

Castlemon Harry

Frank at Don Carlos' Rancho



Harry Castlemon
Frank at Don Carlos' Rancho

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23148811

Frank at Don Carlos' Rancho:

ISBN <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/42358>

Содержание

CHAPTER I	4
CHAPTER II	16
CHAPTER III	23
CHAPTER IV	34
CHAPTER V	43
CHAPTER VI	54
CHAPTER VII	68
CHAPTER VIII	80
CHAPTER IX	90
CHAPTER X	102
CHAPTER XI	114
CHAPTER XII	126
CHAPTER XIII	139
CHAPTER XIV	152
CHAPTER XV	163
CHAPTER XVI	175
CHAPTER XVII	186

Harry Castlemon

Frank at Don Carlos' Rancho

CHAPTER I

ALL ABOUT HORSES

Archie Winters found that he had been mistaken in the opinions he had formed concerning life in California. When he first arrived at his uncle's rancho, he had declared that the fun and excitement were all over, and that he and Frank were destined to drag out a weary, monotonous existence until the time came for them to return home. But Arthur Vane, with the assistance of Pierre Costello and his band, had made things exceedingly lively for him and Frank, and now they were both willing to acknowledge that they had had much more than they wanted of perilous adventure.

The time never hung heavily on their hands, for there was always something interesting going on. First, Dick Thomas returned from San Francisco, and he and Johnny Harris became constant visitors at Mr. Winters's rancho. Then came several unsuccessful hunts after a grizzly bear, which persisted in breaking into the cow-pen every night, and finally an incident happened that brought about a long string of adventures, and

raised Frank and Archie higher than ever in the estimation of the settlers. On the morning on which we introduce them, they, together with Johnny and Dick, were gathered in a room in Mr. Winters's rancho – the same room in which Frank had had one of those memorable encounters with the highwayman – talking the matter over.

The boys were in a state of siege. Every opening, except the port-holes, through which a breath of air might find its way in to them, was closed, and the room was as hot as an oven. They were perspiring like butchers; but not one of them thought of throwing open a door or window. Frank was stretched out on the bed, drumming on his guitar; Archie was walking restlessly up and down the floor, thrashing his boots with his riding whip; Dick Thomas was looking up at the pictures on the walls; and Johnny Harris was standing with his face close to one of the port-holes, fanning himself vigorously with his hat. Silence reigned in the room, broken only by the crack of Archie's whip, and light footsteps outside the door, with which were occasionally mingled low angry growls, and the rattling of a chain. None of the boys had spoken during the last ten minutes; and that, to those who knew them, would have been sufficient evidence that they were thinking about something exciting.

“Frank,” said Archie, at last, “why don't you stop that noise? I don't see how you can lie there and pound on that thing. One would think you were making merry over our misfortune.”

Frank very good-naturedly laid down the obnoxious guitar,

and placing his hands under his head, looked at Archie as if waiting to hear what he had to say next.

“I would do something desperate, if I only had half a chance,” continued the latter, shaking his fist in the air, and flourishing his whip about so recklessly that Dick retreated into a corner, out of his reach. “If I had those villains here I’d – I’d” —

“O, take it easy,” said Frank. “I don’t see the use of making any fuss about it, for the mischief has been done, and we can’t help it.”

“Take it easy!” repeated Archie, in disgust, “how can I? It would provoke any body in the world, except you, and you never get provoked at any thing. I don’t believe you are even sorry.”

“Yes, I am. I feel as badly about it as you do. I would not have lost Roderick for five hundred dollars. He carried me many a mile, and I owned him so long that I had become greatly attached to him. He was the swiftest and best trained horse in the settlement.”

“Except mine,” returned Archie, quickly. “Would your horse walk on his hind legs, or pick up your hat or whip for you? Mine would; and if Roderick was not once badly beaten by him in a fair race, no horse was ever beaten in the world.”

Frank and Archie, as we know, had been rivals from their earliest boyhood, and now they had enthusiastic opponents in Johnny and Dick. Each one insisted that he owned the best horse, the best dog, and the best gun; and that he could beat the others at riding, running, jumping, wrestling, and throwing the lasso.

They all made loud boasts, claiming superiority in every boyish accomplishment, but that was done merely for sport; for each of them knew that, in some things, he was a long way behind the others. The honors were about equally divided, the extra ones falling to the lot of Frank Nelson. He was the strongest fellow, the swiftest runner, the best shot with a rifle or revolver, and wonderfully expert in wrestling. Johnny Harris had once ridden a wild mustang, which was so vicious and unruly that none of the other boys could be induced to mount him, and consequently he was the champion horseman. Archie was the best jumper, and, until within a few days, had owned a horse that was equal to any trick pony the boys had ever seen in a circus. Archie's whole soul was wrapped up in that horse, for he was the only one that had ever beaten Roderick in a fair race. Dick Thomas was the happy possessor of a pack of splendid hounds, and could boast that he never missed his mark with the lasso. He had been a formidable rival for Archie in jumping, and for Frank in shooting and running; but had, at last, been compelled to give up the contest, and acknowledge himself beaten.

Frank and Archie were in great trouble – they had lost their horses. The animals had gone the way a good many other chargers had gone during the last three weeks, for nearly every farmer in that neighborhood had to mourn the loss of some favorite nag, which had disappeared, and left no trace behind. Every one said that there was an organized band of horse-thieves around; but who they were, or what they did with their booty,

could not be ascertained. Large rewards had been offered; the ranches had been patrolled of nights; the settlers had turned out to a man, and searched every nook and corner of the mountains they could get at; but, in spite of all their vigilance valuable horses were stolen every night, and no traces could be discovered of them or the robbers. The settlers seemed to have given up all hopes of ever bringing the guilty parties to justice; for now, when a horse was missing, there was nothing done, and but little said about it. There was no blowing of horns, and gathering of armed men, as had been the case a few days before. The farmers smiled, said that misery loved company, and seemed to think no more about the matter; but they were wide awake, and every man was watching his neighbor. Mr. Winters had been a heavy loser, and now Frank and Archie had come in for a share of the trouble. Roderick and King James (that was the name of the horse that had taken the place of Sleepy Sam in Archie's affections) were gone, and of course the boys were highly indignant. One thing that made Archie so angry was the fact that no one, except Johnny and Dick, seemed to sympathize with him. Frank played lively tunes on his guitar, and advised him to "take it easy," while Uncle James, when Archie reported his loss to him, poked him in the ribs with his finger, and said: "Aha! now you can have the pleasure of going afoot, like the rest of us."

There was no danger that the boys would be obliged to go afoot. There were plenty of fine horses on the ranch, and Dick and old Bob, and half a dozen other Rancheros, were ready

and willing to capture and break any nag they might select; but was there a Roderick or a King James among all these horses? The lost steeds were regarded by their young owners as perfect specimens of their species. They were so intelligent that they could be taught any thing that horses ever learned; so swift that nothing in the settlement could keep pace with them; so restless and fiery that they would never stand still long enough for their masters to be fairly seated in the saddle; and yet so docile that they could be managed, and driven any where, without a bridle. Were there any horses on the rancho that possessed all these good qualities? The boys were sure there were not.

We must stop here long enough to tell how Archie came by his horse, and why he gave him that odd name.

We have spoken of Captain Porter, an old fur-trader, who owned a rancho a few miles distant from the one belonging to Mr. Winters. He was a fleshy, jolly old gentleman, who always took a great deal of interest in every thing the boys did, and listened to the stories of their adventures with as much good nature as he exhibited in relating his own. Having lived on the frontier from his earliest boyhood, he had seen a world of excitement and adventure; and the easy way he had of recounting his exploits over his after-dinner pipe, proved an attraction too strong to be resisted by the boys, who scarcely allowed a day to pass without a visit to his rancho. They had a happy faculty of making friends wherever they went; and it was not long before the old fur-trader began to show that they held a prominent place in his estimation.

He presented Frank with Marmion, the dog which had done him such good service in his encounters with Pierre Costello, and shortly afterward he treated Archie in a still more handsome manner.

One day the cousins rode over to dine with the captain, and while on the way, Archie, who could never be persuaded to acknowledge that Roderick was a swifter horse than Sleepy Sam, challenged Frank to a trial of speed. The race came off, and Archie, as usual, was badly beaten. When Frank dismounted at the captain's door, his cousin was not in sight.

"Where's the little one?" asked the fur-trader, who was seated on the porch, enjoying his long Indian pipe.

"He is coming," replied Frank. "Whenever he is on horseback he can't be easy unless he is racing with somebody," he added, to explain how he came to leave him so far behind.

"And do you always beat him?"

"Always. He grumbles and scolds about it at a great rate, but it doesn't seem to help the matter any. He has tried every horse on uncle's rancho, too; but has never been able to find one that can beat Roderick."

The captain settled back in his chair, and looked at the mustang as he was being led away by one of the Rancheros; and, when Archie came up, trying to smile, but looking rather crestfallen over his defeat, he winked at him, and nodded his head in a very significant manner. Neither of the boys knew what he meant; but Archie found out when dinner was over, for then

the trader drew him aside, and held a whispered consultation with him. Frank regarded them both with suspicion, and when Archie looked at him, and wrinkled up his nose, and made other mysterious signs, he became satisfied that they were getting up some sort of a conspiracy. Nothing was said or done, however, that threw any light on the matter until they were ready to start for home; and then, when their horses were brought out, Frank saw that Sleepy Sam was not there. In his place was a small, clean-limbed animal, as black as midnight, which was pawing the ground, and jumping about as if impatient to be off. While Frank stood looking at him, and admiring his fine points, Archie seized the bridle, and sprang into the saddle.

“Hallo!” exclaimed his cousin, who now thought he understood the meaning of the mysterious winks and whisperings, “who owns that horse?”

“He belongs to the subscriber,” replied Archie, highly elated.

“He is a fine-looking animal, but I don’t know what you are going to do with him.”

“Don’t you? Well, jump into your saddle and I’ll show you. He was presented to me by Captain Porter, on condition that I make him beat that ugly-looking mustang of yours; and I am going to do it.”

“It isn’t my style to allow a challenge like that to pass unnoticed,” said Frank, as he mounted Roderick. “Hold on! Don’t be in such a hurry. Come back here, and give me a fair chance.”

