The Rainbow of Gold

by Joseph Alexander Altsheler, 1862-1919

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Mr. Altsheler's novel *The Hidden Mine* contains the same cast of characters and, although written before this book, can be considered to be a sequel to it.

Chapter 1

Cast Off.

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My uncle's voice had sounded always cold and harsh in my ears, but I had never supposed the man was wholly destitute of affection or sympathy. Now, however, when the time had come to show feeling, if he felt at all, his tones had a harder ring than ever. His face, too, was fixed and repellent, as if he had quite made up his mind, when he said, addressing himself more particularly to me:

"I do not see that I am under any obligations to help either of you through life. Your father's views of his duty towards you were not my views. If he taught you to have ideas above your prospects in life I am not to blame for the result. What little estate he had did not more than suffice to pay his debts. There is nothing left for you to live on in idleness. You have eaten your cake. You have had your spring-time. You must now pay the cost of it."

There was an angry ring in my uncle's voice for which I did not see any justification. Evidently he was lashing himself into a fury. So I said nothing, but

plucked idly at some of the young buds which hung on a low bough, almost in my face.

"I have never approved of these easy ways with boys," my uncle went on. "I am tired of all this fiddlestick and nonsense about education. A boy should be put to work, sir, as soon as he is big enough to hold a plough-handle, and somebody should see that he is kept at it. You are eighteen years old, almost a grown man, and you should be hard at work at this very moment"

"But what would you have me do, sir?" I asked, seeking to soften his wrath as much as possible. But my unfortunate question had the opposite result. His cheeks swelled out, and he gripped his cane nervously.

"What should you do? What should you do?" he asked, raspingly. "That is the question that idle and shiftless fellows like you always ask. You should find work for yourself, sir, instead of coming to me with your puling requests for help, just as if you were a child."

And my uncle in his wrath mercilessly chopped down several weeds with his cane. I still deemed it the wiser policy to say nothing. In fact, there was nothing to be said, for I saw he was in no mood to listen to argument, no matter how sane and strong that argument might be.

"Listen to me," said my uncle, thrusting his angry and now livid face close to mine. "I will give you just this much help: I need hands on my farm. If you two choose to come each of you can have half a man's wages. You are not worth more. I doubt whether you are worth that. But still I will give you the chance. Now, remember, no consideration will be extended to you because you are my nephews. You will have to make your own way in life just as I have made mine."

My uncle snapped these words out as if they were so many balls fired from a musket. Then he drew himself up and stalked off, holding his figure so stiff and straight that I could not help laughing a little bit, though, I assure you, I felt far from cheerful.

When he was quite out of sight I turned and looked at Henry. Henry was two years younger than I was, but I always felt as if at least six or seven years separated us. Perhaps that was because he was slender and studious and went about with a pale face, which I always told him was caused by too much reading, though I never could see that my words kept him away from his books one minute.

At this gloomy moment, which I saw very well was a crisis in both our lives. I felt more pity for Henry than I did for myself. I don't deserve any credit on that account, I know, because I was big and strong and could stand any hardship. Besides, our father almost with his last words said that as I was the elder and the hardier, I must always protect Henry. And out of a full heart I told him that I would. Now when the time had come I wondered how I was to keep that promise. I knew that Henry was totally unfit for the work my uncle offered to us, and I was old enough to know, also, that the man who said you could not make a square peg fit in a round hole told the truth.

Henry was leaning against the tree under which my uncle had stood, and I do not think I ever saw anybody look more woe-begone.

"I should soon die if I had to live a life like that," he said, simply.

And, looking at him then, I believed that he spoke the truth. I think that the farmer's life out in the open air, with the winds of heaven blowing around him and

God's sun shining down, is the noblest of all callings, but that part of it which our uncle designed for us was the merest drudgery and slavery. We would be like the serfs of Russia, and he would be our master, reaping where we had sowed. I knew it and Henry knew it. And my mind rose up in rebellion.

"What shall we do?" asked Henry. "I don't know," I said, desperately. "Our uncle thinks we are not fit for anything, and I suppose he is right."

Then we stood there a while, each waiting for the other to propose something. It was Henry who spoke first.

"I think I'll talk it over with Starboard Sam," he said. "Maybe he can tell us what to do."

"I don't see why you bring that old sailor into it," I said, a little pettishly. "Mighty little good advice he could give us. My uncle thinks we are children, at least in intellect, and if we seek advice from Starboard Sam it will merely be three children instead of two talking."

The truth was I was somewhat offended at Henry for bringing up the old sailor's name. I had thought sometimes that the friendship of Starboard Sam was not the best thing in the world for him. Starboard Sam in his youth had been a sailor on the famous old frigate, Constitution, and had been in more sea-fights than I can tell of now. After that he had served on a whaling ship out of Nantucket, his birthplace, and had been all over the world, seeing all sorts of queer places and queer people. How he ever drifted down into Maryland and anchored in our little town I never knew. But there he was, and on sunny days he would spin tales by the hour of battles between great ships, and, again, of hunting whales in distant oceans, and of sailing among icebergs, and over lonely seas, sometimes for months, without ever meeting another ship. And Henry would lie on the grass and listen to it all, and his pale face would flush and his eyes shine just like a man's who had been drinking more strong liquor than was good for him. Then I would think that Henry's head was about to be turned by the old sailor's tales, for his mind always flared up when people talked to him of distant countries and the queer things that are to seen in them.

I was thinking of the effect of these yarns on Henry's mind when I repeated, rather sharply:

"I don't see what good can come of talking to Starboard Sam. In such matters as these we are more able to advise him than he is to advise us."

Henry reddened a little, but he did not give up the point.

"Sam is an old man, and has seen a great deal of the world. I think it's very likely that he can help us," he said.

"More likely to get us into some trouble," I replied. "It's all he can do to look out for himself."

"Well, at any rate," said Henry, "as soon as we begin to talk of him he comes in sight. That's a good sign, I think, and I'm going to speak to him."

And, sure enough, a figure appeared just then on the crest of the hill. It remained there a moment outlined against the sun, which had now begun to slide down the horizon, and in the shining light I could see every feature of the old sailor's tanned and seamed face. Then he began to approach us with that queer rolling walk, which I am told everybody who lives on board ships acquires. As he came down the hill he began to chant in a hoarse, but not unmusical voice:

It ofttimes has been told that British seamen bold
Could flog the tars of Franceso neat and handy, oh!
But they never met their match, till the Yankees did them catch—
Oh, the Yankee boy for fighting is the dandy, oh!
The Gurriere, a frigate bold, on the foaming ocean rolled,
Commanded by proud Dacres, all the grandee, oh!
With as choice a British crew as the rammer ever drew—
They could flog the French two to one so handy, oh!

I knew the remainder of the song as well as he did, for I heard him sing many a time how the Constitution had met this same Guerriere and had made her lower her colors and her pride. Besides, I was in no mood for song, so I said, still in an ill-humor:

"The singing will keep for another day. Henry wants to speak to you, Sam."

"Hard a starboard, there! Hard a starboard! Gently, my master, gently!" said old Sam. I suppose he got the nickname Starboard because he was always using the word.

Then he rolled up to us, and looked keenly at us both.

"Somethin' wrong," he broke out. "The wind's in the wrong quarter. Somethin' fallen foul o' the ship. What's the trouble, my lads?"

"You tell him, Henry," said I, for I was still feeling a little pettish and annoyed with myself for feeling so.

Henry told the whole story of the interview with our uncle, and our trouble about our future. The old sailor listened with the greatest attention. Then he burst out in a sputter of indignation.

"He's a nice sort of shipmate to have," he said, "and you bein' of his own blood, too. Why, if we'd had as mean a man as him aboard the old Constitution we'd a-tarred and a-feathered him, and then made a present of him to the enemy."

"But what are we to do?" said I, despondently. "That is the question. We've had no experience with the world, and we've got no friends."

"You've got me," said Starboard Sam, puffing himself out until I laughed.

"We know you are our good friend, Sam," said Henry, gently.

"Aye, that I am," said old Sam, slapping his knee.

"But you can't help us," said I.

"Don't you be too fast there and sail right over yourself," said Starboard Sam. "I sailed with an old whalin' captain from Nantucket once, lads, and when I complained about my job he said as soon as my contract was out I could get. An' when it was out I got. I've allers remembered that. Ef you don't like the place you're in you can get!"

"But what has all this got to do with us?" I asked, impatiently,

"I'm comin' into port in a second. Jest you listen," said Starboard Sam. "From what your uncle has told you, you know you ain't welcome here. Waal, you've got to git!"

"Where are we to go?" I asked, much put out by the man's air of mystery and importance.

“That’s what I’ve come to tell you; It was a fair wind that brought me to you at this time. Now, you just listen to me lads.”

The old man drew close to us, and his voice sank into a deep husky whisper.

“Lads,” he asked, “did you ever hear of Californy?”

I had heard of the country lately in connection with the Mexican war, and knew that it had been annexed to our own, but that was the the extent of my knowledge on the subject. It was with some shame that I made this confession to Starboard Sam.

“Waal, lads,” said Starboard Sam, and his whisper grew deeper and huskier than ever, “there’s great news from Californy. It’s been comin’ in streaks, an’ I’ve been watchin’ it for weeks an’ thinkin’ an’ thinkin’ over it, an’ at last I’ve trimmed my ship and come over to you to propose the thing that I’ve got on my mind”

“What is the news you have from California, Sam?” asked Henry, and I saw a faint flush come into his eager face.

It had been raining that afternoon, and a magnificent rainbow arched over the horizon. Sam turned to its brilliant spangle of colors.

“Do you see that, lads?” he asked. “Years and years ago in Nantucket my old grandam used to tell me that there was a big pot of gold over at the foot of the rainbow where it touched the ground, and all you had to do was just to find the end of the rainbow, if you could go far enough, and thar was your gold fur you. Now, lads, that rainbow teches the ground away over thar in Californy, whar the land meets the sea, and the country’s full of gold. Oh, I tell you it’s chock full. It’s a-stickin’ out of the sides of the mountains, and it’s in the bed of the streams and it’s everywhar, jest awaitin’ fur you and me, lads, an’ other bold fellow like us to come and pick it up.”

“Where did you hear all this?” I asked.

“Down at the town,” replied Sam. “An’ thar ain’t any doubt about it, I tell you. I’ve heard it from many a man, an’ it’s in the newspapers, too, an’ everybody’s talkin’ about it.”

“Then what do you propose that we should do?” asked Henry, whose eyes were shining like stars.

“Why, it’s jest this,” said the old sailor. “Knowin’ how badly you stood with your uncle, I was a-goin’ to propose that we go right across the plains and pick up some of that gold for ourselves. Now that the old man has throwed you off it’s just the thing. I’m past the prime of life, boys, but my eyes is as sharp, and my muscles as strong, and my brain as good as ever. You ain’t got any home left, boys, an’ no friend but old Starboard Sam, the sailor. Will you go with me an’ share and share alike?”

The old sailor stood erect and pointed off to the west, where the rainbow hung an arch of color across the sky. Henry threw up his cap with an eager shout and exclaimed.

“Will we go? Of course we will! won’t we, Joe? Hurrah for the rainbow of gold!”

I felt some of the boy’s enthusiasm, but I was two years older than he, and I knew it behooved me to be cautious; So I said to old Sam:

“But how are we ever to get there? It’s thousands of miles across the plains. There are Indians and wild animals and all sorts of dangers.”

"Now, you needn't tell me, Master Joe, you're afraid o' them things," said Starboard Sam, leaning over and looking me squarely in the eyes, "for I know you, and I know you're not. You an' your brother thar are two likely lads, an' I'm a tough old salt, an' none of us is afraid o' a little wind an' weather. All we've got to do is to get us a gun an' a blanket apiece an' some grub an' join the first emigrant train that starts. They'll be glad to have us for company. Nuthin' easier. Now, will you mess with me, lads, an' make the v'y'ge across the continent?"

"Yes, yes," said Henry's eager voice. "We'll hunt the rainbow of gold with you. Say we will, Joe!"

I thought of our uncle's harshness and our forlorn position, and again the temptation to go was very strong in me. But still I hesitated, and Starboard Sam saw the doubtful look on my face.

"All right," he said, "you needn't do it unless you want to; but if you don't you ain't the sort of stuff I took you to be. Stay here an' slave your life out for a man that hates you."

I think his reference to our uncle decided me, for there was adventurous blood in our family, and moreover I liked the open air and the wilds.

"I do not see anything to stay here for," I said, "and we'll go, Sam. That is, if our uncle consents. We are not of age, and he is our legal guardian. I think we ought to speak to him about it and get his permission."

"Thar'll be no trouble about that!" exclaimed Starboard Sam. "He'll be glad enough to get rid of you, for he's afraid he'll have to spend some money on you. No, lads, you'll make the v'y'ge with me. So, hooray for the rainbow of gold!"

"Hurrah! hurrah!" we shouted together, infected by his enthusiasm, "Ho for California and the rainbow of gold!"

We were very young then, and that may account for our sudden transition from despair and gloom to a hope that tinged everything the color of rose. I felt the blood rushing like the wine of life through my veins, and Henry's face was flushed with the pleasure of anticipation.

"I'll be over to see you to-morrow," said Starboard Sam, as we shook hands, "and then we'll fill our kits for the v'y'ge. I feel as good, lads, as if I was startin' out on the old Constitution again."

And then he swung off over the hill and out of sight.

"You'll see our uncle to-night about it, won't you?" asked Henry.

I promised that I would, for my mind was quite made up on that point. We walked slowly on towards the house, and when we had eaten our supper I went in to my uncle and asked for a few words with him.

"Well," he said, coldly, "do you accept my offer?"

I had hardened myself for this interview, and I said without a change of tone:

"I've come to thank you in behalf of Henry and myself for your offer of assistance, but we've decided to decline it."

"Indeed, and what do you propose to do?" said my uncle with a sneer.

"We are going to emigrate, sir; that is, with your permission, as the law says you are our guardian."

"And where do you propose to go?" asked my uncle, elevating his eyebrows still further.

"To California."

“To California? Well, I must say, you will have a journey ahead of you. And what do you expect to do when you get to California?”

“Gold has been found there. We will hunt for our share of it.”

“Gold, eh? Much of it you’ll ever find. And who is going to take you young fools across the plains?”

“Starboard Sam is going with us,” I answered as calmly as I could, for I was smarting under his insulting manner, “and we will join an emigrant train, provided of course, that you give your consent, uncle.”

“Give my consent,” he snarled. “Certainly I will. You may go to California or anywhere else you choose for all I care.”

And he turned, and without another word, began to study a book of accounts. I went out shocked and saddened at his coldness and want of affection for us. He was so different from our dear father that I wondered how they could ever have been brothers. But I was glad that I had seen him. I felt that I had done my duty and now nothing stood in the way of our journey.

From our window Henry and I looked away towards the west that night. The sun had gone down long ago behind the hills and the rainbow had faded away in the darkness. But a rainbow of hope took its place, and by and by, when I fell asleep, a figure rose out of the golden west and beckoned us on.

Chapter 2

The Start.

Early the next day we met Starboard Sam and told him the result of my interview with our uncle. His comment was brief and simple:

“If the captain o’ the ship you are on now, lads, don’t want you, all you hev to do is to go with me and find a tidier and trimmer craft”

Then we three went down to the town and gathered more news about the great gold discoveries in California, and though I do not think I am very excitable, my mind was still further inflamed by what we heard. As for Henry, he was all afire. Starboard Sam took everything very coolly, which was due, I suppose, to his training on the old Constitution.

I well remember the excitement caused by these reports. According to the stories we heard the people in California were picking up gold by the handful. It lay around in chunk as abundant as the stones on some of our old fields. I was old enough and wise enough to make a liberal allowance for such tales, but even after I did that my nerves were all a-quiver. Now that we had determined to go, my eagerness to make the start almost overmastered me.

“When we come back with all our pockets crammed full of gold our uncle will think a lot more of us than he does now,” said Henry.

“Yes,” said I. “if we ever get there and find the gold.” But I knew that my face belied my discouraging words.

It was a matter of no great difficulty to arrange for the trip. All of us, even Starboard Sam, preferred the journey across the continent to the voyage around the isthmus or by the cape. The neighborhood was infected already with the California fever, and a wagon train was to start in a few days from the town. We were sure we could join it without trouble, for in those days of perils by prairie and mountain the stronger the party the better for all.

Fortunately, after the last accounts were balanced we found there was enough left from our father's estate to buy a good rifle and horse and other necessaries for each of us. Starboard Sam provided himself similarly. I wondered where he got the money, but he laughed a dry laugh and said:

"Jest a little prize money, lad, which I put away years ago for some such v'y'ge as this."

I found that the emigrant train had been organized somewhat like a military company. There were ten covered wagons—"prairie-schooners," we call them. They have a deep wooden bed, surmounted by a high arching cover of white cloth, which closes them in tightly, both top and sides. I remember now some of the curious inscriptions that their owners had written on the white covers in big black letters such as these: "Clear the track, we're coming," "On to the Pacific," "We're bound for the setting sun," "This is the Mayflower on wheels." Every owner put up his own motto according to his fancy.

There were forty people in the party, half of whom were women and children. Ethan Simpson, a large, middle-aged, taciturn man, was the leader, and when I told him we wished to go with them he said:

"All right, but you must take your share of the work and danger. Remember, too, that I'm captain, and when I say for you to do a thing, you must do it."

That ended the matter, for we readily agreed to his conditions. I thought that we ought to tell our uncle good-bye and Henry agreed with me.

"You've chosen your own road," said our uncle, gruffly, when we came into his presence. "Follow it. It's probable that you'll be scalped by the Indians before you are half-way to California. Well, I won't be to blame for it. Go!"

And he turned back to the study of the little book of accounts that he loved better than anything else on earth. When we went out Henry expanded his chest and then drew several deep breaths. In answer to my inquiring look he said:

"I think the air in that room was poisoned. I am trying to get it out of my lungs as soon as possible."

Such was our farewell interview with our uncle.

But we were young and old Sam, too, was as young as we were in spirits, if not in years, and as soon as we started the depressing effects of that interview passed away. Capt. Simpson gave the word, the horsemen loosed their bridle reins, the wagon-drivers cracked their whips, and we shouted all together: "Ho for California!"

We followed the old national turnpike which leads across the Alleghany Mountains to the West. For a while we passed through a thickly-settled country and then we began to climb the mountains. The breath of spring was in the air. The fresh green grass was growing by the roadside, and the buds on the trees were bursting into bloom, spangling the forests with pink and white. Henry, Sam and I often galloped ahead on our horses and I saw the color coming back into Henry's

pale face, while even the old sailor's eyes sparkled with delight at the fresh beauty of field and forest

"Ef it's like this all the way to Californy," he would say, "it'll be nuthin' but a summer v'y'ge, and we'll jest grow fat and sassy, we'll have sech an easy time."

Frequently people came out of their houses to look at us and talk with us. Then they would wave us a cheery good-bye and we would promise to bring them back a lump of gold.

By and by we reached the summit of the Alleghanies and were in a wilderness. Henry used to read to me out of his old books that all men lived in the forests once and were on good terms with the wild beasts. He said it was the old Greeks who told us about it, and when I got up in that wilderness I found there was something in my blood that told me those old heathens were right The wilderness and its voices soothed me and I felt happier and, aye, better too, than ever I had felt before in my life. Sam said that was the way he felt at sea, and that the wilderness was the next best thing.

At night we would draw up our wagons in a kind of circle, tether the horses and build great fires of the fallen timber that was plentiful in the forest. Sometimes Henry would read to us out of three or four of his favorite books that he had brought along with him. Robinson Crusoe was liked best by most of us. I have never yet found a man who was not pleased by that book, and when I do I will never trust him with anything of mine. Starboard Sam was especially fond of the tale, and he told us he had been on Robinson Crusoe's very island, which raised him still further in the esteem of the whole party.

Then Sam would take his turn at spinning a yarn; and a right good hand he was at it, too, for he had gone to sea, to use his own expression, when he wasn't "knee high to a duck," and had been through all the wars. He had been in the old Constitution more than fifteen years and he was never tired of telling about her. There was one story that always had great interest for me. It was about the war against those fierce pirates on the north coast of Africa, Tripolitans, I believe they called them.

"Our fine ship, the Phillydelphy, had run on some rocks under their batteries," he would say, "and we had to surrender her. They'd fixed her up an' were a-goin' to use her against us. She was a-lyin' in the harbor of the city of Tripoli, right under the muzzles of all their big cannon. There was a young fellow in our navy named Decatur, who wasn't afeard of anythin' that could walk or swim. He came to the commander one day and he said he'd take a boat and a lot of brave fellers, and go in the harbor some dark night and burn the Phillydelphy right under the noses of them bloody pirates. The commander thought it over, for a while, for the risk looked mighty big, but Decatur kept a-beggin' him to let him go, and at last he let him have his way.

"So one night they fixed up a boat they'd captured from the Tripolitans, and Decatur called for volunteers to go with him. Then such a crowd of young fellers came forward that if they'd all a-piled into the boat they'd a-swamped 'er right off. I was a powder-monkey then (powder-monkeys serves out the ammunition to the gunners when the battle's goin' on), an' I reckon I wasn't a dozen years old. I stepped forward just as proud as er man, and volunteered, too, but they laughed

at me an' told me to wait till I growed bigger. But I slipped into the boat anyway and hid under a sail, and when they found me it was too late to send me back.

"Waal, lads, one dark night we sailed right into their harbor," old Sam would continue, and I tried to hold my breath when he got to this point. "We looked like one of their own fishin' boats come back to port, an' our armed men were all a-lyin' down on the decks where they couldn't be seen. I bein' such a little chap, they put me where I could be a conspicuous figger. The sight o' me, they knew, would lull the suspicions o' them Tripoli fellers.

"An' we went a-sailin' right through their fleet. Gunboats and other warships were a-lyin' all round us, and on the hillsides we could see the mouths o' the great guns in the forts.

"I knowed the Phillydelphy well, and I saw her a-lyin' right under the guns of one of the biggest and strongest forts. I whispered to Decatur where she was. Then we turned our vessel an' glided right up by the side of the big frigate. We claimed to be fishermen who'd been in a storm an' wanted to tie up by the side of the Phillydelphy. The Turks and Tripolitans and other heathen critters aboard her believed us, and we tied alongside. But jest as soon as we'd a-done it we swarmed aboard the big frigate, Decatur at our head, and with a big rush we drove all o' them brown devils into the sea, what we didn't kill. Then we set fire to the Phillydelphy, jumped into our boat and made off.

"As soon as they saw the blaze from the Phillydelphy all Tripoli was aroused, and when they saw our boat a-stealin' out, the forts and the ships opened on us with their great guns. I tell you, lads, I felt ticklish then. More'n a hundred cannon were a-blazin' away at us, but they were in such a hurry and they made so much smoke that never a ball hit us. We went on, and just as we passed out of the harbor the Phillydelphy, with a mighty roar, blew up. We got safe back to our ship without losin' a man."

When I first heard this story I was inclined, to believe it was just a sailor's yarn, but Henry said it was true and that it was all in the histories.

But we never stayed awake very late at night, for we were always up and moving early in the morning. As soon as the story-telling was over we would roll ourselves up in our blankets and go to sleep with the stars twinkling above us.

As the roads and the weather were good, we got along well. But you will never realize what a big country this is until you try to ride across it on horseback. After we passed the mountains we went on for days and days through settled country. It seemed to me that it would never end, and I don't know how many weeks we were crawling across that long stretch of land. Neither Henry nor I thought it so pleasant as it had been back in the mountains. We missed the forest and the shade, for the sun began to be hot. Often we drooped in our saddles, but that interminable country still billowed away before us. Sometimes, too, we met ravens who croaked of evil. I think it was in Indiana that an old farmer, with his straw hat pushed back on his head, came down to the roadside and talked with us.

"After gold?" he said. "Yes, it may be thar, but I doubt whether you'll ever git to Californy. Why, boy, thar's thousands of miles of lone country whar you might starve to death, and besides, the Injuns everywhar are out on the warpath an' 'll get your scalp sure. I've heern that a half dozen trains hev been wiped out already. Better give it up, boy, an' go back to Maryland."

I don't deny that the man's words had some effect upon me, and caused a temporary depression of the spirits, but I soon shook off this gloominess. Henry and Starboard Sam laughed at me, and rallied me on my lack of courage. I was eighteen years old and could not stand that.

Summer was far along when we reached Fort Leavenworth, in Eastern Kansas, and came to the end of civilization. The farms and the houses had been growing scarcer, and now we had seen the last of them. Before us stretched the unknown.

Chapter 3

The Council.

We camped under the walls of Fort Leavenworth, and the next day Col. Griscom who commanded the troops there, came down to see us. He called at once for Capt Simpson, our leader, and the two sat down by a wagon and talked earnestly for a very long time. Then the Colonel went away and I noticed that Simpson's face was very grave. I ventured to approach him, and asked what was the matter.

"Nothing," he said, and he answered me rather curtly, I thought. Henry, with his usual inquisitiveness, had gone into the fort with Starboard Sam to examine the quarters of the soldiers and their mode of living. When they returned a few hours later I saw at once that they had news.

"What is it?" I asked, as soon as they came up.

"Haven't you heard!" exclaimed Henry, excitedly. "They told us all about it in the fort. The scalping parties are out. The Indians are on the warpath. Every man, woman and child in an emigrant party has been killed and scalped not four days' journey west of here. Col. Griscom says we must not think of proceeding further at present The moment we pass out of sight of the fort our lives will be in danger, he says."

Starboard Sam nodded his head emphatically in corroboration of what Henry had said.

"If we can't go on, then what are we to do?" I asked.

Neither Henry nor Starboard Sam could reply, and we three stared blankly at each other. I felt my gorge rising, for unfortunately I am of a stubborn temper, as my uncle often told me, and was indisposed to stop long under the walls of the fort after having come so far.

"But what does Capt. Simpson say?" I asked at length.

"Nuthin' as yet," replied Starboard Sam, "but I suppose we'll call a council of war about it"

Sam was right, for that evening all of us were asked to meet in the circle of the wagons. Sam, Henry and I were there very early. A big fire had been built, and its flames flared back and forth in the wind. We squatted in Turkish fashion around this fire, and I do not remember anything that has made a greater impress on my memory than that hasty council by the firelight on the open prairie. The men were nearest the fire. In the background were the women, their anxious faces showing

through the shadows. Henry, the old sailor and I took our seats in the circle of the men. Just across the fire from us stood our leader, Simpson. With him were Col. Griscom and a third man, who at once attracted my attention. The stranger was an Indian, of the Pawnee tribe, I learned soon afterwards. I had seen Indians before, but the lithe, erect and powerful figure of this man, and his strangely impassive face, held my gaze. He stood so erect that I could understand readily why the expression, "As straight as an Indian," had come into such general use. He was wrapped in a bright-colored blanket of the kind that the Indians of the far Southwest make so well, and he held his rifle in his hand. There were no preliminaries to this council. Capt. Simpson came forward and said:

"Men, we started together to California. We have come nearly half-way across the Continent together, and when we reached the fort here we hadn't had any ill-luck. But I'm afraid there's bad news for you now. Col. Griscom will explain it to you."

