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BUFFALO BILL AND THE RED HAND

By Col Prentiss Ingraham



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Buffalo Bill and the Red Hand

OR,

The Mystery of Spook Cañon

BY

Colonel Prentiss Ingraham

Author of the celebrated "Buffalo Bill" stories published in the
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Buffalo Bill and the Red Hand

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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 AND THE RED HAND.

CHAPTER I.

COOGAN, OF THE SECRET SERVICE.

The shot came with startling suddenness. Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill Hickok were rolling a game of billiards in the "Lucky Pocket" resort, Pagosa Springs, Colorado. The front door of the place was open, a screen standing before it as a shield for the bar. The bullet cut a hole in the screen, flicked past the ear of Wild Bill, who was bending over the billiard-table, cue in his fingers, hit a rack of pool-balls, and then glanced upward and backward, smashing a lamp on the side wall and burying itself in the ceiling.

The king of scouts was leaning on his cue, his eyes on the table. The eyes of both the scout and the Laramie man shifted to follow the course of the intruding bullet.

"By gorry!" laughed Wild Bill, dropping the butt of his cue on the floor. "If that piece of lead had stopped at the bar, asked for a drink, and then gone out again, it would have made the circuit of the room."

"Did you hear it, Hickok?" inquired the scout grimly.

"Hear it? Why, it came so close it whispered to me: 'Lucky for you, Hickok, you're an inch to the right'—that's what it said. Whoosh! Tried to get in the rack with the pool-balls, changed its mind, knocked the lamp to smithereens, and then went out through the roof."

That's the first live noise I've heard to-day. Pagosa Springs seems to be waking up."

It was about 11 o'clock in the forenoon, and Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill were the only patrons in the Lucky Pocket. The barkeeper had been dozing in a chair tilted against the wall, but the crash of the bullet and the clatter of glass as the lamp went to pieces, awoke him suddenly. He gave a jump that brought the legs of the chair forward to the floor and threw him sprawling on his hands and knees, several feet away. Still on all fours, he looked up at the scout and the Laramie man in ludicrous bewilderment.

"Who shot me?" he yelled.

"Why, neighbor," laughed Wild Bill, "the bullet didn't travel within a dozen feet of you. The Lucky Pocket is out one kerosene-lamp, and that's the sum total of the damages. If this thing happens very often you ought to have a bullet-proof screen there at the front door. Which was the target, Pard Cody?" he added, turning to the scout; "you or me?"

Before the scout could answer, and while the barkeeper was picking himself up, a man stepped around the screen.

"Neither, gentlemen," said he. "Yours truly was the target, but the lead went a little wild."

He was a well set up figure of a man—not Western, exactly, but, as the scout took his sizing, Eastern with considerable Western experience.

Possibly he was thirty-five. His face was smooth and he wore a suit of cheap store clothes. There was a bulge at his hip, under his coat, which suggested hardware.

For the rest of it, his light-hearted manner, considering the fact that he had just been shot at, impressed both the king of scouts and the Laramie man most favorably.

"Sorry you were disturbed," went on the stranger, coming forward. "These little things are liable to happen, though, with me. Archibald Coogan is what I'm called, and you're Buffalo Bill, and t'other gentleman is Wild Bill. A hand around, if you please."

The scout took the offered hand quietly, surveying Coogan with a speculative and not unfriendly eye.

"Glad as blazes, Coogan," said Wild Bill. "If I'm any judge, your pulse didn't skip a beat. Who shot at you?"

"That's more than I know. My enemies are many, and lurk in the dark. Bullets have a habit of jumping at me at the most inopportune times. I'm getting used to it. A fortune-teller told me once that when I cashed in it would be by the water-route—so I don't worry much about bullets."

"Where did the shot come from?" queried the scout.

"That's another conundrum. I tried to figure that out before I walked around the screen, but it was too much for me. There's more or less danger to you gentlemen while we stand here talking. If you object to it, I'll meet you later in some place that's less public and more secure. But I'm in Pagosa to talk with Buffalo Bill."

"Then go ahead with your palaver, Coogan," returned the scout. "I reckon we can stand it."

"The idea of danger," grinned Wild Bill, "is very fascinating to me. If it's really dangerous to be with you, Coogan, I think I'll get a pair of handcuffs and attach you to my person. You're an island of excitement in an ocean of monotony, and life once more looks pleasing. Take a cue and join us!"

Coogan, during Wild Bill's characteristic expression of his feelings, stared at him with growing amiability.

"I guess you're a man after my own heart," he ob-

served, "but I won't roll any balls just now. Another time, perhaps. For the present," and here he pulled a ten-dollar gold piece from his pocket, "I wonder if either of you two gentlemen can split this for me? Silver will do."

The scout dug down and came up with five silver dollars. Wild Bill had five more. Pooling their silver, they passed it over to Coogan and took his yellow boy in return.

Coogan, examining the silver dollars one by one, tossed them to the billiard-table.

"Can you remember where you picked up these cart-wheels?" he asked.

"Not I," said Wild Bill. "Somewhere around Pagosa, though."

"Mine came from some of the stores here," added the scout curiously. "Why do you ask?"

"Because they're bogus. They'll ring true, and they've got more silver in 'em than the genuine article, but the milling is faulty and the die-work pretty crude."

"Almost anything with Uncle Sam's name on it will pass in these diggings," commented Wild Bill. "What's the use of making a fuss over coin that's got more good metal in it than the genuine?"

Coogan looked around. The barkeeper was sweeping up the broken glass at the side of the room. Coogan lowered his voice and stepped closer.

"It's my business, gentlemen," he proceeded, "to make a fuss over such things as that. I'm from Washington—Secret Service Department. Some enterprising citizen in this section has a private mint, and I'm here to look it up. May I inquire, Buffalo Bill, why you came to Pagosa Springs?"

"I was requested to do so by the War Department. Somebody was to meet me here."

"Well, I'm the 'somebody.' Throw your eyes over this."

Coogan, of the Secret Service, drew a letter from his pocket and offered it to the scout. The latter read it carefully.

The document merely stated that business of importance was calling Coogan to Pagosa Springs, and Buffalo Bill and his pards were ordered to cooperate with him. The scout passed the letter silently to Wild Bill.

"Fine—oh!" exclaimed the Laramie man, handing the letter back to Coogan. "I'm tickled up and down and clear through. A cloud of snap and ginger glimmers above the sky-line. A hard proposition, I hope, Mr. Coogan?"

"As hard a one as I've ever tackled. You see, Comanches are mixed up in it, and I don't happen to be so familiar with the Indian question as you gentlemen. That's why you're to help me."

"Comanches in a bogus-money dodge!" muttered Wild Bill; "by gorry, but that's a queer combination."

"You've heard of Lon Starkey, of Red Tail?"

"The man that can't be killed? Well, yes, *amigo*, pretty nearly every one in these parts has heard of Starkey."

"You know, then, that he married a Comanche squaw——"

"He has married a good many squaws, and I reckon it's likely there was a Comanche among them."

"Well, Starkey and a bunch of Comanches are suspected, but only *suspected*. The redskins have left a trail of bogus dollars, and the trail seems to end at Pagoso

Springs. I have a clue or two that will take me afield to-morrow."

"Are Buffalo Bill and pards to go afield with you, Coogan?"

"Not just at present. When I get my men spotted I shall call on you."

"Well, you'll find the latch-string out."

"Can you tell me something about Starkey? I haven't secured much information about him, as yet."

"He has a ranch," said Buffalo Bill, "up in the Medicine Mountains. The name of the ranch is Red Tail, and it has been the scene of more fights than I can mention. It's an open question, Coogan, whether the man Starkey is identified by the ranch, or whether the ranch is notorious because of its owner. The ranch-house is a dug-out. When Starkey is at home, he fastens the tail of a red steer to a pole planted in the ground at the door of the dugout. When he's away, there's a steer's horn on the pole——"

"Which is why they call it the Red Tail ranch, hey?" laughed Coogan. "Lon Starkey must be something of a character."

"Starkey disappears from his ranch," pursued the scout, "occasionally for four or five months at a time. If any one goes into the place while the horn is on the pole there's apt to be trouble."

"Where does he go on his long jaunts?"

"He roams through the Indian country. They say he can't be killed. Several times an attempt has been made to hang him, but somehow such attempts never succeed. Starkey is a remarkable man in more ways than one. For instance——"

The scout was interrupted by the bark of a revolver, a crash of window-glass, and the sudden slumping down-

ward of Coogan, of the Secret Service: Coogan fell with head and shoulders under the billiard-table.

It all happened so suddenly that Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill were for the moment astounded—but only for a moment.

"I'll get that handy-boy, Cody!" cried Wild Bill. "You look after Coogan."

With that, the Laramie man rushed for the front door, the barkeeper ran after him, and the scout bent down, laid hold of Coogan's feet, and drew him out from under the billiard-table.

CHAPTER II.

COOGAN'S PLAY TO WIN.

Coogan was a gory-looking spectacle when the scout pulled him out from under the billiard-table. The front of his shirt was covered with a red stain, and his eyes were closed.

The scout knelt down beside him with the intention of ascertaining the extent of his injury. As he bowed forward, Coogan's lips moved.

"Are we alone in here, Buffalo Bill?" he asked.

"Yes," replied the scout, surprised at the robust tones of the detective's voice.

"I'm as well as ever," went on Coogan. "This is a play to win, that's all."

The scout was more surprised than ever.

"Weren't you hit?" he demanded.

"Not at all."

"But that blood——"

Coogan laughed.

"It's rather a thin article for the vital fluid, Buffalo Bill, but it's the best I could do. Red ink. Here's the bottle. Get rid of it, will you?"

The scout, with a grim chuckle, took the empty bottle Coogan handed to him and flung it under the bar. The detective was still lying on the floor when he returned to his side.

"I was tempted to make that play on the door-step when the other shot was fired," proceeded Coogan, "but changed my mind, as I wanted to be where some one could see me. It's known that I'm on the trail of the

coiners, and some of them have been trying to pick me off for several days. The danger hasn't been very great—a man that's born to be drowned will never be shot—but the annoyance was tremendous. That part of the foolishness I propose to end right here. The barkeeper saw the 'tragedy.' Keep him fooled—I'll do my part. Could you and Wild Bill carry me to the undertaker's?"

"We'll do anything to oblige you, Coogan," smiled the scout, "even to seeing you properly planted."

"There's got to be a planting, and I want every one in town, excepting you and your pards and the undertaker, to think it's me that's being put underground. If the coiners think I'm done for, and off their track, I can work to better advantage. See?"

"Exactly," returned the scout. "This reminds me of a little bluff I pulled off once, down in Arizona. I think Wild Bill and I can help you out, Coogan."

"That's the talk. After you get me to the undertaker's, I wish you'd get my satchel, at the Barker House, and smuggle it to me. There's a change of clothes in it that I'm going to need."

"Hist!" warned the scout; "some one's coming."

Coogan lay back and closed his eyes.

Wild Bill, the barkeeper, and three or four townspeople came into the Lucky Pocket. They saw Buffalo Bill, with a long face, kneeling beside Coogan.

"Is he hurt, Buffalo Bill?" gasped one of the men who had trooped in at Wild Bill's heels.

"Oh, no," said the Laramie man derisively, "he's not hurt. I should think any saphead could tell that just by looking at him. How bad is it, Pard Cody?"

The scout got up, shaking his head.

"We'll have to take him to the undertaker's, Hickok," said he.

"I'm a doctor," said one of the newcomers, pressing forward.

"Your services are not needed," returned the scout. "A blanket, Hickok."

The barkeeper found a Navajo blanket and tossed it to Wild Bill. Then the scout and his pard wrapped the silent form in it very carefully.

"Did you discover who did the shooting?" queried the scout, lifting himself up.

"This second shot was as mysterious as the first one," answered Hickok. "The marksman must have been on that side of the building"—he motioned toward the broken window—"and there's a pile of fire-wood on that side of the Lucky Pocket a dozen feet from the outside wall. The fellow that fired the shot was probably behind the wood-pile, but no one saw him, and of course he wasn't there when I went looking. This is tough, mighty tough! Where's the sheriff? Do any of you fellows know?"

"He's off some'rs on the hike," answered one of the gaping bystanders.

"Town marshal ain't around, nuther," volunteered another, "but I reckon he kin be found."

"Find him," said Buffalo Bill, "and send him to me, at the Barker House. This man," and the scout indicated the blanketed form, "was Archibald Coogan—he came from the East. Let's take him to the undertaker's, Hickok," he added; "some of you show us the way."

The barkeeper put up a wail.

"One lamp's gone an' winder's busted! Who's ter pay fer 'em?"

"Oh, blazes!" snorted Wild Bill, stooping to lift

Coogan by the knees. "A man can't even cash in without being dunned for the damage the bullet made that killed him. Go back to your bar and peddle your tangle-foot. That's all you're good for."

"You'll send the blanket back?" asked the barkeeper.

"You'll get your blanket, all right," growled Wild Bill, as he and the scout bore their burden around the screen. "If I had time, barkeep, I'd bring the blanket back myself and make you eat it. That's how I feel about *you*."

It was a gruesome little procession that filed out of the Lucky Pocket. One of the townspeople piloted the way to the undertaker's, the scout and the Laramie man followed with their limp burden between them, and a crowd of curious and morbidly excited citizens made after them, asking questions and going over the details of the recent "tragedy."

At the door of the undertaker's the crowd, including the pilot, was dismissed, and the door closed on a score of disappointed faces.

The undertaker, seeing Buffalo Bill and the burden, guessed, of course, what was wanted. He was a skinny, cadaverous-looking man, and he rubbed his bony hands at the prospect of a fee.

"Something sudden?" he inquired, pointing to a table in a rear room, on which the scout and the Laramie man deposited Coogan.

"Very," said the scout.

"Who'll foot the bill?" went on the undertaker. "Any money in his pockets? I usually get all that's in a man's pockets."

"What's your price for the whole business?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"Well, fifty dollars will do it in pretty fair shape."

"Suppose I give you a hundred?"

The undertaker gave a delighted cackle.

"That'll give him the best there is. Friend of yours, Buffalo Bill?"

"Yes." The scout turned to Wild Bill. "Go over to the Barker House, Hickok," he went on, "and get a satchel which Coogan had there. There may be some money in the satchel."

Hickok made off at once. He had no difficulty at all securing the satchel. The whole town was talking about the shooting, and when the Laramie man asked for the grip it was immediately handed over to him.

When Hickok got back to the undertaker's he found the door barred against him, and screens at the windows to prevent prying eyes from looking in.

A rap on the door brought a question from inside: "Who's there?"

"Hickok," he answered, recognizing the scout's voice.

The door was opened and bolted again. Then Wild Bill gave a startled jump and dropped the satchel. Coogan was sitting in a chair, calmly whiffing a cigar!

"Well, by gorry!" grunted Wild Bill. "What's the meaning of this hocus-pocus?"

"A play to win, Wild Bill," grinned Coogan.

The undertaker laughed raucously.

"A very odd idea," said he, "very odd. But I'm to get a hundred for putting a sand-bag in a long box, carrying it to the cemetery and caching it. That was the bargain, eh, Buffalo Bill?"

"That was the bargain," answered the scout.

Coogan pulled a roll of bills from his pocket and stripped off a couple of fifties.

"I'll pay for it right now," said he, handing the money to the undertaker. "What's more, my friend, if I find that you have kept a still tongue in your head there'll be another fifty coming to you."

"Count on me," said the undertaker, once more rubbing his hands. "I'll be as mum as an oyster."

"You'll have the planting to-morrow morning."

"Exactly."

Wild Bill had been looking on and listening with a confused look on his face.

"I'm all in a tangle, Pard Cody," said he.

The scout explained the situation while Coogan was changing his clothes, replacing the hand-me-down suit with a soiled blue shirt, a red cotton handkerchief, corduroy trousers, and an old slouch-hat. Taking some pigments from the satchel, the detective darkened his face until it was of a swarthy hue. His last move was to slip the revolver out of his discarded trousers and push it into his hip pocket.

By then the scout was through giving Wild Bill the details. The Laramie man was chuckling to himself over the realistic way in which Coogan had carried out his little "play to win."

"You're ace-high, sure enough, Coogan," said Hickok. "When are you going to call on Cody and pards?"

"Very soon. I shall remain here until night, and then I'll get a horse and ride into the hills. You gentlemen will be at the funeral? It will add corroborative detail, you know."

"We'll be there," laughed Wild Bill, as he and the scout took their departure.

The door was carefully locked behind them. As the

pards pushed through the gathering crowd, a man stepped up to the scout.

"I'm Egan, the town marshal, Buffalo Bill," said he. "Was jest on my way ter the hotel ter see ye."

"Come along," answered the scout; "we're just going there."

Buffalo Bill was glad that the marshal had accosted him without trying to get into the undertaker's.

"I don't suppose," said the scout, as the pards and the officer walked toward the Barker House, "that the man who fired the shot is still in town."

"He'd be plumb foolish ter stay here," returned Egan. "Ye kin bank on it, I reckon, Buffalo Bill, that the feller has hiked."

"Then this is hardly a case for the marshal. It's one for the sheriff to tackle."

"That was my view o' the case; but, ye see, the sheriff ain't been seen or heerd of fer two weeks. He's mysteriously missin'."

"Where was he bound for when he left town?"

"It's a secret, although McGowan—that's the sheriff—told me about it. I reckon I can tell you somethin' about it, however, seein' as how ye're hand and glove with the gov'ment an' it's a gov'ment affair. Lon Starkey, o' Red Tail, was in town, spending silver dollars quite free. That was two weeks ago. McGowan ketched on that they was bogus dollars, an' took one of 'em ter Fort Pagosa fer the paymaster ter look at. The paymaster allows McGowan is right about them dollars bein' counterfeit, so back comes McGowan ter lay Starkey by the heels, but Starkey had skipped by the time McGowan got back ter the Springs. McGowan allowed he'd go out an' look Starkey up, an' p'inted fer the Rio Piedra an' the San Juan Mountains. Four days later McGowan's

hoss come back—but the hoss didn't bring McGowan. Animile wasn't injured a particle, an' the ridin'-gear was jest as good as when Mac had set in it, goin' out o' town. But where's McGowan? Nobody knows, although I got my suspicions."

By then the three men had reached the hotel. They went inside at once, and found Nomad, the scout's trapper pard, listening to an account of the recent "tragedy" from the lips of the clerk. The old trapper broke away from the clerk with a whoop.

"What's this I hyer?" he cried, bearing down on the scout and the Laramie man. "Somethin' r'ally takin' place in this hyar dead-an'-laid-out camp an' me not bein' in on ther deal! Waugh! Buffler, whatever did ye mean by drappin' inter a bunch o' excitement an' not takin' me erlong?"

"Why, Nick," returned the scout, "you refused to go to the Lucky Pocket with Hickok and me for a game of billiards, and——"

"I ain't huntin' billiards, Buffler, but excitement. Ef ye'd hev drapped er hint thar was goin' ter be shootin', I'd hev follered ye on ther jump, chaps, taps, an' lati-goes."

"We didn't know about it ourselves, Nick," put in Wild Bill. "Do you suppose the program was all framed up in advance? Take a chair, pard, and compose yourself. The sheriff has been missing for two weeks, and Egan, the marshal, here, was just telling us about it."

"Seen Leetle Cayuse anywhar?" inquired the trapper, pulling up a chair.

"Isn't he around the hotel?" asked the scout.

"Nary. Him an' me was goin' ter take a ride over to'rds Fort Pagosa, an' he went fer the hosses. A feller picked up my animile, Hide-rack, all trapped out with

ridin'-gear, nippin' aimless erlong ther street, but Cayuse wasn't erlong an' hesn't showed up. Some quare, but I reckon ther boy'll come breezin' in bumby, able ter give an account o' himself. Ther sher'ff hes been missin', hey? Waal, I heerd somethin' erbout thiet myself—jest enough ter make me want ter hyer more. Fire away, marshal, ef so be ye're loaded."

"I was jest tellin' Buffalo Bill an' Wild Bill," continued Egan, "that I hev my suspicions as ter what's become o' the sheriff. The subjick was brought up by the tragedy what was recently enacted in the Lucky Pocket—Buffalo Bill sayin' as how the man that did the shootin' had prob'ly left town, an' that the case was one fer the sheriff ter tackle, so——"

"Go on with your suspicions, Egan," cut in Wild Bill. "What do you think has happened to the sheriff?"

The scout was only mildly interested. His main purpose was to get the marshal off the subject of Coogan and the play the detective was trying to make.

In response to Wild Bill's direct question, Egan shuddered instinctively. With excited eyes he peered around him as though fearing some invisible presence might be hovering near to listen and take revenge for the betrayal of a secret. Drawing a bar of "chewing" from one pocket, he nibbled at a corner. Then, settling back in his chair, he went on in a hoarse whisper:

"Betwixt you an' me an' the gate-post, gents, the Red Hand got McGowan."

"Who's the Red Hand?" asked Wild Bill.

"It ain't no human," answered Egan nervously. "Jest a Red Hand about the size o' this floor we're settin' on, at the end o' an arm as long's from here acrost the street. I've heern tell——" He broke off abruptly. "But, say," he added, with a sudden change of manner,

"You folks so plumb full o' common sense, you won't believe things ye can't understand!"

"It don't make any difference what we believe," said Wild Bill, "you've got this far and you've not finished."

"It's what they call a legend!" said Egan, shrugging the lines of his shoulders. "The great deeds have got it by heart—although not all of them. When the first Spaniards came to the land was there, in the San Juan Valley, a fine horse race, and at the end of an hour from here across the street. A tremendous big horse swept down out of the clouds, surrounded by a crowd of a million, then away for the double again."

"The most looked-upon," said Wild Bill, "and not as though he wanted to be looked-upon by you a general look."

"It ain't the ones we listen," he observed, "they have known better's ter spring in."

"You mean that he was riding through the air?" asked Wild Bill.

"That's what," asserted the marshal. "The great thing was that they see, and never take no notice of the fact that they hear, give come up with, wonder or doubt."

The next morning, Wild Bill, who was fond of a good story, had told them to tell them. Two or three days later, he had told them to tell them. Two or three days later, he had told them to tell them.

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"are you folks so plumb full o' common sense that ye won't b'leeve things ye can't understand? If ye are, then this here yarn ain't fer you ter hear."

"It don't make any difference what we believe, Egan," said Wild Bill, "you've got this far and you might as well finish."

"It's what they call a legend," said Egan, watching sharply the faces of his listeners. "The greasers hereabouts have got it by heart—although not many of 'em will tell it. When the fust Spaniards come inter the kentry the Hand was there, in the San Juan Mountains—big as this here floor, an' at the end of an arm as long's from here acrost the street. A tremenjus big hand, gents. It sweeps down out o' the clouds, accordin' ter the greasers, an' nabs holt of a feller, then sweeps on back inter the clouds ag'in."

The scout looked disgusted. Wild Bill laughed. Nomad acted as though he wanted to hear more. Egan got up with a grieved look.

"Ye ain't the ones ter listen," he observed sourly; "I might have knowed better'n ter spring it on ye. Anyways, that's my idee as ter what's become o' McGowan."

"You mean that he was riding through the hills and that this Red Hand came out of the sky and took him away?" chuckled Wild Bill.

"That's what," asserted the marshal. "Fellers that on'y b'leeve what they see, an' never take no stock in what they hear, gits come up with, sooner or later."

The scout, having no time to waste on fairy-tales, excused himself. Wild Bill, who was fond of a story, no matter whether it was true or not, hung to his place. Nomad stayed with him.

Egan had little more to tell them. Two or three men, according to tradition, had vanished from the San Juan

Mountains in the hoary past. The Mexicans averred that the Red Hand had been responsible for their taking off.

"Ye don't hev ter b'leeve it if ye don't want ter," growled Egan, catching a humorous glint in Wild Bill's eye and moving away; "there's plenty as knows the story's true. If this Coogan," he finished, shifting the subject, "is in the hands o' the undertaker, I don't reckon there's anythin' fer me ter do but ter knock around town an' see if the feller what shot him was fool enough ter stay here?"

"That's about all you can do, Egan," answered Wild Bill. "If this Red Hand starts to doing business in Pagosa Springs you tip me off, will you? I'd like to get a look at it. Must be a powerful big man to have an arm that long."

"Oh, shucks!" grunted the marshal, striding sulkily out of the office.

"Thar's er heap o' quare things, Hickok," remarked old Nomad, "thet human bein's ain't able ter savvy."

"Go on, you superstitious old rawhide!" scoffed Wild Bill. "Blamed if I don't think you've swallowed that yarn."

"I ain't er sayin' whether I hev er hev'n't, on'y I'm allers open ter conviction; which," added Nomad darkly, "is a hull lot more'n some ombrays aire."

Nothing of any importance took place during the remainder of that day. Egan beat up the town, in the hope of locating the mysterious marksman who had fired twice at Archibald Coogan, the second time with supposedly fatal effect. The door of the undertaker's place of business remained locked, and the windows curtained. The undertaker was busy—and silent. He was earning \$100 for helping Coogan carry out his plot, and another \$50 by keeping quiet about it.

Little Cayuse did not return, and his pinto, Navi, was not at the corral with the other horses belonging to the scout and his pards. Buffalo Bill was not doing any worrying on the Piute's account. Wherever he was, or whatever he was doing, Cayuse had already demonstrated his ability to take care of himself.

Night passed, and still the Piute boy did not return. Following breakfast, the scout, Wild Bill, and Nomad repaired to the undertaker's. The trapper, meanwhile, had been let into Coogan's secret, and, as may be readily imagined, he was highly delighted. Anything in the nature of a ruse always appealed to Nick Nomad; this, calling for clever work and a certain amount of acting, was particularly pleasing to his fancy.

The cemetery was on a slope beyond the town, in the direction of Fort Pagosa. To this place the scout and his pards, together with a number of townspeople, who were still morbidly curious, followed the buckboard and the long box. There were no ceremonies over the sand-bag in the box—the ruse was not carried as far as that—but the whole proceeding, otherwise, was intensely realistic. The box was lowered, the hole filled in, and all hands returned to town.

In a brief and private conversation with the undertaker, the scout was told that Coogan had left town in the early part of the preceding night, leaving word that, just as soon as he had anything to communicate the scout should hear from him.

Shortly after the scout and his pards reached town they were astounded to learn that Navi, Cayuse's pinto, had returned to the corral without his Piute owner. They went at once to investigate. The pinto was fagged and covered with mud, but he was not injured in any way and the riding-trappings were all in place.

It was in this manner that McGowan's horse had come back. Had Cayuse suffered the same mysterious fate that had overtaken the sheriff?

This return of the pinto without Little Cayuse turned the scout's thoughts from everything except his boy pard. When the Piute's absence was mentioned by old Nomad, the scout had felt no alarm; and he would have continued in an easy frame of mind over the outcome but for the return of the riderless pinto. But now, like a bolt from the blue, had fallen a most unsettling circumstance.

The last act of Coogan's cleverly planned and executed ruse had just been completed, but Coogan, Lon Starkey, and the illegal coiners faded at once from the scout's mind. Until this mystery enshrouding Little Cayuse was cleared up the scout would have nothing to do with anything else.

"This hyar is sartingly er brain-twister," ruminated the trapper, leaning against the corral fence and fixing his gaze on the form of the exhausted pinto. "Ther lee-tle hoss hes been travelin' hard—ye kin see thet with half an eye. But whar hes he been? Thet's ther question."

The scout turned to Jenkins, the corral boss.

"Which way did the boy start when he left here, Jenkins?" he asked.

"Last I seen o' him, Buffalo Bill, he was headin' fer the main street, leadin' Hide-rack, Nomad's mount."

"You didn't see him after that?"

"Nary a sign."

"Cayuse must hev left Pagosa Springs in a tarnal big hurry," put in the trapper. "He didn't even take time ter hitch Hide-rack ter a post, but jest cast him adrift. Howlin' hyeners! We're up agin' er stone wall."

"It's a hard nut to crack, that's sure," said Wild Bill. "It isn't at all like the boy to skip out in that way without saying something about it."

"From the way Cayuse left Hide-rack," returned the scout, "it seems he didn't have time to leave word."

"But what business could he have that was so mighty important?"

This was the point that bothered all of them. As yet there was no business in hand, so far as the Piute knew, claiming the pards' attention.

Pedro, a Mexican employee of the corral, drew close while the pards were standing around Navi. Muttering an exclamation, he stepped to the pinto's knees. The animal's forelegs were caked with a hard bluish mud.

"*Carramba!*" exclaimed Pedro, leaping back suddenly and casting a frightened glance into the faces about him.

"What have you found?" demanded Buffalo Bill.

The Mexican did not answer, but started off at a run. Before he had gone a dozen steps Wild Bill had grabbed him and pinned him against the corral fence.

"Waugh!" grunted Nomad. "Whatever does yer greaser mean by actin' thetaway, Jenkins?"

"Pass the ante," answered the puzzled Jenkins; "never knowed Pedro ter ack that way afore; but then, these greasers is all queer, more or less. Now ye got him, Wild Bill, ye might make him open his trap an' tell us what's on his mind."

"What did you see, Pedro?" asked Wild Bill, his face stern and his words menacing. "You'd better be talking if you want to save yourself trouble."

"The mud, *señor*," gasped Pedro, "the blue mud! *Madre de Cristos!*"

"We savvy purty nigh as much as we did afore," growled Nomad.

The scout went around to Pedro's side as Wild Bill clung to him.

"You know the place where that mud came from, Pedro?" asked the scout.

"Si," whimpered Pedro, rolling his eyes, "*malo, muy malo, señors!*"

"By the jumpin' jemimy," muttered Jenkins, "I'm be-ginnin' ter understand what the pesky greaser is gittin' at. No hosses thet's ever come inter this corral—an' I've been doin' bizness here goin' on three years—hev ever tromped inter the yard with thet blue mud on 'em afore. Buffalo Bill has hit the right nail on the head. Pedro savvies whar that mud comes from—or thinks he does. Make him tell, Wild Bill."

"He acks like he was skeered half ter death," said the trapper. "What's ther reason o' thet? D'ye reckon, Buffle, he had anythin' ter do with what happened ter Cayuse?"

"It's hard to tell what's the matter with him," answered the scout, "but I don't think he was mixed up in anything that has happened to the boy. If he had been he would hardly have come up while we were examining Navi."

Again Buffalo Bill turned to Pedro.

"You might just as well tell what you know, Pedro," said he sharply. "We're going to get it out of you, if not peaceably, then by force. Look here!" The scout drew the gold piece given him by Coogan out of his pocket. "*Sabe the oro?* This is yours if you tell what you know. Where did that blue mud come from?"

Pedro's face was the color of old cheese, his body was

limp, and his eyes, while staring greedily at the money, yet held a wild, fearful look in them. Twice he started to speak, but the words failed, and he moistened his dry lips with his tongue.

"Go on," urged the scout, "if you want the money. If we can't hire you to talk we'll see what force can accomplish. If we can't get to the bottom of this matter one way, we will another."

"San Juan Mountains, *señor*," chattered Pedro.

"That mud came from the San Juan Mountains?"

"Si!"

"I kain't see what thar is in thet ter make him throw er fit," mumbled the trapper, scowling. "What part o' thet San Juans, you Oiler, y'u?"

Pedro gave a groan.

"*Val de mano rojo!*" he cried despairingly.

Jenkins laughed. "I told ye these greasers is queer," he remarked.

"Valley of the Red Hand!" exclaimed the scout, and not only he, but the rest of his pards, thought of the wild yarn Egan had told them the day before.

"He's plumb locoed," grunted Nomad disgustedly.

"All the greasers in these parts is locoed, then," went on Jenkins. "Every last one of 'em believes in the Red Hand, an' wouldn't no more go near that there valley than they'd swap *cigarros* with the Old Boy from below. They're superstitious as the blazes."

"Do you know how to get to this Valley of the Red Hand, Jenkins?" inquired the scout.

"Waal, no, Buffalo Bill, an' I don't reckon ye'll find a white in all this part o' the kentry as believes thar is sich of a place. All moonshine, most of us think. The

greasers claim ter know, but that's part o' the cock-an'-bull story that has been handed down to 'em."

"Do you know where this Valley of the Red Hand is, Pedro?" asked the scout, once more giving attention to the Mexican.

Pedro nodded.

"Where is it?" went on the scout.

"It is a saying, *señor*," whined the Mexican, "that whoever tells the Americanos about *Val de mano rojo*, dies."

"Well," said Wild Bill fiercely, "you'll die if you don't tell, Pedro. So get about it!"

Pedro wriggled like a frightened rabbit, but there was no getting away. When Wild Bill suddenly jerked a revolver from his belt, Pedro slumped to his knees with a cry for mercy.

"Go ahead!" snapped Wild Bill, pressing the revolver against the back of Pedro's neck. "Where's this Valley of the Red Hand?"

With trembling hands Pedro picked up a piece of stick that lay near him; then, with the point of the stick, he began drawing lines in the sandy earth before him.

"He's makin' er map," said Nomad. "He's takin' a good deal o' trouble ter locate thet thar valley, ef we're ter suppose thar ain't no sich thing."

"Prob'ly he *thinks* he knows whar it is," returned Jenkins.

When Pedro got through with his map-drawing, he used the stick for a pointer.

"This place, *señors*," said he, indicating a lot of crossed lines, "we call Pagosa; and this," here he ran the stick along a straight line running west by north, "is what we call the trail to Rio Piedra. Follow Rio Piedra to two

big rocks, called The Friars; turn between the rocks, go north to *Val de mano rojo! Ay de mi!*" and he dropped the stick with another groan.

"Thunder!" muttered Wild Bill, putting up his revolver; "you'd think the poor fool was signing his death-warrant."

"How are we to know the valley when we see it, Pedro?" asked the scout.

"You see a blue hill with a cross, *señor*," said Pedro.

The scout dropped the gold piece in front of Pedro. He grabbed it up and leaped away like a deer.

"Queerer'n blazes, these greasers," remarked Jenkins. "He ain't never seen that Red Hand no more'n I have. but he believes in it, all the same. Gosh! I'm glad I'm Americano an' got some sense."

Buffalo Bill was studying the map.

"Throwed away yer yaller boy, Buffler," chirped Nomad.

"Perhaps not," answered the scout; "anyway, this is the only clue we've got."

"Ye ain't goin' ter foller the clue?" gasped Jenkins.

"Certainly we are," said the scout.

"Ye won't find no Red Hand——"

"That isn't what we're looking for. If we can find a valley with blue earth like that caked on Navi's forelegs, it's quite possible we'll be able to learn something about Cayuse. Go over to the Barker House for our war-bags, Nick," the scout added to the trapper. "Have them loaded with three days' rations."

"We're goin' ter hit ther trail?" queried Nomad.

"If not, why should I be sending for the war-bags?"

Nomad rushed out of the corral with a whoop.

"This hyar is goin' ter be a wild-goose chase fer ye, Buffalo Bill," said Jenkins, with a dubious shake of the

head. "I'm bettin' good money thar ain't no sich of a valley like Pedro said."

"Then we'll find out. If our Piute pard is in trouble, we've got to do what we can for him."

"Kenoi!" seconded Wild Bill. "This is the only clue we've got, and it's our business to find out what's in it."

CHAPTER III.

THE VALLEY OF THE RED HAND.

Accompanying the scout, the trapper, and the Laramie man in their hunt for the Valley of the Red Hand and Little Cayuse, went the three Apache trailers loaned to the scout by the government—Yuppah, Pedro, and Chappo.

There was small need of expert trailers, inasmuch as the pards had their course diagramed, but the scout considered it wise to take the Apaches along.

For some time Cayuse had been nominally in charge of the trailers, had bunked with them and shared their rations, and between the Apaches and the Piute had sprung up a feeling as near regard as an Indian can experience. Yuppah, Chappo, and Pedro were eager to go with the scout, and the scout believed that this eagerness might, in some way, be turned to good account.

During the larger part of the journey to the Rio Piedra, the trail was stony and offered no signs of hoof-prints; but there were places, here and there, which showed marks of passing horses, three sets overlaying each other and pointing west, and one set overlaying all and pointing east.

"By gorry," breathed Wild Bill, after a study of the trail, "I shouldn't wonder if we've picked up the right scent."

"No *cumtux* so many tracks, Hickok," put in the trapper.

"That's a puzzle, sure; but that set of hoofs pointing east might have been made by Navi. It's a cinch the

tracks were left by a horse that wasn't burdened with a rider. There's a set of marks, going the other way, that matches the set headed east—only when the horse was west-bound there was a rider on his back. That horse was Navi, I'll bet a bunch of *dinero*. What's your notion, Pard Cody?"

"You've hit off my idea to a hair," replied the scout. "Cayuse certainly went west over this trail, and Navi returned without him."

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon when the scout called a halt at the Rio Piedra. They had slipped down, and were just taking the saddles from their animals, when they saw a horse galloping toward them along the river-bank from the north. The animal was saddled and bridled, but there was no one on his back.

"Blazes ter blazes an' all hands 'round!" tuned up old Nomad. "Hyar's another riderless hoss, an' we ain't missed no one. Whoever could thet critter hev belonged ter?"

The horse showed a disposition to give the party on the river-bank a wide berth, and the scout ordered Yuppah to go after the animal and bring him in.

Yuppah made light work of the pursuit, and soon rode back to his companions, leading the runaway.

There was the same blue mud on the horse's legs that had been carried into Pagosa Springs by Navi.

"This is wuss an' more of et," puzzled the trapper, running his fingers through his long hair. "I'm up er stump, I am, pards. Ther hoss hes been ter this hyar valley we're tryin' ter find, but who straddled ther critter? An' what's ther ombray got ter do with Cayuse, ef anythin'?"

"You remember," returned Buffalo Bill, "that there were trails of three horses going west. This was proba-

bly the animal that left the second trail. As to who the rider was—well, let's look through those saddle-bags and maybe we'll get a clue."

The bags were tied to the saddle-cantle. Without removing them, Nomad pulled the buckles loose and ran his hands into the pockets.

"Nothin' but jerked meat an' hardtack, Buffler," said he. "Kain't git much of er clue from them er—
Waugh! what's this hyar?"

From one of the bags Nomad pulled out a letter, stared at the address, and stifled a yell.

"I'm er Piegan, Buffler," he said, his voice trailing away in bewilderment, "ef et ain't addressed ter you!"

The scout caught the letter out of Nomad's hand.

"Ah!" he muttered, removing the enclosed sheet and glancing it over, "we clear up one mystery, pards, only to drop into another. Hickok, this is the letter Coogan gave us to read, in the Lucky Pocket."

"Well, by gorry!" Wild Bill took the sheet out of the scout's hand and examined it incredulously. "What do you make of that, Cody?" he added, lifting his eyes blankly.

"Coogan must have gone over the trail after Cayuse did."

"But why? Was he following Cayuse?"

"Hardly that. Cayuse left Pagosa Springs in the forenoon and Coogan didn't leave till last night. Chance has carried them both along the same course."

"It's as hard to figure out what Coogan was doing along this way as it is to understand why Cayuse came in this direction. Jumping sand-hills! I never met up with such a riddle."

"Coogan, you remember," proceeded the scout, "said he had a clue to follow in looking for Starkey and the

Comanches. Perhaps his clue has taken him to the Valley of the Red Hand."

"And he's dropped into the same sort of a fix that Cayuse got into!"

"Ef Cayuse an' Coogan was captered by anybody," argued Nomad, "et's some quare the fellers thet captered them didn't grab their hosses. Whyever was the animiles left ter stampede along ther back track?"

"Maybe we'll find out all about it when we reach the valley," said the perplexed scout. "We'll put out our horses and rest for a couple of hours, and then we'll hike on to The Friars."

While the horses cropped the grass, their riders fell back on their grub supply; then, by five o'clock, the party was once more on its way, Yuppah towing the horse that had escaped from Coogan.

The Rio Piedra was full of crooks, but its gently sloping, sparsely timbered banks made easy going for the horses. The sun went down and dusk began to fall, yet the scout led steadily onward through the gathering night.

Inasmuch as Little Cayuse's misfortune was a mystery, the scout and his pards could not know but that haste on their part might be necessary in order to save the boy from some desperate calamity. Anyhow, it was better to push ahead rapidly rather than to tarry along and take chances.

As the scout rode, his eyes constantly searched the shadows in advance for a glimpse of the two rocks called the The Friars by Pedro. The country was not rough, in the immediate vicinity of the Rio Piedra, and, in spite of the darkness, the scout felt sure he could not miss the rocks once they loomed up ahead.

Four hours of saddle-work, angling back and forth

with the stream, brought the horsemen to the objects for which they were looking. The twin rocks, forty feet high, rose upward out of the scrub, grotesque silhouettes of friars, hooded and gowned.

"Here," said Buffalo Bill, drawing rein between the rocks, "is where we leave the Rio Piedra and lay a course due north."

"And keep going north," finished Wild Bill, "until we find a blue hill with a cross on it. There's no moon tonight, Pard Cody, and if we keep on we're liable to get off the course and miss that blue hill altogether."

Wild Bill's logic was too clear to admit of question. Much as they all wanted to proceed without delay, yet they realized that they would have to halt until morning. With the first streak of dawn they could take the trail again. Reluctantly the scout dismounted and gave the order to unsaddle.

The horses were hobbled, the grub-bags raided again, and then the pards lay down to sleep, heads pillowed on their saddles, and with Yuppah on guard.

The Apaches, throughout the night, took turns at sentry-duty. The last man to go on watch was Chappo. When the first gray of morning showed in the east, Chappo aroused Buffalo Bill.

The horses were at once caught up, watered, and saddled. What food the pards ate that morning was bolted as they galloped.

Ahead of them, in the north, the bastions of the San Juan Range slowly unfolded in the gathering light. An hour after sunrise the horsemen gained the foot-hills. They kept as straight a due north course as possible, through the rough country, and from every rise they surmounted their eyes sought eagerly for the blue hill and the cross.

"Mebbyso Jenkins was right in his surmises, Buffler," said Nomad, "an' thet thar Pedro didn't know what he was torkin' erbout."

"His directions have panned out pretty well, so far," the scout answered, "and I don't know why we shouldn't expect to find that blue hill."

"The whole range looks blue to me," spoke up Wild Bill.

This was a fact, but it was an illusion due to distance. When they came closer, the blue color faded into raw reds and burned siennas, that glowed brightly under the mounting sun. Just one blue spot was left in the chain of uplifts that fronted the pards, and that was off to the right.

"I reckon thet's ther blue hill, Buffler," said Nomad, arousing himself hopefully and pointing.

"We must have got off the due north trail a little," returned the scout, and the course was swerved more to the east.

As they came closer and closer to the blue spot, its vivid emerald hue increased; and presently, like a couple of white slashes in the hill's side, a cross showed itself.

"I'm er Piegan ef thet thar Pedro wasn't right," cried the trapper. "No matter whar he got his information from, et was shore ther straight goods."

On coming closer to the foot of the hill, they discovered that it was some five hundred feet long by a hundred high—an irregular oblong square from the front. Its southern slope was steep and rocky, both rocks and background preserving the same bluish hue. On its northern side the hill merged into a ridge, at whose end it stood like a bold headland.

The cross, on closer inspection, proved to be formed of

white, quartzlike stones, set into the blue wall some twenty feet from the crest and midway of the hill's length.

Under the cross, some fifteen feet up the slope of the hill's base, was a circular patch of shadow. This blot quickly resolved itself into an opening that looked like the entrance to a mammoth tunnel.

"Was all this made by human hands," asked old Nomad, "er is et jest a freak o' natur'? Everythin' appears fixed up accordin' ter human plans, but I'm some doubtful as ter whether men could chisel out a hill like thet."

"It's a work of nature, I think, pards," said the scout, "although men may have improved on the original plan a little. If they did, though, I'm at a loss to understand their object."

The scout scanned the rocky slope leading up to the opening.

"No tracks," he muttered.

"Nothing but rock here, Cody," returned Wild Bill, "and it's as hard as flint. You couldn't make a dent with a sledge-hammer. Are we going through that hole in the hill?"

"It's the only way we can go. Pull your guns, pards, and follow close behind me. We'll see where the hole leads."

The opening was so wide and high that three horsemen could have ridden into it abreast. Revolver in hand, Buffalo Bill led the way on into the thick gloom, his horse's feet clanging on the stone floor and sending weird echoes dancing along the passage.

They were not interfered with on their journey through the big bore, and in a few minutes they emerged suddenly, reaching the broad glare of day. They had arrived at the north side of the hill, and were on a sort of rock platform. In front of them the platform fell

away in a gentle descent to the bed of a cañon; and what they had at first taken to be a ridge backing up to the blue hill, now turned out to be the cañon walls.

"The Valley of the Red Hand!" exclaimed Wild Bill curiously.

"An' we don't know, any more'n a pack o' fools," observed Nomad, "whether Leetle Cayuse came inter ther place er not."

"Yes, we do, Nick," cried Buffalo Bill.

Dismounting quickly, he picked up an object from the stone platform in front of Bear Paw. Turning, he held it up so his pards could see. The Apaches stared and grunted.

"Blamed ef et ain't Leetle Cayuse's medicine-pouch," said the trapper.

Here, indeed, was a find—a find whose significance pointed in several ways. It proved, of course, that Little Cayuse had ridden Navi over that stone platform, and it also proved that Cayuse must have been in something of a taking when he rode through the tunnel and emerged from the same into the light, with the valley below him.

An Indian's medicine-pouch is his badge of worth. When a warrior loses his medicine-pouch he loses his caste, and if the missing object cannot be found, the warrior paints his face, daubs his hair with mud, puts on his raggedest blanket, and retires into the solitude. From this it will be seen that the medicine-pouch is jealously guarded. How, then, could Little Cayuse's beaded bag have gotten away from him unless his nerves had been somewhat unstrung?

"Waugh!" grunted Nomad, brushing a dazed hand across his eyes. "We're runnin' onter a hull lot er things thet aire new ter us, Buffler. I got er quare feelin' pesterin' my narves, I hev so. This hyar cañon don't

look like er healthy place fer folks ter go moseyin' eround in. Cayuse, comin' hyar alone, must hev felt somethin' like what I'm feelin', er he'd never hev drapped thet thar pouch."

"Well," said Wild Bill, "we all know that pouch to be Cayuse's, and the fact of it's being here proves that the Piute may be here now, somewhere. The next thing is to locate him."

The scout climbed back into his saddle and placed the loop of the medicine-pouch about the horn; then all eyes surveyed the gash before them.

On both sides the cañon walls were straight up and down, and smooth as glass. The scout judged the walls to be fifty feet high, and to front each other at a distance of about forty feet. The walls were of a granite formation, although the bed of the cañon was of the same bluish tint as the hill. From under the left-hand wall a small stream of water trickled across the cañon, forming a pool at the foot of the slope leading from the opening through the hill.

The gash led straight north for a distance of perhaps five hundred feet, where it was blocked by another steep wall.

"It's a blind cañon, Pard Cody," observed Wild Bill. "From this platform we can see the whole of it, and there isn't a living thing in the place."

"There are plenty of hoof-tracks in the mud of that pool, Hickok," said the scout, pointing downward. "Navi and the horse ridden by Coogan couldn't have made all those tracks. We'll go down and look them over."

"Hold up, Buffler," fluttered old Nomad. "Afore ye go any farther into this hyar pizen place, I'd stop er spell an' figger out whether et's advisable."

The scout turned and fixed a keen gaze on his old pard's face.

"If I didn't know you to be absolutely fearless, Nick," said he, "I'd think you were losing your nerve."

"Waal, thet's what I am. I ain't er denyin' et. Ef thar was Injuns ter fight with, I'd go fer 'em, no matter ef thar was er thousand. Et ain't humans I'm afeared of—et's things we don't none o' us savvy thet may be waitin' ter put us down an' out some'rs in thet gash. Waugh! I dunno why, but I'm shore gittin' ther creeps."

It was an eery place, no doubt about that; and the probable fact that Cayuse and Coogan had come there and had both been mysteriously unhorsed did not add anything to the general confidence.

However, neither the scout nor Wild Bill were to be daunted by man or devil. Laughing at the old trapper's fears, they spurred down the slope and splashed through the pool.

"Here's where Navi and that other horse collected the blue mud," said Wild Bill. "According to my notion, pard, that clutter of tracks was made by Indian cayuses."

"And recently made," added the scout. "There's a gang of reds somewhere in this cañon."

"Not in the cañon, pard. If they were we could see them."

"Yes," insisted the scout, "in the cañon. Notice the way the last hoof-prints are pointed, Hickok. The last bunch of redskins who rode through this pool went on into the cañon."

"Right, as usual," admitted Wild Bill, after another look at the hoof-marks, "but, if they're in the cañon, where are they?"

"We'll go on and see if we can find out."

While Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill rode on, old Nomad

and the Apaches descended the slope and splashed through the pool. Yuppah was still leading Coogan's horse. The animal, as though entering regions which he had occasion to remember, pulled back on the rope with which he was being led.

"Hey, Buffler!" yelled the trapper.

The scout and the Laramie man halted and looked around.

"Well?" called the scout. "If you're afraid of spooks, Nick, you and the 'Paches can wait there."