The boys had a good deal of trouble in getting started, for Archie showed a disposition to "jockey." His expectations had been raised to the highest pitch by the captain's glowing description of the black's wonderful speed, but he knew what Roderick could do, and he did not intend to allow his cousin to get the start of him by so much as an inch. In order to prevent that, he managed to keep a little in advance of Frank. But at last, after several false starts, they got off together, and the trader witnessed a race that was worth going miles to see. He entered heartily into the sport, clapping his hands, and shouting and laughing at the top of his voice; and when the rivals had passed out of sight of the rancho, he returned to his seat, his face all wrinkled up with smiles, and his fat sides shaking with suppressed mirth.

Archie had not overrated the powers of his horse. He took the lead at the start, and, what was more, increased it at every jump. For half a mile he went at an astonishing rate, carrying his rider faster than he had ever traveled before on horseback; but then the furious pace began to tell on him, and the mustang, which was good for a three-mile race at any time, gained rapidly. Archie, who had kept one eye over his shoulder all the while, noticed this, and knowing that Roderick's long wind would bring him out winner, if the race continued much farther, pulled up his horse and stopped.

"Now see here," exclaimed Frank, "this is not fair."

"What isn't?" asked his cousin, innocently.

"Why, to give up the race when I begin to gain on you. Come

on; this question isn't decided yet."

"I think it is," replied Archie. "I am entirely satisfied. Didn't I keep ahead of you for half a mile?"

"Yes, but I want to explain."

"A fellow who is beaten always wants to make some excuses or explanations. I have beaten you fairly. I own the swiftest horse in the settlement, thanks to Captain Porter, and I have just thought of an appropriate name for him. The genuine Roderick, the rebel your horse is named after, had things all his own way for a while, but met his equal, at last, in King James, who whipped him in a fair fight. Your Roderick has found his match now, and I don't know any better name for the gallant little nag that has beaten him, than King James. That is what I shall call him."

Frank had boasted loudly of the mustang's victories over Sleepy Sam, and now Archie paid him back in his own coin. It was of no use for him to say that he would not acknowledge himself beaten – that Roderick was a "long-winded" horse, and that in a race of three miles he would leave the black one-third of the distance behind – for Archie would not listen; nor could he be induced to consent to another trial of speed. He was very proud of his victory, and loved every glossy hair of the little horse which had vanquished the hitherto invincible Roderick. But now he was gone. He was in the hands of some unknown thieves, who had entered the stable during the night, and made off with him and the mustang. The robbers must have known something about the merits of the two horses, for there were several other fine

animals in the stable, but they were the only ones taken. The loss fell heavily on the boys, for they had expected to ride those horses to the head-waters of the Missouri during the coming autumn. Captain Porter was getting ready to start northward, on one of his annual trading expeditions, and Frank and Archie, and the two trappers, were to accompany him. It was the captain's intention to spend a few weeks in trapping on the Missouri and its tributary streams, and, when cold weather came, to go into winter-quarters in the mountains.

The cousins had nearly gone wild with delight when Uncle James decided that they might join the expedition, and had looked forward with impatience to the day set for the start. What splendid sport they would enjoy! What multitudes of beavers and otters they would trap; what havoc they would make among the buffaloes and antelopes; and what fine opportunities they would have to listen to the trappers' stories, when they were snug in their warm cabin in the mountains, with a fire blazing cheerfully on the hearth, while the fierce winter was piling up the snow-drifts without! Frank and Archie had often talked of these things; but now the journey across the plains, and the excitements attending a winter's sojourn in the mountains, had lost all charms for them. Indeed, during the last week, Archie had repeatedly declared that he would not stir a step. If he could not ride King James on the expedition he would not go; he would stay at home.

"I can't see why the farmers don't wake up and do something," said Archie, who was so deeply engrossed with his troubles that

he did not notice that he was flourishing his whip in unpleasant proximity to his cousin's ears. "If they are willing to let their horses go without making any attempt to recover them, I am not. The thieves are hidden somewhere in the mountains – I am sure of that – and if I were a man I would not sleep soundly until I had found them."

"It isn't often that I wish any body harm," said Frank, "but I hope Roderick will throw the man who stole him, head over heels, the first time he tries to mount him."

"Look out, fellows!" exclaimed Johnny, suddenly.

A heavy tramping was heard in the hall, which grew louder as the footsteps approached the door. The sound had a strange effect upon the boys, for they all uttered exclamations, and began running about the room. Frank sprang up and perched himself upon the head-board of the bed; Dick seized a chair, and thrust it out in front of him, as if waiting to receive the attack of some enemy; while Johnny ran to one of the windows, and endeavored to open the shutters. But the heavy bar, with which they were fastened, fitted tightly in its place, and seeing that the door of the wardrobe was ajar, he squeezed through it, and shut himself in. Archie was the only one who stood his ground.

CHAPTER II

ABOUT BEARS

Archie's actions indicated that he had made up his mind to fight something. He threw off his hat, pushed back his sleeves, and winding the lash of his whip around his hand, raised the butt, in readiness to strike.

“If you don't want a headache for the rest of the day, you had better look out for yourself,” exclaimed Frank. “You made him very angry.”

“Come in here!” cried Johnny, from the wardrobe. “There's room enough for another, with tight squeezing.”

“I sha'n't run a step,” replied Archie. “I am in no humor for nonsense this morning, and if Phil comes near me he will wish he hadn't.”

The door opened at this moment, and in came Mr. Winters, Mr. Harris, and Mr. Thomas, all booted and spurred, and dusty with fast riding. The last named gentleman entered the room in a very undignified manner. The instant the door was opened, a half-grown bear slipped in between his feet, knocking them out from under him, and causing him to sit down on the animal's back very suddenly. To save himself from falling to the floor, Mr. Thomas seized the bear's long hair with both hands, and was brought into the room in triumph.

This bear was the Phil of which Archie had spoken, and the enemy that had been keeping him and his companions in a state of siege during the last half hour. Archie had done something Phil did not like; and he had loitered about in the hall, awaiting an opportunity to be revenged. Now that he had got into the room, he was fierce for a fight; and the boys, who had measured strength with him often enough to know that he was a very unpleasant fellow to have about when he was angry, thought it best to keep out of his way – all except Archie, who was in very bad humor, and would have held his ground against a dozen Phils. The bear, accepting his determined manner and threatening attitude as a challenge to combat, rushed straight at him, and in a moment more would have held him in a very loving embrace, had not Dick seized the chain that was fastened to Phil's collar, and brought him to a standstill.

“Put the rascal out of doors,” said Mr. Winters. “The first thing you know, he will hurt some of you boys.”

But Phil did not give any one a chance to put him out. He raised himself on his hind legs, tumbling off Mr. Thomas, who measured his length on the floor, and disregarding the blows which Archie showered upon him with his whip, sprang upon him and threw him down.

“Pull him off, fellows,” shouted Archie, who knew that the punishment was coming now.

Frank jumped down from the head-board, Johnny came out of the closet, and both ran to assist Dick, who still clung manfully

to the chain; but before they could reach him, Phil gave Archie a ringing slap on each side of his head, and made good his retreat from the room. The next that was seen of him, he was out in the court trying to start a fight with Marmion.

Phil was a rough play-fellow, but he was full of his tricks, always ready for a fight or a frolic, and he held a prominent place in the affections of the boys, who looked upon him as a great institution; but by every one else on the rancho he was regarded as an unmitigated nuisance. One great fault with Phil was, that he was too much like some young people. He always wanted his own way in every thing, and if he could not have it, he would grumble and go into the sulks. He would wander off by himself and pout for hours together, like a foolish boy who had been denied something his mother thought he ought not to have, sticking out his lips after the most approved fashion, and growling and scolding to himself at a wonderful rate. On these occasions it was not safe to venture near him.

Phil was an expert wrestler and boxer, and as long as he could get the better of his antagonist he would keep in excellent humor. He would not growl or scratch him with his claws, and would always wait till he got a fair hold before he made any attempt to throw him down. But when he met his match, as he always did whenever he interfered with Frank, there would be trouble directly. When Phil found that he could not throw him, he would growl and get mad; and then there was always a fight or a foot-race. The boys generally thought it best to run when

he was thoroughly aroused, for he was considerably larger than a Newfoundland dog, his teeth and claws were sharp, his paws heavy, and he used them in good earnest.

Phil was as treacherous as an Indian. Whenever a stranger visited the rancho, he would run to meet him, rub himself against his legs, turn summersaults for his amusement, and try, by every means in his power, to show that he was glad to see him; and all this while he would be watching for an opportunity to play a trick upon him. He would sneak around behind him, and if the visitor did not keep his eyes open, the first thing he knew his heels would fly up, and he would sit down upon the ground in a great hurry.

Another bad trait in Phil's character was, that he never forgot an injury. He always avenged a wrong done him, and if he could not get at the guilty party, he would take satisfaction on some one else. Many a time, when Frank turned him loose in the morning, was he obliged to stand punishment for something Archie had done to him the night before. Phil, catching him off his guard, would trip him up, box his ears, and run off to escape the consequences; and the next time Frank met him he would be as friendly as ever, unless some one had been teasing him in the meantime. He seemed to cherish unbounded affection for Frank (that is, when he was in good humor), but he disliked Archie as much as Marmion did; and he had good cause to be angry at him on this particular morning. Archie had been unreasonably cross and ugly ever since his horse was stolen; and when the bear came up and greeted him in a friendly manner, by putting his paw on

his shoulder, Archie, by taking some unfair advantage of him, succeeded in throwing him down, and cramming a handful of grass into his mouth; and that was an indignity that Phil would not submit to. He flew into a terrible rage, and the boys, knowing that something unpleasant would happen if Phil succeeded in getting his paws on any of them, ran into their room, and fastened all the doors and windows. The bear followed, and after trying in vain to effect an entrance through one of the port-holes, took his stand in the hall, and waited for them to come out. When Mr. Winters and his companions entered the room, he went in with them, and squared accounts with Archie, by boxing his ears so soundly that he had a headache all the rest of the day.

Uncle James and Mr. Harris laughed at Mr. Thomas, and the boys smiled behind their handkerchiefs. Mr. Thomas made some very uncomplimentary remarks about bears in general, and Phil in particular, and helping himself to a chair, resumed the conversation which this little incident had interrupted.

“It will be of no use, Mr. Winters,” said he, “for it has been tried already. He has been chased with dogs, caught in traps, and shot at numberless times; but he is to-day as lively and full of mischief as he was a year ago. He is bound to die a natural death.”

Mr. Thomas was speaking of the bear which had so often robbed Uncle James’s cow-pen, and after the boys had listened for a few minutes to the conversation that followed, they learned that this pest had visited the rancho again during the previous night, and walked off with a fine calf, for which Mr. Winters

had refused a hundred dollars a few days before. More than that, he had got into a trap which had been made especially for him, but had succeeded in working his way out. This same trap had caught and held two good-sized bears, which had tried their best to escape, but it was not strong enough to confine him. He had tumbled the logs about in every direction, and made off with the bait with which the trap was set.