He stepped back then, and Col. Griscom began:

"Our scouts," said he "bring in information that the Pawnees, the Sioux, the Arrapahoes, the Cheyennes, and in fact about all the tribes of the plains are on the warpath against us. It is impossible for us to prevent all their depredations. We have had sad proof of that. One emigrant train was exterminated a few days ago. Several hunting parties have been destroyed, and there is no safety for white people further than the guns of this fort will reach. I have no power to keep your party here, but I warn you that you go further on at the risk of your lives. Are you prepared to expose those women and children to a dreadful fate at the hands of the Indians? Onomo here will confirm all that I say."

When he uttered the last sentence he nodded towards the impassive Indian warrior. One of the men whispered to me that Onomo was a Pawnee who had been educated among the whites and was warmly attached to them, though he frequently visited his own people and wore his native dress when on the plains. This made both Henry and me regard him with a great increase of interest, and Henry said he had read about such Indians in novels.

Onomo, in a very simple and dignified way, speaking fluent English, corroborated all of Col. Griscom's statements. All the young men of his race were looking for white scalps, he said, and it was almost impossible to cross the plains now.

As soon as he said what he had to say he stepped back from the fire and stood in the background of the circle as erect and impassive as ever.

Capt Simpson, our leader, was greatly troubled, and for the matter of that so were all of us. Col. Griscom told us to think it over, and with a polite good-night went into the fort, followed by Onomo.

Chapter 4

The Shadow.

After Col. Griscom had gone the council broke up into a confused debate. The men with families were in favor of staying at the fort until other emigrant trains arrived, when all might join and form a party strong enough to defy the Indians. Some of the others were in favor of pushing on and taking chances.

"Vat for we stay here!" exclaimed a little Frenchman named Pierre Bonneau, who had joined us at St Louis. "Vy we not go on: we came to find ze gold, and we not find it by staying here! I am a Frenchman and I am not afraid of ze Indian! Ze Frenchman always ready for ze fight! Sacré nom de Guerre! Mon Dieu! Vill not ze American dare to go vere ze Frenchman will lead?"

And little Bonneau jumped up and down in wrath, because no one answered him or paid any attention to him.

"What do you think about it?" asked Henry of me.

"Call Sam, and we'll go out on the prairie away from all this noise and talk it over," I said.

We walked beyond the gleam of the firelight and discussed the matter, somewhat moodily, too, it must be confessed, for we were bitterly disappointed at the wall that had been suddenly raised across our way. I believe that Henry and Starboard Sam were for going on immediately, but Sam was an illiterate old sailor, while Henry was very young. Therefore I looked upon myself as the leader, and thought that I should be cautious. Sam soon told what he thought about it. What were a few wild men to a crew of bold laddies who wanted to make a voyage; should the ship turn out of its course for them? That was not the way with the old Constitution, and he chanted the last verse of his favorite song:

Come, fill your glasses full, and we'll drink to Capt. Hull!
And so merrily well push about the brandy, oh!
John Bull may toast his fill, let the world say what it will,
But the Yankee boy for fighting is the dandy, oh!

"We are just as brave now as the Yankee boys were then!" exclaimed Henry, and the ever ready flash came into his eyes.

But I urged that we would be going into an unknown country to face dangers of which we knew nothing. It would be better to wait a little. We talked for some time and, absorbed in our subject, we walked a considerable distance from the fire. Then I proposed that we go back and take a good night's sleep over the matter. My father used to say that a good sound nap was the best cure for indecision. Besides, I have noticed that things which have one look by night often have a different look by day.

Though we were beyond the lights of the camp and fort, there was a faint moon peeping through some clouds, and, looking back, I fancied I saw an indistinct figure behind us. It was some stroller from the camp, I supposed, but when I looked again the figure seemed to be following us. I told Henry and Sam, but they looked and said they saw nothing.

"Joe thinks the Indians are after him already!" said Henry, with a laugh.

"Not at all," said I with some annoyance, for I did not relish the imputation upon my courage, joke though it was. "It is you who are burdened with too much imagination and are likely to see Indians where there are none."

But we walked on, and when I looked back again the figure was still there, at the same distance behind us. I was sure now that some one was following us, and asking Henry and the sailor to go with me, I turned and walked back. But the figure melted away like a ghost in the shadows, and we found nothing.

I think that Henry intended to twit me about the power of my imagination, but probably he remembered my annoyance when he did it before, and on that account said nothing. We returned to the camp. On the way I thought much about the figure, which I was sure I had seen, and for a while the matter rested heavily on my mind. But when we came again within the cheerful circle of the firelight it passed away.

Chapter 5

The Decision.

The next day our departure was still a moot question. The daylight had failed to bring us to a decision, and while the matter was in abeyance I started for the fort. Col. Griscom, in a friendly manner, told me that it would be foolish to push on.

"The territory of the United States extends to the Pacific," said he, "but the power of the Government to protect its people ends at gunshot from this fort"

The Indian, Onomo, was standing near. His face was as expressionless by day as it was by night, but when Col. Griscom went away Onomo did not follow him. Instead, he walked over to me and said:

"Will the white boy and his friends start upon the journey?"

"I do not know," said I. "What does Onomo think of our chances of getting through?"

Onomo drew a large, double-edged knife from his belt and held it up.

"Does the white boy fear that?" he asked.

I was somewhat startled at his action and question, but I replied and said I presumed I was no more afraid than any other would be in my place.

"There are many such as that in the path of the white boy and his friends," said Onomo, gravely, tapping the knife-blade with the forefinger of his left hand.

The face of the Indian remained as impassive as ever.

"Well, I should not wish to run against the edge of any of them," said I, not knowing what else to say.

"The young Indian warrior would not fear the danger of the prairie," said Onomo, suddenly putting his face closer to mine. "Often he goes alone into the country of a hostile tribe and seeks for scalps. Is the white boy less brave than the red boy?"

"What do you mean?" I exclaimed, for I saw a flash in his eye for the first time.

"Onomo wished to see what the white boy thought of the dangers," he said, and he smiled benevolently. Then he turned and glided away, his footfalls making no sound.

I stayed in the fort some time, and passed Onomo more than once, but he did not speak to me again. Indeed, he seemed not to see me. He looked over and beyond me, and there was so little expression on his face it might have been carved out of so much stone.

I know I should have been ashamed of such a feeling, but the Indian's words rankled in my mind. Did he mean to imply that I was afraid to venture out on the plains? Had he, when he was my age, gone alone and fearlessly into hostile country? This Indian had seen much of white life and was loyal to the whites, but perhaps, after all, he ranked them inferior in courage and wilderness lore to his own people.

My temper was not at all improved by my running up against the little Frenchman, Pierre Bonneau, who was hopping about the fort as fiery, as irascible and as impatient as he had been the night before.

"How long eez zees foolishness going to last?" he exclaimed, gripping my arm. "I join zees party to go across ze Continent and find ze great mountains of gold, bright, shining, yellow gold. I not come to stay round zees fort and suck my fingers. Pierre Bonneau eez not afraid of ze red men nor ze scalping-knife. He eez not afraid of anybody! sacré nom de guerre."

In his wrath Bonneau jumped up and down like a man just learning to dance. His words were full of bravado, but they were earnest, for I do not believe the little man was afraid of anything living. I have heard that nearly all Frenchmen are brave, and if the others are like little Bonneau it is true.

"I tell you what, M. Bonneau," I exclaimed. "I am not afraid to go anywhere that you will go, and I don't like lingering around this place any more than you do!"

"Well, zen," exclaimed Bonneau, "eef you are willing to go, vy not go? Perhaps zere are ozzers not afraid! Well, zen, we get togezzer and start?"

"All right," I exclaimed. "If we can make up a party of those who have no families we will start out for ourselves, while the others can wait here for reinforcements."

I heard a slight noise, like a soft laugh it seemed to me, and thought I saw a shadow over my shoulder. I turned hastily around, but if anything had been there it was gone.

Bonneau showed great pleasure at my decision. He seemed to take it for granted that he could make up a party now. I went back to the wagons and communicated my decision, with some misgivings, it is true, to Sam and Henry. But their delight soon banished any regrets that I may have felt. Henry said little, but it was always easy to read his mind in his face. Starboard Sam burst into a verse of his favorite song and then clapped me on the shoulder, saying:

"You're the captain of this crew of three, my lad, and we didn't want to push you, but we're glad we're to keep on with the v'y'ge. With our ship trim and steady and a good eye at the lookout, we'll make the v'y'ge and come into port all right."

We found soon that a number of the unmarried men were willing to go, and when we took count of ourselves there was a party of eight. There was Bonneau, two Pennsylvanians named Magrane and Allen, Wilkinson, a Virginian, Zeke Pike, a big Missourian, who had seen much border life, Sam, Henry and myself. With Pike to instruct us in prairie craft, we thought we were competent to face the dangers of the unknown.

Chapter 6

The Flight.

Whenever you are going to do a momentous thing it is wise not to say much about it. Keep your talk until it is done. I know that much better now than I did when I was younger. There was some talk the next day in the fort and among the wagons about our projected departure. I do not know who told it first, but it soon reached the ears of Col. Griscom, and by and by Henry came to me and told me that the Colonel was mightily disposed to hold us prisoners in the fort in order to save us from what he called our foolhardiness. He had no legal right to take such action, but the Government would not censure him in view of the dangers we were about to face. I sought Pike, to whom we all looked as the leader of our party, in view of his great experience, and he told me the report was true.

"Now, what we've got to do," said Pike, "is to make a dash for it to-night. The boys must keep as quiet as they can durin' the day. Say nothin', but manage to get your horses and guns and other things together, and then when it's good and dark we'll slip away and be off on the prairie. If we can give the soldiers the slip at the start they won't foller us. Their duty won't allow it."

All the men soon had Pike's instructions and we followed them closely. Col. Griscom came among the wagons several times and looked about suspiciously, but I soon learned that he did not know which of us intended to make the dash, and in that ignorance our safety lay. I felt somewhat ashamed of our deception, for I knew the officer intended nothing but our own good, but I was quite determined to go, and Starboard Sam and Henry were even more eager. It was an easy matter to make our arrangements. There was nothing to do but slip the bridles on our horses, see that our weapons were in good condition and tie to our saddles the ammunition and few necessities that we carried.

Dusk came on. It was pretty well known in the camp who were prepared to start that night, but we had come so far together that we felt bound to each other as if by an oath of loyalty, and none would betray us. Shortly after the night fell it began to rain. It was not a hard shower, but a fine drizzle, steady and persistent, as if it intended to last all night. Pike said it was good for our purpose, but after the heat of the day the rain fell cold upon me, and soon I was chilled to the very marrow, and my spirits went down. But I endeavored to hide my discouragement. Indeed, I was much ashamed of it, for I did not like to grow so faint-hearted when the first cold wind blew upon us. As if it were an echo of my own thoughts a soft voice whispered over my shoulder:

"Is the white boy afraid because the wind blows in his face and his bones are cold?"

I started violently, turned around, and there was Onomo.

"Afraid of what?" I exclaimed angrily. "What have I to be afraid of under the walls of a fort like this?"

“The white boy and his friends intend to start upon a long journey to-night,” said Onomo. “They are not afraid. Onomo is their friend, and he tells them to be careful, for the white Colonel is watching them and will stop them if he can.”

Before I could thank him for his warning he slid away so quickly and so noiselessly that the night seemed to open and swallow him up.

It was fully ten o’clock and very dark when Pike told us the time had come to be moving. It was quiet in the camp, and in the fort only the usual lights were shining. I shook hands regretfully with Capt. Simpson, for our long journey together had shown the fine character and solid worth of the man. He wished us good luck, and then came Pike’s low command:

“To horse now, boys, and we’re off.” We mounted and rode slowly in a little group out on the prairie. We were congratulating ourselves on the easy manner in which we had given the good Colonel the slip, when a loud voice split the darkness with a cry: “Who goes there?”

At the same moment some torches flared up and revealed fully a score of mounted troopers near us.

“Stop!” cried an officer at their head. “I have Col. Griscom’s order to detain you at the fort.”

“Follow me!” shouted Pike to us. “They won’t fire upon us!”

He lashed his horse furiously and dashed headlong across the prairie in the darkness and the rain. We followed helter-skelter, keeping as close to our leader as possible. Why some of us did not break our necks I cannot guess to this day, but our horses kept their feet and we clung to them somehow. For a few minutes we heard the troopers thundering after us, and then there was no noise save the hoof-beats of our own horses.

“That’s the last of them,” said Pike, drawing rein after we had been galloping for about an hour. “They wouldn’t foller us far and will never trouble us again. We’ve got all the world before us now.”

He spoke the truth. There was nobody to stay us now. We rode along with the night-wind sighing in our ears, and the cold rain dripping in our faces. Behind us was civilization. Before us lay we knew not what. We had begun in earnest the search for the rainbow of gold

Chapter 7

The Wilderness.

It was well on towards morning when we halted, though our pace had sunk long since into an easy jog-trot. But we waited in silence for the word of our leader, and I was right glad when he pulled his horse to a standstill, jumped to the ground and said:

“It’s time to halt, boys, and take a little rest”

And we needed rest, every one of us. The drip of the rain had ceased, but we were soaked and chilled, and our bones were sore. After we had cast round us a

bit we found near by a grove of dwarfed cotton-wood, and in that we made our camp. With much difficulty we built a fire, but when at last the ruddy light of the blaze leaped up and sparkled and shone under the trees our spirits began to rise rapidly. Warmth and light bring life, and when the chill had left our bodies and our clothes were dry we felt fit for anything from a fight to a foot-race, as Pike put it. Then we wrapped ourselves in our blankets and went to sleep.

When I awoke the sun was already creeping up towards the zenith, and Henry and I were the only ones who still lay rolled in the blankets.

"We thought we'd give you kids a good rest," said Pike, "considerin' your gallop of last night and the fact that you ain't used to wild life yet. But it's been day a long time now and here are some birds b'ilin' for your breakfast."

I thanked him for his kindness, and soon Henry and I were helping to eat several prairie-chickens, which the men had shot. Then we prepared to start on, refreshed and full of courage and enthusiasm.

"Now, boys," said Pike, as we mounted, "as near as I kin calkerlate, it's about 1,500 miles from here straightaway to Californy. The summer's gettin' along, and now we've got to hustle to get across the mountains afore we're snowed in. So we must stick to each other and the line of march, and have no skulkin'."

"Right you are, my hearty," said Starboard Sam; "and wherever the cappen leads, we'll jest trim our sails and follow."

For several days we rode on over the prairie. By day the sun shone bright and hot, but the nights were cool. The country looked fertile but the grass was turning brown, and the absence of trees made it very lonely and desolate. Hour after hour we rode on, and still, the brown country billowed away before us like the sea. Sometimes we would come to a small, shallow stream with a few cottonwoods growing on its banks, but such landmarks as these were soon left far behind, and again the brown sea, spreading out to the horizon, stretched before us. There would be a little halt for a bite to eat and to water the horses when we came to a stream, and then we would resume the march, in Indian file, one behind another. More hours of riding, and then the great red sun, round and blazing, would finish its trip down the arch of the heavens and sink behind the western rim of that brown sea. Then came the night and sleep, with our heads pillowed on saddles and untroubled by dreams.

An antelope now and then and small game supplied us with fresh food. I was expert with the rifle, and I did my share in filling the larder. We watched for the Indians, but as we saw no signs of them the subject soon became a joke with us.

"I don't want to ride through to San Francisco without seeing a single Indian," said Magrane, who had Irish blood in him, as his name indicated; "and I believe if we should find a party of them they'd gallop away from us."

Pike said we had certainly been in luck so far as the Indians were concerned, and the reports of trouble probably had been exaggerated greatly. I believed so too. Often by the camp-fire Pike told us interesting stories of Indian wars, and Henry listened to them eagerly.

"Them critters must be worse than the Barbary pirates," Starboard Sam would say after Pike had finished some literally hair-lifting story.

Chapter 8

A Shadow in the Water.

I think we had been out a week when we camped one evening just as the dusk was falling, in a bit of country that was more rolling and broken than any we had seen hitherto. Off to our right a streak of cotton-woods and willows showed that running water was near. We were organized like a little military company, with Pike as captain, and he told me to take the canteens and go down to the creek and fill them. When I hitched my horse I leaned my rifle against a tree and started on the errand.

Though it was dark, I had no trouble in finding my way, and soon I could see the water shining like a silver streak through the trees. The canteens were slung over my shoulder, and I strolled along, thinking of many things. Somehow my uncle had been in my thoughts that day, and the recollection was full of melancholy. I was sorry that we had been compelled to part in such a manner, and there was sadness in the reflection that men whom we had never seen until recently were kinder to Henry and me than our father's brother had been. I thought, too, of the old home back in the East. Verily events were moving rapidly with us. A few months before I had no thought of going even a day's journey from where I was born, and here we were over the Alleghanies and beyond the Mississippi, hundreds and hundreds of miles from Maryland, and beyond the furthest verge of civilization.

But as I sauntered along towards the creek those thoughts soon yielded to others which were not unhappy. The strain of wild blood in me, which is in us all, I think, was growing stronger. I had not yet known hunger nor imminent danger, and I felt and enjoyed the freedom of the wilderness.

I pulled myself up with a jerk, for if I lingered long the boys would be shouting for water. Then I hurried on to the creek, which flowed in a deeper bed than is usual with these shallow prairie streams.

Presently I found a convenient place and began to fill the canteens. As soon as one was filled I put it on the bank beside me and picked up another. This took several minutes, and the darkness was increasing. I think I was filling the fourth canteen when I felt a curious, indefinable sensation, slight at first, but gradually, growing stronger. It came without any cause, so far as I knew, but it made me shiver a little.

Did you ever have an uncanny feeling when you were alone in the fields or the woods just at that point of time when the day has ended and the night has not begun?

I raised the canteen from the water and held it mechanically in my hand. All the time I was growing colder and my nerves seemed to be palsied. Had I lost the power of movement? Was the chill that settled over me caused by some mysterious presence? I cast my eyes down at the stream and I thought that by the light of the few last rays of the setting sun I saw a shadow in the water. The chill deepened, but by an effort of both mind and muscle I sprang to my feet, and as I did so the

canteen slipped from my nerveless fingers and fell with a loud splash into the stream.

I think the falling of the canteen and the noise it made restored me to my balance. I turned around, and the shadow of something flitted away among the cottonwoods. Then I was not mistaken. The presences had been real.

I do not think I am a coward, and I ran towards the shadow. It flitted away among the trees, the rustling of no twig, the sound of no footfall marking its flight. I followed, but I was not able to diminish the distance between. Then I lamented my folly in leaving my rifle at the camp, for I would certainly have fired at the dim object before me. I should have known enough never to let my rifle go a foot from my hand in this wild country.

On among the trees went the shadow. Was it a real figure or merely the creature of a heated imagination? I followed as well as I could. The figure disappeared and then reappeared. For a moment it seemed to stop. There was a rush of cold air and a buzzing past my ear, and then I saw the figure no more. I hunted among the trees, but there was nothing.

Very much taken down, I went back to the stream and got the canteens. This is what comes of dreaming too much, I said to myself. At first I thought I would not speak to anybody about the matter. It was merely the effect of the half light and my mood, and the men would laugh at me. Then I concluded I had better risk the gibes of my companions and speak to Capt. Pike. When I returned to camp some one remarked that I had been a long time in getting the water, but I turned the matter off and hunted up Capt. Pike. As accurately as I could I described the episode at the creek. As I had expected, he laughed at me.

"If it had been a man," he said, "thar could have been no mistake about him. As fur ghosts, thar ain't any ghosts on the prairie. I guess you've been dreamin'."

But Pike kindly refrained from saying anything to the other men about the affair. I saw he wanted to spare my feelings. He also volunteered after we had cooked our supper and eaten it to go down to the creek with me and take a look. I guided him to the spot where I had filled the canteens, and as there was a fine moonlight, we searched for quite a while, but found nothing.

The next morning Pike, Magrane and I went down to the creek. As Magrane was a yard or two behind us Pike said jokingly to me:

"I don't suppose you'll see any ghosts in broad daylight like this, Fieldin'."

A minute or two later we came to the creek. Pike wanted a drink of fresh water, and as we did not have any of the canteens with us, there was no way to get it except by kneeling down on the creek bank and reaching the surface of the water with the mouth. As Pike kneeled down he said to me:

"This was whar you filled the canteens, wasn't it?"

I said that it was, and he added in a moment:

"Yes, here are your tracks in the earth."

Then he paused, and I saw the expression on his face change. He began to crawl over the earth and examine it very closely.

"What do you see?" I exclaimed eagerly.

He made no reply, but there was a flush on his face and his eyes were alight. For fully five minutes he crawled about like a panther, alert and nervous. Then he stood up and looked at me.

“Boy,” said Pike, in his slow drawling way, “I laughed at you last night fur seein’ a ghost, but I take it back this morning. Thar’s a human track here that ain’t yours. You saw somethin’ last night shore enough.”

I felt a sensation of real relief at his words, for I did not like to think that my senses had played me such a shabby trick.

“What was it then?” I asked.

“I don’t know ’cept that it was a man,” said Pike. “What man or what kind of a man is more’n I can tell. But I’m goin’ to foller his tracks. They may lead to somethin’.”

Scrutinizing the earth with the utmost care, Pike began to move slowly away from the creek. I followed him, and soon I noticed that his course was exactly the same as mine when I chased the phantom the night before. He looked around at me presently, and he must have divined my thoughts from my face.

“Is it the same?” he asked.

I nodded, and he went on with his eyes fixed on the ground. The course led over little hillocks and among the trees, until Pike stopped by a tree near the edge of the creek.

“Did you come here?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, “I am sure of it. This was where I caught the last glimpse of the figure. In front of me there it seemed to draw itself up. I felt a rush of cold air past my face and the figure vanished.”

“Yes,” said Pike, “an’ here is what sent that rush of air past your face. It was the narrowest escape you ever had in your life.”

As he spoke he lifted his eyes from the ground, reached up and tapped with his hand the shaft of an arrow which was buried spike-deep in the body of the tree, under the foliage of which I had stood.

I stared in amazement.

“It’s all plain now,” said Pike. “The fellow, whoever he was, wanted to pick you off without alarmin’ the rest of the boys. He lured you away from the camp, and then he used the bow and arrow either because he didn’t have any other weepin or because he was afraid the sound of a gun would draw us all out. Jest pull that arrer out of the tree fur me, will you?”

I tried to draw the arrow out, but all my strength was unavailing.

“I thought so,” laughed Pike. “It was a strong arm that pulled that bow. Ef that arrer had hit you, Fieldin’, it would have come purty nigh goin’ clean through. I guess we had better see what became of that devil.”

He examined the ground again and walked to the edge of the creek.

“Jest as I thought,” he exclaimed. “The feller come to the creek here after he dodged out of sight, and waded along it to keep from bein’ tracked. No use in tryin’ to foller him. Like ez not he’s forty mile from here now. But this means bizness. Our picnic’s over. We’ve got to be a-watchin’ now.”

The discovery of the arrow was soon known to our entire party, and naturally there was much stir about it All went down to the tree to look at the arrow.

“Pirates!” roared Starboard Sam in great indignation. “They were clippin’ mighty close to you, Joe, and you’ve got to keep your weather-eye open!”

This was an echo of what Pike had said, and all saw the truth of it. Our party was more quiet and cautious that day than it had been before, and in the

afternoon, when we stopped to hunt game for our supper, Pike ordered that at least three should go out together, and we should not leave each other on any pretext.

For some time we had experienced very little difficulty in finding game. Antelope were plentiful, and there were several varieties of prairie fowls that were excellent eating when nicely broiled on the end of a sharpened stick. I was fortunate enough that afternoon to kill an antelope with a very fine shot which drew compliments for me from the others, and I was feeling in such a good humor that my depression on account of the incident of the arrow disappeared.

Chapter 9

A Hand in the Dark.

After we had eaten supper and were sitting around our little camp-fire, Henry, who seemed to be longing for adventure—his head, I suppose, being stuffed full of the stories he had read before leaving home—asked Pike if there was a chance for anybody to see another ghost that night. But Pike did not look at the matter in the light of a jest.

"I don't want any more such ghosts, boy, as the one that sent the arrow clipping by the head of your brother last night," he said.

"If the bloody pirates come we'll blow 'em out o' the water," said Starboard Sam.

"At any rate, if they come, they mustn't find us asleep," said Pike.

Hitherto, owing to the freedom of the country from all suspicious appearances, we had not posted any guards at night, relying upon our horses, which are always quick to scent danger, to warn us. But Pike said that would not suffice any longer. One man must watch one-half of the night and another the other half, and on the succeeding nights all of us must take our turn. There was no demurring at this, for every one saw the necessity of it. I volunteered to take one watch, but Pike decided that the older men must begin. So it was arranged that Wilkinson, the Virginian, should watch the first half, and Allen, one of the Pennsylvanians, the second half.

This was settled as we were closing a very savory supper which Bonneau had cooked. I never saw anybody enjoy a border life more than this little Frenchman did. I have noticed that the French adapt themselves more readily to a wilderness life than anybody else, except our own native-born Americans, and Bonneau was no exception to the rule. The cooking arrangements, which were very simple, nothing more than broiling over the coals, drifted into his hands, because he was better fitted than anybody else for such duties. But slender as were his opportunities, I have never tasted anything better than some of the antelope steaks and prairie chickens little Bonneau cooked for us.

Bonneau had less faith than any of the others, unless it was Starboard Sam, in the presence of danger.

“Vy should we fear ze Indians?” he asked. “Ve have done zem no harm. Besides, ze Indians are cowards. Zey will run from ze light of our campfire.”

Pike shook his head, but made no verbal answer. By and by all except Wilkinson rolled themselves in their blankets and prepared for sleep. Wilkinson paced up and down with his rifle in the hollow of his arm.

I was unable to go to sleep for a long time. Now that the darkness had come on again, my adventure of the preceding night presented itself to me almost as vivid and impressive as if I really saw the figure again. The thing ran through my head. I could not get rid of it. Usually after the day’s long ride and a hearty supper I went to sleep almost as soon as I lay down to rest. But to-night was different. I repeated the multiplication table to myself. I counted up to a thousand and then counted it over again, but none of these plans to force sleep succeeded.

The camp was in a clump of half a dozen trees by the side of a shallow brook, for we never halted until we found water. The horses were tethered a few yards away. My sleeping companions lay near me, motionless, and looking like so many logs. Wilkinson was still pacing up and down like a military sentinel.

The night was dark and the firebrands died down. A wind sprang up and sighed mournfully over our heads. I fell asleep at last and dreamed that we were pursued by mounted Indians. They overtook us, and we fought them, but one by one our men fell until only Sam, Henry and I were left. We fled again, and Sam fell and then Henry, and I alone survived. I galloped on until I came to a mountain which rose like a wall before me and barred my path. Then I turned and composed myself as best I could, and waited for death. But before the fatal blow fell I awoke and found myself clammy with perspiration.

