own glance to follow Cayuse's.

Coyote lay on a flat at the foot of the mountain. For two or three miles, north of the town, the track lay on a level.

As the two peered at the spur of rocks from behind which the track wound down onto the flat, a hand-car suddenly leaped into sight, bounded dangerously on the curve, but held to the rails and swept downward.

"Ugh!" muttered Little Cayuse. "Little car come down hill. Two men on car; one man him sit up, other man him lay down."

"Who are they, Cayuse? It must have been almost a breakneck job to tumble down the mountain on a hand-car."

Cayuse made no response. Climbing up on the ties, he continued to watch the car as it darted toward them.

Suddenly he gave a shout and flung himself down. The next moment he was racing up the track.

"What is it, Cayuse?" called Dell, starting after him.

"Pa-e-has-ka!" yelled the boy, over his shoulder.

"Buffalo Bill!" murmured the girl, her face lighting up.

By then she, also, could make out the well-known figure of the scout. Buffalo Bill's hat was gone, and his long hair was flying out behind him with the speed of the car's flight. Dell ran excitedly after Cayuse, but it would have been more to the point if they had remained at the pile of ties.

The car, its speed slowly diminishing, passed them before they had gone a hundred feet.

The scout waved his hand to them as he flashed past, and they turned on their track and started at their best speed in the direction the car was going.

By the time the car had lost its momentum and come to a stop, it was half a mile beyond Coyote. The scout, when the girl and the Piute reached him, was sitting on the side of the car awaiting their arrival.

"Buffalo Bill!" cried the delighted girl, catching the scout's extended hand.

"You act as though you had seen a ghost, Dell," said the scout.

"It's hard for me to believe that I'm not looking at one now," she answered.

"Wuh!" put in Little Cayuse.

"What do you mean?"

Thereupon Dell explained how she had received one of the scout's revolvers, and a note from Culberson stating that the scout had been—as the note gracefully phrased it—put "out of the running."

"That's a queer way for a man to get his lost guns," murmured Buffalo Bill, taking the weapon Dell handed to him. "Here's the other one," he added, slapping his hand against it. "I got it from Wild Bill. It came to him just as this one came to you, Dell, and with it there was the same kind of a note."

For a while, neither Cayuse nor Dell had taken any account of the silent form sprawled out on the platform of the car. Abruptly, Dell's eyes lighted on the form, and she started back.

"Who's that?" she asked.

"Culberson," and a grave look crossed the scout's face with the word.

"Is he hurt?"

"He has reached the end of his 'death-trail,' but it is he, and not Buffalo Bill, who has 'cashed in.' One of his own men struck him down with that bar, and then paid the penalty of his crime by dropping to his own death from a trestle. This isn't anything for you to see, Dell. Leave Cayuse and me here, and you return to Coyote and send Wild Bill's men, Hank Pierson and Scrim Oliver."

Dell turned away and set her face toward the town. She was wildly impatient to hear what Buffalo Bill had to say concerning his recent experiences, and she was overjoyed to know that the scout's long-drawn-out battle with the gamblers had ended successfully—but the sight of that silent form on the hand-car made her eager to get away from it.

Buffalo Bill's battle with the gamblers had ended in tragedy, just as she had felt all along it would do, but it was a satisfaction to know that the scout had come out of the conflict unharmed.

While the scout and Cayuse were waiting for Pierson

and Oliver, they pushed the hand-car, with its gruesome freight, back toward the town. By the time the car was on the track, at about the point where the Coyote station was to be erected, Pierson and Oliver showed themselves, and with them came Terhune, the sheriff.

Terhune had happened to be in Coyote on business, and Pierson and Oliver, meeting him on their way down to the track, had asked him to come with them.

"What's happened?" asked Terhune, as soon as the scout had finished greeting Pierson and Oliver.

"You can see for yourself, Terhune," the scout answered, waving his hand toward the form on the car.

"Who's the man?" Terhune inquired, turning the form over and surveying the wound with professional hardihood.

"Nervy Nat Culberson, the gambler."

"Then he's got what's coming to him," scowled the sheriff. "A worse citizen never held up a stage or snaked a game of faro. You've done the country a service, Buffalo Bill."