This bear was a well-known character in that section of the country – as well known as Mr. Winters himself. He was called “Old Davy;” and this name had been given to him to distinguish him from a few other old settlers of the same species; but these had been killed off, one after another, and now Old Davy was left alone. Those who had seen him, described him as a monster animal, fully as large as two ordinary bears. He could be recognized by a large bald spot on his forehead, which was, doubtless, the scar of a wound received during some of his numerous battles, and his track could be distinguished from those of other bears by the peculiar shape of the print left by one of his hind feet. A portion of the foot had either been shot away, or lost during a conflict with dogs, and the track made by this wounded member, showed only the claws and the ball of the foot. But this did not interfere with Old Davy’s traveling, or his fighting, either. He could wander over a good portion of the county in a night, and had, more than once, demonstrated his ability to whip all the dogs that could get around him. Between him and the horse-thieves, the farmers had lost many a dollar.

When Old Davy and his exploits had been thoroughly discussed, Mr. Winters told his nephews why he had come in there. He was on the point of starting for San Diego, to be gone three or four days; and he wanted the boys to manage affairs during his absence. "There is not much to be done," said he, with a laugh, "but if you can manage to shoot Old Davy and catch those horse-thieves while I am gone, I should be delighted."

The boys told themselves that they had not the slightest intention of going within a mile of Old Davy. If men like Dick Lewis and Bob Kelly, who had hunted grizzly bears all their lives, could not kill him, they certainly had no business with him. And as for the horse-thieves, they were, doubtless, a band of desperadoes, who used their revolvers or bowie-knives upon any one who came in their way, and the boys were quite sure that they would let them alone also. But, after all, they had a good deal to do with the horse-thieves, and with Old Davy also. Some exciting events happened in the settlement during the next few hours, and when Uncle James returned from San Diego, he was more astonished than he was when he listened to Frank's story of his first encounter with Pierre Costello.

CHAPTER III

A STRANGE STORY

“Now,” said Archie, when he had seen Uncle James ride off toward San Diego, “what’s to be done? It’s dreadful slow hanging around the house all the while, and I propose that we visit that bear trap. We might repair it, you know, and perhaps we can make it strong enough to hold Old Davy the next time he gets into it.”

As no objections were raised to this proposition, the boys strolled slowly toward the stable, where Mr. Winters now kept all his fine riding stock, it being unsafe to allow the animals to run at large. There was no danger that the robbers would get any more horses out of that stable, for Dick Lewis and old Bob Kelly had taken up their quarters there. Archie thought it would have been a good thing for him and Frank, if this precaution had been adopted a few days before.

The stable was full of horses, but Frank and Archie could not find any to suit them. While Johnny and Dick were saddling their nags, the cousins, with their bridles in their hands, walked slowly up and down the floor, critically examining the twenty sleek, well-kept animals which were standing quietly in their respective stalls; but they measured every thing by Roderick and King James now, and none of their uncle’s horses were good

enough for them.

“I believe I won’t go, fellows,” said Archie, at length. “I have a good mind to say that I will never leave the rancho again, until I get my horse back. Will you agree to that, Frank, if I will?”

“No, sir!” replied his cousin, quickly. “I can’t see the use of hurting my nose to spite my face. I am going on that expedition with Captain Porter this winter, if I have to ride a mule.”

“Well, it beats me that there is no one here who can catch those robbers,” said Archie, bitterly. “Dick Lewis, I have lost all faith in you.”

The trapper was seated on a bench beside the door, busy at work on a new hunting shirt, which, like all the rest of his garments, was gaudily ornamented with beads and bright-colored pieces of cloth. He smiled good-naturedly at Archie, but made no reply.

“I built my hopes high upon you,” continued the latter. “You have spent your life on the frontier; fought all through the Mexican war; have shot dozens of grizzly bears and Indians; been in numberless scrapes with all sorts of desperate characters, and yet you allow Old Davy to invade the rancho every night, and walk off with some of uncle’s best stock, and permit a band of horse-thieves to settle down here in our very midst, and carry on their trade without a word of protest. What do you mean by it?”

“We have done all we could, little ’un – me an’ old Bob have,” replied the trapper. “But don’t you know that thar are things movin’ around us all the while, that no livin’ man can’t foller,

'cause they don't leave no trail?"

"Of course there are," said Johnny. "Birds, for instance."

"But the birds didn't steal my horse," exclaimed Archie.

"I aint sayin' they did," returned Dick. "I know well enough that your hosses were stole by men, 'cause I seed the prints of their feet in front of this yere very door. I know which way they went, too, fur me an' old Bob tracked em."

"You did?" cried Frank. "Then why didn't you follow them up, and catch them?"

"'Cause we couldn't; that's the reason. It's a leetle the queerest thing I ever hearn tell on."

"What is?" asked all the boys in a breath. They began to get interested and excited now, for the trapper's mysterious manner indicated that he had some great secret to communicate.

"I haint sartin that I had oughter say any thing about it," replied Dick. "It's something I can't begin to see through, an' that's the reason I haint told your uncle of it. You 'member when Mr. Winters lost them two hosses of his'n, don't you? Wal, the next mornin' me an' ole Bob tracked 'em nigh onto five miles, an' finally lost their trail about a hundred yards from the creek that flows on this side of Don Carlos' rancho. Thar war the prints of their hoofs in the soft 'arth, as plain as bar's ears, an' thar the trail ended. Now, where did them two hosses go to? That's what I want to know."

"Perhaps they turned up or down the creek to find a ford," said Frank.

“They couldn’t have done that without leavin’ a trail, could they? It was a good hundred yards to the creek, as I told you, an’ me an’ Bob sarched every inch of the ground, but couldn’t find the print of a single hoof.”

“The robbers may have doubled on their trail, for the purpose of throwing you off the scent,” suggested Johnny.

“I don’t reckon that men who have hunted wild Injuns an’ varmints as long as me an’ Bob have, could be fooled by sich a trick as that ar’,” replied the trapper. “I have since found out all about it, youngsters. Them hosses didn’t make no more trail; that’s the reason we couldn’t foller ’em.”

“Then, of course, they didn’t go any farther,” said Dick Thomas.

“Yes, they did. They went acrost that creek, an’ into Don Carlos’ rancho, an’ never touched the ground, nor the water either.”

“Into Don Carlos’ rancho!” repeated Archie in great astonishment.

“And never touched the ground!” echoed Johnny. “Were they carried over?”

“Sartinly not. They walked.”

“How could two solid flesh-and-blood horses walk a hundred yards without stepping on the ground?” asked Frank.

“They could step on something else, couldn’t they? *They walked on clouds!*”

As the trapper said this, he settled back on the bench,

and looked at the boys, to observe the effect this astounding announcement would have upon them. He expected them to be greatly amazed, and they certainly were. Any four boys in the world would have been amazed to hear such a declaration fall from the lips of a man whom they knew to be strictly truthful, and who, moreover, was not jesting, but speaking in sober earnest. They looked at the trapper a moment, and then at one another, and finally Johnny and Dick Thomas burst into a loud laugh; while the cousins, who were better acquainted with their old friend, thrust their hands deep into their pockets with an air which said plainly that they did not understand the matter at all, and waited patiently for him to explain.

“You may believe it or not,” said Dick, “but it’s a fact, ’cause ole Bob seed it with his own eyes. He watched the hul thing from beginning to end, and it well-nigh skeered him to death.”

“What did he see?” asked Frank, growing more and more bewildered. “I didn’t suppose that Bob was afraid of any living thing.”

“Nor he aint, nuther,” returned the trapper, quickly. “But show him something that can’t be hurt by a rifle-ball, an’ he’ll take to his heels as quick as any body. As I was sayin’, the trail of them two hosses ended thar on the bank of that creek, an’ we couldn’t find it ag’in. Me an’ ole Bob puzzled our heads over it fur a long time, an’ we finally made up our minds that that ar’ old Spaniard, Don Carlos, could tell us all about the matter if he was a mind to, an’ Bob said that we would go back the next night, an’ watch

his rancho. Wal, when the next night come, we couldn't both go, 'cause your uncle said he wanted one of us to keep an eye on the stables: so I stayed at home, an' ole Bob went alone. He was gone about three hours, an' when he come back I seed a sight I never seed afore, an' one I never expect to see ag'in. Ole Bob's face was as white as a Sunday shirt, an' he was shakin' all over like a man with the ager."

"What had he seen?" repeated Frank, who was impatient to get at the bottom of the mystery.

"Easy, easy, youngster, I'm comin' to that," replied Dick. "Now, I've knowed ole Bob ever since I was knee-high to a duck, an' I've been with him in more 'n a hundred fights with Injuns, an' Greasers, an' varmints – sometimes, too, when we jest did get away with our ha'r, an' that was all – but I never seed him skeered afore. It made me feel kinder funny, I tell you, 'cause I knowed that thar had been something onnatural goin' on; an' I aint ashamed to say that I looked all around this yere stable, to make sure that me an' him were alone. The ole feller didn't say any thing, till he had filled his pipe an' smoked it about half out; an' then he told me what he had seed. 'Dick,' says he, 'thar's been awful things agoin' on about that ar' old Greaser's rancho, an' if I hadn't seed it all with my own two eyes, I shouldn't believe it. I went down thar where we lost the trail last night, an' arter hidin' my hoss in the bushes, tuk up a position from which I could watch both sides of the creek. I knowed that Don Carlos had gone to bed, 'cause thar was no light about the rancho, an' the doors an'

winder-shutters were all closed. I hadn't been thar in the bushes long, afore I heered the trampin' of hosses; but it stopped all of a sudden, an' fur the next five minutes I lay thar on the ground listenin,' an' peepin' through the trees, tryin' to get a sight at the fellers. But I couldn't see 'em, an' finally I begun to crawl up closer.

“Now, the last time I looked at the rancho, it was dark an' still, an' thar wasn't a sign of a human bein' about it; an' durin' the two minutes I was crawlin' t'wards them hossmen, thar wasn't even the rustlin' of a leaf to tell me that thar was any thing goin' on. But sich fellers as them that live in that rancho don't make no noise about their work. They had done a good deal in them two minutes; an' when I looked acrost the creek ag'in, I knowed how it come that we had lost the trail of them hosses. I seed enough to skeer me wuss nor I was ever skeered afore, an' if I could have got up from the ground, I should have made tracks from thar sudden: but, Dick, I couldn't move – something held me fast.