I heard voices, but it was only Allen relieving Wilkinson of the watch. Apparently all the others were sound asleep. Big Pike was even snoring, and I was fretful because I, too, could not find restful sleep. Wilkinson, when Allen relieved him, lay down, and in a few minutes was slumbering. Allen walked back and forth for a while as Wilkinson had done, and then sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree which lay near the brook.

Being unable to go to sleep and not knowing what else to do, I watched the man. The wind was still sighing mournfully through the trees, and the sky was partially obscured by clouds. Within the shadow of the trees I could see nothing more than the outlines of Allen’s figure. Soon I grew tired of watching him, and shut my eyes in an effort to bring sleep. When I opened them and looked around Allen was still sitting on the log. I was surprised at that, for it was the man’s duty to patrol the camp, and he had never shown any inclination before to shirk his part of the work. I was tempted at first to stir or speak or make a noise of some kind, thinking the man might be asleep. Then I concluded I would probably offend him by such action, and it was really not worth while, anyway.

Thus debating with myself I lay still for some time. Allen sat upon the log, his back resting easily against a bough that projected upward, his gun between his knees and his hands clasped around the barrel near the muzzle. He had been motionless so long that I was sure now he was asleep. But I thought his position had changed slightly since I had closed my eyes. I determined to get up and awaken him. I ought no longer to hesitate.

Just then some of the clouds that obscured the sky drifted past and I caught a glimpse of Allen's face. Seen in that pallid light it wore an uncanny look. Slowly my blood chilled at the sight. I glanced at my companions, but only the sound of their heavy and regular breathing rose in the darkness.

There came another glimpse of Allen's face, and I could stand it no longer. Rifle in hand I sprang to my feet. A shadow darted from behind Allen. I fired at the shadow. There was a fierce, prolonged shout, a cry of hate, or triumph, or both, unlike anything I had heard before, and far more terrible. In an instant the camp was in an uproar.

Seeing the smoking rifle in my hand some of the men shouted to me, asking what was the matter. But before I could answer there came the shrill neighing of the horses and the trampling of their feet.

"A stampede! A stampede! After me, boys, and save the horses!" shouted Pike, seizing the single firebrand that still smouldered on the ground and rushing towards the horses. Instinctively I followed him, and the others did the same. Just as one of the horses was about to bound away over the prairie Pike, with a great oath, sprang forward and seized him by the lariat. At the same moment he drew a pistol and fired at a black form that darted out from among the horses and disappeared in the darkness like a flash of summer lightning.

"Catch the horses! Hurry for your lives!" shouted Pike fiercely, and almost before I knew what I had done I found myself clinging to the lariat of a horse that reared and stamped in affright and threatened to trample me into the earth. Pike's hurried and emphatic command acted quickly upon the other men, and in a few minutes we had all the horses secured, though they shook and trembled with fright. Then Pike examined the lariats as well as the moonlight enabled him to do, and said:

"Boys, every horse here was safely tethered when we went to sleep. Since then every lariat has been cut. Some enemy's been here, and ef that warnin' hadn't come in time we'd a-been left a minute later afoot on the great plains. You know what that means. That wuz a timely shot of yours, Allen. It saved us."

Pike waited to hear from Allen, but there came no response.

"What did you see, Allen, when you fired?" asked Pike.

I thought it was time now for me to speak.

"Captain," I said, "It was not Allen who fired the shot. I did it. I saw something like a human form move among the trees, and I aimed at it. When I fired Allen was sitting on the log back there,"

Pike swore furiously.

"In war they'd shoot a sentinel for such carelessness as that!" he exclaimed.

Then he strode back to the log, and I followed him. Allen was still motionless, leaning against the upthrust bough.

"Allen," said Pike, angrily, "hev you been asleep?"

The man never stirred. Pike clapped his hand roughly upon his shoulder. The figure collapsed, slid off the log and fell in a heap on the ground. Pike started as if he had been stung by a rattlesnake. Stooping, he turned Allen over on his face.

"Good God!" exclaimed he. "The man is dead!"

It was so. A stray moonbeam glinted along the handle of a knife that was buried deep in Allen's heart, and the ground at the foot of the log was red with his life-blood. "Build up the fire there!" shouted Pike, "we must see more of this!"

Soon a strong blaze flared up, shedding its light all over the little grove. The knife was drawn from Allen's body, into which it had been buried to the hilt. There was nothing to mark it as a peculiar weapon. It was just such a knife as any white man or Indian in the West might carry. But a strong hand had driven it home. Of that there was no doubt.

We put the body under one of the trees. Poor Allen! He had been a quiet sort of a fellow, but our companionship in the journey had attached us to one another. Even Pike, much as he had seen of wild life, was affected. As for Henry and me we had never looked upon sudden death before, and we stared, horror-struck, at the silent form. Evidently Allen had not felt the presence of the last messenger, for his features were composed and peaceful.

Pike and Magrane took torches and searched behind the log. Pike announced presently that he had found the traces of footsteps there.

"The murderer crept up behind this log," he said. "Allen was sitting here, and the man or whatever it wuz, reached over and stabbed him in the heart. Then, when you fired at him, he tried to stampede the horses, whose lariats he had cut already, an' leave us afoot on the plains."

We remained silent, and Pike added, presently:

"Boys, it's mighty bad ez it is. Poor Allen's been took, but we'd better be thankful that no more of us have been took in the same way."

Then he asked me about the thing I had seen when I fired. I told him that the figure appeared just as it did the night before, shadowy and indistinct. That was all I could tell about it. Pike took his torch, and searched again. In a few moments he called us to him, and pointed to some drops of blood on the ground.

"You've stung our visitin' friend a bit," he said, grimly. "That blood shows that you've left your mark on him. He may not forget you for it."

I felt a chill at the allusion. Coupling the events of the night and its predecessor, I felt much shaken. My own narrow escape, followed by this tragedy, showed that the shadow of death was upon us, that an unknown, mysterious hand was lifted to strike us in the darkness when we knew not. I think that the others felt as I did, for we built the fire high until it threw its light far out on the prairie, showing that no one could be concealed near enough for a shot. And then, with the horses tethered close to us for further companionship, we sat huddled up until the daylight came.

The sun found us a gloomy party. After we had eaten some of the antelope steak Pike said that our first duty was to dispose of Allen's body. We could not leave it lying there on the prairie.

"How will we do it?" asked Sam. "We haven't got anything to dig a grave with. Now, if we were out at sea it 'ud be easy enough."

"We'll bury him as the Indians bury their dead," said Pike.

We wrapped Allen's body tightly in his own blanket, which we tied up at each end. Then we stood with uncovered heads over the bundle while Henry recited a prayer. After that the men carried it up into one of the trees and lashed it on a bough. There it lay out of the reach of the wild beasts, while the thick blanket

would protect it from the birds. Thus we left in that vast silence what was mortal of poor Allen and rode sadly away.

Chapter 10

Buffaloes.

We did not recover our spirits very readily after the tragedy of the night. Starboard Sam was much depressed, and said as he rode by my side:

"I ain't afraid of anything, lad, that I can see, whether it's pirates or Injuns; but this thing of slippin' up on a man in the night and stickin' a knife in him when he don't see you ain't jest to my taste."

Nor was it to my taste, either. I had no consoling reply to make to Starboard Sam, so we rode on in gloomy silence. Before that morning I had felt to the acutest pitch the delight of pure physical enjoyment in this life in the wilds. The crisp, fresh air, the boundless sweep of the great plains, the gallop forward by day, the deep, dreamless sleep by night, and the freedom from care, had taken hold of me and enchanted me. I had begun to feel as if I would never care to return to civilization. But now I saw through another light. Everything was tinged with the dark stream of Allen's blood, and the wilderness seen through this red haze became gruesome and repellent.

Pike's taciturnity and look of abstraction showed that he was worried, and he became an exceedingly cautious leader. Every night when we camped the neighborhood was examined very closely. The horses were tethered almost at our feet, and a strict watch was kept.

But out on the plains, where the wind blows forever, it will blow care away eventually, and with slow certainty our spirits lightened.

We had just reached, about noon a day or two afterwards, the crest of a bit of rising ground. Henry was at the head of the file, and when he reached the highest point of the ridge he reined in his horse, his face shining with enthusiasm, and shouted to us:

"Buffaloes! Buffaloes!"

We had wondered why we did not meet buffaloes sooner, and all—Henry and I especially—were anxious to have a shot at these huge animals. We rode forward hastily and caught our first sight of the buffaloes, about an eighth of a mile beyond us. I stared at them with the greatest interest, and all of us sat motionless on our horses for a minute. There were about a hundred of the animals. They were scattered here and there, grazing on the short, succulent grass. Fortunately, the wind was blowing in our direction, and they had not scented us. We were full of eagerness to ride forward and begin the hunt, but as was appropriate, Pike took command of the hunt. We divided into two parties. Pike, Henry, Sam and I formed one. Then with diverging columns, in order to strike the herd on either flank and drive them towards a common centre, we bore down. We rode forward as swiftly as we could. I observed a very large buffalo, evidently an old bull, who was feeding

nearest to us. But his head was turned in the other direction, and at first he did not see us. Soon he raised his head, as if he suspected or heard something. Then, evidently with suspicions lulled, he began to nibble at the grass again. A moment later, he threw up his head a second time, whirled around and saw us riding down upon him. He gave a loud snort, the whole herd took alarm, and in an instant were lumbering off,

"After 'em, boys," shouted Pike, "and look out for yourselves."

I rode a good horse, and, wild with excitement, I was in the front of our party, dashing helter-skelter over the plain. The buffaloes had huddled up into a mass, but they were fleeing at a great rate. Nevertheless, we were overtaking them, and I had already selected my victim, a fine fat cow on the outskirts of the herd. I let the reins of my horse fall over the pommel of my saddle and raised my gun in both hands, seeking to obtain a good shot. The cow shied off, disturbing my aim, and I took my gun down from my shoulder to wait for a better opportunity. We had discussed buffalo-shooting before we had seen buffaloes, and Pike had told me to wait until I got close, and to plant the bullet in the heart.

The cow drew further away from the body of the herd and I followed. Once my horse stepped in a depression of the earth, stumbled and nearly threw me over his head. But with an effort I saved myself and my horse regained his lost ground. Steadily we drew up on the cow and soon we were galloping side by side. This was my opportunity. With as much care as I could exercise at that hard gallop I took aim and fired. I almost uttered a shout of joy, for the hunting fever was strong upon me, when the cow uttered a kind of gasp and plunged over on her head, stone dead.

I was about to dismount and examine my prize, when I heard a heavy tramp behind me. Looking around I saw the old bull who had given the alarm plunging down upon me. Somebody had given him a shot in the shoulder, for the blood had stained his huge hump to a gory hue. It was clear that the animal was mad with rage and pain, and it was equally clear that the wound had not robbed him of his strength. Instinctively I kicked my horse in the side and he bounded forward. I was much frightened. I am willing to say that now, though it was a sore subject with me for some time. The great bull charged after me and I imagined I could feel his hot breath upon me. My horse snorted with terror and shied so suddenly that I almost went over his side. The bull veered around after us and my horse curved again to avoid him. In these sudden turns I think the horse must have lamed himself in some manner, for otherwise he could have distanced the bull. As it was the bull was always a few feet behind us. The hunter was now hunted, and I realized it fully. I made desperate efforts to reload my rifle, but we were going at such a pace that I was unable to do so.

I looked back and the bull was gaining upon us. His horns almost touched my horse's flanks and I could feel the animal trembling with fright under me. I expected that in a minute my horse would be thrown down and I would be trampled to death by the infuriated bull, but at that moment there came a cheering shout. I heard a rifle-crack very near to me and the bull ran off at a tangent, whirled about a bit and then fell dead.

"Pull up! Pull up, Joe, you are safe now," came Pike's welcome voice, and I did pull up, with as thankful a heart as ever I had in my life.

“Close shave, that,” said Pike. “It won’t do to hunt these old bulls, ’specially when your gun ain’t loaded.”

“But I never hunted him,” I exclaimed. “He hunted me.”

“I’m glad to see you’re so ready to tell the truth,” said Pike.

I flushed a little, but Pike said no more, though his remark was very pat. But the sting of my misadventure did not linger long, for I had brought down a buffalo and I was flushed with what I thought constituted the greatest triumph of my life. Pike rode back with me to look at the cow, and my pride swelled greatly when he complimented me on my shot.

“Right into the heart,” said he. “You’ll make a good a buffalo-hunter yet, Joe.”

And he quickly added:

“Thar’s one of the boys who’s having as bad a time as you did, Joe.”

He pointed over the plain, and sure enough, galloping along by the side of a bull, which turned every now and then to jab with his horns at the horse the hunter rode, was little Bonneau. The Frenchman had lost his rifle, and he was clinging with both hands to his horse’s mane. It seems that the horse, which he had bought at Fort Leavenworth, was a trained buffalo-hunter. That is, he had been taught to gallop along by the side of the hunted buffalo in the most approved fashion until his rider could take aim and bring down the game. The horse was acting up to his training, and was bringing Bonneau forward for a shot. Every time that the animal turned to jab at him the horse sprang nimbly aside, and though Bonneau was not in the same plight that I was, he was the hunter, because he could not help himself and because his horse compelled him to be.

Away horse and buffalo tore over the plain, and little Bonneau in his efforts to hold on had squirmed up on his horse’s neck. The other hunters were too much absorbed in the chase to notice him, and Pike and I set out in a gallop to rescue him. We overtook them and brought the buffalo down just as Bonneau’s horse gave a more than unusually vigorous leap and deposited his rider on the turf.

Bonneau sprang to his feet as agile as a rabbit, and, regaining his composure with wonderful quickness, ran to the dead buffalo, put his foot over him, stood in an attitude of triumph and exclaimed:

“Ah, my friends, you have deprived me of ze honaire. I was just going to shoot ze buffalo ven your fire brought ze great animal down.”

“You were, were you?” said Pike, dryly. “What were you going to shoot him with? You don’t seem to have your rifle with you.”

The Frenchman was disconcerted for a moment, but it was only for a moment Then he smiled and said, gayly:

“Zat is what you Americans would call ze joke on me. I confess. But I will kill a buffalo yet.”

Plucky little Bonneau. I said once before he was a game man, and so he was, and a cheerful little fellow, too. Everybody in the camp liked him. We recovered his horse and gun for him and trotted back to join the others. The hunt was over already. Everybody had killed a buffalo except Bonneau, and all were happy. Henry’s glee was undisguised, and I think he had a right to rejoice, for not many boys of sixteen have a chance to become successful buffalo-hunters.

Fortunately, we found water near by, and the evening that followed was by far the most cheerful since the death of Allen. Keen appetites and luscious buffalo

steaks put us in a splendid humor with ourselves, and though Bonneau and I had to stand some joking we were able to do it very well under the circumstances. In his delight at concocting some new dishes out of buffalo tongue, which he said offered unlimited opportunities, Bonneau cared nothing at all about his misadventure.

"Sacré, what a dish this would make for Paris!" he exclaimed. "Wiz ze buffalo tongue I would have one grand restaurant zere and make my fortune!"

Starboard Sam concurred in all he said, and added that it was the best meat he had tasted since he ate roast pig in the Sandwich Islands, when he was out in the whaler, Nancy Bell, of Boston, twenty years ago.

The matter of my escape from the flight of the arrow and Allen's death had quite passed out of my mind, and after eating I soon sank into a sound sleep. I was awakened from it at what hour of the night I know not by a tremendous crash that nearly split the drums of my ears and made every nerve in me tingle. I sprang to my feet in alarm, and there was a sudden blaze of light out on the prairie in front of us. The heavens seemed to open and dash down a great sheet of fire. I was blinded for a moment by the tremendous effulgence, and when my eyes cleared I saw the men huddled about in a state of great excitement. Again the thunder cracked and rolled and reverberated, and the lightning blazed across the heavens.

"Hold the horses," shouted Pike, and we leaped to the heads of the animals, which were rearing in terror. By the blaze of the lightning which flashed incessantly, I could see that Henry and Sam were near me and were unharmed. Every moment I expected some of us to be struck by the lightning. More than once the prairie was torn up by a bolt that fell near by, but though we were nearly blinded by the glare none of us were hurt.

In a minute or two the splendor of the pyrotechnical display abated. The thunder died into a deep rumble, but there came another distant roaring sound out of the southwest.

"Get out from these trees!" shouted Pike, and there was fright in his voice. "It's a tornado."

Instantly he released his hold on his horse's head, though he still clung to his rifle and ran clear of the trees. Then he dropped down in the grass and dug his hands into the roots of it and clung there. We followed pell-mell and imitated him. It was well we did so, for a moment later the tornado, hissing and shrieking, burst over us. Henry and I clung to each other as well as to the grass, but the power of that wind, which whirled around like a top as it rushed onward, almost raised us from the earth. We heard the horses, which had broken their lariats, thundering by, but we had no time to think, and indeed could not have stopped them if we had sought to do so.

I do not think the tornado was a minute in passing, but it seemed to me like an age, for there was a most infernal screeching in my ears. Then it whipped off over the prairie and left us wet, unharmed and desperate. The moon came out and we stared at each other in despair. We had our rifles, our ammunition was dry in our pouches, but we were now afoot on the plains. Only you who have been in a similar case or have been adrift in a small boat on a lonely sea can know what that is. No wonder despair was stamped upon the face of everyone of us.

We did not have long to look at each other and wait for some one to suggest something. Again we heard a distant rumbling, but this time it came from the north.

"Another cyclone!" I exclaimed, involuntarily.

"They don't come together that way," said Pike. He lay down on the wet grass and put his ear to the earth. When he rose to his feet his face was pale, but he said in a steady voice:

"Boys, it's not a cyclone this time, but it's wuss. Thar's a stampeded buffalo herd a-bearin' down upon us—thousands and tens of thousands of 'em thar must be, for the whole earth is a-shakin' with their tread. Thar's only one chance for our lives. Stick to me and obey orders."

There was no reason for him to fear that we would disobey him, for when he set off on a run towards the south we followed in a bunch close after.

"Draw the wet charges from your guns as you run," he commanded, "and reload with dry powder."

We did this as expeditiously we could. The effects of the storm had passed with almost miraculous quickness, and the heavens were now spangled with a million stars. The rumble, at first distant and faint, had grown deeper and nearer. Looking back, I saw extending across the plain the crest of a dark line like an incoming wave on the seashore. I knew what it was, and dread almost paralyzed the action of my heart. I am sure I am not a coward, but in the presence of irresistible force that threatens to overwhelm and crush us, he is a brave man indeed who does not feel a quaver. I saw Henry's white face beside me, while Starboard Sam was panting at my other shoulder.

Far to right and to left, until it melted away in the darkness, extended the line of the buffaloes. It may have been many miles in length, for the solid earth resounded with their tread and the air was filled with the hoarse bellowings of the great beasts.

"What are we going to do? Can we escape?" I gasped to Pike.

"Steady, boy, steady," he replied, running with the long, easy lope of the frontiersman. "Don't break yourself down. The beasts are not on you, yet. Keep alongside of me and do nothing until I tell you."

We sped on over the plain with that rushing, living torrent behind us, the black, tossing line steadily drawing nearer. Pike held his gun clasped in both hands, and cast frequent looks to the right and to the left as if he were searching for something.

"You're all here, are you?" he asked, and then looking around, he added: "Yes, thar's seven, that's all. Don't forgit to stick close to me."

We must have run a mile, when Pike uttered a cry of joy and veered off to the left. We followed hot-foot and in a moment had ascended a slight elevation. It was not more than a few feet in all, with a gradual ascent, but Pike halted abruptly on the crest and we did the same.

"Steady now, boys, steady," said Pike, "for your lives depend upon it. Face about and when I tell you to take aim, take aim, and when I tell you to shoot, shoot."

The big Missourian turned and faced the rushing mass as calmly as if he had no thought of danger, and obeying his masterful impulse we turned with him.

As we wheeled about a horseman shot down ahead of the dark line of the buffaloes and passed to the right of us. As he passed he raised his rifle and fired directly upon us. There was a stream of fire from the muzzle of his gun, and Wilkinson fell like a stone at our feet, with a bullet through his brain. Shrill and clear above the tramp of the buffaloes rose that fierce triumphal shout, the same that I heard the night poor Allen fell. Then the phantom horseman flitted on and was gone, while I heard a gasp of horror from those around me.

Pike's courage and presence of mind brought us back to ourselves and our great danger. He ordered us in his sharpest tones to look at the buffaloes. The thunder of those countless hoofs was now stunning our ears. They were not far distant now, and their line seemed as solid as a wall, buffalo pressed against buffalo.

"Raise your rifles!" shouted Pike, and we did so, mechanically, like a troop of soldiers.

"I'm goin' to aim at the buffalo straight in front of me," said Pike, "and do you, Joe, do the same. The others shoot at the buffaloes on the right and the left of him. Wait until they are almost on you, and then be sure your aim is good, and fire straight at the beast. Fire when I give the word."

The great black mass was almost upon us, when Pike shouted "Fire!" at the top of his voice. Six rifles cracked together, and the three buffaloes pitched forward dead right at our feet. The others behind them coming upon the bodies snorted and pressed away, passing around their dead companions. Like the blade of a wedge the three bodies divided the great herd, and on it flowed to the right and the left of us, closing up again in a solid mass after it had gone twenty yards beyond us.

"Load your guns again," shouted Pike, ever ready of deed when danger confronted us. "We'll take no chances, and build this wall so high they won't come over it."

We loaded and fired again and again into the herd. The heap of dead buffaloes in front of us accumulated, and the herd circled further and further around on either side of us.

"An old buffalo-hunter taught me that trick," said Pike, who was chuckling to himself with satisfaction. "He said it had saved his life a half dozen times, and it was our last chance, boys."

Thus we stood there while the great herd thundered by. It was many hours in passing. The night wore on, and we still stood behind the rampart of dead buffaloes, A gray streak appeared in the east, then widened, and the sunlight fell on the plain, and still the buffaloes thundered on. The sight thrilled me in every fibre, and for the moment I forgot, as I believed the others did too, the death of Wilkinson, as sudden and unexpected as if he had been struck by a bolt of lightning from a cloudless sky. We had drawn his body up into our little circle, where it would not be trampled by the buffaloes, and there poor Wilkinson lay on his back, his dead face staring at the newly risen sun.

All the buffaloes passed at last, though we could hear them for some time rolling away to the south. Not till then did we feel entirely safe and come to the subject of Wilkinson's death.

"Did you see the horseman?" asked Pike of me.

"But indistinctly," I replied. "He came, fired, and disappeared like a flash. I saw a figure and nothing more."

"'Twas no mortal," said Starboard Sam, who was superstitious, as I am told nearly all sailors are. "'Tis an evil spirit that's pursuin' us. It's the same that killed Allen and shot the arrer at Joe."

"I don't know about the evil spirit," said Pike thoughtfully, "but ghost, devil or man, it seems to keep up with our movements purty well, fur I believe you're right, Sam, when you say it's the same enemy that's done us all this harm."

I felt no doubt on that point, and I believe all the others held the same opinion. Again the ominous nature of this mysterious danger thrust itself upon us, and I believe Pike himself was frightened by it.

"Ef 'twas only out in the open, man for man," he muttered, "I wouldn't care. The chances would be equal."

But we could not stand there lamenting. It was time to be up and doing. Truly our position was most forlorn, for with our horses gone, the chances that we would ever reach California were very much against us.

"We might foot it back to Fort Leavenworth," said Pike.

But clamor arose at once against that proposition. None of us wanted to go back. We had started to California, and we preferred to keep on and run the imminent risk of death.

"I thought you'd say that, boys," said Pike, "and I'm with you. I just wanted to put it fairly and see what you'd say. Since that's settled, I think we'd better get breakfast. We've got a plenty of fresh meat. That's one piece of good luck, at least."

There were fully a score of dead buffaloes before us, and the abundance of buffalo chips over the plain made the matter of a fire an easy thing. We skinned one of the buffaloes and were soon eating a substantial breakfast, washed down by the water from our canteens. While we ate and drank we debated the future.

Chapter 11

The Attack.

Pike did not say very much, but left the bulk of the talking to the remainder of us. I noticed soon that he appeared to be very restless and uneasy. He studied the plain in every direction, and seemed to be making calculations. There was nothing unusual in the appearance of the country. It was the same level, or almost level expanse, rolling away on every side to the horizon, that we had been travelling over for days.

A few minutes after we finished eating Pike rose to his feet and said:

"It's jest as I expected. Get ready boys."

"Get ready for vat? Is a nozzer herd of ze buffaloes coming?" exclaimed little Bonneau.

"Not buffaloes this time," said Pike, without a change of countenance, "but men. We are about to be' attacked. See there!"

He pointed away to the south, where we could see some dim, black specks on the horizon line. The specks appeared to be moving, for they grew larger.

"My eyes are used to the plains," said Pike, "and they tell me them specks are men, men on horseback. What kind of men would you expect to meet out here? Injuns, of course. The chances are a hundred to one them's Injuns, and the odds are just ez big that they want our scalps. We've got to fight for it."

"But when you saw them you said, 'Just as I expected.' Why did you say that?" I asked.

"Hev you forgotten last night, an' the horseman who killed Wilkinson?" asked Pike. "Thar ain't any ghosts, Joe, and that horseman has come back with others to finish us. We must get ready for them the best we kin. These dead buffaloes will help us a lot"

Working with the utmost vigor under Pike's direction, we drew the bodies of the buffaloes up in a small circle. With one piled upon another they formed a breastwork several feet high, through which no ordinary bullet could pass. Then we sat down inside this queer fortification.

"See to your guns," said Pike, "and keep your ammunition handy. It's lucky we've got plenty of that. At any rate, thar's some satisfaction in fighting an open enemy out in the daylight."

"Perhaps they are not hostiles after all!" hazarded Henry.

"Don't you believe it," said Pike.

"Them fellers are after scalps, and the scalps they're after our ourn."

Then we sat quite still and waited for the strangers to approach. It was soon evident that Pike was right. They were Indians. The party numbered about fifty, and they stopped just out of range, brandishing lances and uttering yells which made me shiver.

"It's a war party, and they're well-armed, too," said Pike. "Lay close, boys. We'll wait for them to begin the dance."

"To what tribe do you think they belong?" I asked Pike.

"Can't tell," he said. "Pawnees, Arapahoes, Sioux, Cheyennes all gallop over these plains."

The Indians seemed to be in no hurry. Apparently they knew all about us. They were careful not to come within range. Some of them dismounted and lolled about on the grass. Others galloped up and down, still yelling and brandishing their lances. I knew nothing about Indian tactics, but Pike explained that the warriors never exposed themselves uselessly. They could take us with a rush, but they would wait and maneuver. Soon we saw proof of this.

In about an hour the warriors who had dismounted climbed back on their ponies. Then the whole troop began to gallop away from us.

"They are going to leave us," exclaimed Henry, joyfully.