"I wasn't the one," spoke up the scout hastily.

"Who was, then?"

"A fellow named Hankins——"

"Hankins? Great blazes! Why, he was one of Culberson's stand-bys—a hoss-thief and an all-around bad man, if there ever was one. However did Hankins do this? Did he and Culberson quarrel about something?"

"It was a mistake on Hankins' part," explained the scout. "The car was dropping down the side of the mountain with Culberson, Hankins, and myself aboard. I was fighting with Culberson, and Hankins picked up that iron bar and made a strike at me. I pulled back to keep



from dropping over the side of the car, and the bar fell on Culberson's head instead of on mine."

"Cody-luck!" boomed Terhune. "Say, Buffalo Bill, if I had your run o' fortune I'd be the greatest sheriff in all New Mexico. Where's Hankins? Did he get away? I'd like to find him and give him a medal."

"No, Hankins didn't get away. He fell from the car into a gulch the road crossed coming down the mountain."

"Well, now, that's what I call wiping out our shady citizens by wholesale. No one is going to half-mast any flags for Culberson and Hankins. I'll take charge o' this, Buffalo Bill, and relieve you of any further responsibility. Just by luck I happen to be in Coyote to-day, so you can bank on me to plant Culberson and send to Rincon Gulch, and bring in Hankins."

"While you're about it, Terhune," suggested the scout, "I wish you'd send as many mounted men as you can spare up the mountain to the head of the track. I left Wild Bill there, and he was having a hot time of it when I started."

"Bill was shore crazy mad when he left hyer yesterday artemnoon," said Pierson.

"Plumb crazy," averred Oliver. "I've knowed Bill fer quite a spell, but I never seen him in sich a takin' as that afore."

"Many gamblers in town?" queried the scout.

"Nary, they ain't," replied Pierson. "Ye couldn't find one if ye curried the place with a fine-tooth comb. The hull lot hev skehotted. Reckon they got skeered at some-thin' an' shied off."

Leaving Culberson to be dealt with by the sheriff

and Pierson and Oliver, Buffalo Bill and Cayuse went up into the town.

A big hotel had been built in Coyote on account of the anticipated boom that was to follow the advent of the jerk-water railroad. The railroad didn't amount to much, anyway, and now that the contractor for the mine-owners had had a row with the laborers, the road's prospects had reacted fatally on the "boom."

The hotel was about half-finished and half-furnished, but it was open for custom, and there the scout, Dell, and Little Cayuse made their headquarters. The scout had fasted for some time, and, after a meal had been hastily prepared and partaken of, the three pards repaired to the hotel porch.

While they were sitting on the porch, and Buffalo Bill was just getting ready to describe his trip down Medicine Mountain, three horsemen appeared at the end of the street and cantered toward the porch. Two of the men were Pierson and Oliver; the other was Wild Bill, and he was leading Bear Paw.

"Good enough!" exclaimed the scout, with intense satisfaction. "One more pard accounted for. Considering what he must have gone through, Wild Bill appears to be in fine fettle."

Wild Bill, as soon as he discovered who were sitting on the porch of the new hotel, gave a delighted whoop, and covered the remaining distance at a gallop.

"Cody," he cried, riding up to the porch, "it sure does my eyes good to see you again. When you streaked off down the mountain with Culberson and that hired ruffian of his, I was afraid we'd faced our last bunch of trouble together. And Culberson's done for, and that fellow that began the trip with you fell into Rincon Gulch! Queer

how things shape themselves sometimes, eh? Pierson and Oliver have been telling me all about it."

"We started up ther mountain as soon as we'd helped Terhune kerry off Culberson," explained Pierson; "but we hadn't got far afore we met Bill, ridin' down with yore hoss in tow."

Wild Bill slid out of his saddle onto the porch.

"Take both horses, boys," said he, "and put them up somewhere where they can rest and eat. I'm going to stay with Cody for a while."

As Pierson and Oliver rode off with Wild Bill's mount and Bear Paw, Wild Bill turned to Del and Cayuse.

"How does it come," said he, "that you two flocked here?"