“I told you that the last time I looked t'wards the rancho it was all dark, didn't I? Wal, it wasn't so now. The walls of the buildin', an' the bank of the creek, were lighted up by streaks of fire; an' where they come from I couldn't tell. Howsomever, I didn't think much about that, fur I seed somethin' else that made my ole 'coon-skin cap raise up on my head. It was a *bridge of clouds*, which ran from the wall of the buildin' down to the water's edge. Mebbe you won't believe that, Dick, but I seed it with my own eyes. Them streaks of fire, that come from the rancho, lighted

up every thing fur a hundred yards around; an' I could see the clouds a rollin' an' tumblin' like the smoke from the mouth of a cannon. More 'n that, thar was a small flatboat in the creek, which I hadn't seed thar afore, an' on it were four hosses an' three men. Two of the hosses were Roderick and King Jeems. Each one had a feller on his back, an' each feller was holdin' another hoss by the bridle.

“By the time I had noted these things the boat begun to move, an' then I seed something else that skeered me. That ar' boat, Dick, was rowed acrost that creek without hands. It's a fact, 'cause I seed it. I rubbed my eyes to make sure that I wasn't dreamin', but thar wasn't no mistake about it. Them two fellers sot thar on their hosses, without layin' a finger on an oar or paddle, the other stood in the starn, with his hands in his pockets, an' yet the boat carried them acrost. It wasn't no time in reachin' the other bank, an' when it stopped, the hossmen rode out on this bridge of clouds, which seemed to have been put thar on purpose fur them, and went t'wards the house. I kept clost watch of them, to see which way they turned, but they didn't turn at all. They kept straight ahead, an' went into the rancho. I rubbed my eyes ag'in, an' when I opened 'em the boat wasn't thar, the bridge of clouds had disappeared, the fire had gone out, an' the rancho was as dark an' silent as though thar had never been nobody about it. I tell you, Dick, I was skeered when I seed that; but I've got a leetle courage, I reckon, an' I made up my mind that I would find out the meanin' of them strange doin's, or die a tryin'. I had seed them

two fellers go into the rancho, an' I wanted to know how they got in, an' what they were goin' to do thar. I didn't stop to think the matter over, 'cause I knowed I should back out if I did; but jumpin' to my feet, I ran down the bank of the creek to the water, an' struck out for the other shore. I wasn't long in gettin' acrost, an' presently I found myself standin' clost to the wall where I had seed the fire shinin', an' where them two hossmen had gone in. Was I really awake? Had I seed any body about thar at all? Dick, thar wasn't a door or winder on that side of the buildin'! The wall was as solid as the ground – not a single crack or crevice in it. How could them two fellers have gone through a stone wall five foot thick? I axed myself that question, an' then I fetched a little whistle, an' turned an' run fur my life. I swum that creek quicker'n it was ever swum afore, I reckon; an' when I reached my hoss, I put spurs to him, an' come home a flyin'. I kept lookin' back all the while, to see if thar wasn't somethin' follerin' me, an' I didn't draw an easy breath until I come within sight of this rancho. I've seed an' heered of a heap of queer things durin' the sixty years I've been knocked about on the prairy, but this yere is a leetle ahead of 'em all.' That's the way old Bob told me his story, youngsters," said Dick, in conclusion. "You may laugh at it if you want to, but I won't, 'cause I know that every word of it is the truth."

For a few moments after the trapper ceased speaking, the boys stood looking at him and at one another in blank amazement. His story reminded them of the tales of enchantment they had

read in the Arabian Nights. As strange as it may seem, however, they were not so much astonished at the recital of the singular events that had happened at the old Spaniard's rancho, as they were to know that Roderick and King James had been seen to go in there. Frank turned the matter over in his mind, and told himself that he had heard something that would, sooner or later, lead to the breaking up of the robber-band. Like the others, he could not explain the "bridge of clouds," nor could he understand how a boat could be ferried across a wide creek without hands, or how a solid stone wall, five feet thick, could open to admit the horsemen; but still he knew that if these things had really happened, they were the results of human agency, and that there was nothing supernatural about them. He did not believe that Don Carlos had any thing to do with the horse-thieves, and yet it did not seem possible that such proceedings as the old trapper had witnessed could go on in his rancho without his knowledge. Don Carlos was a prominent personage in the settlement. He was one of the wealthiest men in Southern California, numbered his cattle and horses by thousands, his money by bushels instead of dollars (Uncle James had once told his nephews that he had seen three barrels of gold in the old Spaniard's bed-room), and there was no need that he should risk his life by engaging in any such business. Besides, he had lost several fine horses himself, and had been untiring in his efforts to discover the thieves. If he was one of the guilty parties, he certainly had reason to congratulate himself on the skillful manner in which he had avoided arousing

the suspicions of his neighbors.

“I have told you the story, youngsters,” said Dick, “an’ you can do what you think best. You can bear one thing in mind, howsomever, an’ that is, if you’re goin’ to be keerless, like you allers are, an’ try to find out what’s been goin’ on at that rancho, you can look to the settlers for help, if you want any. Ole Bob says that thar aint money enough in Californy to hire him to go back thar; an’ if he won’t go, you’d better believe that Dick Lewis won’t go nuther. I don’t want to see any thing that ole Bob is afeared of.”

“I think we had better let the matter rest until Uncle James returns,” said Frank. “He will know what ought to be done. Now let us go out and look at that trap.”

“You had better keep away from thar,” said Dick. “If Ole Davy happens to be prowlin’ about in the woods, he’ll larn you more of the nater of grizzly bars than you ever knowed afore.”

“O, we’re not going to trouble him,” replied Johnny.

“And if he knows when he is well off he won’t trouble us either,” said Archie. “I’ve wanted to fight somebody ever since I lost that horse; and I’m just as willing it should be Old Davy as any one else.”

The cousins had a good deal of trouble in selecting their horses; but, with the trapper’s assistance, they were finally mounted to their satisfaction, and after securing their weapons, and a couple of axes, with which to repair the trap, they whistled to their dogs, and galloped toward the mountains.

CHAPTER IV

“OLD DAVY.”

It was a long time before the boys ceased to wonder at the singular story they had just heard. They discussed it while they were riding toward the mountains; but after they had all expressed an opinion, they were as much in the dark as they had been before. They could not understand it at all. Dick Thomas declared that old Bob must have fallen asleep while he was watching the rancho, and that the bridge of clouds, the streaks of fire, and the boat that was ferried across the creek without hands, were things which he had seen only in his dreams. Such incidents, he said, might have happened in feudal times, and in some old castle which had been built with secret doors and dungeons and passage-ways; but no one need try to make him believe that they could take place at that late day, in a civilized country, and in a house that had been erected simply for a dwelling. It was ridiculous. Johnny said that was his opinion, too; but Frank and Archie, who knew that the old trapper was not the man to fall asleep while watching for an enemy, were confident that something unusual and exciting had been going on at Don Carlos' rancho. Bob was a very ignorant man, and of course he was superstitious. He believed in signs and omens, and any thing he could not account for was sure to frighten him. This may have led

him to exaggerate the occurrences at the rancho, but, for all that, they knew that he had been a witness to some strange scenes.

“Old Bob didn’t make up that story,” said Archie, decidedly, “and he never dreamed it, either. He saw something, and I’ll know what it was before I am two days older. It’s my opinion that that old Spaniard has got my horse: and if he has, he must give him up, or there’ll be a bigger fuss in this settlement than there was when the Indians attacked it years ago.”

But all thoughts of Don Carlos and his rancho, and the mysterious things that had happened there, were soon driven out of their minds; for, by this time, they had reached the spring near which Frank, Archie, and Johnny had been captured by Pierre and his band, and there they found the trap of which they were in search. It was built of heavy logs, with a movable top, like the lid of a box, to which, when the trap was set, a “trigger” was adjusted, in such a manner that, when the bait was removed, the top would fall down, confining the bear in the pen. The boys thought that Old Davy must have possessed immense power of muscle to work his way out of that trap. He had left the marks of his great claws and teeth on the logs, and there were the prints of his feet where he had passed along the muddy bank of the spring into the woods.

Frank and his companions sat in their saddles looking at the trap, while the dogs, with all the bristles on their backs sticking straight up, ran about in a state of intense excitement. The boys were all thinking about the same thing: and that was, if they dared

to send on the dogs, and could find and shoot Old Davy, what a feather it would be in their caps! That would be doing something that Dick Lewis and Bob Kelly and all the best hunters in the settlement had tried in vain to accomplish. There was one of their number who was reckless enough to believe that they could do it, and that was Archie Winters.

“Hi! hi!” he yelled, so suddenly that he startled all his companions. “Look to him, dogs. Hunt him up!”

No sooner were the words spoken, than the dogs uttered a simultaneous yelp, and disappeared in the bushes. There were five of them in the pack – Marmion, and four splendid hounds, which belonged to Dick. Their young masters had often declared that they should never follow Old Davy’s trail, for he was a famous hand to destroy dogs, and during his numerous fights, he had killed nearly all the finest animals of this species in the settlement. A few months before, every farmer in that section of the country had pointed with pride to his pack of fifteen or twenty hounds, to which he gave as much care and attention as he bestowed upon his horses; but Old Davy had thinned them all out, and now some of the settlers had only two or three remaining. Frank and Dick had, thus far, kept their favorites at a safe distance from the grizzly, but Archie had sent them right into his mouth. When the dogs came up with him, they would of course attack him, and that would be the last of them. A bear that could demolish twenty fierce hounds in a single fight, would not wink over five antagonists. However, it was too late to recall

them. They were already out of sight, and yelping fierce and loud as they swept up the mountain in pursuit of the grizzly.

“I’ve seen my hounds for the last time,” said Dick.

“And I’ll never put eyes on Marmion again,” chimed in Frank. “What made you send them on, Archie?”

“Now look here, fellows,” replied the latter. “We have said a hundred times that we wanted to see Old Davy, and I’d like to know if we’ll ever have a better chance than we’ve got now. Let’s follow the dogs, and when they bring us within sight of the bear, we’ll call them off. We can look at him without having a fight with him, can’t we?”