"I allers said the Injuns wuz a lot o' cowardly pirates, and would run from a tight little crew like ours," said Starboard Sam.

"Don't be so fast. They ain't gone yet, by a jugful," said he sarcastically. "Them Injuns think they've got an easy thing and they're goin' to play with it."

The Indians must have been a mile away when they stopped. Then they began to trot around us in a circle, which slowly narrowed. Meantime they kept up a most infernal yelling, and I am sure every one of our party wished he was safe

back at Fort Leavenworth. They spent an hour or more at this sort of thing, and then when they were almost within range stopped again. There seemed to be some bustle and preparation among them, and Pike said:

"I think they're goin' to treat us to some fireworks now."

A single warrior rode out from the group. He had no lance, but he held a rifle in front of him.

"Don't any of you boys do anything until I order you to do it," said Pike, with a warning look.

The warrior uttered a loud shout, struck his horse and galloped directly towards us. Before he had come a rod he changed the course of his horse, and suddenly shot out of sight behind that animal. I thought he had fallen off, but Pike said he was clinging to the horse, having put the latter's body between him and us, and would fire at us over or under the animal's neck as soon as he had a good opportunity. All the time the Indian pulled his horse about in the most erratic, zigzag fashion. Pike explained that the fellow was showing off before his comrades and made his horse curvet to disturb our aim.

Emboldened by our silence the Indian circled nearer. He must have caught a glimpse of one of our heads, for there was a flash of flame under his horse's neck, and I heard the whizzing of a bullet, which lodged in one of the buffaloes. At the same moment Pike fired and the Indian's pony fell. The Indian bounded to his feet as if he was made of rubber.

"Shoot him, Magrane! Shoot him!" exclaimed Pike. "It's our lives against theirn, the bloodthirsty varmints. It's no time for mercy."

Magrane, who was a good marksman, fired, and the Indian dropped dead, on the grass. It was first blood for our side. The other Indians set up a yell when they saw the death of their comrade, and galloped about, but did not come nearer. They had tasted of our mettle and did not like it.

The Indians deliberated for half an hour. Then they spread out in a great circle around us. At a signal from one of their number, evidently a chief, they began to gallop down on us from all sides, swing behind their horses and yelling. There was some trepidation in our party at this combined attack, but Pike steadied us and arranged us so we could meet them at all points.

"Lay low," he said, "and whenever you see a head fire at it."

The fellows came at us with a tremendous discord of yells, firing from behind their horses. Fortunately, we obeyed Pike's injunction to lie low, and none of us was hit as yet. Then our own rifles began to pop. I was watching one fellow on a blaze-faced horse, who seemed to me to yell louder than any of the others. I could have shot his horse, but that would have left me without any load in my gun, and then he could have run away unless some of the others by chance picked him off. I held my gun ready, and presently, when I saw his hideously painted face show over his horse's back, I fired point-blank at him. The horse reared and galloped off over the plain, but he was riderless. The Indian lay stark and lifeless on the grass.

I know it is an awful thing to kill a man, but I felt no compunction when that Indian fell before my rifle. As Pike had truly said, it was our lives or theirs, and they had made it so, for they were the attacking party.

I reloaded my rifle hastily, but did not get another shot, for the Indians galloped away and left us victors for the time being. As they scurried off over the plain a voice sang:

Come, fill your glasses fulland we'll drink to Capt. Hull!
And so merrily we'll push about the brandy, oh!
John Bull may boast his fill!
Let the world say what it will!
But the Yankee boy for fighting is the dandy, oh!

It was Starboard Sam chanting his pæan of triumph, and little Bonneau, whose blood was afire, shouted:

"Vive le Capitaine Pike! We have thrashed ze red devils! Ah, zis is ze fighting I love!"

Bonneau was a bloodthirsty little wretch when he got the light of battle in his eyes. But I would have been glad to be out of it all. I am not ashamed to say that. Peeping over our strange fortifications I could see the Indian whom I had killed lying upon his back. I could see the blood-stains upon his breast where my fatal bullet had entered, and though he had come as a ravenous enemy I felt no sensation of triumph. It was the first time that I had shed human blood, and now that the battle was over for the while I had some uncomfortable reflections. I was aroused from my thoughts by Pike asking me how much water I had in my canteen. We had provided ourselves with these useful articles before beginning the long journey over the plains. I found that mine was nearly full. So were the others, and the investigation gave Pike great satisfaction. Evidently he expected a siege of some duration.

"We have ze water," said Bonneau, "and when we get hungry we will eat a piece of our fort."

The day wore on. The Indians were visible in the distance, but they made no further demonstration. Soon we experienced the attacks of a new enemy, the heat. The sun hung in the sky a huge, round, burning mass, and seemed to concentrate all his rays on our unprotected heads. There was no escape from them. We were compelled to lie there and suffer, though sips of the precious water in our canteens saved our throats and lips from parching. Pike said there would be no more attacks as long as daylight lasted. So we watched and waited.

Henry used to tell me an old story about a sword hanging by a single hair. Whenever that hair was cut some one would receive the blow of the sword. I thought more than once of that old tale as I lay there that evening and waited. Beyond us on the prairie I could see the Indians watching like so many wolves. When would the sword fall? In the heat of action, when the blood is high, one forgets himself; but to lie there under the blazing sun, just waiting, waiting for death, was almost beyond endurance.

It was with a curious mingling of emotions that we saw the sun sink lower and lower, and the shadows lengthen on the grass. It brought relief from one form of torture, but it also brought us nearer to what we believed would be the crisis.

The sun sank from sight, the gray twilight came, and in the shadows the Indians became invisible. We knew they were still there, for wolves, when they believe they can run their victim to earth, never leave the scent.

The night came on, and we sat straining our eyes and ears. Two or three of us might have slept while the others watched, but nobody was willing to close his eyes. So all watched together. Pike went outside our rampart and beckoned to me to follow. When I climbed over he whispered to me that he could hear better there, and it was just as safe for the while at least

"The redskins are almost sure to attack us to-night," he said. "They have the darkness, an' we can't pick em off while they are creeping up."

It is curious upon what trifles matters of the utmost importance sometimes turns. I soon realized that our lives would depend upon the degree of darkness the night might bring forth. If we could see only a few feet the Indians would upon us before we were able to fire a shot. If the night should be clear we could open upon them at a distance. Pike gazed up at the skies with the greatest anxiety. Some clouds were floating about, but there were stars twinkling, too. We did not have a broadside of luck, but it was partly in our favor. As Pike put it, it was just so so, neither very clear nor very dark.

Pike extended himself at full length and lay with his ear on the prairie. The Indians were sly, he said, and could creep along almost with the silence of a snake gliding over the grass, but if they attempted it he believed he could hear them before they came too near.

We had been lying on the ground full two hours when I heard a slight noise behind me, and started, believing at first that the Indians had succeeded in creeping upon us. But a well-known voice reassured me. It was only Henry, He said he had grown too anxious inside the fort and had come out to join us. I was for sending him back, but Pike said: "Let the kid stay; we may need him," and so the boy remained with us.

There we lay and listened for the approach of the Indians. Often I was sure that I heard them creeping, creeping, but it was only the wind rustling through the dry grass, and Pike lay with his ear fixed to the earth as still as if he were dead. Save for the rustling of the grass the silence of the great plain was appalling. Around us was the vast and misty darkness. Overhead the clouds drifted now and then between us and the twinkling stars. We seemed to be alone with the night and our Creator, but I could not associate this silence with peace. The events of the day would not allow it. The stain of blood was over everything. There was Wilkinson's dead face behind me, and before me was another dead face—that of the Indian whom I had killed. And further on I knew the warriors lay, savage for our blood.

Near midnight the clouds thickened somewhat and the night grew a little darker. Pike crawled out on the plain a short distance. In ten minutes he came back and said to us:

"We'll join the others inside now. I'm sure they're coming, Ef I didn't hear 'em I'm mightily mistaken. Besides this is the best time fer 'em."

We crawled inside and joined the others. How long we waited I could not say. It seemed to me an age. Perhaps it was only a minute, until the air was rent with yells, and dusky figures rose like phantoms from the grass.

“Fire into ’em,” shouted Pike, “as fast as you can.” And we obeyed his order with frantic eagerness.

I fired plump at a warrior who rushed on ahead of the others. Whether he fell I know not, for the next moment there was such a blur of flame and smoke around us that I could see nothing distinctly. With fierce yells the band charged us, firing as they came. Bullets whizzed by our ears. I felt a stinging sensation in my left shoulder and knew that I was hit, but how seriously I had no time to think. The blood streamed down my coat-sleeve, but I rammed another charge into my rifle with the haste one knows how to use when his life depends upon it. I heard a groan beside me, but did not look around to see who uttered it.

The Indians were at the barrier. I raised my rifle and fired again. Most of the enemy had discharged their weapons and they swarmed up to the rampart of the dead buffaloes, cutting at us with tomahawks and knives, and endeavoring to leap over among us. I jabbed the muzzle of my rifle with all my might against the chest of one fellow, and he fell back groaning. The next moment I felt my throat seized in a grip that cut off my breath and paralyzed muscles and nerves. The rifle dropped from my palsied hands, and I could do nothing but watch with staring eyes the savage face of a powerful warrior who, a knee upon the barrier, had seized me with one hand, while he held his knife ready to strike in the other.

Even in that brief moment of suspense, in the face of what I regarded as certain death, all my being flamed up against it. I was too young—I had done too little—to be sent thus abruptly to another world. Then I looked for the blow to fall, but instead there was a spurt of flame before my face, the crushing grip on my throat relaxed, and the Indian fell lifeless to the ground.

“Just in time, Joe, old boy,” exclaimed a voice in my ear. I looked around and saw Henry, whose face was transfigured with excitement. He held a still-smoking pistol in his hand, and I knew who had saved me.

“Give it to ’em, boys!” shouted Pike, and he opened his throat and uttered a mighty cheer which filled us with renewed courage. In the open, foot to foot, the Indians would have overpowered us easily with their great numbers, but our improvised defences saved us. In charging us they had fired hastily and at random, and when they reached our ramparts their guns were unloaded. When Pike brought his clubbed rifle down with a great crash on the head of their leader they fled, snarling, in the darkness. Then our camp was silent again, for even the wounded had managed to drag themselves off where their groans could not be heard.

“We’ve won again, boys,” said Pike. “How many we’ve dropped I don’t know. Our loss is one killed, and I believe three wounded.”

It was Magrane who had received the fatal bullet. He was lying at my feet stone dead, and a red spot on his temple showed where the lead had entered. I had a slight wound in my shoulder. A bullet had grazed Pike’s forehead, drawing blood, and Bonneau had a flesh wound in the arm, which so far from daunting him made him more bloodthirsty than ever.

Even with the loss of Magrane we had fared better than we had a right to expect, and we exchanged congratulations on the result. Then Pike told us to load our guns and pistols and look well to the priming. Usually Pike’s face was

expressionless, but there was now a glint in his eyes that told us he had important plans. He was not long in divulging them.

"The time has come for tis to' get," he said "We've beat 'em off, but we can't hold this place forever. Dead buffaloes won't last long 'ez a wall. We must slip away while they're in confusion and afore they've time to rearrange their circle."

The wisdom of Pike's words was at once apparent. If we remained where we were the Indians had only to exercise patience and we would fall into their hands as surely as the night follows day. A very few minutes and we were ready.

"We'll have to leave them where they fell," said Pike; "but bring their guns and pistols. If it comes to the pinch again we'll need 'em."

We spread their blankets over the dead men's faces, and then, taking up their weapons, left them in the darkness.

Pike cautioned us to make no noise, but there was no need for him to impress that fact upon us. In every one of us the love of life was still strong, and, Pike leading the way, we stole off like so many ghosts across the prairie. We knew that the chances were against our slipping through the hostile circle, but the attempt was our only recourse.

We advanced about three hundred yards, when Pike ordered us to drop down on our knees and crawl. He said if he made a hissing noise like the rattlesnake when it coils we must stop, lie flat upon the ground, and "Don't you even breathe," he added. Then Pike led the way again, squatting so low that his figure was indistinct to me though I was only a few feet behind his heels. This was painful progress, and at best but slow, but its necessity was apparent. Ten minutes of it and we heard Pike's warning hiss. We sank lower on the prairie and lay still, but presently Pike whispered to us that it was a false alarm and resumed his advance.

I crawled up by Pike's side, and we went on for another five minutes. Then he gave the warning hiss a second time. Almost at the same moment a horse whinnied and Pike, gently pulling my arm, pointed to the left. There was light enough to disclose a group of horses.

"They left their ponies thar undercharge of some warriors while they tried to steal up on us," said Pike. "I've half a mind to make a rush on 'em, cut down the guards, seize the horses and gallop off."

The plan looked feasible for desperate men. If we could seize enough of the horses to mount ourselves, stampede the others, and then gallop away it would be turning the tables on the Indians. We would be mounted, they would be afoot, and we might laugh at their pursuit. But unfortunately for such a plan we saw forms coming over the prairie, and at least a dozen Indians joined the guards around the horses, making the party too strong for a rush on our part. I could hear the Indians talking, and Pike, who understood some of their jargon, said they were arranging a system of guards to prevent our escape.

While we lay there several other Indians came up and joined the party. Then three started away, and passed very near us. We lay very close. In fact I felt as if I were trying to squeeze myself into the earth. But fortunately the darkness was sufficient to conceal us. When they were gone we resumed our crawling march over mother earth. Pike said if we could get past the horses and their guards without being detected he thought we would have nothing, further to fear, for that night at least.

The horses whinnied repeatedly and stamped the earth. I am sure they were conscious of our presence, but the noise they made did not arouse the suspicions of the Indians.

Though it was very far from being a laughing matter to us, we must have presented a somewhat ludicrous sight creeping one after another on all fours over the prairie, forming a black, shapeless column like some of the pictures of extinct animals I have seen in books.

We circled around the horses, though we could still hear the Indians talking, and gradually with a great sense of relief, as if a crushing weight had been lifted off us, we passed them. Ten minutes more and we were beyond earshot. But Pike would not let us rise yet. He said there was danger still. Ten minutes later we struck some rolling ground and passed over the crest of a little ridge.

Pike had just turned to me saying we might take to our feet now, when we heard a crunching of footsteps on the dry grass. An Indian warrior stalked unwittingly upon us. He almost stumbled against Pike, and then he saw us. A cry rose to his lips, but it never found utterance. A leonine, powerful figure shot up from the grass, and a hand of steel seized his throat. A knife flashed for a moment before his eyes and then was plunged into his heart.

"It's an onpleasant duty," said Pike, as he dropped the body of the dead Indian on the grass, "but thar wuz no choice. It had to be done. Now, boys, let's run for it, but the gang must keep together."

Our course lay to the west, towards the rainbow of gold, and with light hearts we swung forward, running with the long, easy trot that saves muscle and wind, but covers ground at an amazing rate. Our spirits were due to the reaction after such danger and suspense. Pike told us that we were not yet out of the woods, but the remainder not being so experienced as he, dismissed all alarm, so far as the Indians were concerned.

Thus we swung along, and when daylight came we must have been twelve or fifteen miles from the spot where the fight had occurred. Then we halted for a little rest. The truth of it was we were still in very hard case without our horses, but fresh from our escape we did not feel so badly over that trouble just then. We drank the water that still remained in our canteens and felt much refreshed. But after so much fighting and waiting and running we were very hungry. But to dispose of our hunger was an easy matter. We were in the heart of the buffalo country. The passage of the great herd the night before indicated that many stragglers would be about. So it proved.

A half-hour's hunting and we found several of the animals grazing on the plain. A rifle shot and we had all the meat we wanted, and a fire of buffalo chips soon gave us steaks that were like manna to hungry men. Pike said that waiting was a risk, but we could not push ahead on empty stomachs, an opinion in which all concurred with the utmost heartiness.

As soon as our food was ready we took it in our hands and ate as we trotted along. I knew that Pike feared pursuit, and I asked him about its probability.

"Of course they'll follow us," he said. "They can track us even on this plain. Ef they are bothered sometimes, don't forgit that they are on horseback while we're afoot, and they kin make up lost time. Besides, thar's a lot of 'em, and they can

spread out over the plain and hunt for us. They'll see that dead buffalo back thar, sure, and that'll help 'em in the chase."

The cogency of Pike's reasoning was too evident, and our spirits fell again.

Chapter 12

The Flight.

The sun rose from the earth, warm and bright, and swept up towards the zenith. Sweat rolled down our faces, but, with an occasional short rest, we trotted on. Pike looked anxiously around at the country. There was no change in its character. Still, the same wide rolling plains, covered with short, wiry grass.

"If we were in the mountains and timber we could give them devils the slip," said Pike, "but in such a country as this they can see for miles."

About noon we halted, and took a longer rest than usual. Our muscles were strained and sore after so much jogging, and we needed repose badly. Then we resumed our journey, and had been travelling about two hours when Pike, who had been looking back, said:

"It's no use stretchin' and strainin' fellers. We needn't go any further. They're comin'."

It was true. We could see the figures of the horsemen as they rose on the prairie. It was not worth while to run, for what were the speed and endurance of men to those of horses? Near us were some hollowed-out places in the earth, which Pike said were buffalo wallows. A man lying down in one of these would be fairly well sheltered from bullets, unless the marksmen were very near. We found three of these pretty close together, and two of us lay down in each of two, Pike taking the third alone. We had given up the hope of saving our lives, but we were determined to sell them at a high price. I felt a savage thrill at the thought that the Indians most likely would have to pay for our lives with as many of their own.

The horsemen were still some distance away, when to our utter amazement Pike walked out of his buffalo wallow, and burst into a loud, boisterous laugh. For a moment I thought he had gone crazy. But Pike was the last man among us to be upset by privation and danger, and I recalled the thought. We stared at him, and some asked what was the matter. Pike made no answer, but rolled over on the ground in his mirth.

"What on airth is the matter, cappen? Have you got the fits?" demanded Starboard Sam, impatiently.

"No, I haven't got any fits," said Pike, "but I deserve to have 'em. I'm just laughin' at myself. You laugh at a fool. Waal, I guess I've been the biggest fool on this hull round world. The joke's on me, boys."

We could see nothing to laugh at, and said so. Then Pike resumed more gravely:

"Boys, we've made up our minds to die like brave fellers. We meant to kill as many of them Injuns as we could afore we wuz tumbled over. Waal, there ain't any use of fightin'at all."

“What do you mean, surrender without a struggle and be tortured to death?” Henry exclaimed, indignantly.

“No, I don’t mean to surrender any more than I mean to fight,” said Pike calmly.

“But we can’t run away, cappen,” said Starboard Sam.

“No, and I don’t mean to run away, not just now anyway,” said Pike, with the same provoking calmness. “Joe,” he said turning to me, “wet your finger, hold it up and tell me which way the wind is blowing.”

I did so, and said it was blowing towards the east.

“That’s back towards the Injuns, ain’t it?” said Pike.

I said it was.

“Waal, now,” said Pike, “you jest watch me an’ I’ll get you out of this hole quicker’n a flash of prairie-lightnin’.”

He laid his rifle almost flat on the grass and fired it. We had the old single-barrelled, muzzle-loading guns then, and when the cap exploded the dry grass ignited like tinder. It blazed up in an instant. The fire leaped over the ground, swept to right and to left, and then in whirlwinds and pyramids of flame roared over the plain and off to the east directly in the face of the incoming Indians.

It was so quick and so simple that we scarcely realized our deliverance. We could not see over that moving wall of fire, but there was no doubt that the Indians beyond it had turned and were galloping eastward for their lives. They had to choose that alternative or certain death.

“Now, boys, while they’re runnin’ for their lives, as we’ve been doin’ to-day,” said Pike, “we’ll make tracks in the other direction an’ travel towards that rainbow of gold Joe and Henry talk so much about. But don’t furgit that little trick of a prairie-fire. It may be useful again some day, providin’ the wind’s blowin’ in the right direction.”

We resumed our forward march. Behind us for a long time we could see the smoke of the fire and the tongues of flame. We were full of thankfulness for our escape, which was so simple and which yet looked like a miracle. This feeling made us forget for a while the troubles that still hedged us around.

The wind died away, and the sun shone with great splendor. We were hot, tired and dusty, and at last we sat down in the dry bunch grass to rest. The water in our canteens was exhausted, and there was neither buffalo nor antelope in sight. As we travelled onward since we set the prairie on fire, the character of the country seemed to change somewhat. It was more sterile and the grass was thinner. We also began to see queer precipitous hills, shooting up like great rocks from the plain, and bare of trees and grass. I afterwards learned that these are called buttes, which I suppose is a French name.

We were longing for water, but there was no trace of any, not even a pool of that brackish alkaline stuff, which a man will not drink unless he is nearly dead of thirst.

What with heat, thirst and hunger, things began to look bad, and about the middle of the afternoon Pike called a council of war. He put the case to us in a few words. He said the country was entirely strange to him. In which direction water lay he did not know. But he would suggest that we lie to until sundown and rest. Then we might travel after nightfall, when we could save our strength better, for there would be no heat to assist exertion in robbing us of it.

This plan was approved with great unanimity, for all felt very tired. We lay down in the shadow of one of the buttes, and though we were deeply bitten by thirst we tried to be cheerful. In this effort Starboard Sam and Bonneau were of great service. Both were of a naturally sanguine temperament, and despite our surroundings they were able to joke and laugh and tell stories, which we found to be very interesting. Sam recounted some of his experiences in the naval wars and in the fights with the Barbary pirates, while Bonneau told us tales of Paris, which, if what he said is true, and I have no reason to doubt Bonneau's word, is a very fine and lively place.

There was one he told about the French quarrelling among themselves and building great barricades in the streets of Paris. Behind these breast-works people who wanted to change the Government stood and fired while the soldiers charged them. Bonneau said he had been in one of these affairs, an emeute he called it, whatever that may mean, for I am not a French scholar, when he was a little boy, and had beat a drum while the bigger boys and the men fought. I was at first inclined to believe Bonneau was inventing the tale to amuse us, but Henry, who is full of book-learning, said it was in history, just as the fights with the pirates that Sam told us about were, too.

But I have often wondered since then how Paris managed to stay a great and splendid city with such goings-on as that in the streets. Bonneau didn't seem to think much of it, and said an emeute was great fun sometimes.

When the tale-telling was done we watched the sun—a great, round, burning ball—sink in the plains. It seemed to go right into the ground, and Sam said that the whole scene reminded him of the sea. Indeed, he commented on that fact more than once. By and by the darkness came and brought some relief. We slept half the night and tramped on the other half.

A light dew that we sucked from the grass helped us wonderfully, but the sun rose the next morning on a sight even drearier and more desolate than that of the day before. The ground had become more broken, but the grass had disappeared almost entirely. Instead, we saw a queer plant, covered with needles, which Pike said was the cactus. Around us were the flat-topped buttes and the bare mud-hills. Occasionally we saw a little salt plain, from which a dreary, ghost-like mist was rising. But nowhere was there a sign of a living thing. It was inexpressibly gloomy,—a land of desolation.

We sought each other's eyes for encouragement, but found none. Our faces were haggard, and the alkali dust that had settled upon them stuck there in a kind of crust. We seemed to be wearing ghastly masks. Henry looked very much worn down, and, knowing that he was physically the weakest of our party, I felt a sickening fear on his account. But if his strength had waned, his courage had not, and he replied cheerfully to my questions that he could go as far as any of us.

Pike, who seemed to look on me as his lieutenant, called me aside and said it was not worth while for us to tramp and waste our strength merely for the purpose, perhaps, of going deeper into a desert. He proposed that Bonneau, Sam and Henry wait at the foot of one of the hills while he and I searched the country for game or water, or both. This certainly looked like wisdom, and we put the plan into operation at once. Leaving the three at what we thought to be the most

conspicuous spot in the landscape, Pike and and I set off towards the north. Pike noticed the ground very carefully as we went along.

"Ef I don't do it," he said, "well never find those boys agen."

We beat around the country for hours, but we could find neither buffalo nor antelope. It seemed as if every living creature shunned this grim country as it would the shadow of death. At last, when the afternoon was growing old and we were in despair, we gave up the hunt and started back to rejoin the others. We found them without much trouble. They were sitting almost as we had left them, but Henry's face was terribly pinched and drawn. He laughed weakly when we came up and told the pitiful result of our wanderings, and said we would find plenty of food and cool water in the morning. I looked at him in the utmost alarm, for his eye was glaring.

Sam held up his hand, and, drawing me aside, said the lad's mind was wandering. Overwhelmed with grief, I could do nothing but sit down beside him and talk to him and endeavor to calm him. He rambled on about the shade of the forests and green grass and cool, running water, and his talk affected all of us most deeply.

Starboard Sam, who was a tender-hearted old fellow, muttered that he couldn't stand it. He got up with his rifle on his shoulder and staggered off over a little hill that lay only a hundred yards from us. We were in a benumbed condition, and nobody said anything to him. Besides, we thought he would be back in a few minutes.

Sure enough he reappeared in a minute over the crest of the hill. But he was acting in a manner that seemed very strange to us. He held his gun up with both hands and was waving it as if it were a flag. Moreover, he was running as fast as he could towards us. His manner betrayed great excitement. Our first thought was of Indians, and we sprang to our feet with our rifles ready.

"I've found a buffalo! I've found a buffalo!" exclaimed Sam when he came up. "He's over the hill thar! He's over the hill thar!"

At first we believed that the sailor's eyes had deceived him or his mind was wandering like Henry's, but he insisted with so much emphasis and so much clearness of statement that we started off with him. Henry going along, too. Pike warned us to step lightly, for if there were really any buffaloes it was of the last importance to us not to frighten them away until we could get a shot. Our exhaustion for the moment forgotten, we tiptoed up the hillside, and when we reached the crest Starboard Sam pointed triumphantly to the valley below.

An old buffalo bull, perhaps an outcast from some herd, for often when these old bulls become crusty and too savage for good company the others drive them away, was picking at a few wiry tufts of bunch-grass. Our hearts rose at the sight, and perhaps never was the death of anything wished for more eagerly than we wished for a mortal shot at that poor, forlorn old buffalo.

Luck was with us in one respect, for the wind was blowing in our direction and could carry no warning to the buffalo. His head, too, was turned away, and the chances favored a close shot at him. Pike, like the good general he was, at once arranged our advance upon the enemy. Starboard Sam was ordered to stay put of sight with Henry, while the other three were to steal upon the unsuspecting buffalo.

“Get down on your knees,” said Pike to Bonneau and me, “and sneak up as quietly as you did when we were creepin’ through the Injun lines. If the buffalo takes alarm aim as well as you can and fire at him. If he doesn’t take alarm wait until I give the word, and we’ll fire, all three together.”

With these instructions, we dropped down on our knees and began to worm over the grass. The old bull nibbled placidly at the tufts of grass, and we passed more than half the distance before he gave any signs of alarm. Then he sniffed, raised his head, and appeared to be listening intently. We lay still and waited with anxious hearts, for the death of that lean, mangy old bull meant life to us. But Master Buffalo got over his alarm, lowered his head, and resumed his browsing. Fortunately he kept his head still turned away from us.