"I ain't torkin' erbout spooks now, Buffler, an' I reckon I'd be purty small pickin's ef I wouldn't foller wharever you an' Hickok led. But look at thet hoss o' Coogan's. Ther critter hes been hyar before, an' he had sich er tough time thet he hates ter perceed. Ef we all had as much hoss-sense as thet animile hes got, we'd turn around an' hike fer t'other side o' ther hill."

"We're here to find Cayuse, Nick," said the scout, facing the other way.

"Waal, ef Cayuse was in ther cañon ye could see him."

"Stay behind, Nick," joked Wild Bill, "if you're afraid to come."

"Afeared! Waugh!"

Nomad dug the irons into Hide-rack and rushed ahead.

The scout, as he rode along, was keeping watch of the trail of the unshod ponies, visible in the soft earth of the cañon bed, and was likewise making a survey of the walls.

The mystery of the place seemed to deepen. The very atmosphere spelled danger—but it was the intangible danger which the scout's intrepid nature scorned to notice.

Suddenly an object which had previously escaped their

notice struck on the startled eyes of the scout and Wild Bill. The object was an Indian lance, planted point down in the earth not two feet from the blank wall on the left-hand side of the defile. From the top of the lance hung the red tail of a steer!

Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill exchanged glances.

"Lon Starkey!" muttered the Laramie man. "By gorry! Say, Cody, do you think Starkey is here? Was that why Coogan rode in this direction from Pagosa Springs?"

"It must be. If this is Starkey's ranch, where is Starkey? Usually he has the pole planted beside the door leading into his ranch-house at Red Tail. But there's no door here."

"We're into a riddle, here, clean up to our eyes. The farther we go the more tangled the whole proposition becomes. If we could only——"

Just at that moment there happened an event; and so silently, swiftly, and relentlessly did it come and pass that Wild Bill, Nomad, and the Apaches were literally astounded.

The scout and the Laramie man were holding in their horses in the middle of the cañon. Buffalo Bill, with his back to the left-hand wall, was giving his attention to Wild Bill, who was speaking.

Across the scout's shoulder Hickok could see the left-hand wall while looking at the scout. Abruptly, like some ill-omened monster, a gigantic red hand slipped noiselessly out of the apparently solid wall. Behind the hand was an arm, which lengthened and lengthened, until, with a prodigious sweep from left to right, the hand closed about the scout, lifted him from the saddle, the huge fingers clutching him in a grip there was no es-

caping, and then, like a flash, the hand vanished within the cliff, taking Buffalo Bill along with it.

There was no cry from the scout nor from any of his pards. It was all done in a twinkling, and with a silence and certainty that were paralyzing.

As soon as they could corral their scattered wits, the Apaches let out a yell and lashed their ponies toward the slope leading to the tunnel. Nomad and Wild Bill, their faces white and their eyes gleaming, backed against the right-hand wall and drew their revolvers.

What Wild Bill and Nomad could accomplish with their revolvers against that gigantic hand they did not know. Like the brave men they were, they stood their ground and waited, eager to do whatever they could for Buffalo Bill. By swift degrees they recovered full possession of their faculties.

"Now, by all the fiends!" whooped Hickok furiously. "What sort of devilish clap-trap was that? There are men back of it—men like you and me, Nick—and why don't the cowards come out and face us?"

"Thar ain't no men back o' et," said old Nomad huskily. "Et warn't no flesh-an'-blood hand, Hickok, an' nothin' thet human bein's had fixed up. Ef et was, et would hev left some sign. Et——"

"This is no time for gammon! It's sign enough for me to see Bear Paw standing there, puzzled out of all his horse-sense, wondering where the blazes Pard Cody has gone. Sign! What more sign do you want, Nick, than the disappearance of our pard?"

"Ye don't savvy, Hickok," persisted old Nomad earnestly. "Et ain't in natur fer a hand an' arm ter show up like thet 'un did, pushin' out through ther solid rock thetaway an' drorin' back inter et ag'in. Waugh! Et wa'n't nothin' human. I had er feelin' we ortn't ter

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come down hyar. Ef Buffler would on'y hev listened ter me he'd hev been with us now."

"What do you think it was that got him?" demanded Wild Bill, turning his angry eyes on the trapper.

"Whiskizooos."

That was Nomad's explanation for all things which he deemed supernatural. Just "whiskizooos." Malign spirits they were, roaming aimlessly about and hunting for opportunities to destroy people.

In his anxiety and perturbation Wild Bill swore.

"I'd like mighty well," he cried, "to have a chance at your whiskizooos with my forty-fives! That whelp of a Starkey is back of this, and I'll gamble money on it."

Spurring wrathfully across the cañon, he halted in front of the place where the Hand had appeared, and shook his fist at the apparently blank wall in front of him.

"Lon Starkey," he yelled, "if it's you that's doing this, and any harm comes to my pard, Buffalo Bill, I've got you marked up for a finish! Where's the Red Hand? Shoot it out at me! I dare you. If you've got the sand, come out into the cañon and meet me, man to man. Starkey, of Red Tail, is a skulker and a coward!"

Old Nomad had yelled frantically for Wild Bill to come back to the right-hand wall, but he might as well have ordered the wind to stop blowing. Realizing the uselessness of trying to curb Hickok when he had the bit in his teeth, the trapper's yell died on his lips and he drooped breathlessly over the saddle-horn. Any instant he was afraid that whiskizoo-hand might leap out of the stone wall and deal with Hickok as it had dealt with Buffalo Bill.

But this dread event did not come to pass, although something else happened which sent the Laramie man's

wrath to boiling-pitch. An eery, mocking laugh came from some mysterious place, and echoed tantalizingly up and down the cañon.

"That's right," shouted Wild Bill, "hide behind your barrier. If you had the courage of a coyote, you'd come out here and show yourself."

Revolvers in hand, Hickok spurred recklessly to the left-hand wall, inspected it sharply for breaks, and everywhere he thought there might be a hidden opening he planted a bullet.

Once more came that tantalizing laugh, followed by a cry of alarm from Nomad and a distant clatter of hoofs. Wild Bill whirled his horse. From the direction of the blind wall at the end of the cañon were coming a horde of Comanches, scalps fluttering from their lances and rifles shining in the sun. A clamor of bloodthirsty whoops rolled through the defile as they charged.

"The tunnel, Nick, the tunnel!" roared Wild Bill, leaning over his horse's neck and plying spur and quirt.

Nomad darted alongside of him, while Bear Paw, frightened at the shouting, laid off the ground just ahead of them.

"Where did they come from, Nick?" asked Wild Bill.

"Out o' the yarth!" stormed the old trapper; "they jest nacherly heaved up out o' the bed o' ther cañon. They ain't real Injuns, but faked-up whiskizos."

Sping! sping! sping! spoke the rifles behind, bullets cleaving the air all around the racing pards.

"They're firing real bullets, anyhow," answered Wild Bill, while the horses labored through the muddy pool.

On up the slope they went, crossed over the rim of the stone platform, and dashed into the mouth of the tunnel.

Here the Apaches were waiting for them, half-relieved

of their superstitious fears by the sound of shooting. Yuppah secured Bear Paw, and made him fast to Coogan's horse.

Wild Bill slid from his saddle and started for the platform in front of the tunnel.

"What's ter be done?" asked Nomad.

"Fight, of course. We'll leave the horses in here where they'll be safe from bullets and we'll nail the Comanches as they tumble up the slope. They may be whiskizosos in disguise, but I'll show you, Nick, that they're not bullet-proof."

Already there was a great clatter on the rocky slope. No time was to be lost if the Comanches were to be turned back before they reached the platform.

Wild Bill and Nomad plunged out on the stone shelf, Chappo and Pedro close behind them. Yuppah stayed in the tunnel to take care of the mounts.

Hurrying to the edge of the shelf, the four men spread out and their revolvers began to talk. The slope was thick with Comanches, but the bullets jumped at them between the heads of their horses.

There was firing in return, but it was ineffective. The warriors in the front rank of the Comanches had already discharged their muzzle-loaders. In order to shoot over the heads of their comrades, the Comanches behind had to elevate their rifle-points so high that their lead struck the hillside a couple of feet above the men on the shelf.

The destruction of the revolvers was great. Ponies, minus their red riders, whirled back on the warriors behind and dashed through their ranks, causing the utmost confusion.

A stampede toward the other end of the cañon re-

sulted, the Comanches grabbing up their wounded and slain as they retreated.

"Hoop-a-la!" exulted old Nomad. "We cleaned up on 'em, by thunder ef we didn't! See 'em scatter! An' they're five ter one, now."

"I reckon you know, by this time," observed Wild Bill grimly, "that they're flesh and blood, like ourselves."

"Them Comanches aire flesh an' blood, thet's er cinch, but thet thar hand thet swiped Buffler out o' ther saddle kain't be no human contrivance. Whoever heerd o' sich er thing afore? Waugh! I tell ye, Hickok, et's er spook hand."

"Bosh!" growled Wild Bill disgustedly. "There's a way into that hang-out of Starkey's, and we can find it. We've got to find it, if we do anything for Pard Cody."

"Watch them Injuns as they git clost ter the end o' ther cañon," said Nomad. "They're within twenty feet o' thet blind wall now, an' they're goin' like mad. Seems as though they was goin' ter run bang inter ther clift. Watch 'em!"

Wild Bill's eyes were fixed on the retreating Comanches. As Nomad had said, the redskins were galloping at speed, with every indication that they were going to smash against the rocks in a head-on collision; then, abruptly, they began to melt into the bed of the cañon just under the blind wall. Within a minute the last horseman was out of sight.

Old Nomad drew a long breath. "How d'ye account fer thet thar?" he gasped.

"There's a way to account for it," asserted Wild Bill. "There are many queer makeshifts in this cañon, and that hand, and the way those reds vanished, are part of

them. The explanation is simple enough, if we only knew what it was."

The old trapper shook his head dubiously.

"I dunno, Hickok," he muttered hopelessly, "ef et's Starkey thet's behind this hyar game, he's shore got ther bulge on us. I reckon Leetle Cayuse was picked up ther way Buffler Bill was, an' likewise thet Secret Sarvice man, Coogan. Whoosh! Me no *cumtux*!"

"Possibly, too, McGowan, the sheriff, was nailed in the same way."

"Thet's so. Starkey must hev quite a gatherin' o' pris'ners, by now. But what sort of er layout is this hyar cañon, anyways? Starkey an' his Comanches couldn't hev fixed et up."

"Remember what Egan said about the greasers having a legend concerning it?" returned Wild Bill. "In the old days, when the Spaniards owned the country and ruled the Indians with an iron hand, they had lots of trouble. It was necessary for them to contrive refuges to which they could flee whenever there was an uprising of the reds. Also, the old dons had to fix up ways to protect their gold and silver-mines. It may be, Nick, that this freak of a cañon was an old stronghold of the Spaniards, and that Red Hand was used by them to overawe the superstitious redskins."

"But how'd Starkey git holt o' et?"

"At a guess, I should say Starkey found out something about the place from the Comanches, and that he came here and is turning it to his own use. He's crafty and resourceful; besides that, he's an odd genius, and a place like this would please him to death."

"Allowing thet things aire as ye say, Hickok, what're we goin' ter do? Buffler an' Cayuse hev got ter be res-

cued, but I'm er Piegan ef I kin savvy how et's ter be done."

"We'll camp down in that tunnel," answered Wild Bill, following a brief period of reflection. "If we go on short rations, we've got chuck enough for four days, and we can get what water we need from that pool. The Apaches can hunt grass for the horses on the other side of the hill. Meanwhile, we'll hold the fort, use our eyes and ears, and try to find an opening through which we can reach the scout and the Piute. I don't see anything else we can do. From this tunnel, and the stone bench in front of it, we can hold off all the Comanches that come against us."

Manifestly, this plan was the only one to follow, and the pards proceeded forthwith to put it into execution.

CHAPTER IV.

THE RANCH OF MYSTERY.

Buffalo Bill was as much astounded by the sudden appearance of the Red Hand as were the others in the cañon. He did not see, and so noiseless was the hand's operation that he did not hear it. The contrivance swooped from behind him, and his first intimation of it was a sudden gripping of his body by the great red fingers and his bodily flight from the saddle.

The instinct of self-preservation caused him to attempt a struggle, but he was encased in five bands of rigid steel and was as helpless as a babe. Before he could do more than realize that the Red Hand was a reality and not a myth, he was drawn into the wall and held there in Stygian darkness.

The gap through which he had been pulled closed as mysteriously and silently as it had opened. The steel fingers still gripped him, making any movement impossible.

Giving over the struggle to free himself, and while waiting for the next move on the part of his captors, he allowed his mind to busy itself with the situation.

The strangest thing, to him, was that there was a foundation in fact for that wild legend related by Egan, Cayuse, for some reason, must have come to the cañon, and was doubtless snatched from his horse in a way similar to that in which the scout had been picked up. So, also, with Coogan, and perhaps with McGowan, the sheriff.

That the scout must now be somewhere in the stony

The Ranch of Mystery.

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posom of the cliff there was no doubting; but just where, and why was he kept waiting, helpless in the steely clasp of those huge fingers?

His thoughts had carried him thus far when there came a glow of light from a distance. The light was approaching along a gallery, borne noiselessly by a white man, clad in buckskins. Back of the white man were half a dozen feathered heads, bobbing about in the light.

As the flickering torch came closer, illuminating the place into which the scout had been drawn, he saw ponderous machinery back of the hand, balanced so nicely with huge weights that the mechanism must have responded to the slightest touch.

Barely had he finished these observations when the men with the torch came into the chamber that housed the hand. Perhaps the chamber measured twenty feet in width and length, by ten in height. At any rate, it only comfortably cared for the strange mechanism in which the scout was held as in a vise.

The man in buckskins lifted the torch high, and peered through its glare at the captive in the steel fingers.

"Starkey!" exclaimed the scout.

"You bet!" answered the white man, with a grin. "I guess ye're wonderin' what happened to y'u, hey? Waal, this here's the Ranch o' Mystery, an' Lon Starkey, o' Red Tail, is the boss. I been expectin' y'u fer quite a spell, Buffler Bill—ever sence I heerd Coogan, the Secret Service man, was comin', an' had orders ter pick y'u up in Pagosa. I don't intend ter be tampered with, savvy? An' I ain't goin' ter be, so long as I got this ole Spanish *rancheria* at my back."

"What have you taken me in for?"

"Oh, bosh! Y'u're wise ter that. Didn't I jest say y'u was helpin' Coogan?"

"Ah," returned the scout, "this is your private mint, eh?"

"That's whar y'u're shy, Buffler Bill. I ain't runnin' no mint."

"How does it come you've been leaving a trail of bogus dollars through the country?"

"Nacherly that's my bizness, an' I ain't talkin' it over with nobody."

"Where's my Piute pard, Little Cayuse?"

"I reckoned y'u'd be frettin' about that thar Injun kid. Waal, y'u don't need ter fret no more. I got him as safe's I got you. An' it'll be some sort of a while afore either o' y'u git away from this Ranch o' Mystery. Y'u see, I'm boss o' the mysteries, an' they're all loaded ter take keer o' Lon Starkey, o' Red Tail."

"Is Coogan here, too?"

"He walked inter the trap like a six-y'ar-old huntin' hick'ry nuts," guffawed Starkey.

Turning to the six Comanches, Starkey spoke to them in their own language. One of them had a rope. This redskin passed around to the scout's back, reached through the opening between the steel fingers, and pulled the scout's revolvers from his belt.

Thus Buffalo Bill was absolutely helpless; nor could he, struggle as he would, avoid having his hands drawn around inside the steel bars and made fast at the wrists. Following this, the Comanche came around in front, bent down, and made the prisoner's feet fast at the ankles.

Just at this point a muffled, mocking laugh echoed through the chamber. The scout looked about him wonderingly.

"That's ole Pablo, my engineer," grinned Starkey,

"havin' fun with yer pards out in the cañon. Never mind him. If the Red Hand wasn't in use, I'd have some more o' yer friends in here ter keep y'u comp'ny."

Starkey put his fingers to his lips and gave two sharp whistles. Noiselessly the gripping fingers opened and Buffalo Bill dropped upright on his bound feet. Two Comanches sprang to his side, each catching him by an arm. Starkey whistled another signal. Instantly the Hand, now flattened and with every digit straight out from the palm, moved back against the chamber wall.

The promptness and weird silence with which the huge mechanism obeyed the will of Starkey were marvelous. The scout, in spite of his desperate situation, followed the movements of the Red Hand with wonder.

"It's a fine machine, Buffler Bill," chuckled Starkey. "If I'd wanted ter, I could have had the Hand double inter a fist an' knock y'u lifeless off'n yer hoss, or I could have had it drap both yer hoss an' you at one blow. But I was easy on y'u, although I ain't goin' ter be so easy if you an' Coogan don't promise ter leave me an' my Comanches alone. Why, if I'd wanted, I could have had them steel fingers squeeze y'u to a pulp! Oh, I'm purty well fixed ter take keer o' myself."

Once more the mocking laugh floated through the chamber.

"What's that man doing?" demanded the scout.

"Havin' fun with yer pards, I jest said." Starkey lifted his voice. "Pablo!" he shouted.

"*Que quiere, señor?*" came a distinct response.

The man from Red Tail answered in Spanish, the scout following his words as he spoke.

Run out the hand, Pablo, and jerk in one of the others."

"Too late, señor; the Comanches have charged and the

Americanos are fleeing toward the cañon entrance. Can't you hear the shooting?"

The scout, vaguely alarmed, listened, and thought he detected sounds of firing. But the sounds were very faint, and proved how thickly the opening through which he had been drawn had been screened.

"Have you set your reds on to make war with my pards?" demanded the scout.

"Think I'm goin' ter let 'em come crowhoppin' around these here private premises?" answered Starkey. "Waal, hardly."

"The military authorities will make you rue this day's work, Starkey!" said the scout hotly.

"Nary, they won't. Fust off; they kain't find me; then, ag'in, if they do, why, I've got a charge planted ter blow this hull ranch inter smithereens. No one else'll have anythin' ter do with it arter I'm done. I reckon y'u know yerself that Lon Starkey o' Red Tail can't be killed, so I stand ter win whatever way the game turns."

He whirled and gave some more orders to the Comanches. Thereupon the scout was carried out into the passage and along it, farther into the breast of the cliff. Starkey, with the torch, led the way.

The scout noticed, while they went along, that the passage had been dug through a sort of conglomerate rock. It was as square as level and plumb-line could make it, and evidently much care had been expended on the work.

But who had performed the work, and when?

That the stronghold was of ancient origin was proved by the deep path worn in the stone floor of the passage. Countless numbers of moccasined feet, passing and re-passing, had been necessary to groove that furrow out of the solid stone.

At a distance, it may be, of a hundred feet from the chamber where the hand was stored, Starkey came to a halt.

"Ye're goin' in here, Buffler Bill," said he, "an' here's whar y'u stay till y'u promise ter gigg back on yer orders ter hunt Starkey. If y'u never promise, then y'u'll never leave this place, an' none o' the others'll leave, either."

The scout made no response. Starkey, flashing his light over the wall, pressed a round bit of iron that projected from the hewn stone. Slowly a square opening yawned in front of the Comanche bearers.

"Y'u won't make any trouble in thar," chuckled Starkey, as the scout was carried into the gloom, "kase y'u can't. Bynby I'll show up an' talk with ye, connectin' with yer idees as ter what y'u think ye'll do. *Adios* fer now."

In the blank darkness, the scout, bound as he was, was laid down on a rocky floor. The two Comanches passed out, the stone door glided back into place, and Starkey and his redskins were lost to sight.

"Ugh!" came a grunt from the gloom somewhere close to the scout. "Pa-e-has-ka, me heap sorry Starkey ketch um."

"That you, Cayuse?" asked the scout.

"Ai."

"We're all here, Buffalo Bill," spoke up another voice. "I'm Coogan—down and out the first clatter out of the box. That trick of mine, back there in Pagosa Springs, didn't work worth a copper cent. We're in a tight corner, friend, you, and Cayuse, and I, and McGowan, the sheriff, who's lying next to me."

"I've been here goin' on two weeks," piped up a husky voice dispiritedly. "There ain't no gettin' away. Star-

key's got us plumb ter rights. I've been ready ter cave fer the last week, but the boss of the ranch don't give me no chance."

The scout listened in silence. Were Starkey's nefarious designs really to prosper, in spite of right and justice, just because fortune had given him that mysterious retreat?

Buffalo Bill would not believe this. Although he was a prisoner, yet he had loyal friends on the outside who would work tooth and nail to bring about Starkey's undoing. Besides, there might be something Buffalo Bill could do himself, prisoner though he was.

"The horses belonging to all of you," said the scout, at last, "came back riderless. The mystery of your disappearance baffled everybody—particularly in the case of McGowan. What happened to you, McGowan?"

"Well," replied the sheriff drearily, "I tangled up in somethin' that didn't concern me particular, an' this is the pay I got fer it. Found some silver dollars that wasn't genooine, took 'em over ter the post an' had the paymaster make sure the money was crooked, an' then I purceeded ter butt inter the gov'ment's bizness. A Comanche come ter me an' allowed, on the quiet, he could take me ter the place whar the dollars was made. Said he'd once belonged ter the gang, but they hadn't given him enough o' the boodle an' he was pinin' fer revenge. It was a frame-up, but I couldn't savvy it. Saddlin' my keetle hoss, I rode off with the Comanche. He led me inter the cañon through the blue hill, an' fust I knowed I was grabbed out o' my saddle by that big Red Hand and snaked inter the clift. Thar, while the hand held me, I was tied up an' kerried in here. Oh, but I was easy! Been kept here ever sence. Don't see nobody but the half-breed that brings the grub. He told me Starkey was the

boss, an' that Starkey 'u'd have a talk with me jest as soon as things shaped around like he wanted 'em to. I reckon this puts 'em about like he wants, an' that purty *pronto* Starkey'll come an' hand us a bunch o' palaver, tellin' us what he wants us ter do an' what we're ter expect. Waal, I'll agree ter anythin' in reason. He's got the whip-hand, an' I'm gittin' anxious ter see what daylight looks like, once more."

"Your disappearance is a conundrum for Pagosa Springs," said Buffalo Bill.

"I got a wife an' fambly thar, too. It's purty tough on them, not savvyin' whether I'm alive er dead. I want ter git out as soon as I can."

"So do we all," put in Coogan, "but I don't think it well to agree to Starkey's terms too quickly."

"How did you happen to drop into the grip of the Red Hand, Coogan?" queried the scout.

"I told you in the Lucky Pocket that I had a tip. I wasn't sure whether the tip amounted to anything or not, because it came in the form of an anonymous letter. That sort of thing don't go with me, as a rule, but I concluded to sift this one and see what there was to it."

"The letter was sent to you?"

"No, to the colonel at the fort. He turned it over to me and said he'd give me a file of soldiers when I started for this place. But I was shy on the soldiers. I made up my mind to feel around in the San Juans, locate the right spot, if possible, and then call on you, Buffalo Bill, to help me wind up the affair. So I came here, following instructions contained in that unsigned letter. What happened, after I reached the cañon, was pretty much the same as happened to McGowan. I was nabbed by the hand and dragged into the clift; then I was toted in here, and Starkey allowed, just as he did with

McGowan, that he'd bat up a proposition to me when a few other matters had been attended to. I was somewhat surprised to find your Piute pard had dropped into the Ranch of Mystery a while ahead of me, Buffalo Bill."

"How did it come about, Cayuse?" asked the scout. "We might just as well understand the whole layout now, while we're all together and able to discuss it."

"Ugh!" grunted Cayuse dejectedly. "Heap bad medicine, Pa-e-has-ka. No like um."

"Nomad sent you to the corral to get your horse and Hide-rack," said the scout; "somewhere between the corral and the hotel you cast Nomad's horse loose, and that's the last we were able to guess about your movements. Why did you leave town in such a hurried fashion?"

"Me ride past um Lucky Pocket," answered Cayuse; "hear um shot, hear um smash of window, see um Injun with gun behind wood-pile. Wuh! Me *sabe* Injun bad medicine, *sabe* Pa-e-has-ka and Wild Bill make um play with round balls in Lucky Pocket, think mebbys Injun shoot um. Injun make um run all same like jackrabbit for *caballo*; me follow um. Injun git away toward Rio Piedra, still Piute follow; Injun go up river, Piute close behind; then Injun him come through hole in blue hill, and down into cañon. Chase him plenty long, plenty hard, but Piute think him got Comanche in box cañon. Piute heap fool. Big Red Hand ketch um Piute. Ugh!"

This characteristic talk of the Indian boy's let in a flood of light on a point that had been shrouded in mystery. Cayuse had taken French leave of Pagosa Springs, thinking he was doing something of benefit to the scout and his pards. Buffalo Bill had felt, all along, that Cayuse's move had been inspired by his idea of duty. And of all the people in Pagosa Springs the Piute had

been the only one who had seen the hidden marksman put a bullet through the window of the Lucky Pocket.

"Lon Starkey was the fellow who was after me," spoke up Coogan. "It was one of his Comanches who was dogging my heels and taking pot-shots at me. In following the red rascal, Cayuse got into this mess himself."

"This, I reckon," observed the scout, "must be Starkey's mint?"

"That's the way I size it up. The old Spaniards went to considerable trouble to make him a bang-up place to do his coining."

"Those old dons," said McGowan, "never took all the trouble to fix up this place without havin' an eye on the precious metal. You can gamble on that, friends."

"What do you mean, McGowan?" asked the scout.

"I mean that those old Spaniards prob'ly found gold here an' fixed up this place so'st ter protect themselves while they was minin'. Ever'body knows how they treated the Injuns, yokin' 'em tergether an' makin' 'em work like galley-slaves jest fer the privilege o' gittin' enough grub ter keep body an' soul tergether. Ev'ry once in a while the Injuns would rebel, an' when that happened the Spaniards had ter have some place ter go whar they'd feel tollable safe. They rigged up that big Hand, I'm guessin', told the Injuns the Great Spirit was on their side, an' then worked on the superstitious idees o' the savages until the reds was skeered ter interfere with anythin' thet went on in this cañon. Why, the yarn them ole dons spread around has come down ter this day. Mexicans savvy it, an' believe it, too."

"I shouldn't wonder if you were right in your surmises, McGowan," said the scout. "I've seen a lot of

old Spanish workings in the Southwestern country. This may have been a mine——"

"Prob'ly it's a mine now, an' that the yaller metal hasn't played out," interpolated McGowan. "Fer all we know, Starkey may be gittin' out gold an' makin' the ole place pay him well."

"Don't you believe it," spoke up Coogan. "If he had a paying gold-mine here Starkey wouldn't be peddling bogus silver dollars around the country. He'd be engaged in lawful mining, and nothing else, instead of taking chances of being nabbed by the government."

"Waal, I don't know jest how the land lays," proceeded McGowan, "but thar's a heap goin' on in this hole in the wall. The dons fixed up a swell place, from what I kin see. Prob'ly it laid idle here for several hundred years, an' nobody knowin' anythin' about the place till Starkey stumbled onter it. O' course, that luck had ter come his way. No decent, law-abidin' citizen like me could have got hold o' the place."

"Starkey, I reckon," said the scout, "found out about the Ranch of Mystery through the Comanches. You know he married a Comanche woman, and that gave him a hold on the tribe."

"That's how, I suppose. Arter Starkey ketched onter the place he must have put it in good repair, fer sart'inly that hand works like greased lightnin'. The way I was yanked out o' my saddle made me ketch my breath—it was all done so quick."

"The Ranch seems to be full of mysterious odds and ends," put in Coogan. "The way that hand jumps out of the cliff and then vanishes back into it again is some peculiar. Coming down the cañon, in broad day, a person can't see a sign of any openings in the rock wall."

"The whole thing has been cleverly conceived and

wrought out of the cliff with a tremendous amount of industry and patience," observed the scout.

"The dons made the Injuns do all the work," said McGowan; "all the Spaniards done was jest ter be on the spot an' do the bossin'."

"Simmering the whole thing down," went on Coogan, shifting the topic, "what are we going to do? Here we are, all of us bound hand and foot and locked in a rocky chamber. Is there any chance of escape? What do you think, Buffalo Bill?"

"I've been working at my ropes all the while we've been talking," the scout answered. "I don't know, as yet, what there is to be gained by getting rid of the lashings, but it's a comfort to have the use of your hands, anyway."

"How ye makin' out with the ropes?" queried McGowan.

"I'm not making out at all. They were evidently put on by a red that knew his business. If your teeth are good, Cayuse, you might gnaw through a strand or two of the rope about my hands. Can you roll over this way?"

"Wuh," answered Little Cayuse, captivated with the idea.

After considerable effort he managed to come close to where the scout was lying. The scout turned on his side and the boy began using his teeth on the hard hemp.

"I don't savvy what ye're ter do when ye git clear, Buffalo Bill," said McGowan. "I'd thought o' freeing myself, but the stone walls o' this hang-out are so thick as ter be plumb discouragin', even arter ye've got yer hands an' feet free."

"Well," said the scout, as Cayuse panted and worked,

"I'll feel a heap more fit to attempt something if I have the use of my limbs. You never can tell what chance may come your way, you know."

For half an hour Little Cayuse labored tirelessly. At the end of that time he had severed one coil of the rope that secured the scout's hands. The other coils loosened at once, and Buffalo Bill found his arms free.

To get rid of the ankle-rope, after that, was the work of only a few minutes. Just as he had finished, the rock door rolled back and a glow of light flooded the room.

"It's the half-breed," whispered McGowan; "he's bringin' our chuck—an' prob'ly aimin' ter make shore we're all safe an' not up ter any tricks."

At that a sudden idea darted through the scout's brain. Lying back, just as though he was still bound, he tucked the severed ropes under him and watched the half-breed with the eyes of a hawk.

CHAPTER V.

THE FIRST STROKE FOR FREEDOM.

The half-breed was a big fellow and with a face as villainous as any the scout had ever seen. His hair was long, his fierce eyes were set close together, and he wore a bell-crowned hat and a baggy Mexican cloak, belted about his waist. In the belt were a revolver and a long, ugly-looking dirk.

The half-breed carried an *olla*, or water-jar, in each hand, the rims being wound with a rope that formed a sort of handle. One of the jars contained water. The other, which he set down and broke with a sharp kick, contained chunks of jerked beef and cold *tortillas*.

The prisoners, bound as they were, were expected to roll to the water-jar and the scattered food, supplying themselves with drink and something to eat as best they could.

A Comanche trailed after the half-breed, carrying a torch. Having rid himself of his burdens, the half-breed and the Comanche began examining the bonds of the prisoners, one going to one side of the room and the other to the opposite side. Both were rough in their examination.

It was the Comanche who came to the scout's side of the prison chamber. First he turned Cayuse over and looked at his ropes; then he stepped to the scout.

The plan that had darted through Buffalo Bill's mind was desperate in the extreme. Its only possible chance of success lay in the quickness and certainty with which it was executed.

As the Comanche bent over him and stretched out a hand to grip his shoulder and jerk him over on his face, the scout's fist flew upward, catching the redskin on the point of the jaw. A resounding thwack echoed through the chamber, followed by a *chug* of escaping breath and the hard fall of the Indian.

The Comanche was unconscious from that terrific blow even before he had hit the floor.

Amazed at the scout's audacious tactics, the other prisoners watched breathlessly for what was still to come.

The torch had dropped from the Comanche's hand. It was still burning, on the stone floor, and afforded the scout plenty of light for the rest of his work.

The half-breed, who had been examining Coogan's bonds, raised erect abruptly when the commotion started across the chamber.

Here is where the scout's quickness won the day. Brief though the time was between the half-breed's hearing the racket and his lifting erect and whirling about to see what was going on, yet Buffalo Bill had leaped up and hurled himself across the room.

There was no time for the half-breed to give a warning yell. His hands instinctively leaped for his knife, just as the scout's fingers twisted about his neck.

With a crash the two men fell flat on the floor, the scout on top of his antagonist and worrying relentlessly at the breath in his throat.

The half-breed had his knife clear of the belt, but so smothered was he by the gripping fingers that his nerveless hand could do no more than jab the knife fruitlessly into the air.

When he considered it safe, the scout hastily withdrew one of his hands and plucked the revolver from the half-breed's belt. The next moment a blow from the butt of

the weapon stretched the scoundrel out as unconscious as was the Comanche.

"Waal, by Jericho!" muttered the astounded McGowan. "I'd never have believed thet could be done if I hadn't seen it. Great snakes! Neither of 'em had time ter let off a yell."

"Wonderful!" breathed Coogan. "I'm dashed if it wasn't the most remarkable piece of work I ever saw—and I've seen a-plenty of this rough give-and-take."

Cayuse merely stared at the scout with gleaming eyes. The scout was bending over him, the half-breed's knife in his hand.

"If we make the most of this opportunity," said the scout, in a low tone, slashing at Little Cayuse's ropes, "we've got to get on a hurricane hustle."

Having freed Cayuse, he flung down the knife in front of him.

"Hurry, pard," he whispered; "free Coogan and McGowan, and don't cut the ropes any more than you can help. After that, go to the Comanche and tie him. I'll look after the half-breed."

It was a time for action rather than for words. All recognized this. The scout, unbuckling the belt from about the half-breed's waist, jerked it off. He then removed the long Mexican cloak and threw it beside the belt.

By that time Cayuse had released Coogan and McGowan and had thrown a couple of pieces of rope to the scout for use in binding the half-breed.

Coogan went to the scout's assistance and McGowan to Cayuse's. Having been long in the cords, however, the sheriff was stiff and lame. Before he and Cayuse could come close to the Comanche, the Indian had leaped up and darted through the door and into the passage.

Cayuse said things in Piute. McGowan did the same in English.

"Never mind," panted the scout, hurriedly getting the ropes on the half-breed. "I'm sorry it happened, but it can't be helped. The Comanche wasn't onto his job or he'd have stopped long enough to shut the door. Stand there, Cayuse, and see that no one else closes it before we get out."

The boy leaped to take his place in the opening, the knife in his hand.

Buffalo Bill had planned on gagging the half-breed, but there was no occasion for that, now that the Comanche had got away and spread the alarm.

Starting up, the scout pushed his own hat into the breast of his coat and put on the half-breed's. Next he slipped into the long cloak and then brought it in about his middle with the belt.

"Not much of a make-up, *amigos*," said he, "but still it may serve us in a pinch. Now, let's cut out of this. Any other part of the Ranch is safer for us, at the present moment, than this room."

On his way to the door, the scout trampled on the flaring torch and extinguished it.

"Darkness, also, is a good thing for us," he added, groping his way out into the passage.

"Where now?" asked Coogan anxiously, as they grouped themselves in the corridor. "If we knew any way to get out of this confounded place, our cue would be to make for it."

"What we don't know about the Ranch o' Mystery," put in McGowan, "would fill a purty large book. I'm fer reachin' the chamber whar Starkey keeps the hand. We all savvy that thar must be an openin' from thar inter the cañon."

"I was thinking of proceeding in that direction," said the scout, "but, unless I'm mightily mistaken, some of Starkey's people are there. Listen!"

Heads were inclined for a space and smothered talk was heard. It was foreign talk, and excited, and the scout gathered that the Comanche had made in that direction and was giving his report.

"We'll go the other way, and chance it," whispered the scout. "Catch hold of me, Coogan; and you, McGowan, get a grip on Coogan; Cayuse will hang onto you."

Clinging to each other in this fashion in order to avoid becoming separated in the darkness, the little party of escaping prisoners started along the corridor. There was not a ray of light anywhere, and the strangeness of the surroundings, coupled with the chance that they might at any moment run into a pack of Comanches, rendered the situation tremendously uncertain.

From time to time Buffalo Bill took a backward glance. He was puzzled not to see a light in the direction of the large chamber. There was no doubt about some of Starkey's gang being there. Were they following the scout and his companions in the dark, or had they taken some short cut, known only to themselves, with the intention of heading off the escaping prisoners farther along the passage?

Buffalo Bill turned this over in his mind. No matter what Starkey's warriors might be doing, all the scout and his friends could do was to forge ahead in the way they were bound.

"Ugh!" muttered Cayuse, from behind, "Comanche make um chase, Pa-e-has-ka. Comanches come *pronto*."

With Cayuse's last word all were made aware that the pursuit was on. Shrill yells echoed up and down the

passage, causing a terrific din in the confined quarters, and the swift patter of moccasined feet could be heard.

Buffalo Bill broke into a run, and, the next moment, he collided with something that brought him to a halt with the breath almost knocked out of his body.

"What's the matter?" asked Coogan.

"I'm just trying to find out," replied Buffalo Bill, groping over the object with his hands. "Jupiter!" he exclaimed, the next moment, "it's a notched pole. Up with you, Coogan—quick!"

Stepping aside, Buffalo Bill forced Coogan forward.

"Where does it lead?" gasped the detective, laying hold of the pole and proceeding to mount by the notches.

"It doesn't make much difference where it leads," said the scout, "any place is better than this. Up with you, McGowan, close behind Coogan. Cayuse, you follow McGowan. Hustle, hustle, every one of you. I'll come last and protect the rear with the revolver."

In the dark a string of figures clambered up the notched pole. By the time Cayuse got high enough to give the scout foot-and-hand holds, the pursuers were almost upon them.

Bang! spoke the half-breed's revolver in the hands of the scout.

The quick flash was followed by a yell of agony, and the tumultuous shouts of the savages were stilled for an instant. Then suddenly the corridor was luridly lighted and a roar of shots crashed in the direction of the pole.

"Pa-e-has-ka!"

It was the voice of Little Cayuse calling down to the scout.

"Climb!" came the sharp response.

"You hurt, huh? No stop um bullet?"

"I'm all right, but——"

"Landed!" called Coogan from above. "There's another passage up here. Over with you, McGowan."

"O. K.," puffed the sheriff. "Yer hand, Cayuse."

"Ugh!" muttered Cayuse. "Here, Pa-e-has-ka."

The scout felt the boy's hand groping for him, and the next moment he also was on a projecting ledge with the others.

"Careful," the scout warned; "a careless step would throw any one of us down this winze. Help me with the pole, Coogan. We'll pull it up and keep those reds from following us."

The pole was lifted and jerked clear of the grabbing hands below; then quickly it was brought up to the landing.

It was impossible to get the pole into the passage, as it was too long to turn the angle formed by the shaft and the bottom of the corridor. Lifting it straight up, however, the scout and the detective pulled the bottom of the pole onto the ledge where they were standing. This, of course, made it inaccessible to the Comanches below.

Having accomplished this much, the party tarried a while for counsel.

"If we knowed the fust thing about this blooming place," said McGowan, "I reckon we could purceed to a hull lot better advantage. But we're goin' it in the dark in more ways than one."

"We have to slide along in the course of least resistance," said the scout. "Any course is good enough, for the present, so long as it takes us out of trouble. This is an old mine, sure enough. We just came up a winze on one of the old climbing-poles used by the ancient diggers. This is another level. We can only follow it in one way, and as we proceed we'll have to be careful of pitfalls."

"A light would be a blamed good thing, Buffalo Bill," put in Coogan.

"It would show us where to go, yes, but it would also make us plain targets for any of the gang who happened to be in this part of the Ranch."

"Hist!" murmured Cayuse; "make um listen."

The party grew silent on the instant. They "made um listen" and heard footsteps. Some one was approaching from down the passage.

"We're hemmed in now, fer sure," whispered McGowan. "With reds comin' on us from one way, an' the open shaft behind us, we're caught proper."

"You're shy a little, McGowan," the scout whispered back. "Only one person is coming and he's not an Indian. He's wearing boots. Quiet, now. We'll find out who he is."

The steps continued to approach. When they had come quite close they stopped, the man evidently hearing the breathing of the fugitives by the shaft.

"Ho-la!" came a voice. "Is that you, Señor Starkey?"

The question was in Spanish, and the scout, changing his voice, essayed an answer.

"Yes."

"What's all that noise? Are you having trouble with the prisoners?"

"No."

The scout was making his replies as brief as possible, hoping to keep the man in the dark as to his identity until he should come close enough to be captured.

"I thought you were going after the white men in the cañon, Señor Starkey?"

"In a little while."

"I have to tell you, then, that they are nosing around

close to the wall. If you wish, we can get one of them with the hand."

This, no doubt, was Pablo. Could it be that they were close to the chamber from which the hand was operated?

Coogan, divining that the scout wanted to make a capture of the man, had worked his way slowly along the passage, guiding himself by the sound of the Mexican's voice.

Suddenly the scout heard a quick movement and the noise of a scuffle. It lasted only a moment and then died away in silence.

"I've got him, Buffalo Bill," spoke the voice of the detective. "He's on his back and I'm on top of him. What do you want to do?"

"Well done, Coogan!" exclaimed the scout, pushing his way to where the detective was pinning his prisoner to the floor of the level.

By groping with his hands, he located the Mexican's head and pressed the muzzle of the revolver against his temple.

"Take your hands from his throat, Coogan," went on the scout. "He knows I've got a gun, and that I'll use it if he tries to give an alarm."

The detective's hands came away and the prisoner began sputtering for breath.

"You're Pablo?" hissed the scout, still keeping to the Spanish.

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Buffalo Bill."

"Caramba!"

After what had happened the Mexican had scant cause to be astonished on discovering the scout's identity. Nevertheless he was.

"Do you operate the Red Hand for Starkey?" went on the scout.

"Yes."

"Where is the place you work?"

"Down the drift, at the look-out."

"Let him get to his feet, Coogan," said the scout. "Don't let go of him for an instant, however."

Coogan got up and the scout ordered Pablo to rise. When he had climbed erect, the scout ordered him to lead the way to the place where he manipulated the mechanism at the end of the lower level.

Pablo, very much disgusted with the unexpected turn events had taken, muttered oaths to himself as he set off down the passage. Presently he halted, and the scout could hear him fumbling about in the dark. Then a door opened and a bright light poured through it into the level.

"Here it is, *señor*," said Pablo sulkily. "Now what do you want?"

"I want to find out how the machinery is worked. Take that revolver out of his belt, Coogan," the scout added to the detective, "and keep him constantly under the point of it. Cayuse," and the scout turned to the Piute, "close the door and stand in front of it."

Cayuse pulled the door shut and posted himself on the threshold. Coogan, possessing himself of Pablo's revolver, kept the point of it on the Mexican.

The latter was a wizened, dried-up little man, who looked to be all of sixty years old. He had rings in his ears and they glittered in the light of a couple of lanterns that hung from the ceiling of the room.

From his inspection of Pablo the scout turned for a survey of the place in which he and his friends now found themselves.

It was clear that the room was almost flush with the face of the cliff, and directly over the larger chamber below in which the mechanical hand was kept. Against a side wall, sticking up through the stone floor, were half a dozen iron levers. These were of antiquated design, and, from their appearance, had been wrought by hand.

Across from the levers, in a niche of the opposite wall, stood a crucifix with a couple of dusty, half-burned tapers in front of it.

There was a table pushed up against the wall fronting the cañon—a heavily constructed table, but badly worm-eaten. Over this table hung a hood formed of tanned buffalo hide.

"So here's where you work, is it, Pablo?" inquired the scout.

"Yes." Pablo kept his eyes on the revolver that stared him in the face, and his amiability increased somewhat.

"What's the table for?"

"That enables me to see what goes on in the cañon," explained Pablo.

The scout stepped to the table, lifted the buffalo robe and allowed it to fall about his head and shoulders.

He found the arrangement to be a sort of camera obscura—an arrangement of mirrors throwing the section of the cañon immediately in front of the Ranch in clear outlines upon the top of the table.

From wall to wall the scout could see the whole of the cañon immediately adjacent to the front of the Ranch. Across this reflected strip of territory walked the forms of Old Nomad and Wild Bill Hickok. The scout saw them as plainly as though he had been looking down on them through a hole in the wall.

They were cautiously reconnoitering, hoping, no doubt, to find a door leading into the Ranch of Mystery. A

plan suggested itself to the scout as he looked, and he withdrew his head and faced Pablo.

"Pablo," said he, "my two pards are out there——"

"I know, *señor*," interrupted Pablo. "It was because I saw them that I went out into the dark level to call Starkey; then I heard noises, and——"

"Is there any way to reach this chamber from the one below, where Starkey has the hand?"

For answer, Pablo turned to the wall and pulled a lever. Instantly a door opened in the wall.

"That leads to a stone stairway, *señor*," said Pablo. "By going down the stairway one comes into the Chamber of the hand. One lever opens both doors."

"We need two good men, well armed," went on the scout, "and I propose to bring Wild Bill and Nomad into the Ranch of Mystery by means of the hand. Can you do it without injuring them, Pablo?"

Pablo, it was evident, was not pleased with the idea set forth by the scout.

"I can do my best," said he dubiously.

The scout studied his face.

"You can do the trick, if you will," he returned sternly. "Go ahead. Release the first one as soon as he is inside the Ranch and shoot the hand back after the other. If either of them is injured, I'll call up the stairway and you will be shot."

Buffalo Bill took down one of the lanterns and moved through the door leading to the stone stairs.

"Get busy, Pablo," said he sharply, "and remember what will happen to you if you don't do this *right*."

The scout vanished. Pablo shivered, cast a wild glance at the revolver and stepped to the table.

CHAPTER VI.

CAPTURING REINFORCEMENTS.

If Buffalo Bill and his friends ever escaped from that old Spanish rendezvous honeycombed inside the cliff it would have to be by fighting their way out. And how could they fight successfully their overwhelming force of enemies with only two revolvers and a knife?

More men were needed, and more weapons. This was the scout's plan to get them. Old Nomad and Wild Bill would prove a host in themselves.

There was a chance, of course, that some of the enemy were in the chamber below. On the other hand, it was quite possible that Starkey and all his Comanche followers were plunging through the various passages and chambers of the Ranch looking for their escaping prisoners. Yet, be that as it might, the scout had decided to run the risk and bring his pards into the Ranch. The Apaches undoubtedly had the horses in charge and would look out for them.

The stairway led in a winding descent to the room beneath. Flashing his light as he went, Buffalo Bill saw that the stone treads of the stairs were deeply worn by the many feet which, ages before, had climbed back and forth between the two chambers.

As Pablo had said, the door at the foot of the stairs was open. The doors were slabs of rock and slid open or shut in grooves.

He reached the chamber just in time to stand in the doorway and see the great hand swing in with a squirming form in the grip of its fingers. The form was

dropped quickly, there was a flash of daylight, and once more the ingenious mechanism darted through the face of the cliff.

There was not the chug of a wheel or the clatter of a crank. Noiseless as death was the huge contrivance, fabricated, centuries before, by some Spanish mechanic in the ranks of the *conquistadores*. The great weights which balanced the mass of steel lifted and fell.

"Waugh!" came a familiar voice to the scout's ears. "Whar ther blazes am I? How did I git hyar? Sufferin' jackrabbits! What's goin' on, anyways?"

This was old Nomad, who had been first to be grabbed and jerked into the Ranch of Mystery. Just as he finished speaking, Wild Bill was dumped down beside him. The relaxed fingers of the hand flew back against the wall, and all was silence in the chamber save for the excited exclamations of the trapper and the Laramie man.

"They got you, too, hey, Hickok?" demanded Nomad.

"That's how it looks."

"Why didn't ye run when ye seen what happened ter me?"

"I tried to, but the Red Hand overtook me. By gorry! What sort of a layout is this?"

"This way, pards!" called the scout, flashing his lantern.

If the trapper and the Laramie man were startled by the summary manner in which they had been snatched out of the cañon, they were doubly startled on hearing the scout's voice and seeing him standing with a lantern in the stone doorway.

"Buffle!" gasped old Nomad, plunging into the glow of the lantern. "I'm er Piegan ef et ain't Buffle!"

"Pard Cody, by all that's good!" cried Wild Bill.

"What's to pay in here? Why were we slammed into this crack in the cliff like that?"

"Because I wanted you," answered the scout, "and that was the only way I knew to get you here——"

A chorus of Comanche yells echoed through the chamber, just then, from the direction of the passage. The game of hide-and-seek was still on, and the redskins had become suddenly aware that the mechanism of their retreat was being tampered with.

In the rush of feet that followed the tumult of cries, Nomad and Wild Bill jumped for the doorway and the scout sprang up the stairs.

"Shut the door, up there!" he roared. "Quick!"

The last word was drowned in the sharp reverberation of a volley. There was a crash of glass and the lantern was extinguished in the scout's hand.

"Whoop-ya!" bellowed the old trapper. "Hyar's what I been pinin' fer."

His revolvers added their might to the echoing din; then, abruptly, the stone door slid into place and the light which the Comanches were carrying was blotted out by the barrier.

"Waugh!" cried the disappointed trapper. "Thet pizen door bit ther scrimmage right in two in ther middle. Eb promised ter be a purty fight, Buffle."

"Too one-sided, old pard," returned the scout.

"Where have you been, Pard Cody, since we saw you last?" Wild Bill inquired.

"Here in this Ranch of Mystery."

"Some 'un give ye ther freedom o' ther place? Been gallopin' eround jest as ye blame' please?"

"It doesn't look like it, does it?" queried the scout.