The others were by no means sure of that. Those who knew Old Davy best said that he was a quarrelsome fellow, and that he never hesitated to assault anybody who invaded his dominions. A black bear, unless driven desperate by hunger, will generally take to his heels at the sight of a human being; but Old Davy was a grizzly, and one of the most ferocious of his species. But, although the boys were well aware of all these facts, they did not hesitate to follow Archie, who, without waiting to hear what his companions had to say to his proposition, put spurs to his horse, and dashed into the bushes. They unslung their guns as they went (although they all declared that they had not the slightest intention of shooting at the bear if they came up with him), and, guided by the hoarse baying of the hounds in front, galloped through the trees, and up the side of the mountain, like a squad of cavalry on the charge.

The higher they went the more difficult the ascent became. The bushes were thick, fallen logs incumbered the ground, and the trees and saplings grew so closely together that their horses could scarcely force their way through them. It was a splendid hiding-place for a bear, and Frank could not help asking himself how many chances there were in a hundred that all of them would succeed in making their escape, if Old Davy should suddenly pounce down upon them.

After a tedious, fatiguing ride of half an hour, during which time the music of the hounds continued to ring out louder and clearer, as the trail grew warmer, they reached the top of a spur of the mountain, and were on the point of descending into the ravine on the opposite side, when Dick Thomas, who was leading the way, suddenly uttered an exclamation, and stopped his horse.

“What is it?” asked his companions in a breath.

“We’d better be getting away from here, fellows,” replied Dick, so excited that he could scarcely speak plainly. “There’s the old rascal himself.”

“Who? Where? You don’t mean Old Davy!”

The boys had talked bravely enough about meeting this dreaded monster; but now that they were close upon him, their courage began to ooze out at the ends of their fingers, and the faces they turned toward Dick were a good deal paler than usual.

“Yes, I do mean Old Davy. Don’t you see him sitting there at the foot of that mammoth oak?”

The boys looked through the trees in the direction Dick

pointed, and, sure enough, there was the grizzly, scarcely more than a hundred yards distant. There could be no mistake as to his identity, for there was the bald spot on his forehead as plain as daylight. They had got themselves into a nice scrape.

That was the first thought that passed through Frank's mind, and the next was that he would never again have a word to say about Marmion's courage. He had never been more astonished in his life, than he was when he witnessed the actions of his favorite. The hero of a score of hard-fought battles, the dog that had been at the killing of half a dozen bears, and never once hesitated to attack the largest of them – Marmion the infallible, upon discovering Old Davy, uttered one howl of terror, and faced about and fled for dear life. The hounds followed close at his heels, and such a scrambling to get out of harm's way Frank had never seen before. They were out of sight in an instant.

The boys had prepared themselves to see something frightful when they came within sight of Old Davy, and they were not disappointed. He was even larger and uglier than their imaginations had pictured him. He sat on his haunches at the root of a huge oak, swinging his head slowly, from side to side, and apparently unconscious of the presence of the young hunters.

“Well, fellows,” said Frank, who was the coolest one in the party, “we've found the old villain, and now what are we going to do with him?”

“Let's shoot at him and run,” suggested Archie.

“If the ground was clear, and I had my own horse, I would

agree to that,” replied Frank. “But don’t you know that this mountain behind us is almost impassable? What would happen to us if we should fail to kill or disable him, and our horses should become entangled in the bushes?”

“Well, we must do something very soon,” said Johnny, “for the old fellow isn’t going to sit there much longer. He is getting uneasy.”

Frank raised himself in his stirrups and took a survey of the ground before him, like a general who was about to lead his forces into action. But he had no intention of provoking a fight with their enemy. His only desire was to bring himself and companions safely out of the dangerous predicament in which they had thoughtlessly placed themselves. He was certain that when they began to retreat, the grizzly would assume the offensive; and in a race through those thick bushes, he would have a decided advantage, and might succeed in overtaking some of them.

“There is only one thing we can do,” said he, “and that is to get down to the bottom of the ravine.”

“Why, we’ll have to go right past Old Davy to get there,” said Archie.

“We can’t help that. We must reach clear ground, where we will have a fair chance for our lives, if he takes it into his head to attack us. Move in single file, boys, keep close together, and if Old Davy shows fight, we’ll give him a volley, and take to our heels.”

“That’s the way to do it,” said Dick, approvingly. “You give the commands, Frank, and then every thing will be done in order.”

The boys were, by this time, recovering from the nervousness that had been occasioned by the first sight of the grizzly; and, as their courage returned, there was more than one among them who secretly determined that he would not leave the field, until he had had at least one fair shot at the bear. They had swift horses under them, trusty weapons in their hands, and they knew that if Old Davy would keep quiet until they were well out of the bushes into clear ground, there was nothing to be afraid of.

Frank turned his horse and rode slowly down the mountain toward the bottom of the ravine, his companions following after in single file. They carried their rifles across their saddles in front of them, cocked and ready for instant use, and each boy kept his eyes fastened upon the grizzly. Old Davy watched them closely, too; and when he saw them moving about among the bushes, he raised his head and uttered an angry growl. That growl had a demoralizing effect upon the young hunters, for their line of battle was broken in an instant, and Frank’s horse made one or two frantic leaps down the mountain, almost unseating his rider. The general consternation was greatly increased when Johnny called out that the bear was coming.

“Take it easy, boys!” shouted Frank, with difficulty restraining his frightened horse. “There’s time enough. Wait till he comes out of the bushes, and fire at that bald spot on his forehead. Be sure of your aim, now.”

It required no little nerve for the young hunters to sit there in their saddles and await the onslaught of that enraged grizzly. They could not see him now, but they heard his angry growls, and saw the bushes shake and bend as he charged toward them. Presently his enormous head and shoulders emerged from a thicket scarcely more than twenty-five yards distant, and Frank gave the word.

“Ready! Aim! Fire!” he shouted.

Four shining rifle-barrels arose in line, four sights covered the bear’s head, four fingers pressed the trigger at the same instant, a roar that awoke the echoes far and near rang through the mountains, and before the smoke cleared away, four frightened horses had dashed past Old Davy, and were carrying their riders down the ravine with the speed of the wind. The boys knew that their hands trembled, but they were all good marksmen, and they were sure that at least one of the four bullets that had been fired at the grizzly’s head, had found a lodgment in some vital part; but what was their amazement, when they reached the bottom of the ravine, and turned in their saddles and looked back, to see Old Davy still on his feet, and coming down the mountain in hot pursuit, he did not appear to have been in the least injured by the storm of bullets they had rained upon him.

CHAPTER V

A RUNNING FIGHT

It was one of Dick's sayings that bear-hunting was a "business by itself" – as much so as book-keeping or steamboating; and Frank and Archie had been in California long enough to learn that the trapper told the truth in this, as in other matters. It was a favorite pastime with the settlers in that section of the country, and the cousins had seen as many as thirty men take part in a single hunt. They were generally divided into two parties: some went in the drive – that is, they followed the hounds, and if the bear was brought to bay by them, they signaled to their companions with their hunting horns. The others were scattered about among the mountains, watching the "runaways," and holding themselves in readiness to shoot the bear if he attempted to pass by them. This was the part our four boys always took in a bear-hunt, and they had engaged in so many during the last few weeks, that they began to consider themselves experts in the business. They had never killed a grizzly, but they could boast of having had an exciting fight with one. How it would have ended it is hard to tell. The boys were getting the worst of it (by that we mean that the bear was charging upon them, and they were running for dear life toward the place where they had left their horses), when Mr. Harris, who happened to be near at

hand, came up and put an end to the fight by shooting the bear through the head. The boys afterward had reason to wish that he had stayed away a few minutes longer; for all the hunters in the settlement laughed at them, and Mr. Harris created a great deal of amusement by showing how Johnny looked when he was running through the bushes, with his coat-tails sticking straight out behind him. They defended themselves against the charge of cowardice with a good deal of spirit, and did not, by any means, acknowledge themselves whipped. They affirmed that it was their intention to draw the bear into open ground, and continue the fight on horseback; but the old hunters refused to believe this story, and the boys solemnly avowed that, if they ever got a fair chance, they would show them that they could kill a bear as well as any body. Now they had an opportunity to try their skill on Old Davy, and this was the time to make good their boasts. The result of this day's work would be a fair test of their abilities as bear-hunters. There were no dogs to worry the grizzly, and no experienced men, with quick eyes and steady hands, to ride up and rescue them if they came to close quarters with their enemy. They had no one to depend upon but themselves; and, if they killed the bear, the glory would be all their own.

“I am going to have one more shot at that fellow before I leave him,” said Archie, with as much apparent indifference as though he was speaking of shooting at a squirrel. “He'll never rob any more cow-pens when I am done with him.”

The boys were all wonderfully brave and reckless now that

they imagined themselves safe from the claws of the grizzly; but when they reached the bottom of the ravine, and found that their situation there was not much better than it had been on the mountain-side, their courage all left them again, and they had nothing more to say about shooting Old Davy. They were really in more danger now than they had been before, for they had but one way to run. On two sides of them were precipitous cliffs, which could not be scaled on horseback; behind them was the grizzly; and in front an almost impenetrable wall of bushes shut them off from the prairie beyond. They took this all in at a glance, and, knowing that there was but one way of escape open to them, they urged their horses forward at increased speed, and dashed pell-mell into the bushes, where, a moment afterward, they found themselves brought to a dead halt. Their horses, snorting with terror, exerted themselves to the utmost, but without making any perceptible headway, and but a short distance behind them came the bear, lumbering along as easily as though the bushes, which effectually checked their progress, had been nothing more than so many straws in his way. It was a critical moment, and more than one among the young hunters gave himself up for lost. Beyond a doubt it would have been the last bear-hunt for somebody, had it not been for the coolness and courage of Frank Nelson. Seeing that the grizzly was gaining rapidly, and that he would certainly overtake them before they could work their way out of the bushes, he very deliberately slung his rifle over his shoulder, and drew one of his revolvers. Reining in his plunging,

frantic horse, he faced about in his saddle, and took a deliberate aim at the bear's head.

"Shoot close, Frank," said Johnny, whose horse seemed to be hopelessly entangled in the bushes. "If you miss, somebody is done for."

With almost breathless anxiety his companions awaited the result of his shot; and when the smoke of the revolver had cleared away, and Old Davy was seen struggling on the ground, the shout that went up from four pairs of strong lungs was almost deafening.

"Hurrah for the champion rifle-shot!" yelled Dick. "He's down!"

"But he's up again!" exclaimed Frank, "Push ahead, fellows!"

During the delay occasioned by Frank's lucky shot, short as it was, the boys gained considerable ground; and before the grizzly was fairly on his feet again, they had worked their way out of the bushes into the bed of a creek which ran through the ravine. As the water was but a few inches deep, it formed an excellent highway; and, with another shout, the boys gave rein to their horses, which set off at a rapid gallop, leaving Old Davy far in the rear. They were safe now, and their courage rose again.