Patience and much muscular exertion soon cut off half the remaining distance, and we were within range for a good shot. But the bull did not present his flanks to us, and Pike said we must aim for his heart. So we waited fully ten minutes—like a day it seemed to me—until the old bull shifted around where we got a good side view of him.

Then we took aim, Pike cautioning us to be steady. He counted three and cried, “Fire!” Our rifles cracked so close together that we could distinguish but one sound. The old buffalo gave one leap forward, stood stock-still for half a minute, then began to run around in a circle, This he did for another half minute, and then pitched over dead.

We uttered a shout of exultation and ran up to his body. Pike waved his hat to Sam to come on with Henry, and then we did a thing which may seem very ghastly and repellent to those who sit in their nice houses with food and water in plenty, but which was the saving of our lives. We opened his veins and drank some of his blood. Then we skinned him, cut off hunks of raw flesh and ate it. The meat was stringy and tough. God knows the old bull had found little enough to eat in that desolation, and the wonder of it is that he had not died of starvation long before we found him. Perhaps we saved him from such a fate, anyhow.

This savage repast heartened us up mightily, and to the great joy of us all, Henry came back to himself. The night that followed brought a blessed Providence with it, for rain, a cloud-burst in the desert, came. It was like a deluge, and soaked us through, but we did not mind that. Instead we laughed at it and played with it like children. We turned our eyes up to the heavens and let the cool drops beat in our faces and fall in our mouths. I think we were half delirious with joy, but at last we sat down, dripping, and planned for the future. All the little depressions in the earth held pools of the fresh rain-water, and we filled our canteens.

Careful husbanding of such a supply would make it last us several days. we cut off great strips of the buffalo meat, and laying them beside us, sank into a deep and happy sleep, careless of Indians or anything else.

Chapter 13

The Mountains.

When we awoke the next morning the sun was high and the ground was dry. We were somewhat stiff after the wetting we had received in the night and our sleep in damp clothes, but we felt courageous and strong and ready for any emergency. I would have preferred my breakfast cooked, and I know the others felt the same way, but we were willing to overlook a trifle like that—at least it looked like a trifle at such a time. Henry was quite well again, and, in fact, all of us were very much refreshed and invigorated.

Pike thought that the broken nature of the ground indicated our approach to mountains, and he was in favor of pressing on toward them as fast as we could. We were more than willing, as we were thoroughly tired of the heart-breaking country in which we then lay. In the mountains there might be water and cool shade and plenty of game.

After our breakfast we resumed the march. It was easy enough for us to make a start. All we had to do was to throw our rifles over our shoulders and begin the tramp forward. Sam began to chant the inspiriting strains of his favorite nautical song, and Bonneau capered about. Between the efforts of the two our little party perked up wonderfully, and by noonday we had covered quite a stretch of ground. Fortunately we found some buffalo chips and cooked our strips of meat. Before dusk came on again we saw a dim blue line in the distance, which Pike said was mountains, and we pushed on with all speed.

As we knew the mountains were very far away and we were not sure of finding any more game, we travelled half the night and were on foot again very early in the morning. We pushed on all the next day, and the outlines of the mountains grew clearer. They were very high, for the crests of the peaks were snowclad. Henry, with his imagination stirred into vigor, said he could see the cascades of water tumbling down the precipices, but we laughed at him. Again we travelled half the night, and the next morning the mountains looked quite near. Our supply of food was sufficient, but the water in the canteens was getting very low.

I do not know why we looked forward with such confidence to finding an abundance of game in the mountains, but the idea had taken possession of us all. Those mountains were our Mecca. How long and how grievous seemed that last day's tramp! With bruised feet and stiff and aching bones we struggled on, and just as night came we reached the base of the first ridge. The mountains looked bare, bleak and repellent, but we came to a little rivulet which trickled down a slope, probably fed by the melting snows of the summits, and soon lost itself in the sands of the plain. This alone was enough to reward us for all our toil and suffering. We drank of the cool liquid. Then we pulled off our clothes and bathed in it. Heaven knows we needed a bath badly enough, for each of us was a mass of dust and grime. Then we slept the night through by the banks of the brook.

In the morning we began the ascent of the mountains, which we soon found to be very steep. We toiled forward and upward for half a day, but found no game. I was not sure what sort of game Pike was looking for, but he persisted in saying that we would find it yet.

"Thar's always game in the mountains," he said, "an' I'll bet my hat we find somethin' to shoot at before nightfall."

I could not for the life of me see what any animal would find to subsist upon on those bare slopes, but Pike's words inspired confidence nevertheless. We stopped about this time and looked back at the country we had left. The considerable height to which we had climbed made the view a very fine one. Far behind us stretched the desert over which we had toiled so painfully. Off to the south we could see another line of mountains, and there was a third chain in the southwest.

"We're in the Rockies," said Pike, and for a few minutes we were silent. I think one of the most impressive sights of a man's life is his first view of snowclad mountains. I know the sea is very majestic, but the great peaks, with their snowclad crests, glittering and white, right under the nose of the sun, strike the imagination with still greater force.

We had ascended to a very considerable height, for the air was much thinner and colder, when Pike called to us to stop and pointed to a precipice to our right. Perched upon the very edge of this precipice were half a dozen animals. At that distance we could not tell much about them except that they had enormous curved horns.

"They're Rocky Mountain sheep! They're Rocky Mountain sheep! I've read about 'em in the books!" exclaimed Henry.

"Right you are," said Pike. "The kid guessed it fust thing. An' what's more to the p'int, boys, thar's our supper, right up thar on them cliffs. But we've got to git it yet"

For this latter task Pike chose himself alone. He said the sheep were very suspicious brutes, and it took a practised hunter to stalk them. He told us to lie down among the rocks, concealing ourselves as well as possible, and to make no noise whatever. All of which we did faithfully.

Pike made a circuit on the mountain-side which brought him on a level with the sheep and much nearer to them. He guarded his movements so well that the sheep showed no signs of alarm. We saw him crouching for a shot, then we heard the crack of his long-barrelled rifle, and one of the sheep bounding out from the precipice, curved over and over and landed at our feet. Pike's bullet had pierced him in the brain. The others leaped along the mountain-side and disappeared. But one was enough for us.

The sheep that Pike had killed was in fairly good flesh, and he was such a peculiar-looking animal that we examined him critically. Pike had seen this kind before, and told us some extraordinary tales about their powers. He said they could jump down precipices a hundred feet high and land without harm on their horns. Though Henry said travellers had told such tales about them and he had read their stories in books, I am inclined to believe that Pike stretched the truth a little.

We found some scrubby timber on the mountain-side. With a great deal of difficulty we lighted a fire. Then came Bonneau's turn. He was always anxious to do the cooking, and the others were more than willing to let him have his way about it. Pike had some culinary skill that he had picked up in his wild life on the border, but Bonneau learned all his tricks in the wink of an eye and then improved on them. He had never seen a mountain sheep before, but the mutton he cooked for us that day was as delicious as any I ever tasted. Pike expressed the

sentiments of us all when he said it was worth half starving to have meat taste so good.

We slept that night on the mountain-side and found it very cold. Fortunately we had been wise enough to keep our blankets, which we carried in a tight roll on our backs, and they protected us to a considerable extent.

The next day we crossed a ridge between the snowclad peaks and began the descent of the other slope. We soon noticed a great difference in the appearance of the western side of the mountains. We could see below us trees which appeared to be of good size, and even where we were then standing the indications of vegetation were numerous.

When we were half down the slope and had reached the bottom of a rather steep place, Henry, who was in-advance and had just turned around a big rock, uttered a cry of surprise and delight and pointed ahead.

"Look! Look! I believe we've found the Garden of Eden!" he exclaimed.

We hastened forward and looked upon the pleasantest sight it had ever been the lot of any of us to behold. Before us and apparently hemmed in on all sides by the high mountains was a beautiful green valley. It seemed to be about ten miles long and about one-half as broad. There were green sward and noble trees, and in the centre of the valley, and probably occupying one-third of its area, gleamed the silver waters of a lake. I have since learned that there are many of these lakes and fertile little valleys in the Rocky Mountains, but this was the first we had come upon. After our dangers and our toils in that grim, brown desert behind us it looked bright enough and attractive enough to warrant Henry's exclamation that we had found the Garden of Eden. Bonneau awarded it the highest praise in his vocabulary:

"It ees as beautiful as la belle France!" he exclaimed.

Even Pike's weather-beaten and usually stolid face showed signs of enthusiasm.

"Thar may be Injuns in that valley, or thar may not be," he said. "At any rate we'll camp thar. Ef I ain't mighty mistaken that place is just alive with game."

By the middle of the afternoon we had descended the mountain and were in the valley, which we found on closer acquaintance to be even more fertile and beautiful than had appeared at first The trees were of great size, and the turf under them, though its green was already tinged with the brown of autumn, was as level and smooth as if it had been trimmed with a scythe. Henry said it must be like the noblemen's parks in Europe that his books told about.

Pike's surmises about the game were correct, for before we had gone a hundred yards in the valley a troop of magnificent elk suddenly appeared ahead of us. Starboard Sam instantly had his gun up for a shot, but Pike struck it down.

"We want to find out fust if thar are any enemies in this valley. Ef they are here we don't want to notify 'em fust thing that we've come by firin' off our guns. But I should say from the way them elk are doin' that we are the first human bein's to come to this place, at least for a long time. But it's best to be shore."

There were probably a hundred elk in the herd, and though they saw us plainly they did not seem to be alarmed, but stalked off down the forest aisles with the utmost gravity and dignity, and when we saw them disappear in the distance they had not condescended to increase their speed beyond a walk.

This confirmed Pike in his opinion that they were unaccustomed to the presence of human beings. Still, we were very wary, as we walked on towards the lake. A half-hour brought us to its pebbly margin. Swarms of wild fowl floated on its bosom, and others hovered over it. Scarcely two hundred yards from us we saw two deer drinking. The lake was fed by brooks of clear water, which came tumbling down the sides of the mountain from the snow-clad peaks, and we found that one of them had been dammed by an industrious colony of beavers, who plunged into the water and disappeared when we came up.

"The pelts of all them beavers would be worth a pile of money back in St. Louis," said Pike, "but as they are a leetle distant from market, we'll let'em keep their hides."

We explored the valley until nightfall and saw more elk and deer, and were thoroughly convinced by their lack of fear that we were the only human beings in the valley, hence we dismissed whatever uneasiness we had felt on that subject. We still had plenty of the flesh of the mountain sheep; so we shot no game, but built a fire of fallen timber and went to sleep under the boughs of a big tree.

When we held a little council meeting the next morning, and Pike called for opinions, there was but one expressed. All were in favor of staying awhile in the valley and recuperating. We were haggard and worn, and needed rest badly before resuming our journey. Bonneau was the most delighted of all, for he foresaw unlimited opportunities in the culinary way. He soon had a chance to display his skill still further. We shot a deer that day and found its flesh exceedingly fat and tender. Sam cut strips of its hide, trimmed a piece of bone into the semblance of a hook and soon had a rude fishing equipment. Anywhere else his efforts with this improvised line and hook might have been a failure, but these secluded waters were swarming with life, and in a half-hour Sam had as many fine lake trout as a whole picnic party could have eaten. Bonneau broiled them to a turn, and they were so good as to fairly melt in our mouths. Sam shot a couple of ducks, which we found almost as appetizing as the fish, and what with these and the venison and the mutton, we had a dinner that day fit for a king. We did not feel the lack of bread half so much as one might think we would have done.

Chapter 14

Up a Tree.

Despite the lateness of the season, we liked the valley so well that we lingered there. Its fresh atmosphere and beautiful scenery charmed us and furnished solace for all our trials. The lateness of the season bade us to be up and going, for the leaves of the trees were taking on already the red and brown tinges of autumn, but we found life there too pleasant to seek the bare plains again, just yet.

Starboard Sam took a huge delight in the lake, and under Pike's skillful instruction he soon made a bark canoe which, although a trifle shaky, could carry two people at once in a fair degree of comfort and safety.

He and Henry usually monopolized the canoe, and as they brought us ample supplies of toothsome fish every day nobody found fault with them for it.

While all of us enjoyed ourselves, I think Henry was in reality the happiest of the party. The life we were leading was calculated to appeal most forcibly to a boy of his romantic temperament. He used often to say we were just like so many Robinson Crusoes, and I think we were.

Bonneau and I took the canoe one day and paddled up the lake, intending to seek an elk, for the animals had become wilder since human beings had arrived in the valley and rifle shots had been heard. The sun was bright and the air which had the breath of autumn in it was cool but pleasant. Being in no hurry, we lolled along in the boat, Bonneau doing the paddling.

At last we decided to land at a spot at least seven or eight miles from where our little camp lay. We beached the boat and plunged into the forest.

Bonneau, noticing Pike's skill, had a great idea that he, too, could trail game. So he said to me:

"I tell you what, Monsieur Fielding, I will watch ze ground for ze tracks of ze game, and when I see where ze elk have passed I will tell you. Zen we track ze animals down and shoot zem."

In pursuance of this plan Bonneau began to scurry about and examine the earth with an appearance of great eagerness. He scrutinized every foot of ground, looking for "ze track." I had much less confidence in Bonneau's powers as a scout or trailer than I had in his skill as a cook. Accordingly I began a search on my own account for game. Both being engrossed in our work, we wandered apart.

I heard a rapid footstep behind me presently, and turning around, saw Bonneau, his face very much flushed and his eyes blazing with excitement, rushing up to me.

"Ah, Monsieur Fielding," he exclaimed, eagerly. "I am ze great scout, I have found ze trail of ze king of ze elk. He must be as large as ze elephant or ze mastodon; came back and I will show you ze footprints!"

I hastened back with Bonneau, and when he came to a little glen he stopped abruptly and pointed to the earth, exclaiming:

"See zere! Zere it ees!"

I looked down and saw a large impression in the earth, but I knew at once that it had never been made by any member of the deer tribe. It was more like that off a bear or a panther, but its great size amazed me.

"See, here ees ze way he goes," said Bonneau, pointing to more of the tracks which led in a line across the glen and on under the trees. It was easy enough even for two hunters who were as inexperienced as Bonneau and I to follow the trail. We followed it without hesitation, for our curiousity was greatly aroused.

The tracks zigzagged through the undergrowth. Two or three times we saw bushes that bore succulent red berries had been pulled down by some powerful grasp, and all the berries swept off. It was evident that the animal had been taking his time and was lounging along. This encouraged us in our belief that we would overtake him, for the bushes seemed to have been freshly broken.

Bonneau was full of eagerness, and also of pride, because he had discovered the trail, and scuttled about like a cat after a rat. Though the trail veered about, its general direction was through the woods and towards the mountain-side. We

followed it across two or three brooks and saw where the animal's body had crushed down the soft banks. In a short time we were at the base of the mountain. The tracks, which were now quite fresh, led up among the rocks.

"We will have ze beast in a meenute!" exclaimed Bonneau. "He cannot be far."

He leaped lightly up among some rocks, and then started back with a gasp of horror. A gigantic beast up rose and confronted the Frenchman. Standing on his hind legs he towered above Bonneau. His eyes, of a burnt Sienna color, were streaked with red and were aflame with ferocity. Around his neck all the hair was rubbed away, adding to his uncouth and ferocious aspect. The claws on his uplifted front paws were long, sharp and gleaming.

Bonneau and I were face to face with our first grizzly bear.

I was so startled that the hand which held my gun hung limply by my side. Bonneau seemed paralyzed with surprise and fear, and stood staring at the great brute that towered over him. Old Ephraim returned his stare with interest, and his red-mottled eyes sparkled with anger. Bonneau was the first to recover his power of action. I do not say reason, for he acted upon impulse. He raised his gun and fired point blank at the brute. Then uttering a shout, he threw his empty weapon at the brute, and, turning, fled back into the forest.

The bear, growling fiercely, seized the abandoned gun in his teeth and bit at the barrel. He was bleeding where Bonneau's bullet had struck him, but did not seem to be much hurt. He snarled and snapped at the gun-barrel for a moment or two. Then he dropped it and lumbered down towards me. I had now recovered my presence of mind, and levelling my rifle, I took good aim at the bear and fired.

To my horror my bullet did not check the brute's course at all, and, still clinging to my gun, I turned and followed Bonneau. I stuck my hand in my belt for my pistol, but, never thinking of danger, I had left it at the camp.

I crashed on helter skelter through the brush, and behind me came that lumbering beast with astonishing speed. I knew that he was cutting down the distance between us, and in my consternation and terror I fancied I could feel his hot breath upon me. He was perilously near when I dodged nimbly around a tree, and his huge mass hurled past me. He recovered himself quickly and came on again, but I had got a little breathing spell and increased my speed. I found this paid so well that I tried it again with the same success.

Thus we dodged in and out among the trees, for all the world like children playing a game of hide and seek, though the stake of the fugitive was life. I was rapidly becoming tired out when a shrill voice shouted: "Take to zee tree! take to zee tree!"

I faced about and hurled the rifle, which I had still clung to, mechanically, I suppose, at the snout of the bear. He reared up, caught it in his claws and open mouth and, exuding venom, tore at it. Profiting by this diversion, I shinned up a tree with an agility born of mortal terror. Just as I reached the lowest boughs and swung myself up, the bear dropped the rifle, stretched himself to his full height and made a swinging blow at me with his paw. The claws struck the sole of one of my old shoes, and ripped it off as if it were made of so much paper. But I was safe, and I climbed higher and higher until I sat down on a bough and clung to the tree, trembling in every muscle and cold and wet with perspiration.

“Well done, Monsieur Joe—well done!” came Bonneau’s cheering cry, and I looked around, to see my friend snugly ensconced in a tree not fifty feet away from me.

“Ze tree ees ze great zing when you are chased by ze greezly bear,” he said. “I hallo to you sooner to climb ze tree, but perhaps you not hear me.”

The bear was snarling in a great rage and gnawing with his long, powerful teeth at the tree in which I sat. I viewed this new performance with the greatest alarm, for he was making the bark and chips fly at a wonderful rate. With such progress he could cut the tree half through in a few hours. But he was a bear with only a bear’s sense, and after a few minutes of such work he quit and slouched over to the tree which contained Bonneau. He went through the same performance there, then strolled over until he was midway between the two trees, lay down on a soft spot and complacently closed his eyes, with the air of a gentleman taking his afternoon nap.

“Vat shall ve do?” hailed Bonneau, who had been as neglectful as I was, and had brought no pistol. In fact, I doubt whether a pistol bullet would have made any impression on that huge brute.

I had no satisfactory reply to make to Bonneau, and we could do nothing but cling to our trees and contemplate the bear, who lay stretched out in all his strength and hideousness. He appeared to be sound asleep. I even imagined that I could hear him snoring. To see whether he was or not I began to descend the tree. As I reached one of the lower boughs the bear was on his feet and made a dash for the tree. But I scuttled back like a squirrel and stayed there. It was apparent that old Ephraim was not so sleepy as he had seemed to be.

He lay down on the ground again, and thus the afternoon dragged on and the sun sank behind the mountains. We looked, longingly around for a rescuer. We hoped Pike would come, for we knew he would be alarmed when we did not return at nightfall, but we saw no signs of him. We shouted at the top of our voices, but there came no response save from the bear, who clawed at our trees and growled.

I proposed to Bonneau that each of us descend his tree to the lowest boughs, and when the bear made a dash for one the other was to drop from his tree, seize one of the rifles, which lay conveniently near, re-ascend the tree with it and shoot the bear to death at his leisure. But we abandoned the plan as too dangerous. So we had nothing to do but sit and watch the thick-growing darkness. By and by both Bonneau and the bear became invisible. Bonneau and I shouted to each other occasionally in order to hearten ourselves up. An occasional heavy shuffling and blowing showed that the bear was still there.

When the moon came out Bonneau and I could see each other, and we felt better. Bonneau became quite cheerful and affected to make a joke of it. He sang two or three French songs and even told a comic story. But all that could not disguise the gravity of our situation, for the bear seemed to be perfectly comfortable and made no preparations for departure. If the two bullets we fired into him troubled him that trouble was not visible in his behavior.

The time dragged along, and despite our anxiety I began to grow sleepy. Bonneau advised me to tie myself to the tree. I acted on his advice, tore off a stout strip of my coat and knotted it around my waist and the trunk of the tree. Subsequently I took a short nap in safety. Bonneau was a wiry and enduring little

fellow, and occasionally his loud halloo rang through the forest with great distinctness, but it did not bring our friends.

Day came after a long and weary night, and disclosed old Ephraim rubbing his nose with his paws as if he were making his morning toilet. Bonneau and I shouted together as loud as we could at intervals of ten or twelve minutes, and about two hours after sunrise we heard a faint halloo.

"Zat ees ze Monsieur Pike, ze great hunter coming to rescue us," exclaimed Bonneau joyfully. "Now we halloo together louder than ever."

We strained our lungs in a mighty shout, and again came the distant hello—o—o—o in reply. We waited a little, and we heard the cry again, but nearer. Shout and answer continued thus for a few minutes, and we no longer had any doubt that it was Pike or Sam, or both, coming to help us.

These noises aroused the bear, who shuffled about, pricked up his ears and bared his teeth.

From my perch I saw a figure approaching, and recognized it as Pike, with his rifle on his shoulder.

"Look out, Pike! look out!" I shouted, "we are treed by a grizzly, and he'll be after you if you come too near."

"All right," shouted Pike in reply. "Let him come. I'll take care of him."

The grizzly made a dive through the trees for his new enemy, but Pike, slinging his rifle across his back, climbed up a tree like a cat. He secured a good seat among the branches, and when the bear came under the boughs fired into him. The bear did not fall, but gnawed the tree and tore at it in his frenzy. Pike calmly reloaded his rifle and fired again and again into the bear. The vitality of the monster was wonderful. Shot after shot crashed into his body and the streaming blood soaked the fallen leaves, but he wrestled with the tree with scarcely diminished vigor.

"He's a good un! He's got good grit!" called Pike, "but I'll finish him if I have to turn him into a lead mine."

When fully a dozen bullets had been fired into the bear he fell over, kicked and gasped a little and died. We waited some time to be sure there was no mistake about the matter, and then we descended the trees.

"It was mighty lucky for you two that these trees were handy," said Pike, "or there wouldn't have been more than a few scraps of you left. We've been huntin' you all night through the woods. Sam and Henry are off on another trail. When I struck the tracks of that grizzly back yonder I was afraid it was all up with both of you. A grizzly b'ar is a mighty onsartin' animal for a man that ain't used to him."

We could vouch for the truth of Pike's last statement, and we had no hesitation in saying so. We recovered our rifles and returned to the camp. We were joined there later by Sam and Henry, who were overjoyed at finding us all right.

But we went back afterwards and skinned that bear, taking his hide to the camp as a trophy.

Chapter 15

An Interruption.

The autumnal tints of the forest deepened, and still we lingered in the valley. These indications of coming winter and the alarming fact that our supplies of ammunition were growing short warned us that it was time to resume the overland journey. But we were loth to go.

We had been discussing the necessity of an early start. All were agreed upon that point, but nobody would name the time of departure. After we had talked the matter over and all our discussions had ended in nothing, I picked up my rifle and strolled off among the trees to think about this vital question. Absorbed in meditation, I wandered much farther from the camp than I intended. Finally my thoughts glided away almost unconsciously from the subject and I began to watch the scenery of the valley and the lake, of which I never grew tired. I sat down on a fallen log a few yards from the margin of the water, and, leaning my rifle by my side, allowed my thoughts to stray off on various tangents.

I fell to musing over our strange adventures since we had left the East. I felt as if years had passed and I was quite a man now. I wondered how our journey would end. Then, in boy-fashion, I began to pick up pebbles and skim them along the surface of the lake.

I had been engaged for several minutes in this not very instructive occupation when I heard a slight rustling behind a large tree which grew not a dozen feet away. At first I thought it was a snake, but I remembered that we had seen no snakes in the valley. Then I concluded it was a frog, and resumed my occupation of skipping stones over the lake.

But the rustling behind the tree continued, and I stepped forward to see what was making it. I passed around the tree, and came face to face with a hideously painted Indian warrior. He had no gun, but he held his knife in his right hand, and I knew as soon as I saw his face that if it had not been for the slight rustling behind the tree the knife would have been buried a minute later in my back.

I was surprised, but I did not lose the use of my faculties for a moment. My gun was behind me, leaning against the log, but, though under nineteen years of age, I was as large as an ordinary man and as strong and wiry as a bear. I seized the right wrist of the Indian and hurled myself upon him. He nearly fell, but by a powerful effort recovered himself and threw his left arm around me, trying to pin my arms to my sides. At the same time he endeavored to wrench free the right hand in which he held the knife. I think he, too, had been much surprised by my sudden approach to the tree, and some of his wits were wandering when I threw myself upon him. This surprise helped me.

The warrior was as strong and as wiry as I was, but I held to his right wrist with the clutch of death, and clasped his body with my other arm. If he could wrench his right hand free I knew that I was doomed. But I was determined that he should not do it I put forth all my strength, and with a savage delight I could feel my nails imbedding themselves in the flesh of his wrist and the blood trickling between my fingers.

Back and forward we writhed over the leaves, our breath coming in gasps. The Indian’s eyes glared hate into mine, and in those moments on the verge of eternity

I took notice of everything—the black hair, wiry like the brush of a mop, the hideous stripes and bars of paint and the keen edge of the knife.

I compressed my grip on his wrist, hoping to paralyze his arm and compel him to drop the knife, but his fingers remained clinched around its haft. Suddenly my foot slipped on the dry leaves and I felt the earth sliding from under me. I fell full length upon the ground, with the Indian on top of me. The heaviness of the fall half dazed me, but even in that stupefied state the instinct of life was strong within me and I never relaxed my grip on the Indian's wrist. He had uttered a grunt of triumph as I fell and endeavored to shift the knife to his left hand, but I held his right arm outstretched and he could not reach the weapon.

I knew something about wrestling and the Indian did not. With a sudden whirl, I threw him off, and then as if by mutual consent we rose to our feet again, my grip still being on his knife-arm. Then we stood for nearly a minute gazing into each other's eyes. My face streamed with perspiration, and the body of the Indian, which was nearly naked, was damp with his exertions.

I was wondering what to do next, when the Indian suddenly doubled up his left hand and struck me a heavy blow between the eyes. Blood gushed from my nose and I staggered. But Indians are not trained boxers any more than they are trained wrestlers, and the blow, heavy as it was, did not take me off my feet or break my grip on his wrist. In an instant I imitated his tactics—strange that I had not thought of it before—and my own right shot out with all the force that I could put into it. I caught him squarely between the eyes and he went over like a stricken ox. The violence of his fall causing him to whirl the knife over his head and a dozen feet behind him.

I leaped to the fallen log, and when the Indian, the blood mingling with the paint on his face and rendering his aspect more hideous and ferocious than ever, rose to his feet, my gun was cocked and levelled at his breast.