"Dell got one of my revolvers and a note from Culberson," said the scout, "the same as you did. She hunted up Cayuse, and they decided that Culberson must have been too much for me. Feeling the need of advice, they came on to Coyote for a talk with Wild Bill, only to find that Wild Bill had left town."

"I don't blame 'em for feeling worried," said Hickok. "I was worried myself. As for leaving their places on the surround, I can't blame them for that, either. Didn't I do the same thing? Besides, Pard Cody, your 'ring' wasn't what you thought it was going to be."

"The theory was all right," the scout answered; "and if events had fallen out as I supposed they would, the 'ring' would have proved its value. But when Culberson sent his men to capture the signal-corps in the Cafitans, he tangled up with the army, and it was fear of the army that put him and the rest of the gamblers on the run. What happened to you, Hickok, when I got aboard that car and left you to do your own fighting?"

"Several things," grinned Wild Bill. "You left me with two gamblers, and I had just made up my mind to capture both of them, when half a dozen more handy boys came boiling out of the timber. I changed my plans then, and did it quick. I jumped across that track like a long-eared rabbit, with eight tin horns sniping away at me as I went. I must have kept ahead of their bullets, though, for none of 'em touched me. When I reached the horses, you'd have thought I was riding pony-express the way I got 'em loose, flopped into the saddle, and sailed away with Bear Paw trailing behind. Then I went down the mountain—not quite as fast as you did on that hand-car, Buffalo Bill, but still without giving the grass time to grow under me. A little way out of Coyote I ran into Pierson and Oliver, and they told me how you had arrived in town. Good business, pard, but I must say that your luck was right-side up with care on that down grade."

"You seem to know all about Buffalo Bill's work, Wild Bill," spoke up Dell, "but that's more than we know, and we're anxious to hear all about it."

"Square away, Cody," said Wild Bill. "Our girl pard has all of a woman's curiosity, and I can't blame her for wanting to know what's been going on."

"I'm in something of a taking, pards, about old Nomad," said the scout. "I had information to the effect that Nomad, Wild Bill, and Dell had all been captured by the gamblers. The information was false so far as Wild Bill and Dell were concerned, but Nomad's failure to present himself, or make his whereabouts known, apparently points to the fact that he has experienced trouble of some sort."

"I'll bet money," chipped in Wild Bill, "that Nick



shows up with another of your guns, Cody, and a note similar to the one that came to Dell and me."

"I only had two guns when I dropped into that trap on the Bonita trail, so Nick couldn't have one."

"Then he'll come around with your bowie. Like as not, the old cimiroon is carving out a trail of revenge among the gamblers this minute, same as I calculated on doing."

"With Nomad," went on the scout, "the case is different than with any of the rest of you. I flashed a message to him over the heliograph, telling him to go to Jicarilla. The gamblers got the message and sent two of their number to follow Nick and lay him by the heels." The scout's face became grave as he added: "You all know what two enemies, skulking along on your trail, might be able to accomplish."

The scout, when he had first learned from Doubleday of the gamblers' coup in the Cafitans, had taken rather an optimistic view of the situation; but now his failure to hear from his old pard filled him with foreboding and gloom.

"How about riding to Jicarilla this afternoon," suggested Wild Bill, "and looking the camp over?"

"I think it would be a good plan, and, if you're agreeable, we'll——"

The scout broke off abruptly and struck a listening attitude. From down the street a burst of something that might have been melody, if the singer had had a different voice, came to the ears of all on the porch:

"I once knowed a gal in the year o' fifty-two,  
A harnsome young thing by the name o' Emmy Loo;  
I never could persuade her fer ter leave me be,  
And she went and she took and she mar-ried m-e-e!"

"The strains of that bazoo sound mighty familiar, Cody," muttered Wild Bill, leaning over the railing of the porch and staring down the street.

"Why, it's Nomad!" cried Dell, in a flutter.

"Big as life," seconded Wild Bill, with a laugh. "He's leading two horses, and there's a man tied to each one. How many gamblers trailed Nick to Jicarilla, Cody?"

"Two."

"Well, old Cut-and-slash is bringing 'em in. By gorry, I don't think I'd waste any time worryin' about *him*."