"Isn't there any way to get the better of that fellow?" asked Archie. "If we can induce him to follow us out on the prairie, I'll ride home after Dick Lewis. He'll fix him."

"Oh, he will follow us," replied Johnny: "you need not be at all uneasy about that. I guess you haven't learned much about

grizzlies yet.”

Archie thought of the adventures he had had with these animals when he and his friends were encamped at the Old Bear’s Hole, and told himself that he had learned a good deal about them; perhaps quite as much as his friend Johnny, who had lived among them all his life.

“I declare, he’s coming now,” continued the latter, looking over his shoulder. “I don’t believe we have hurt him at all.”

The others were of the same opinion. Old Davy made headway astonishingly for an animal that had five bullets in him, and during the next ten minutes they did not gain on him more than a stone’s throw. But that did not cause them any uneasiness. They knew that the grizzly could not overtake them as long as the way was clear before them, and as they dashed along they discussed the best means of conquering their dreaded enemy. When they got him out on the prairie should they stop and fight him, or go home after the trapper? They knew that they would gain a good deal of honor, if they could exhibit the grizzly’s skin as a trophy of their prowess, but they were so much afraid of him that they did not want to permit him to come within shooting distance of them again, if they could avoid it. They did not have time, however, to come to any decision on these points, for they suddenly discovered something that drove all their plans for Old Davy’s destruction out of their minds, and turned their thoughts to a matter of much more importance – their own safety. As they swept around an abrupt bend in the creek, they found themselves

brought to a standstill by a huge tree which had fallen across the ravine. Against the body of the tree was piled a mass of smaller logs and branches, which had probably lodged there during high water, the whole forming an obstruction at least seven feet in height. They could not go around it, because of the cliffs on each side; and they dared not turn back, for there was the grizzly close behind them. They were fairly cornered.

The boys became appalled when they saw the danger of their situation, and for a moment they sat in their saddles as motionless as if they had been turned into stone. Then a glance over their shoulders showed them that the grizzly still kept up the pursuit; and that once more aroused them.

“What shall we do?” asked Archie, turning his pale face toward his cousin, to whom he always looked for advice and assistance in times of danger.

Frank’s answer was not given in words. When they first discovered the obstruction in their path, they had stopped their horses, and during the half a minute of inactivity that preceded Archie’s question, Frank had taken a survey of the situation, and determined upon his course. The others knew what it was when they saw him bend forward in his saddle, and gather his reins firmly in his hand.

“You can’t do it!” Dick almost gasped. “It is too high.”

Before the words were fairly uttered, Frank’s horse was flying down the ravine at the top of his speed. For a moment the gravel and water flew about in all directions, then there was a

crushing among the branches which had lodged against the body of the tree, and Frank had disappeared from view. His horse had jumped the log; and if the others could be induced to follow, the young hunters were safe.

“I did it easily enough, didn’t I?” shouted Frank, waving his hat to his companions. “Come on, fellows. It’s your only chance.”

As soon as he could stop his horse he turned to wait for the others. Then for the first time he realized how high the obstruction was – what a tremendous jump his horse must have made to carry him safely over it – and he trembled when he saw his companions preparing to follow him. As he sat in his saddle, he could just look over the log and watch their movements. A very slight accident – a single instant’s hesitation on the part of one of their horses – might result in a terrible tragedy.

Johnny was the first to take the leap. In response to a light touch from his spurs, his horse arose in the air and sailed over the log like a bird. Two of them were safe, and their courage arose again wonderfully: but now misfortunes befell them. Archie’s horse made an awkward start, and striking his fore-feet against a branch of the tree, fell rather than jumped over the obstruction, dashing his rider with stunning violence to the ground. Dick’s horse came on gallantly enough, but stopped when he reached the log, laid back his ears, and stubbornly refused to move an inch in any direction. Johnny turned white with terror, and the ramrod with which Frank was driving home a ball in his rifle, trembled like a leaf in his grasp. There was Archie lying stunned

and bleeding where he had fallen, Dick on a balky horse, which only kicked viciously when his rider touched him with his spurs, and the bear close behind, and coming on as fiercely as ever.

Frank gazed in bewilderment and dismay at the scene before him, and his first impulse was to put spurs to his horse and ride away, that he might not see what would follow when the grizzly came up. But that feeling was short-lived. He knew that neither Archie nor Dick would have deserted him had he been in their situation, and if he could not save them, he would, at least, have the satisfaction of knowing that he had done what he could.

“Johnny,” he exclaimed, in a voice which to save his life he could scarcely raise above a whisper, “can you take Archie in front of you?”

“Hand him up here,” was Johnny’s reply. “I’ll take care of him.”

“Dick,” continued Frank, “jump down from that horse, and mount Archie’s.”

Dick was prompt to act upon the suggestion. He threw himself from his horse, which he sincerely hoped would stand where he was until Old Davy could get his claws upon him, tumbled over the log, and in a moment more was safe in Archie’s saddle. Frank, in the mean time, had raised his cousin from the ground, and placed him upon Johnny’s horse; and by the time the grizzly came in sight, the boys were ready to continue their flight.

“Ride for life, now, Johnny,” said Frank. “Remember that you have got a double load, and don’t spare the whip.”

“Don’t be uneasy,” was the answer. “I’ve a splendid horse, and I won’t be long” —

Another misfortune cut short Johnny’s words. If his horse was a splendid animal, he was also a most vicious one, and he did not like to carry double. No sooner did he feel Archie’s weight on his back, than he set off at a furious pace, and suddenly throwing down his head, sent both his heels high into the air. Johnny, being an excellent horseman, and always on the watch for such eccentricities, would have had no difficulty in retaining his seat, had not the saddlegirth parted with a loud snap, throwing him and Archie headlong to the ground.

“Did any body ever hear of such luck!” growled Johnny, who was on his feet almost as soon as he touched the ground. “Come here, Dick; you’ll have to take him now.”

He gave one parting glance at his horse, which was flying down the ravine, and then raised his insensible companion in his arms, and ran toward Dick, who galloped up to meet him. The former took the wounded hunter upon his horse and continued his flight, while Johnny picked up his gun, and drew a bee-line for the nearest tree.

While this was going on, Frank had finished loading his rifle, and dismounted from his horse, and was now standing in front of the log, awaiting the approach of the grizzly, and ready to carry out his self-imposed task of covering the retreat of the others. In one hand he held his bridle, and in the other his trusty weapon, which he raised to his shoulder now and then, as he caught sight

of the grizzly through the branches of the tree. He knew that every thing depended upon the result of this shot, and he was resolved that he would not fire until a fair mark was presented. He tried to argue himself into the belief that Old Davy was a squirrel, and that he could easily put a ball into one of his eyes at a distance of fifty yards. He recalled to mind some of the excellent shots he had made during the last few days, and tried hard to keep up his courage by telling himself that it was seldom indeed that he missed his mark. Still he did miss sometimes, and what would be the result if he missed now? His life would not be worth a moment's purchase. He would not have time to mount before the grizzly would be close upon him. But even if he did succeed in making his escape, how far could Dick's horse carry his double load before he would be overtaken? Once more Frank raised his rifle, and just at that moment Old Davy's head and shoulders appeared above the log, not more than ten feet distant. His mouth was open, showing a frightful array of teeth, his ears were laid back close to his head, his eyes seemed to shoot forth angry sparks of fire, and, altogether, his appearance was enough to shake the strongest nerves. But Frank's were as firm as a rock. The trusty rifle was held as steadily as though it were a part of him it had served so long and faithfully; and just as the grizzly's fore-feet touched the ground, a sharp report rang through the ravine, and for an instant the smoke concealed both hunter and bear from the view of Johnny, who, from his perch in a neighboring tree, had watched all that was going on before

him with breathless anxiety. When the smoke cleared away he saw Frank standing erect and unharmed, and Old Davy lying motionless where he had fallen. Frank's bullet had reached its mark.

CHAPTER VI

DON CARLOS' RANCHO

Old Davy, the terror of the country, the destroyer of dogs, and winner of goodness knows how many desperate battles – Old Davy the invincible – had met his match at last in Frank Nelson, a boy of sixteen. The young hunter had long enjoyed an enviable reputation, dating as far back as his desperate fight with the moose, which had taken place during the previous winter, while he and Archie were sojourning at Uncle Joe's cabin. Since that time he had been the hero of as many scrapes as a boy of his age could well get into. He had been lost on the prairie; stampeded with a herd of buffaloes; passed a night in the camp of a band of blood-thirsty outlaws, who stole his horse and threatened to tie him to a tree and leave him to the mercy of the wolves; had three desperate encounters with a highwayman, and been captured at last and held as a prisoner by him; and in all these trying situations he had shown that he possessed a wonderful degree of courage, and had always conducted himself in a way to draw forth the highest praise from his friends the trappers. But all his former exploits were as nothing compared with the feat he had just accomplished. He had a reputation now that any farmer in that country would have been proud to possess. He would be pointed out as the one who had killed a monster which had held his own

against all the men and dogs that could be brought against him; and when he heard old bear-hunters recounting their adventures, and boasting of their achievements, he could hold his head as high as any of them.

That was what Frank thought half an hour after the fight was over; but, when he stood there looking at his prize and at his companions – at Archie, who sat on the ground beside the bear, with his aching head resting on his hands, and at Dick, one or both of whom had been saved by his lucky shot, he never reflected on the glory he had won. He could not help thinking of what the consequences would have been if he, in his excitement, had missed the bear, or failed to disable him.

Never before had the boys engaged in so exciting a battle. It was far ahead of any of their former hunts. It had been ended so fortunately, too! Archie had a lame shoulder and a bruised nose, and for a few minutes had been utterly unconscious of what was going on around him; but he did not feel half so badly about it as Dick did over the trick his horse had played upon him.

“I’ll fix him for that,” said the boy, with a threatening shake of his head. “I’ll put him in one of father’s teams, and make him work for his living. I don’t owe him any thanks for coming out of this fight with a whole skin. After he has made a few trips between our rancho and San Diego, hauling heavy loads of provisions, he’ll wish he had behaved himself.”

“I’ll tell you what I am going to do with mine,” said Archie, with a glance of contempt at the nag which had been the cause

of his misfortune: "I'll leave him out of doors to-night, and let the horse-thieves steal him."

"I don't see how you can be revenged on the horse by doing that," said Frank. "I don't suppose it makes much difference to him who he has for a master."