He saw that he was in my power and anticipated his fate. He had fought a game-fight and lost. There was no sign of fear in his appearance. He drew himself up, expanded his chest, and without the flinching of a muscle awaited the deadly bullet. I looked along the sights of my rifle and picked out the spot on his bare breast beneath which the heart lay.

But I hesitated. A feeling of repugnance thrilled me. I had passed through dangers and had become hardened to many things, but I could not shoot down an unarmed man, though I knew he would have had no scruples had our positions been reversed.

My finger played with the trigger of the rifle. I saw an expression of impatience come into the proud and defiant eyes of the Indian, and he struck his chest with his right hand. I looked down the sights again and then I formed my resolution.

I turned the muzzle of my rifle to the ground. Then I pointed silently to the forest.

The Indian's look of defiance changed to one of wonder, but I pointed again to the forest. He muttered something in the Indian tongue which I did not understand, bowed his head as if he were giving me a salute, and turning away, picked up his knife, which lay gleaming among the leaves. Then he gave me his strange salute again and stalked off among the trees.

I watched his brown body as he walked steadily on until he disappeared. Then I hastened back to the camp and told the boys about it. Pike censured me very much for sparing the Indian.

"You shouldn't have been so squeamish, Joe," he said. "He was stealin' upon you to stick his knife in your back, and you shouldn't have let him go. Ef he should meet you again he'd try to kill you jest as hard as he ever did. An Injun has no gratitude. I found an Injun of a peaceful tribe sick on the prairie once. I took him up and tended him until he was well. As soon as he was strong enough to go about again he stole my horse and rifle, an' I've never seen Injun, animal or weapon agin."

But Henry stood by me, and Sam and Bonneau inclined to my side, too. So I was not sorry that I had spared the warrior.

"It don't make much difference noway," added Pike philosophically, "fur ef thar's one Injun in a place like this thar's purty shore to be others. It's luck that you had a tussle with him, fur we know now they've come afore they've had time to ambush us. Boys, this is a purty place an' we've had a good time here, but we've got to leave it and leave it to-night. It's no time to stand on the order of our goin'."

Our first duty, under the instructions of Pike, was to fill our canteens with fresh water and to load ourselves with the jerked venison which we had prepared already for the journey.

"Now, boys," said Pike, "we must shift to another part of the forest, fur the smoke of our campfire has already, I guess, told them devils where we lie. It's a good thing for us that night is so near."

Our preparations were completed in five minutes, and we started towards the western end of the valley, treading softly in Indian file. Sam wanted to take a farewell look at his beloved canoe, but Pike would not allow it. The reign of peace in our happy little valley had ended abruptly, and the very air seemed to be impregnated with danger.

Chapter 16

The Cry of the Wolf.

None spoke for a while, and there was no sound save the light pit-a-pat of our footsteps. I asked Pike which way he intended to take. He pointed to some light clouds that floated over a rent in the mountains.

"I hope that we will be thar afore mornin'," he said.

The next moment all of us started, then stood as still as if we had lost the power of motion. A long, plaintive cry rose and echoed and re-echoed through the forest and then died away. It was the howl of a wolf. Pike seemed to divine our thoughts, for he said with his dry laugh:

"The reds have made a mistake thar. Ef they'd been in this valley as long as we have they'd have knowed thar war no wolves here. That cry came from the throat

of a redskin, and I guess it's a signal from one lot of 'em to another that they've found our camp. We didn't move a minute too soon, boys. I wish night wuz here."

Pike cast up his eyes, but the sun still showed above the crest of the mountain. "We're goin' it blind, fellers," he said.

"Like as not we'll tumble right into a nest of the scamps. They may be scattered all over the valley."

We pushed on rapidly towards the western mountains and with infinite joy saw the sun sinking behind their crest. We were skirting the margin of the lake, which at this point had a sandy beach. Pike said it would be a good idea to hide our trail, and we waded in the water until it was halfway up to our knees. Thus we trudged in the edge of the lake as long as the beach lasted, when we came out on dry land again.

We heard the cry of the wolf a second time, apparently a quarter of a mile behind us, and it was answered far off to our left. "The varmints are searchin' the woods fur us," said Pike, "an' I guess they think they've got an easy thing of it this time. We've been through some pretty tight rubs together, haven't we, boys? an' I guess we can pull out of this hole too,"

We talked in whispers, but we gave a hearty reply to Pike's cheering assurance. We were fully conscious of our peril, but having become inured to danger it did not weigh so heavily upon our spirits as one might think. Night was now coming on fast, and that fact added to our hopes. Beyond and above us loomed our goal, that great slash in the hills.

We proceeded with the utmost caution and there was need for us to exercise prudence. The undergrowth was dense, and the stumble or the cracking of a stick beneath a heavy footstep might bring our enemies upon us. Occasionally we heard the cry of the wolf, followed in a moment by its answering cry. The cries were invariably behind us or off to our left. The lake lay on our right. We had remained very near it for a while, but at length Pike led us away from it. He said he did not wish, in case of a crisis, to have us hemmed between the warriors and the water.

We were about four miles from the base of the mountains, when the cry of the wolf came, louder and more piercing than ever. But this time the sound was directly in front of us. All stopped involuntarily, and every face was turned towards Pike. It was too dark for me to see the expression of those faces, but I know my own heart was beating violently. Again the wolf howled, and answers came from behind us and also from our left.

"Boys," said Pike in a cautious whisper, "we're in a ring of death. Them fellers have surrounded us. The wolves scent prey, and we've got to be as crafty as the wolves theirselves to escape 'em. Now you foller my lead an' whenever I give a little whistle—it won't be heard more'n ten feet away—jest you drop down to the ground as easy and gentle ez you can an' lay thar ez still ez stones."

Pike bore further away to the left, stealing noiselessly forward with his rifle at the trail. We followed as silent and ghostlike as he. All of us wore moccasins of elk hide, or our shoes had been worn out long ago, and the soft skin made no sound as it touched the earth.

Pike stopped presently and stood stock still for at least five minutes. He was bent forward in a listening attitude, but I could hear nothing. He resumed his wary flight and we followed close after. The wolfish howls grew more numerous

and also closer. The circle of death was closing in. I loosened the pistol in my belt and held my rifle ready to be thrown into position at a moment's notice. Even if the warriors overtook us there was hope left. We were five men—for Henry and I could be called men now—well armed, and we could make a great deal of trouble for an attacking party.

Pike uttered a faint whistle, and we sank to the earth. I heard nothing and believed it was a false alarm, but looking towards the right I saw a half dozen figures stalking past us and not thirty feet away. They walked in single file, and, though it was too dark to distinguish their features, we knew very well they were Indians and enemies. The ghostly procession soon passed and disappeared in the woods beyond us. We lay quite still for a little while, but saw no other forms.

"Sence them fellers have gone back," whispered Pike, "there may be no more left ahead of us, an' ef that's so, our way is open."

He rose to his feet and stole on, with us in his wake. Some night birds fluttering among the leaves of the trees thrilled our nerves, and then came the long-drawn plaintive note of the wolf again, directly ahead of us. Pike snarled like a catamount at bay and stopped abruptly. He said nothing, but we knew as well as he that the ring of warriors still inclosed us, and our danger was increasing every moment.

After some hesitation, Pike sheered away towards the lake again, and soon we could see the silver sheen of its water through the trees. The frequency of the howls to the left showed that there was no thoroughfare in that direction, and our only chance for a passage lay near the lake. The nearest mountain slopes were now not more than two miles away. We had paused to listen when Henry stepped forward and called Pike's attention to the dense trees and undergrowth that crowded the edge of the lake and even grew in the shallower part of its waters. There was a kind of saw-grass, very thick and tall, which grew out of the water and rose two or three feet above it. Henry proposed that we wade into the water and conceal ourselves in the grass and under the overhanging boughs of the trees. Pike was much taken with the idea.

"It's fust-rate," he said, "but tie your ammunition and your pistols 'roun' your necks and hold your guns up. An' be shore you don't splash the water about."

We adjusted our ammunition and weapons in order to keep them dry, and then crept into the water. We waded out until it rose almost to our waists, and stood there completely concealed by the water, the grass and the drooping foliage. We could not have found a better covert, but the water was chill, and in a few minutes I was shivering. I dare say the others were too.

But soon we were very thankful for Henry's suggestion, for presently we heard the Indian signal not forty feet from us. Answering signals came, and in time we heard the murmur of voices. Evidently the circle of the Indians had closed in and the warriors, in their surprise at finding nothing, were discussing new plans.

The talking lasted fully half an hour. Then silence succeeded, and the next sound we heard was a wolf howl far down the valley behind us. I suggested that we leave the lake and push on for the pass, but Pike made us wait in the water fully an hour longer. In all that time we heard no signals ahead of us, and then Pike said our time had come to make a dash for the pass.

With benumbed limbs we waded back to dry land. We stood there for a while, shivering and rubbing our muscles to restore the circulation, and then we pushed

on again for the pass. It was now the "darkest hour before the dawn," when night is preparing to flee at the coming of day, and objects were not visible twenty feet off. This gloom served well to conceal our movements, but it might also cause us to plunge headlong into a party of our enemies.

"Them devils haven't given up the chase," growled Pike. "Don't you believe for a moment that they have. They know we're here, and they're too fond of scalps to quit huntin' fur 'em ez long ez thar's a chance to find any. We must get into that pass afore daylight comes."

We crept on through the woods, and presently I heard a whisper in my ear. It was Starboard Sam's voice.

"I saw some mighty lively adventures on board ship," he said, "when I was a lad, but darn my eyes, Master Joe, ef I ain't seein' jest about as lively ones in my old age on land. I never thought as there was so much variety on shore as this."

But some signals which thrilled through the night air just then made me pray for an absence of variety. We were almost at the end of the valley now. A slender bar of gray was breaking through the darkness in the east, and by its pale light we could see the rough, rocky sides of the mountain looming above us. The sight was a welcome one, and in our anxiety to gain the pass we broke into a trot.

The opening into the pass was not more than twenty feet wide, and high, precipitous walls of granite rose on either side. It is just such a deep ravine as one sees frequently in the loftier Rockies.

Day was now breaking. The valley behind us which we had found so pleasant a home was swarming with enemies. We turned for one farewell look at it, and then we made a dash for the pass.

Pike emerged first into the open, and as his figure darted out from the trees a rifle cracked, and a bullet chipping his neck drew blood. A half dozen dark figures sprang up from the ground in the mouth of the pass, and all fired at us. But the uncertain light and our wavering figures caused every bullet to go amiss. Then Pike's unerring rifle spoke, and a dusky brave emitting his death yell fell to the earth.

"Smash'em, boys! smash 'em!" shouted Pike, as he rushed upon them with clubbed rifle, his herculean figure towering up in the morning light. We fired with the best aim we could, and then with pistol or clubbed rifle we threw ourselves upon them. The conflict was short. We swept forward like a whirlwind. There was a popping of pistols, the smash of crushing blows, wailing cries like those of wolves, the half uttered death-yell, and then we swept on, leaving four dead Indians on the ground, while the others had fled for refuge in the forest.

As we ran Pike made a rapid accounting, and found that none of us had more than scratches. We had, indeed, come off wonderfully well.

"They tried to stop a cyclone that time," chuckled Pike, in high glee, "an' it whirled 'em aroun' and chawed 'em up. Won't the others of the band be mad when they hear of it, which will be mighty soon, too, fur they'll all be snarling' an' yelpin' on our trail now."

He was right, for very soon we heard a chorus of discordant yells that caused us to hasten our footsteps and look well to the priming of our rifles. We were now deep in the pass, and though the sun was over the mountains, the walls rose so sheer and so high on either side that the light was faint around us. Still we could

see that a fairly good natural road led on further into the mountains. Down the centre of it trickled a brook that flowed into the valley and mingled its waters with those of the lake.

Pike noticed our surroundings carefully as we fled, and I guessed that he was looking for some rocky breastwork that would serve us for a good battle-ground in case we were pushed to the wall.

We had settled into a jog-trot, but as we were gradually ascending we were soon panting. By Pike's order we lessened our speed.

"It's time them devils down thar were givin' tongue," he said, "for of course they know which way we've come, seein' that this is the only path."

Ere he uttered the last word a series of yelping cries arose behind us, and we knew the warriors were hot-foot in pursuit.

"Steady, boys, steady!" said Pike, using his favorite word of caution, "they're a good bit behind us yet, and thar's no use in windin' ourselves in the first beat."

The pass suddenly became precipitous, and we clambered up it with some difficulty. The water tumbled down a cliff in a silver cloud, and some beautiful pink flowers grew on its verge. I noted these things, but it was no time to stop and admire them, for we heard again the yells of our enemies.

A hundred yards further on the pass curved to the right, but the high granite walls still rose far up on either side. The light was still dim in that mighty trench.

The ground began to grow rougher, and with a sudden sickening of the heart we noticed that the pass was narrowing, and narrowing rapidly. The thought must have come to us at the same time that we were running up a blind alley. I saw even Pike's face go pale in the misty light, I knew what my own must have shown.

"Run aground!" gasped Starboard Sam.

As if to convince us that our surmise was right, we heard behind us a yell that sounded like a whoop of triumph. Nevertheless we ran on, at full speed now, and came face to face with a blank wall of stone.

We stared at each other in despair.

"Vell, vat does zee General say? Vat shall we do?" exclaimed Bonneau.

"Where does this brook come from? It must flow out of that wall sumwhars!" cried Pike.

Henry, always quick, pointed to a dark hole in the cliff. A stream of water issued from it, but the stream was not as broad as the aperture.

"Come on, boys!" shouted Pike. "It's a chance, and we've got to take it!"

He dashed forward and, dropping on his knees, crawled into the hole beside the stream. We followed, and in an Instant our party was burrowing in the side of the mountain like so many moles. We stumbled over some rocks, stepped into some shallow water, came to dry land again, and then at Pike's warning cry we stopped.

"We must stay at the mouth of this hole for the present," said Pike, "and hold it agin' them yellin' imps, who will be here in a minute. One man in a place like this ought to keep back a thousan'."

We scrambled back, near enough to the mouth to see the light outside, and then waited for the appearance of the Indians.

Chapter 17

In the Cavern.

The place in which we lay furnished perfect concealment and yet did not obstruct our view of the pass. It was such a refuge as Providence sometimes offers to men when the last moment seems at hand. At this point the cleft in the mountain was so deep and narrow that twilight reigned there though the sun was high in the skies overhead. Nevertheless we could see a considerable distance down the pass. In about five minutes the Indians rushed into sight. They came on pell-mell, fifty, sixty, a hundred of them at least. They were so hot on the chase that they must not have noticed the abrupt narrowing of the pass, and they were brought up with a jerk by the sheer blank wall of the cliff, in the same manner that we had been stopped.

Indians are probably the most cautious of human beings. I, who have seen so much of them, should know. But this crowd was taken by surprise. I imagined I could see a look of astonishment and chagrin on their faces, bronzed and painted though they were. Apparently the earth had opened and swallowed us up, and their spoil had slipped right out of the hollow of their hands. I heard a deep, joyous chuckle beside me and Pike whispered in my ear:

"It was worth comin' so fur an' runnin' so many risks to see this, Joe! them devils are jest kerflummexed!"

We knew the Indians would soon divine the manner of our disappearance, for the intelligence that led us to seek the source of the brook would lead them into the same path. In fact their bewilderment lasted only a minute. Then one of them uttered what sounded to me like a warning cry, and they vanished with a quickness that took my breath. I could not understand it at first, but Pike explained it in a moment.

"They've dropped to the groun'," he said, "an' the muddy color uv thar bodies an' the bad light, makes 'em look like the earth. They've seen this hole an' know we're in here. They're afeard uv shots from us an' they're sneakin' off out uv range. Then they'll try to think up some way of prizin' us out uv here. I could pick off one uv them fellers easy enough from here, but 'tain't worth while to waste good powder an' ball. We'll wait till the shoe pinches tighter."

Looking closely, I could see some of the Indians gliding away over the earth. When they disappeared a dead stillness reigned in the pass.

"Since we've had a hard run for it an' have work ahead," said Pike, "we'd better take a little dinner. Nuthin' like a full stummick when you've got to fight and circumvent the red imps."

Following Pike's instructions and precedent each of us took a strip of dried venison and began to eat.

"We're purty well fixed fur a siege," said Pike. "I guess our water supply'll never give out, fur you kin hear it tricklin' away over thar, an' we've got enough of this jerked meat here to last us a long time. Tain't as comfortable az it was down in the

valley thar afore the Injuns came, but I guess we kin get along, though I'm boun' to say our new place ain't very well lighted."

"Suppose this place has another entrance!" said Henry. "The stream may flow through the mountain. Suppose the Indians find the other entrance and come, in behind us."

This thought was very alarming, but Pike's reply reassured us.

"'Tain't likely we've got anythin' to be afeard of in that line," he said. "Thar may be an openin' in the other side of the mountain. But it is a hard matter for the Injuns to get over thar. It would take a year's huntin' to find it, an' then, if they ever found it, it mightn't be big enough for a coyote to squeeze into. The chances are a million to one agin thar comin' on us from behin'. No; we'll jest lay here and watch the pass out thar. That's whar the danger is."

Several hours passed away, and the silence in the pass was unbroken. By this time our eyes had grown somewhat accustomed to the darkness, and we could see that we were lying in a species of cavern, which a few feet beyond the entrance widened rapidly. The roof was higher than a man's head, and the floor was fairly even. On one side the brook splashed over the pebbles.

Our attention was drawn from the examination of the cavern by Bonneau's exclamation of surprise:

"Look! Look!" he cried. "Zere ees somethin' strange coming to see us!"

An object that looked like a platform of timber turned up edgewise had come into view. We couldn't see behind it, but we knew very well it was pushed by the Indians. It came on very slowly over the uneven ground. I was very much puzzled, but Pike explained the matter.

"They're goin' to try to smoke us out," he said. "They've been down in the valley, an' they've made the thing thar. They've got loads of dry grass behind it. When they get close to the door of our house here, they'll set it all afire, an' then wait fur the smoke to drive us tumblin' out of our holes. A redskin thinks mighty hard when he's got a good chance to get a scalp, and that's the result of some of his thinkin' today. The wind's blowin' squar' in our direction, an' they believe their trick'll do the work."

It was evident that it was a difficult task for the Indians to transport the big wooden frame, for they stopped frequently to rest. As they were pushing it along, Pike caught sight of a brown ankle at the corner of it. Quick as a flash he fired.

A yell of pain followed the report of the rifle.

"That'll teach 'em to be careful," said Pike. "They mustn't expect to have a picnic of it when they're maneuverin' agin a lot of white gen'elmen. I'll be bound that feller don't walk agin fur a month."

Two or three shots were fired from behind the wooden barricade at the mouth of the cavern, but the bullets merely flattened against the rocks. They were random shots, as the Indians could see none of us, and they did not waste much of their ammunition in that manner. They resumed very cautiously the work of pushing forward the new weapon which they thought would prove fatal to us. When they were within twenty feet of us they stopped, set the grass and leaves which they carried behind it on fire, and retreated. They had supposed, probably, that they would be protected in their flight by the wooden frame, but as they dashed back

into the valley one warrior came into full view. Pike's rifle spoke, and the next instant the Indian was rolling over, clutching at the stones in his death-agony.

The grass and leaves crackled and burned rapidly, and the pieces of timber caught fire next. But the whole thing was such a miserable farce that we actually laughed. Most of the smoke floated against the rocks above us, and then went sailing off in spirals into the clouds. A little came into the cave and tickled our eyes, and made us sneeze, but that was the whole result the Indians had achieved with the loss of one killed, one wounded, and at the cost of much labor.

"Ef that's the best they kin do," said Pike, sneeringly, "they'd better go back to their lodges and let somebody else try it."

"Do you think they will leave us now?" asked Henry.

"Not much," replied Pike. "Do you see that patch of ground kivered with boulders down the pass thar? Wa'al I'm willin' to bet at least twenty of the reds are lyin' in thar watchin' the mouth of this cave. Ef you don't believe it just watch me an' I'll prove it"

He crept nearer to the mouth of the cave, took off his cap, put it on the muzzle of his rifle, and raised it gently until the crown appeared in view. Three rifles cracked at once. Three gusts of flame rose above the boulders in the pass, and the cap was dashed against the rocks with three bullet-holes in it.

"Purty good marksmen," said Pike, picking up the cap and examining it critically. "Rather better than most Injuns are. You kin see easy now that they're watchin' fur us. Thar's nothin' an Injun kin do better than watchin' and waitin'. They'll set out thar till next summer, ef they think they kin git us by doin' it"

Noon came and then the sun began to descend the horizon, and as Pike anticipated an attack in the night, we gathered up all the loose stones we could find in the cavern. These we heaped up in the entrance, leaving a hole just large enough for a man to crawl through. We could have closed it up entirely, but we were compelled to have fresh air.

By and by the night came on, very thick and dark. Pike chose me to watch with him and told the others they might go to sleep. They demurred at first.

"I don't want to sleep when pirates are tryin' to board us," said Starboard Sam. "I'll keep watch, too."

But Pike assured him that it was not necessary for more than two to watch. The others should sleep and regain their strength. This argument prevailed and soon was heard the deep, heavy breathing that indicated that they were asleep.

Pike and I sat on either side of the entrance with our rifles across our knees. We felt comparatively safe, for, situated as we were then, it was impossible for the Indians to get at us. For the while we had nothing to fear except some new trick.

Hours passed and we heard not the slightest sound to indicate the presence of the enemy. Pike grew impatient.

"They haven't left us, that's shore," he said, "an' I'm afeard they've hit upon some plan which they think'll do the work for us."

We waited awhile longer and Pike's impatience increased. He rose cautiously to his feet and said:

"Joe, I want you to help me move some of these big rocks."

"What are you going to do?" I asked in surprise.

"I'm goin' out thar in the pass to see what them reds are up to."

“Why, it’s worth your life to make such a venture!” I exclaimed in protest.

“I think not,” he replied. “Fact is, I may learn somethin’ that’ll save our lives.”

He would listen to no protest, and with his rifle in his hand crept through the opening. As he went he whispered to me:

“Keep a good watch, but you’ll have to depend on your ears more’n your eyes. Don’t stir from the cave no matter what you hear unless I give a yell.”

The darkness swallowed him up almost instantly. I waited and watched with the most intense anxiety. Not a sound came from the pass. I could hear the breathing of the sleepers near me, but that was all. I began to feel queer. I won’t say I was frightened, but I was lonely. Pike was gone, the others were asleep and I was the only one on watch. I conjured up all sorts of shapes and began to imagine that I saw figures flitting around outside. But a second look always showed that it was merely my fancy playing tricks with me.

In such a situation, and oppressed by such feelings, it is impossible to reckon time, but Pike must have been gone an hour when I heard a sound like a gasp or a sigh. It thoroughly startled me, but remembering Pike’s injunction I sat still, though I held my rifle at half cock.

There were five minutes more of silence when a whisper came out of the darkness:

“It’s me, Pike! Don’t stir or make a noise.”

I was overjoyed, and in a moment Pike was crawling through the hole.

“What did you find?” I asked.

“They’re still thar,” he said, and he held up his knife between my eyes and the slight light that sifted down into the pass. There was blood on the blade. I needed no further explanation of the sound I had heard.

Pike awakened Starboard Sam, who took my place, and lying down on the hard rocky bed of the cavern, I fell into a sleep as heavy and as sweet as if I lay on a feather-bed between white sheets.

When I awoke the light was shining in at what Henry fancifully called the front door of our house. Pike, who had not slept at all during the night, said the Indians had made no further demonstration. After we had eaten of our jerked venison and drunk of the cool, running water, Pike pointed to two long dry sticks that lay on the ground.

“I brought them in last night,” he said. “It’s part of the stuff that the Indians tried to smoke us out of here with. You’ve got some matches, Joe. Now, I want you an’ your brother to light them sticks, usin’ ’em as torches, and see whar this cavern leads to. Be mighty keerful whar you step or you might go pitchin’ down some deep hole. Work your way as you go along. Ef thar’s any stones pile up two or three of ’em every few yards. Ef it’s soft earth dig a hole in it with your heel. But no matter whar you go, make some kind of a mark that you’ll know. You don’t want to get lost on the inside of a mountain.”

I shuddered at the very idea and there was no further need for Pike to impress this caution upon me.

“We’ll hold this place till you git back” said Pike, “an’ ef you don’t come to anythin’ in four or five hours, turn and make tracks for this place agen.”

We lighted our torches, which burned with a steady flame, and, promising to exercise all the caution possible, started on our explorations into the heart of the mountain.

For several hundred yards we advanced without difficulty. The way was smooth and the roof was high. The water of the brook gurgled pleasantly over the stones beside us. Then we began to ascend rapidly. The cavern also narrowed, and presently we were compelled to wade in the shallow water. It broadened out again, but the roof became so low that we had to get down on our knees and crawl.

A half hour of such tiresome work and we emerged into what our fancy readily converted into an immense hall. Beautiful stalactites hung from the lofty roof and the walls were in white stone, polished and convoluted as if it had been done by the hand of a great sculptor.

But we did not stay long to admire this room. The way narrowed again, but the roof was high enough to permit us to stand erect. I was just congratulating Henry on the ease with which we were advancing, when he stopped with a gasp of terror and pulled me back, pointing downward with his extended finger.

We stood on the verge of a great pit. I swung my torch over it, but no bottom was disclosed. The beams of light penetrated far down and then lost themselves in shadows.

Shuddering we passed around this pit and continued our explorations, and we came to two or three other pits, but were so cautious that we did not stumble upon them unawares.

We had been ascending so rapidly that we stopped to take breath just where the road made an abrupt curve around another of the deep pits. We sat down and while resting I thought I heard a noise. Henry laughed at me, but not convinced, I looked around the curve ahead of us and saw a faint light approaching. I knew I could not be mistaken, and what were we to expect but an enemy?

I blew out my torch in the utmost haste and Henry did the same with his. Then we shrank back against the rocky wall. The light increased, and the sound of foot steps echoed down the cavern. Evidently nothing was further from the thoughts of the new-comer than a meeting with us. He came on steadily, and the light from his torch filled the cave around us. He turned the ledge of rock and walked almost against us.

It was an Indian warrior holding a torch over his head. He was startled at the sight of us, but was as quick as a cat in action.

Henry was the nearest to him, and he struck at the boy's head with his wooden torch. The rapid movement extinguished the flare, but I heard the boy gasp and fall against the rock.

I sprang at the Indian, dropping my torch and without drawing weapon in my excitement. I seized him round the shoulders and endeavored to throw him down. He held his footing and tried to writhe out of my grasp. Afraid that he would draw a weapon before I could do so, and remembering the tactics with which I had defeated the Indian at the struggle in the valley, I clinched my fist and drove it with all my might into his face.

He fell back from my grasp. I heard a scratching and sliding sound on the stones, then a yell of fright and horror, and a faint echo from the pit beside me, the presence of which I had forgotten. I fell fainting on the floor of the cavern, and

when I revived Henry was standing beside me with a lighted torch in his hand. There was a bruise on his head, but though he had been stunned when the blow was struck, he assured me it amounted to but little.