"I've been pretty wide of having things my own way. Cayuse, Coogan and McGowan are with me. We were

trussed up, but we managed to break loose and bolt through the Ranch—not knowing a thing about the place and going it hit or miss. By luck we ran onto the Mexican who operates the hand. We took him in and made him show us the room from which the hand is manipulated. It's above here, at the head of this stairway. Seeing you in the cañon, and feeling the need of reenforcements, Coogan made the greaser operate the hand and snake you inside, while I went down to the vestibule to welcome you."

"By gorry!" breathed Wild Bill. "All this sounds like a dream."

"Nightmare, Hickok," qualified the trapper. "Ef thet thar hand wouldn't make a ombray see things at night, I'm er Chink. Ye're dressed some quare, Buffler. I wouldn't hev knowed ye ef et hadn't been fer yer voice."

"I thought I was going to make use of this get-up," returned the scout, "but, so far, I haven't had any occasion. Did you leave the horses with the 'Paches?"

"Yes," responded Hickok. "They'll be scared stiff, those 'Paches, seeing Nick and me grabbed out of sight like we were. What sort of a joint is this, anyhow?"

"An old Spanish gold-mine, I reckon, although I won't be sure. I haven't seen any gold, yet—but then, I haven't had much time to look. All of us have been on the jump ever since I got into the place."

"Et takes Pard Buffler ter stir things up," chuckled old Nomad. "Whar we goin'?"

"To the place where I left Cayuse, Coogan, McGowan and the captured greaser. This must be the door. It was bad business, letting the Comanches smash that lantern."

"The door is closed!" exclaimed Wild Bill.

"When a lever is thrown in the operating-room," ex-

plained the scout, "it opens the door at the head of the stairs and the one at the foot. Pound on it with your revolver, Nick. My guns were both taken from me. I managed to pick up another but left it with Coogan, who's taking care of the captured greaser."

Nomad pressed up the stairs until he had reached a place alongside of the scout. Drawing one of his forty-fives he knocked the butt of it against the stone slab in front of him.

The door slid back abruptly and a glow of light flashed in the faces of the three pards. An instant later and the scout saw that he had made a mistake.

He was not looking into the operating-room where he had left Cayuse, Coogan, McGowan and Pablo, but into a larger and rougher chamber where were gathered at least a dozen redskins!

For an instant the scout was dashed; then, seeing that the Comanches were advancing in a hostile manner, he whispered to his pards to keep back and remain quiet, and stepped into the room.

The scout was surprised to see the Comanches restrain themselves at all. They were suspicious, and inclined to be hostile, yet something held them back. Suddenly it flashed over the scout that the Indians were mistaking him for the half-breed. With the intention of making the most of this, he faced the red men boldly, keeping his face as much as possible in the shadow.

A torch, planted in one of the rocky walls of the chamber, threw a flaring light over the Indians. They approached closer and closer. Not caring to have them come near enough for inspection at short range, Buffalo Bill waved his hand.

"*Vamos!*" he cried gutturally.

There was an instant's hesitation, and then, turning,

all of the Comanches glided off through a level that opened into the chamber. The scout, hardly able to realize the luck that had come his way, was left alone in the underground room.

"Come in, pards," he called, in a low tone. "We're safe, for now. This half-breed rig fooled the Comanches—they mistook me for one of Lon Starkey's right-hand men. It's a joke on the reds, but it might just as easily have been one on me. Let's glance this place over before we join the rest of our pards; it looks mighty interesting, and we may never have another chance."

"Et's quite er sizeable room," observed old Nomad, squinting around. "What's thet over thar under the torch?"

"An assayer's furnace, by gorry!" muttered Wild Bill. "That was never toted in here by the old Spaniards. It's too blamed modern for that."

The scout stepped close to a stone bench on which the furnace stood. There was a crucible on the bench beside the furnace, and near the crucible was an iron ladle. At the end of the bench was a heap of charcoal.

Wild Bill picked up the crucible and turned it upside-down. A mass of metal dropped out of it, gleaming like frosted silver in the torchlight. As a matter of fact, it *was* silver.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed the scout, "here's the mint Coogan is looking for. There's the raw material for those bogus dollars. They weren't stamped out with dies, as Coogan supposed, but were run into molds. Where are the molds? See if you can find them, pards."

The scout was in a hurry to see all there was in the chamber and to get away. He felt positive it could not be long until the Comanches who had just left would

meet the real half-breed and discover their mistake. After that, of course, they would come flocking back.

The molds were not found, but Wild Bill, in the hanging wall of the level, at the point where the wall ran into the chamber, discovered a six-inch vein of almost virgin silver.

"Jumping sandhills!" he exclaimed, after calling the scout and the trapper to look at the vein; "it wasn't a gold-mine those old Spaniards had, Pard Cody, but a silver-mine. The coiners dig their raw materials right here, refine it and manufacture their *dinero* on the spot. Man, man! Say, Starkey would do pretty well if Coogan would only leave him alone."

"That's right, put it onter Starkey! When y'u git through chinnin' with each other, y'u might pass a look over this way."

The voice came from the doorway through which the scout and his pards had recently passed. Lon Starkey, of Red Tail, was there; the half-breed was there; and a dozen or more Indians were there—all blocking the narrow entrance and trying to see how many rifles they could bring to bear on the scout, the trapper and the Laramie man.

"Jest stay as y'u are," commanded Starkey. "Y'u've been lookin' my hang-out over purty thorough, Buffer Bill, an' we ain't had no chance ter bother ye a turrible sight till now. I reckon y'u've got a few things ter find out about this Ranch yet. Fer instance, I don't mind tellin' y'u that thar's a way of openin' the door at the foot o' the stairs without workin' the lever in the operatin'-room. I opened the door, an' Perique, here, who was purty roughly treated by you down below, come with me ter find out whar you fellers was. I reckon

y'u better go back down-stairs an' git inter the place whar y'u belong."

It looked like a wind-up for Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill and old Nomad. They were under the muzzles of a dozen guns, and there was a businesslike air to Starkey's voice which they did not like.

It will be remembered that they were grouped close to the entrance to the level where they had been examining the vein of silver. Wild Bill was almost under the torch, and the scout and the trapper were on his left, in front of the mouth of the level.

"I reckon Starkey has out-played us, pards," said Wild Bill, looking at Buffalo Bill and Nomad. "Better cave, hadn't we?"

Wild Bill's drawling voice was as cool as ever, and, while his words spoke of surrender, the glance his eyes telegraphed his pards suggested something far different.

"I reckon we're sartingly up er stump," returned old Nomad, flashing a look at Hickok that informed him his message was understood and agreed to.

"Well, yes," added the scout, his own eyes giving assent to anything, however desperate, Wild Bill might lay his hand to.

"Then here goes," cried Hickok.

Quick as a flash he had torn the torch from the wall and hurled it straight at the group in the door. A good many things happened, then, and happened all at once.

First, however, all three of the pards dropped flat on the floor the instant the torch was thrown. Almost immediately Starkey and his men let go with their guns. Smoke filled the cavernous room, and the deafening roar of the weapons rang out through the passages, cross-cuts, shafts and winzes of the Ranch of Mystery. But

none of the bullets found a mark, although, in the darkness that had suddenly blanketed the chamber, Starkey and his braves thought otherwise.

The three pards had escaped partly because they had dropped to the floor of the chamber, and partly because the glare of the torch in the eyes of the riflemen had played havoc with their aim. Wild Bill, even in his most audacious moments, always knew what he was about.

After the volley, and while the fuming Starkey and his men were finding the torch and getting it lighted again, Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill and old Nomad crawled quietly off into the level, got to their feet when at a safe distance and made the best speed they could into some other part of the mysterious hang-out. They did not know where they were going, and they hated to be compelled to take a course which seemed to be removing them farther and farther from the operating-room and Cayuse, Coogan and McGowan. But they were victims of necessity, and there was but a single avenue of escape open to them.

"Careful, pards," panted the scout. "If we don't slacken up we're liable to drop down a shaft, or a winze."

"I don't think so, Pard Cody," puffed Wild Bill. "We've been going down hill ever since we made our get-away from the mint."

"I noticed that," returned the scout, "and while the incline may lead to a tunnel communicating with the cañon, yet we can't be sure of it. And, anyhow, if we were sure of it, and knew we could get clear of Starkey and his gang by keeping straight ahead, we couldn't go on. Cayuse, Coogan and McGowan are behind us. We mustn't forget that. When we clear out we've got to take them with us."

Angry whoops and fierce yells rolled down the in-

clined passage from behind. Above the uproar could be heard the furious voice of Lon Starkey.

"They went this way, boys! After 'em! A thousand dollars ter the Comanche thet takes Buffler Bill's scalp!"

"Whoosh!" wheezed old Nomad. "They're hot on our trail, Buffler, but thar ain't no Injun goin' ter pick up thet thousand Starkey's offerin'. Kain't we find er good place an' stand 'em off?"

"We don't know enough about the hang-out to take any chances," answered the scout, as they went on.

"Where in blazes does this incline lead to?" demanded Wild Bill. "It's a straightaway course with no turn in either direction, and no cross-cuts or levels opening off it."

The scout cast a look behind, up the slope to where the glow of light, bringing feathered heads and shimmering gun-barrels into bold relief, was sliding downward hot on their trail.

"We've got to keep on, pards," cried the scout. "Cayuse, Coogan and McGowan will have to shift for themselves for a while."

A few moments later the descent turned into an ascent. At a sharp angle the tunnel mounted upward.

"Another twist in the course of events," panted Hickok. "We're heading up into the mine again."

The bend in the tunnel had cut the fleeing pards off from a sight of those behind. While Starkey and his redskins were on the down-grade, the scout, the trapper and the Laramie man were on the up-grade, with an elbow of the rocks between them.

While they struggled up the slope, stumbling onward through the darkness, there was a sudden burst of daylight ahead. It was as though some unseen hand had

brushed aside a curtain and let the sunshine into the underground retreat.

"The cañon!" shouted Wild Bill.

"Daylight, er I'm a Siwash!" yelled old Nomad.

"How did that happen?" the scout asked, puzzled to account for the sudden rift at the top of the ascent.

"Waal, I no *cumtux*, Buffler," answered Nomad, "but the hole's thar, an' thet ort ter be enough fer us."

"We're doing one good thing for Cayuse and the others, anyhow," said Wild Bill, listening to the redoubled yelling behind, "and that is, we're keeping the heft of Starkey's gang mighty well occupied."

Just then the pards bounded over the top of the slope and found themselves in the cañon, close by the foot of the wall that blocked the end of it.

They slackened pace a little to breathe themselves.

"Hyar's whar them Comanches rode out when they made thet charge agin' us, Hickok," said the trapper.

"Right-oh," replied Wild Bill. "They certainly rode up that incline. There was a slab of stone over the top of the slope—and how was that slab jerked aside? If it hadn't been for that, we three would have been neatly penned in the end of that drift."

"Probably the stone door at the top of the incline was pushed aside by mistake," suggested Buffalo Bill; "but that needn't bother us now. Where's a good place to make a stand and get busy with our guns? Starkey and all his yelling Comanches will be out here in about a minute."

"Let's go ter ther place whar we stood off thier Injuns, Hickok," said Nomad. "I reckon thet's as good er spot as we kin pick out."

"It's the only spot, Nick," said Wild Bill. "There's

not another place in the cañon where we could find holding ground."

While the three pards were splashing through the pool at the foot of the slope leading up the incline, the first of their pursuers were hustling out of the tunnel at the farther end of the cañon.

When they had gained the top of the slope and thrown themselves wearily down on the platform, Chappo and Pedro emerged from the tunnel and joined them. They were pleased to see the scout, although the excitement ahead did not give them much time to show it.

"Stand ready, now, for the fight of your lives!" called Wild Bill to the Apaches, rising to his knees and watching Starkey and his followers dashing toward them.

The scout was already up, holding one of his trapper pard's revolvers and waiting for a chance to use it.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HAND'S LAST CLUTCH.

"The reds aire jest a-b'ilin' out o' thet hole under the wall!" exclaimed old Nomad. "How many d'ye reckon Starkey's got in his gang?"

"There are twenty-five down there with him," said the scout.

"All of that number," added Wild Bill.

A number of boulders had been laid along the edge of the stone platform in front of the tunnel through the hill.

"Where did these stones come from?" inquired the scout. "They weren't here when we rode across the bench earlier in the day."

"Hickok an' me piled 'em thar, Buffler," replied old Nomad. "The Comanches charged us once on hoss-back an' we didn't hev nothin' ter git behind, so we allowed we wouldn't lose no time fixin' up a barricade agin' another attack."

"We could stand off a small army behind these rocks and at the top of the slope," declared Buffalo Bill. "If Starkey makes a charge we're going to give him something to think about."

"He ain't in no pertic'ler hurry erbout comin' on," said old Nomad, watching events up the cañon with deep interest. "Starkey and his reds hev halted ter hold er powwow."

Evidently Starkey and his lieutenants did not like to face the entrenched position occupied by Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill, Nomad and the Apaches.

"The boot seems to be on the other leg," laughed

Hickok. "It'll be sundown mighty soon, an' I hope the reds'll make their attack afore that."

"I reckon that's the point they're trying to decide," said Buffalo Bill. "Starkey is game, clear through. As a rule these western 'bad' men are cowards, but nobody ever said Lon Starkey was a coward."

"He's got sand enough, I reckon, but he don't use it like he'd orter," commented the trapper.

In the middle of the cañon Lon Starkey was surrounded by a cordon of feathered heads, all bobbing up and down. The sounds of the voices, in loud palaver, reached those at the mouth of the tunnel, but it was impossible to distinguish anything that was said. Starkey was throwing his arms around and jumping back and forth like a pea on a hot griddle.

"Starkey is telling 'em to come on, and show what they're made of," remarked Wild Bill, "and the bucks don't like the layout a little bit. I reckon some of them are remembering the hot welcome Nick and I gave them, the other time."

The scout, while waiting for the force below to come to some decision, turned to Chappo.

"Where is Yuppah, Chappo?" he asked.

"Him take care of *caballos*, Pa-e-has-ka," replied the Apache.

"The horses are all right?"

"Si."

"That's good. We may need them in a hurry."

"What did ye think, Chappo, when Hickok an' me was grabbed by ther Red Hand an' snaked out er sight?"

"Whoosh!" grunted Chappo. "Him heap bad medicine. No like um."

"No like um," echoed Pedro.

"We think mebbysso we run," went on Chappo, "then think more mebbysso we stay. But hand him *muy malo*."

Just here the horde below began to separate, having apparently arrived at a decision as to what they would do.

About fifteen of the Indians stepped farther back down the cañon, while ten fell in behind Starkey and began a slow forward movement.

"Starkey," announced the scout, "has called for volunteers and those ten are coming with him to the attack."

"We'll clean up on 'em too quick," growled the trapper.

"If you shoot any of them," counseled the scout, "pick off the half-breed that's coming just behind Starkey. He's a human fiend."

"I've got my eye on him," said Wild Bill, "and——"

The words died on Wild Bill's lips, for just then a most extraordinary thing happened—so extraordinary that none who witnessed it would ever have believed it could happen had they not seen it with their own eyes.

Starkey, marching a few yards in advance of his volunteers, had arrived opposite the point from which the hand usually emerged. Just as he gained the place the red marvel showed itself with the silent swiftness that characterized all its movements.

The scout, with his eyes on the place from which the hand came, saw a sudden break in the stone wall, as of a port-hole quickly uncovered; then the great crimson monstrosity darted forth at an angle with the cañon wall, and with the edge of the palm downward.

Suddenly the great fingers flew apart and the palm with its spread digits swept the other way of the cañon. Starkey tried to escape, but the hand was quicker than he was. It caught him, and the fingers closed on his

squirming form; then, in the space of a heart's beat, the mechanism executed a new movement.

With Starkey struggling in its palm, the hand turned with its back to the bed of the cañon and flung itself straight upward in the arc of a circle. On reaching its highest point the fingers straightened out, uncovering the form in the palm. There followed a jerk, and Starkey, impelled by the terrific momentum the hand had given him, cleared the crest of the wall and vanished beyond!

The pards were dumfounded by this feat. The Apaches stared with jaws agape, and seemed undecided whether to run or to stand their ground.

But the effect on the half-breed and the Comanches was one of panic. Yells of fear went up from them as the Red Hand flashed from sight into the bosom of the cliff; then, as one man, the Comanches turned and bolted for the incline under the cliff.

Old Nomad dropped his revolver, sat up on the stone platform and rubbed his eyes dazedly.

"Am I dreamin'?" he asked. "Did I see that with my own eyes? Was Lon Starkey, o' Red Tail, throwed over ther wall o' ther cañon? An' did ther Red Hand do ther tossin'?"

"You're not the only one, Nick," said Wild Bill, "that's inclined to doubt his senses. We all saw it, and I can hardly believe the evidence of my eyes. By gorry! Pard Cody, what do you think of that?"

"That Red Hand is the most wonderful piece of mechanism I ever heard of!" exclaimed the scout.

"But how did et come ter treat Starkey thetaway?" queried Nomad.

"Cayuse, Coogan and McGowan must still be in the operating-room," continued the scout. "They were able

to see what was taking place in the cañon. They saw us rushing for the tunnel through the hill, and they must have known that Starkey and his warriors were after us. I shouldn't wonder, too, if we found that our friends in the operating-room were the ones who slid that stone aside from the top of the incline. But, however that may be, those with Pablo could see the powwow Starkey held with his chief warriors, and they were on the watch when Starkey took his volunteers and started in this direction. Then Coogan, with a revolver at Pablo's head, forced the greaser to manipulate the hand, as we have just seen."

"It was wonderful!" breathed Wild Bill. "Those old dons were great inventors. I'm not wondering the Pagosa Springs greasers are all worked up when they think of the Red Hand. I'll never think of it myself, after this, without my nerves tying themselves in bowknots. Whoosh! And that's the last of Starkey."

"It looks like it," said the scout.

"He made his brags that he couldn't be killed, but I don't see how he could possibly live through a toss like that. I'll bet money he's over on the other side of the ridge, smashed in a thousand pieces."

"And he went an' fixed that Ranch o' Mystery up, arter et had laid quiet for a few hundred y'ars, jest ter git himself tossed sky-high." This from Nomad. "Waugh! Ef he knowed when he was well off he'd hev let ther ole Spanish hang-out alone."

The scout was getting up.

"Chappo," he called, "you and Pedro go and help Yuppah bring the horses. Now's our time, pards," the scout added to Nomad and Wild Bill, "to ride down into the cañon and do something for the friends who have helped us."

"Right-oh!" sang out Wild Bill, leaping to his feet. "That Coogan is certainly ace-high. It would never do to let the Comanches get away with him after this."

"Shore not," agreed Nomad. "We'll prance down thar an' make a grand sashay inter the Ranch o' Mystery on hossback. The Injuns aire stampeded, an' we ain't got er thing ter fear from them."

"There may be a whiskizoo or two around," observed Wild Bill, with much gravity.

"Drap et!" snorted old Nomad.

"Nick allowed, Cody," went on Wild Bill, turning to the scout, "that whiskizooos were working that Red Hand, and——"

"Close yer trap, Hickok," cried the trapper, "er I'll git ter shootin'. Kain't a feller make er mistake oncet in er while without hevin' some yap rub' et inter him? I give up erbout them whiskizooos. They warn't hyar, this time, but thar is sich things, an' don't ye fergit it."

The scout laughed a little, Wild Bill grinned and Nomad reached for the bridle of Hide-rack, who had just been led out of the tunnel by Yuppah.

They had barely got into their saddles when, with startling suddenness, a rumbling report ran through the cañon like a roll of thunder. The blue hill shook so violently that Hide-rack went to his knees and Bear Paw staggered. From the incline under the cliff at the farther end of the cañon came a puff of white smoke, which surged upward in a billowy cloud. A section of the cliff, close to the point where the hand used to operate, broke away and crashed downward into the cañon. A gap was left in the wall and from this gushed a column of smoke.

The scout, sliding from the back of his shaking horse, stared blankly into the eyes of the Laramie man.

"Tearing earthquakes! what was that?" shouted Wild

Bill, watching the dust float upward in a haze from all over the cañon.

"Erbout ten thousand tons o' powder let go down in ther yarth," cried old Nomad. "Waugh! Ther Ranch o' Mystery is clean done fer. Thet Red Hand won't do no more jugglin' in this hyar cañon. I reckon them ole Spanish fellers'll be turnin' in their graves erbout this."

"Starkey planned this," said Buffalo Bill. "He told me that he had planted a charge under the Ranch of Mystery and that no one else would have the place if he didn't."

"Ye mean ter say thet Starkey had planted a lot er powder under thet shebang over thar?"

"Yes."

"Waal, he couldn't hev set et off."

"No, but he perhaps had some arrangement with the half-breed to set off the blasts in case anything went wrong with him."

"It don't seem likely," put in Wild Bill, "that the half-breed would blow up the Ranch with himself and all those Comanches inside."

"They may have had some way of getting out that is unknown to us, 'Hickok," went on the scout. "The half-breed may have blown up the place just to get even with Coogan, Cayuse and McGowan for what they did to Starkey. They say the half-breed is a demon. After firing the fuse, he may have levanted and taken the Comanches with him."

"Possible, possible," muttered Hickok, a heavy frown on his face. "If that half-breed has wiped out Little Cayuse——"

"Ef he's done thet," broke in Nomad, his eyes glittering, "we'll——"

"We'll do what we can to split even, of course," snapped the scout; "but a dozen lives like the half-breed's couldn't pay for one like the Piute's. Come on, pards. We'll ride down into the cañon and see what we can find."

The Apaches did not accompany the scout and the other two into the defile. Yuppah, Chappa and Pedro had been considerably unsettled ever since the Red Hand had first showed itself; and this blow-up, while it had nothing to do with the hand, still further contributed to their unrest, and their soulful desire to get away from the cañon.

The scout, the trapper and the Laramie man were heavy-hearted as they rode on their mission of discovery. The bottom of the cañon was rank with powder fumes, and smoke was still rising fitfully and dust slowly settling.

"I don't think it possible that Cayuse and the rest would stay in that operating-room after they had manipulated the hand to destroy Starkey," said Wild Bill.

"When ther gang cleared out," chimed in Nomad, "I should think Cayuse an' the rest would hev made er get away. That was their chance."

"The trouble is," returned the scout, "none of them knew how to get clear of the Ranch. We were all at sea while we were inside the place. Pablo might have made to——"

The three pards were in the pool when there came a loud shout from the top of the slope. Looking up the ascent to ascertain the cause of the alarm, another terrific surprise struck home to the pards, and struck hard.

Through the first faint dusk of evening, already descending over the cañon, the eyes of the three in the pool

discerned Little Cayuse, Coogan, McGowan and Pablo standing on the edge of the stone platform above.

"I know blame' well I'm dreamin' now!" mumbled Nomad.

"Cayuse!" yelled Wild Bill.

"Ai," came back from the Piute boy.

"Ye could knock me down with er feather," said the old trapper solemnly, "ye could so."

Wild Bill took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair; then, muttering to himself, he spurred his horse back up the slope in the wake of Bear Paw.

Nomad, when he had regained the platform, got down from his bony mount and felt Cayuse over very carefully.

"I'm er Digger ef et ain't ther Piute, all right," he ayerred. "Consarn et, kid, whar did ye come from?"

"All samie come around hill," replied Cayuse.

"Come around the hill?" echoed Nomad. "How was thet, Coogan?"

"Pablo showed us the way out," returned the detective.

"He knew about it and we didn't. We started to climb for the open just after Starkey was flung over the hill, and we got clear just ahead of the Comanches."

"The Comanches got out, too?" asked the scout.

"Everybody got out. The only one that didn't leave with a whole skin must have been Lon Starkey. We hadn't begun to discover the mysteries of that Ranch, Buffalo Bill. When you left and didn't come back——"

"We had trouble down below," explained the scout.

"The lantern was shot to pieces and we couldn't see. When we thought we'd got to the right door it proved to be the wrong one, and we tumbled in on a bunch of reds. By a happenchance we got out of that only to find ourselves under the guns of Starkey and some more of his gang. We made a foot-race of it, and just as we

got up here prepared to defend ourselves against all comers, Starkey was grabbed by the hand and thrown over the cañon wall."

"We were responsible for that," said Coogan, "as well as for a few more things. We knew you and your pards were in trouble, Buffalo Bill, and after I had poked up Pablo with the point of that six-shooter, he had it figured out that you were being chased away by the horse-path. Then, just to put you on the safe side, if that was really the case, we had Pablo open the slab that closed the top of the incline leading out from under the wall at the other end of the cañon."

"We had already decided that you fellows were responsible for that, Coogan," said the scout. "It was the best thing that could have happened for us. We needed the daylight, just about then."

"Waugh, I should say!" spoke up Nomad, "an' we shore needed et *bad*."

"I suppose," went on the scout, addressing Coogan and McGowan, "that you fellows saw Wild Bill, old Nomad and me streaking it up the cañon ahead of Starkey and his men?"

"We did that," said McGowan, "an' we seen Starkey holdin' the powwow with his reds. All we was waitin' fer, then, was ter hev the reds git out o' the way so't the hand could git a good swipe at Starkey."

"Pablo," proceeded Coogan, "didn't play quite according to his orders. I told him to have the fingers squeeze Starkey, and then drop him all ready for planting, but Pablo, without consulting any of us, rang in that variation. Well, I don't know but it answered the purpose just as well. It was a heap more spectacular."

"And right after that you fellows pulled out?" queried Wild Bill.

"Pablo was wild to get away," replied Coogan. "He swore the Comanches would raid the operating-room and kill him if we didn't leave. So we made a get-away, and Pablo guided us all out the back door of the Ranch of Mystery. About five minutes after we got clear, and had started on our way around the blue hill, the Comanches came pouring out, larruping their cayuses as though the fiend was after them. Then followed the explosion. As soon as the ground got through shaking, we came on around here."

"Fortune has favored us most remarkably, Coogan," observed the scout, "but it's too bad that the Ranch was wrecked. It was a mine, but not a gold mine. Silver was the metal that came out of the cliff. We found the vein, and the workroom where the silver was melted up and run into dollars. But that's all destroyed now. The interior of the Ranch of Mystery must have been completely wrecked by that blast."

"I don't see how it could have been otherwise," agreed Coogan, "for the explosion was frightful."

"Ther inside o' ther place is all scrambled tergether," averred Nomad, "an' et 'u'd be as much as an ombray's life is wuth ter go explorin' in ther place."

"Well, if the mint is wrecked, the leader of the coiners wiped out and his gang scattered, I don't see what else I can do."

"You couldn't do a thing more, Coogan," asserted the scout. "Let's get out of here. A quick ride will bring us to the Rio Piedra, and that's a better place to camp than this cañon."

All were of this opinion, especially the Apaches. They hailed with grunts of huge satisfaction the scout's order to mount and ride for The Friars.

Coogan's horse was ready for him, and McGowan rode up behind. Little Cayuse doubled with the scout, as he had often done before, and the procession was soon on the move.

The odor of burnt powder was wafted after the horsemen as they rode through the tunnel of the blue hill. When well down the slope beyond the farther end of the tunnel, Wild Bill cast a look at the ridge through the increasing darkness.

"I'd like to go on a hunt for what's left of Starkey," said he. "Do you reckon we could find him, Pablo?"

The old Mexican was riding behind Hickok, and he wasn't making any attempts to bolt. He realized that he was a whole lot safer with the scout and his pards than he would have been roaming about that country by himself. The Comanches would never forget what he had done to Lon Starkey.

"We no find heem," averred Pablo. "Him stuck on top of ridge—not tumble on other side. *Sabe?*" Rocks ketch heem on top of ridge."

"Well, I reckon it's good-by to Starkey. The country's not much the loser."

"He told me," said the scout, "that we were wide of our trail in trying to make him out a counterfeiter."

"That's his word for it," answered Coogan. "We've got to take things as we find them, eh, Buffalo Bill?"

"He had the mint, and the silver, and he was caught peddling the bogus dollars. I don't know how he could get around all that."

"And the melancholy fact remains," observed Wild Bill, "that Lon Starkey was killed by the hand which he had planned to use in his own defense. That's an odd finish for Starkey, of Red Tail."

CHAPTER VIII.

BY THE RIO PIEDRA.

Camp was pitched, that night, by the rocks called The Friars. Every man in the party was tired out with the whirl of exciting events and the labor they had entailed. Guards were posted to protect the live stock against wandering Comanches, but no man was asked to do sentinel duty for more than an hour. There were enough in the party to carry the work through to morning with each one doing his brief period of sentry duty.

By sunrise the camp began to stir itself into wakefulness. The haversacks were raided, horses caught up and the return to town commenced.

Pablo was still with the party. So long as there was danger of encountering stray Comanches, the old Mexican had no notion of being abandoned to his own devices.

As when leaving the cañon, Pablo continued to ride with Wild Bill. The scout was on Hickok's right and Coogan on his left.

Beside them as they rode flowed the waters of the Rio Piedra.

The scout had been waiting for a chance to talk with Pablo, and the opportunity seemed now at hand.

"Did you belong to Starkey's gang, Pablo?" asked the scout, in Spanish.

"No, *señor*," replied the Mexican, "I am too good a man to be a member of such a gang as Starkey's."

"How did you happen to be in the Ranch, then?"

"I was captured by Starkey, *señor*, and taken there.

All the while I was a prisoner, yes, that is true. I am too old a man to belong with such an outfit."

"That is the truth, is it, Pablo?"

"Yes, it is the truth," and Pablo crossed himself.

The scout, nevertheless, was not taking much stock in Pablo's denial of membership in Starkey's gang. The burden of proof was against him.

"How long have you been a prisoner of Starkey's?" asked the scout, humoring the old fellow's conceit by pretending to believe him.

"Only two months, *señor*."

"Did Starkey dig his silver in the Ranch of Mystery?"

"Yes, but there is little silver left. The old Spaniards had taken out the most of it before they were driven from the country."

"And Starkey made his counterfeit money there, didn't he?"

Pablo went into a flutter of protestation.

"He was a bad man, *señor*, but he made no bad money, no, no."

Pablo's pockets were sagging heavily. Leaning forward the scout dipped into one of the pockets and brought out a bright, but bogus, *peso*.

"Ah!" said the scout severely; "Pablo, you're a shaver of the queer yourself."

Pablo called on all the saints to witness that there was no evil in his heart.

"The bad money," he said, "was all in the Ranch of Mystery when Starkey came there. Starkey thought it was good money, and went to the settlements spending it."

"What are you going to do with the dollars in your pocket, Pablo?"

"*Señor*," said Pablo earnestly, "I shall go at once to Mexico, and these bad dollars I am taking with me for mementos of the time when I was a prisoner of the Americano, Starkey."

"What did Starkey do in the Ranch if he didn't make bad money?"

"He had much pleasure in the old place," asserted Pablo, "prying into the mysteries."

"Was that all he did—pry into the mysteries?"

"Even so, *señor*; nothing more."

There was nothing to be got out of Pablo. After this talk with the scout the little man was noticeably ill at ease. Whether he was afraid that Buffalo Bill was suspicious of him, or that Coogan might try to arrest him and take him before the *alcalde*, could not be guessed; yet, nevertheless, there was some powerful influence at work in his mind.

"I will leave the *señor* and his brave friends at this place," said the Mexican suddenly, after they had been following the windings of the Rio Piedra for an hour.

"But what if the Comanches should catch you, Pablo?" asked the scout.

"I will be careful not to let them. I have a friend not far from this place—he chops wood for the people of Pagosa Springs. If you will let me, I will dismount and take leave of you."

Pablo, although he was probably as guilty of illegal work as any of the rest of the gang, was not worth bothering with. The scout looked at Coogan, and Coogan nodded.

"All right, Pablo," said the scout, "you can go." Pulling his last piece of jerked meat from his war-bag the scout tossed it to the Mexican. "Take that with you," said he; "perhaps it will last until you find your friend."

"*Gracias, señor,*" cried Pablo, and vanished in the scrub.

"Pablo don't amount ter a whole lot," remarked McGowan, "but he shorely knew how to work that Red Hand."

"I'd like ter know how many stunts ther thing could be put through," ruminated old Nomad.

"There were a lot of them," said Coogan. "Pablo would put his head under that buffalo-hide hood and watch what was going on in the cañon while he manipulated the levers. That hand and arm must have weighed more than a ton, and yet the slightest push or pull of the levers would set the mechanism in motion."

"It was balanced with weights," explained the scout; "I saw the machine in operation when Nomad and Wild Bill were snatched into the Ranch."

"I was looking at the table-top, under the hood with Pablo," went on Coogan, "when Starkey was grabbed up and tossed over the cañon wall. Pablo's orders were to squeeze Starkey with the steel fingers, but he went on with the tossing episode just as though he hadn't been ordered to do anything else. Afterward, when I asked him why he had failed to carry out instructions, he explained that the levers hadn't worked properly. He had pulled the one that caused the fingers to close, but the machine had slipped a cog and thrown Starkey over the ridge. Of course, I knew better than that, but one finish seemed as certain as the other to me. Besides, my main object was to keep Starkey from leading his gang against you fellows at the end of the cañon."

"You did that in great shape, Coogan," said Wild Bill. "But we were all fixed for the Comanches, and they'd have got a hot reception. What was Starkey's object in

capturing McGowan, Coogan, Cayuse and Buffalo Bill? Does anybody know?"

"He wanted to make a deal with us," replied the scout. "What sort of a deal?"

"I don't know for sure, but from what Starkey said I believe his design was to make us promise to leave him alone. If we didn't give such a promise he was not intending to let us leave the Ranch of Mystery."

"I was willin'," said McGowan. "Two weeks in that dark hole, eatin' with my hands tied and never seein' the light o' day, was a great plenty fer me. In order ter git out I'd hev promised anythin' Starkey asked."

"We were all of us feeling pretty much that way," remarked Coogan, "when Buffalo Bill was brought in. He hadn't been there more than two hours before he made the quickest play I ever saw in my life."

"It shore was," seconded McGowan.

"Thet's Buffler's style er doin' things," asserted old Nomad proudly.

"Well," went on Coogan, "if it hadn't been for that swift and successful play, probably we'd be in Starkey's hands yet. When he trapped the king of scouts he trapped a hornet."

"That shot goes as it lays," observed Wild Bill heartily; "but, I say, Coogan, you'll look nice traveling into Pagosa Springs when a good share of the town saw you neatly planted in the cemetery."

"That play to win didn't amount to much; still, it was a good piece of work, and, under some conditions, would have helped out immensely. That anonymous letter is what played hob with me. If it hadn't been for that I wouldn't have gone to the cañon."

"It's a good thing you did go there, Coogan," asserted the scout, "and a good thing the rest of us went there."

If things hadn't happened just as they did, Starkey would be doing business at the same old stand."

"While now," said Coogan, "Starkey is wiped out, the Ranch of Mystery is wiped out, and the country is to be congratulated on both counts."

"Right-oh," chirped Wild Bill.

CHAPTER IX.

AN ASTOUNDING ESCAPE.

Although this happened years ago, whenever old-timers gather in the Southwestern country their reminiscences are pretty apt to embrace the escapades of Lon Starkey—the "cold-game 'gent' from Red Tail"—and are certain to include his astounding escape from the noose at Lime Gulch, Arizona.

The saying runs that "a man born to be hung will never be drowned." To fit Starkey, the old saw would have to be changed to "a man born to be drowned will never be hung." Even then the application would not be very clear except as to the hanging part; for, assuredly, and much as he deserved the fate, Lon Starkey had never been born to decorate a gallows.

He was neatly hung in New Mexico in '76, just above Hacheta Gap, for good and sufficient reasons, by Joe Coffin and a few more administrators of justice. A few weeks later he bobbed up serenely in the Staked Plains. How he ever got his neck out of the noose was a mystery.

In '77 Starkey and his Indian wife took a sudden departure from the Cache Creek reservation of the Comanches, in their flight picking up a couple of ponies belonging to Joe Goodwin, the marshal. Goodwin pursued the thieves along the old Chisholm Trail and caught his man just across the Texas line. Taking his prisoner twenty miles to the old Raider Tree—still standing—the marshal enveloped him in a web of riata coils and strung him up with three ropes around his neck. Mrs. Starkey,

who was hiding in the scrub, climbed the tree as soon as Goodwin was gone and cut her husband down.

But the escape which figures in this recital was the most astounding of any of the get-aways in which the notorious Starkey defeated the ends of rough-and-ready justice on the frontier. It happened shortly after Starkey had been supposedly hurled to his death by the wonderful mechanism evolved by the ancient Spaniards.

At the time of Starkey's third hanging, brave Dunc Perry, said to be the strongest man—as he was surely the gamest—in Arizona, was sheriff at Lime Gulch. Barney Billonsar was judge, duly chosen to the office by the citizens.

Starkey's fame as a cheater of the gallows had preceded him, and from his first appearance in Lime Gulch he was kept under the vigilant eye of Dunc Perry. After about a week of quiet, Starkey cleaned out Sawyer's gambling-house and made a heroic attempt to run the town. Perry objected. The two men came within shooting distance of each other in front of Peter's feed-shed and their hardware began to talk spitefully.

Bullets, as will sometimes happen with the best of marksmen, went wide. Then Starkey and Perry dropped their guns and grappled. Perry was a veritable Hercules, and he had no trouble in overpowering Starkey and holding him down while a bystander went hot-foot for Judge Billonsar. The judge, who happened to be in Sawyer's wrecked chance-emporium, made his way speedily to the scene of the capture.

"What am I wanted for, Perry?" demanded the judge.

"To try this man, judge," answered Perry, punching Starkey to make him behave.

The judge squared away judicially.

"Prisoner," said he, clearing his throat, "stand up—er—a-hem—lie down. Are you guilty, or not guilty?"

Dunc Perry had two hands about Starkey's throat so that Starkey could not have spoken if he had wanted to. But what was the use of his saying anything? Everybody knew Starkey's stripe and had been merely waiting for an outbreak as an excuse to give him his due.

"Guilty, are you?" said the judge. "Hang him."

"That's the talk," sputtered Starkey, as Perry loosened his hold a little. "Please hang me. Do it fair, though, an' stand by, all o' you, ter see that I git a squar' deal. If I git clear o' the rope, le'me go; if I don't, le'me hang. Is it a go?"

"Well," drawled Billonsar, "if these lads can't string you up so'st to make you stay hung, I reckon you're entitled to your liberty."

"All I want's a whack at him," growled Perry. "He fooled Coffin, and Goodwin; if he fools me, I'll just give him half an hour to make himself absent from this peace-lovin' town of Lime Gulch."

The crowd was delighted with the prospect. Pioneer crowds, in those days, lived life at its worst and were always rough and ready.

It was agreed that Starkey should be bound wrist and ankle, hoisted on the shoulders of four men and a lariat put around his neck and made fast to the big rafter in Peters' feed-shed. If he managed to get clear of his rope entanglement, he was to have his freedom and thirty minutes to make himself scarce; if his ingenuity wasn't sufficient to save his neck, he was to be allowed to swing where he was. This charming program was carried out. Starkey, bound hand and foot, was hung from the rafter.

"Adios, Starkey," called Dunc Perry.

Starkey grinned.

"Scatter!" he yelled abruptly.

The four men, who were with Perry, taken by surprise, jumped aside. As they did this, Starkey hunched forward his bound feet, striking one of the men full on the head and knocking him flat. But the head, brief though his feet were in contact with it, had given him the necessary leverage. With a tremendous effort he swung his legs upward and over the rafter, and there he hung head down with the slack riata beside him.

The crowd began to clamor delightedly. Slowly Starkey worked his way along the rafter to where the rope was tied. The knot was tied a foot below the rafter, and Starkey, when he reached it, began to gnaw at the knot with frantic fervor.

The crowd watched with profound interest. Every one knew that a slip from the rafter would spell Starkey's finish, and a man's gamble with Death is always thrilling.

The knot was tough and compactly tied, but gradually it began to yield. At length his teeth worked their way through the rope and Starkey dropped from the rafter.

"How's that, Perry?" he asked, panting.

"Most remarkable thing I ever saw in my life," declared Perry. "I'm willing to let you go this time just for the pleasure of taking you in again."

"Ye can't do it."

"Watch my smoke. Where'd you learn how to use your teeth like that?"

"I got the notion from Buffler Bill's Piute pard, Little Cayuse. He chewed a rope in two that I'd put on the scout up at my Ranch o' Mystery in the San Juans. Buffler Bill an' pards kin look out fer me an' my Comanches from this on."

Dunc Perry threw back his head and roared with mirth.

"Man, man," he gasped, "you've played fast and loose with your kibosh a good many times, but you listen to me: if you want to keep your health, leave Buffalo Bill alone."

"I know my biz," grunted Starkey. "Didn't I hev Buffler Bill foul up thar in the San Juans?"

"And didn't he run you and your red gang out of the Colorado mountains?" retorted Dunc Perry. "And where is your Ranch of Mystery now?"

"I fooled him, though," growled Starkey. "He thought I was done up, but he had another guess comin'. I reckon I kin go, hey? Cut me loose. Y'u said I'd only hev an hour——"

"A half-hour," struck in Perry, "and if I catch you anywhere around here when that half-hour's up, I'll hang you from a tree with a wire cable and camp close by until I make sure the job succeeds."

"Well, well," mumbled Starkey, "y'u don't expect me ter stand here chinnin' the whole half-hour, do ye? Git the ropes off'n my hands an' feet."

The ropes were removed and Starkey levanted. Perry and Billonsar watched the cold-game gent flicker away among the shacks and 'dobies toward the edge of town.

"Never'd have believed it if I hadn't seen it," commented Billonsar. "Most remarkable thing I ever witnessed."

"It grabs the banner," returned Perry moodily. "He had one chance in a hundred—and it came his way."

"He didn't have as many as one in a hundred over in Red Hand Valley that time he got tossed into the air."

"I don't know, judge," ruminated Perry, "but I'm be-ginnin' to think the fellow can't be killed. This will be news to the scout and his pards when they get back here

and find that the Red Hand didn't do up Starkey after all."

"Where is Buffalo Bill, just now?"

"Out to Nate Witherspoon's. They left the day before Starkey struck Lime Gulch, and they haven't the least notion that this cold-game gent has come to life again."

"D'you reckon, Dunc, that Starkey came to Lime Gulch because he heard the king of scouts was here?"

"It would be like him."

Billonsar laughed.

"Starkey is shy a few if he thinks he can go gunning for Buffalo Bill and not get bagged himself."

"Ex-actly, judge. Starkey, smart as he is, has got a few things to learn. If he ever comes within reach of the scout's outfit, Buffalo Bill will lay hold of him and wind him up like an eight-day clock. I know Cody mighty well, and I know what the result will be if Starkey gets too fresh around him."

"What's the scout doing out to Witherspoon's?"

"Pass the ante. One of Nate's greasers rode in, more'n a week ago, his hoss just a-smoking. The greaser has a confab with the scout, old Nomad and Wild Bill, and then every man-jack of the scout's outfit, Apaches, Piute and all, hit the back track with the Mexican. Nary a yip was let out by any of 'em as to the why or wherefore. But there's something doing, you can gamble your spurs on that."

"Reckon I'll have to sweep out the office and get my justice-shop ready for b-i-z, biz," said the judge reflectively.

"Shouldn't wonder," returned Perry. "I'll have to mosey off, now, and see if Starkey has quit the town."

With that the two officers separated, the sheriff going one way and the judge another.

CHAPTER X.

THE COMANCHE PRISONER.

"It shore beats me," said old Nate Witherspoon, cramming the tobacco into his pipe with his stumpy thumb. "Them Injuns that's been a-hangin' 'round hyer is shore Comanche if I knows the breed, an' I reckons thar ain't no ombray savvies Injun, north 'r south, much more'n me. You know as well's I do, Buffler Bill, that this ain't no reg'lar stampin'-ground fur Comanches. They ranges funder north than what this is. But if they *aire* Comanch'—which I allows—then they're part o' Lon Starkey's gang which you-all chases from the San Juans; an' as I says when ye fust come up yar from Lime Gulch, Lon Starkey's Injuns ain't hangin' around this part o' the range fur no good."

The old trader, trapper and ranchero trailed a sulfur match over his pipe-bowl, shaking his head forebodingly as he puffed the smoke.

Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill were talking with Witherspoon in his adobe hang-out on Navajo Creek. Bear Paw and Ajax, the horses of the two pards, were at the hitching-pole in front, all accoutered for a ride back to Lime Gulch. The scout and the Laramie man were merely waiting for old Nomad, Little Cayuse and the Apaches, who had galloped off, some two hours before, to comb the hills eastward of the ranch in the hope of rounding up some of the suspected red men. But it was a forlorn hope. The scout and all his pards had been looking for these supposed Comanches of Witherspoon's

for a week, now, and had not caught a glimpse of a single feathered head.

"How close did you come to any of those reds, Nate?" inquired Wild Bill.

"Clost as me an' you is, purty nigh. They was in the bottom of a dry wash an' I was on top o' the bank, in a bunch o' scrub. Thar was two on 'em, reg'lar Comanch', an' they had a fire an' was roastin' a hunk o' meat. It was the smoke o' that fire what fust drewed my attention. They was talkin', them two. I'm summat lame on my Comanch' lingo, but I understood enough ter savvy they was expectin' ter be j'ined soon by Lon Starkey himself, an' that thar was a lot more Injuns clost by."

The scout had heard this before. Now that he and his pards were leaving Witherspoon's ranch, without finding any Comanche "signs," the old trader's information seemed of doubtful value.

"I don't see how the Comanches could have been expecting Starkey," the scout patiently explained for the dozenth time, "when I and my pards saw him tossed over the rim of Red Hand Cañon by that wonderful piece of mechanism constructed by the ancient Spaniards."

"H'm!" Witherspoon cleared his throat and peered at his pipe reflectively. "You-all knows, I reckon," he went on, "that the sayin' is Lon Starkey kain't be killed."

"Which is bosh," declared the scout. "Starkey is flesh and blood, like the rest of us, and consequently mortal."

"Ye're fair sartin that 'ar Red Hand done him up?"

"Look here, Nate," put in Wild Bill. "Just imagine a steel hand as big as the floor of this shack of yours, at the end of an iron arm as long as from here to the hitching-pole out in front. That hand and arm can work

almost like they were human, see? Well, just supposing the hand rushed out at you from a cliff, grabbed you and tossed you, neck-and-heels, over the top of a straight-up-and-down fifty-foot wall. Do you think it would finish you?"

Witherspoon smiled grimly.

"I reckons it would, podner," he answered, "allowin' I didn't hev no wings."

"Well, that's just what the Red Hand did to Lon Starkey."

"It seems sartin, podners, that yer bean's on the right number. Mebby I didn't savvy at all correct what them Comanches was chinnin' erbout. As I says, I'm some lame on their lingo. I'm a heap sorry you-all hev spent a week in these yar diggin's without seein' hide 'r ha'r o' ary Comanche, but I reckoned you ort ter know what I'd seen an' heerd, which was why I sent my greaser ter Lime Gulch arter ye. I've enj'yed yer comp'ny immense, an' I'm hopin' that when ye git back ter the Gulch ye won't think ole Nate's flighty, er——"

Just here the door was burst open and old Nick Nomad, the scout's trapper pard, jumped into the house with a whoop.

"Hoop-a-la, pards! Wake up an' rejoice! We've gone an' bagged er Comanch'. He tried ter git erway from us, an run like er skeered coyote, but Hide-rack was too blame' swift fer his Injun cayuse."

"Good fur you-all, Nick!" cried Witherspoon, leaping to his feet.

Just then the two Apache trailers, Chappo and Pedro, entered the house with the Comanche. They walked one on either side of the prisoner, whose hands were bound at his back, and behind came Little Cayuse, the Piute boy, poking the Comanche along with the point of

a revolver. Yuppah, the third of the Apache trailers, was looking after the horses, in front.

"Bravo!" applauded Wild Bill. "Where'd you catch him, Nick?"

"Over west on the Navajo," answered Nomad. "Picked up his trail, which was some hot, an' follered et like singed cats hustlin' fer water."

The prisoner, sullen-looking and in full war-panoply, was brought before the scout. Chappo and Pedro stepped back, a hand on their weapons. The scout looked the captive over, up and down.

"He's Comanche, all right," said he.

"No doubt of it, Pard Cody," agreed Wild Bill.

"He's one o' the two I seen in the dry-wash," said Witherspoon.

The scout had a little Comanche talk on tap and proceeded to interrogate the Indian.

"Do you belong with Lon Starkey, of Red Tail?"

The Comanche grunted, but whether the grunt meant yes or no was hard to tell.

"Is Starkey alive? Did he escape from the Red Hand Valley?"

Another indefinite grunt. The scout turned to Wild Bill.

"He's not answering," said the scout. "Pull your hardware, Pard Hickok, and if he doesn't talk better——"

The scout made a significant gesture. Wild Bill, with an ominous scowl, drew a revolver from his belt and stepped to the Comanche's side. The prisoner cast an uneasy glance at the revolver and appeared to understand the move and why it was made.

"Is Starkey alive?" repeated the scout sharply.

"He is alive," replied the Comanche.

"Where is he?"

"Lime Gulch."

"Is he going to come here?"

"He is coming to join his red brothers."