"Who said I wanted to be revenged on the horse?" asked Archie. "I don't; but I'll take a terrible revenge on the robbers. Perhaps the fellow who gets this horse will try to jump him over a log, and the horse will fall down with him, as he did with me, and smash the robber's nose, and knock his shoulder out of joint. That's the way I'll get even with him."

"Three cheers for the champion rifle-shot and bear-killer!" yelled Johnny, for the twentieth time.

Again and again the ravine echoed with lusty shouts – even Archie lifted his pale face and joined in with a feeble voice – and having thus given vent to their enthusiasm, the boys pulled off their jackets and began the work of removing the grizzly's skin.

"That will be a valuable addition to our museum at home, won't it?" asked Archie, stretching himself out in the shade of a tree close by. "When it is stuffed and mounted, it will be worth all our other specimens put together. I'd give something to know what Dick Lewis will have to say about it. Hallo!"

The boys looked up to see what had caused this exclamation, and discovered the trapper standing at a little distance from them, closely watching their operations. They had often seen him astonished, but never before had they seen such a look of

utter amazement as that which now overspread his face. He stood with his body bent forward, his neck stretched out, and his eyes almost starting from their sockets. With one hand he held his horse, and in the other his rifle, with the butt of which he was thumping the ground energetically, as if giving emphasis to some thoughts that were passing through his mind. His whole attitude and appearance indicated that he was little prepared for the scene he was witnessing.

“Hallo, Dick!” exclaimed Johnny; “we’re glad to see you. You and old Bob can just hang up your fiddles now. There’s a hunter in the settlement who is a long way ahead of both of you.”

The trapper tied his horse to a limb of the nearest tree, and walked toward the boys. “You amazin’ keerless feller!” said he, addressing himself to Frank, “I b’lieve it’s my bounden duty to take this yere ramrod out of my gun an’ give you the best kind of a wallopin’.”

“You had better be careful how you talk to him,” said Dick Thomas. “He’s the man who killed Old Davy.”

“Don’t I know all about it?” exclaimed the trapper. “Didn’t I say to myself this mornin’, when you fellers left the rancho, that somethin’ was goin’ to happen? Didn’t I saddle up my hoss an’ foller you, to keep an eye on you, an’ haint you gone an’ fit an’ killed that ar’ grizzly bar afore I could find you, to lend you a helpin’ hand? You have; an’ it beats any thing I ever heern tell on. The next thing I know you will be foolin’ around among them hoss-thieves.”

This was the way Dick always lectured Frank and Archie whenever they did any thing that astonished him, and a stranger, to have heard him speak, would have supposed that somebody had ordered him to watch the cousins closely, and keep them out of trouble; and that he had found the task an exceedingly difficult one to perform. The stranger would have believed, too, that he was very angry; but the boys knew that the fierce scowl he had assumed was intended to conceal a very different feeling – that he was highly elated over their victory, and that, before a week had passed, he would tell it to every body in the settlement. They knew, also, that the story would lose nothing in passing through his hands; for, although Dick always confined himself strictly to the truth when relating his own adventures, he did not hesitate to exaggerate a little when recounting the exploits of his “youngsters.”

“I wouldn’t be in Uncle Jeems’s boots fur nothin’,” said the trapper, filling his pipe and looking severely at Frank. “He promised your folks, afore we left Lawrence, that he would keep you out of all danger, an’ bring you safe back to your hum; but how he’s a goin’ to do it I can’t tell. I wouldn’t make no sich bargain as that ar’ with no man, ’cause I couldn’t live up to it. What’s the matter with you, little un?”

“I’ve got a broken head, and a lame shoulder, and a cracked nose, and somehow I don’t feel all right,” replied Archie.

“Don’t! Wal, tell us all about it.”

The trapper settled back on his elbow to listen, and Dick

Thomas, who was a smooth-tongued fellow, related the story of their adventures from beginning to end. As he proceeded, the scowl gradually faded from the backwoodsman's face; and when he told how Frank had stood there at the log, and risked his life to secure the retreat of the others, Dick slapped the young hero on the back so heartily that he felt the effects of the blow for a quarter of an hour afterward. When the story was finished, he unsheathed his long bowie and assisted the boys in removing the grizzly's skin; and as soon as this had been done, he placed Archie on his horse, and led the way toward home.

Their morning's work had sharpened the boys' appetites, and the excellent dinner which the housekeeper served up for them rapidly disappeared before their attacks. Even Archie disposed of his full share of the eatables, and after a hearty meal, pushed back his chair, declaring that he was all right, and ready for any thing the others had to propose, even if it was a fight with another Old Davy.

When the grizzly's skin had been stretched upon a frame to dry, the boys lounged about the house for an hour or two, talking over the incidents of the morning; and then Johnny and Dick bade the cousins good-by, and started for home. Archie was lonesome and restless after they had gone. While Frank sat in his easychair, deeply interested in some favorite author, Archie lay stretched out on the bed, tossing his heels in the air, and scarcely knowing what to do with himself. His lost horse was still uppermost in his mind, and he wanted to talk about him, and

about nothing else. There was Frank, as serene and undisturbed as usual, poring over the pages of some dry book, when he knew that the steed he valued so highly was within five miles of him! Archie did not see how any body could read under such circumstances, and he told his cousin so. He did not want to stay in the house either; and, what was more, he wouldn't. He wanted to go somewhere, and do something.

"Well," said Frank, laying down his book, "let's hear what you have to propose. I am quite at your service."

"Suppose we beard the lion in his den," said Archie.

"All right. Show me the lion."

"O, I am not joking. Let's visit Don Carlos. Mark my words now, Frank: that old rascal knows more about the horse-thieves, than any body else in the country. We are on pretty good terms with him, and perhaps he will invite us to stay all night. If he does, we may be able to learn something about the bridge of clouds, and the other strange things old Bob saw there. Will you go?"

"Of course. But I'll tell you what it is: You are going to be disappointed. We must not let Don Carlos know that we suspect any thing, for if we do, we may get ourselves into trouble."

"I guess we are smart enough to look out for that. We will listen to his stories, and hear him rail at the robbers, and lament the loss of his fine horses, and all that, and act as though we believed every word of it. We mustn't let Dick know where we are going," added Archie. "He would be sure to make a fuss about it, for he has somehow got it into his head that he is our guardian

in uncle's absence."

One would think that the cousins had already seen enough of excitement and perilous adventure, to satisfy any two boys in the world; and that, after their recent narrow escape from the clutches of Old Davy, they would think twice before undertaking so dangerous an enterprise as this, which Archie had called "bearding the lion in his den." The way they went about their preparations, however, showed that they were in earnest, and that they were fully determined to learn more about the mysterious rancho, that is, if there was any thing more to be learned. Frank did not think there was. Of course the friendly old Spaniard would insist that they should accept his hospitality for the night, as he always did when they visited him. They had passed two or three nights under his roof, without seeing or hearing any thing unusual, and they would do it again. As for Don Carlos' complicity with the horse-thieves, that was all in Archie's eye. It was only another of the thousand-and-one foolish notions he was continually getting into his head, and when morning came he would be obliged to acknowledge the fact. Archie, on the other hand, had made up his mind to see some queer sights during the night, if they remained at Don Carlos' rancho. He knew that he would have to fight somebody, and he prepared for it by putting a small revolver into his pocket, as did Frank, also. He was satisfied, too, that Bob had seen his horse go into the Spaniard's rancho; and, if he was still there, Archie would have him out, or he would raise a fuss about the old fellow's ears that would make

him think he had stirred up a hornet's nest.

“Just think of it!” exclaimed Archie, indignantly. “Our horses are being used every night by those robbers! O, you may smile and shake your head as much as you please, but I *know* it is so!” Frank thought if his cousin's convictions on this point were as strong as the blow he struck the table to emphasize his words, they must have been very powerful indeed. “Now, I can tell you in a few words just how this matter stands,” continued Archie, “and one of these days you will see that I am right. The robbers make their head-quarters at that rancho, and ride Roderick and King James on their plundering expeditions. They know that the animals are swift, and that if they are discovered they can run away from their pursuers very easily. But my horse sha'n't engage in any such business. He is a good honest horse, and I am not going to have him taught any bad habits.”

In a few minutes the boys were in their saddles, and galloping through the grove toward the creek. They carried their rifles slung over their shoulders by broad straps, their navy revolvers in their holsters, and their small pistols in their pockets. They rode the same horses that had carried them through the fight with the grizzly, Archie remarking that although his nag was not much of a jumper, he was a good one to go, and he might have occasion to use a fast horse before morning. They succeeded in leaving the rancho without the trapper's knowledge; and in half an hour drew rein on the bank of the creek a short distance from Don Carlos' rancho.

The building was like a good many others in that country – there was nothing remarkable about it, either in its appearance or history. It had stood a siege, and there were plenty of bullet-marks about it; and the same was true of the rancho in which Frank and Archie lived. It was built in the form of a hollow-square; the rough stone walls were five feet thick; and all the openings, except the port-holes, were protected by heavy plank doors and shutters, through which a rifle-ball could not penetrate. A tall flag-staff arose from the open court in the center, and from it floated the Stars and Stripes. Don Carlos was evidently patriotic.

The boys gazed long and earnestly at the building, and Archie was a good deal disappointed because he did not see some signs of the curious things the old trapper had witnessed there. They saw something else, however, at least Frank did, and he called Archie's attention to it, by inquiring:

“Do you see the second port-hole from the right-hand side of the building?”

“I do,” replied his cousin; “and I see something sticking out of it. It looks to me like a spy-glass.”

“That's just what it is. There is somebody in there watching us. And wasn't that flag flying at the mast-head when we first saw it?”

“Of course it was,” answered Archie, beginning to get excited, “and now it is at half-mast. Now it is being hauled down altogether,” he added, as the bunting disappeared behind the

walls of the rancho. "What can it mean? It must be a signal of some kind; and I – I – believe I won't go any farther. I'll return home and report the matter."

"What good will that do?" asked Frank.

"Why, when uncle comes back, he can raise a crowd of men, and storm the old villain."

"I don't think he would do it. He would want the very strongest evidence before he would consent to assault a peaceable settler in his own dwelling, and that is something we haven't got yet. Of course we can say that we saw somebody watching us through a spy-glass, and that the flag was hauled down when we came in sight; but that doesn't prove any thing. If we should go home with that story, every body would laugh at us."

"It is proof enough for me," said Archie, "and I don't care about trusting myself inside that rancho. I believe I'll go back."