"We should be thankful we are not down there with him," he said solemnly, pointing into the depths of the pit.

I shivered, and was too much moved to reply.

"I vote we go on," said Henry. "Our meeting that fellow shows that there is another entrance. It is not likely that we'll find any more of his kind in here. If there had been a lot of them they would have stuck together in a place like this."

This looked like sound reasoning and we went on, keeping a very anxious watch for pits. We had gone about a mile when I fell a cool breath upon my face and could not restrain an exclamation of joy. We were now walking along a narrow archway. The brook had disappeared long since. In reality it did not flow through the mountain, but our theory that it did had served to lead us through the passage. A short distance further and we could see a few beams of sunlight. As a precautionary measure we extinguished our torches and presently scrambling up a rocky ledge we thrust our heads out into God's sunlight.

It was a small opening, but we easily drew ourselves through it and out into the open air, which felt very fresh and very good on our faces.

We stood on a mountain-side, with high peaks shooting up around us. Dimly to the east we could see our valley. To our right was the deep cut which we had entered from the valley. There was nothing around us but rocks. We could see no signs of life.

Chapter 18

In Camp.

We made merely a brief examination of the vicinity, and re-entering the tunnel, for such it was, began our return journey. We passed the pit, on the verge of which our encounter had taken place, and peered shudderingly into its dismal depths. About the middle of the afternoon we reached the other mouth of the tunnel, and found that nothing had occurred during our absence. Of course there was great joy at the result of our trip, though all were some what startled at our adventure with the Indian.

"Vat a death, to drop down into the bowels of the earth!" exclaimed Bonneau.

Pike at first thought of waiting until night for our passage through the tunnel. Then the darkness would cover our escape across the mountains. But on second thought he concluded that as one Indian had found the tunnel another might do the same, and it would be better for us to leave immediately.

We gathered up our arms, ammunition and food, and refilling our canteens from the brook, started on the reverse route through the passage. We knew that the Indians would not learn of our departure for a long time, for they would not

dare to approach the mouth of the cavern by daylight, and we felt safe from immediate pursuit.

When we emerged from the subterranean passage it was late in the afternoon. The setting sun illumined the bleak mountain-side with unusual brilliancy, but we could see nothing to indicate the proximity of enemies.

"They're still watchin' fur us in the pass down thar," said Pike, "and while they're enjoying themselves at that sort of business we'll be puttin' miles between us and them. Ef we don't have bad luck we'll never see that crowd agin."

We picked our way up the stony mountain-side, which was broken here and there by deep gulches. When darkness fell we were very near the crest of the range which, fortunately for us, was not so high here as at other points. We began to suffer from the cold which the elevation and the lateness of the season rendered acute. We still had our blankets, which Pike would not let us abandon, even in the extremest danger, and we were now very thankful to him for his foresight. We wrapped them around our bodies, and they protected us in some measure.

We pressed on in the night, which was not very dark, and made good progress, when the roughness of the way is taken into consideration. About two hours after dark it began to snow, though not heavily. This increased our difficulties so far as travel was concerned, but Pike said it protected us from the danger of Indians, unless we blundered right into the camp of a party, which, however, was exceedingly improbable on a bleak mountain-side.

An hour or two after we reached the line of snowfall we passed over the crest of the range and began to descend the far side of the mountain. The slope there was not great and the going was rather easy. We stopped about half-way between night and morning and, finding good shelter under some projecting rocks, rested there until day.

When the light came and we looked ahead we saw stretching before us another plain, bare, brown and endless, like that we had left on the other side of the mountains. Our road to California of necessity lay through it.

"Thar's nothin' to do," said Pike, "but make the venture. We can't go back to the valley. Our scalps wouldn't be safe on our heads an hour thar. We've got to strike out across that plain thar and trust to luck. Anyway, luck has stood by us so fur. We ain't got any right to complain."

Pike spoke the truth. Providence had been our merciful ally in many dangers. That thought inspired us. We had become inured to hardships and the struggle for life. Our fibre had been toughened and I do not think that any of us was discouraged even at the dreary prospect before us. We shouldered our guns again and, still in good spirits, resumed our tramp down the mountain-side.

The plain did not prove to be so extensive as we feared, for we crossed it with a two-days' march and came into some pretty good country, through which a shallow little river ran. Here we found both buffalo and antelope. As these were good hunting grounds, we feared the presence of Indians and exercised the greatest caution in our movements. But we saw no indications that they were in the vicinity and concluded that our fears were groundless.

We stopped in a little grove where we could find shelter from the keen winds which now blew over the prairie, and Pike and I went out to shoot a buffalo. As we had no horses, hunting buffalo was now a somewhat difficult matter with us. We

found one of the animals grazing near the river-bank and managed to creep up within firing distance before alarming him. Pike fired a shot at him, but his aim was not as good as usual and he merely wounded the brute.

The buffalo, which proved to be a ferocious old bull, turned and charged rapidly upon us. He rushed at Pike, who leaped to one side. I heard a groan of pain, and, to my great surprise, saw Pike tumble over on the earth. The bull had turned for another dash at him, but I was fortunate enough to bring the animal down with a bullet. Then I ran to Pike's assistance. He was sitting up, but his face was pale.

"I've winged myself for a while, Joe," he said; "I wrenched my ankle when I turned thar to save myself from the bull. I think I've got a bad sprain that'll lay me up for a while. I don't know but what it sarves me right for makin' sech a bad shot. Give me your hand and help me up."

Leaning on my shoulder he struggled to his feet, though he groaned again with pain. His fears proved true, for his right ankle was severely sprained. This was a piece of very bad luck, for Pike, with his great experience of border life and his naturally clear intellect, was the brains of our party. Without him we were so many children in leading strings, and we owed our lives to him a half dozen times over.

We made our way back to the camp very slowly and painfully, and Pike's accident caused much dismay. Starboard Sam had seen much of surgery aboard ship, and his experience stood us in good stead now. He bathed Pike's ankle and bound it up with some strips of clothing, but said he would not be able to walk for days. Then we held a council of war. To go on at present was impossible.

"Boys," said Pike, "thar ain't but one thing for us to do. We've got to stay right whar we are an' make a winter of it in this grove. The cold weather's comin' fast. We kin feel it already in the air, an' winter on these plains ain't no picnic. As we can't start now thar'll never be a chance fur us to get through to Californy this winter. We've got to build a cabin here, an' this'll be our home for the next four or five months."

The wisdom of Pike's remarks was obvious. There was no longer any hope of getting through to California until the following spring, and it would be necessary for us to stay in the grove and take our chances with the winter and the Indians. Had we been supplied with plenty of ammunition we would not have cared much, but both powder and lead were getting low, and it would be necessary for us to husband our resources very carefully.

It was a difficult task to build a house without tools, but we were spurred on by necessity, and Henry and I really enjoyed the work. Pike could do little with his hands, but his active intellect was busy with suggestions and orders. We found a steep little hill near the grove and with strips that we sharpened with our hunting-knives we dug down its side until it was as steep as a wall. Then we built a lean-to. There was enough fallen timber and broken boughs in the grove to make the two sides of a house. We piled the logs and sticks on each other in any sort of fashion, and filled in between with great clods of earth and turf. We ran sticks across the top and covered over with turf in the same manner. The side of the hill formed the rear of the house, and we closed up part of the front with brush, leaving just room enough for us to enter. We also heaped up clods of earth with

the brush, and our house was as snug as you please. It would shed the rain, and a thick bed of dry leaves made a dry and comfortable floor.

Our cabin, as we called it, was not large, but all could sleep in it at the same time, and I have seen houses that were not as cozy and as warm as ours.

By the time we had finished the house Pike's ankle was well. We had jerked the meat of the buffalo we had killed, and also of several deer and some elk that we had killed. Even if we should find no game in the course of the winter we would have plenty of meat.

We had made ourselves comfortable for the winter, when Henry and Sam went out one afternoon to take a look at the country. As they were following the course of the river there was no danger that they would get lost.

"Look out for Indians," said Bonneau as they left; "we won't let you into our house if you come back without your scalps."

The two promised to keep a good watch, for we now had had enough experience to wish for no more of the troublesome company of the redskins. Henry and the sailor were gone several hours, and we were expecting their return when I heard a distant prolonged cry. It set my heart a-beating, for it reminded me of something I had heard back in the valley when we were surrounded by the Indians. I was much alarmed, and instantly called Pike's attention. He listened, and we heard the long-drawn note again.

"It's an Indian signal," I explained. "They have found us again!"

"I think not," said Pike. "That howl this time comes from a genuine four-legged wolf. But he may be as dangerous as the two-legged kind. It was in that direction that Sam and Henry went. Get your weepins and call Bonneau."

I divined at once what he meant, and shouting to Bonneau, we seized rifle and pistol and ran down the river. The howling increased until it sounded like the yelling of a pack of hounds. Then we heard a rifle shot, followed by another.

"That's good," said Pike. "Them two shots so close together show that neither of 'em is down yet."

Panting and excited, we ran around a curve of the stream, and in the twilight which had now come on, saw two human figures speeding towards us. Behind them came two score of long-limbed animals, leaping over the earth and howling in an infernal chorus. One of the men turned and fired a pistol-shot into the howling mass. The animals stopped to rend and tear something and fight with each other over it. While the pursuers battled the two figures came on with increased speed, and in another minute Starboard Sam and Henry, with faces that unmistakably indicated fright, met us.

"Break for the cabin, boys," said Pike, "or they'll tear us all to pieces. Don't any of you fire at 'em. I'll tend to that part of it When I call for a gun, hand it to me."

The wolves now resumed the chase and would have overtaken us easily, but Pike fired and wounded one of them. While the others stopped to slay and devour him we widened the distance between us. The trick was repeated three times before we reached the cabin, Pike firing one of his shots almost from the front door. Then we tumbled in and hastily threw up the logs which served as a door. Such was the ferocity of the wolves that they endeavored to rush in upon us. One jumped up and thrust his nose between two logs, where he hung until Bonneau cut his throat with his hunting-knife and pushed him back.

“Wa’al, boys, we’re safe now ef our house holds,” said Pike. “How did it all happen?”

Henry briefly related that he and Sam had gone a long distance down the river-bank. They could not resist a shot at a deer feeding among some trees, and had killed the animal They cut out the best part of the venison, and were bringing it back to the cabin. Before they had come a mile they heard howls behind them, and soon saw a large pack of wolves in pursuit. Alarmed by their number and apparent ferocity, they had thrown down the venison and taken to their heels. The wolves had stopped to eat the meat, and then had resumed the chase. They were following so fast that the two fugitives turned and fired into them. These were the shots we had heard, and the rest we knew.

“Trailed you by the blood of the deer you killed, I guess,” said Pike. “That’s as bad a lot of devils out thar ez a fellow ever had to face. Timber wolves, too, the boldest and wust of the hull wolf tribe.”

It was a sight to send the chill into a man’s blood. The great wolves, gaunt with famine, threw themselves against the walls of our little cabin. It was well indeed that we had built the place tight and strong, or we would speedily have been torn to pieces by the blood thirsty pack. All the time they kept up a fearful snarling and howling and thrust their sharp noses between the logs in an effort to reach us, showing their white teeth and bloodshot eyes as they snapped and snarled. They had already devoured the wolf whose throat Bonneau had cut, and the appetite of the cannibals was whetted for more.

“Let ’em snarl away,” said Pike; “we’ll rest awhile after that long run, and then we’ll see ef we can’t fix up a plan to give ’em some amusement.”

We sat on the floor and composed our spirits as best we could, while the demon crew outside howled and fought to get at us. Pretty soon we heard a noise overhead, and all of us except Pike started to our feet in alarm.

“Never mind,” said Pike, “its jest some of the wolves on the roof of our house. They had nuthin’ to do but walk from the hill right out on it. But they can’t get in.” The roof was indeed strong and wolf-proof, but I could not help feeling uneasiness at having wolves on all sides of us and above us into the bargain. But Pike was very complacent, and rested as calmly in his bed of leaves as if there were not a wolf in a thousand miles. After a while he said:

“I think, boys, that concert out there has lasted long enough. I’ll see if I can’t change the style of their music a leetle.”

He offered no explanation of his plan, and we watched him with curious interest He took a long, slender pole which was lying in a corner, and with some deer thongs, lashed the handle of his hunting-knife tightly to the end of it. Then he grasped the pole in both hands and approached the door. When he came near the fury of the wolves redoubled, and in their efforts to reach him they bounded against the stout logs.

One old fellow, rearing up on the wall and thrusting his nose between the logs, exposed his throat full and fair. Pike, using the pole as a lance, jabbed the knife-blade into his throat. When the animal tumbled to the ground the others, all their cannibalistic instincts aroused, sprang upon him and devoured him. As they tore at him Pike jabbed the knife into another, and they fell upon him in turn.

For an hour this thing went on, and it was the most horrible sight I ever beheld. The incessant snapping and snarling of the wolves, the rending of flesh, the yelps of the dying and the reek of steaming blood sickened me. I shut my eyes, but I could not close my ears or my nostrils. Even the face of Starboard Sam, hardened as he was to adventure and danger, looked ghastly in the moonlight which filtered between the logs.

The wolves themselves must have sickened at it, for after many of their number had perished, either under Pike's lance or the teeth of their companions, they slunk out of reach. They sat down, in a land of semicircle about twenty yards away and set up a mournful howl, which Henry said was a dirge for their dead.

"I hate to waste good ammunition," said Pike, "but I think if I give 'em a shot now they'll scatter."

He brought down one with a pistol-ball, and the others, evidently cowed by their reception, glided away in the darkness.

We did not venture outside the cabin that night and kept a guard until daybreak, but as soon as the sun came up we took down the poles and went out to look at the dead wolves, or rather what was left of them uneaten. Pike said we were not likely to be troubled again by wolves, for they had plenty of sense and would keep away from a place where they had met such bad luck.

Chapter 19

Surprised.

Pike's prediction about the wolves came true. We would see one slinking about the grove occasionally, but they never came in packs and we had no fear of them. After the wolf-fight, time was very heavy on our hands for a few days until we began to find occupations for ourselves. Every man followed the natural bent of his mind. There were colonies of beavers along the streams, and Pike made traps which were rude in construction, but nevertheless he captured many of these cunning animals. Pike cached or buried the hides.

"Some fur traders might happen along here some day," he said, "an' a pack ov fifty or sixty beaver hides is wuth nigh onto a thousan' dollars back in St. Louis."

Pike also made bows and arrows which we learned to use with a fair degree of skill in order to save our powder and lead. In reality we had plenty of jerked meat to last us the winter through, but we wanted fresh meat now and then, and Pike managed to tumble over several deer with his bows and arrows.

With a great deal of trouble and paring with his hunting-knife, Starboard Sam scraped out a rude wooden shell which looked something like a fiddle. He fitted this up with four strings made of the dried tendons of the deer, and we were astonished at the music he got out of it. He played some of his old sea ditties in a manner that seemed very pleasant to us who could get nothing better.

Bonneau built a kind of bake-oven of stones beside our house and installed himself as cook. I helped Pike usually, while Henry was tale-spinner for the party and whiled away many an evening for us.

We covered the inside walls of our hut with the hides of the buffalo and the deer, which addition greatly increased its comfort as well as its appearance, for the nights were now growing very cold. Pike was talking continually about the snow and said we must expect it soon. One evening as Starboard Sam was playing his fiddle I looked out of the door, thinking I had heard the noise of a wild animal, and something light and moist struck me in the face. It was a whisk of snow, the first of the season. The next morning the ground was white.

When the snow came we appreciated the warmth and comfort of our little cabin to their full extent. We could not build a fire in it, but we had such an abundance of long glossy furs that we could wrap up in them and keep as snug as a bug in a rug. Our fear of Indians had passed completely. Pike thought if anybody were to find us it would more likely be the Rocky Mountain fur-hunters. But we did not anticipate a visit even from the latter.

On the whole, we did not have much cause for complaint. The little valley from which we had been driven by the Indians would have been a cosier place, but we were doing very well where we were.

In this interval we had some leisure to think over our adventures. Pike often talked with me about my narrow escape the night the arrow had been fired at me and the somewhat mysterious circumstances connected with the death of two of our companions. He said in all his experience of the plains, extending over a period of many years, he knew nothing like it. But bothering over it did not bring us any nearer to a solution, and at last we gave it up as a bad job.

The snow which I have mentioned had melted, and I was out with Pike hunting deer with the bow and arrow. I had not been successful on that trip, and Pike had a joke at my expense. I resolved that I would do better, and the next day, leaving my rifle at the cabin, I took my bow and sheaf of arrows and went out to hunt the deer, which, as well as elk, were plentiful in our vicinity.

The timber followed the course of the little river, none ever growing more than a few hundred yards from it. I went up the stream and tramped along for a long time, but found no game. I was inclined to give up the hunt for that day and return to the cabin, when I saw an elk among the trees. It was a noble stag, and instantly I was afire with the ardor of the chase. To slay such an animal as he with the primitive weapons I carried would indeed be a hunter's triumph.

The wind was in my favor, and I set out to stalk the deer. I lay down on the ground and pulled myself slowly along, stopping at short intervals to rest. I thought that if I got within fair range I could bag the stag. My arrows were stone-headed, but the bow was well made and I had a strong arm to draw it

The stag was pulling at the dry twigs of a bush, and came within range before he suspected an enemy. Then I fitted the arrow to the string and it whizzed from my bow. By a wonderful piece of luck it went straight and true to the mark and pierced the heart of the stag. He took two or three mighty leaps forward, then collapsed to the earth and breathed his last.

I rushed up full of triumph and bent over to see where my arrow had entered. I heard an ejaculation behind me, and was about to whirl around when there was a stunning crash, stars twinkled before my eyes and I fell senseless.

The next thing of which I was conscious was a dull, throbbing pain in my head. I endeavored to put my hand to it, but I found that I could not move a finger. I wondered dimly why it was, but my brain and nerves were so languid that it was a quarter of an hour before I opened my eyes. I could see nothing at first, but when I became used to the semi-darkness I saw a wall of skin, buffalo hide it might be. I thought at first I was in our cabin, but looking again, I knew that the piece was unfamiliar.

I tried to move my hands and failed again. Then I knew they were bound, for there was a sharp pain at my wrists where the thong was biting into the flesh. I squirmed about a little, but I only made my bones ache, and I ceased the effort

As my mind became clearer I realized that something very unusual had befallen me. The shooting of the stag, the blow from behind, and the fall all came back to me. My mind ran over these things several times, but when it came to the fall it stopped, There was no memory of anything after that.

These thoughts made my head ache with great severity and brought me no nearer to a knowledge of what had happened to me. I had closed my eyes again when I heard a light step beside me and a voice said in very good English:

“Has the white boy’s mind returned to him? Does he see and hear again?”

I opened my eyes and saw an Indian standing beside me. He was tall and very erect. His face was calm and inscrutable, but it did not seem to be wholly unfamiliar. I could not at first recall where I had seen it, and I stared at the Indian. He smiled gently, and then I knew.

“Onomo!” I exclaimed, “the friendly Pawnee whom we saw at Fort Leavenworth with Colonel Griscom!”

The Indian smiled again.

“Where am I? And what has happened to me!” I exclaimed

“Hush,” said Onomo, “the white boy must not speak so loud. He is in the hands of his enemies. He is a prisoner of the Pawnees, who are on the warpath!”

“And what are you doing here?” I asked.

“Though Onomo is the friend of the whites, who have taught him their ways,” he replied with dignity, “the lodges of his people are not closed against him. He comes to the red men, who are his brethren, when he pleases, and leaves when he pleases.”

“Tell me how the whole thing happened—my capture, I mean?” I asked.

Onomo smiled again.

“It was very simple,” he said. “The white boy was stealing up on a stag. He watched the stag only, and saw nothing else. But some of our warriors were near, and when the white boy stood over the fallen stag in triumph, they stole up behind him and felled him to the earth with a blow from the flat of a tomahawk. They did not wish to kill him then.”

The “then” grated upon me very unpleasantly.

“So they want to kill me yet?” I asked.

“The red men are on the warpath,” said Onomo, gravely. “They seek scalps, not prisoners.”

“But you will help me, Onomo, won’t you?” I exclaimed, eagerly. “You have lived with the white people! You are our friend! Can you not assist me to escape?”

“Onomo will do all he can,” he said, in his grave way, “but the white boy is bound and closely watched. The tepees of the warriors surround him, and even if his hand and body were loosened he could not get away.”

I was in a very bad position, and I saw it clearly, but I still had some confidence in the help of Onomo, who seemed so calm and so masterful.

“Can’t you loosen these thongs on my wrists a little?” I asked. “They are eating through the flesh to the bone.”

Onomo bent down to do as I asked, and I noticed what looked like a burnt line across the left side of his forehead. Such marks are usually made by a bullet. I did not remember that the scar was there when I saw him at Fort Leavenworth.

“You have been doing some fighting yourself,” I said, “for I see you have been barked by a bullet.”

“It was an accident,” said Onomo, in a tone which implied that he did not care to say anything more about it. He loosened the thongs somewhat, and I was able to turn over and get a better view of my surroundings. I was lying on a buffalo robe in a small skin tepee. A thong around my waist was tied to a stake driven in the ground

The thought of my brother and my friends now came to me, and this brought a new and great anxiety.

“Am I the only prisoner?” I asked. “Has any other been taken, or—or—killed?”

“You are the only one,” said Onomo. “The warriors would have stolen upon the others and taken their scalps, but the big white hunter, who has the ears of the deer and the courage of the grizzly bear, learned they were coming. He and all the others are now in the cabin, ready to fight for their lives,”

“Your warriors will never get them out of the cabin, either,” I said; “for he shoots very straight and very far.”

Onomo shook his head and again smiled,

“The Pawnees know the ways of the wilderness,” he said, “and they will find a path into the cabin of the white hunter and his friends.”

“Not while Pike lives and can aim his rifle!” I said emphatically.

Onomo went out presently, saying he would get me something to eat and drink. He returned quickly with some jerked buffalo meat and a gourd of water, and unbound my hands long enough for me to dispose of them. The food and water greatly refreshed me, and my head ceased to ache. There was some clotted blood in my hair, but Onomo assured me the wound was nothing but a bruise that would heal up in a few days. Then he rebound my wrists, saying he was compelled to do so or the warriors would become very suspicious of him. He said, however, that they had allowed him to look after my wants. I felt very grateful to him for this, and said so.

“Onomo is very glad when he can be of service to any of his white friends,” he said, and went out smiling his peculiar, gentle smile.

He came to see me again later in the day, and told something about the Indian party. He said there were about fifty warriors, with ponies and tepees. They had been killing buffaloes further up the stream, when they learned of the presence of the whites. I heard with much joy that an attack on the cabin had been repulsed

that morning, with a loss of two warriors. Onomo added that the Indians were much infuriated at their defeat, and he hinted about a desire some of them had to put me to the torture at once in revenge. I knew the nature of the Indians of the plains, and the horrible cruelties they inflicted upon their captured enemies, but my blood ran in a chill current back to my heart at the idea of torture.

"Surely you can prevent this, Onomo," I exclaimed. "You have enough influence with them."

"Onomo will do all he can for his friend the white boy," he said briefly.

Then he went away and left me to alarming reflections. My own fate naturally was uppermost in my mind, but my thoughts wandered also to the little party in the cabin. Would they be able to hold out under Pike's brave and skillful leadership? I believed they could defend the place against all attacks, unless the Indians devised some ingenious trick to rout them. The cabin could be approached from the rear over the slope of the hill, against which it jutted. The Indians even could crawl upon the roof without danger to themselves. But they would be no better off there than the wolves were. They might break a hole through, but it would be in the face of almost certain death, and they would scarcely dare such a risk as that. The greatest danger to the defenders would be in the expenditure of their ammunition. Fortunately, the Indians did not know how their supply had been diminished.

It was agony to lie there, bound and helpless, while Henry and the others were fighting for life. I strained at the thongs on my wrist, but succeeded only in cutting the flesh anew, and after awhile I lay quiet, exhausted in body and fevered in mind. How I lamented the carelessness that had enabled the Indians to capture me so easily! All they had to do was to walk up behind me and take me just as if I were a little child.

My complete ignorance of everything that was passing outside was not the least of my ills. You have often heard that waiting is one of the hardest of all things to do. But I fancy that no one can understand what it really is until he is in the situation in which I was placed, bound and helpless, with death by torture before me.

The hours dragged on as slow as eternity. The semi-dusk in the little tepee gave place to darkness, and I knew that night had come on. I had nothing else by which to measure time. In spite of my situation I began to get hungry again, and was wondering if Onomo would come again now with food and water when the flap of the tepee was raised and two men, one of whom carried a blazing torch, pushed in.

The light dazzled my eyes, and for a few moments I could not see the features of the warriors. I expected to find that one of them was Onomo, but as soon as I was able to use my eyes to good purpose again I found that both were strangers. They were elderly men, and I inferred from their dress and manner that they were chiefs. I did not like their faces at all, for they were seamed with scars and looked very ferocious. They did not appear to be the kind of men who would show mercy to a prisoner.

The two warriors looked at me in silence, and I began to wonder what their purpose might be, when Onomo entered. I had resolved to bear myself bravely. So

I took no notice of Onomo, but met the gaze of the two warriors with a stare that I believed to be as steady as their own.

One of the warriors talked earnestly with Onomo. Then Onomo said to me:

"They want you to tell them all about the cabin in which your friends are. Is there any weak point about it which will enable them to capture it without heavy loss of life?"

"They must have a strange opinion of me!" I exclaimed, indignantly. "Do they think I would give them such information as that?"

"But they say if you do it they will be merciful with you," said Onomo. "They will take the cabin, anyhow. Your refusal will not save your friends, while it will injure yourself."

I am glad that I never hesitated for a moment when Onomo put the matter to me in that insinuating way. Pike had often talked to me about the treachery of Indians, and I replied with heat:

"They may burn me at the stake, or do what they will with me, but I will never knowingly do anything that will help to put my friends in their hands."

"Consider it well," said Onomo, "for if you refuse, my influence may be powerless to serve you."

"I care not," I said. "My mind is quite made up. It is not worth while to talk to me about such a thing."

I turned my face as far away from them as I could as an emphatic sign of my refusal. The chiefs talked for some time, and Onomo's voice, much smoother and mellower than the others, joined theirs at intervals. By and by the two warriors went out. When they had gone Onomo said to me in a gentle and sorrowful voice:

"The white boy will regret that he has refused to do what the warriors asked him to do. His refusal only makes his own situation the worse."

"Don't speak to me about it again, Onomo," I said, energetically. "I am white, and I could not do such a thing. But I thank you, Onomo, for all that you have done for me and all that you would do for me if you could."

I was sorry that I had used the word "white," which might imply that Onomo, being a red man, would do what I held to be treason. But it had slipped out, and, besides, he did not seem to notice it.

He brought me food and water again, and after I had partaken of them he readjusted my thongs and went away.

Chapter 20

A Friend.