"How many red brothers are around this part of the country?"

The Comanche held up both hands twice.

"Twenty, eh? Did you all come from the Valley of the Red Hand?"

"We came from there."

"What are you going to do here?"

The prisoner shook his head.

All the rest were following the conversation as well as they could.

"Mebbyso he knows an' won't tell. Buffler," spoke up old Nomad. "Tickle him in ther ribs with ther p'int o' yer shootin'-iron, Hickok."

Wild Bill used the weapon as directed, but again the prisoner shook his head.

"How did Lon Starkey escape from the Red Hand?" inquired Wild Bill, supplementing the words with the hand talk.

"The good spirits helped him," asserted the Indian. "Lon Starkey cannot be slain. He is big medicine."

"Good sperrits!" mumbled Nomad derisively. "Waugh! I'd like er pictur' o' them good sperrits helpin' Lon Starkey."

"Anyways, sperrits 'r no sperrits," put in Witherspoon, "it looks as though Starkey had fooled death ag'in."

"I won't believe that," returned the puzzled scout, "until I see Starkey face to face."

"Me, nuther," said Nomad.

"Nor I," added Wild Bill. "By gorry, if Starkey got

clear of that Red Hand, he must have hooked onto a stray balloon while he was sky-rocketing."

"What 'u'd these Comanches want ter lie about Starkey fur thataway?" demanded Witherspoon. "Can you-all answer that?"

"There's some scheme working at the back of their heads," averred Wild Bill.

"It's my opine," pursued Witherspoon, "that them 'ar Injuns wouldn't be so fur south onless Starkey had sent 'em. Starkey ain't feelin' anyways peaceable to'rds Buffalo Bill an' his podners about now, supposin' him ter be alive an' kickin', an' it's Mexican dollars ter doughnuts the Comanches hev come yar ter wait so'st Starkey kin git in a whack at the king o' scouts an' his outfit. He don't fergive no debt like that 'un, Starkey don't."

"Where have you Comanches been hiding?" asked Buffalo Bill, once more facing the prisoner.

"In a barranca on the Navajo," was the reply.

"Are all the rest of the Comanches there now?"

The Indian nodded.

"Is Starkey to come there?"

Another nod.

"When?"

"Before another sleep."

"On the chance that Starkey may be alive, and show up in this barranca," said Buffalo Bill, turning to Wild Bill, "we'll just put off our departure for Lime Gulch and make for the hang-out of the Comanches, taking the prisoner with us so——"

The scout was interrupted by a single yell, abruptly stifled, followed by a diminishing patter of horses' hoofs. The sounds came from without, and all the pards, except the two Apaches in charge of the prisoner, sprang for the door.

When the scout and his pards reached the front of the house they saw that the horses were gone; also that Yuppah, who had been in charge of the mounts, was hanging over the hitching-pole in a limp and unconscious condition. Southward along the trail could be seen a flurry of dust.

"Sufferin' wildcats!" whooped old Nomad; "some 'un's run off with ther critters. Now who in blazes worked this hyar hocus-pocus, an' why?"

The scout and the Laramie man stared at each other in amazement for a space, then allowed their eyes to jump along the trail in the direction of the dust-cloud. The dust was thick and completely enveloped horses and riders.

"By gorry," cried Wild Bill, "it's hard to tell who ran off with the mounts! There must have been quite a bunch of the thieves, for not even one of the 'Pache cayuses has been left."

"Tarnation!" mumbled Witherspoon. "It was done quick an' quiet. Jest one yell out o' ther 'Pache, then a poundin' o' hoofs."

"Bring Yuppah back to his wits, Hickok," said the scout hurriedly, "and he'll tell who the thieves wore. Witherspoon, where's your horse?"

"In the lean-to back o' the house."

Buffalo Bill rushed along the side of the 'dobie and circled around and into the door of the "lean-to." It was his intention to jump Witherspoon's horse and pursue the thieves, but a disagreeable surprise awaited him.

Witherspoon's horse was gone, as well as the rest!

Hurrying back to where his companions were standing, the scout announced his latest discovery.

"Waugh!" yelled Nomad furiously, "thet makes et er clean sweep o' ther hosses. I wouldn't er lost thet pizen

Hide-rack o' mine fer a thousan' pesos. He was *muy malo*, an' fuller o' cussedness than what er egg is o' yelk, an' ekaled my ole Nebuchadnezzar; but by ther jumpin' gee-whiskers he had more ginger an' bottom in him than ary hoss in this hyar kentry, always an' only exceptin' Buffler's war-hoss, B'ar Paw. Oh, them missable pizen whelps!"

The old trapper danced around the hitching-pole, shaking his fist along the trail and fuming like a steam-engine.

"Ugh!" growled Little Cayuse, "Hide-rack him not so good as Navi. Navi him little, but him plenty better. Ugh!"

"I ain't er goin' ter git inter no dispute with ye, son," said old Nomad, "but I'm er clay-eater ef I ever seen anythin' on four laigs ter beat Hide-rack, he was thet long an' rangy."

"Bear Paw was the best horse I've had since Brigham," remarked the scout, drawing close to where Wild Bill and Witherspoon were reviving Yuppah.

"Ajax wasn't no slouch of a traveler," observed Wild Bill, looking up.

"An' that 'ar Comet hoss o' mine was shore some at showin' his heels," mourned Witherspoon. "Gad-hook the luck, anyways! Yar we aire, all hung up an' twenty miles from ary other animle we kin git our hands on. Oh, whoosh!"

"War-bags gone, too," snorted the wrathful old trapper; "an' gear—why, thet thar Cheyenne saddle o' mine was wuth a hunnerd."

"What's the matter with Yuppah?" inquired the scout.

Wild Bill pointed to a bruise close up under his red-flannel head-band.

"He was hit with something hard," said Hickok, "and it dropped him like a ten-pin in a bowling-alley."

"This, perhaps, is what did it," said the scout, picking up a round water-worn stone as big as his fist.

Twenty feet from the front of the cabin, across the trail, was a thicket of manzanita. The scout's eyes roved in that direction and then fell to the ground.

In the vicinity of the hitching-pole the earth was packed to the hardness of rock, leaving no impressions of feet or hoofs. The scout started toward the bushes. A dozen feet from the hitching-pole he struck the trail. Here he saw marks of moccasins in the dust, all toeing in and aiming for the front of the adobe.

"Reds!" he called. "Yes," he added, "and one white man, by the boot-prints."

"What kind o' reds?" demanded Witherspoon.

The scout knelt for a closer examination of the moccasin tracks.

"Comanches," he announced.

"Comanches, hey?" yelled old Nomad. "While we was in ther house, confabin' with thet thar other Comanche, some more o' ther pizen whelps stole up hyar, knocked Yuppah over with er rock, slammed inter our saddles an' made off. Oh, this hyar is plumb interestin', this is. Hide-rack! I wouldn't er took two thousand fer him, stripped o' the ridin'-gear."

The scout followed the tracks beyond the trail to the thicket. There, among the bushes, he found abundant evidence to show that the white man and the Comanches had hidden themselves away in that place while carrying out their designs on the live stock.

"The thieves," went on the scout, returning across the trail, "sneaked up from the creek and hid in the chaparral. They may have been following Nomad, with the

intention of getting back the captured redskin. As they lay low in the bushes, the temptation to make off with the horses must have been too great for them to withstand. One of them heaved the rock at Yuppah as he leaned against the hitching-pole. He had time for just one yell before he dropped over the pole; then the reds made a rush and were off down the trail before we could get clear of the house. Quick work," he added glumly.

"An' blame' quiet work, too," spoke up Witherspoon. "How'd the reds ever snake Comet out o' ther lean-to without us a-hearin' of 'em? We're shore up agin' a hefty lot o' hoss-lifters, *compadres*."

"Did you bring the prisoner in on his own pony, Nomad?" queried the scout.

"That's what we done, Buffler, an' ther mustang was out hyar with ther rest o' their animiles."

"Then there must have been nine in the crowd, since there were nine horses run off, counting Witherspoon's and the prisoner's." Once more the scout stepped close to Wild Bill and Yuppah. "What's the matter with Yuppah, Hickok?" he asked. "He's a long time coming to, seems to me. Do you think he's badly hurt?"

"Well, it wasn't any light blow that laid the 'Pache out," replied Wild Bill, "but his skull's thick and I reckon it didn't do much more than send him to the Land of Nod for a spell. Ah, he's opening his eyes."

All crowded around the Apache as his eyes flickered open and he sat up dazedly.

"Ugh!" he grunted, feeling of the dent in his head. "No like um." And then he used a little of the language which helps an army teamster to get a government six out of a mud-hole.

"No make um swear," growled Little Cayuse, who was a sort of underboss of the three Apache trailers.

"Me feel like um," answered Yuppah, rubbing his head and blinking.

"How many were there in the party of thieves?" asked Wild Bill.

"Heap plenty; not got um time to count."

"Were they all Indians, Yuppah?"

"Me see um one white, plenty more Injun; then, plenty quick, me no see um nothing. Ugh!"

Yuppah was not in very good spirits. He was taking it to heart because the horses, left under his charge, had been run off. It was clear to all, however, that Yuppah was not particularly to be blamed. He had been "jumped" unexpectedly by nine men. The wonder was that he had escaped with his life.

"Who was the white man, Yuppah?" asked the scout.

"All same Starkey."

This was a good deal of a bombshell. Old Nomad jumped, and the others were equally startled.

"What hev I been tellin' you-all?" demanded Witherspoon. "I reckons that 'ar Red Hand didn't do fer Lon Starkey arter all, Buffler Bill, even if it did h'ist him fifty feet."

"Are you sure, Yuppah," asked the scout, "that the white man was Lon Starkey, the fellow we had those dealings with in the Ranch of Mystery?"

"All same," declared Yuppah, without a moment's hesitation.

"We've got to take Yuppah's word for it, pards," said Buffalo Bill, turning to those around him. "It isn't possible that Yuppah is mistaken. He knows Starkey by sight, even if he is not so well acquainted with him as Cayuse and I are. How that scoundrel ever got clear of the Red Hand Valley with his life is a mystery to me."

"He's like er pizen cat," growled Nomad, "an' he's got nine lives, I reckon; but ef I don't git Hide-rack back, sound in wind an' limb, I'm goin' ter take all nine of 'em."

"There's no use trying to chase Starkey and the Comanches on foot," mused Wild Bill, "and, as Witherspoon says, it's twenty miles to the Gulch and more horses. Shall we climb for the Gulch, Pard Cody, get more mounts, and then take Starkey's trail?"

"We'd lose a lot of time by doing that," answered the scout, frowning over the problem. "If our prisoner is telling the truth, and the gang really has headquarters in a barranca near the Navajo, I'd be in favor of pushing straight for the gang's headquarters. It can't be very far from here, and we might be able to get hold of our mounts at the place."

"Thet's ther idee," agreed Nomad. "Let's make fer thet barranca. Ef ther gang has moved their headquarters, we kin hike fer Lime Gulch, borry some hosses, an' then lay out a longer campaign. I'll hev Hide-rack, er I'll hev Starkey's skelp. Mebbysö I'll git both."

"Have the prisoner brought out here, Cayuse," said the scout. "We'll question him some more, and, if his answers ring true, we'll make him lead the way to the barranca."

While Cayuse was in the house, old Nomad called attention down the trail in the direction recently taken by the horse-thieves. A white man was hurrying along toward the creek on foot, waving his arms as though to secure the notice of those in front of the 'dobie. He was a big man and seemed excited.

"Well, well!" muttered Buffalo Bill. "Either I've got the blind-staggers or else that's Dunc Perry."

"Perry!" exclaimed Wild Bill; "by gorry if it ain't!"

"What's Perry doin' so fur from home without no hoss?" queried Witherspoon.

This was a question which Perry himself was soon to answer.

CHAPTER XI.

DUNC PERRY'S MISHAP.

When a man's saddle becomes a habit with him he grows awkward in his walking. Therefore Dunc Perry, who was a horseman par excellence, traveled all over the trail as he tore along.

"He's got something on his mind more'n his hat," observed Wild Bill.

"Waugh!" laughed Nomad, "he walks as ef his spurs hurt his feet."

"Jest like the rest o' you bow-legged hossback fellers," said Witherspoon. "A powerful good man, Dunc Perry is."

"Right you are, Witherspoon," returned the scout heartily. "Dunc is a powerful fine man, and he has all the sand and sagacity that goes with the making of a successful one."

Just at that moment the sheriff lurched in on his high-heeled boots and flopped panting to the ground by the hitching-pole. Drawing a sleeve across his dripping forehead, he pulled off his hat and began fanning himself with it.

"Spurs are a big help to a man when he travels on foot, Dunc," grinned Wild Bill.

"Wherever is yer hoss, Perry?" inquired Nomad.

Perry, having recovered his breath, proceeded to say things.

"Starkey and a pack of his reds corraled the horse some two miles along the trail," said he.

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"What were you doing, Dunc," asked the scout, "while they were corraling the horse?"

"Riding along like a saphead, never thinking of trouble. All I had in my mind was getting here and talking with Buffalo Bill. In a little pass, before I had any notion what was going on, riatas began leaping at me from both sides. Now, I can dodge one rope, and maybe two, but when six come at me, all in a bunch, I'm plumb liable to get snagged. Well, I was. When I was on my back, kicking like an up-ended taranch, that confounded Starkey and a pack of Comanches came riding out from among the rocks. Starkey can be tantalizing when he wants to, and he was then. If I'd had the use of my fist, I'd have knocked his face through into his back hair. I won't repeat what he said. It would make me so hot from spurs to headpiece that I might swell up and bust. All I'll say is that he rode on with my horse, leaving me my guns and a forty-foot riata from which I had to untangle myself. As soon as I got free, which wasn't very long, I scrambled for here."

"You were coming to see me?" queried the scout.

"That's what I was. There was something I thought you ought to know, so I pulled out of Lime Gulch this morning."

"What was it?"

"Why, that this same Starkey hadn't been put out of business in Red Hand Valley. You, I know, were under the impression that he had been wiped out."

"I been tryin' ter convince the scout o' that ever sence he reached my place, a week back," struck in Witherspoon.

"We're purty well convinced by now," remarked Nomad dryly.

"Starkey showed up in Lime Gulch," pursued Perry.

"the next day after you and your pards left town to come here."

"Looking for us, I reckon," dropped in Wild Bill.

"Wisht he'd er found us," added Nomad darkly. "Thar'd been some things thet wouldn't be happenin' now."

"I watched him like a hawk," continued the sheriff, "waiting for him to show his hand and give me a chance at him. He did that yesterday by cleaning out Sawyer's place and then trying to boss all the citizens, including me. We clashed. When I got Starkey down, Judge Billonsar tried him while I held him, found him guilty, and ordered him to be hung. The execution proceeded immediately, but ended in a bobble."

Perry went on to describe the "bobble," throwing into the recital all the pent-up feeling that surged in his breast. When he had finished, his listeners were excited and amazed.

"He kain't be killed, not noways," breathed Witherspoon.

"The Old Boy is sure looking after him," averred Wild Bill.

"Waal," muttered the old trapper, "he ain't goin' ter be able ter dodge his kibosh *all* ther time. One o' these hyar days he'll connect with et good an' plenty."

"A most remarkable case, Perry," said the scout quietly.

"Correct, it is," answered Perry, getting up and leaning against the hitching-pole. "I'll have to borrow a horse while I'm getting back my own. Any one here who'll lend me a mount?"

Nomad looked sour, for a moment, and then began to laugh. The laugh was echoed by Wild Bill and

Witherspoon. There was something funny about Perry's appeal to that horseless crowd for a mount.

"What's the matter with you yaps?" demanded Perry. "What's the joke?"

"The joke is on all of us, Dunc," returned the scout. "There's not a horse to be had. If you'd looked sharp at the animals ridden by Starkey and his outfit, you would have discovered that they belonged to me and my pards."

The sheriff opened his eyes at that.

"Do you mean to say that your *caballos* have been lifted, same as mine?"

"They were lifted, all right, although not in exactly the same way. Nomad, Cayuse, and the Apaches had just brought in a Comanche prisoner. We were pumping him, when Yuppah, who was in charge of our horses here in front, was knocked over, and the herd run off."

Perry allowed a grin to flicker across his face.

"Then we're all in the same boat, eh?" he inquired.

"That's about the size of it, Dunc," said Wild Bill. "For a while we're a bunch of walkers."

"What were you planning to do? Go back to the gulch and outfit with more horses?"

"Buffler had a better kyard than thet up his sleeve," said Nomad. "Ther Comanche pris'ner said as how Starkey an' his gang had made their headquarters in a barranca on ther Navajo. We was goin' ter make ther Comanche take us ter this barranca, on ther chance thet Starkey an' his reds 'u'd trail in thar with ther hosses."

"Fine!" exclaimed Perry. "I wouldn't lose any time pulling that off, Buffalo Bill. I'm with you, of course. What I want is to lay violent hands on Lon Starkey, as well as to get hold of my horse."

"That's what we all want," said the king of scouts.

"We were just starting when we saw you coming along the trail. Here's the prisoner."

The scout turned and beckoned to Chappo and Pedro. They pushed forward, with the Comanche between them.

"Maybe you can believe what he says and maybe you can't," observed Perry, after looking the prisoner over. "If I'm any judge, the red'll lie a heap quicker than he'll tell the truth."

"What I want to impress on him is that it will be fatal if he lies to us," went on the scout. "I don't believe he's hankering to lose his scalp, Starkey or no Starkey."

Dropping into the Comanche lingo, the scout proceeded to address the prisoner.

"What's your name, Comanche?"

The prisoner sulkily hesitated. Wild Bill pushed close with his revolver significantly displayed.

"Running Panther," answered the savage, his shifty eye on the gun.

"Running Panther has said that Starkey and his Comanches have their hang-out in a barranca. Starkey has taken the horses of Pa-e-has-ka and his friends, and must give them up. Will Running Panther lead Pa-e-has-ka and his friends to the barranca, so that they can get back the horses?"

Running Panther was not at all pleased with this program.

"Ugh!" he grunted. "It is a hard road to the barranca. White men on their feet cannot get there."

"He's tryin' ter dodge!" growled old Nomad. "Tickle him in thier ribs ag'in, Hickok."

Wild Bill nudged Running Panther with the muzzle of his forty-five. The Indian cringed away from the point.

"Does Running Panther want to lose his life?" demanded the scout. "Pa-e-has-ka and his friends are going on foot to the barranca, no matter how hard it is for them to get there, and Running Panther is going to show them the way. If Pa-e-has-ka finds that Running Panther has been talking with a double tongue, then Running Panther dies. And if Running Panther fails to show Pa-e-has-ka the way to the barranca, or tries to be treacherous, then for that Running Panther will die. Is it well?"

The prisoner's eyes glimmered fiercely, but he nodded his head.

"Fix up your ranch so it will be safe while you're gone, Witherspoon," continued the scout, turning to the trader.

"I got a trap-gun planted in the house," said Witherspoon, "an' if any one opens the door, it lets go. I'll jest git a grub-bag, fix the gun, an' be with ye ag'in in a couple o' shakes."

He turned and vanished into the house.

"Ask him how far away this barranca is, Buffalo Bill," suggested Perry.

The scout put the question.

"One march with a horse," replied Running Panther; "two or three marches on foot."

"We'll make it one march on foot," commented Wild Bill. "There's not much time to lose, if I'm any prophet. Tell the red he's to take us to the barranca by the shortest way."

This was made known to the prisoner, and he grunted assent.

Meanwhile, Witherspoon adjusted his trap-gun, filled a canvas bag with rations, and came out and carefully closed the door.

When the door was closed he hung a placard on it from a nail. The placard read as follows: "Warnin. Owner not ter hoam. Strangers stay out or take the conserkenses."

"I reckons I'm ready fer the trail," said Witherspoon, shouldering the grub-bag and facing around.

"Step off!" ordered the scout.

Running Panther headed across the trail, Chappo and Pedro hanging to him by either arm. Wild Bill and Little Cayuse came behind, revolvers in their hands. The rest trailed along by twos.

In this fashion the little column wound through the chaparral and on into the rough country that bordered the Navajo.

The course taken by Running Panther led the scout and his companions eastward along the creek. The Navajo, at that time, was running bankful, and there were several small branches through which the party had to wade.

"Waugh!" exclaimed Nomad disgustedly. "An om-bray never appreciates a good hoss until he's whar he hes ter use his own hoofs. Thet thar Hide-rack o' mine hes got er temper like er catamount, but he's shore wuth his weight in gold, fer all thet."

"That Comet critter o' mine is the clear quill, too," remarked Witherspoon ruefully, jogging along at the trapper's side. "Had him nigh on five year, huntin', trappin', tradin'. I reckons he's saved my skelp a dozen times, bein' so nimble on his feet."

The trapper and the trader brought up the rear of the procession. At the other end of it were Chappo, Pedro, and Running Panther, with Wild Bill and Cayuse just behind. Back of them traveled Buffalo Bill and

Dunc Perry, and between the scout and the sheriff, and the trapper and the trader, came Yuppah.

"Thar's another ditch we got ter cross," announced Nomad, staring ahead to where the rest of the party were clambering over a small stream on a tree-trunk.

It was a small tree, but the sure-footed Indians galloped over it with perfect ease. Nor did Wild Bill, the scout, or Perry have much trouble. All the excitement of the crossing, as it chanced, came the way of Nomad and Witherspoon.

The trader, stepping ahead, started across the tree in advance of the trapper. The grub-bag, being rather heavy, gave Witherspoon a little too much weight on one side. Midway of the tree his foot slipped. In the scramble to recover his balance, the trader shifted the grub-bag suddenly, and its weight dragged him down on the other side of the narrow foothold.

With a splash, he dropped into the water, but, tossing forward his hands, he managed to get his arms over the tree and so supported himself.

At the first start-off of the mishap, old Nomad lurched forward and grabbed the grub-bag. This move included him in the disaster, and he shot downward. Like Witherspoon, however, he managed to hook his arms over the tree, and trapper and trader, up to their middle in the flood, hung on and stared across the narrow bridge at each other.

The grub-bag, as luck would have it, lay between them on the tree-trunk.

"Sufferin' whipperwills!" bawled Nomad, shocked by the suddenness of the catastrophe.

"Jumpin' jee-mimy!" sputtered Witherspoon. "Saved the rations, anyways."

"Hang the rations!" fumed Nomad. "I'm down jes

fur enough ter wet my forty-fives an' ammunition-belt. Drat the luck!"

Yuppah, turning back, stepped nimbly out on the tree and grabbed the trapper by the coat-collar. In another moment he had raised him dripping to the trunk. In the same manner Yuppah heaved the trader to a secure foothold, then took charge of the grub-bag and went stoically on.

Nomad and Witherspoon succeeded in getting to the other side, and there dropped down on the rocks.

Wild Bill and Dunc Perry, looking back, haw-hawed with merriment. Even the scout smiled.

Old Nomad had his back arched like an angry cat, and was spitting his maledictions upon the Navajo and every other brook, rill, and streamlet that emptied into it.

"Et's er heap funny, ain't et?" he yelped. "Go on, all o' ye. Witherspoon an' me aire goin' ter tarry right hyar an' empty er gallon er two o' water out o' our boots an' wring some more o' et out o' our clothes. We'll ketch up with ye. I'm hopin' ye'll be through enjoyin' yerselves by ther time we meet up ag'in."

"Be as quick as you can, pard," called back the scout, turning to make off after Chappo, Pedro, and Running Panther.

For half an hour those in the lead continued on, rounding the base of rocky uplifts and threading small seams through the bleak barrens. They proceeded leisurely, in order to give Nomad and Witherspoon a chance to over-haul them. But, at the end of the half-hour, those behind had not caught up.

The scout halted.

"It won't do to go any farther, Perry," said he, "until Nomad and Witherspoon rejoin us."

"What's the matter with 'em?" muttered Perry, looking back. "They ought to be with us by now."

"That's what I'm thinking. We're in the enemy's country, and it won't do to take many chances. The rest of you wait here while I go back and see what's keeping the laggards."

"Want me to go along?"

"No, I don't think we'd better scatter too much. One's enough for an investigation. Probably I'll meet Nick and Witherspoon coming."

Thereupon, the scout dodged around the foot of a hill and lost himself from the sight of his friends on the back track.

Keeping his eyes constantly ahead, the wondering scout traversed the entire distance between the point where he had left his companions and the scene of the trapper's and trader's mishap, without seeing anything of the stragglers.

What at first was pure comedy was turning into a very serious matter, and Buffalo Bill was dumfounded. What could have become of his missing comrades?

He saw the rocks on which Nomad and Witherspoon had seated themselves to remove their boots, but where they had gone from that point was more than he could discover. The flinty earth left no sign of their passing.

Making a trumpet of his hands, the scout called loudly. There was no response, save the echoes of his own voice bounding through the hills. He repeated the cry again and again, but still without result.

Puzzled, he started up the nearest bank, to gain an elevated position from which he could survey the surrounding country. Before he was half-way up the bank, a clatter of distant shots came faintly down the wind.

He halted and turned about, aghast at this unexpected

event. Inasmuch as the firing came from the direction of his waiting pards, there was small doubt in the scout's mind but that enemies had engineered a surprise.

Giving up all thought of trying to locate Nomad and Witherspoon just then, Buffalo Bill bounded back down the slope and started eastward at a run. He drew his revolvers as he raced, and all sorts of forebodings ran through his mind.

Had Running Panther, in spite of the threats as to what would happen if he showed the least sign of treachery, led them into a trap? Or had Starkey and his red allies been dogging the steps of the scout and his pards, and seized upon the moment when they were separated for making an attack?

One guess was as good as another, and the bewildered scout sidetracked his speculations until he could reach the scene of the clash and get at the facts by an investigation.

As he figured it, upward of two miles separated the small stream where Nomad and Witherspoon had got their ducking and the place where he had left his companions.

Buffalo Bill covered this distance in record time, rounding the base of the rocky hill at a rush, ready to take a hand in whatever was going on.

After the first volley there had been no firing, and the silence was ominous.

Once around the hill and looking upon the place where he had left Wild Bill, Perry, and the Indians, the scout's surprise grew when he saw no one—no one but a red-skinned form crumpled along the stony ground.

He listened a moment, but heard nothing either to

quiet or arouse his fears. Moving cautiously forward, he gained the side of the prostrate form.

It was the form of Running Panther. There was a wound in the back, and a brief examination showed the scout that the Panther had trailed his last with the allies of Lon Starkey.

Lifting himself erect, the scout shouted for Wild Bill, as he had recently called to Nomad and Witherspoon—and with no better result. Echoes answered him, but only echoes. A pall of silence lay over the hills, and there was nothing and no one to tell the scout what had happened to cause the disappearance of his comrades.

Climbing the nearest slope, the scout peered about him at the rocky uplifts. Not a sign of friends or enemies greeted his straining eyes.

A little to the north, the swollen Navajo raced along its course, carrying the drift that had toppled from its banks. On all other sides there was nothing but bleak country, with not a living thing in sight.

Perplexed as he had rarely been before, Buffalo Bill descended to the slain redskin once more, and stood beside the body, pondering.

It seemed strange to him that Starkey and his redskin followers should have made a descent upon Wild Bill, Perry, and the rest and slain only the Comanche. Was it possible that the Comanche had been leading the scout and his pards on a bee-line for the barranca, and that skulking redskins had killed him for his treachery? Or had Running Panther really led the white men into a trap, and then, by accident, alone suffered death in the brief fight that followed?

The scout was still guessing—and that was not a time for useless speculation, but for swift and masterful action.

He looked over the ground. Finding nothing to guide him, he started on eastward in the direction Running Panther had been leading his captors.

Before he had held to this course for five minutes, a distant shout came to him—apparently from across the creek. With a forlorn hope rising in his breast, the scout answered the cry, then hastened at his best speed in the direction of the Navajo.

CHAPTER XII.

A THREE-CORNERED FIGHT.

The banks of the stream were steep and rocky, and the scout, leaping from boulder to boulder, and coming swiftly closer to the water's edge, kept his eyes fixed on the swirling, eddying surface. From what particular point had come the cry? His glance ranged across the creek in an endeavor to locate the spot.

"Help, here, some o' you reds!"

This call, coming from up the creek and from around a jutting spur, caused the scout's heart to leap with exultation. It was Lon Starkey's voice! In that moment Buffalo Bill imagined that Starkey was being hard beset by Wild Bill, Perry, and the rest. With an answering yell, he flung himself around the end of the spur and came out on a stretch of gently sloping bank.

Here another surprise confronted him. Bear Paw, dingy with sweat and dust, was standing by a small sapling, hitched to the tree by the looped reins.

At sight of the scout, Bear Paw lifted his head and gave a whinny of recognition.

"Well, well, old boy," cried the delighted scout, starting toward the horse; "this is a mighty queer meeting, seems to me. I've got you again, though, and——"

The *crack* of a revolver bit the scout's words short. A bullet rushed snarling through the air close to Cody's side and *spatted* against a rock over Bear Paw's head. The report was followed by a muffled oath and a sound as of some one thrashing among bushes.

The bullet had come from behind Buffalo Bill. Halt-

ing quickly, he whirled about. The stream lay before him, and there were no bushes. However, a big cottonwood-tree, undermined by the flood and carried down the stream, had lodged butt-on against the bank. The thrashing noise came from the thick branches at the farther end of the tree-trunk.

The struggle continued, and the scout could see the branches moving and swaying. The foliage was so dense that he could not see the combatants, but he knew that one of them was Lon Starkey. The call the scout had heard had settled that point. If any more proof was needed, Bear Paw gave it.

Starkey, escaping from the noose in Lime Gulch, had rushed to join his Comanches in the barranca near the Navajo. Then had followed the running off of the horses from in front of Witherspoon's adobe, in the performance of which coup Starkey, as was quite natural, had taken possession of the best horse in the lot—Bear Paw.

What had happened after that was not quite so clear to the scout. Anyhow, here was Bear Paw, and among the branches of the cottonwood, fighting desperately, was Lon Starkey. The scout quite naturally surmised that Starkey was struggling with Wild Bill, Perry, or some other of those who were hunting him.

With a shout of encouragement for whoever it was that was battling with Starkey, Buffalo Bill ran for the water and flung himself at a leap upon the tree-trunk. The impetus of his alighting body drove the tree away from the bank and into deep water; there, caught by an eddy, it whirled around so that its roots and the lower part of the trunk pointed toward the middle of the racing flood.

Then, owing to some weight thrown suddenly to one

side among the branches, the tree began to turn. The scout flung up his hands to save himself, and his revolvers dropped. One of them went into the water. The other, landing on the wet and slippery trunk, lay there an instant. The scout made a frantic effort to grab it, but it slipped into the stream just as his fingers were almost touching it.

Just at that instant the cottonwood whirled back into its original position, and Buffalo Bill had to throw himself into the tree-roots in order to keep himself from going by the board.

After that came a few minutes of silence, the tree whirling and sweeping along on the flood. The silence was broken by a sputtering, ill-omened laugh coming from among the branches.

"I reckon y'u won't tag me with a bullet *this* trip, Buffler Bill," called the voice of Lon Starkey. "Yer guns hev drapped inter the drink, same as mine."

"Who's in there with you?" demanded the scout.

"*Who?* Waal, I like that. Say, you'll find out who it is afore long. Y'u got hyer jest in time ter leave me free-handed fer a bit. Wow, but this is a queer keetle o' fish!"

"How did you come to be on the tree-trunk?"

The scout was after information, and there didn't seem to be anything better on hand, just then, than a talking-match. Later, when the scout saw what sort of a situation faced him, he would lay his plans to get the whip-hand of Starkey.

"I was lookin' fer some o' yore pards," answered Starkey. "Me an' the Comanches took 'em by surprise, an' scattered 'em like rabbits. They dug fer kiver, an' we split up in bunches, ter foller 'em."

"You were watching us, were you?"

"Waal, kinder. When a man hes enemies like Buf-
fler Bill, Dunc Perry, an' the rest, he's got ter watch
sharp an' git in the fust blow. I hadn't ort ter hev let
Dunc Perry go, when I took his hoss. I had er grate-
ful streak on, howsumever, an' wanted ter pay him back
fer the way he knotted that riata in Peter's feed-shed.
If the rope hadn't been tied a foot below the rafter,
I'd 'a' never got at it with my teeth. Perry an' me is
squared fer that now, though, an' from this on the
sher'ff hes got ter expect the wust if him an' me ever
come inter collision."

"Do you know what became of Nick Nomad and
Witherspoon?" demanded the scout, hanging to the tree-
roots and measuring the distance that separated him from
the branches where Starkey lay concealed.

The trunk of the tree was drenched, and would af-
ford but a slippery foothold, yet the scout was determined
to get at Starkey at the earliest possible moment. A
knife still remained in Buffalo Bill's belt, and Starkey
was presumably armed in the same manner. A bowie-
fight on a floating tree was something of a novelty; it
offered perils, too, to each combatant that would not
have been faced on hard ground. Nevertheless, ad-
vantages and disadvantages were even.

"I don't know a thing about Nomad an' Withers-
poon," replied Starkey, from his bower at the other
end of the swaying trunk, "an' I didn't know how you
happened ter be separated from Wild Bill, Perry, an'
yore Injuns. It looked like er good time fer me ter
strike, howsumever, an' so we bore down on the outfit
in the gully."

"There was a lot of firing. Did you hit anybody
besides your Comanche?"

"Couldn't tell. Yore pards ducked out o' sight so

quick we didn't hev time ter see. I reckon we must hev
got some on 'em besides the Injun."

"You haven't told me yet what brought you onto
this cottonwood," pursued the scout.

"I heerd a noise among the branches, while I was
ridin' around that spur o' rock, so I hitched that hoss
o' your'n an' purceeded ter investigate. I found out
mighty quick what I'd tackled, an'— Wow! Keep
away from me, you!"

Here commenced another wild struggle among the
tree-branches, a struggle of which the scout could not
see the least detail. The branches shook and crashed,
and Starkey yelled and swore frantically.

Finally the fighting ceased, and the scout could hear
Starkey breathing hard.

"If it was possible fer me ter be killed," panted
Starkey, "I reckon I'd hev been a goner by now. I
got a charmed life, I hev, an' don't y'u fergit it. I
saw y'u measurin' that tree-trunk with yer eyes, Buf-
fler Bill. Better not come near me if y'u know when
y'e're well off."

"Have you got a knife, Starkey?" demanded the scout.

"I shore hev, an' I come purty near needin' it, too."

"Then come out from among those branches and meet
me man to man in the middle of the tree-trunk. You
say you can't be hurt. If you believe that, you hadn't
ought to be afraid to face me."

"I ain't fool enough ter take any chances," answered
Starkey. "Besides, I never said I couldn't be hurt. I
kin be hurt, but I kain't be done up. Jest now, I don't
want ter git hurt any more'n what I am. Consarn the
pesky luck, anyways!"

Starkey's good humor was swiftly passing. It was
plain he was hedged in by considerable peril, and that

this, and in the creeping panther's eye he read its hostile intentions against himself.

With bowie alone, in ordinary circumstances, Buffalo Bill would not have been loth to try conclusions with the big cat; but just now, when he had Starkey in his mind's eye, he could not think of trying conclusions with a panther. During the fight, Starkey might have lurched out from his concealment and helped the four-legged brute.

The man from Red Tail continued his vicious shaking of the tree-trunk. This plainly angered and annoyed the creeping cougar, but it kept its baleful eyes on the scout, as though intending to take vengeance upon him alone.

Buffalo Bill, never taking his glance from the gleaming eyes in front of him, gripped his bowie in his teeth and climbed carefully over the tree-roots. Getting behind the flat mass of roots, his feet on the "tap" root and his body over the swirling water behind the tree, he ducked downward just in time to avoid the panther's second leap.

The animal landed on the jagged ends of the roots and perched there, snapping and hissing. Meanwhile, the scout, with a display of acrobatic skill which must have amazed Starkey, got around the side of the roots and squirmed back on the tree-trunk. The beast was looking into the bubbling water, apparently wondering what had become of its intended prey.

"Whoop-ya!" screamed Starkey, wrathful because of the scout's successful escape. "Take ter the water, Buffler Bill, if y'u know when y'u're well off! Don't y'u come near me, or I'll plant a knife in yer ribs!"

"That's a game two can play at, Starkey," answered the scout.

With that he went on with the tactics he was pursuing

when the panther interrupted him. Planting his bowie in the tree-trunk, he made his way swiftly toward the branches.

Evidently Starkey had no mind to meet the scout among the leaves where the branches would interfere with the set-to. Before the scout had covered half the distance separating him from the branches, Starkey cautiously emerged from his concealment.

He was an evil-looking scoundrel, at best, but just now he was doubly repulsive. The panther had dragged its claws across his face, and a red flow had trickled down Starkey's throat and over his shoulder. The sleeves of the coat and shirt had likewise been scratched from his left arm, and the wounds from the claws were raw and bleeding. But no one had ever denied that Starkey was possessed of courage. He had plenty of bravery and plenty of determination. With his knife in his teeth, he crawled out to engage the scout.

Starkey was in a position to watch the panther and at the same time not shift his gaze from Buffalo Bill. It was needless for the scout to distract his attention and throw a glance behind him, for he could tell just what the animal was doing by watching his enemy's face.

"No Red Hand, ner no rope, ner no knife or bullet kin git me!" hissed Starkey, talking with the blade in his mouth.

"We'll see about that," was the scout's calm retort.

"Thar's goin' ter be warm doin's hyer in erbout a minit, an' if y'u——"

Starkey's words were blockaded by an instinctive gulp. The scout saw this, and likewise the expression of alarm that ran through Starkey's ensanguined face.

"The panther's goin' ter make another spring," said

Starkey huskily. "He'll land on you or me, one or t'other. If we're locked tergether, he'll git us both."

"That panther's not going to come between you and me, Starkey. Surrender, or take the consequences!"

Starkey had ceased his forward movement. The cottonwood, caught in a racing eddy, was being whirled around and around like a whirligig. The scout found himself looking now up the river, now down, and now at the banks. Some one he saw on one of the banks sent a thrill through him.

"Nick!" he yelled.

"Whoop-ee!" came back the voice of the old trapper, followed by a perfect rattle of metallic *clicks*.

Nomad was trying his revolvers, but not a cartridge would explode. He gave up with a yell of rage and despair.

"They won't go off, consarn 'em!" he whooped. "Somethin's wrong with ther pizen shells; they got soaked."

Over the trapper's shoulder hung a riata. Where he had found the rope the scout did not know, but it promised much at that moment.

"Use the rope!" yelled the scout.

Nomad was plunging along the high bank, trying to keep pace with the tree.

"I don't reckon I kin reach Starkey with et, Buffler," the trapper called back.

"Never mind Starkey—I'll take care of him. Rope the panther!"

From the intense look in Starkey's face, the scout could *feel* that the animal was about to spring. As the tree whirled, Buffalo Bill saw Nomad getting the rope in readiness for a throw.

It would be a long cast and successful only when the tree-roots, with the crouching panther on top of them, was turned nearest the bank where Nomad was making his preparations.

The scout, observing that Starkey was seemingly paralyzed into inaction by the turn of events, ventured a glance behind him.

The panther was hunching itself and working its claws against the root on which it was perched. A few seconds more, and—

Right then and there two important things happened. Starkey, seeking to take advantage of the scout's look behind, had risen and sprung forward, knife in hand. Buffalo Bill's bowie was thrust into the tree. Before he had time to withdraw the blade, Starkey was upon him, bending for a thrust.

The scout's fist leaped upward, catching the descending arm in the wrist. Starkey gave a yell of pain, and the knife fell from his limp fingers into the water.

Another moment and the scout was up and at his enemy with bare hands. By pressing his foot against the planted bowie he secured a sort of foothold as he reached for Starkey's throat with his gripping fingers.

All this happened swiftly, and while it was happening the tree-roots swung toward Nomad's side of the creek. The noosed rope flew outward over the curling waves, dropping around the panther's head as the animal was in mid-air. Nomad fell back on the rope with all his strength, and the cougar, stopped at half the length of its intended spring, dropped downward, half-on and half-off the tree-trunk.

Desperately the animal sought to regain the tree, Nomad pulling all the while to keep it off and drag it

into the water. The result of all this leverage on the side of the cottonwood set it to turning.

The entire three-cornered clash could be numbered in seconds, so swiftly did it proceed.

While Nomad and the panther were doing their worst, Starkey and Buffalo Bill were at hand-grips, swaying back and forth on their leaping and twisting foothold.

Both combatants were agile, but the scout was the stronger of the two. When the tree began to turn, he rushed Starkey back toward the branches.

Here Starkey fell with a crash. Keeping a firm clutch on the scout, he dragged him down among the branches.

Wedge into the boughs, it was impossible for the two men to fall one way or the other. They merely remained where they were and went over with the tree.

As the water closed around them, both cast off their holds and fought fiercely to get clear of the network of branches which, if that side of the tree remained under very long, would mean a double drowning.

The scout lost all track of Starkey. Kicking and floundering, he managed to escape the grip of the boughs and to propel himself upward to the surface. Just as he arose and gulped his lungs full of air, the tree-trunk swept past him and he grabbed for it.

He was as wet as a drowned rat, but he was safe. Not more than three feet from where he clung to the tree-trunk the panther was clinging, front paws over the bole and claws sunk in the wet bark. Between the brute and the shore the rope was taut.

Casting his gaze shoreward, the scout saw old Nomad and Witherspoon laying back on the riata and hauling in on it.

The panther was the connecting link between the rope and the tree, and so fiercely did the animal claw in that

the cottonwood was slowly dragged through the current and toward the bank.

But where was Starkey?

The scout looked around him over the troubled surface of the river, but could see no sign of the man from Red Tail.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BARRANCA.

Hanging to the log, Buffalo Bill and the panther were towed ashore by the trapper and the trader. The big feline, acting as a coupling-pin, never broke its hold until the bank was reached; thereupon, thoroughly frightened, the animal dropped off, leaped twenty feet up the slope at one bound, and overturned both men at the other end of the rope. There were no usable revolvers in the crowd, and no safe way of killing the panther, so Buffalo Bill, twisting his bowie out of the tree-trunk, slashed the rope in half. Away went the cougar, with ten feet of hemp slapping and slashing around its flying paws.

"Waugh!" gasped old Nomad, picking himself up and rubbing his bruised shins. "Of all ther pizen perdicymments I ever seen ye in, Buffler—an' I'm blamed ef I hev'n't seen ye in a plenty thet was shore ha'r-raisin'—this hyar grabs ther persimmon! Panther on one side o' ye an' Lon Starkey on t'other, both plumb hungry fer yer gore; an' underneath ye a rollin', bobbin', consarned cottonwood tree-trunk with er depth o' water consid'ble over yer head. Whoosh! Thet was shore goin' some. S'posin' I hadn't found thet rope, an' s'posin' I hadn't been handy by ter heave et? An' s'posin', furthermore, I hadn't made er good throw like I done? Et shore makes my skin crawl ter think o' what might hev took place."

"Wust fix I ever seen a ombray in, honest," added Witherspoon. "It was sartain a most onnery scrape fer

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a white man. However did ye come ter be hooked up like that?"

"We haven't any time to palaver just now," returned Buffalo Bill. "You two scout along the river-bank and see if you can find Starkey. Look close. There's a chance to capture him, right here, if he isn't at the bottom of the river. I reckon I'm as much surprised to find you fellows as you are to meet up with me, but we'll talk that over later. Go, now, and hunt for Starkey."

While Nomad and Witherspoon ran along the bank, the scout proceeded to empty the water out of his boots and to twist it out of his clothes. By the time he had got out of his gear, dried it as well as he could, and then got into it again, Nomad and Witherspoon had come running back.

"Any trace of Starkey?" asked the scout.

"Nary a sign," replied the trapper, "an' I reckon et's a cl'ar case o' a man bein' drowned thet' warn't never born ter be hung. Starkey's a goner, shore es shootin', Buffler. But we diskivered somethin' else, even ef we didn't find the feller from Red Tail."

"What did you find?"

"Ther barranca whar Starkey an' his Comanches had their hang-out."

This was news, indeed, but the scout was a little doubtful of its correctness.

"Running Panther wasn't leading us in this direction," said he.

"Shore not," piped up Witherspoon, "but mebbey he wasn't plannin' ter do that, anyways. Like enough, he was layin' ter lead us some'r's whar we could be trapped by Starkey an' his reds."

"Possibly," returned the scout. "What makes you think you've found the barranca?"

"Waal," went on Nomad, "we seen er couple o' Comanches ridin' inter a gash thet opened at ther aide o' ther water. They had ter ride inter ther creek, in order ter git inter ther place. One of 'em was ridin' Ajax, Buffler, an' t'other was straddle o' Witherspoon's buckskin, Comet."

"Thet's straight," added Witherspoon; "I'd know that thar Comet hoss as fur as I could see 'im."

"If that's the case," said the scout, "likely enough you're right in your surmise, and that we have stumbled upon the barranca. But suppose we have? What are we to do? My guns are in the creek, and the ones you and Witherspoon have, Nomad, seemed to have balked on you. If we showed ourselves in the barranca, it would be an invitation for the reds to come and take us in. That won't do, pards."

"Whar's Wild Bill an' the rest?" queried Nomad.

"I wish I could tell you," answered the scout gravely.

The trapper and the trader took alarm at once.

"Y'u don't mean ter say anythin' has happened ter 'em?" asked Witherspoon.

"Something must have happened to them, although just what it is I'm at a loss to say. We got a couple of miles from the place where you and Nomad fell into the stream, traveling slow, to give you a chance to catch up with us. You didn't come, and I began to get worried. Leaving Wild Bill, Perry, Cayuse, and the Apaches, I hurried back to see if I could find you. I didn't meet you, and I didn't find you where you had been left. While I was trying to figure out where you had gone I heard shooting back along the trail. When I got to where the rest of our pards were waiting, they

weren't there. The only one of the party I found was Running Panther, killed by a bullet. The rest had vanished."

"Waal, croakin' bullfrogs!" murmured the trapper, a blank look on his face. "Wouldn't thet jest nacherly rattle yer spurs? Whar d'ye think Wild Bill an' them others went ter, Buffler?"

"As I've said two or three times, old pard, I haven't the least notion," continued the scout. "While I was bushwhacking around, I heard a yell from the direction of the creek. When I got down to the water I found that tree lodged against the bank, and Bear Paw hitched to a sapling——"

"B'ar Paw!" exclaimed the trapper.

"Yes," and the scout went on to describe how he had inadvertently launched the tree, found Starkey and the panther in the branches, had a three-cornered set-to, and was finally snaked out of the flood by Nomad, Witherspoon, the rope, and the fierce cougar.

The trapper and the trader listened wide-eyed, dropping in a few remarks here and there by way of showing their intense interest.

"I had some talk with Starkey," pursued the scout, "and he gave me to understand that he had charged Wild Bill, Perry, and the rest of our pards with his Comanches. Our friends scattered, and Starkey didn't know whether any of them had been hurt or not. Where they scattered to is more than I know. Starkey was hunting for some of them when he heard the panther in the branches of the cottonwood and went to investigate. Now you know as much about it as I do, and can proceed to tell me why you fellows took French leave like you did. Didn't you know we would be waiting for you?"

"Shore we knowed et, Buffler," replied Nomad, "an' we wouldn't hev effaced ourselves like we did ef we hadn't thort et was fer ther best. Ye see, we ketched sight of er Comanche, peekin' over ther top o' ther bank, clost ter whar we was dryin' ourselves. Witherspoon snapped ther trigger at him, but thet's all et was—jest er snap, with no flyin' lead back o' et. We jumped fer Mister Comanche, but when we got ter ther top o' ther hill, he was scootin' away like er skeered coyote. We seen thet he hed Hide-rack under him, an' thet was enough ter make my blood bile. Fer some sort of er while, arter thet, I didn't think er nothin' but overhaulin' thet Injun. Witherspoon was as plumb anxious as what I was, an' we climbed after ther pizen red jest er smokin'."

"The trouble with we-all was," admitted Witherspoon, "we didn't pay no 'tention ter the way we was goin'. So, when the Comanche lost us, we was all at sea, not savvyin' how ter git back ter the place from whar we'd come. Course we had ter git back thar, in order ter git our bearin's, so'st ter foller the road you-all had took."

"Et was Hide-rack lured us off," said Nomad. "Et made me madder'n a hornet ter see an ornery Injun a-straddle o' ther critter's back. I ain't had er hoss since Nebuchadnezzar which I set sich er store on as I do on thet same Hide-rack. You know, Buffler, jest as well as me, thet Hide-rack was fullèr o' grit than a porkypine is o' quills, an' thet——"

"Yes, yes; I understand all that," broke in the scout impatiently.

He looked at the sun, which was just dipping down behind the hills in the west.

"Night's coming on," he continued, "and it will be a difficult matter to locate our missing pards after darkness

sets in. It doesn't seem to me, though, that they can be far off."

He cast a glance around him, and then across the river.

"Now thet Starkey's done fer," observed Nomad, "I reckon erbout ther on'y thing us rawhides hev got ter do is ter find our pards an' git our hosses back, hey?"