## CHAPTER XXX.

### GATHERING OF THE PARDS.

Nomad, shacking along on Hide-rack, with two led horses roped to his saddle-horn, did not see the group on the porch until he was opposite the hotel. Then he gave a whoop, turned Hide-rack crosswise of the street, pulled rein, and stared.

"Howdy, Nick!" called the scout.

"Where did you come from, Nomad?" laughed Wild Bill.

"Why don't you come over and see us?" asked Dell.

"Sufferin' varmint!" breathed the astounded old trapper. "Pard Buffler, Wild Willyum, Dell, an' Leetle Cayuse, all comfortable as ye please, roostin' on er porch in this man's town obsarvin' Nomad ride in! Waugh! Somethin' must er happened."

Nomad, having eased himself a little of his surprise, spurred up to the porch and shook hands.

"This hyar's er pizen big surprise-party on me, pards," said he, settling back in his saddle. "I was expectin' some ter run onter Wild Bill, kase this was his place on ther 'ring,' but I never dreamed o' runnin' inter Buffler, Cayuse, an' Dell!"

"What have you been up to, Nick?" asked Wild Bill.

"I've hed a pressin' engagement with a couple o' gents as trains with ther gamblers." Nomad backed away so that those on the porch could have an unrestricted view of his prisoners. "These aire the fellers," said he. "The nigh one's name's Spink, an' ther off one ~~came~~ called himself

### Gathering of the Pards.

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Pecos. They was gunnin' fer me, but I heerd 'em follerin' afore I got ter Jicarilla. Dodged inter the rocks an' waited fer 'em ter lope erlong. When they was clost enough, I tried ter surround 'em an' exercise ther free an' unlimited use o' ther kibosh. Hide-rack shied at ther pre-cise moment I was goin' ter star myself, ther cinch o' ther saddle come loose, an' I kerlapsed inter ther trail, saddle an' all.

"When I come to I had ropes on me, an' was layin' out in ther scrub with Spink and Pecos keepin' gyard an' busyin' themselves with a bottle o' firewater. I was mad as er hornet, but I held in fer thet night. Next day, Spink an' Pecos was so well likkered up they didn't want ter do nothin' but lay in ther shade an' sleep. Thet suited me, an' I made use o' my time by sawing the ropes off'n my wrists on a sharp aidge o' rock. Then I put some ropes o' my own on Spink an' Pecos, an' set around while they got over the effects o' the firewater.

"When they was sober enough so's I could handle 'em, I got 'em inter their saddles, tied 'em thar like ye see, an' begun wonderin' whether I ort ter go ter Jicarilla arter sich an unexpected delay. I knowed Jicarilla was a bad place fer gamblers, an' I knowed Buffler wanted me thar in er hurry, but Spink an' Pecos had made me lose a hull lot o' time. Ef I took ther pris'ners ter Jicarilla, would the gamblers thar turn to an' take 'em away from me? Waal, ther upshot of et was, I didn't go ter Jicarilla, but trusted ter luck an' p'inted fer hyar."

While the old trapper was palaverin', Pierson and Oliver had approached the porch on foot, returning from the place where they had left the horses.

"Where's Terhune, boys?" inquired Wild Bill, leaning over the railing and addressing the two men.



"Down ter Culpepper's store," Pierson answered.

"Well, here's another job for you. Take these two prisoners to Culpepper's store and turn them over to Terhune. Tell him they're some more of the gamblers' outfit that tried to do up the scout and his pards. Take all three horses and put them out with the others."

Wild Bill turned to Nomad.

"Get down from Hide-rack, Nick," he finished, "and join us. Pierson and Oliver will look after your outfit."

Nomad was perfectly willing to exchange his saddle for a comfortable chair; he was also anxious to hear what had been going on while he had been having his extended seance with Spink and Pecos.

As Pierson and Oliver went off with the prisoners and the horses, Nomad dropped down in a seat, heaved a long breath, and reached for his pipe.

"Now, then, pards," he remarked, "the one o' ye with ther most ter tell, 'll please tune up fust. I'm hungry ter lis'en."

"That means Buffalo 'Bill," chirped Dell.

Buffalo Bill surprised Nomad a good deal when he stated that the old trapper had fallen in with the gamblers in the Cafitans, and not with the regular signal-sorps.