In five minutes the two warriors who had come to see me earlier in the evening returned, but without Onomo. They unbound me, and dragged me roughly to my feet. They did not vouchsafe a word. Indeed, I do not suppose either knew any English. One pushed me towards the door of the tepee, and I stepped out

I stood beside the tepee, gazing around me. I was on the rim of a species of circle, made of Indian tepees. A great many warriors were grouped in the circle, and some of them held up flaring torches. All the warriors were staring at me, and there was a peculiar expression in their fierce, black eyes. I could not guess why I was brought there, and I looked around for my friend Onomo, who might explain it to me. But I could not see him.

The Indians who brought me out of the tepee had remained beside me. One of them said something in a deep, guttural voice, and a young warrior who stood directly in front of me ran forward, and before I could make a motion in my own defence, struck me very hard in the face with his open right hand.

The pain and the indignity set me afire, I sprang at him, intending to strike him to the earth. But he darted nimbly away, and before I could reach him a powerful hand reached from behind, seized me by the hair, and jerked me to the earth. I struggled to my feet, but received a buffet in the neck which sent me to the earth again.

Then I was seized by numerous hands, and the clothing was jerked from my back. I writhed and endeavored to struggle from their grasp. Suddenly they released me, and something lashed me repeatedly across the back, stinging and burning as if a hot iron had been drawn across the naked flesh. I could feel the blood running down my back, and, dazed by pain and humiliation, I struck out blindly and at random, but never hit anything.

Then I knew what it was. This was either the preliminary torture or the end itself. Many of the warriors carried long willow switches, and when I rushed after one, another would lash me across the back. They laughed with infernal glee as I tried to seize or strike some one and could not. Occasionally a blow from a heavier rod would fall across my shoulders and bring me to my knees. But rage was mingled with my pain and humiliation, and I would struggle to my feet again and make a rush at them. I shouted at them. I called them cowards and devils. I dared any of them to face me. But they only laughed at me and struck me again.

At last I sank down, panting and exhausted. I was covered with blood, but I did not notice it then. The jeering laughter continued for a while, then ceased abruptly. Somebody said something in a loud, decisive tone that sounded like a command. Three or four Indians seized me and dragged me to the tepee from which I had been brought. After they had thrown me on the buffalo skin as roughly as if I were a mere clod of earth, they rebound me and went out.

I lay alone in the darkness, raging in spirit, and for the time thinking little of my wounds. But the latter after a while drew my attention, for every bone in me, and every square inch of flesh on those bones, was aching. I had made up my mind that I was so badly hurt I would die, when I heard a soft voice beside me.

“How does my friend, the white boy, feel?” asked the voice.

I recognized Onomo’s tones at once, and I answered savagely:

“He feels like murdering the first of your redskin brethren he can get his hands on.”

“Onomo warned the white boy he would be put to the torture,” he said.

“Yes, I know,” I replied, wearily.

“What he has endured to-night is but the prick of a pin to what will come,” he said, without a change in his voice.

“You don’t mean to say they are going to put me through another course of torture?” I exclaimed, horrified.

“The white boy still has it in his power to save himself from much pain.”

“But I’ll never use that power!”

Onomo went out, but returned almost immediately with a torch.

“Onomo,” I said, “won’t you tell me how serious my wounds are? Are any of my bones broken? I’m in such an ache all over I can’t tell where I’m hurt most.”

“All but the skin of the white boy is sound and whole,” said Onomo. “The warriors would not break any of his bones or injure him seriously yet. It would interfere with their further plans for him.”

“Your brethren are a fine lot of fellows, Onomo!” I exclaimed. “I don’t wonder that one of your kind disposition should stay away from them, at least part of the time, and associate with the whites.”

Onomo made no reply to this, and I added:

“Can’t you do something for my back and stop that confounded burning?”

He patted my back, put on some kind of lotion, which was wonderfully soothing, and readjusted my clothing. I was very grateful to him and expressed my thanks more than once. He smiled gently, as if he would wave my words aside. Then I asked him once again to help me if he could.

“Onomo will do all he can for the white boy, his friend,” he said, “but the warriors knowing he is a friend of the white people watch him very closely.”

Then he took up his torch and left me to my reflections. I turned over everything in my mind, but I could find no hope in anything. Hitherto in all our dangers we had never been pushed quite to the wall. We had been united, and circumstances favored us frequently. Now I was alone in the enemy’s hands. Were Pike free to act I might expect something from his bold and skillful mind. But he and the others were now fighting for their own lives. So the chance of rescue was hopeless.

With the love of life still strong, although death seemed to be at hand, I tried again to break the thongs that bound my wrists or to slip them over my hands. But my captors had been too cautious to permit of any such chance.

I ceased my efforts and hope deserted me. Then, with that terrible sinking feeling at the heart which is the worst of all sensations, I began to think of the end. In what manner would it come? How hard to die, a horrible death when one was so young, when life was so sweet! If Henry and the others escaped they might never so much as know what became of me. I would perish and disappear unnoticed, like the withered leaf that falls from the tree.

Then my mind ran back over our journey. I remembered the rose-colored hopes with which we had started, and our dreams of distant California and the gold which we would find. I saw my uncle’s hard face again and I cherished no resentment against him.

How long I would have lain there, or what further turn my thoughts would have taken, I cannot say, but my attention was attracted by a slight rustling which seemed to me to come from under the edge of the tepee. My senses were rendered preternaturally acute by my situation. There was no noise outside, and I knew that my ears had made no mistake. I listened and heard the rustling again. I managed to turn over on my side with my face in the direction whence the sound

came. But there was not a beam of light in the tepee, and I could not even see its skin walls.

The noise, very slight, but heard by me plainly, for my ears were strained, continued about five minutes. Then I heard a faint clicking sound, and before it died away the cold perspiration broke out on my forehead. A snake was making the noise, I was sure. From what could that clicking sound come but from a rattlesnake coiling to spring? I do not know why I had such a feeling of horror. I had expected to die on the morrow by the torture. Surely, the death from a snake's fangs could not be worse than that! But there is something in a man which shudders at such a death, and he would turn aside from it no matter what lies beyond.

I was about to cry out with all my might in an endeavor to bring the Indians to my rescue, but a heavy hand was clapped over my mouth, and a voice said something in my ear which I did not understand, but which I took to be a warning.

There was a mighty revulsion of feeling. Hope flamed up in me. Who could be coming to me in such a manner but a rescuer, and who could that rescuer be but Onomo? I breathed a short prayer of thankfulness while I waited for him to release me. The idea that he had come for that purpose had taken complete possession of me.

He slipped his hand down to my wrist. I felt cold steel against my flesh, and then the severed thongs fell away. Next he cut the stout strip of deer-hide that confined me to the stake. A strong arm that he put under my shoulder assisted me to rise, for I was stiff from my beating. I rubbed my arms and legs until the circulation was restored, and waited for my rescuer to make the next movement But I bent over and whispered with my heart in my mouth:

"Onomo, from the depths of my soul I thank you. If ever you are in deep distress and I can help you I will risk my life, if necessary, to do it."

But he merely replied with a sibilant hiss, which I knew he meant as a caution for me to make no noise. Then taking hold of one of my hands he crawled noiselessly to the edge of the tepee. I followed him in the same silence. He fumbled and raised the edge of the buffalo hide. We crawled out and then dropped the skin back behind us. I looked around, but it was so dark I could see nothing, except the faint outlines of other tepees. To my right I heard a slight murmur, which I took to be some of the Indians talking.

I realized fully the necessity of silence, and had been too near to death to throw away my chance of escaping it by carelessness. So with extreme caution I followed my rescuer, who still held my hand and led the way to the left. At each step I felt the earth first with my moccasin before bringing down my full weight, in order that no rustling of a twig or breaking of a stick might bring the enemy upon me again,

We were several minutes in crossing the little circle of the tepees. Twice my rescuer sank down upon the ground, and each time I did the same. Some noise alarmed him, but the alarm soon passed, and then we resumed our stealthy flight. At last we reached the tepees and stopped between two of them. My friend put both his hands upon my shoulders and pressed down heavily. I dropped into a recumbent position, for such I thought he meant for me to do. Evidently I was right, for leaving me there he took several steps forward and then stopped, dimly outlined in the darkness.

Presently another Indian came up and began to talk to him. I saw soon the reason for my friend's act. The second Indian was a sentinel. I crouched closer to the earth, while the two talked. But the second Indian went on, and my friend instantly came back to me. We stole cautiously forward again, and soon the outlines of the tepees faded out of sight behind us. Then my heart gave a great leap of joy, for now I believed I was safe. Again I whispered my thanks to my rescuer, but he replied only with his warning hiss.

He retained his hold of my hand and led me some distance further. We passed under some trees and then came out into the open. Here my friend handed me a rifle, a powder horn, and a shot-pouch which I knew by their weight to be filled, but he still kept his face turned away as if to avoid my thanks.

He pointed ahead as if indicating the direction for me to go, but I was determined not to leave him after he had risked so much for me without saying something which would show how I appreciated his help.

"Onomo," I said, "you have risked your life to save me. I know what those wretches back there would do to you if they knew how you had helped me, and I don't want to go without making you understand how deeply grateful I am to you."

The Indian faced me, and standing as straight as a pine tree, looked fixedly at me. The moon came out a little just then and showed his features distinctly. I sprang back in amazement. It was not Onomo.

The Indian struck his chest with his right hand and the gesture brought recollection to me in a flash. It was the warrior whose life I had spared when I held him at my gun-muzzle in the valley.

I beheld one Indian's gratitude, and when I recovered my surprise my heart beat with what I believe to be generous emotion. I seized his hand and pressed it in mine. Probably nobody ever shook his hand before, but he must have understood the gesture and my manner, for there was a smile on his face.

"I don't know your name, old fellow," I said, "I guess I'll never see you again. I'm pretty sure you don't understand a word I'm saying, but you're a man for either the white race or the red race to be proud of."

He smiled again, then motioned me off, and making a salute I threw the rifle over my shoulder and walked rapidly. I looked back once, but the Indian was gone. As well as I could make out in the darkness I maintained the general direction that my rescuer had pointed out. The moon was of sufficient brightness for me to see fairly well and I found that I was striding over a bare plain.

When I had gone several miles I stopped to deliberate. Though I was out of the grasp of the Indians, I knew my position was far from enviable. Moreover, I could not leave Henry, Pike, Bonneau and Sam beleaguered in the cabin. I would join them there if possible. But how to reach them was a most puzzling question. I sat down on the prairie and mused over this for a long time, but no feasible plan presented itself to me. I determined at last to go back towards the Indian encampment, hang around the outskirts, and watch my opportunity to assist my brother and my friends, and to join them.

I felt better after I had come to this decision, for nothing hurts like doubt. I turned on my own course and began to retrace my journey with a springy step. Daylight was now breaking and the plain around me appeared wholly unfamiliar. In none of our expeditions since we built the cabin had we come into this part of

the country. But I had settled in my mind the direction in which our cabin lay, and I pushed on rapidly.

I calculated that two hours would bring me in sight of the trees that fringed the watercourse and marked its presence. But at the end of that time I saw only the bare plain spreading around me and stretching to the horizon, without a tree or an elevation of any kind to break its monotony.

I looked up at the sun, and concluded that I had mistaken my course somewhat. I made what I considered to be the necessary correction and pushed on again. But the sun rose higher, and still I failed to see the trees for which I was looking. On all sides of me the plain was as bleak and uninviting as ever.

I had felt positive that I knew the direction in which the cabin lay, and though my confidence in the possession of that knowledge was seriously diminished, it had not disappeared altogether. After a little rest I took my bearings again by the sun and made a third attempt. I walked diligently for more than an hour, all the time searching the horizon for the trees, though I failed to see them.

I stopped to rest and think the matter over. While I was standing there something in the formation of the plain attracted my attention. I looked more closely. It seemed familiar. I had been there, and very recently, too, even on that very day, I scrutinized the earth, which was soft at that spot, and saw some footprints. I put my own foot in them and they fitted exactly. Why should they not have fitted me? I had made them myself. The whole alarming truth burst upon me in an instant. I had been travelling in a circle, and was walking over my own tracks. I was lost on the plains as completely as was ever lone traveller lost in the vast solitudes of the desert.

I was crushed at first by the knowledge. My brain swam around, and I lay down until I could compose myself. My dismay did not proceed so much from fears for myself as from the knowledge that I was cut off from my friends. I did not know the direction in which the cabin lay. Every step I made might take me further from it.

Absorbed in other things, I had not noticed the increasing chilliness of the atmosphere, which was now forced upon my attention, as I had ceased to move about and keep the circulation lively. Drifting clouds hid the face of the sun, and the gloominess of my mind was accentuated by the gloominess of the skies.

Heavy clouds were piling up on the horizon, and I noticed these indications with a great increase of alarm. I was watching the clouds gather, when I thought I saw a figure far out on the plain. It was indistinct. It might be a man or a buffalo or an antelope. I decided that I would see, and taking up my rifle, I bent my course to the figure. Its outlines grew more definite very fast, and I soon perceived that it was coming rapidly in my direction also. Then I saw that it was the figure of a man. I kept on boldly. Of course, it was probably that the stranger was an Indian and an enemy, but I was in such a situation that I was willing to take the chance. If it should prove to be an enemy, I was well armed, and it would be man for man. Fortune might be on my side and not on his.

The stranger came on with equal boldness, and the dress and features of an Indian were revealed. He came nearer, and, with a shout of joy, I recognized Onomo.

I ran forward to greet him. He said nothing, but when I was within twenty feet of him he halted, raised his rifle to his shoulder, and fired point blank at my head. The bullet went just above the temple, and clipped off several locks of hair.

I was dazed for the moment, and then I ran forward, crying:

"Onomo, don't you know I'm your friend, Joe Fielding? Why have you tried to kill me?"

But he glowered at me with a look of hate the most ferocious I ever saw on a man's face, and drawing a pistol from his belt, fired at me again, the bullet cutting through the deerskin tunic I wore, and grazing my side.

I saw very clearly now that he meant my death, and that it was his life or mine. But impulse or instinct, for I had not time to think what I would do, I raised my rifle and discharged a bullet into his chest. With a smothered, groaning cry he fell to the earth.

I ran up and bent over him. His blood was staining the ground, and his face was ghastly. He was in a half-reclining position, supported on the ground by his left elbow. I intended to offer my help, but when I bent forward he snatched a knife from his belt and made a furious stab at me. I leaped back, and heard the swish of the blade past my face. He tried to rise to his feet, but fell back. Then, snarling like a cat, he hurled the knife at me with his failing strength, and when he again failed to do me any harm, the ferocious expression on his face deepened.

I was divided between horror and amazement, but I approached him again.

"Onomo," I said, "you forced me to shoot you. It was done on the spur of the moment to save my life. Why have you tried to kill me? I have never harmed you, and thought you my friend."

He dragged himself painfully up on his elbow again, and with eyes flashing hate, exclaimed:

"I, your friend! I hate you and all your race! I would kill every one of them if I could! I am an Indian, a wild man, do you hear? It is bred in the bone! I love the ways of my people, and I hate the ways of yours. I have learned the white man's language and the white man's knowledge only that I might use them against him. I made them think me their friend that I might trap them the more easily! I was never happier than when I was taking a white man's scalp!"

I was aghast at his declaration, and shrank from him.

"And I hate you most of all," he ran on. "Do you see this scar on my forehead? You asked me about it once, and I told you it was an accident! But it was not! Your bullet made it the night I slew your friend when he watched! It was I who killed another of your friends when the buffaloes were running you down, and it was my arrow that flew by your head when you went down to the waterside! Yes, I would have killed you and your brother and your friends if I could! I have followed you all the way from the fort, and I meant to have all your scalps."

My amazement deepened. Such a nature as this was beyond my comprehension. I was not sorry now that I had shot him. I had merely taken the life of the man who had treacherously slain two of our friends.

The blood was still oozing from the hole in his chest, and he had sunk into a recumbent position. But his eyes still glared hate at me. He burst into a horrid kind of laugh, and said:

“You have escaped my bullet, but you will never see your friends or the face of a white man again. You will perish on the plain with me. See, the storm comes now!”

He pointed upward with a quivering finger. Some flakes of snow settled down upon us, and a chill wind blew over the plain. The flakes came down faster and larger, and in a few moments the plain was covered. The wind increased in velocity, and the whirling snow was driven into my eyes.

Chapter 21

Friends.

I had heard of the great winter storms of the plains and I knew their dangers. To stand there would mean freezing to death, I turned to Onomo, and I was so horrified at what he had told me that my first thought was to finish him where he lay. But I could not do that. Besides he was dying fast. So I said:

“Onomo, I ought to put another bullet through you, but I will not do it. I may perish as you say, but I do not think I will deserve my fate as you have deserved yours.”

I took one look at him and his face was as ferocious as ever. Then I plunged blindly forward through the snow. It was driving so furiously that I could not tell anything about my course, and I could not have returned to the spot where Onomo lay had I wished to do so.

The storm increased in vigor. The wind howled and screamed and lashed me across the face like a whip. The snow was picked up in whirlwinds which scuttled across the plain in white, conical, revolving masses. A numbing deadly cold crept through my clothing and into the very marrow of my bones.

I thought no longer of the direction in which I was going. My sole object now was to keep life in my body. I strapped my rifle to my back, rubbed my hands vigorously together and ran about, always seeking to keep my back to the wind. This helped me somewhat, but the violence of the storm remained unabated. The wind shrieked as if it were some live thing. Even when I dared to raise my eyes and face the beating snow which was whirled at me from every point of the compass I could not see twenty feet away.

Hour after hour passed, and still I plunged on in the wind and the snow. If I could only live that storm through I felt that I could face anything afterwards. Staggering forward, I stumbled and fell to my knees. I sprang up again and with joy recognized the cause of my fall. I had come unexpectedly upon the steep side of a hillock. Broken ground would mean some protection from the storm. I sought about and presently stumbled into a kind of ravine. I crouched down in it, and the screaming wind which dashed and tore over my head failed to reach me there. But I kept up the vigorous rubbing of my hands and slapping of my thighs and ankles to keep from freezing and moved about as much as I could in the narrow ravine without exposing myself again to the full force of the storm.

I was busy tramping up and down and having no thought of anything but to keep warm, when distinctly above the howling of the storm I heard the sharp report of a rifle, and a bullet whizzed past my cheek and flattened itself against a stone in the side of the ravine.

I looked up and saw the vengeful face of Onomo glaring at me, and even as I looked the tense muscles of his figure relaxed. His still smoking rifle slid from his hands. The eyes grew dull and vacant. His head dropped over and he rolled to the bottom of the ravine and lay at my feet. I put my hand upon his pulse and found he was stone dead. He had died in the last effort to take my life.

How Onomo, when gasping out his life, was able to regain his feet, reload his rifle and follow me in that fearful storm I do not know. Only an Indian seeking blood could show such tenacity.

I thoroughly assured myself Onomo was dead and then I took away his store of powder and bullets, thinking I would need them hereafter. Even when dead he inspired me with such horror that I turned my face away in order not to see his body. But when next I looked that way the sifting snow had covered it up and concealed it from my view.

All day the storm swept the plain and, shrieked in my ears. Soon after nightfall it ceased with an abruptness that astonished me. The last pyramid of snow had gone whirling out of sight. The air was still, and all the tumult which the storm had created was succeeded by complete silence.

I crept from the ravine and looked around me. The plain was a vast sheet, broken here and there by mounds and long windrows of snow, which the hurricane had heaped up. Then I looked back in the ravine and saw the white shape that was Onomo in his burial robe of snow.

Without any particular object in mind I set out again over the plain. The night was bright, the snow and the moon together making it almost like day. I trudged steadily on all through the night I think my only reflection was that if I kept going I must in the end come to something.

Constant movement kept me fairly warm, but hunger began to gnaw at me. I sucked balls of snow, and these refreshed me a little, but I would have given a fortune if I had had it to give for a big piece of jerked buffalo meat or venison.

Now that I look back at it my situation should have appeared very hopeless to me, but I had escaped so much that I did not give up. I suppose there is a certain amount of reserve strength in us that nature provides for just such emergencies.

Daylight came again and found me still plodding through the snow. I began to look around me in the hope of finding game, but saw instead some upright objects on the horizon line. I shouted aloud in joy, for they were trees. Trees meant the presence of water, and water meant the presence of game.

It might be that our cabin lay over there and I might succeed in rejoining my brother and the others.

I hurried on with all speed, and before I was half way to the trees I saw a thin blue column of smoke rising above them. I was sure now that I had come back to the starting point and that the smoke I saw came from the Indian encampment. I determined to approach and take the risk of being captured again. I was eager to know whether Pike and the boys still held the cabin.

The grove appeared to be rather broad, and as the smoke rose from the far side I thought I could approach its edge without great danger. In a half hour I had reached the nearest tree. I stood behind it a few minutes listening. But, hearing nothing, I stole further on to another tree. I peeped from behind it and beheld a scene that contained no familiar aspect.

Before me was a little valley, and around its sides were a dozen or more of cabins resembling ours. Smoke rose from all of them.

As I peered into the valley trying to make out the character of what it contained, a strong hand fell upon my collar and a loud voice exclaimed:

"Wa'al, what under the 'tarnal sun hev we got here?"

I looked up and saw a face, bearded and rough, but white and kindly. I suppose I was already on the point of exhaustion, for when I started to reply the words stuck in my throat, I felt a curious catching of the breath and I tumbled over in the snow in a dead faint.

When my senses returned I found I was lying upon a pile of soft furs, and a half dozen big-boned men dressed in deerskins and carrying rifles in their hands, were standing around me. But they were white and were regarding me with great interest. When I opened my eyes one of them asked:

"Who are you, young feller, and how did you come to get here?"

"Give me something to eat first," I replied, "and I will tell you all you want to know."

"Give him some venison, Bill," said the man to one of his companions, "the lad's starvin'."

The man called Bill returned presently with a chunk of deer meat which I ate like a ravenous wolf. After that they brought me a gourd of water, and I sat up greatly refreshed. Then I told my story, to which they listened with the utmost attention.

"Do you know where you are now and into whose hands you hev dropped?" asked the man who had first addressed me, after I had finished my story.

"No," I replied, "I do not know whar I am, but I am sure I am in the hands of friends."

"You are right, thar, my lad," said the man. "This is a detachment of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, encamped here fur the winter. Thar are sixty of us, every man of 'em a thorough plainsman and trapper. I'm thar leader, Jim Harper. I guess that cabin o' yourn is on this same river further down. The river is jest across the hill thar. But I didn't think thar war any Injuns in this part o' the kentry."

This was luck, the most wonderful luck that had ever befallen me, and instantly the hope of rescuing the boys flamed up in me. I turned to Harper and said:

"My friends are fighting for their lives against the Indians down there. Won't you take your men and rescue them?"

"I kain't say about that," he replied. "Our business is to trap beaver and other such animals, not to fight Injuns unless they drive us to it. I'll hev to lay it afore the boys."

But there was a flash in his eyes that encouraged me. Feeling quite strong again I went out with Harper, for they had put me down in one of their cabins, and looked at the camp. It was a snug place, well protected from the weather, and the

men, most of whom were present, were a hardy, powerful lot. I was forced to tell my tale over again for the benefit of those who had not heard it already. My pursuit by Onomo and his death interested them deeply. Many had known him, and they had never doubted his sincere friendship for the whites.

After we had eaten a substantial dinner, Harper called the men together and said:

"Boys, down this river somewhars thar are white men tryin' to hold thar cabin agin the Injuns. In that cabin among them white men is Zeke Pike, one of the best fighters that ever plunked a redskin, one of the best hunters that ever knocked over a buffalo, a pard that a man kin tie to, fur he always knows whar to find him. Most of you know 'im, an' them that don't know him by face hev heard uv him. Now, boys, ef any of you wuz in his place he'd resk his life to help you. Will you do ez much fer him an' his friends that's down thar? All them that'll foller me and help pull Zeke Pike an' his friends out o' danger hold up thar hands."

Every man held up his hand, and Harper said, with a smile of satisfaction:

"Wa'al, that's settled. I guess we'll give them Injuns fits or the boys hev forgot how to shoot"

Harper was a man after Pike's own fashion. He wasted no time deliberating. A half-hour after the vote was taken we had set out. A half-dozen men were left behind, much against their will, to look after the camp, and in a short time the remainder of us were miles away, tramping over the snow and following the southward course of the river. We were fifty-seven strong, as fine a body of men as one could wish to see for the work that was marked out for us. Every one of the trappers was a skilled backwoodsman, as courageous as a lion, and a Daniel Boone with the rifle.

We followed the course of the river until night came, and then we halted among some trees. Harper sent three or four of his best scouts in advance, and in a few hours they returned with the welcome news that the defenders were still holding the cabin, and that, the Indian encampment having been torn up greatly by the cyclone, everything there was in confusion.

"That's good, darned good!" said Harper. "We'll catch 'em jest about half-way between midnight and day, an' ef we don't send 'em flyin' may I never trap another beaver."

We resumed our march, and when midnight came I saw familiar ground. We halted again. Then Harper took me and three or four others and stole forward through the trees.

"Do you know that place over thar?" said Harper to me, pointing with a long arm.

I looked and saw the tepees of the Indian encampment and beyond it the little hut against the hill that I knew so well.

"We'll save yer friends, now," said Harper. "I guess you're ready to b'ar a hand in the scrimmage."

I assured him that I was, and took my place with my cocked rifle in my hand. Harper arranged his men in a semicircle, lapping around the camp, and we stole down upon them.

An Indian sentinel saw a dark form gliding from tree to tree. He opened his mouth to utter the yell of alarm, but a ball from Harper's rifle took him in the forehead.

"Forward, boys," shouted Harper, in a stentorian voice. "Drive the varmints from the face uv the earth!"

We uttered a mighty yell, all together, and swept down upon the encampment Indian warriors darted among the tepees, and a few scattering shots saluted us. But I suppose the Indians being taken by surprise after they had been threshed about by the storm—for their camp was in an exposed position—lost all heart when we made our attack. There was a crackling' fire from our rifles, some death-whoops, the rapid beat of flying feet, an overturning of tepees, and the combat was over;

"That wuz jest as easy as anything I ever see," said Harper, leaning on his rifle. "The hull caboodle uv 'em wuz sent a-skippin', an' not a man of us wuz hurt wuss than a scratch."

"But it was a good job for somebody else, Jim Harper," said a well-known voice near him, "fur thar warn't more'n ten charges fur our rifles left, an' we'd a had to give up soon ef you hadn't come, and I won't forgit you fur it, Jim Harper."

I uttered a shout of joy and sprang forward, and wrung Pike's hand, and then came greetings from Henry and Starboard Sam and Bonneau, who followed behind him. Starboard Sam did a sailor dance on the snow, and sang the song of the Constitution from beginning to end.

We joined the trappers and spent a pleasant winter with them. In the spring we bade them a regretful good-bye and pushed on to the Mormon settlements, where we joined a large emigrant train bound for California. How we reached the Golden State, Pike, Starboard Sam, Bonneau, Henry and I, and found our lumps of gold, is not a part of this story.