"That's the work cut out for us. If we could get the horses back first, we could hunt for our pards a good deal easier than we can on foot."

"Why not allymand-left over to'rds ther barranca? When night comes I allow we kin nose around ther place without gittin' ketched. Who knows, too, but we mout pick up a stray shootin'-iron er two?"

"The plan is a good one," said the scout. "Bear Paw, I suppose, is waiting for me two or three miles up the creek, but I can let him wait until we reconnoiter the barranca and get the lay of the ground."

"Wild Bill an' ther rest hev got the grub-bag," mourned Witherspoon, "an' I feel like nibblin' a little right now; but I reckon I kin pull my belt a notch an' stifle the feelin'."

"Are you sure none of the cartridges in your belt will go off, Nick?" asked the scout. "I don't see how all of them can be spoiled."

"I reckon I'll try some on 'em," returned the trapper. "Ye mout do ther same, Nate."

The trapper and the trader at once got busy pushing the spoiled cartridges out of their solid-framed, forty-five caliber Colts. Then, extracting other cartridges from their ammunition-belts, they filled up the cylinders again. The result was gratifying as well as surprising. The first time Nomad and Witherspoon pulled their triggers their revolvers spoke loudly.

"Hoop-a-la!" gloried the trapper. "I reckons Saucy Susan an' Scoldin' Sairy aire still able ter drop a few remarks. Hyar's one of 'em fer you, Buffler. I'll worry erlong with er single handful er hardware."

The feel of the hand-grip of the six-shooter sent a welcome thrill through the scout's nerves.

"Now we're all right," said he, "even if we do have to make a few brisk plays. Lead on to the barranca, Nick."

"Thet's me—hot-foot," and the old trapper started down the creek.

It was almost dark when the mouth of the barranca was reached. Close to the entrance of the defile the creek-bank flared into a fifty-foot hill, making it necessary for the pards to wade along a cliff, hugging the rock closely in order to keep their bodies well within the cliff's shadow.

The opening was so narrow that no more than a single horseman could have entered it at one time, and the walls were so high that their shadow filled the bottom of the pass with blankest darkness.

For some twenty feet the high, narrow walls continued, then suddenly broke away on either hand into a gulch that reminded Buffalo Bill somewhat of the Valley of the Red Hand.

The barranca was lighted up, at about the center, with a huge fire—and the very fact that they had a fire proved how little the Indians cared for the presence of the scout and his pards in that part of the hills. No doubt, the Comanches believed that the owners of the stolen horses had been successfully routed, and that they were then making the best use of their legs in the direction of Lime Gulch. If that was their notion, something else was proved; viz., that the Comanches knew

very little about the king of scouts and the bold *compadres* who trained with him.

By the light of the fire the scout was able to make a tolerably clear observation of the barranca. He saw that it was not more than three or four hundred feet in length, that it was closed in with precipitous walls, and that it was barred by a cliff at the farther end. In short, the barranca was what is known as a cul-de-sac—conforming, in this regard, with the Red Hand defile. Nowhere was it more than fifty feet across.

The fire had been built midway of the barranca's length, and about it were silhouetted the figures of many Comanches. The scout counted fifteen, while Nomad and Witherspoon made the number slightly more.

"Whar's ther hosses?" whispered Nomad. "Thet's ther main p'int."

"They're on the other side of the fire, Nick," answered the scout. "If they were this side of the Comanches, I'd risk our getting away with them from right under the Indians' noses."

"I kin see the critters," put in the trader. "They're clost ter the right-hand wall, on t'other side the fire. I don't reckon thar's any way o' gittin' 'em out. Even ef we was ter git past the Injuns, we'd hev ter ride plumb over 'em ter git ter the creek; an' thar don't seem ter be ary other way in er out o' the barranca but this."

"Thar's somethin' goin' on over thar," muttered Nomad, straining his eyes. "Two o' ther bucks aire plantin' a pole in the ground, thar, by the left o' the fire."

"I've been watching those bucks," said the scout, "and I don't like the looks of what they're doing. From the appearance of things, they've got a prisoner, and are gettin' ready to try some of their torture-tricks."

"Waugh!" growled Nomad, his gorge rising. "Ef they've got er pris'ner, Buffler, et must be one o' our pards. I wonder which one ther pizen varmints aire gittin' ready ter burn at ther stake?"

At that very moment the question was answered. The stake, having been made secure, two more of the Comanches dragged a bound prisoner into the circle of light cast by the fire.

"One o' Buffler Bill's 'Paches!" whispered Witherspoon excitedly.

"Chappo!" fumed old Nomad, his blood fairly boiling. "I wisht I had er cannon; I'd slam a solid shot right through ther hull measly gang. What d'ye think o' thet, Buffler? Them whelps hev captered Chappo, ther best 'Pache o' ther three. Et looks like they was intendin' ter give him ther limit. Kain't we do somethin'? Consarn et, we *got* ter do somethin'. We kain't stand hyar, like stoughton bottles, an' see pore Chappo burnt at ther stake."

Buffalo Bill understood that as well as Nomad. Of all the three Apaches, Chappo was the one the scout liked best. And Chappo's history wasn't much of a recommendation for him, at that. In his earlier years he had gone out after his own father, and brought in his scalp for a government bounty of \$200. But since that time Chappo had associated with the scout and his pards, and had changed. In all things he was loyal, and he had faced death countless times to forward the work of his loved chief, Pa-e-has-ka.

"I'm thinking, Nomad," muttered the scout. "We can't charge that outfit of red scoundrels—only three of us, with but four revolvers, which may or may not go off when we try to use them. We've got to work a ruse of some kind."

"Think et up, Buffler, think et up," implored the trapper. "Use thet brain o' your'n as ye never used et before. Waugh! Looket thar, will ye? They're slap-pin' Chappo in the face with their hands an' ticklin' him with ther p'int's o' their knives. Oh, but I wisht the rest o' our pards was hyar!"

"Chappo's game, all right," murmured Witherspoon admiringly. "He never flinches er turns a ha'r."

"Thet's his stripe, Nate," answered the trapper. "Buffler wouldn't hev no other kind o' Injuns about him. Thar, they're ropin' him ter the post. Say, ain't thet Chappo boy plumb fine? Thar never was a better-built Injun. He stands up like he was ther king-bee o' ther festivities. Hear 'im! What's he sayin'?"

Chappo was shouting something as they tied him to the stake. Breathlessly the three in the barranca listened.

"He knows a little Comanche," said the scout, "and he's using it. He's calling the Comanches squaws and horse-stealers, and he's calling on them generally to watch how a pard of Pa-e-has-ka's can die."

"Wisht I was clost enough ter pat him on ther back," gurgled the admiring Nomad; "and," he added fiercely, "ter hand a couple o' them Comanches what's comin'. Ain't ye thort o' nothin' yet, Buffler?"

"Yes, I've got a plan, but it's a long chance whether it succeeds or not. Witherspoon, do you think you could go to the entrance of the barranca and give a call in Comanche?"

"What sort of er call, Buffler?"

"Why, a call for help. Imitate Starkey's voice, if you can, and tell the reds it's Starkey calling. Splash around in the water. The redskins, maybe, will take the bait and rush this way in a body. They'll come on foot if they think they've only got to go as far as the creek."

When they come, make yourself scarce. Get back beyond the cliff, and take to the hills where they can't find you."

"If I kain't keep clear of 'em," returned the old trader, "I reckons I ort ter be ketched. But what good is it goin' ter do coixin' of 'em out yar?"

"Nomad and I will work the other end of the trick. We'll worm our way into the barranca, around the wall, and we'll get to the horses. After picking out those belonging to our pards, we'll stampede the rest, rushing them for this narrow pass. Somewhere behind the stampede, Nick and I will come with our own mounts—and with Chappo."

"How'll you an' Nick git through with all them 'ar Injuns facin' you? 'Pears ter me, Buffler Bill, like you-all hev picked out the hottest end o' the bargain."

"That's what I want to do. Before you set up your cry, Witherspoon, you must give Nick and me plenty of time to reach the horses and get ready for the stampede. Half an hour will be enough. Can you guess at that?"

"Shore I kin; but durin' that half-hour what's goin' ter happen ter Chappo?"

"They won't begin the critical part of the torture before that time. I know the Indian custom well enough to be sure of that."

"Waal, begin makin' yer play, Buffler Bill, whenever you an' Nick aire ready. Ye kin bank on it that I'll do my share, jest as you've laid it down."

"Then et's up ter us, Buffler," put in Nomad impatiently; "let's be movin'."

"Don't forget that we're to have a half-hour, Witherspoon," said the scout.

"Ye kin gamble on gittin' it, Buffler Bill."

Stepping through the entrance, Buffalo Bill dropped

to his hands and knees and began circling the right-hand wall. Nomad followed him.

A more desperate undertaking could hardly be imagined. There were fifteen or more of the bloodthirsty Comanches in the barranca, and if the scout and the trapper were discovered, and compelled to fight their way out through the entrance, they had only two unreliable revolvers to fall back on.

The first part of their crawling progress was fairly safe. The danger would come as they arrived opposite the camp-fire, where the glow of it struck redly against the rock wall and would betray them to any chance eye turned in their direction.

Fortunately for the pards, Chappo, for some little time, would form the center of attraction for the Comanches. The stake had been planted on the left of the fire, and the creeping pards were to the right of it—consequently, the eyes of the Indians would be turned away from them.

Chappo, bound hand and foot and fastened with ropes to the stake, bore himself with a contemptuous, undaunted air. From time to time he shouted his taunting remarks, calling the Comanches squaws who did not know how to torture. Thus nagged, the red captors went from one extreme to another. They threw their hatchets at Chappo, trying to see how close they could come to him without striking him; then they got their bows and poisoned arrows, and sent whistling shafts within an inch of his head. But the Apache, throughout it all, never so much as winced.

With their eyes on Chappo a part of the time, and always on the Comanches, the two venturesome pards crawled farther and farther into the zone of peril.

CHAPTER XIV.

A DARING RESCUE.

As has been stated, the barranca was no more than fifty feet from wall to wall at its widest. The fire was in the middle of the defile; therefore, when the scout and the trapper came abreast of it, while working their way toward the horses along the right-hand wall, they were about twenty-five feet from the fire, and not more than fifteen or twenty feet from the nearest savages.

Fortune, they say, favors the brave. Certainly Buffalo Bill and Nomad were favored that night. For a dozen yards they were obliged to crawl through leaping firelight which made their bodies plainly visible against the wall, but not one Comanche eye saw them.

Fifty feet beyond the fire and the scene of torture were the horses. There was no grass in the barranca and the horses were tethered to scrubby, low-growing bushes.

The difficulty which now presented itself to the pards was that of picking out the various mounts belonging to their party, grouping the animals together, and making ready for a dash as soon as the Comanches rushed toward the creek in answer to Witherspoon's cries for help.

How to circulate among the horses, picking out those wanted in the half-light and bunching them in one place, all without arousing the suspicions of the Comanches, was a problem.

"It's a good thing for us, pard," whispered the scout, as he and Nomad drew in among the tethered animals, "that the Comanches are drawing matters to a con-

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clusion with Chappo; a good thing for us, and a good thing for Chappo—in the end. If it wasn't for that, we'd be discovered sure, and there'd be no helping the Apache when the rub comes."

"Whar'll we begin collectin' ther critters, Buffler?" queried the trapper.

"On the other side of the herd. That will be our proper place when we start the stampede for the barranca."

"Hoop-a-la!" caroled the trapper, under his breath. "Hyar's Hide-rack; we'll start our selected bunch with him."

"And here's the buckskin horse Comet," murmured the scout. "Work as quick as you can, Nick, for we haven't more than fifteen minutes left us."

With wonderful dexterity the pards unhitched Hide-rack and Comet from the scrub and worked them through the herd to the side nearest the end wall of the barranca. Securing the animals there, they pushed noiselessly back for more of the stolen animals. On their way they saw that the Comanches were heaping fagots about the feet of Chappo and making ready for the last act of torture.

Ajax, Wild Bill's horse, and the mount belonging to Perry were easily located, since none of the Indian ponies bore saddles. These two animals were led off to join Hide-rack and Comet.

On their second return to the fast-diminishing herd, the pards saw that the fagots had been piled to Chappo's knees.

"We got ter hustle now ef we ever did!" breathed Nomad.

"We'll gather in Navi and the three Apache mounts all at this next trip," returned the scout.

It was not hard to find Navi, and the Apache ponies were identified in the gloom by their rawhide bridles. With each of the pards leading two horses, the return up the barranca was again made.

There were now eight horses in the number selected by the scout and the trapper.

"We'll take two riatas," said the scout, "and tie three horses on each rope. Give the animals plenty of room, so they can straggle out and go in single file through the barranca exit. I'll ride Ajax, Nick, and, of course, you'll take Hide-rack. Tie your string of led animals to Hide-rack's saddle. I'll have to lead the whole bunch, while you're cutting loose the Comanche ponies and making ready to release Chappo."

Two riatas were taken from the saddles of Hide-rack and Ajax. Working quickly, the scout's instructions were carried out in record time. Buffalo Bill climbed upon Ajax, tied his string of three to the saddle-horn, and gripped the bit-rings of Hide-rack with his left hand. In his right hand he clutched the revolver loaned him by Nomad.

The trapper, taking his knife, started to cut loose the Comanche ponies. He had not glided a dozen steps into the scrub before he and Buffalo Bill saw a Comanche coming hurriedly in their direction. Being between them and the fire, the Indian could be clearly seen.

It was plain that the movements among the horses had at last been detected, and that the hostiles had delegated one of their number to make an investigation. The scout and the trapper were in the gloom. The Comanche, coming directly away from the bright fire, was unable to see distinctly, and bore swiftly down toward the point where old Nomad was standing.

There was no need of instructions then. The trapper

knew exactly what was expected of him, and crouched and waited. The Comanche drew swiftly abreast of him. The scout saw a quick movement, heard a stifled yell, the thud of a knife, and then the fall of a body. A moment later Nomad was back at his pard's side.

"Hyar's er shootin'-iron, Buffler," he remarked, "thet's warranted ter tork whenever ye tech ther trigger."

"Keep it for Chappo," returned the scout. "I'll be close when he's released. Give him a quick tip as to what we're trying to do, and cut out one of the ponies for him. Off with you, Nick, because——"

At that juncture Witherspoon tuned up from the mouth of the barranca. First came the crack of a revolver, calling the immediate attention of the Comanches; then came the yell, in Comanche lingo:

"This way, warriors! To the creek, the creek! The Chief from Red Tail calls on his braves! Help! Help!"

After that there was a mighty splashing. Witherspoon's imitation of the husky voice of Lon Starkey was admirable.

The torch had already been applied to the heap of fagots about Chappo's feet, and the blaze was gathering volume slowly. But from this spectacle every Comanche turned, grabbed for his guns, and rushed toward the creek.

There were at least ten ponies to be stampeded. Nomad ran from one to the other and slashed at the tethering-thong. He worked swiftly, yet the fleet Comanches were crowding into the barranca entrance before he had finished.

Leaping away from the last cayuse, the trapper rushed for the stake where Chappo was tied. Jumping among the blazing fagots, he scattered them viciously with his feet.

"*Amigo!*" he called. "Pa-e-has-ka an' Nomad aire savin' yer bacon, Chappo. Buffler's behind, with er string o' ther stolen hosses. Ye're ter jump fer ther nighest, take this hyar gun, an' see how quick ye kin git through ther barranca entrance to ther creek. Savvy?"

"Ai!" gurgled Chappo.

If he felt any surprise or joy over his release, he did not show it. While he was talking, Nomad was using the knife that had already done such gruesome work. Slash, slash went the blade through the rope-coils that bound Chappo to the stake, then slash, slash through the cords at wrist and ankle. Chappo leaped through the smoke of the scattered fagots, dodged the loose ponies that were racing past, caught the revolver out of Nomad's hand, and whirled.

The scout, with seven horses in tow, had thundered up.

"Here, pards!" he called, drawing in his loping herd with difficulty. "Mount and rush the stampeded animals down the barranca. Quick on it, now!"

Chappo took the back of the nearest pony at a flying leap. Again old Nomad used his knife, cutting the pony free of the others.

Two seconds later the trapper was on Hide-rack's back, his blood bounding through his veins and singing in his ears. This was the thing he loved! Buffler, and him, and Chappo, with a stampeding herd ahead and fifteen Comanches! Hoop-a-la! Who wouldn't give his eye-teeth to be a pard of the king of scouts?

In an abandon of savage joy, the redoubtable old man, hero of a thousand fights, lifted his voice exultantly.

"Way, thar, ye pizen varmints! Way fer ther boss o' ther plains an' ther mountings! Pard Buffler, ther orig'nal human thunderbolt, backed with two other me-

jum-sized agents o' death an' dee-struction, aire b'arin' down on ye! Way, thar, er git trompled on! Whoop-ya! Go et, ye pizen critters!"

The deep voice rang through the barranca in clarion tones. The stampeding horses gathered speed in their flight. An Indian tore through the mouth of the barranca.

Bang!

It was Chappo's weapon that spoke, and the Comanche, who had been one of the chief torturers, melted downward. A second dusky form showed itself in the barranca entrance, but was knocked over by the frantic ponies as they plunged madly into the narrow pass. One by one they flickered through the opening, leaping and crowding on each other's heels.

Astounded yells came from the direction of the creek. There was splashing in the swollen waters and other sounds that indicated panic.

"We got 'em on ther run!" bellowed old Nomad. "This hyar is whar Pard Buffler evens up fer ther tree-trunk drift! Chappo is saved an' ther hosses is saved! Tune up, yeh whipperwills, an' sing fer glory! I feel like er brass band, an' I got ter toot!"

Buffalo Bill led his pards through the narrow pass. The scrambling ponies cleared away before him, and Ajax landed in the creek with a mighty splash.

Patter patter, patter came a rain of lead against the rock face of the cliff. Some of the Comanches were in the creek and some were across it. All had been struggling to lay hands on their runaway horses, but all stopped as the yelling Nomad and the scout and Chappo rushed from the barranca into the creek. Weapons were discharged again and again, but the three daring horse-

men, with their string of led animals, faded up the creek like so many wraiths.

Back to the astounded Comanches came the last taunting cry of the Cyclone from the Niobrara and the River Platte:

"Back ter yer wickiups, yeh pizen reds, yeh squaws, yeh bunglin' hoss-thieves! Yer chief's in ther bottom o' ther Navajo, ther stolen hosses hev been snaked out o' yer hands, an' yer prisoner hes vamoosed! Cl'ar out an' shake hands with yerselves bekase Pa-e-has-ka didn't treat ye no wuss. Hoop-a-la!"

The last, exultant yell died in a distant splash of water at the cliff's base, and then all was silence, save for the noise made by the Comanches themselves and by their locoed ponies.

Far up the creek, in a place where the banks were sloping and the pards secure, the scout called a halt. Nomad was babbling like a delighted six-year-old.

"Oh, this hyar is livin', this is! This hyar is doin' things thet's wuth while! Rubbin' elbows with death fer the life of er pard, an' usin' yer brains as well as yer muscle, thet's what I calls ther highest expression o' human activity—which is somethin' of er remark fer ole Nomad ter let go of, all alone by hisself! We done et, Buffler, we did so! Chappo didn't even scorch er mocasin, although ther smoke was gittin' purty thick an' ther fire was drawin' close. Erbout ther on'y thing left ter complete my full enjoyment is ter hyer from thet ole rayhide, Nate Witherspoon. In my rejoicin' I was plumb fergittin' thet trader man. Ef he was hurt in ther scrimmage——"

"Which he warn't!" boomed a voice from near at hand, as a figure forged down the slope. "Did you-all git that 'ar Comet hoss o' mine?"

"He's here, Witherspoon," answered Buffalo Bill. "Come and take charge of him."

The trader's joy in recovering Comet was almost as great as Nomad's in getting hold of Hide-rack. Releasing the buckskin from the riata, the trader climbed to the animal's back.

"Chappo," said he, "I could look inter the barranca, an' I held off hollarin' until the reds begun lightin' the torch an' passin it ter the wood pile. Then I cut loose. How'd you-all think I done?"

"Ye done fine, Nate," declared Nomad. "I reckon ye had ter scamper some ter git out o' ther way o' them reds when they come b'ilin' inter the creek."

"It was plumb easy," asserted the trader. "I sneaked off down the cliffside without er ripple. I knowed you-all 'u'd come this yar way, so I didn't halt until I'd put a good distance between me an' trouble. This yar sample o' the way Buffler Bill an' pards does things is an eye-opener fer me. Gee-Christopher, but it was great! I'd never hev reckoned it could 'a' been done. However did you-all pull it off?"

"We'll ride up the creek and look for Bear Paw," said the scout, "and we can talk as we ride."

The narrative of what took place in the barranca was briefly recounted for Witherspoon's benefit. The scout's remarks were extremely brief, but Nomad's glorying was responsible for a good deal of circumlocution on his part.

The scout cut short his trapper's lengthy talk by a demand on Chappo for what happened to the rest of the party.

"Heap tough," said Chappo. "We make um wait for Pa-e-has-ka, all same in place where Pa-e-has-ka left us. Bymby, whoosh! up come heap many Comanches. White

braves say run for rocks. We run, all same jack-rabbit, one go this way, one go that way, everybody all over. Running Panther him drop at first fire. Chappo stumble, roll down um hill. Comanches ketch um, take um to barranca, try burn um. Pa-e-has-ka save um. Pa-e-has-ka great chief; Nomad great chief; trader him great chief, too. Ugh!"

That is the manner in which Chappo, prince of red trailers, neeled off the experience which nearly cost him his life. Never a word about his defiance of the tortures or the narrowness of his escape.

"We was plumb proud o' ye, Chappo," spoke up Nomad, when the Apache was done. "I never thort I could be proud o' er Injun, but ye're an exception. Waugh! Say, ye stood et fine."

"Evidently," resumed the scout, shifting the subject to a matter nearer his thoughts, "Wild Bill, Dunc Perry, Little Cayuse, Yuppah, and Pedro escaped capture. If they had been taken prisoners, we should have found them in the barranca. They may have got together, or they may now be roaming separately through the hills, looking for us. It's hard to tell what the situation is."

"One thing is shore, Buffler," said Nomad. "Wild Bill, Dunc Perry, Little Cayuse, an' them two 'Paches aire too wise ter let themselves git captered now. They'll steer cl'ar o' ther Comanches; ef they don't, then ye kin gamble they'll give ther Comanches a trouncin', ef so be they come within pistol-shot of 'em."

"Mebby," put in Witherspoon, "some o' them pards hev been done up a'ready."

"I don't think so," returned the scout. "The talk I had with Starkey on the cottonwood leads me to believe that all of our pards escaped—excepting Chappo."

"Ye couldn't gamble none on what that Starkey said."

"I could gamble, all right, on the truth of what he told me while we were adrift on the tree. It's his stripe to glory in a shooting or a capture of my pards. The fact that he didn't do it, it seems to me, proves that they fooled him and his reds."

"Waal, I'd like right well ter nibble at some o' the contents o' that 'ar ration-bag," murmured Witherspoon.

"Waugh!" said Nomad. "Pull up yer belt another notch."

"I hev pulled up the belt, Nick, until it's fair cuttin' me in two, but I'm honin' fer grub in spite o' it. We've been rammin' around consid'able sence we last set in at grub-pile, an' nothin' makes a man hongrier'n excitement an' work."

While the trapper and trader were exchanging remarks, the scout led the procession around the jutting spur which he had passed during the afternoon just before he had begun his drift on the cottonwood.

The night had brightened with moon and stars, and the scout pressed eagerly forward. Nomad, Witherspoon, and Chappo were leading the horses, and this left the scout free to hurry ahead and look for Bear Paw.

When the rest came around the spur, the scout had drawn Ajax to a halt by the sapling where Bear Paw had been tied.

"Did ye find ther hoss, Buffler?" shouted Nomad.

"No," came the puzzled response, "Bear Paw isn't here."

"Not thar?" echoed the trapper and trader, in a breath.

"He's disappeared."

"Starkey must hev come out o' the creek an' come back fer him," suggested Witherspoon.

"Not on yer life, Nate," said the trapper decisively. "Thet Red Tail feller hes been emptied inter ther Colorado, by now, an' erbout ter-morrer he'll be tearin' through ther Grand Cañon, on ther way ter the Gulf o' Californy an' them man-eatin' sharks thet Buffler an' me met oncet. Ye kin bank yer gilt thet Lon Starkey hes been rubbed out."

"Whar's the hoss, then?"

"Some one else may have happened along and taken him," returned the scout.

"Not them Comanches in the barranca, Buffler," demurred Nomad; "we'd hev seen B'ar Paw ef he'd been in thet thar gash."

"Perhaps there are other Comanches loose in the hills."

"Thet's er fact; an' mebbys, Buffler, B'ar Paw broke loose an' hes gone pikin' back ter Lime Gulch, huntin' fer you."

"The horse didn't break loose, Nick," the scout answered. "The sapling doesn't offer any evidence that the horse made a get-away. We'll hang out here for the rest of the night and look over the ground in the morning."

The horses were turned out to grass, and the weary pards laid down on the ground, saddle-blankets under them and saddles for pillows. A watch was kept throughout the remainder of the night, Chappo going on duty first, then calling Witherspoon. The trader, at the end of his period of sentry-duty, called the scout, and the scout roused up Nomad for the balance of the night.

All was peaceful on that part of the creek. If the baffled and panic-stricken Comanches were skulking through the hills, looking for their foes, they wandered far from the scout and those with him.

The night ended with an alarm. Nomad passed around quickly, arousing the sleepers.

"What's to pay, Nick?" demanded the scout.

The sun was rising and a slight mist hung over the surging waters of the creek.

"Gun-work, Buffler. Listen, will ye?"

All sat up and inclined their heads in listening attitude. From far off to the south came distinct sounds of firing, the hoarse *sping* of rifles broken into by the fainter and higher note of revolvers.

The scout leaped to his feet and began gathering up his riding-gear.

"What d'ye think o' thet, Buffler?" queried Nomad anxiously.

"I think our pards are holed up somewhere and standing the Comanches off," replied the scout, hurrying to Ajax and working with saddle and bridle. "Wild Bill, Perry, and the rest must be at a disadvantage, inasmuch as they have to fight on foot and with only their revolvers. The Comanches are mounted and have rifles. Early morning, as you all know, is the favorite hour for Indians to make an attack."

"Them Comanches we fooled in ther barranca must hev pulled themselves tergether, ketched up their ponies, an' gone lookin' fer us," hazarded Nomad, busy with his own riding-equipment; "but, instid o' findin' us, they spotted our pards, an' now ther *baile* is on with ther music. We'll hustle reinforcements ter the scene an' make ther Comanches think they've been hit with another tornader. Hoop-a-la, *compadres*! Chappo, we're shore gittin' plenty fun this grass."

While the other horses were being made ready, the scout made some investigations in the vicinity of the sapling. There were bootmarks in the soft ground—

most of them, of course, Starkey's. But there was another pair of boot-prints, easily distinguished from Starkey's.

As the scout climbed into his saddle and joined his waiting pards, he was feeling easier in his mind about Bear Paw.

"One of our pards found Bear Paw, pards," declared Buffalo Bill. "The horse was taken from the sapling by a man with civilized foot-gear—and it wasn't Starkey, either. Follow me, and we'll reach the scene of the clash to the south of us."

"More fightin'," murmured Witherspoon, "an' I'm as empty as er whisky-bar'l thet's been nine days in er gold-camp."

CHAPTER XV.

THE ROUND-TOPPED HILL.

The music of rifles and revolvers continued without interruption as the scout and his pards journeyed south. It grew in volume as they advanced, the roar of rifles interspersed with the clatter of revolvers. Sometimes the firing would cease for a space, then be renewed with fresh vigor.

"Wild Bill, Perry, Leetle Cayuse, an' the 'Paches aire shorely givin' er good account o' theirselves," asserted Nomad. "They're peckin' away at them red riflemen like all-possessed."

"How d'ye know, Nick," asked Witherspoon, "that all the missin' pards are thar?"

"You can tell that from the volume of revolver-shooting," answered the scout, looking back as he plugged along. "Five men are handing out those small-caliber bullets, and they're working with both hands, at that."

"Wisht I had as much savvy as you-all, Buffler Bill," returned the trader. "When ye kain't use yer eyes, ye use yer ears. It must hev took a heap o' trainin' ter make yer ears answer fer yer eyes."

The rough country was gashed and seamed, and the scout, who kept the lead, chose the defiles, angling this way and that, but keeping a general southerly course. Presently he drew rein in what appeared to be a great circular valley. The shooting came from over the valley's crest.

"Star right here, pards," said Buffalo Bill, "while I

do a little scouting and get the lay of the land. Don't move until I come back."

"All we got ter do ter git inter the fightin'," said Witherspoon, "is ter cross the ridge in front o' us."

"Yes, and we might get into more trouble than we could handle by going it blind. We'll savvy the situation before we make our play. Wait here."

With that the scout turned Ajax along the valley, and the curve of it quickly carried him out of sight of his waiting comrades.

He found that the valley continued its circular course. There was no break in the right-hand bank, and only one on the left-hand side. The break, apparently, led to the scene of hostilities. But it was a crooked break, and the scout's peering eyes were baffled by a turn of rocks. Through the opening the rattle of musketry came to his ears in redoubled volume.

The scout spurred on through the valley. In twenty minutes he had rejoined his pards, coming in on them from a direction opposite that along which he had departed.

"Waugh!" muttered Nomad, "I wasn't lookin' fer ye ter come from thet thar way, Buffler."

"This valley," explained the scout, "is a big circle. Hold my horse, Nick, while I climb the slope and get a closer view of the situation. This is a case where it is well to look before we jump. A hasty move might spoil everything."

Dismounting, the scout passed his reins to his trapper pard and crawled up the bank, from over the crest of which came the rattle of firearms.

The scout had lost his hat in the Navajo, and had knotted a handkerchief for head-gear.

Cautiously he gained the top of the slope and peered over. What he saw sent a thrill through his nerves.

He was looking down on a sort of circular arena. In the center of the arena was a round-topped hill, and skirting the base of the hill was an inner circular valley, conforming in shape to the outer valley, only smaller. The inner valley was lined with huge boulders, and from behind these rocks the Comanches were firing. The Indians, so far as the scout could see, had scattered so as to completely surround the base of the round-topped hill.

The top of the hill was pierced with a deep gash, cutting it through north and south. The scout was looking at the hill from the north, and he discovered that the open end of the gash had been heaped with stones, no doubt to make it a safer refuge for his besieged pards.

The Comanches, loading and firing, had far-and-away the best of the battle. Their rifles carried farther, and whenever a head showed itself they pecked away at it. The revolvers of the besieged men were of too short range to be of much avail, although they were kept going incessantly.

Of course the Comanches dared not leave their retreat and charge up the hill, for that would have invited slaughter and defeat. Their play was to sit tight, annoy the besieged men, and capture them when thirst drove them out or weakened them beyond further resistance.

The scout, as he watched, saw Wild Bill's hat lift above the rim of the gash. Only the crown showed, but instantly half a dozen bullets leaped at it from all around the base of the hill.

The hat dropped. Another instant and Wild Bill daringly showed himself and blazed away with two revolvers, laughing defiance. Hickok was out of sight

again in a second. His bullets had chipped pieces from the rocks sheltering two Comanches, but had done no damage.

Such a one-sided fight could have but one termination—unless the scout, and those with him, were able to drive the Comanches away. Illy armed, as were the scout, the trapper, trader, and Chappo, what could they hope to accomplish?

For some minutes the scout studied the situation. His eyes roved toward the western side of the circular valley, as his thoughts circled about the difficulty, and there he saw the crooked break that led from the inner valley to the outer. A pony's head showed itself, around a shoulder of the break. There, he reasoned, the Comanches had left their ponies.

Instantly a plan of campaign flashed through his mind, and he turned away and slid down the slope to his waiting companions.

"What did ye find out, Buffler?" queried Nomad impatiently.

The scout briefly gave a résumé of the situation.

"We gotter git right down ter bizness," said Witherspoon. "S'posin' we flock over the ridge an' jump inter them reds like a tornader. Huh? Thar ain't nothin' else we-all kin do."

"Yes, there is, Witherspoon," returned the scout. "That's altogether too risky, poorly armed as we are. I've got a scheme that beats that."

"Shore ye hev," observed the trapper. "No sitiwa-tion is ever battet up ter Pard Buffler thet he kain't take keer of. What's ther play, pard?"

"Witherspoon and Chappo will steal into that break, first off," replied the scout, "and bring away the Comanche ponies——"

"Waugh!" breathed Nomad. "They stole our hosses an' now we'll steal theirs. *Bueno!* What next?"

"When the horses are out here, we'll take them all over the rim of this valley, to a place that's fairly safe, and leave Chappo to watch them; after that, Nick, you, and Witherspoon and I will distribute ourselves on three sides of that inner valley, poke our weapons over the crest, make a noise like a regiment of infantry, and see if we can't scare the Comanches out."

"Good, good!"

"If they run into the break after their ponies, of course they'll find that the ponies are not there. That will increase their panic. While they're charging around the outer valley, here, we'll call to Wild Bill, Perry, and the rest and have them join us; then we'll all make for the horses, get into our saddles, and make a run of it. We'll get back to Witherspoon's adobe, and then, if the Comanches want their ponies, they'll have to come after them."

"An' we-all'll give 'em what-fer, right from the shoulder, if they does," finished Witherspoon. "I could shore work better if I had hunk o' 'jerked' ter chew on," he added.

"Oh, fergit yer stummick fer a spell, Nate," said Nomad. "Don't understand how ye kin think o' eatin' with all this hyar excitement goin' on."

"I kin think o' grub when I kain't think o' nothin' else."

Chappo, understanding his instructions, was already off his cayuse and proceeding down the valley toward the break. Witherspoon slid down from the buckskin's back and followed.

When they were well away, Buffalo Bill and Nomad tied the horses together and went up the slope to watch

the Comanches and guard against possible discovery of the horse-lifting operations.

The bloodless battle was still going on, much ammunition being wasted upon the rocks.

"Our pards could hang out thar, on top er thet round-topped hill, Buffler, until ther crack o' doom ef et wasn't fer ther need o' water."

"That's what I'm afraid of," answered the scout. "The Comanches, so far as Wild Bill, Perry and the rest are concerned, appear to have everything their own way."

"But they ain't figgerin' on *us*," chuckled the trapper. "Them reds'll dance ter diff'rent music, humby."

"We'll hope so, anyhow."

While the volleying was kept up between the base of the hill and the top, Chappo and Witherspoon worked with care and alacrity. Thirteen ponies were smuggled out of the break and added to the horses in the outer valley.

The move was not discovered by any of the attacking redskins, and the scout and the trapper slid back down the slope.

"Thirteen," muttered Nomad. "Thet's er shore unlucky number an' don't speak well fer what's goin' ter happen ter ther Comanches. I reckon the loss o' Starkey won't leave much fight in 'em when we shows our hands."

"It's a wonder they fight as well as they do, considering the loss of their leader," said the scout. "There must be a brave among them who's a good deal of a power, and right handy with his head-work. Now to carry out the rest of our plan."

The horses were led over the ridge enclosing the outer valley, and then moved around to a point southward of the valley. In this manner, if the Comanches began

tracking their stolen ponies, they would be some time across the ridge before they were able to set eyes on their mounts. While they were looking, the far-sighted scout was planning to get Wild Bill, Perry and the rest out of their predicament and across the two intervening ridges to the place where Chappo was keeping watch of the horse-herd.

Chappo was to busy himself, while Buffalo Bill, Nomad, and Witherspoon were making their foray, dividing the captured ponies among the horses belonging to the scout's pards, so that each in the party would have ready the ones he was to take in tow. When the scout, the trapper, and the trader returned, as they hoped, with their besieged pards, everything must be in readiness for instant flight.

Having settled these preliminary matters, the three white men recrossed the outer ridge and halted below, in the outer valley.

"Now," said the scout, "the plan is to make a surround of three, leaving the break connecting the inner valley and this one open for the Comanches. We'll climb up the inner ridge on three sides, make as much noise as we can, and open our revolver-play. The Comanches will be within easy range of our revolvers, and the rocks, while protecting them from Wild Bill and the rest on the round-topped hill, won't protect them from *us*. Either the reds will have to run, or they'll have to get around their barricades and expose themselves to the fire of our pards."

"They'll run afore they do that," averred the trader.

"So I think," said the scout, "especially if we can make so much noise that they'll imagine there's a crowd of *us*. Now, I'll go up the ridge right here, Nomad will go around opposite me, and you, Witherspoon, will go half-

way around. I'll wait until I see the heads of both of you across the ridge-crest, then we'll let loose with all the bedlam we can raise."

"Kerect," answered the trapper, "I'll raise er plenty, Buffler."

"You-all kin count on me ter do my share," said Witherspoon.

The trader and the trapper started off together. When they had vanished around the base of the circular ridge, Buffalo Bill began his ascent. Just under the crest he picked out a secure position, where he could see the ridge across and around to his right without being seen by the Comanches below, and waited.

Wild Bill, Dunc Perry, Cayuse, Yuppah, and Pedro were too busy looking down the hill to make any discoveries on the crest of the ridge.

Ammunition among both besiegers and besieged must have been running low, for the firing had become desultory. Only now and then a rifle spoke, and the answers of the revolvers were few and far between.

Witherspoon's head was the first to show itself to the scout. A little later Nomad bobbed into sight. The scout waved his hand, and then a surprise was sprung upon the Comanches below.

Revolvers cracked, but they could hardly be heard for the tremendous hubbub raised by the three white men. A clamor of yells hurled itself over the ridge from three sides, and it must have seemed to the redskins that a company of soldiers was making an attack.

The first moment of panic, the scout knew, would decide the issue of the day. If the Comanches took to their heels, on the spur of the moment, they would run into the break, discover the loss of their ponies, and then, with increased panic, stampede for the valley. But, if

they halted to deliberate, they would be almost certain to discover the weakness of the attacking force, and might put up a fight and turn the tables against the scout, the trapper, and the trader.

But the Comanches, stricken dumb by the unexpected yells and shooting, did not pause to deliberate. All about the round-topped hill they leaped from their boulders and dashed pell-mell for the break leading into the outer valley.

The noise and confusion were added to by those on top of the hill. Seeing the scout, Nomad, and Witherspoon, Wild Bill, Perry and the rest at once divined that here was a move for their rescue. They sprang up on top of the hill and sent bullets after the fleeing reds, contributing in no slight measure to their panic.

Wild Bill, mounted on Bear Paw, showed himself at the end of the gash, and began spurring furiously down the slope in pursuit of the Comanches.

"Hickok!" roared the scout, lifting himself to the top of the ridge. "Let up on that! Come this way, all of you! This way, pards! Hustle!"

The stentorian shout reached every one of the besieged party. They did not understand, of course, what the scout wanted them for, but that was no time for explanations.

Wild Bill rushed down the slope, across the valley, and then up the ascent on the other side.

"Pard Cody," he shouted, "you're ace-high, now and all the time! The reds had us. We might have held out for the day, but we'd have been goners some time to-night. I never wanted a drink so badly in my life. Here's your horse. Have you any notion where the rest of our mounts are?"

Hickok scrambled clear of Bear Paw and the scout swung to the saddle.

"You'll find Chappo in charge of all the horses across that outer ridge, Pard Hickok," he answered. "Hustle over there and stand ready to make a get-away as soon as the rest of our pards arrive."

"Better and better!" whooped Hickok, plunging down the ridge in the direction indicated by the scout. "How you ever did it is more than I know."

"None of our pards were hurt?"

"Not so much as a scratch, with all the firing," flung back Wild Bill, over his shoulder.

Truth to tell, Dunc Perry, Cayuse, Yuppah, and Pedro seemed agile enough. They were bounding from rock to rock up the ascent like so many antelopes.

"Man, man, but this is a stunner," cried big Perry. "Where did you fellows come from?"

"Never mind for now, Dunc," returned the scout. "See where Hickok is going?"

"I'd be blind if I couldn't, pard."

"Then follow him."

Cayuse, Yuppah, and Pedro came lightly up to the crest, their eyes gleaming and their usually passive features lighted up with something mightily akin to wonder.

"Ugh!" cried Cayuse. "Where Chappo?"

"Me find um, Cayuse," answered the scout. "You and the 'Paches trail after Perry."

The Piute boy led the race in the wake of Hickok and Perry. Hickok, upreared on the second ridge-crest, could look down and see the horse-herd below.

He divined the *coup* carried off so successfully, and, in his delight, yelled aloud and performed a bit of a war-dance; then, having aroused the amazement and

wonder of the others racing up the slope, he turned and vanished over the crest.

Witherspoon, full of joy over the success of the scout's ruse, came galloping along the valley.

"Say," he cried, "you-all ort ter hev seen them reds, Buffler Bill, when they hit that 'ar break in the ridge. Every last one of 'em went right up in the air. They acted plumb crazy fer about a minit. From whar I set on the ridge I could see the hull pformance."

"Never mind, Witherspoon," said the scout. "Hustle after the rest. If we want to make this play a complete success, we've got to hammer out of this in short order."

Witherspoon made after the Apaches, chuckling as he went.

The scout was waiting for old Nomad. He presently came loping along the valley, his weather-beaten face fairly beaming.

"Never had sich er time in all my born days," he called. "Et was ther wust stampede on ree-cord, Buffler, et was so. Why, et even beat thêr thar git-away in ther barranca. We've won out, hands down. Whar's our pards?"

"Over the ridge—where we ought to be," replied the scout. "Climb up behind me, Nick."

The trapper hauled himself to the back of the scout's saddle, and Bear Paw was headed up the slope of the outer ridge.

"Did you see the Comanches after they poured through the break?"

"Waal, I reckon," haw-hawed Nomad. "They was tearin' along like they thort ther hull United States' army was arter 'em."

"Did they follow their ponies' tracks?"

"Foller nothin'. Why, Buffler, they was that skeered an' panicky they jest run fer ther nighest slope o' ther ridge. They ain't thinkin' er hosses, ner anythin' else, on'y jest ter make themselves skurse. Slickest thing I ever see."

There was a tremendous jollification over the ridge. The pards were once more together, every one of them was on his own horse, and every one was happy—Witherspoon in particular, for he was gnawing at a piece of "jerked" meat, taken from the ration-bag which Yuppah was still carrying.

The arrival of the scout and the trapper was the signal to use spurs and quirts. Nomad vaulted from Bear Paw to Hide-rack, and with a clatter of hoofs the entire outfit got under way.

"Where to, Pard Cody?" sang out Wild Bill.

"Witherspoon's," answered the scout.

"But we don't want to leave here until we get Starkey?"

"We've got him!"

"I'm stumped!" exclaimed Perry, as he galloped. "You say you've got him, Bill, but where is he?"

"In the bottom of the Navajo."

"That's working it pretty low-down on a respectable creek," grinned Wild Bill. "Don't you think so, Pard Cody?"

CHAPTER XVI.

AT WITHERSPOON'S.

Witherspoon's adobe was reached by two o'clock in the afternoon. Although there had been a veritable clamor on the part of the pards rescued from the hill for information and news, yet the scout resolutely refused to talk.

"We'll wait till we get to the adobe, pards," said he. "Curb your impatience until then, and we'll all have an exchange of views in a place more comfortable than the saddle of a galloping horse."

Approaching the adobe from the rear, saddles were stripped off and the entire herd of horses was secured in the vicinity of the lean-to. Cayuse and the Apaches were placed on guard, with instructions to keep a sharp watch and not to allow the Comanches to repeat their horse-stealing performance of the preceding day.

When the scout, the trapper, the trader, the sheriff, and the man from Laramie trooped around the side of the adobe, saddles over their shoulders, they encountered a surprise at Witherspoon's front door.

A wizened little Mexican lay on the ground with a bandage around his left leg. The door of the house was open.

"Hurroo!" exclaimed the astounded trader, coming to a halt and dropping his riding-gear. "Some 'un tried ter git inter my wickiup an' didn't pay no 'tention ter the warnin'. Ther trap-gun exploded an' ther critter got a bullet in the laig. Say, you!" and here the trader

stepped closer to the Mexican, "didn't ye read the warnin' I had on the door?"

"No *sabe* English," murmured the Mexican, casting his shifty eyes about into the faces bending over him.

"By gorry!" exclaimed Wild Bill, "it's old Pablo."

"Pablo, er I'm er Piegan!" echoed old Nomad.

"Who's Pablo?" inquired Witherspoon, looking around.

"That's what I want to know," put in Perry.

"Why," explained the scout, "Pablo is a greaser that used to train with Lon Starkey the time he was doing things in Red Hand Valley."

"And it was Pablo," continued Wild Bill, "who used to operate the Red Hand. Cayuse and another man that was with us held the gun on Pablo and made him run out the hand and grab Starkey. Against orders, Pablo made the Hand throw Starkey over the ridge—that part of which has been told so many times I reckon all of you know it."

"But how do y'u-all opine he come ter be yar?" went on Witherspoon. "What's he snoopin' around my premises fur, an' openin' my front door an' settin' off my trap-gun?"

"That's something we will find out," said Buffalo Bill. "See how badly he's hurt, Hickok."

"No bones broken, so far as I can see," answered Wild Bill, after an examination, "but I don't reckon Pablo feels much like using his feet."

"Ef he had, pard," put in Nomad, "he wouldn't hev waited hyar fer us ter come an' ketch him."

"Take him into the house," said the scout. "I'd like to bet something Pablo is still a member of Starkey's gang."

Wild Bill and Perry picked up the wounded greaser

and bore him into the house. While Witherspoon was putting the trap-gun out of the way, the scout was explaining how it was that Pablo had left him and his pards at the time the Red Hand Valley affair was wound up.

"The Comanches were scattered," said the scout, "the Ranch of Mystery was destroyed, and we, all of us, supposed that Starkey had been put down and out. Pablo was a prisoner in our hands, but he seemed so little and insignificant that we didn't think he was worth bothering with. He wanted to leave us as we were trailing along the Rio Piedra, and as Wild Bill's horse was carrying double, and as Pablo was willing to hoof it to the place where he wanted to go, we allowed him to vamoise. I'm of the opinion that he hunted up Starkey and joined him and his Comanches, and that he came down into Arizona with them. Otherwise, why should he be here?"

"Get him to talk," suggested Dunc Perry. "Maybe he can tell how Starkey got away from the Red Hand without so much as a scratch."

"I think," went on the scout, "that Pablo, when he made the hand throw Starkey over the cliff, contrary to orders, was working with Starkey's welfare in mind."

"I'll bet ther same thing," declared Nomad. "Try ter git him ter tork, Buffler. I'd like mouty well ter savvy how Starkey got away from thet thar Red Hand."

While Witherspoon stirred around, building a fire in his cook-stove and getting ready a good meal for all hands, the scout and his pards made themselves comfortable and proceeded to investigate Pablo. The talk was carried on in Spanish, with which all in the room were more or less familiar.

"I think you're tricky, Pablo," began the scout, hitch-

ing a chair close to the couch on which the little Mexican was lying.

Pablo's face showed guilt, but he had nothing to say.

"Why did you come and try to get into this house?" pursued the scout.

"I was tired and hungry, señor," answered Pablo, rolling up his eyes. "I could not read what was on the door, so I tried to get in. The gun went off and I was shot in the leg. *Madre mia!* For a while I thought I was killed. Then I came to myself and tied up the leg and—and here I am, señor."

"Didn't Starkey send you here for something?"

"No, he did not send me."

"What were you doing in this part of the country?"

"I walked, señor, from the San Juan Mountains."

"What d'ye think o' thet!" exclaimed Nomad. "He walked from the San Juan Mountings! Wonder ef he's lyin'?"

"Why did you come?" went on the scout.

"Señor, I fooled you. Kill me if you will, but it is the truth."

"How did you fool us?"

"Oh, in many, many ways. I told you I was a prisoner in the Red Hand Valley. It was not so. I was one of the gang, yes."

"You didn't fool us much on that, Pablo," laughed the scout. "We suspected it all along, but we didn't think you were much to be feared."

"Well, señor, I was coming to Arizona to join Starkey and the Comanches."

"That was why you left the San Juan country, eh? And you walked, did you? You must have been some time on the way."

"Two weeks, señor."

"And you stopped here to rest and get something to eat?"

"Yes."

"You fooled us again when you made the Red Hand throw Starkey over the ridge, there in that valley of the San Juans?"

"Yes, señor. I knew it would not kill Starkey, and that is why I made the hand throw him."

"Wasn't he thrown over the ridge?"

"No, señor. On top of the ridge there is a deep pool of water. I knew just how to work the hand so as to throw Starkey over the ridge and into the pool on its top. We had experimented often, like that."

"Well, by gorry!" gasped Wild Bill. "It was a pool of water that saved Starkey, then. Say, Pard Cody, we ought to have climbed to the top of the ridge and investigated."

"That's how it would seem, Hickok. But we didn't, and Starkey got out of that scrape with Pablo's help. But he'll never get out of Navajo Creek."

"Nary, he won't," grunted Nomad. "Starkey is in the Grand Cañon by now."

"That's what I want to know about," complained Dunc Perry.