As soon as the trapper had got over his chagrin and amazement, the scout proceeded with further details of his experiences.

All hands enjoyed the recital. Any excitement that had plenty of ginger in it, with few stage waits, always appealed to them. Save for the few hours he had hung out at Bonita, the scout had been exceedingly busy from the time he had left Sumner until he had dropped into Coyote on the hand-car.

Wild Bill, when the scout had finished, related how he had received the revolver and the note, and had formulated a one-man scheme of vengeance and started to carry it out.

Dell told a similar story, and explained her going to Nogal, coming with Little Cayuse to Coyote, and being down by the railroad-track when the scout made his spectacular entry into the town.

Nomad lighted his pipe for the tenth time. While the talking was going forward, he had been too interested to smoke.

"Waal, ain't et er caution how things sashays around sometimes!" he commented sagely. "Pard Buffler's 'ring' was er prime idee, an' ef ther gamblers hadn't got skeered o' ther sojers, like es not ther 'ring' would hev been needed fer somethin' more'n ornamental purposes. Ye've done ther heft o' ther work, this trip, Buffler. Carnforth was done up by that fer-de-lance reptyle, Culberson was killed by one o' his own gang, ther feller thet put him out o' ther way never lived long enough ter realize et, an' Doubleday is a pris'ner at ther fort—purvidin' this hyar Two-sticks was man enough ter git him thar, which I ain't doubtin' at all. I reckons, speakin' free as between men an' feller sports, thet Buffler Bill's outfit is on top, eh?"

"You can bank on it!" declared Wild Bill, with enthusiasm.

"An' ther gamblers' syndicate hes been busted fer keeps?"

"I don't see how the syndicate can ever get over this blow," returned Bill.

"Ner me, nuther. Thar's a hull lot o' tinhorns'll hev ter crawl back ter their ole stampin'-grounds an' be good

from now on. Ther game, pards, thet was begun in Durango, Colorado, some time ago, side-tracked itself on ther Mississippi, an' then headed fer New Mexico, has at last been brought ter a finish. I'm happier'n a squaw with er string er glass beads ter think we all come through as well as we done. Culberson an' his gang hev had a good many chances at Pard Buffler, an' I reckons as 'how on'y one thing saved him."

"One thing?" queried Wild Bill. "What's that, Nick?"

"Cody-luck," answered Nomad. "Ther original brand, blowed in ther bottle an' stuck on ter stay."

\* \* \* \* \*

The day after the scout and his pards had thus provisionally come together in Coyote, they all took horse and proceeded to Fort Sumner, taking Spink and Pecos with them. The two prisoners were part of the gang who had captured O'Rourke and his men, and, hence, would be gladly welcomed by Colonel Tolliver.

On reaching the fort, Spink and Pecos were put into the guard-house with Doubleday; and Pedro, the treacherous Apache, was brought out and given his freedom.

Charley Two-sticks, as loyal to the scout as Pedro had proven treacherous, was given his hundred pesos. Three more redskins, who had been helping the scout, but had not been placed in a position to do very much active work, were suitably rewarded and sent away. Pierson, Oliver, and some more of the whites whom the scout had retained, were likewise paid off and dismissed.

Dell Dauntless, who had come from her Arizona ranch to help Buffalo Bill in his last stand against the gamblers, went back to her home, carrying renewed assurances of the scout's hearty appreciation and friendship.

Doubleday, Spink, and Pecos, for their clever tampering with Uncle Sam's signal-corps, were sent to a government prison, where they were given ample time to reflect on the folly that had led them to join Culberson in his fight against Buffalo Bill.

Culberson was buried on a rocky hilltop overlooking the camp of Coyote, and beside him was laid the man whose attempt to slay Buffalo Bill had cost Nervy Nat his life.

It is not often, in this world, that violence returns, as in this case, upon the heads of those who bring it into being. As Captain Weedon remarked, in connection with the fer-de-lance episode, the outcome might be termed a matter of "poetic justice."

The syndicate, with its leading spirits killed or imprisoned, was effectually broken up. This result was due entirely to the tireless activity of the king of scouts and his spirited pards.

THE END.



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