"Me, too," chirped Witherspoon, pounding a bag of coffee with a hammer. "Ain't it about time——"

"Wait till we get through with Pablo," interrupted the scout.

"Pay attention ter yer knittin', Nate," said Nomad. "The quicker ye get some hot grub on ther table the better we'll all feel."

"I'm thinkin' o' that right smart myself."

"Then, Pablo," continued the scout, "you haven't seen Starkey since that trouble we had with him in Red Hand Valley?"

"No, señor."

"Do you know why he came down here into Arizona?"

"He would play even with Buffalo Bill and his pards, señor, and he heard that you were all in Lime Gulch."

"I was thinking of that," said Perry. "Starkey held a rein on himself for a week after he reached the gulch, but his disposition worked up to the surface and he had to clean out Sawyer's place. He can't keep quiet for long, that fellow."

"If you want to kill me, señor——"

Pablo rolled his eyes again, but he was so thin, and gray, and wizened that all the pards laughed at his words.

"We're not going to kill you, Pablo," said the scout. "As soon as you're well enough to leave you'll be free to go. I want to tell you, however, that if you meet up with any of Starkey's Comanches you're to warn them that Starkey was drowned in the Navajo, and that, if the reds know when they're well off, they'll get back to their hunting-grounds, stay there, and keep the peace."

"That's what!" struck in Perry resolutely. "I won't stand for any such work as has been going on here yesterday and to-day—horse-stealing, indiscriminate shooting, and all that. I'm sheriff of this county, and the Comanches will find it out to their cost if they keep on like they've been doing."

"If I see them, señor, I will tell them—most assuredly."

The conversation, after that, drifted onto other topics,

to be interrupted, at last, by the welcome announcement from Witherspoon of "All set."

Food was carried out to Cayuse and the Apaches, and the rest of the pards gathered around Witherspoon's table and made good use of his tin dishes and iron knives and forks.

CHAPTER XVII.

AROUND THE FESTIVE BOARD.

Being a trader, Witherspoon had a supply of food, canned and otherwise, among his stores; and, being hungry himself, he drew bountifully upon his stock. The table was heaped with boiled potatoes, two platters of bacon, crackers, mush, and other things, and the hungry pards proceeded to work havoc with all that was before them.

As hunger became appeased, all were in a mood for talk. Since the fate of Starkey seemed the most important event that had marked recent experiences, Buffalo Bill went into his tree-trunk drift down the Navajo, with Starkey and the panther. He began at the beginning, which was when he took the back track looking for Nomad and Witherspoon, and finished at the end, which included the rescue of Chappo, the failure to find Bear Paw, and the rescue of the besieged party on the round-topped hill.

The recital was listened to with deepest interest. The novelty of the scout's ride, on the swollen waters of Navajo Creek, and the peculiar way in which he met the situation, and in which the cougar was roped and dragged ashore, led to stories wherein it was brought out how ferocious the beasts can be, when hungry, and how they will hang like grim death to any object they fasten their claws into.

Witherspoon took a hand in the wild-animal stories, and, quite naturally, Nomad found himself in his element and started in to tell something about a whilom pard

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of his and the scout's called Catamount Joe. But the scout broke in to ask an account of what befell Wild Bill, Perry, Cayuse, and the two Apaches.

"There you go, Cody," laughed Wild Bill. "I don't care much about that part of the proceedings."

"What's ther matter with 'em?"

"Nothing," put in Dunc Perry, "except the way we skehotted when Starkey and his reds jumped up. But there wasn't anything else we could do. You see, we were scattered out along the gully. Yuppah and Pedro, with Running Panther, were in one place, Cayuse was looking around in another, Chappo was off somewhere on his own hook, and Wild Bill and I were gallivanting around looking for horse-tracks."

"We were all looking for horse-tracks," proceeded Hickok, "and scattered along that gully for a quarter of a mile."

"But I told you——" began the scout.

"Sure, you long-headed King of the Kiboshers," broke in Perry, with a laugh, "you knew what we were to expect and you told us to hang together. Well, we thought we might as well make the most of the time while we waited for you to come back with Nomad and Witherspoon, so we tried to find out whether Running Panther was acting square with us or not."

"Then," said Wild Bil, "the blow fell."

"Like lightning from a clear sky," interjected Perry.

"First we knew," continued Hickok, "the Comanches were pounding along the gully, banging away with their rifles. Perry and I saw Running Panther flatten out, and Yuppah and Pedro dodging for holes like a pair of prairie-dogs. We didn't see what became of Chappo and Cayuse, but we thought we knew which way they went."

Our plan was to all get together, in some good holding-ground, and stand the reds off."

"And to get a whack at Starkey, if we could," interpolated Perry.

"Well," proceeded Hickok, "Perry and I went the right way to dodge the Comanches, but we didn't go the right way to meet up with Cayuse and the rest. We didn't find them until along toward night, when we made a *pasear* back to the gully. They were there waiting for us—all except Chappo. What had become of you, Buffalo Bill, and Nomad and Witherspoon we couldn't begin to guess, but we had a faint notion Starkey had waylaid you. Then we set out looking for Starkey. While we were reconnoitering around, I found Bear Paw standing by the river-bank. That *was* a surprise, and we couldn't any of us figure out how the animal had been left there, hitched to the sapling, with not a soul in sight. I was able to do a lot of running around with the horse, but we seemed to get fooled at every turn. We couldn't find the barranca, and we didn't run across Starkey or any of the Comanches."

"Not till toward morning," laughed Dunc Perry. "Then we found more Comanches than we were looking for."

"If you had stayed in the place where you found Bear Paw," said Buffalo Bill, "we'd have come together, the lot of us. As soon as we got Chappo out of the barranca we made for that spot on the bank. I was surprised, too, when I found that Bear Paw had disappeared. We camped right there, so as to be able to examine the ground by daylight."

"That only goes to show," observed Perry, "how fate will put a kink in events when folks are trying to locate

each other. Sometimes the best way to hunt for any one is to stand still and wait."

"It was close on to midnight when we blundered into that circular valley," resumed Wild Bill. "Dunc knew the place, and remembered a fight he had once had with horse-thieves on the crest of that round-topped hill. Taking his advice, we went up there and bunked down for the rest of the night."

"It was poor advice," admitted the sheriff. "Everything went well enough until day began to come, and then the smack of a bullet on the rocks told us something was doing. I looked over the rim of the gash and lost a lock of hair; but I saw enough to convince me that there were a thousand nice boulders at the foot of the hill and, as it appeared, a Comanche behind every boulder."

"Waugh!" exclaimed Nomad. "You fellers sartinly done er lot er shootin' with yer leetle guns."

"We worked 'em with both hands," said Wild Bill, "whenever we could get both shoulders out of the gash without being plugged. Of course we knew what the reds were up to. They wanted to keep us where we were until the lack of water took all the fight out of us. That made us desperate, and we tried our blamest to pick off some of the reds—but we couldn't. Our guns didn't carry, and whenever we did get in a shot at fairly close range, the Comanches were out of the way before the bullet arrived."

"You saved our bacon there, all right, Buffalo Bill," said Perry.

"What did ye think when ye heerd Buffler, an' Nate, an' me howlin' an' shootin' around the crest o' the ridge?" inquired Nomad.

"You made noise enough for the whole Sioux nation,"

returned Wild Bill. "We thought rescue was at hand, but didn't imagine there were only three of you to pull off the trick."

"I don't reckon ther Comanches did, nuther," laughed Witherspoon. "Jee-Christopher, how they scampered out o' that little valley! I luffed so I come mighty nigh rollin' down the hill."

"It was a good bluff," declared Perry, "a mighty fine bluff."

"And a bluff that worked," added Hickok.

"What I can't savvy is," went on Perry, "how the Comanches hung together and bottled us up so neat without Lon Starkey there to boss 'em."

"They must have had some leader," answered the scout, "who was pretty near as sharp as Starkey. They must have dropped into the valley during the night, so as to be ready to begin operations when the day broke. Didn't you fellows keep any watch on top of that hill?"

"I watched some of the time," said Perry. "and Wild Bill stood duty the rest of the time. Neither of us saw any signs of Injuns until daylight. When dawn came, they were all there and all busy. I'm going back to Lime Gulch, after this, fairly easy in my mind. Starkey's wiped out and I've got my horse back. Say, I'd have looked fine, wouldn't I, walking into the gulch and explaining to Billonsar that Starkey had seen me and taken my horse. Wow! They'd have kicked me out and elected another sheriff."

"What's goin' ter be done with all them Injun cayuses?" queried Witherspoon. "If I'm any prophet, thar'll be others of Starkey's gang besides Pablo, thar, doin' some walkin'."

"Let 'em walk," growled Nomad. "They made us

hoof et inter the hills, an' I don't reckon we're used ter et any more'n what them Comanches aire."

"But who gits the *caballos*?" persisted Witherspoon. "Thet's what's pesterin' me."

"I'm out a hat and a brace of forty-fives," said the scout. "I think I'm entitled to that much in the draw if those thirteen ponies are confiscated."

"We all ort ter pull out somethin' ter pay us fer——"

Old Nomad was speaking, but he did not finish. Just at that moment Cayuse burst into the room.

"Pa-e-has-ka!" he exclaimed.

"What's on your mind, Cayuse?" inquired the scout.

"Me see um Comanche——"

"Only one?" cried Perry. "Why didn't you make a lead-mine out of him?"

"That's right," seconded Witherspoon, getting up and reaching for a gun. "I don't want any o' that trash nosin' around yar."

"Him got white flag," went on the Piute.

"White flag, eh?" muttered Dunc Perry. "That's a pleasing notion, pard. A Comanche killer and horse-thief with a flag of truce!"

"Bring him in," said the scout. "Make him understand, if you can, that the white flag will be respected."

Cayuse turned and hurried out of the room.

"I ain't fer treatin' them reds like they was civilized," growled Witherspoon.

"We'll treat this one that way, anyhow," returned the scout, "and hear what he's got to say."

"Señor!"

The call came from the couch where Pablo was lying. The Mexican had lifted himself on his elbow and seemed to be excited.

"What is it, Pablo?" the scout asked.

"If this Comanche will take me with him I'd like to go."

"Why do you want to go with the Comanche?"

"The Indians will be going back to the San Juan Mountains, and I know they will take me along. I can ride, señor, even if I can't walk."

At that moment the bearer of the flag of truce was conducted into the room by Little Cayuse.

The Comanche carried no weapons and his moccasins looked as though he had been doing a good deal of tramping. His arm was bound up with a piece of buckskin, and swung from his neck in a sling. In his other hand he carried a pole with a square of dirty white canvas fastened to the end.

"You no shoot um Comanche?" he asked.

"No shoot um," replied the scout, as he and all his pards faced around and gave the hostile their attention.

"Me heap good Injun," continued the messenger; "all Comanches heap good Injuns now."

"Oh, yes, I'll bet!" snorted Perry.

"You're always good when you're down and out," put in Wild Bill.

"I'll bet a brace o' dollars he's arter them ponies," said Witherspoon.

"Me speak um English," pursued the Comanche.

"So I observe," answered the scout. "What do you want here?"

"Comanche heap sorry they go on war-path against Pa-e-has-ka."

"I knowed ye'd be," grunted Nomad.

"Starkey him dead. Comanche find um lodged in tree by creek-bank. Him gone now, and Comanche no got

um chief. Mebbyso Pa-e-has-ka be Comanche chief; huh?"

There was a roar at that. The Indian took it passively.

"Pa-e-has-ka no like um to be chief of Comanches?" he asked.

"Pa-e-has-ka has something else to do besides boss a gang of red killers and horse-thieves."

"Wuh! Comanches want to go back to San Juan country. No travel without ponies. Mebbyso Pa-e-has-ka give um Comanches ponies they go 'way?"

"I told ye!" cried Witherspoon. "Kick the red heathen out o' the house, Nomad!"

"Wait," said the scout, as Nomad made a move toward the Indian. "I don't think we want any truck with a pack of scrawny cayuses. What do you think, Perry?"

"If they'll take the horses and skip for Colorado," returned Perry, "I'd call it cheap at the price. Anyhow, we haven't any right to the animals. Taking them, like you did, was the only thing that enabled us to get clear of that round-topped hill without a fight. That was all right, but I don't see why we should keep the brutes."

"Gad-hook it all!" struck in Witherspoon, "I could do tradin' with 'em over in the Moqui kentry."

Perry shot a steely glance at the trader.

"I reckon you won't do any trading with Comanche cayuses, Nate," said he quietly.

The tone was enough. Witherspoon flopped back in his chair and subsided.

"The Comanches can have their ponies," said Buffalo Bill, turning to the warrior, "providing they promise to go back to the San Juan Mountains and stay there. If you don't go back, the white men will hunt you down

and make you sorry you stayed in Arizona. Savvy? You reds have made trouble enough. I think Starkey was the one who put you up to all your deviltry, and that, now he's out of the way, you'll be tolerably peaceable, and tolerably honest. But if we give you your ponies you've got to clear out of here and stay out."

"That's the talk," cried Perry, jumping up and facing the Comanche. "This is not your country. The Comanche country is away to the north. I won't have you around here. You've proved yourselves a lot of thieving scoundrels, and if you're here to use the double-tongue with us, you'll find you've made a big mistake. Just get that through your head and reflect on it."

The Comanche seemed quite humble and very much depressed.

"Me savvy," he answered. "Comanches go as soon as they get ponies."

"And it's the best thing for you, Witherspoon," proceeded Perry, turning to the trader. "If we kept these Comanche ponies, the whole gang would hang around here and make you no end of trouble. The only way to get rid of them is to give them their horses."

"I ain't so blamed shore we'll git rid of 'em then, Perry," returned Witherspoon.

"If we don't, a word from you sent to Lime Gulch will put me on the war-path with every man-jack in the settlement. We'll wipe 'em out, if we have to."

"That 'ar shot goes as it lays," said the trader, "an' I'm satersfied."

As the Comanche turned to go, Pablo piped up from the couch. At the sound of the Mexican's voice, the Indian whirled. Apparently he had not seen Pablo until that moment.

The Comanche said something, but in a tongue that was strange to the scout. Certainly it was not Comanche.

Pablo answered in the same language, and for a time they kept up a warm cross-fire of question and answer.

"Do you savvy what they're saying, Buffalo Bill?" asked Perry uneasily.

"It's too much for me," responded the scout. "I've got a smattering of all the lingo used by the plains Indians, but I never heard that before."

"Maybe they're putting up some sort of a dodge?"

"What dodge can they put up? You've given the Comanche a threat and a warning. He knows what to expect if he don't do what you say. Anything Pablo can chip in won't effect the general result."

Dunc Perry was somewhat appeased. The Comanche left presently, and Pablo struggled to a sitting position on the couch.

"Red Elk says he will take me with him, señor," announced Pablo, with what seemed like a good deal of satisfaction.

"Did he tell you anything else?" queried the scout.

"He told me that Starkey had been drowned in the Navajo, and that they had found him and put him on a burial scaffold. The heart has been taken out of the Comanche braves. All they want, now, is to get back to the north country. And that is all I want—me, old Pablo. Let me get back to the San Juans and die there."

Out behind the adobe Cayuse and the Apaches were making ready the Comanche ponies for Red Elk to lead. There was no love lost between the Piute and the Apaches and the Comanches. The red trailers remembered how nearly Chappo had come to being burned at the stake in the barranca, and they would much rather

have been fighting against Red Elk than helping him get ready to return to the rest of his band.

One of the ponies was set aside for Pablo. The horse was led to the door, and Nomad and Wild Bill carried the little Mexican out and placed him on the horse's back. There was no doubt that the wounded leg gave Pablo considerable pain, but he stood it well and seemed more than glad that he was leaving.

When all was ready Red Elk rode off, leading five ponies on one side and six on the other. Pablo, drooping over the neck of his cayuse, brought up the rear.

"I've got er feelin', Buffler," remarked Nomad, in a low voice, as they all stood watching the horses and the two men disappear, "thet we're doin' ther wrong thing."

"We're doing the only thing there is to do, Nick," averred the scout. "That question has already been settled by Perry."

The scout turned to the rest of his pards.

"Get up your horses, *amigos*," said he; "we're for Lime Gulch. There's nothing more to keep us here."

Witherspoon wanted them to stay longer.

"Our start fer Lime Gulch has already been delayed a hull day, Nate," said old Nomad. "More'n er day, ef ye figger et clost, an' I'm feelin', like Buffler, thet we'd better shack erlong. Ain't afeared them Comanches'll come back, aire ye?"

"Nary, I ain't; but it seems ter me like you-all 'u'd like ter rest a little."

"We'll do our resting when we get back to Lime Gulch," spoke up the scout.

Twenty minutes later the scout and his pards were in the saddle and riding for town.

Witherspoon stood out by the hitching-pole and watched them vanish into the growing dusk along the

trail; then, shaking his head dubiously, he went back into the house.

He, also, seemed to entertain some doubts as to the advisability of returning the ponies; but then, he might have been thinking of the lost trade with the Moquis.

CHAPTER XVIII.

NOMAD GETS THE "HA'NTS."

"I got er quare feelin' in my bones," muttered old Nomad, "an' I'm blamed ef I knows whether et's bekase o' thet sour-dough bread an' plum-duff I et so hearty of jest at sundown, er whether et's whiskizooos thet's a-pes-terin' me. Waugh! I got er notion ter wake up Buffler, er Wild Bill, an' swap er few remarks with 'em fer ter soothe my troubled sperrits. Whoosh! These hyar cold chills thet goes gallivantin' through a ombray's system ain't noways pleasant."

A shiver ran through the old man's form. He started to rise from the boulder on which he was sitting, and then dropped back again with a muttered exclamation.

"Buffler 'u'd laff at me," he muttered, "an' Wild Bill 'u'd jest nacherly poke fun at me ontill life 'u'd be a burden. I'd shore be sorry I ever 'woke either of 'em. They ain't got sense enough ter b'leeve in whiskizooos. They says whiskizooos is all bosh, an' gammon. Ef et's thet sour-dough bread and plum-duff thet ails me, I reckon I kin weather et through all by my lonesome. Must be erbout midnight, I reckon, an' clost ter thet hour when whiskizooos aire most li'ble ter be eround ha'ntin' humans. Waugh! What was thet—what *was* thet?"

Nomad heard, or fancied he heard, a rustling in a patch of bushes, not more than twenty feet from where he was sitting. Jumping to his feet and clasping his forty-five with a hand that was none too steady, he stared excitedly into the dusky thicket. His fears, how-

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ever, seemed unfounded, and in a few moments he heaved a long sigh and dropped back on his boulder.

"Nomad," he chided himself, "ye're sartinly er ole fool. Set still now an' be ca'm. Sufferin' wildcats, pard, ye ack like ye had them deliriums tremenjous. I wisht my watch was done with," he fretted. "Buffler might hev given me the fust end o' ther night instid o' ther middle o' et. Ther moon's as big as er dish-pan an' es bright as er lump o' pure silver. I wisht et wasn't so big an' bright. From all I've heern tell, whiskizooos likes ter fool eround in ther moonbeams. They walks on moonbeams jest as easy as human folks walks ther solid yarth, an' they kin hang ter 'em, an' cavort eround in 'em, jest ther same es—jumpin' gee-whiskers! thar et goes ergin!"

Once more Nomad shot to his feet, revolver in hand and bulging eyes fixed on the bushes.

The king of scouts had pitched camp on the north Texas boundary, just where the Wichita empties into Red River. This part of the line was directly south of Comanche country.

Buffalo Bill and his pards were on their way to Fort Sill, called there by urgent government business, although what this particular business was they did not know.

At dusk they had fallen in with a gang of hunters, who had invited them to stay to supper. The hunters were living high, and it was in their camp that Nomad had warehoused the sour-dough bread and the plum-duff. The pudding, sauced with black-strap molasses, was a treat, and Nomad had eaten heartily of it. Following the meal the scout, who was in a hurry, had hastened his pards on to the Red River, where they had bunked down for the rest of the night.

The party consisted of the scout, Nomad, Wild Bill of Laramie, Little Cayuse, and the three Apache trailers, Yuppah, Pedro, and Chappo.

Wild Bill had had the first watch, and when he turned in the trapper went on duty.

From the boulder on which Nomad posted himself he had a view to right and left of the Red River and the Wichita. On the sloping bank of the former stream were the horses—Nomad had them constantly under his eye. A dozen yards farther toward the junction of the two streams, on a small "hog-back," lay the scout, the Laramie man, the Piute, and the Apaches, all calmly sleeping.

The moon, gleaming across the Red, made a pathway of rare beauty—but the trapper was not appreciating scenic effects. "Whiskizos" were uppermost in his mind, and the longer he thought of them the more they got on his nerves.

Now a man who has roamed the virgin wilderness for the better part of his life, coming into frequent contact with superstitious Indians and Mexicans, is quite apt to develop a vein of superstition himself. Buffalo Bill was not inclined that way, and neither was Wild Bill, but old Nomad was never backward in avowing his firm belief in "whiskizos."

He never seemed quite clear in his mind as to what "whiskizos" were. They were spooks, he knew that much, and sometimes they took one shape and sometimes another. When "whiskizos" troubled a mortal too much, then the mortal had what Nomad called the "ha'nts"; and if a fellow ever got the "ha'nts" uncommon bad, then the only thing for him to do was to hit the One-way Trail as soon as possible, for the

"ha'nts" was a complaint which no man was ever known to get over.

The feeling that came over the old trapper, there in the silent, moonlit camp, led him to believe that he was getting the "ha'nts." It was either that, or a combination of sour-dough bread and plum-duff which didn't agree with him very well.

If a man is on guard in a country that may be hostile, it becomes his business to investigate the source of any sound he hears, or imagines he hears. The safety of the camp, perhaps, may depend upon the thoroughness with which he pries into the cause of a snapped twig, a rolling stone, or a rustling in the brush.

No man knew this better than Nick Nomad. And yet, while he realized what he ought to do in the circumstances, the fear of coming company front with a gang of whiskizos held him back.

The noise which he thought he had heard for the second time was not repeated.

"I reckon," said he to himself, "thet I'll prance over ter thet chaparral an' bushwhack er leetle. Ef so be a Comanch' is skulkin' thar, plannin' ter put er knife inter me an' run off some o' ther live stock, et's my bizness ter make him change his notion."

Taking a fresh grip on his revolver, he started toward the bushes.

And it was right then and there that something happened.

A glow as of a faint light appeared in the midst of the thicket, hovering about like a will-o'-the-wisp. By degrees it expanded and took on the vague shape of a human face. The features of the face grew into clearer outlines, showing an ill-omened countenance. There was no body, no legs, no arms—just simply a head, floating

among the bushes and wrapped in a sulfurous, lambent glow.

Nick Nomad had come to a halt. The strength went out of his knees, and he had all he could do to hold himself upright. He tried to yell, but his tongue and lips seemed paralyzed; and he tried to turn and run, but some dread power chained him to the spot and he could not move a finger.

The flaming face grinned sardonically. The lips moved, and a hollow rumble issued from them. It was a groan, weird, unearthly, and the sweat began to come out on old Nomad's forehead. Again he tried to yell and to run, but he was in a thrall, and any movement was impossible. He would have dropped the lids over his popping eyes, if he could, and so shut out the horrid vision—but his eyelids seemed paralyzed like the rest of his body.

Once more came the rumbling groan, this time followed by a speaking voice.

"Nicholas Nomad, ole Terror o' the Plains, don't y'u savvy who I am?"

The trapper gulped, and power was given to him to answer huskily:

"Go 'way, Lon Starkey, go 'way!"

"Hah! Then y'u do reckernize me—me, Lon Starkey, as was drowned in the water o' Navajo Creek. I've come back from the place whar I went—that orful, scorchin' hot place, ter give Buffler Bill an' his pards a warnin'. Aire y'u listenin' ter me?"

"Suf-suf-sufferin' c-catermounts!"

It was an odd thing that Nomad couldn't yell or run, but could stand there and gibber a few husky words at the phantom.

"Aire y'u listenin' ter me?" Again the question came dismally from the floating head.

"Y-y-y——"

Nomad tried hard enough to say "yes," but the word stuck in his throat.

"Buffler Bill an' his pards hev got ter turn back from Fort Sill. If ye go on inter the Comanche kentry ye'll all git the kibosh. It's the late lamented Lon Starkey, o' Red Tail what's a-tellin' y'u this—he's come back from er watery grave jest ter give ye a tip, see? Whoo—to-whoo!"

The specter made a noise like an owl, and Nomad's hair went up like the quills on a fretful porcupine.

Then the head began to swing back and forth, and to oscillate horribly.

The old trapper felt the full power of his voice returning. He'd be able to yell in a few seconds, he felt positive of it. And he might be able to run.

His revolver hung at his side. His fingers were still clutching it. He tried to raise the hand that held the weapon, and was passively surprised to find that the effort was successful.

In a burst of frenzy he brought the six-shooter in front of his face and pressed the trigger.

Bang! bang! bang!

The clatter of shots rang loudly through the silent camp. The fiery face faded like a snuffed candle, while a mocking, blood-curdling laugh trailed along in the wake of the three stinging reports.

Old Nomad could stand no more. He yelled like a Comanche, and turned and ran. A stone got in his way and he stumbled over it. Everybody in camp was aroused, and it happened that Wild Bill was directly in

front of the fleeing trapper when he hit the stone and pitched headlong.

Both the trapper and Wild Bill went down in a struggling heap, and rolled over and over down the side of the "hog-back."

CHAPTER XIX.

OLD NOMAD DEMORALIZED.

Never before had old Nomad been thrown so completely off his equilibrium. He was very hazy about what happened immediately after the spook-face had vanished, and when he fell over the stone and collided with Wild Bill, he realized only that he was fettered with a pair of hands and arms which might or might not be of flesh and blood. The trapper struggled to free himself, and yelled as he struggled.

"Waugh! Git off my back, yeh pizen varmint! Stop thet rollin' me! I ain't never walked under no ladders, ner hit no cross-eyed man, ner kicked er black cat, ner nothin'. Le'me be! Say, I'll hev my mad up in er brace o' shakes an' then all ther whiskizos this side o' Tophet kain't head me. Whoosh!"

The last word was a spluttering gurgle. The trapper and the Laramie man brought up with a jolt against a stone on the side of the "hog-back." The jar shook the breath out of their bodies and left even Wild Bill more or less bewildered.

Untangling from old Nomad, Wild Bill picked himself up.

"By gorry, Nick!" he exclaimed, "what the Old Harry has got into you? You act like you thought I was a Comanche. Man, man! Corral your wits and tune up with an explanation—that is, if you've got any to make."

Nomad grunted, lifted himself slowly erect, and leaned against the stone that had stopped him and Wild Bill so suddenly in their rolling descent. Buffalo Bill, Cay-

use, and the three Apaches had joined the Laramie man, and all were grouped wonderingly about the trapper. Nomad rubbed his eyes and peered at his pards strangely through the moonlight.

"Did you do that shooting Nick?" demanded Buffalo Bill, all at sea on account of his pard's queer actions.

"Waal," and here Nomad ran his fingers perplexedly through his long hair, "I raised thet Scoldin' Sairy gun o' mine, pulled ther trigger, an' thar was some reports, but I—I don't reckon I done any shootin'."

A brief silence followed this remarkable statement. If Nomad had gone through all those motions with his six-shooter and the weapon had barked in its customary manner, why was it he had any doubts as to the shooting?

"Nick," said Wild Bill, with a low laugh, "you've been grazing on a bunch of loco-weed. You're talking all around an established fact. If you pulled the trigger and the gun went off, then it's a cinch you shot at something."

"Nary et ain't no cinch," gulped Nomad, staring up the slope and to the right in the direction of the bushes where he had seen the whiskizoo. "I'm some muggins, ain't I, when et comes ter gun-play? Ye never seen me fire at er mark when et wasn't no more'n a dozen feet from ther open end o' my hardware without hittin' et, did ye? Say!"

He pulled one sleeve across his damp forehead and stared earnestly at his pards.

"When it comes to pistol-practise, Nick," said Wild Bill, "I don't know as I ever saw you go wide of the bull's-eye."

"What has your marksmanship got to do with it, pard?" inquired the scout.

"On'y jest thet thar was er spell on me," was the trapper's lugubrious response, "thet's all. I thort I fired at somethin', but as I didn't hit nothin' I'm sorter opinin' I didn't do no shootin' arter all. Consarn ther pizen luck, anyways. *Amigos*," he added solemnly, "I reckon I got 'em."

"Got what?" demanded Buffalo Bill.

"The ha'nts, an' I got 'em bad. I shouldn't wonder ef this hyar 'u'd be my finish. Wild Bill, ye kin hev my two poppers, Saucy Susan an' Scoldin' Sairy, an' likewise my hoss, Hide-rack. Cache me some'rs north o' ther Red——"

Buffalo Bill stepped forward, caught the trapper by the shoulders, and gave him a shake that made his teeth rattle like castanets.

"Stop your blatting," said he; "that's enough in that strain, Nick."

"By gorry, that's right," chimed in Wild Bill. "I wouldn't take your hardware on a bet, Nick. When a respectable six-shooter goes off with a noise like a real gun, but fails to throw metal or do damage, no one can unload it onto me. That's flat. As for Hide-rack, I've always thought that brute was a luxury—so much of a luxury that I wouldn't pamper myself with him."

"Who were you shooting at, Nick?" asked the scout briskly.

"Waal," answered the trapper, "I thort I turned loose at Lon Starkey, o' Red Tail——"

"Starkey!" exclaimed Wild Bill.

"Nonsense!" added the scout. "Why, Lon Starkey was drowned in the waters of Navajo Creek. You know that, Nick, just as well as the rest of us."

"Shore he was drowned in ther Navajo," returned Nomad. "Didn't I see et with my own eyes?"

"Then," went on the puzzled scout, "what do you mean by saying that you shot at him?"

"Thet's ther plain truth, so help me!" averred the trapper, with much earnestness. "While I was on gyard, Lon Starkey's face, all picked out in fire, floated over ther tops o' some bushes. Thet's all thar was o' Starkey, jest his head. Waugh, but et was orful! I was all goose-flesh ter oncet. I tried ter yell, but I couldn't, an' I tried ter run, but I couldn't do thet, nuther. Yet thar was Starkey's head, makin' faces at me an' gibberin' somethin' tur'ble. Starkey said he'd come back from ther hot place ter give us all a warnin'. We got ter turn back from Fort Sill, he says, an' ef we don't, but keep right on inter ther Comanche kentry, we'll all git ther kibosh. He groaned fearful, Starkey did; them hair-raisin' groans thet make ye wisht ye was any place else except whar ye kin hear 'em. Pard, what I seen was er whiskizoo! Ole Nomad hes got ther ha'nts an' they're pushin' him straight fer ther One-way Trail. As nigh as I kin figger et, I put three bullets through thet blazin' face, but et on'y laughed at me an' went out."

Nomad told all this in tones of the utmost conviction. There was no doubting his sincerity. Cayuse was impressed, but endeavored not to show it; the Apaches also were impressed, and apparently didn't care who knew it. By a common impulse, Yuppah, Chappo, and Pedro drifted closer to each other and stared about them with glimmering eyes.

"A very nice fairy-story, Nick," remarked Wild Bill, with an uneasy glance at the king of scouts and then at the Apaches.

"Nomad ate too much supper," laughed Buffalo Bill. "That plum-duff has got him to seeing things at night. The fact that he fired three shots without bagging any

game proves clearly that his imagination was at work. If he really saw any one, then it was some thievish night-prowler, with an eye on the horses or some of our camp truck."

The scout was doing his best to counteract the effect of Nomad's yarn on the superstitious Indians. The merest hint of anything supernatural was enough to head the Apaches toward panic. Cayuse had a little more command of himself than had the Apaches, but a belief in spooks had been bred in him and he was never able to quite get away from it.

"I'm tellin' ye et was er whiskizoo," insisted the old trapper absently, "an' thet I got ther ha'nts. Ef my life is anyways vallyble ter you ombrays, ye'll immejitly take ther back trail an' cut ther Comanche kentry an' Fort Sill off'n our map. Fer us ter go on means thet I'll shore git ther kibosh, an' mebbysso ther hull passel o' us. Let's saddle up and p'int fer ther south. What d'ye say?"

The king of scouts and the Laramie man were astounded at this suggestion on the part of the old trapper. It proved how completely Nick Nomad had become demoralized.

"We're under orders, Nick," said Buffalo Bill, "to proceed to Sill, and to Sill we're going, whiskizoo or no whiskizoo. If you feel that your health demands that you face the other way, then turn and ride. You can join us later."

"I ain't no hired man, but er pard," averred Nomad, "an' ef I kain't persuade ye ter go south with me, then I'm goin' north with you, an' no two ways erbout et. But don't plant me south o' ther Red, whatever happens. I'm honin' fer ther Platte, when my light goes out, so git me as nigh ther ole stream as what ye kin."

Buffalo Bill was mounting the slope to make an investigation of the bushes where the trapper professed to have seen the whiskizoo. Wild Bill followed.

"Nick's plumb stampeded," observed the Laramie man, as he and the scout mounted steadily toward the dusky thicket.

"Just so we can keep the reds from being stampeded, too," said the scout, "that's all I care for."

"What do you think of that hair-raising yarn?"

"Why, if Nick really saw Starkey, then it's a cinch that the man from Red Tail wasn't drowned in the Navajo. He's up to his tricks, and is trying to keep us away from his new stamping-grounds."

"That's the way I size it up, Pard Cody. But I can't think it possible that Lon Starkey escaped from the Navajo."

"No more can I; but then we mustn't forget that Starkey is a very slippery person. He has been hanged three times, and got away each time; so probably it's not to be wondered at if he has been drowned once and now bobs up again."

"If that's the case," declared Wild Bill, "then it's a cinch Starkey is up to some lawlessness in the Comanche country and doesn't want us to interfere with him. He's playing on the superstitious fears of a part of our outfit in the hope of turning us back. But—"

Wild Bill was interrupted by a hollow, unearthly groan. In weird crescendo it swelled into a sound that echoed and reechoed through the camp, so uncanny that even the two matter-of-fact pards were brought to a halt.

The scout and the Laramie man were close to the bushes where Nomad had raised the specter, and the groan apparently came from their depths.

"Anyhow," said Wild Bill, "it makes a pretty good noise like a ghost. Let's jump into the chaparral and see what the thing looks like."

Revolvers in hand, the pards flung themselves into the thicket. Hardly had they thrashed into the brush when frightened yells went up from the Apaches at the foot of the slope. Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill whirled around.

Something was moving away from them along the top of the "hog-back"—something which, at first, looked like a mere blur of light. As they gazed, the blur resolved itself into the arms and trunk of a man. There was no head and no feet visible.

"We'll lay this ghost, anyhow," breathed the scout.

Simultaneously his revolver and Wild Bill's cracked. The target was a good one and the range easy; nevertheless, to the astonishment of both pards, the headless and legless body continued its gliding across the "hog-back," giving a mocking laugh as it went.

Wild Bill said things under his breath, and the king of scouts started after the supposed apparition. Before the scout had taken a dozen steps, however, the glow vanished like a flame smothered by a wet blanket. At the same moment there came a sound of galloping, diminishing rapidly in the distance.

"What's that?" shouted Buffalo Bill.

"The Apaches!" flung back Wild Bill; "the pesky reds have gone on the hike."

Shouting to the fleeing Indians at the top of his voice, the scout swerved to the left and ran down the side of the "hog-back."

Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill reached the boulder where they had left Nomad and the Indians at about the same time. Nomad was still there, but Cayuse, as well as the Apaches, had vanished.

"No use yellin' fer them reds, pards," croaked Nomad dismally; "they're skeered plumb out o' their wits, an' I don't reckon they'll pull up this side o' Mexico. Waught! Et's er blame' uncomfortable feelin' I got, erbout now."

"Did you see those reds hike out, Nick?" asked the scout.

"Shore."

"Why didn't you stop them?" demanded the scout impatiently.

"Snarlin' painters! Why, Buffler, I might es well hev tried ter stop so many thunderbolts. They had the bit in their teeth, them reds did. Besides, I didn't hev no heart ter try an' stop 'em. I was on'y frettin' bekase I couldn't ride with 'em myself."

"I wouldn't have thought Little Cayuse would climb his horse and leave us like this," muttered Wild Bill.

"He allowed he'd trail arter ther 'Paches an' bring 'em back," explained Nomad, "but et was easy ter see he was mighty anxious ter git erway. Now, you ombrays hev seen thet whiskizoo yerselves, an' I reckon ye won't keep on layin' et ter my imagination. Ye tried ter put er bullet inter et, too, an' yore lead wouldn't work any more'n mine did. Changed yer minds erbout saddlin' up an' ridin' south?"

"Changed nothing!" growled the Laramie man; "we'll sift this business to the bottom, if it takes a leg. Eh, Pard Cody?"

"We will that, Hickok," answered the scout grimly. "Watch the rest of the horses, Nick," he added. "Come on, Hickok, and we'll investigate the top of the 'hog-back.'"

"Hyar!" palpitated the old trapper, in a flurry. "One o' ye stay with me. Think I want ter be left all by my lonesome in a ha'nted place like this?"

But the scout and the Laramie man paid no heed to the trapper's frantic request; instead, they proceeded to the top of the "rise" and went over it thoroughly from one end to the other. They found nothing.

"We'll have to wait till daylight before we can pick up any clues," announced Buffalo Bill, halting for a parley.

"We may not find anything worth while, even then," returned Wild Bill. "If Starkey is really alive, we can gamble that he's covering his tracks as cleverly as ever."

"It's rather foolish of him, though, to think he can scare us. The whole thing is a mystery, anyhow."

"Nomad saw the face of the spook," went on Wild Bill, "and we saw the trunk and arms. I must say, pard, that what we saw of the 'ghost' looked mightily like Lon Starkey, of Red Tail."

"My idea exactly, Hickok. We're dealing with Lon Starkey, of Red Tail—the real, flesh-and-blood schemer that we had experiences with in Red Hand Valley and on the Navajo. He has crossed trails with us in this jeird fashion for some underhand purpose of his own."

"Well," mused Wild Bill, "if he's flesh and blood, Pard Cody, why didn't we get him when we let go with our barkers? I'll take my solemn oath I put a bullet right into the middle of what I was looking at. Starkey may bear a charmed life, but I don't savvy how he could turn a lead slug at that range."

"I'm positive my bullet went straight to the mark, too," said the scout, puzzled. "That was a flesh-and-blood laugh, though, Starkey threw back at us. It's easy to understand how he could fix himself up for this ghost business, but I'm over my head in trying to explain the failure of those bullets to do any damage."

"Do you know the nature of the work that's calling us to Fort Sill?" queried Hickok, taking another tack.

"I haven't the least notion what's wanted of us," answered the scout.

"I'll bet a yellow-boy against a Chink wash-ticket that it has something to do with lawless work in which Lon Starkey is interested. That's why he wants to head us back."

"Whatever his game is, Hickok, you can gamble Starkey is looking out for number one. If he——"

"Hey, thar!"

Nomad's voice came out of the moon-shadows below. There was a shake in the voice and other indications of a pining for companionship.

"What is it, Nick?" called the scout.

"Located anythin'?" Nomad's voice was getting louder, and he could be seen coming up the slope.

"Not a thing, Nick."

"Ner ye won't. Whiskizos aire able ter divide themselves up so'st they kin be in half a dozen place all at ther same time, ef they wants ter. They melts out o' one spot ter melt inter another, an' they kin move from Canady ter Mexico in ther time et takes ter bat an eye. The one as was hyar on this 'hog-back' may be er thousand miles off by now. Movin' so quick like thet, they ain't got time ter leave no trail. Consekently, what ye're a-lookin' fer is somethin' ye kain't find."

"I'm not up on whiskizos like you are, Nick," said Wild Bill, with mock gravity, "but it strikes me that if we hang out here until broad day, and then, with the sun to help us, locate 'signs' of our ghostly intruder, that will prove that he wasn't a whiskizoo, won't it?"

The old trapper pondered the question.

"Et mout," he answered finally, "an" then ag'in et

moun't. Whiskizos kin leave signs ef they wants to—they're plumb cunnin' in foolin' humans thetaway."

"Once and for all, Nick," put in the scout a little sternly, "get this ghost foolishness out of your head. We're not dealing with one of your whiskizos, but with the real Lon Starkey. He's working some game in the Comanche country and wants to keep us away."

Nomad muttered a protest and went to the rock over which he had stumbled a while before. Getting down on his hands and knees, he began groping about in an endeavor to find the six-shooter which he had dropped just before he and Wild Bill went rolling down the slope. A few moments later he found something—but it was not the six-shooter. The scout and the Laramie man saw him rise up from his knees, and they could hear him talking to himself as he bent his head to examine the object he had picked up.

"Found your gun, Nick?" called Wild Bill.

"Nary I hev'n't," was the answer; "et's er bowie, as nigh as I kin make out."

"One of ours," queried the scout, "or a skinning-knife belonging to one of our reds?"

For answer, Nomad turned and came back toward the scout and the Laramie man.

"Look et over fer yerself, Buffler," said he. "I don't reckon thet sticker ever hung from er belt belongin' ter our outfit."

"Strike a match, Hickok," said the scout, taking the knife.

Under the flickering taper the knife proved to be a double-edged, bone-handled bowie. The steel-guard where the blade entered the handle held a small steel ring. A murderous weapon, truly. A hand, gripping the

hilt, could thrust a finger through the ring and steady the weapon for a plunge, and a twist in the wound.

"A Price knife!" exclaimed the scout.

"Right," agreed Wild Bill, "and one of the deadliest Price ever made. Costs money, too, and ought to be branded with the owner's name."

"It is," continued the scout, examining the handle by the last gleam of the match. "Here are the initials, 'L. S.,' burned into the bone."

"'L. S.,'" murmured Hickok, tossing away the burned match; "by gorry, pard! That stands for Lone Starkey, if I know anything about it."

"Nothing less," averred the scout. "When Nomad's whiskizoo moved along the 'hog-back' that last time it came this way and dropped the knife." The scout whirled on his trapper pard. "What do you think of that, Nick?" he asked. "Here's Starkey's knife, so it must have been Starkey who was here."

Probably Nomad could have explained this in some elaborate fashion to support his argument as to the intruder being a real, original whiskizoo—but he had not the chance. Just then a beat of hoofs was heard, coming toward the point formed by the junction of the Wichita and the Red Rivers.

"Our Injuns aire trailin' back!" exclaimed Nomad.

"Hardly," said Wild Bill. "There's only one horse coming this way, so it can't be our stampeded reds."

"And the horse is *shod*," added Buffalo Bill, his quick ear catching the ring of iron shoes. "That means that the rider is none of our allies. Watch the horses, Nomad. Hickok, this way!"

Thrusting the bowie quickly into his belt, the king of scouts started forward to intercept the lone horseman. Wild Bill hastened after him.

CHAPTER XX.

THE COURIER FROM THE FORT.

In a hostile country it is always safer to treat a stranger as an enemy until he has proven his intentions. The scout had no idea who the man on the shod horse could be. He was making no attempt to hide his approach, however, and if he knew he was coming upon a camp it was a fair presumption that he came as a friend. The crescendo of falling hoofs was aiming straight for the "hog-back," and the scout and the Laramie man posted themselves in the chaparral and watched the galloping blot untangle itself from the shadows and come into clearer prominence in the moonlight.

"A swattie!" muttered Wild Bill.

"He looks it," answered the scout.

Even in that faint light it was not difficult to detect a military erectness and bearing in the rider. When the horseman had come close, the pards stepped out from their place of concealment, the moonbeams glittering on their drawn revolvers.

"Halt!" shouted Buffalo Bill. "Stand while you tell us your business here. We have you covered," he added significantly.

"I'm looking for Buffalo Bill, the government scout," answered the man, drawing quick rein.

"Then, by gorry!" tuned up Wild Bill, "you're not looking for him but *at* him."

"I reckoned I'd land on Cody somewhere about here," returned the other. "I met up with an outfit of hunters, off to the south, and they said you had headed for the

junction of the Wichita and the Red for your night's camp."

"Who are you?" demanded the scout.

"Lieutenant Craig, from Fort Sill, a special courier with instructions for Scout Cody."

"Come closer," commanded the scout. "You'll excuse us if we continue warlike until we make sure of you. There have been doings in this camp to-night that impel us to be cautious."

The scout and the Laramie man both knew Lieutenant Craig, of K Troop. They were fairly sure of his identity from the sound of his voice, but Lon Starkey had many tricks up his versatile sleeve and the pards were taking no chances.

With a laugh the courier spurred on, and drew rein once more between the scout and his pard. One close look at the lieutenant was all either of the pards needed.

"Howdy, Craig!" exclaimed the scout. "Get down and turn out your horse. Our animals are over the ridge on the bank of the Red."

"Yes," chuckled Wild Bill, "get down, Craig, and take a look at our spook camp."

"Spook camp?" echoed the puzzled trooper, sliding to the ground.

"Why," explained Wild Bill, "we've had a ghost with us to-night, which is the reason we're stirring around at a time when your regulation camper would be snatching his forty winks. Our reds have caught a panic and stampeded—only Pard Cody, Nick Nomad, and I are left."

These words had a queer effect on Craig. An exclamation escaped his lips.

"How many Indians did you have, Cody?" he asked.

"Our Piute pard, Little Cayuse," replied the scout, "and our three Apache trailers."

"All four skipped out?"

"The three Apaches took to their ponies, and Little Cayuse chased after them to bring them back."

"By Jupiter!" muttered Craig. "I don't think you fellows can expect them back to-night—nor for a good many more nights unless you get busy."

It was now the turn of the pards to be astonished.

"How do you figure that out, Craig?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"About an hour ago, while I was riding this way from the camp of the hunters," went on the lieutenant, "I came within an ace of running head on into a bunch of Comanches. I dodged into the scrub just in time to let them miss me. The place where they passed was a shallow coulee, with the moonbeams bright in the bottom of it. I couldn't be seen, but I could peer out through the brush and see the reds plain enough. They had three redskin prisoners—Apaches, I judged, from their red flannel head-bands. When they got out of sight, and just as I was making ready to leave the scrub, a little Indian on a calico cayuse came along. Thinking that he belonged with the main party, I waited until he had passed."

"Here's a go!" muttered the scout. "Our trailers, when they fled from our camp here, got out of the frying-pan into the fire. The Comanches were laying for them and took them in. They were the three prisoners you saw, Craig, beyond a doubt; and the little Indian behind, on the calico cayuse, must have been the Piute boy. He was trailing the Comanches in order to do what he could for the Apaches. What do you think of this, Hick?"

"Tough luck," answered Wild Bill. "It means delay in getting to the fort—and you had hurry-up orders for there, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"I am bringing fresh instructions," spoke up Craig, throwing an arm over his saddle and leaning against his horse. "Colonel McCaffery thought it wise to have me meet you and give you an idea of your work before you get into the Comanche country. That you have been sent for may be known; and the rascals you will be asked to capture may lay for you north of the Red, with the idea of wiping you out before you get to Sill. For that reason the colonel told me to ride south and head you off with the details of the work he wants you to do."

"That was thoughtful," said the scout. "What's the work, Craig?"

"The Comanches haven't exactly gone on the war-path, but some one is among them stirring up trouble and peddling fire-water. If the whisky traffic is stopped, the chances are the Comanches will get peaceable again. That's the line, Cody, the colonel has chalked out for you."

"Is the trouble confined to any one part of the reservation?"

"The most of it is between here and Sill, in the vicinity of Cache Creek."

"Any idea who's causing it? Some white man or half-breed must be mixed up in the whisky smuggling."

"That's the colonel's notion. It looks like Lon Starkey's work; but Starkey was drowned in the Navajo, so it must be some one else who is cutting his cloth according to Starkey's pattern."

"By gorry!" growled Wild Bill. "I reckon we've opened up a pay-streak, Pard Cody."

"Well," said the scout, "certainly what the lieutenant says makes it easier for us to understand these spook manifestations. Craig, did you see a white man with those Comanches?"

"No. But what do you fellers mean by all this spook talk?"

Buffalo Bill told him, beginning with Nomad's experience and finishing with his own and Wild Bill's.

"Hickok and I," the scout finished, "had already made up our minds that Lon Starkey was playing the ghostly pranks; now, from what you tell us, Craig, I am sure he is the fellow we have to deal with."

"Then he wasn't drowned in the Navajo, after all?" queried the lieutenant.

"I and my pards have been under the impression that he was, but our experiences here to-night prove the contrary. It is Starkey who is selling whisky to the Comanches. He married a Comanche squaw, you know, and that fact gives him considerable influence among them. Starkey's the fellow we must get."

"And when we get him next time," muttered Wild Bill, "we'll have to do it in such a way that there'll be no mistake."

"There's no doubt in my mind," pursued the scout, "but that Starkey was with that gang of Comanches that captured the trailers. Probably he was wrapped in a blanket and Craig couldn't tell him from the reds. If we want to lay Starkey by the heels in short order, our cue is to follow the Comanches."

"My orders," said Craig, "are to stay with you, Cody, and give you what help I can. I have bushwhacked through this Comanche country for three years and know it by heart."

"Glad to have you with us, Craig. Hickok and I know

the country fairly well, but probably not half as well as you do. How many reds were in the party?"

"Seven or eight."

"Not many, Pard Cody," spoke up Wild Bill. "If they had been strong enough, the gang would have tried to sponge us out, there on the 'hog-back,' and Starkey would not have tried his hand at that spook racket."

"If you're going to follow the redskins, Cody," said Craig, "there's little time to lose."

"We'll have daylight in about four hours," said the scout, "and your horse, Craig, can stand a rest. We'll wait for morning to hit the trail."

"That will give the gang a good, long start of us," complained the lieutenant. "It strikes me we ought to start at once. My horse is pretty well fagged, but it will be better for us to nurse him along and travel slow rather than not to be traveling at all."

"Under ordinary circumstances that advice would be good, but you're overlooking the fact that Little Cayuse is trailing after the Comanches. He'll continue to track them and contrive in some way to keep us informed. In fact, he may return here before sunup. It will be better for us to wait."

The scout's word decided the matter. The pards led the lieutenant to their camp, explained matters to Nomad, and the trooper's mount was tethered with the rest of the horses.

There was accumulating proof that the supposed ghost was the real, live, flesh-and-blood Starkey, but the old trapper combed the evidence with mental reservations. If Starkey wasn't a specter, how had he been able to dodge the bullets that had been fired at him?

Nomad slept little during the remainder of that night. A strict watch of the camp was kept, but **nothing un-**

usual happened. Fate, apparently, thought the scout and his pards had had enough of the unusual for one night, and was leaving them in peace.

Little Cayuse did not return, but the scout was confident they would hear from him before long.

At daybreak there was a hasty raid on the provision bags, followed by a quick saddling of horses; then, guided by Craig, Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill, and Nomad trailed off toward the south, in the direction of the coulee where the lieutenant had seen the Comanches and their prisoners.

CHAPTER XXI.

LITTLE CAYUSE'S LONE TRAIL.

As has already been stated, Little Cayuse had been born into a certain amount of superstition. He had passed his earlier years among red kinsmen, who believed in all sorts of spirits, good, bad, and indifferent. It was inevitable, therefore, that he should believe in the supernatural. Companionship with Buffalo Bill had done much to eliminate the worst Piute traits in his make-up, but there were some that would remain with him always, no matter if he lived a hundred years and passed his whole life among white people.

Cayuse was such a great admirer of the scout that he tried in every way to pattern after him. The scout did not believe in good spirits or bad demons, or any other brand of spooks. So Cayuse tried not to, but the Piute blood fought against the effort. The best he could do, if there was a hint of prowling spirits in his vicinity, was to screw up his courage to the sticking-place and defy the evil ones to do their worst.

He and the Apaches listened to Nomad's fearful account of the flaming face in the bushes. Cayuse's heart had at once begun to pound, and he and the Apaches had gathered in a compact group, as though for mutual protection. But Cayuse had been made chief of the three red trailers by Buffalo Bill, and the little Piute considered himself responsible for their behavior. So, while he was inwardly quaking himself, he was doing his utmost to keep a bold front and prevent the Apaches from making a break.

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Up to the time the spook made its second appearance, the Piute succeeded fairly well. Yuppah, Chappo, and Pedro were restless, and the attitude of old Nomad did not serve in the least to reassure them; but when the "ghost," minus head and legs, glimmered along the crest of the "hog-back," the Apaches found themselves loaded up with more worry than they could stand.

Whirling away, they scampered for their ponies. Little Cayuse did not witness their departure, having his awed glance up the slope, and being entirely wrapped up in the manifestation taking place at the top of the "rise." When the scout and the Laramie man fired, and the spook replied with a scornful laugh, Cayuse's heart went down into his moccasins and he turned toward the place where the Apaches had been standing. He could not see them, and Nomad told him they had jumped the camp. Calling back that he would chase after them and bring them in, Cayuse rushed to the horse-herd, cut out Navi, his pinto, and dug for the south as though the fiend were after him. Probably he had never put so much enthusiasm into a pursuit of his runaway braves before. His scalp-lock was standing on end, and his heels drummed a wild tattoo against Navi's ribs.

Fortunately for him, his ardor cooled considerably before he was a mile from the camp; cooled just in time, in fact, to keep him from dashing pell-mell into a crowd of dusky forms that were gathered in a compact group on the bank of the Wichita. The forms were busy about something, and as they were in a sort of natural clearing among the timber, Cayuse could see them with some distinctness.

The boy pulled rein and watched. The tangled mass distintegrated, resolving itself into feathered heads and half-nude bodies.

"Comanches!" thought the boy, and, as usual in matters of the kind, his surmise was the correct one.

Under Cayuse's startled eyes the Comanches leaped to the backs of their ponies, which were standing near, and rode at speed toward the south. They had three prisoners who wore no feathers in their hair, but had their black locks bound down with head-bands.

"Apaches!" whispered Little Cayuse. "Ugh! Yupah, Chappo, Pedro make um big mistake. Comanches ketch um."

These discoveries threw the boy into a quandary. Should he follow the Comanches and their prisoners, or should he return to the camp and tell Pa-e-has-ka what had happened?

The Piute was a self-reliant youngster, and, considering himself responsible for the welfare of his men, he decided to trail after the captors and their captives. While he was going back to tell Pa-e-has-ka about the capture, the Comanches would be getting out of the way. Besides, just at that time Little Cayuse really had no consuming desire to return to the spook-harried "hog-back."

Following the Comanches was easy. Cayuse was not always able to see them, but he managed to keep within ear-shot of their ponies' thumping hoofs—and for successful night-trailing, ears are better than eyes.

A mile farther toward the south the Comanches left the timbered bank of the Wichita and struck across an open stretch, where the boy was much put to it to hide his shadowing. However, he proved equal to the emergency. Although the Comanches looked often along their back track, they were never able to apprehend the solitary little Piute, hovering on their rear and taking advantage of every scrap of shadow lying in his course.

It was a lone trail for Little Cayuse, but that very fact, it may be, spelled his success. Two trailers can hide more securely than three, and hunting alone has advantages over hunting in pairs.

At the farther side of the open stretch there opened the mouth of a shallow coulee. Into this the Apaches were taken by their captors, and Cayuse breathed more freely when he had gained the cover of box-elder and manzanita which grew sparsely in the swale.

From end to end, it may be, that coulee measured three miles. At the lower end the Comanches pitched hasty camp by a spring, and Cayuse drew off into a comfortable position and dismounted to watch.

If it seemed to him that the Comanches were to remain in their present position for a few hours, the boy had thoughts of a swift return to the "hog-back" with his news. Then Pa-e-has-ka, Wild Bill, and Nomad could make a quick ride and an equally quick descent on the Comanche camp, scattering the warriors and rescuing the trailers.

While the hostile braves were putting out their ponies, Cayuse pulled his riding-thong sharply around Navi's nose, in order to prevent a telltale whinney. From experience Cayuse knew that ponies will exchange greetings in that manner at the most inopportune times.

The moonbeams trailed brightly into the bottom of the coulee, and from his position Cayuse had a good view of the spring and the Comanche camp. He counted seven warriors besides the three prisoners. No fire was lighted, and the Comanches appeared wary and apprehensive. Cayuse gathered the idea that the Indians did not intend remaining long in their present quarters; consequently, he decided that he would not make a run for the "hog-back." He would follow again when the

Comanches resumed their march, and endeavor to discover where their permanent rendezvous was located. After that he would go hunting for Pa-e-has-ka, well assured that he could give him information of value.

The ponies of the hostile warriors were picketed very close to the camp, and presently the warriors themselves were all crouched together in a circle about the bound Apaches.

Two or three hours passed, and the first faint streamers of dawn quivered above the eastern edge of the coulée. The Comanches gave no sign of breaking camp, and Cayuse resolved to creep closer and see if he could pick up any information from the mumbling talk that floated toward him.

Hitching Navi to a small tree, well screened on every side by brush and scrub, the boy went down on hands and knees and worked his way, snakelike, in the direction of the spring.

Shielded by convenient thickets, he came so close to the Comanches that he could pick a word or two out of their guttural talk. One of the words, many times repeated, was "Pa-so-la-ki." What did that mean, the boy asked himself, and why were the Comanches harping on it so much?

Cayuse had overheard just enough to be fired with a curiosity to hear more. He would find out what this "Pa-so-la-ki" was, if possible. Leaving his position, he started to crawl nearer.

Then it was that the unexpected happened, so that it looked, for the fraction of a minute, as though the boy, instead of helping on the rescue of the Apaches, was to be held a prisoner with them. With eyes on the Comanche camp, and intent on getting still closer to it, Cayuse tried to climb over a Comanche sentry.

The sentry gave vent to a blood-curdling yell, shot to his feet, and made a vicious stab at the Piute with a knife. Cayuse dodged the knife. The Comanche's left hand, however, gripped the elk-tooth necklace that encircled the boy's throat. The necklace was close-fitting, and the elk teeth were strung on copper wire. The wire was strong, and for about two seconds it was a question as to whether Cayuse was to be strangled or decapitated.

The Piute could hear the Comanches yelling and running through the brush. If he did anything to get away, he would have to be quick about it.

Gasping and choking, he jerked his knife from his belt and jabbed at the warrior's arm. The sentry released his handful of elk teeth and brought his own blade around with a whole-arm sweep.

Cayuse, freed of the strangling grip at his throat, fell to his knees, and the glimmering knife clove the air above his head. The next instant he was bounding like a deer for the place where he had left Navi.

A clatter of firearms rang out behind him, bullets slapping into the bushes or singing murderously through the air. His eagle-feather, the pride of his life and sticking straight upward from his scalp-lock, jerked in his hair. It had been touched by a leaden missile, but that was the nearest any of the bullets came to him.

Reaching Navi, Cayuse tore him loose from the sapling, gained his back at a flying leap, and sent him full tilt down the coulée.

There was some delay on the part of the Comanches before they could discover just what the trouble was with their sentry, and begin the pursuit with their ponies. They had hopes, up to the last moment, of bagging

Cayuse with a bullet; as these hopes faded, most of the braves turned to get their mounts.

With Navi under him, Little Cayuse felt that he could laugh at pursuit. Navi could develop a burst of speed out of all proportion to his size; and he had the endurance of one of the "choo-choo" cars which Cayuse had once seen puffing into Denver.

When the mounted Comanches broke into view behind him, the Piute had a straightaway lead of an eighth of a mile. The boy laughed aloud, and shook his brown fist at his pursuers. After the Indian fashion, too, he taunted them with being squaws, and of trying to overtake the Thunder Bird on slow-crawling turtles. Owing to the distance that separated him from the Comanches his gibes never reached them; but the mere voicing of his contempt filled the Piute with a joy not to be measured.

Then, too, even though the Comanches could not hear his words, they could see his gestures, and these alone were enough to make the pursuers tear at their scalp-locks.

Before Cayuse came anywhere near the end of the coulée the situation had undergone a very decided change. Navi, usually as sure-footed as a mountain-goat, had stepped on a loose stone and gone sliding to his knees. The Piute was not unhorsed—when he once got his seat he could have hung to a streak of greased lightning—and he pulled Navi up with a tug at the riding-thong. But the little pinto had barked his shin and gone lame, and Cayuse stopped saying things to the Comanches and fell to wondering how he could save his scalp with a crippled horse.

The Comanches had been more than an eighth of a mile behind when Navi went down, for Cayuse had

been steadily increasing his lead, yet the boy was not so far away but that the pursuers were able to witness his mishap, and their far-off whoops came unpleasantly to his ears.

Jerking Navi to a quick halt, Cayuse leaped to the ground and made a hasty examination of the injured leg. So far as Navi was concerned the injury was not serious, but there was no making a getaway on the pony. If the Piute held to his course, his pursuers would overhaul and capture him, or shoot him off the pinto's back, before he was half-way across the open stretch lying between the mouth of the coulée and the Wichita.

What was to be done?

There was not much time to ponder this important question, for the exultant Comanches were larrying their horses over the stretch of country separating them from their intended victim.

Cayuse looked about him. The right-hand bank of the coulée was a gentle slope, but the left-hand bank was steep, and, half-way to the top of it, he saw something that chained his attention.

The object looked like a cutout, or a recess in the wall. The wall, although steep, could be scaled, and if the niche Cayuse was looking at was deep enough to shelter him and Navi, then they might take refuge there and be safe from their enemies for a time, at least. This was a forlorn hope, but it was the only one Cayuse had, and forthwith he led Navi across the coulée and began climbing the precipitous wall.

Realizing the need of haste, the Piute proceeded as rapidly as he could. If he was not in the niche by the time his enemies came abreast of him in the coulée, then it would be simply a bit of target-practise to pick him off the rocks.

There were crumbling stones and treacherous spots to be passed, but Cayuse picked them all out as he climbed, avoiding loose footholds unerringly. The din of the approaching hoofs was loud in his ears as he led Navi over the edge of a flat shelf and in under a rock overhang.

The niche was some twelve feet deep by ten broad. Only in the center of it, where the overhang was highest from the floor, was there room for Navi. Cayuse left the pony as far from the edge of the shelf as he could, then threw himself flat down and crawled out for a look at his foes.

The Comanches were thirty feet below him. There were four of them—presumably all that could be spared from the camp—and two had dismounted and were hurrying on foot toward the base of the wall.

Cayuse had a revolver. It was a small weapon, but serviceable, and as he lay on the shelf he drew it and dropped a bullet at the two Comanches on foot by way of discouraging them.

The lead took a piece out of one of the Indians' ears, and the Comanche flung a hand to the side of his head and danced yelling across the coulée toward his mounted companions. The other Indian dodged behind a rock, poked the muzzle of a repeating rifle over the top of it, and began firing.

The angle formed by the shelf and the face of the wall was Cayuse's protection. In order to reach him the Comanche's bullets would have had to turn a sharp corner. As it was, the bits of lead simply broke splinters from the edge of the shelf and flattened harmlessly on the under side of the overhang. Cayuse had drawn back into safety, and as the bullets spat against the rocks over his head he set up a clamor of defiant yells.

When the firing ceased, and he thought it safe to do so, he took another look over the edge of the shelf—a bullet immediately taking away another section of his eagle-feather.

"Ugh!" grunted Cayuse, ducking back and muttering at the way the Comanche had fooled him with what must have been the last shot in the magazine of his repeater.

When he looked again the boy was more cautious. The situation below had changed somewhat. The Comanches had taken their ponies farther up the coulée and secured them among the bushes. All the Indians were now on foot and climbing the sloping bank directly across from the niche.

This move caused Cayuse a lot of hard thinking. With their rifles, the four Comanches had only to gain a point on the slope level with the niche to be able to pour their bullets into it.

Unlimbering his revolver again, the boy attempted to discourage these tactics as he had done in the case of the two Indians who had tried to climb up to him. He was successful in hampering his enemies but not in frustrating their design. The slope was well covered with boulders and the Comanches ran from one stone to another as they made their ascent. Cayuse caught one of them in the arm, by a quick shot, but that was the extent of the damage he inflicted.

It was only a matter of time, now, before the boy would be at the mercy of the Comanches' long-range weapons. Squatting comfortably behind boulders, the four Indians could take their leisure putting bullets into the niche, and incidentally into the boy and his pinto.

If there had been any loose stones on the shelf Cayuse might have constructed a sort of breastwork that would

have turned the bullets. There were no stones, however, and the little Piute was at his wits' end.

But for those Comanche rifles, he thought, he could have issued boldly from his retreat, rushed down into the coulée, and got in a counter-stroke by making off with the four ponies. Had he attempted that, however, the rifles would have dropped him before he had fairly left the shelf.

Feeling that the game was up, Little Cayuse seated himself with his back to the niche wall and made ready to sing his death-song.

A pang went to his heart with the thought that he was never again to see Pa-e-has-ka. The evil spirit that had visited the "hog-back" during the night and had laughed at the white men's bullets, must have come as a bad omen. The fates had known that Cayuse was soon to die, and they had sent the flaming shape to the "hog-back" as a warning.

Sping!

A report came from across the coulée and a bullet hissed into the niche and glanced from the wall just over Navi's head. The pony, instinctively scenting danger, plunged and stamped.

"We make um die, little Navi," said the boy; "all same Comanche kill um Cayuse, kill um Navi. You no sing um death-song. You listen. Cayuse sing um."

Bang!

Another hiss and another *spat*, this time the bullet glancing from a protuberance of the wall at Cayuse's side and ringing upon the rocks opposite.

For his death-song the boy chose the Piute legend dealing with The Little Red Ant. It told how the little red ant, descending a hill with one arrow only, faced the Demon of the Underworld, and, conquered in the

flesh, went unconquered in the spirit to the Home of the Trues.

As the chant rose, the popping rifles and the spitting bullets gave it a fitting accompaniment. How long Cayuse sang he did not know. It was the warrior custom to sing the death-song until death cut it short. So, while the boy chanted he was waiting.

Yet he did not die, and neither did Navi. He became aware, suddenly, that, although there was plenty of shooting in the coulée, no more bullets were entering the niche. Puzzled and wondering, he got up and walked out on the edge of the shelf. What he saw below caused him to stare in amazement.

Pa-e-has-ka was there, and Nomad, and Wild Bill, and a pony-soldier, all mounted and charging by in pursuit of the Comanches. The four Indians had gained their horses and were flickering through the scrub like mad.

Then and there Cayuse's death-song changed into a song of victory.

"Pa-e-has-ka!" the boy yelled; and the scout, at the sound of that familiar voice, drew Bear Paw to a halt with a quick hand, turned in his saddle, and looked upward.

"Cayuse!" shouted Buffalo Bill. "Was it you those reds were shooting at? Come down, boy. Where's your pony?"

"Me got um," flung back Cayuse joyfully. And then, seizing Navi's bridle-thong, he led the limping pinto out of the niche and down toward the scout and those with him.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FLIGHT OF THE COMANCHES.

"Waugh!" cried old Nomad, as Little Cayuse came close. "How did ye ever happen ter crawl inter a crevice like thet thar, son?"

"He was trying for a getaway," put in Wild Bill, looking Navi over with a critical eye, "and lamed his horse. After that, there was only one thing for Cayuse to do and that was to find holding-ground and hang on as long as possible."

"Was that it, Cayuse?" asked the scout.

"Ai," replied the boy.

"Were those reds some of the Comanches who ran off our trailers?"

"All same, Pa-e-has-ka."

"Where are the Apaches now?"

"Pa-e-has-ka find um at other end coulée. Cayuse find um, Comanches chase um. Ugh! Cayuse climb hill, get in hole, think sure him get killed. Then Pa-e-has-ka come."

"We got hyar right in ther nick," observed old Nomad. "Them pizen Comanches was roostin' on that other hillside, slammin' bullets right inter yore hang-out, Cayuse, and I no cumtux how et was they didn't git ye. But hyar we aire, an' hyar you aire, an' we'd be all tergether ag'in ef we had our trailers."

"We'll go after the trailers now," announced the scout. "You'll probably not be able to keep up with us, Cayuse, if Navi is lame, but you can shack along in the rear and we'll wait for you." The scout turned to the lieu-

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tenant. "All ready for a fight or a horse-race, Craig?" he asked.

"Ready for anything, Cody," replied the trooper. "A man has to be if he rides with you."

"No pipe-dream about that," laughed Wild Bill.

"Come on, then!"

With that, Buffalo Bill used his spurs. Carrying a revolver in each hand, the king of scouts swept along the coulée, Bear Paw's hoofs pattering swiftly on the hard ground. Primed for business, the other three men plunged onward, a horse's length behind. Little Cayuse was doing his best to keep up with the procession, but in Navi's crippled condition the pace was far and away too fast.

The spring and the site of the Comanche camp were reached in short order, but there were no Indians in sight.

"Fooled ergin!" bellowed old Nomad, in clamoring disgust. "Sufferin centipedes! What's become o' them varmints? An' whar's ther 'Paches?"

"I reckon the whiskizos must have jerked 'em out of the way," grinned Wild Bill. "Those whiskizos of yours can work in broad day as well as in the night, can't they, Nick?"

The temptation to have a little fun with the trapper, now and then, on account of the whiskizos, was too much to withstand.

"Thet's right," snorted the old warrior, "rub et in. When ye're as old as I be ye'll know more erbout a hull lot er things, an' ye won't be so quick ter laff an' show yer ignorance. Whiskizos ain't done with us yit, Hickok, an' ye'll find et out afore we're many hours older."

"Let 'em come," laughed Wild Bill, spurring closer.

to the spring, so that his horse could drink from the pool just below it; "the more the merrier, Nick."

Off to the left, on the spot where the Comanches had been encamped, the scout and the lieutenant were making a quick survey of the ground.

"They got away from here in a hurry, Cody," said Craig, pointing to a couple of wolf-skin war-bags that had been left behind in the hurry of the flight.

"No doubt about that," returned the scout, following the well-defined pony-tracks with his eyes. "They dashed through the end of the coulée, taking their prisoners along." The scout lifted himself in his stirrups. "This way, pards!" he called to Nomad and Wild Bill.

At top speed the chase was resumed, the scout still in the lead. The trail of the fleeing Comanches led around the foot of the ridge forming the right-hand bank of the coulée. Here there were seams and erosions, and masses of boulders heaped in fantastic forms. To the left of the ridge the country was flat, but to the right it was as rough and broken as could well be imagined.

As the scout clattered through the entrance to the coulée and swerved Bear Paw to the right and along the base of the rocky uplifts, a crack of rifles rang out and puffs of white smoke leaped upward from among the boulders.

The scout swayed in his saddle. Divining that something was wrong, Bear Paw stayed his headlong gait.

"What's ther matter, Buffler?" yelled old Nomad, in a tremor of apprehension. "Did ye stop one o' them pesky bullets?"

Wild Bill and Craig were fully as much exercised over the matter as was Nomad, and anxiously headed their horses in the scout's direction.

With an effort, Buffalo Bill steadied himself in his

saddle. There was a smear of red at the side of his throat, and he lifted a quick hand to investigate the hurt with his groping fingers.

"Creased, that's all," said he laconically, "and not very badly creased, either. The lead jolted me a little as it gouged past, but there was no particular damage done."

"A close call, by gorry!" scowled Wild Bill.

"Closer than I'd want to have," averred Craig.

"We'll git even with ther red whelps fer et," rumbled the trapper.

The scout bound a handkerchief about his throat and picked up the reins from the saddle-horn.

"Some of the Comanches are up that slope," said he.

"We'll run 'em out before we go any farther. Spurs and quirts, pards!"

The charge that followed was a brilliant dash up the boulder-strewn slope straight at the entrenched redskins. Bullets whistled like bees about the ears of the four horsemen, and whenever a feathered head showed itself a revolver spoke. Presently the firing from behind the rocks ceased, and when the attacking party reached the place where the Comanches had been entrenched, only one was found, and he was stretched out lifeless on a broken and useless needle-gun.

"Whar'd the rest of 'em go?" queried old Nomad, lifting in his stirrups for a sharp look around. "As nigh as I could figger et thar was four er five o' ther varmints hyar."

"They scattered in good shape," said the scout, "but this is fine ground for a getaway of that sort. They may have gone in half a dozen different ways. That gash on the left, there, has fine possibilities for a bunch of reds that were hard pressed. Or that little barranca, higher up, would serve; or this rocky ridge would afford

cover while men on horseback rode around to the mouth of that cleft, on the right. There are other avenues of escape the reds might have used, but these look the most likely. Nick, you bear off to the left and look into that gash; Craig, follow the ridge and see what you can find in the cleft; Hickok, you and I will investigate the barranca."

"If any one of us wants the rest," called the scout, "three shots fired in quick succession will be the signal. Don't go far, pards, and if you find nothing worth while come back here within an hour."

The opening of the barranca was forty or fifty feet above the ridge of boulders which Craig was traversing. Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill rode into the narrow defile and found it a tortuous gash leading toward the heart of the ridge.

"Nothing doing here, Pard Cody," commented Wild Bill.

"We'll ride on around that first turn and make sure," replied the scout.

On account of the narrowness of their quarters it was necessary for them to ride in single file, making slow progress because of the stones with which the bottom of the barranca was littered.

As the scout, who was riding ahead, rounded the first turn and swept a fruitless glance through the defile to another turn beyond, a distant crack of a revolver, thrice repeated, came to his ears and Wild Bill's.

"By gorry!" cried Hickok, "somebody else is having the luck. That was the signal, all right, Pard Cody."

"It came from the direction of the cleft," answered the scout.

"Craig must have done the firing. Can we save time by climbing the side of the barranca?"

The scout swept the wall with his eyes, selecting a place where it might be scaled with hard work.

"We'll have to get down and lead our horses, Hickok," said he, sliding out of his saddle. "It will be a stiff climb, but we'll save a few minutes when every minute may count."

"Right-o," sang out Wild Bill.

Pawing and slipping and floundering, the two pards mounted the wall, trailing their horses behind them. The task was difficult, but they carried it through and clawed over the crest of the bank onto a small, rock-strewn plateau.

"Straight ahead, pard," puffed Wild Bill, "is the place where we'll find Craig."

"The cleft he was following must have run in the same direction as our barranca," returned the scout.

Just as they had mounted, old Nomad hove into sight across the barranca, spurring Hide-rack in their direction.

"What ye found, pards?" he whooped; "was thet you fired them shots?"

"Nary," called back Hickok, "it must have been Craig."

"You'll have to cross the barranca, Nick," cried the scout, "and look out you don't get a tumble. Hickok and I will hustle on, and you can follow us as fast as possible."

"I'll be thar! Save er leetle o' ther fightin' fer me, thet's all."

Nomad ducked down out of sight to effect his passage of the barranca, and the scout and the Laramie man spurred across the plateau. When close to the farther edge, they were surprised to see Craig riding toward

them from around a pile of rocks. Craig also appeared to be surprised.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "Did you find any signs of the Comanches?"

"Why," replied the scout, "we didn't fire those signal-shots, Craig! Wasn't it you? They came from this direction."

"By Jupiter!" exclaimed Craig. "Perhaps it was Nomad who shook the three loads out of his gun?"

"No, he's coming this way thinking it was you."

"Here's a go, and no mistake," muttered Wild Bill. "Who did that shooting, if it wasn't any of us?"

"Ugh!" grunted a familiar voice. "Pa-e-has-ka come this way, heap quick!"

"Cayuse, er I'm er Piegan!" came from old Nomad, spurring up at that moment. "How did ther Piute ever git hyar?"

The scout did not take time to answer. Cayuse's voice had come from behind a nest of boulders, not more than forty feet from the rock-pile around which Craig had ridden a few minutes before.

The scout spurred around the base of the boulders, and was presently confronted by a scene that astonished him.

Behind the nest of boulders stood Navi, whinnying his recognition of Bear Paw, and on the ground near the pony was Little Cayuse.

The presence of the boy in this place, when the scout and his other companions had left him in the coulée, was surprising enough in itself. But the biggest jolt to the scout's equanimity was given by a third figure which was lying on the ground in front of Cayuse. It was the form of a little wizened-faced Mexican, gray as a badger. He was sprawled out on his back, his eyes closed, his arms thrown wide from the shoulders, and his fingers

digging convulsively into the hard earth. There was an ugly crimson spot on the breast of his shirt.

"Well, thunder and carry one!" breathed the amazed voice of Wild Bill, at the scout's side. "Wouldn't this knock you slabsided? Cayuse here, and—yes, by thunder, there's no mistake about it—old Pablo."

"Howlin' brain-twisters!" boomed Nomad. "Et's our ole friend Pablo, et shore is."

"Who's Pablo?" asked Craig.

"Pablo?" returned the scout. "Why, he's a man who used to help Lon Starkey in his various lawless enterprises. We met Pablo first in Red Hand Valley, and later in northern Arizona shortly after Starkey escaped from Dunc Perry at Lime Gulch. Pablo is a wily greaser, but he looks now as though he had reached the end of his rope."

The scout tossed his reins to Wild Bill and got down.

"Did you fire those three shots, Cayuse?" the scout asked, coming close to where the boy was crouching beside Pablo.

"Ai," answered Cayuse.

"Did you know it was a signal Nomad, Craig, Hickok, and I had agreed on?"

"No *sabe* signal," answered Cayuse. "Me shoot um gun, want um Pa-e-has-ka. Mebbysso gun make um signal, me no *sabe*."

"Most ree-markable," spoke up Wild Bill. "Cayuse wanted us and let go with his little pepper-box. By chance he pulled the trigger three times. Well, well!"

"Just a happenchance," said the scout. "A thing like that will occur now and then. One of those signal-shots didn't hit Pablo, did it, Cayuse?"

"Me no shoot um," responded Cayuse. "Me find um

like that, know him Pablo, Starkey's man, then shoot um gun to bring Pa-e-has-ka."

The scout bent for a closer look at the little Mexican. He was unconscious and making hard work of his breathing.

"See what you can do to revive him, Craig," said the scout. "I think Pablo can give information that will be of help to us."

"I've got a flask of wet goods in my hip pocket that will do the trick, if anything can," replied the lieutenant, dismounting and kneeling beside Pablo.

While Craig worked, Buffalo Bill talked with the Piute.

"We left you floundering along the coulée with Navi, Cayuse. How does it happen you're here?"

"Make um short cut," said the boy. "Me see um Pa-e-has-ka turn to the right when he leave um coulée, and Cayuse make um try to ketch up by climbing coulée-bank and making short cut. Cayuse hear um plenty boom-boom. Heap fight, eh?" The boy's eyes gleamed. "Well, me try reach um place where fight go on, but fight quit all same before me git there. Ugh! Then, bumby, me find um Pablo and shoot um gun for Pa-e-has-ka."

"Clear as mud," commented old Nomad. "Cayuse runs his idees tergether so it 'u'd be too much fer a Denver lawyer ter foller him. Anyways, he's hyar, we're hyar, an' Pablo's hyar. Et's facts we want an' facts we got, no matter how we got 'em."

Craig, meanwhile, had lifted the Mexican's head and pressed a flask to his lips. The wounded man seemed to be reviving.

"How badly is he hurt, Craig?" inquired the scout, stepping closer to the lieutenant's side.

"The wound is mortal," replied the trooper. "It's a wonder he's lived as long as he has."

"Get him to talk, if you can, before he cashes in," spoke up Wild Bill.

Nor was Hickok so selfish or heartless as the words made him seem. What he wanted—what they all wanted—were facts regarding Lon Starkey, their ghostly visitor of the preceding night.

"He's come back to earth, Cody," announced Craig suddenly, "but he won't stay long, if I'm any judge."

All gathered close around Pablo. His eyes were open and he was staring upward into the face of the scout.

"Do you know me, Pablo?" inquired the scout, in Spanish.

"Si, señor," answered Pablo.

"How did you get hurt?"

"I was with Starkey, señor, among the rocks when you rode out. We tried to shoot you, but you charged us, shooting as you came. One of the Comanches was killed, and I—I was shot in the breast."

The words came faintly and with many a falter. At the last they died to a whisper. The scout motioned to Craig. The latter once more bent down and pressed his flask to Pablo's lips. The Mexican's fleeting strength responded at once to the fiery draft.

"Starkey was with you, then?" proceeded the scout.

"Si, señor."

"How did he escape from the waters of the Navajo?"

"He was in the branches of a tree, and he floated away with it when the Señor Cody and his pards were gone."

"Waugh!" exclaimed the trapper. "Nine lives, thet's what thet pesky Starkey hes got."

Paying no heed to the interruption, the scout went on with his questioning.

"How did you come here, Pablo?"

"I rode this far, *señor*. Here I gave out. Starkey and the Comanches took my horse and rifle and left me to die. *Madre mia!*" Pablo gulped down a sigh, and, as his physical tortures took hold of him again, dug his fingers into the ground and groaned.

"Starkey is selling whisky to the Indians and stirring up trouble among them?"

"Si," whispered Pablo.

"He has my Apaches with him?"

"Si."

"Where is he going from here?"

"North, to—to——"

The scout bent his head to catch the whispered words.

"North to—where?"

With his ear at the Mexican's lips the only answer the scout heard was a rattle in the throat. He started up just in time to see Pablo fling out his limbs convulsively and lay back, limp and silent.

"Too late," said Wild Bill. "He cashed in just as we were getting down to the most important point. He wasn't half-bad, that Pablo. But he fooled us several times. First off, just after we left Red Hand Valley, he told us he was a prisoner of Starkey's and that he was helping him against his will. Later, down there in northern Arizona, we found out different. Then Pablo allowed he was a member of the gang, but had had enough of it and was going back to the San Juan Mountains to live an honest life. This is the way he did it. How did he and Starkey join the Comanches, and when? They weren't with the reds when Craig saw them last night in the coulée."

"I'll take my oath to that," declared Craig.

"Were Pablo and Starkey with the Comanches when you saw them this morning, Cayuse?" asked the scout of the boy.

"No see um, Pa-e-has-ka," replied Cayuse.

"Then," mused the scout, "Starkey and Pablo must have joined their red allies about the time we rode down the coulée to attack them. And they passed this way after our skirmish among the rocks, heading north."

The scout turned and fixed his gaze on the rocky, forbidding hills that extended northward as far as he could see. The glances of his pards followed the trend of his own eyes.

"Thet kentry is plumb full o' hidin'-places cl'ar ter Fort Sill," said the trapper gloomily. "How we're ever goin' ter ketch Starkey in sich er layout is more'n I know."

"That's the work cut out for us," said the scout firmly, "and it's the work we've got to do."

"Mebbyso Cayuse help." With these words, and with his eyes gleaming, the little Piute faced the scout and his companions.

"Mebbyso ye *kin* help, ye leetle fernomenon," returned Nomad, "but how?"

"He's got something up his sleeve," said Wild Bill, "I can tell by the look in his eyes. What is it, kid?" he added. "This is no time to hang fire with valuable information like that."

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON TO PHANTOM GULCH.

In order to make himself understood, Cayuse had to describe how he had crept up on the Comanche camp in the coulée and had tried to overhear what the Indians were chattering about. The word many times repeated, and about the only one which he could distinguish, was "Pa-so-la-ki."

"Mebbyso Comanches wait for Starkey in coulée, eh?" Cayuse finished; "then, mebbys, they speak um 'Pa-so-la-ki' to mean something. Me no *sabe*. Mebbys Pa-e-has-ka *sabe*."

"It's too much for me," said the scout. "The word might stand for a hundred important things, but if we don't know just what it means, the information is no good to us."

"I know what it stands for," said Craig, and all eyes turned upon him eagerly.

"Bully!" exclaimed Wild Bill. "Now we're getting down to cases."

"Thet's ther tork," added Nomad. "At last We, Us an' Comp'ny aire beginnin' ter dig up somethin' wuth while."

"What is it, Craig?" asked the scout.

"Pa-so-la-ki," replied Craig, "is the Comanche name for a certain gulch." He made a wry face as he added: "But up at the fort we call that same place Phantom Gulch, and we've all got the notion that it's bad medicine."

Nomad received this information with a good deal of

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concern. His eagerness oozed away from him and he leaned moodily against Hide-rack as he remarked:

"Mebbyso thet thar Spook Cañon is er stampin-ground fer whiskizos, same as thet spook 'hog-back' whar ther Wichita an' ther Red comes tergether. Me no like um. Waugh! I ain't fer headin' fer thar, not noways."

Wild Bill cackled mirthfully.

"By gorry, pards," said he, "we're running into all kinds of spook doings this trip. I don't wonder, if Starkey is playing ghost in order to sell whisky to the Comanches, that he picked out Spook Cañon for a hang-out. The old Death-defier is consistent, no matter what else you can say about him."

"Well," went on Craig, "there isn't a man at the post who would hike through Phantom Gulch after sunset for a bushel of dollars. That's how the rank and file feel about the place."

"What are the doughboys afraid of, Craig?" queried the scout, with an amused smile.

"Why, afraid they'll see a headless trooper named O'Fallon, who was killed in the gulch by Comanches, a year ago. O'Fallon was carrying despatches through the Comanche country, and failed to arrive at Sill. A detachment was sent out to look for him, and he was found in the gulch—that is, he was found all but his head. The Comanches had decapitated him. The dead trooper was known to be O'Fallon, however, by a tattooed mark on his arm."

"There's nothing uncommon about losing a trooper in that fashion," observed the scout. "Despatch-carrying, in a time of Indian troubles, is desperate business."

"But redskins don't often take away a man's head, do they?"

"Not often; still, you never can tell what sort of a turn a savage will take when he deals with an enemy."

"Well," resumed Craig, "the detachment hunted around in the gulch to find O'Fallon's head. They hadn't found it by sunset, so they decided to camp in the gulch and take another look on the following day. Now," and Craig's voice grew even more serious, "here's where the peculiar part of the thing comes in. O'Fallon, at one time, was a bugler. Along in the night, while the detachment was sleeping, every man Jack of them was brought up standing by the notes of a bugle sounding 'taps.' At first they thought there must be another detachment of troopers near them, and that the bugler with this second detachment had given the call. But who ever heard of a bugler sounding 'taps' when with a party on the move? What's more, it was long after the time for 'taps'—being well after midnight."

Craig paused. Nomad looked around him, in a startled way, and drew his sleeve across his forehead.

"Pretty fine, that," chuckled Wild Bill. "I reckon Nomad thinks it was a whiskizoo that blew the call."

"Waugh!" sputtered the trapper. "Don't poke fun at things ye don't savvy, Hickok. Go on, Craig," he added huskily.

The lifeless Mexican on the ground lent a gruesome atmosphere to the surroundings—an atmosphere entirely in keeping with Craig's wonder-story.

"The worst is to come," proceeded the lieutenant, making out to speak in an amused tone, but it was so palpably an effort that it merely proved his nervousness. "The notes of the bugle came from the south end of the gulch. Hardly had they died out when a rattle of hoofs could be heard approaching the camp of the detachment from the north. The sound of galloping grew

louder and louder, and then——" Craig hesitated, and coughed in an embarrassed way. "I know this sounds foolish," he apologized, "but I'm giving it to you just as it is told at the post to this day. While the troopers stood waiting, a flaming apparition, horse and rider accoutered in full army gear, thundered past the camp and disappeared to the south. That's all. The detachment didn't wait to do any more hunting for O'Fallon's head, and they didn't even bother to bring back as much of O'Fallon as they had found; they just simply saddled up in record time and trailed out of that gulch a-smoking. From that time to this the place has been known as Phantom Gulch, up at Sill, and people who ought to know say that the bugle sounds in the gulch every night, and the phantom horseman, always minus his head, thunders past in the direction of the sound."

"That is all very entertaining," said the scout grimly. "Quite logical, too. The phantom head toots a phantom bugle, and the headless horseman rides in the direction of the sound in the hope of recovering the missing part of his anatomy. Did you catch all that, Wild Bill?"

"None of it got past my guard," answered the Laramie man. "The best part of the joke is that Craig more than half-believes the yarn himself."

"I'm open to conviction," laughed Craig, "that's all Nomad believes it, however," he added, "and so does Cayuse."

The little Piute had been intensely interested in the lieutenant's recital. He tried to dissemble and not show that the story had had any effect on him, but this was something he could not do.

"How far is Spook Cañon from here, Craig?" asked Wild Bill.

"It's ten miles north of Red River."

"And the Comanches call it Pa-so-la-ki?" queried the scout.

"Yes."

"It's my opinion, then, that we're on the right track. Cayuse heard the Comanches discussing the gulch, and from what we have learned from Pablo it seems certain that the reds had camped in the coulée while waiting for Starkey and Pablo to join them. It isn't likely there'd be so much talk about Pa-so-la-ki among the redskins if they had not a rendezvous there."

"We've got it right, Pard Cody," agreed Wild Bill. "The Comanches and Starkey have got away from us here, but there's nothing to prevent us from riding north to Spook Cañon and capturing Starkey right in his hang-out."

"It's the one move for us to make," assented Craig.

"Ef ye'll listen ter me, which I knows ye won't," said old Nomad, "thar'll be no tamperin' with things in Spook Cañon. Et's all er play o' ther whiskizos ter git us whar they want us, then put ther kibosh on good an' plenty."

"If you don't want to go with us, Nick," began the scout, "then you can wait for——"

"Easy thar, Buffler!" interrupted Nomad. "I don't keer whar ye're a-goin', ye kin bank on et thet Nick Nomad trails erlong. I told ye, back thar at thet 'hog-back,' thet I'd got ther ha'nts. Et's er cinch thet by goin' ter Spook Cañon I'm playin' with death an' destruction, but I'll stay with Pard Buffler till I'm snuffed out. All I wants is ter hev my guns an' Hide-rack fall inter good hands, an' ter be cached as clost ter ther Platte as ye kin git me. Thet's all. Now I'm ready ter ride whenever the rest o' ye aire."

"That's the way to tune up!" declared Wild Bill approvingly.

"We'll start without delay," said the scout, "but, first, we must do what we can for poor old Pablo."

There was little the scout and his pards could do, but that they did conscientiously and well. Close to the base of the boulder-heap they laid the Mexican, and covered him with loose stones. When the cairn was finished, horses were mounted and the party rode away under the guidance of Craig.

"On to Spook Cañon!" said Wild Bill. "We'll find Starkey there and stop this whisky-smuggling in short order."

"We'll find some 'un else thar aside from Starkey," grunted the trapper.

"Nick," cried the scout, "brace up and be sensible! Can't you see Lon Starkey's cunning hand in all this? Why, if he's gone into the whisky-smuggling business in the Comanche country, the troopers are the ones he has to fear. Now, if what Craig tells us is true, none of the troopers will go near Spook Cañon. That's what Lon Starkey wants. If he can carry on his operations in a place where a soldier dare not go, then his lawlessness will be all the safer for him. There's a method in pretty nearly everything Starkey does."

But old Nomad would not be convinced. He shook his head forebodingly and muttered in his beard.

"I ain't figgerin' none on leavin' Spook Cañon, arter I git inter et," said he pensively. "The rest o' ye may pull out o' et, but not me. I'm too fur gone with the ha'nts."

"There's a surprise in store for you, Nick; I feel it in my bones," spoke up Wild Bill.

"Waal," returned Nomad, "I'm hopin' thar ain't nothin' wuss nor a surprise."

CHAPTER XXIV.

PHANTOM "TAPS."

Trailing an enemy through country like that in which the scout and his pards now found themselves was an impossibility. The flinty rocks caught no impress of the unshod hoofs that had passed over them, and trailing an eagle through the air would have been almost as easy as tracking the notorious Starkey and his Comanches.

The clue afforded by Cayuse was the only one the scout and his pards had to follow. But for that they could only have roved blindly northward, trusting to luck. Now, however, they could shape their course for Phantom Gulch—or "Spook Cañon," as the pards seemed to prefer calling it—with a fair amount of confidence that they would find Starkey there.

In retracing their way to Red River, Craig found it convenient to regain the "hog-back" and the site of the scout's recent camp. And here it was that, in spite of the protests of Nick Nomad and the nervousness of Little Cayuse, the scout, the Laramie man and the lieutenant agreed to pass the night.

Nomad, using little reason in supernatural affairs, felt positive there would be more manifestations on the "hog-back." In vain the scout tried to tell him that Starkey had been back of the manifestations, and that, with Starkey making for Spook Cañon, there would be no ghostly visitors. The old trapper merely shook his head and looked discouraged. Whiskizos could do unreasonable and illogical things, and there was no dealing intelligently with them.

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Neither Nomad nor Cayuse were put on guard that night. Craig took the first watch, Buffalo Bill the next, and Wild Bill the third and last. There were no prowlers about the camp, either natural or supernatural, and the night passed prosily and peacefully.

Yet Nomad, even though he was not on sentry duty, did little sleeping. Cayuse's fears kept him from faring much better. The Piute lay so he could fix his eyes on the top of the "hog-back," and he spent a good deal of his time looking for the ghosts that he did not see.

The camp was astir bright and early, and the intense relief pictured in Nomad's face was comical to behold.

Cayuse had been doctoring Navi's injured leg, and the pony was able to use his foot much better that morning than on the preceding afternoon. This fact pleased the boy, and his concern for Navi in a measure took his mind from spooks and whiskizos.

After a hurried breakfast, riding-gear was put on the horses and the party mounted and forded the Red. Once across the river only ten miles lay between them and Spook Cañon. They were hard, rough miles, however, and could only be covered slowly.

"Have you noticed at the post, Craig," queried the scout while they traveled, "that the whisky-selling and Indian troubles centered in the vicinity of this gulch to which we are going?"

"Well," returned Craig thoughtfully, "the troubles cover a territory which might very easily include the gulch. Whether it does or not, is something we're to find out."

"Where does the unlawful whisky come from?"

"Generally it comes from Texas. That, I reckon, is the case in the present instance. Starkey is well ac-

quainted with the Texan whisky traffic, and probably had no difficulty getting himself supplied."

"There's one thing, it strikes me, against his using Spook Cañon as a base of operations."

"What's that? It seems to me the gulch could not suit his business better."

"What do the Comanches think about that headless phantom that rides through the cañon? If they're as afraid of it as you say the soldiers are, I shouldn't think they'd dare visit the place for their wet goods."

"An Indian will face a good many dangers for a drink of whisky," said Craig dryly. "It may be, too, that corn-juice spirits are the only kind to be found in the gulch, and that the Comanches know it."

"What do you think about that headless phantom, Craig?" the scout asked hurriedly.

"I don't know what to think," was the indefinite response. "The captain in charge of the detachment that saw the phantom swears by all that's good that the apparition showed itself, and every trooper and non-commissioned officer backs up his statement. It's hard to impeach such testimony, Cody."

The scout was silent for a moment, snapping aimlessly with his quirt at the bushes he passed.

"You say O'Fallon, the trooper who was killed, was carrying despatches?" he queried.

"Yes."

"Do you happen to know if, by any chance, those despatches in any way concerned Starkey?"

Craig gave Buffalo Bill a startled look.

"Why?" he asked.

"Well, if the despatches had anything to say about Starkey, then it might be that Starkey was the one who killed the trooper, and that Starkey is carrying on this

ghostly business in the cañon in order to make the place a safe retreat for himself."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Craig, "but it has a logical sound to me. Come to think of it, I believe Starkey *was* mixed up with the Comanche troubles at the time O'Fallon went on his luckless trip with the despatches, and very possibly Starkey was prominently mentioned in the colonel's instructions to the force in the field. Do you think Starkey would make such elaborate preparations just to give the gulch the reputation of being haunted?"

"He would go to any amount of trouble—if there was to be any benefit in it for Lon Starkey. But it's remarkable to think that he has got all the soldiers fooled!"

As they drew closer and closer to the cañon about which their hopes of capturing Starkey had finally centered, the country assumed a barren, blasted look that accorded well with its nefarious reputation. But, no matter how carefully they surveyed their surroundings, the scout and his pards could discover absolutely no trace of Indians or white renegades. If Starkey and his gang were hiding in that region, they were keeping themselves mighty close.

At last, when it was nearly noon, Craig halted the scout and his pards between two hills and on the bank of a small stream bordered with a scanty growth of timber.

"We're now within rifle-shot of the entrance to Phantom Gulch," he announced. "Do you want to go into the gulch during daylight, or at night, Cody?"

"Daylight hits me purty squar'," said Nomad.

"Wuh!" agreed Little Cayuse.

"Not knowing much about the place," put in Wild Bill, "it's my opine we'd better turn ourselves loose

there at night. We don't know what sort of a deal Starkey has got framed up for us, and if it's dark we'll come nearer to being on an even footing with him than if it was daylight."

"You've called the turn, Pard Hickok," said the scout. "My mind has been running along the same lines."

"Then," went on Craig, "right here is as good a place to camp as we could find. If you'll stand in your stirrups and look north, you can see through the timber a black hole let into a rocky ridge. That hole leads to Phantom Gulch."

They all rose in their saddles and peered, with a variety of feelings, at the entrance into the mysterious defile.

"Looks harmless enough," remarked the Laramie man, getting down and beginning to unsaddle.

"Ye kain't most allers tell by ther looks of er thing whether et's harmless er not," croaked Nomad.

"No more we can't, Nick," laughed Hickok, "but I'm banking that there's nothing more dangerous in that Spook Cañon than a handful of Comanches and a white whisky-smuggler."

"After you take care of your horse, Hickok," said the scout, "I wish you'd take up a position where you can watch and see whether any one enters or leaves the cañon. Watch closely and report if any redskin or white man shows himself."

"Keno!" answered Wild Bill as he led his horse away.

The Laramie man spent the entire afternoon watching the hole in the ridge. No one came from the place and no one went into it.

Buffalo Bill, back with the rest of his pards, worried considerably on account of the Apaches. He could not understand why Yuppah, Chappo, and Pedro had been run off, in the first place. Starkey, however, never made

any move that did not have a well-considered plan back of it, and while his object in capturing the Apaches was a little dark, yet there was no doubt but that he had one. All the scout could think of was that Starkey had made the capture in order to weaken the force bound for Fort Sill.

As night drew on Wild Bill rejoined his comrades and reported his failure to detect any signs of life about the entrance of the cañon. An hour later, when dusk had fallen, horses were made ready and the pards started on the last stage of the journey.

Nomad, although gloomy, was determined. He would go into the cañon and face a hundred headless horsemen, if he had to. If the "ha'nts" got in their work on him, as he confidently expected, he would yield up his life strictly in the line of duty.

Cayuse rode directly behind Buffalo Bill and Craig. The boy, even more fearful of what was to happen than Nomad, was equally as determined to see the venture through at any cost.

In silence the cavalcade wended its way down the creek, swerved from it at the nearest point to the cañon and then struck directly for the opening in the ridge. The opening was narrow, and at its farther end the walls of the cañon spread out abruptly to a distance of perhaps a hundred feet. The walls were high, and the shadows they cast into the bottom of the defile were heavy and menacing.

From time to time as the pards advanced northward they stopped to listen. The silence was intense and ominous—just the kind of silence a superstitious mind would associate with ghostly phenomena.

"How long is the cañon, Craig?" asked the scout in a low tone.

"About a mile," answered Craig, in a voice that quivered slightly. "We're about half-way through it, I should judge, and we haven't heard a sound that——"

At that precise juncture the silence was broken by the shrill notes of a bugle. A startled gurgle escaped old Nomad; Cayuse muttered potent Piute charms under his breath and pressed closer to the scout; and Craig, with a hoarse "By Jupiter!" straightened rigidly in his saddle.

The bugle-notes rang out soft and clear. They came from the black shadows clustering about the southern part of the cañon.

"That's 'taps,' all right," exclaimed the scout, "and as lively a call for 'lights out' as I ever heard in my life. There's a good pair of lungs back of that bugle-call, Hickok!"

As the strains died away in eery echoes they were taken up by another sound to the northward—a *clippity-clip, clippity-clip* of galloping hoofs, coming at speed.

Every member of the party turned and peered back along the ground over which they had just passed.

Presently a faint glow appeared in the south; it drew closer to the pards, brightening as it came.

"The phantom horseman!" gasped Craig huskily.

"I told ye not ter come, I told ye not ter come," babbled old Nomad over and over.

Cayuse was busy with his Piute charms, chanting them with a good deal of ardor in a voice that was none too strong.

Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill kept silent, staring at the glow as it rapidly approached. In a moment more they were able to make out a horse and rider. Both were glowing with a pale, yellowish light. The rider's head appeared to be missing—at least, there was no light in the place where the head should have been.

The course the strange horseman was following carried him past the scout and his pards at a distance of some twenty feet, and along a part of the cañon-bed that was slightly elevated.

"There's a head there, Hickok," muttered the scout, "but it's hidden with some sort of a black covering so it won't show in the darkness."

"The head's there, plain enough," returned Wild Bill; "in fact, Cody, there's something about that apparition which reminds me of the trunk and arms we saw on the 'hog-back'."

"It's Starkey, there's not a doubt of that."

"Shall we turn loose on him with our guns?"

"He's bullet-proof, evidently. The best way is to overhaul him and capture him. You stay here and keep a firm hand on our superstitious pards while I take after his ghostship."

"Count on me," chuckled Hickok.

This exchange of ideas was hurriedly made. When the talk was finished, the fiery horseman was a little way to the south of the position occupied by the pards. Using his spurs, the scout sent Bear Paw careering after the meteoric rider.

All the horses had pricked up their ears at sight of the supposed apparition, but had evinced no particular signs of fright. Bear Paw, seeming to understand what was required of him, put forth a fine effort.

Nearer and nearer drew the scout to the fleeing mystery, and when Bear Paw's shoulders were opposite the saddle-horn of the other horse Buffalo Bill reached forward to clutch the form in the saddle.

At that instant the "apparition" turned, and one of its flaming arms was raised, evidently to strike at the man

behind. For a ghost without a head to display so much intelligence was in itself remarkable.

A hard, flesh-and-blood fist struck the scout a glancing blow on the arm. He laughed loudly.

"You're a joke, Starkey!" he called. "Surrender, or I'll begin shooting."

A muttered oath came from the apparition. The next moment the hand that had hit the scout on the arm was raised again, this time with a glimmering weapon in its clutch.

Just as the weapon was discharged, Bear Paw hit some obstacle in his course, doubled up like a jack-knife, and went down with an equine somersault. The scout was hurled through the air as though from a catapult. Dropping in a heap on the hard ground, he rolled over and over, finally coming up with a jolt against a boulder and lying there half-stunned.

It was odd, ran his vague thoughts, that Bear Paw should have stumbled in a place over which Starkey's "phantom" steed had just safely gone. While his numbed brain was trying to puzzle this out, some one came stealing toward the scout from across the cañon.

Scenting treachery, Buffalo Bill continued to lie quietly. The man came on, scuffling with his feet as though to locate some object on the ground which his eyes were not able to see. At last his feet struck the scout, and the man bent down and began groping with his hands.

By then the scout's wits and strength had fully returned. Rising upward as though propelled by a spring, he struck the man a blow with his fist, then gripped him in his arms and bore him to the ground.

The man swore and fought fiercely. He was no match for the scout, however, and in almost less time than it takes to tell it Buffalo Bill was on the scoundrel's chest

with both knees and hanging to his throat with a strangling grip.

A horse could be heard coming up.

"Cody!" called a voice; "where are you? What happened?"

"Here, Hickok!" answered the scout. "Come over this way and bring a rope."

A moment later Wild Bill had dismounted and made his way to the scout's side.

"Got a prisoner?" he asked excitedly.

"Yes."

"He isn't so luminous as he was a spell ago," chuckled Wild Bill. "I heard a sound as of a fall, back along the cañon, and was mighty sure you'd done something."

"I *have* done something, but not what you think, Hickok. This isn't our luminous friend, Starkey; it's another one of the gang, I reckon. Pass over the rope and we'll get the lashings on him. After that we'll try and find out who and what he is."

With Wild Bill's help the prisoner was bound hand and foot.

"Who are you?" asked the scout, when the binding was finished.

It was so dark in the cañon that he was unable to see the prisoner with any distinctness.

"None o' yer bizness," was the insolent response.

"All right," said the scout briskly, "if you want it that way; but you'll find that we'll make it our business to find out about you before we're done. Let's load him onto your horse, Hickok," the scout added to his pard.

"Correct," answered Wild Bill. "But where'll we take him?"

"Back to where you left the balance of our pards." The scout started around the prisoner with the inten-

tion of getting where he could lift him by the head and shoulders. His foot struck against something that rang like metal. "Hello!" he muttered, stooping and picking the object up, "what's this?"

"What does it feel like, Pard Cody?" returned Wild Bill. "If you think it's safe, I'll strike a match."

"It's hardly advisable to show a light, but strike the match, anyway. I'd like to get a look at the prisoner and at the thing that I've found."

Wild Bill lighted the taper. "A bugle!" he exclaimed as soon as his eyes fell on the glimmering object in the scout's hand.

"Looks like it," muttered the scout, with a low laugh. "This is the spook bugle, I reckon—the one we heard a while ago. Hold the match over the prisoner's face, pard," and the scout bent down and eyed the bearded face of the man until the match went out.

"I don't know him," said Wild Bill. "Do you, Cody?"

"No, he's new to me. But he's one of the gang—that goes without saying. I reckon we'll have a look at Bear Paw before we load this fellow on your horse, Hickok. That stumble of Bear Paw's may not have been caused by a misstep, after all. I'm beginning to scent all sorts of double-plays in this cañon."

Leaving the prisoner for a moment, the pards made their way to where Bear Paw was standing. Bending down, Buffalo Bill ran his hands over the animal's forelegs and hoofs.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "the horse is roped by a front foot. The man with the bugle must have done that. A good cast for having been made in the dark!"

"You almost had Starkey," said Wild Bill; "in fact, from what I could see of the race, I thought you did have

him. Then the sound of the fall left me in a little doubt."

"I would have had him if the man with the bugle hadn't tripped Bear Paw."

"Hello, there!" came a hail from close at hand.

"Hello, yourself, Craig!" returned Wild Bill. "How are our panic-stricken pards? Didn't let them stampede, did you?"

"Hardly," was the grim response; "we're all hanging together this trip."

"Waugh!" turned up the voice of Nomad; "let's make tracks out o' hyar. Come on, Buffler. Et's a wonder ye wasn't killed when ye chased arter thet whiskizoo, an' ther quicker we vamose ther better."

"Not so fast, Nick," said the scout. "We've captured one of the whiskizoo—the one who blew the bugle."

"And the bugle," added Wild Bill. "We've likewise captured that."

Releasing Bear Paw from the rope, Buffalo Bill led him toward the place where the prisoner had been left.

"It isn't Starkey you've got, is it?" asked Craig, dismounting and following the scout and the Laramie man.

"Not Starkey," replied Wild Bill, "but one of his gang. It's the fellow that made Nomad's hair stand up by sounding 'taps' on the bugle. Oh, this is a fine spook layout, I must say! And it got all you swatties at the post on the run! Whoosh!"

"Here, Craig," went on Buffalo Bill, scratching a match and holding it over the prisoner's face, "look at this fellow and let us know if you've ever seen him before."

Craig stooped over, and the astonishment that appeared in his face was reflected in the face of the prisoner.

"Discovered, by thunder!" grunted the prisoner.

"Why, the devil!" cried Craig, straightening up.

"Have you any notion who this fellow is, Cody?"

"Not the least," was the answer.

"Why, *it's O'Fallon!*" was the astounding announcement.

CHAPTER XXV.

O'FALLON, OF COMPANY K.

Craig seemed mightily disturbed by his discovery. Certainly he had some cause. If he had made no mistake, here was a man who had been given up for dead for a year—a man, in fact, whom it was supposed had been found headless, and identified by a tattoo-mark on his arm. The whole affair was a tax on his credulity.

The scout and his pards shared Craig's feelings, in a slightly less degree.

"Here's a joke, then, on you fellows at the post," said Wild Bill. "A man is found minus his head, and he is supposed to be Trooper O'Fallon, a despatch-bearer. O'Fallon used to blow the bugle. In this cañon a bugle is blown at night, and along comes O'Fallon, in a blaze of light, looking for his head. By gorry, I'd like to be one of the party that takes O'Fallon back to the fort."

"Sure he's O'Fallon, Craig?" asked the scout.

"He looks the part," said Craig, "and besides, he virtually admits it."

"Look at his arm."

With the aid of another match Craig pushed up one of O'Fallon's sleeves and found what he was looking for.

"Yes," declared Craig, "there's no doubt of his being the man. But it's a whale of a mystery. I'm dashed if I can make head or tail of it. Who was it that detachment found who answered O'Fallon's description?"

"Don't fret your noodle over it, lieutenant," put in the prisoner; "now that I've been caught I'm plumb willing

to go back to Sill. I've had enough of this life, and I'm more than willing to quit haunting the gulch."

"Who was it some of the boys of your company found a year ago?" queried Craig.

"It wasn't me, you can gamble your hat on that. Starkey furnished the material for that trick. A white renegade who trained with Starkey had been recently killed, and my clothes were put on him and his arm was tattooed with a needle and some red dye furnished by Starkey's Comanches. Oh, it was a slick dodge, all right enough. That's Starkey's way of doing things."

"But the head—the missing head?" exclaimed Craig.

"That had to be taken away. You see, this here unfortunate renegade didn't look like me. Starkey managed it."

"What was your motive for helping him work the game, O'Fallon?"

"I didn't have any motive, along at the first, lieutenant. Y' see, I was ridin' through the gulch with despatches an' fightin' as shy of Injuns as possible, when Starkey shows himself. I makes a bluff at usin' my carbine, but Starkey waves his hand an' tells me to look around. I do, and I sees guns coverin' me from both sides o' the trail, a Comanche behind each gun. I drops my carbine like a hot potato an' asks Mr. Starkey what he wants. He says my despatches'll do. I tells him the loss of the despatches will be hard to explain when I gits back to Sill, an' he wants to know what I want to go back for? He can use a man about my heft and disposition, he says, an' he can promise me more'n thirteen dollars a month. It was wrong fer me to do it, but I goes him, right on the spot. It wasn't desertin', lieutenant, but it was gittin' out o' the army an' leavin' your name on the honor roll, with no provost guard to be feared."

"What did Starkey want of you?" went on Craig.

"Starkey had a hang-out in this gulch. It's a favorite stampin'-ground o' his, an' he opined he could work a ghost racket on the doughboys an' get the military to stay away. First off, I used to play spook, rubbin' myself an' my hoss with phosphorus an' pullin' a black bag over my head so'st ter make it look like the head was gone. By and by, Starkey took to playin' ghost hisself, leavin' me to toot the bugle. Oh, it was a clever enough idee, an' the best part of it was *it worked*."

"How did Starkey work his headless horseman business that night the detachment was in the gulch?"

"There was some scurryin' around, but Starkey got ready in time. He cuts the heads off'n a boxful of sulfur matches an' used 'em for illumination. It was rather a bum ghost he made that night, but the display was good enough to git them sojer-boys goin'. I played on the bugle at one end o' the gulch an' Starkey run to'rds me from t'other end. I reckon you've heard, lieutenant, how the swatties got out without payin' any more attention to the remains of what they supposed to be me."

"Has that ghost trick been played often?"

"A dozen times or more. Some Smart Alecs as didn't believe the gulch was ha'nted come here, saw Starkey blazin' by without a head, an' then lit out with consider'ble haste. They never come back ag'in. Starkey's been improvin' the ghost right along, cultivatin' a graveyard voice an' throwin' in little extry didoes. Oh, he's Class A in any game o' that kind."

"Do you stay in this gulch all the time, O'Fallon?"

"I manage the whisky-peddlin'. Starkey's been away a good bit of the time durin' the last six months, over to his ranch in the Medicine Mountains, an' down in Texas, Colorado, an' Arizony, workin' leetle side-grafts

while I attended to the main whisky business. I've been ready to quit Starkey 'most any time, only I was afeared. What 'u'd happen ter me if I showed up at Sill? That's the question that's been causin' me a lot o' trouble. Starkey an' I ain't been gittin' along any too well together lately. He thinks I dassen't leave him an' he's been makin' me work jest fer my keep."

"You sounded 'taps' on the bugle to-night, didn't you?"

"Sure; an' when Buffalo Bill chased after Starkey I was the handy boy with a rope. Starkey has been about half-locoed ever since he heard that Buffalo Bill an' pards was to get orders to bust up his whisky business. Before he found that out Starkey was feelin' tollable good. He'd jest got back from Arizony, leavin' everybody to think he'd been drowned, an' he was qualified to play ghost a leetle on his own hook. But the news that Buffalo Bill and pards was comin' upset him a heap. He went south to the Red River to play ghost an' try ter git 'em ter turn back. I told him it was a foolish thing, but when he gits his mind made up there ain't no headin' him. But say, lieutenant, what d'ye think they'll do with me at the post?"

"You're in a hard row of stumps, O'Fallon," said Craig. "First, you were derelict in your duty, traffickin' with Starkey as you did with those despatches; second, you're a deserter, even if your name is on the died-for-duty roll; and, third, you've been helping Starkey sell whisky to the Indians in direct defiance of military law. I reckon you're in for it."

"Ain't there nothin' I can do to make it easier fen me?"

"I can't think of anything."

"Mebby I can."

"What can you think of, O'Fallon?" put in the scout,

who had been an interested listener to this queer conversation.

"Well," and O'Fallon lowered his voice, "what if I helped ye to git Starkey? He ain't no friend o' mine, an' never has been. He knowed I didn't dare ter leave him; now that I'm ketched, though, I might as well do what I can ter play even with Starkey—purvidin' it'll make it easier fer me at Sill."

"I can't make any promises, O'Fallon," said Craig. "It's been a big surprise for me to find you like this, when every one supposes you dead, and I don't know how the colonel will feel about—"

"Say," said O'Fallon eagerly, "if I fix it so's ye can capter Starkey, why couldn't you fellers le'me go an' not say anythin' erbout findin' me? Hey?"

"That won't do," returned Craig sharply. "I've got my duty to perform, and I'm going to do it. You've nothing to lose, however, by doing what you can to help us land Starkey. I'll give you full credit in my report, and a thing like that usually goes a good ways with the colonel."

O'Fallon was silent for a space turning the matter over in his mind.

"I reckon I'll go ye, lieutenant," said he finally. "Ye'll have ter set me free if I'm ter do anythin'."

"And when you're free," chimed in Wild Bill, "it's you for the tall timber."

"That's where ye're shy, friend," protested O'Fallon. "It will only take three of us ter git Starkey. You can go along, and Buffalo Bill. Walk one on each side o' me, if ye want to, an' take my guns. Cover me all the time with yer own hardware, if that'll make ye feel any easier in yer mind. If I try to act double with ye, shoot. Ain't that fair enough?"

"This may be some trap you're trying to spring on us, O'Fallon."

"Trap nothin'. Why, if I tried ter trap you fellers I'd only succeed in gittin' trapped myself. Here I am workin' dead ag'inst Starkey. If I don't help ye make a capture, he'll shore kill me. I mean ter try my best ter pull the deal off successful, 'case Starkey'll have my skelp if I don't; an', if I do, mebby Craig'll put in a good word fer me."

"What do you say, Cody?" said Craig, appealing to the scout.

"We can capture Starkey without any of O'Fallon's help," replied the scout, "but——"

"No, ye couldn't—never. He's got more'n a dozen ways fer escapin' from this here gulch. If ye want ter block him, Buffalo Bill, ye got ter take me with ye."

"But, as I was going to say," proceeded the scout, "O'Fallon may help us bring this affair to a quick conclusion. If Starkey once gets out of this cañon he can keep dodging us for weeks. I reckon it's not a bad plan to use O'Fallon."

"All right," agreed Craig. "Hang onto him, though. He has proved, plainly enough, that he's a slippery whelp, and we can't afford to let him give us the slip now."

"Don't ye worry none about me givin' ye the slip," said O'Fallon. "Jest cut me loose an' I'll explain what we're ter do an' the way we're ter do it."

"Take off the ropes, Hickok," ordered Buffalo Bill.

Wild Bill made short work of releasing O'Fallon, but was careful to keep a tight grip on him as he arose to his feet.

"Dark as is in this cañon, O'Fallon," said the scout,

"don't think for a minute that you can play fast and loose with us."

"That's right," added Wild Bill, giving the arm he held a vigorous shake. "Try any treacherous plays, O'Fallon, and we'll wind you up like an eight-day clock."

O'Fallon had a six-shooter in his belt. The scout took the weapon away from him.

"I jumped into this to save my scalp," said O'Fallon, "an' I wouldn't be helpin' myself much if I tried ter back-cap you. I'm goin' ter conduct myself so'st the colonel'll have a good word ter say fer me when I'm up fer court martial."

"That's the idea, O'Fallon," approved Craig. "What's the first step in getting Starkey?"

"The first step, lieutenant, is ter select the men who're to stay with the hosses, an' the ones who're to go with me an' do the heft o' the work. Two's enough to go with me, but if ye're any ways juberous about the result I won't object ter takin' more."

"I want to be on the firing-line, of course," said Craig, "and I think Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill feel the same."

"Waugh!" came from old Nomad. "What's ther matter with me bein' on ther firin'-line, too?"

The trapper had been a listener to the revelations taking place in the gulch. He had learned that Starkey had been playing understudy for a whiskizoo, and that the whole fabric upon which had been built the manifestations of the headless horseman was of human contrivance. All this had come to Nomad with a cogency and force there was no dodging, and there were some things in the immediate past he would have liked to sponge out.

"Oh, no, Nick," said Wild Bill, "we couldn't think of letting a man with the ha'nts get so near the whiskizooos."

You and Cayuse will have to look after the horses, and leave the real work to the rest of us."

Old Nomad was "sore," but there was nothing for either him or Cayuse to do but make the best of the situation.

"Yes," said the scout, "if this expedition is to be continued on foot, Nick and Cayuse can take care of the horses. Where had they better be left, O'Fallon?"

"Right here," answered the deserter. "This is as handy a place as we could find. I'm plannin', before we git Starkey, ter release your Apaches, Buffalo Bill. I reckon that's what ye'd like done, ain't it?"

"Yes; I'd like to begin by releasing the Apaches and their horses, providing we can do that without giving Starkey a chance to skip out."

"We can. Starkey'll be waitin' fer us when we go after him."

"That's mighty accommodating of Starkey," spoke up Wild Bill. "What do you think he's up to while this confab is going on in the middle of his gulch?"

"He's in the storeroom with the door locked, waitin' to hear how I come out with you fellers. Starkey is on the run wuss nor he ever was before. The way ye're houndin' him, Buffalo Bill, has made him nigh crazy. Why, he dreams about you an' your pards in his sleep, he's that worked up."

"How many Comanches has he with him?"

"Nary a one in the storeroom *with* him, but there's a dozen clost by—some of 'em looking after the three prisoners. I'll take ye to where the Apaches are, and, as the hosses ain't fur from where the pris'ners are bein' kept, we'll be able ter kill two birds with one stone, as the sayin' is. I'll walk ahead with Wild Bill, him hangin'

enter me so'st I kain't git away, an' you, leftenant, kin foller clost behind with Buffalo Bill. Are ye ready?"

"Yes," came the answer from the scout and Craig.

"Then for'ard, march."

O'Fallon laid a course southward and proceeded in that direction for perhaps a hundred yards; then, turning sharply to the right, he walked directly across the cañon and came to a halt at the face of the cliff.

"The pris'ners an' their guards ain't more'n fifty feet from here," whispered O'Fallon. "A couple o' ye kin crawl south along this wall until ye reach the place. It's a big overhang. The guards an' the 'Paches are in the front of it, an' the hosses are in the back. I don't know how many guards there are, but two o' ye'll sartinly be able ter take keer of 'em. But do it quiet. We don't want ter turn on a general fight. Starkey 'u'd hear it an' u'd make a run out o' the gulch."

"Craig," said the scout, "you stay here and look out for O'Fallon. Hickok and I will see what we can do for the Apaches."

"I reckoned ye'd want me looked after," grunted O'Fallon, "but I'm playin' square with ye, as ye'll find."

"I'll stay," said Craig. "You'll come back here?"

"Yes."

Having made this arrangement, the scout and the Laramie man began their advance along the foot of the cliff. They had to crawl, and the scout took the lead. It was difficult for them to see what they were doing, but they kept their course by rubbing their shoulders along the wall as they crept.

Finally the scout reached a place where there was a break in the cliff. Groping with his hand, he found that the break was a stone corner, and that he was upon the

recess and the stone overhang mentioned by O'Fallon. He could see nothing, but he fancied he could hear stealthy movements. Presently a glimmer of light showed in the opaque gloom. A Comanche had struck a match and was lighting a cigarette.

Wild Bill had crawled up beside the scout and both were looking in under the overhang. The match enabled them to make a quick but comprehensive survey of the situation.

There were two Comanche guards squatting on the sand floor of the cavern and with rifles lying across their knees. Beyond them could be seen the indistinct forms of the prisoners.

The match flickered out, and Buffalo Bill drew back around the stone corner of the wall and pulled Wild Bill with him.

"Luck!" whispered the scout. "There are only two guards, Hickok."

"I noticed that."

"You noticed the position of the two Comanches, as well?"

"Yes. They're squatting there with their backs to us. Both are smoking. We can smell our way to 'em by the smoke of their cigarettes, even if we can't see the fire."

"We'll crawl in together. You take the right-hand Comanche, and I'll take the one on the left."

"Keno!"

Everything depended upon the way this initial step of the program was carried out. If the pard made the slightest mistake, every hope of capturing Starkey that night would go by the board. Understanding this fully, they drew upon all their resourcefulness to carry out the work quietly and quickly.

It was not necessary to "smell their way to the Comanches," as Wild Bill had suggested, for the glowing tips of the two cigarettes could be plainly seen, the men having shifted their positions.

While covering half the distance separating them from the Comanches the pards were not heard. As they drew closer, however, one of the guards grunted, got up and walked toward them.

The scout gave Wild Bill's arms a quick squeeze and slowly arose to his feet. The Laramie man understood. Buffalo Bill had planned to take the Comanche who was advancing on them and leave the other one for Hickok to manage.

Waiting until the Indian came within arm's reach of him, Buffalo Bill jumped for his throat like a panther. The Comanche tried to yell, but too late. Two sets of fingers encircled his throat like steel bands, and he was overset and had his head bumped on the hard ground with such force that he was stunned.

Wild Bill, meanwhile, had made his assault on the second Indian simultaneously with the scout's attack on the first.

The Laramie man prevented an outcry on the part of the redskin, but he was not able to keep him from drawing his knife and attempting a murderous use of it. Deftly Wild Bill turned the point of the blade against the one who wielded it, the Indian going limp forthwith and proving that he had been touched in a vital spot.

"Hickok!" called the scout.

"Here!" was the response. "What luck, Cody?"

"My man's down."

"So is mine."

"Then release the Apaches, Nick, while I tie up the two reds and get a gag between their teeth."

"My red doesn't need ropes and a gag, but while you're trussing up the captive I'll attend to the 'Paches."

Wild Bill made his way to the prisoners, finding them by stumbling over their helpless bodies.

"Don't be in a taking, lads," murmured Wild Bill; "Pa-e-has-ka and his pards hadn't forgotten you. Roll over on your faces so I can get at your hands."

There came sounds indicating that the Indians had rolled over; then, groping for their bonds, Wild Bill ran the edge of a knife through them. Sitting up, as soon as their hands were freed, the Apaches pulled the gags from their mouths.

"Pa-e-has-ka!" muttered one. "Heap fine. Pa-e-has-ka no forget um red trailers."

"You ketch um Starkey, huh?" asked another.

"We're going to do that next," answered Buffalo Bill. "Do you boys know where your horses are?"

"Si."

"Then get them. After that, take the weapons from the two Comanches lying here and wait in this place until we come after you. Sabe?"

"All same," chattered the delighted Apaches.

"And don't make any more noise than you can help," added Buffalo Bill. "Come on, Hickok," he added. "I reckon that Yuppah, Chappo, and Pedro can take care of themselves from now on. We'll go back to Craig and O'Fallon and start in on our next play. We've got to bring matters to a head with Starkey before he gets wind of what's doing and tries for a getaway."

"Correct," returned Wild Bill, highly gratified by the success that had attended the beginning of their work.

CHAPTER XXVI.

GETTING STARKEY.

"Couldn't you find 'em?" asked Craig of the scout and the Laramie man as the two came to where he and O'Fallon were waiting.

"You bet we found 'em, Craig," replied Wild Bill. "There were two guards. After putting 'em down and out we left the 'Paches to get their own horses and wait under the overhang until we called for 'em. Fine business, Craig, if I do say it."

"I should say it was fine," chirped O'Fallon. "Why, us fellers never heard a sound."

"We tried to do the business as quietly as we could," said Buffalo Bill. "Now, for the balance of it. If the rest of the Comanches are not with Starkey, O'Fallon, where are they?"

"There's another overhang on t'other side of the gulch, an' the most of the Comanches are over there—guzzlin' fire-water, like as not. Starkey won't have any of them with him in the storehouse. In fact, we never let the reds know where the storehouse was; ye see, they might raid it if they knowed, an' thought they could do it successful."

"So Starkey's alone in the storehouse?"

"That's it. He couldn't hang around in the gulch with his hoss an' himself all kivered with phosphorus. Until the stuff wears off, which hadn't ort ter be long, now, Starkey an' his hoss will stay in the storehouse. He wouldn't dare ter show himself, kase he knows he'd be a shinin' mark fer Buffalo Bill an' his pards."

"Well," said the scout, "take us to the storeroom at once, and we'll wind this up in short order."

"This way, then," responded O'Fallon, starting off with Craig.

The course was still southward, cutting across the lower end of the cañon at an angle that avoided the hang-out where the Apaches were waiting. In spite of the darkness O'Fallon seemed to know exactly where he was going, and to be taking the most direct path. He did not halt until he reached the south end of the defile and was close to the face of the wall.

"Here's the door of the storeroom," said he, in a low tone. "You can't see it, even by daylight. There's a bit of a cave here with a small entrance that Starkey has fixed up with a stone door. And the stone of the door matches the stone of the cliff in a way that puzzles ye ter tell one from t'other, unless ye know how. Now, I'm goin' up and hammer on the door."

"And when the door opens," added Wild Bill grimly, "you'll duck, the door'll close, and O'Fallon, of K Troop, will be gone. Very nice—for you."

"Ye're so blame' suspicious!" growled O'Fallon. "Come up to the door with me, an' hang onter my arm along with Craig. Will that do?"

"That'll do," answered Wild Bill. "We're taking no more chances than we have to, this trip."

O'Fallon, with Wild Bill and Lieutenant Craig on either side of him, stepped to the face of the cliff. He was no more than a minute selecting the place to knock. Picking up a stone, he tapped it on an apparently solid part of the cliff.

But the cliff at that point was not solid. A voice answered the summons—sounding very faint but quite distinct.

"Who's that?"

"O'Fallon," answered the deserter, his lips close to the rock.

"If y'u're O'Fallon," came the voice on the other side of the stone door, "signify it in the us'al way."

The deserter gave three taps, paused, then followed with two more.

"That's our private knock," he explained in a whisper to those with him.

"Any Injuns around, O'Fallon?" asked Starkey.

"Not clost ter here."

"How erbout Buffler Bill an' his pards?"

O'Fallon chuckled and answered, "I reckon they ain't goin' ter bother me much."

There came a sound as of a shoved bolt.

"Push on the door, O'Fallon," said Starkey.

O'Fallon pushed. A square section of the wall gave way and an angle of light appeared. The angle grew as the door continued to open. The deserter pushed into the room.

"Traitor!" howled the voice of Starkey as he caught sight of Craig.

Then, had it not been for Wild Bill's quick work, O'Fallon would have paid for his treachery with his life. Starkey, quick in his movements as a tiger-cat, launched a bullet at the deserter. The selfsame moment the trigger was pressed, Hickok threw himself against O'Fallon and tumbled him on the floor. The bullet passed through the air over the heads of both Wild Bill and O'Fallon.

Before Starkey could fire again, Buffalo Bill was upon him, knocking the six-shooter out of his hand and gripping for a struggle.

The interior of the cave was illuminated by a lantern swinging from an iron spike in one of the walls, but

Starkey himself was still gleaming with the phosphorus he had rubbed over his hands and clothes in order to play the rôle of headless horseman.

No one who knows will ever say that Lon Starkey, of Red Tail, was a coward. Unlike most "bad" men and killers who flourished in the West, Starkey had abundant courage and never seemed to know when he was beaten.

Although he was alone in the storeroom and confronted by four men, he threw himself into the fight just as though there was a possibility of his escaping.

He was like a child in the hands of Buffalo Bill, however, and the scout threw him down and held him writhing upon the stone floor.

"A rope!" called Cody.

A riata was found and Starkey's hands were bound at his back and his feet at the ankles. As soon as the renegade saw there was no help for him he ceased his struggles and accepted his fate philosophically.

"For a spook, Starkey," laughed Buffalo Bill, "you put up a pretty strong fight."

"I done the best I could, Buffler Bill," replied Starkey, "but y'u was too many fer me. Howsumever, I reckon y'u can't count on hevin' Lon Starkey fer a pris'ner. I'm too slickery a propersition."

"You got away from Dunc Perry," said Buffalo Bill, "and you got away from me and my pards, down on the Navajo, but you're not going to get away from us this time."

"We'll see erbout that later." Starkey, from where he lay on the floor, wobbled his head around until he could see O'Fallon. "Y'u low-down coyote!" he hissed. "I'm goin' ter git clear if on'y ter wipe you out fer what y'u done ter me."

"Bah!" sneered O'Fallon. "Ye been puttin' the screws onter me fer the last six months, thinkin' I didn't dasst ter turn on ye. But ye made a mistake, Lon Starkey. Ye kain't treat O'Fallon like a galley-slave without payin' the price."

"I'll put a bullet inter y'u, one o' these days," flared Starkey, "an' make a real ghost out o' y'u."

"Two kin play at that game."

"Why weren't we able to hit you with our bullets, Starkey?" asked Wild Bill. "How did you get away from that lead of ours?"

"Guess it out," said Starkey curtly.

"This is how, Wild Bill," went on O'Fallon, dropping to his knees and pulling aside Starkey's flannel shirt.

The lantern-light gleamed on a mesh of fine steel rings which overlay the entire upper part of the renegade's body.

"A bullet-proof coat!" exclaimed the Laramie man.

"A jacket of chain mail!" muttered the scout. "Where did he get that, O'Fallon?"

"He had it made for him down in Mexico," answered the deserter, "and it's about the slickest thing in armor ye ever heerd of. Why, it's as pliable as a piece o' cloth an' don't weigh more'n five pounds, yet it'll turn a rifle-ball."

"No wonder your bullets didn't hurt him," said Craig.

"But Nick shot at his head, which was bobbing among the bushes," remarked Wild Bill. "I reckon Starkey didn't have his face protected, did he?"

Starkey gave a gruesome laugh.

"Nick Nomad's nerves was considerable unstrung when he shot at me," he explained. "His bullets drapped low an' struck the coat o' steel. Ye'll notice that when I showed myself on the 'hog-back' I had pulled my black

cap over my head an' had rubbed the phosphorus on my shoulders an' arms. I wasn't lettin' any spook-hunters like Buffler Bill an' Wild Bill take chances at me."

The scout turned away to look around the cave. It was not large, and Starkey's horse, still glowing a little with phosphorus, was standing in the back part of the vaulted room. On one side was a rude bunk, and near it, on end, stood three barrels of whisky.

Craig found an ax. "Here's where I settle the liquor question on this part of the reservation," he announced, and began plying the ax.

As soon as the head of a barrel was knocked in, Wild Bill and the scout would tip it over, allowing the "valley tan" to flow over the floor.

"Hev yer fun," growled Starkey. "Ye'll all pay fer this, some time."

"What next, Pard Cody?" asked Wild Bill as soon as the barrels had all been broached and overturned.

"We'll put Starkey on his horse, Hickok," replied the scout, "and you can mount and ride for the place where we left our mounts. Craig and I will set fire to the storeroom and follow you."

This plan was carried out. Wild Bill got into the saddle and the helpless Starkey was roped to the cantle. The renegade's weapons were taken from his belt, and the scout picked up a repeating rifle from the floor by the cot.

"Put the lantern in that pool of whisky, O'Fallon," ordered Buffalo Bill.

The lantern was placed as directed.

"Clear out, Wild Bill," was the scout's next command, "and you and O'Fallon follow him, Craig. I'll stay behind to get the fire going."

Wild Bill spurred through the stone doorway, Craig

and O'Fallon following close to the horse's heels. Raising the rifle to his shoulder, the scout smashed the lantern with a bullet. The whisky caught fire and the flames leaped up instantly, lapping at the drenched barrels. In a few moments, the scout knew, the storeroom, which had been the scene of Lon Starkey's nefarious work, would be completely gutted.

As the scout whirled to leap through the door, a rattle of firearms greeted him. The volley was followed by fierce Comanche yells, and by the stentorian tones of Wild Bill:

"The reds are after us, pards! All together, now, and give 'em Hail Columbia! Whoop-ya!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FIGHT IN THE GULCH.

Instinctively the scout divined what had happened. When he stopped to think of it, he wondered that it had not happened before.

The Comanches had gotten wind of what was going on. Although they did not know the location of the storeroom, yet the lantern-light, shining through the open door, had guided them to it. Evidently they had arrived at just about the time the scout had sent his pards from the cavern, preparatory to smashing the lantern.

A bright light still came from the open door. As the scout stepped clear of the cavern, he pulled the door shut behind him, thus making his pards and himself less conspicuous as targets.

Bullets seemed to be coming from all sides. Spurts of flame shot up, as guns were discharged, and gave fleeting glimpses of painted, hideous faces.

"Fight your way through the reds, pards!" shouted the scout. "We've got to get to the other end of the cañon! Pick up Nomad, Cayuse and the horses, as you go. I'll get the Apaches!"

"We'd better all hang together, Cody!" cried Craig, popping away with his revolvers.

"If I don't look after the Apaches," the scout answered, "they'll be taking a hand in the fight and perhaps doing us as much damage as they do the Comanches. You can reach the other end of the cañon, all right. Wait there."

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With that the scout bounded off toward the side of the gulch. Wild Bill, Craig, and O'Fallon started north at the same time, keeping up a vigorous firing as they went.

The Comanches, in some manner, had become aware of the scout's move. Several of them tried to head him off, and for an instant it looked as though disaster would surely overtake him.

But the king of frontiersmen was equal to the emergency. For infighting his revolvers had advantages over the rifle found in the storeroom, and, clutching the repeating weapon in his left hand, he used one of his revolvers with his right, driving the redskins away. As soon as he had cleared his path he ceased firing, for, by keeping up the fusillade, he merely located himself to his foes.

The Comanches continued to peg away with laudable persistency, but their bullets went wide of the scout. Hurrying to the overhang of the side wall, he found the Apaches in a state of wild excitement because of the battle. The red trailers could hear what was going on, and they were eager to ride out and take part, but they had received orders from Pa-e-has-ka to remain where they were. Smothering their impatience as well as they could, they remained under the overhang, holding to their ponies.

"'Paches!" panted the scout, coming in on them swiftly.

"Ai!" answered the relieved trailers in chorus.

"Have you got your *caballos*?"

"Wuh!"

"Then mount and come with me. Ride slow, because I'm on foot, and don't do any shooting—you might hit some of our pards. Vamose!"

Eagerly the trailers flung themselves to the backs of their horses and trooped out after the scout.

"Are you armed?" asked the scout, as he led them northward along the cañon wall.

"Got um *dos* rifles, *dos* revolvers, one knife," enumerated Chappo.

"You're well fixed, then. None of you boys are hurt?"

"Comanches no hurt um; Comanches say they torture um to-morrow. Ugh!"

"There'll be no torture now."

Desultory firing was still going on out in the cañon, but, from the sound of it, the shooting was mostly at random. Now and then a shot came from the north, and these reports the scout believed to have been made by the weapons of his pards. If he was true in his surmise, then Wild Bill, Craig, and O'Fallon had joined Nomad and Cayuse and all were close to the end of the cañon.

Leaving the wall, the scout led the Apaches in an angling course that gave a short cut to the cañon entrance. No one interfered with them, and they encountered neither friend nor foe until they were fairly within the entrance. Then a menacing voice hailed them:

"Stop, thar! Another move this way an' we'll pepper ye!"

"No, you won't, Nick," flung back the scout.

"Is et you, Buffler?" cried the overjoyed trapper.

"Big as life. Are all the rest of our pards with you?"

"They're hyar, an' we got B'ar Paw fer ye. Whar's the 'Paches?"

"Riding at my heels."

"Hooray!" yelled the voice of Wild Bill. "If it wasn't for O'Fallon, we'd be out of the woods with ground to spare."

The scout ran forward and was soon among his comrades.

"What's the matter with O'Fallon?" he asked.

"The Comanches nailed him," spoke up Craig. "He was killed instantly and we had to leave him half-way down the gulch."

"Tough luck!" muttered the scout. "That fellow showed good stuff at the finish. However, a knotty question has been settled, and the colonel won't have to puzzle his brains over what he'll do with the deserter. Where's Bear Paw?"

"Here, Pa-e-has-ka!" Cayuse rode forward on Navi and tucked the scout's reins into his hand.

Buffalo Bill swung to the saddle.

"We could charge back through the cañon, Pard Cody," cried Wild Bill, his fighting blood aroused, "and wipe out every red in the bunch!"

"What's the use?" returned the scout. "We've captured Starkey and destroyed his whisky-shop. That covers the letter of my instructions, doesn't it, Craig?"

"You've wound up your orders in good shape, Cody," said the lieutenant. "There's nothing more for us to do, now, but to get away."

"Then we'll make for our old camp between the hills and pass the rest of the night. Ride, pards!"

Horses were put in motion, the entrance of the cañon passed and the cavalcade came out into the moonlight.

"O'Fallon got it," spoke up Starkey, with a heartless chuckle; "that does me more good than I know how to express. It saves me a job when I git away."

"You'll not get away, Starkey," said Craig.

"Don't y'u fool yerself, leftenant. I've got out o' tighter squeezes than this. Even if y'u try ter hang me, I'll fool y'u. I kain't be hung. The rope was never

made that kin do the trick. An' I kain't be drownded, either, as Buffler Bill and his pards know, an' I'm bullet-proof."

"You'll not be bullet-proof, Starkey, when we peel that armor off of you," remarked Wild Bill.

"Shucks!" scoffed Starkey. "I kain't be killed with er without this chain coat. Mebby y'u won't git me ter the fort; but, if y'u do, I won't stay ther long. Y'u kin bank on that."

"We'll put you in double-irons, Starkey," said Craig, "and double-lock the guard-house. There'll be no escape from Sill, for you, and you'd better make up your mind to that."

Starkey's answer was a grim, defiant laugh.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A TASK WELL DONE.

In the timber, on the bank of the creek that ran between the hills, the scout and his pards slept out the rest of that eventful night. No Comanches came near to molest them, and all hands had a good rest. By early morning they were in the saddle, en route to Fort Sill.

Nomad was very much reserved. He talked little and showed a disposition to efface himself by hanging in the background. Wild Bill joshed him unmercifully.

"I reckon, Nick," observed Hickok, with mock gravity, "that this is the first time on record a real, live whiskizoo was ever taken into captivity. What do you think?"

"Waugh!" snorted the trapper. "Ef you don't hesh, Hickok, I'm goin' ter make er display o' fireworks. How much d'ye think a feller kin stand o' thet sort er tork, anyways?"

"That's so; it must be rough on a fellow, especially when he's far gone with the 'ha'nts.' How are you feeling now, old pard?" and Wild Bill's voice became very sympathetic and solicitous.

Old Nomad glared and dropped farther in the rear.

"Easy, Hickok, easy," said the scout, in a low voice.

"Nick has got about all he can stand."

"I wish we could cure him once and for all of that whiskizoo habit."

"You can't; he's had it so long it has become second nature to him." The scout turned to Chappo. "You got away from the camp on the 'hog-back' rather suddenly, Chappo," he said.

Chappo eyed the scout for a moment, then looked off into the hazy distance. "Ugh!" he grunted.

"Were you afraid?"

"No 'fraid," said Chappo, "but no like um."

"Thought what you saw was a ghost?"

"No savvy ghost. What 'Pache saw all same bad medicine. Whoosh!"

"How did the Comanches get hold of you?"

"We run into um; before we savvy Comanches 'round, we ketched."

"You were taken to the coulée and the Comanches went into camp?"

"All same."

"Then the Comanches saw Cayuse and took after him?"

"Ai. 'Paches see um Cayuse; no help um."

"And while some of the Comanches were chasing Cayuse Lon Starkey and Pablo came to the camp?"

Chappo's eyes opened wide at that.

"Wuh! You know um, Pa-e-has-ka? How you know um?"

"Oh, we had that figured out. How did the Comanches treat you?"

"Not so *malo* like other time. Heap bad, all same."

This was the second time Chappo had been in the hands of the Comanches. In rescuing him before the scout and his pards had had a much harder time of it.

Leaving Chappo, the scout dropped back alongside Wild Bill and the renegade who was secured to the horse Hickok was leading.

"How long have you been handing out whisky to the Comanches, Starkey?" he asked.

"Got inter it when I fust married my wife, on Cache Creek," was the frank response. "Other traders was

doin' the same thing, an' I opined I might jest as well hev a hand in the traffic. Thar's good money in the business."

"You left O'Fallon to run the gin-shop while you were off disporting yourself in Red Hand Valley, and stealing horses in Northern Arizona."

Starkey scowled.

"Consarn that doughboy!" he growled. "I'd a-been a heap better off if I hadn't never had nothin' ter do with him. I treated him plumb white, an' see how he turned on me! Why, if O'Fallon hadn't showed y'u where I had my storeroom y'u never'd 'a' found me."

"Don't fool yourself on that, Starkey," put in Wild Bill. "We were going to camp on your trail this time until we made sure of you. Buffalo Bill never hits a trail but he runs it out."

"Waal, I ain't through with y'u yet. Y'u'll hear from me ag'in, an' don't y'u fergit it. Y'u've made things a heap interestin' fer me, I'll admit, but that's all. I got a good many years o' usefulness ahead o' me in this part o' the kentry."

"Usefulness?" mocked Craig. "Is that your name for it?"

"Sure. There's other useful people besides doughboys."

"You must have been off your head, Starkey," said Wild Bill, "when you tried to scare Cody and his pards away from that 'hog-back.' We knew who the ghost was, and we knew, too, that you must have escaped from Navajo Creek in order to be there on the Red."

"I skeered some o' yer gang, anyways," chuckled Starkey. "I got that ghost business figgered down purty fine, an' fer all of a year, now, the swatties hevn't come ter Pa-so-la-ki ter bother me. All the sojers at the post

believed in the headless hossman." Starkey's mirth grew, and he doubled up with laughter. "Say," he added, "thar's a heap o' fun foolin' sojers that-away."

Craig looked grieved.

"It's a fact, Starkey," said he, "that you had the soldiers at Sill fooled pretty badly. When we take you in, and tell them about you and O'Fallon, there's going to be a lot of mad doughboys at the post. They won't let you get away, you can be sure of that."

The scout's mind was running along another line.

"We found your old friend Pablo where you abandoned him, Starkey," he observed. "That wasn't a very nice way to treat a pard."

"Pablo had got his gruel, so what was the use o' botherin' with him?" returned Starkey. "A live pard is all right, but when he's as good as hit the One-way Trail it's only a waste o' time to fool with him. Was Pablo alive when y'u run onter him?"

"Yes."

Starkey began to show a little concern.

"Did he tell y'u anythin'?"

"Well, yes, Starkey, Pablo told us a few things."

"Another traitor!" said Starkey, with an oath. "I been all surrounded with 'em this time, seems like."

"Pablo told us that you had escaped drowning in Navajo Creek by hiding in the branches of the cottonwood."

There was something humorous in this recollection for Starkey. He laughed again.

"Waal, I was in the branches o' that driftin' cottonwood," said he, "all the time you an' yer pards was talkin' about me bein' in the bottom o' the creek. It was the biggest joke y'u ever heerd of, honest! When the cottonwood let go an' drifted away, I drifted with it."

Haw, haw, haw! All I got was a wettin' out o' *that* scrimmage."

"You came north with your Comanches from Arizona?"

"Yes—by way o' the Texas line. I thort O'Fallon might be gittin' out o' budge, so I laid in a supply. After a while I heerd that the kunnel at Sill was goin' ter call on Buffler Bill an' his pards ter hunt fer the ombray that was sellin' whisky ter the Comanches, an'——"

"How did you hear that?" demanded Craig sharply.

"Don't you never think I ain't got ways an' means o' keepin' informed o' what's goin' on at Sill, leftenant. I knows what's takin' place thar afore some o' you orficers does. Waal, as I was sayin', I got kinder worked up when I heerd Buffler Bill was goin' ter be put on my trail ag'in. I knowed Buffler Bill thort I was dead, and so I thort o' playin' thet ghost-dodge on him. Didn't allow, very strong, I could skeer Cody out, but I reckoned I could git his Apaches an' some o' his pards on the stampede, which 'u'd make it easier fer me ter deal with him. Y'u know what happened. We skeered all the reds, an' Nick Nomad, an' if O'Fallon hadn't butted inter my game like he done, I'd hev won out."

"Oh, thunder!" exclaimed Wild Bill disgustedly.

When the scout and his pards arrived at Fort Sill on the following day, a good deal of excitement was caused by the bringing in of Lon Starkey. Starkey had been supposed to have met his fate in the Navajo, and it was like meeting a man from the grave. But if Starkey's coming excited surprise, what was the condition of the post when it was learned that O'Fallon, of K Troop, had not been slain by the Indians a year previous, but had been assisting Starkey in Phantom Gulch—not only as-

sisting him in his illicit whisky business, but to play spook and give the gulch a name that would keep all prowlers away from it?

The story of O'Fallon was a seven-day wonder, and was repeatedly told and retold in barracks and officers' row. The fact that O'Fallon had, at the last, turned to and helped Buffalo Bill and his pards lay Starkey by the heels counted, of course, in the deserter's favor. But this would hardly have saved O'Fallon from severe punishment.

Because of Lon Starkey's desperate character and known facility for escaping from officers of the law, he was guarded with extra care. Not only was he put in double-irons, but he had two armed guards with him in the guard-house, and two on the outside. In this manner he was taken care of until he was tried, and, the trial over, he was taken to serve a long term in a federal prison in the East.

Starkey, at last, had collided with a situation from which he could not escape. He richly deserved death, perhaps, but that could not be meted out to him on the charge for which he was brought to book by the military authorities.

Buffalo Bill and his pards did not remain long at Fort Sill. They had accomplished the work cut out for them on their way to the post, and consequently they could not linger there when their services were required in other quarters.

The wound the scout had sustained in the skirmish with the Comanches, at the time Pablo received his death-wound, was of little moment. It was dressed by the post surgeon, and after that gave the scout no trouble.

By the time the pards were ready to leave Sill, too, old Nomad had recovered from his injured feelings on

account of the laying of the specter. There were a lot of troopers at the post who had been as badly fooled as the old trapper, and some among them, probably, would retain their faith in spooks even as Nomad retained his in whiskizos. Which was foolish, of course, but hardly to be helped as long as human nature is what it is.

THE END.

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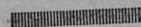
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