"And I will go on," said his cousin, riding down the bank toward the ford. "If Don Carlos asks me to stay all night, I'll do it: and I shall feel as safe under his roof as I would at home."

Archie pulled off his sombrero, and scratched his head in deep perplexity. He did not want to go home without Frank, and neither did he want to go with him into the rancho. The hauling down of the flag had made him timid. If it was not a signal, why was it pulled down at that time of day – two hours before sunset? If he had never been satisfied before that there was something wrong with Don Carlos, he was now. Beyond a doubt he was connected with the robbers – he was their leader, perhaps

– and when he and Frank went into the rancho, they would find themselves surrounded by a crowd of villainous Mexicans, broken-down miners, and other desperate characters, who would never allow them to go out again. Worse than all, they could not hope for assistance, for they had left the rancho without telling any one where they were going; and when their absence was discovered, their friends would not know where to look for them.

“Frank,” exclaimed Archie, “are you really going in there?”

“I am, if I can get in,” replied his cousin, who was by this time half way across the ford. “Come on. I want to satisfy you that you have been wrongfully accusing an honest man.”

“And I’ll show you that I haven’t,” said Archie, galloping down the bank of the creek, and into the water. “If you are bound to go on, of course I shall stick to you.”

While the boys were riding toward the rancho they kept their eyes fastened on the port-hole, and saw that the person with the spy-glass closely followed all their movements. They discovered nothing else that looked suspicious, however, and when they dashed through the gate-way and drew up in the court, the reception they met with, from the proprietor of the rancho, went a long way toward convincing Archie that he had made a great mistake.

Don Carlos was a small, slim man, with a very sallow face, a long, hooked nose, and an immense gray mustache, which covered all the lower part of his face. He called himself a Spaniard: but he looked more like a German Jew, and talked

exactly like one. He was as polite as a Frenchman; and when the boys rode up to the porch, he pulled off his sombrero, and stood bowing and scraping to them until they dismounted from their horses.

“Ach! here ish my goot leetle poys!” he exclaimed, in his broken English. “I peen so glad to see you. You shall shtay mit me now all night, of course, aint it? Peppo!” he added, in a louder tone, addressing a young Mexican who stood at a little distance, looking on – “you von grand rascal! dake dis horses to dem shtables. I do so hope dem horse-dieves won’t shtéal ’em pefore mornings. Valk right in de house, leetle poys.”

“The more I see of this old fellow, the more I am convinced that he is a Dutchman,” thought Archie, as he followed Frank and the Don into the rancho. “I’ve met a good many Spaniards since I have been in California, but I never heard one talk like that.”

Their host conducted them through a long wide hall, the walls of which were ornamented with old-fashioned pictures and implements of the chase, and ushered them into an elegantly-furnished room, where he left them to take care of themselves; telling them that his herdsman were out collecting a drove of cattle to be sent to San Diego, and that it was necessary that he should superintend their operations. If the boys wanted to read, there were plenty of books on the center-table; and if they did not feel like sitting still, they might walk about the rancho, and see if they could find any thing to amuse them. Supper would be ready at sunset; he would then be back, and would pass the

evening with them.

“What do you think now, Archie?” asked Frank, when the Don had gone out. “Is this the sort of a reception a robber would be likely to extend to visitors? Do you suppose that if there was any thing wrong here, he would have allowed us the freedom of the house so readily?”

“He does that merely to blind us,” replied his cousin. “He is more polite and attentive than he used to be, and that makes me suspicious. If we don’t wish ourselves a thousand miles from here before morning, I will make you a present of my horse when I get him.”

Frank recalled these words a few hours afterward, and told himself that Archie had more sense than he had ever given him credit for.

CHAPTER VII

A HEAVY REWARD

Frank, we repeat, was obliged to come over to his cousin's way of thinking before he was many hours older; but now he believed his own opinions to be correct, and showed his contempt for Archie's by settling back into an arm-chair, and becoming deeply interested in a book which he selected from among the numerous volumes on the center-table. Archie, being left to himself, walked restlessly about the room, looking at the pictures, gazing out at the port-holes, examining the weapons that hung on the walls, and so interested was he in his investigations, that his good-breeding alone restrained him from peering into closets and wardrobes. He kept up an incessant talking, but Frank's answers were given only in monosyllables, and Archie finally became disgusted, and left him to read in peace. "You will turn into a book one of these fine days," said he. "But I'll tell you what it is, old fellow, you'll not take things so very easily much longer."

Archie continued his walk about the room, passing his hands over the walls, looking under the bed, and behind tables and sofas, as if searching for something that he was in a great hurry to find, and the last his cousin saw of him he was standing with his hands behind his back, and his head turned on one side, closely

examining a large oil-painting which extended from the ceiling to the floor. The next time Frank looked up, he was alone in the room – Archie had disappeared.

“What trick are you up to now?” exclaimed Frank, laying down his book. “Come out from under that bed. What would you have to say for yourself if the Don should come in and find you there?”

But Archie was not under the bed, nor was he anywhere in the room. Frank called him, but there was no answer. He looked into every nook and corner of the apartment in which it was possible that Archie could have concealed himself, and then he caught up his hat and hurried through the hall, looking into all the rooms he passed, and out into the court. The rancho seemed to be deserted, with the exception of a solitary Mexican, who stood leaning against a door-post on the opposite side of the court. This man scowled fiercely, and looked suspiciously at him as he came up; and instead of making inquiries about Archie, as he had intended, Frank thrust his hands into his pockets, and strolled slowly toward the stables, peering in at the doors and windows, and keeping one eye on the Mexican, who closely watched every move he made.

“Archie hasn’t had time to get far away,” thought Frank; “and no doubt he is roaming about the rancho, searching high and low for some evidence to confirm his ridiculous suspicions concerning Don Carlos; and that is something he won’t find, of course. That is a villainous-looking fellow,” he added, with

another glance over his shoulder toward the Mexican, "and I should feel quite as well pleased if he would take less interest in my movements. He acts as though he had been stationed there to watch me."

Frank finally found his way to the stables, but without discovering any signs of the missing Archie. He found his horse there, and his cousin's, standing quietly in their stalls; and he also saw several other fine animals, which the Don had doubtless brought in there for protection from the horse-thieves. Frank did not think it very probable that he would lose any more of his stock, for the most expert robber would have found it a difficult task to effect an entrance through those well-secured doors; and, more than that, Frank noticed that there were several beds in a small room adjoining the stable, and the garments, lassos, weapons, and other articles that were scattered about, showed that the apartment belonged to some of the Don's Rancheros. The old Spaniard was not out on the rancho with his herdsmen, as Frank had supposed, but he was in this room, holding an earnest conversation with some one who disappeared very suddenly and mysteriously when Frank thrust his head in at the door. The latter thought, by his actions, that the old Spaniard would rather not have been discovered; but he greeted his guest very cordially, and seeing that he was alone, made hurried inquiries for Archie.

"He is out somewhere looking around, I suppose," answered Frank. "No doubt he will turn up all right in a few minutes."

"Ah, yes," said the Don, with some anxiety in his tone; "but I

would like to know *vare* he ish. Peppo! you von grand rascal!"

The young Mexican was on hand immediately. He came out of a dark corner of the stable, to which he had retreated when Frank came in, and where he had stood watching him.

"Peppo!" continued his employer, "it's petter you go find dis leetle poys, and tell him we will have some suppers now."

There was nothing in the old Spaniard's words or manner to indicate that haste was desirable, but Beppo, perhaps, seeing or hearing something that escaped Frank's notice, started off on a keen run. This seemed to be a signal to the Mexican who stood leaning against the door-post, for he walked rapidly across the court, and presently half a dozen Rancheros appeared and hurried about in different directions, all searching for Archie. The Don watched their movements, and so did Frank. The former was evidently growing uneasy, and his guest certainly was. The Spaniard stepped nervously about, talking hurriedly in his broken English on indifferent matters, and laughing uproariously at his own jokes; and Frank glanced toward the gate-way as if he had half a mind to take to his heels. He believed, now, that it would have been much better for him if he had kept at a respectful distance from Don Carlos and his rancho. A dread of impending evil, which he could not shake off, began to press upon him; and it was plain to him that if he was not in a scrape already, he soon would be. It is true that nothing had been said to induce this belief, but he had seen and felt enough to satisfy him that such was the fact. In the first place, it seemed to him that an

air of mystery brooded over the rancho, and that the Don, in spite of his cordial greeting and jovial manner, was trying to conceal something from him. He acted, now, as though he did not want him there. And then, the sudden appearance of those men was another thing that troubled Frank. Until within a moment he had seen but two persons on the rancho besides the Spaniard, but, at an instant's warning, half a dozen herdsmen had sprung into view, and to save his life he could not tell where they had come from. They appeared at the same moment, and in different directions, as if they had come up out of the ground, or found their way into the court through secret trap-doors in the pavement. Why had they remained concealed? and what was the reason that Archie's disappearance had created such a commotion among them? Frank judged from the old Spaniard's words that he was particularly anxious to know where Archie was, and what he was doing; and this implied that there were things about the rancho that the Don did not want him to see.

Frank's uneasiness increased as the search progressed, and finally he became thoroughly frightened when he noticed the excited looks of the Rancheros as they hurried past him, and heard the angry, threatening words which they exchanged with one another. The Don began to be alarmed also.

"Vell! vell!" he exclaimed, looking back into the stable for the twentieth time, to assure himself that Archie's horse was still there, "vare ish dis leetle poys?"

"He may have gone out," replied Frank, with as much

indifference as he could command. "I'll step to the gate and look for him." "And when I get there," he added, mentally, "I won't stop. I'll show you Greasers some running that will make you wonder. You may be all right in here, but I don't like your company."

Frank had great confidence in himself, and he was certain that if he could only get half way to the gate, he could elude any attempts that might be made to detain him. He had not the remotest idea, however, that any such attempts would be made. That would be a heinous offense in the eyes of the settlers, who would never allow it to pass unnoticed. Frank turned to leave the Don, but the latter stepped forward and laid a heavy hand on his arm. "I guess it's petter you don't go," said he.

Frank was thunderstruck. The old Spaniard's tone and manner showed him that he was in earnest, and he knew now that Archie's suspicions were correct, and that he himself had been sadly mistaken in the opinions he had formed regarding his host. If he had been allowed his choice in the matter, he would much rather have been standing in front of that log, awaiting the onset of another Old Davy. He would have felt more certain of escape than he did now, surrounded as he was by those villainous Mexicans. A wonderful change had come over Don Carlos. His jovial, good-natured smile had given way to a terrible scowl, and his face was pale with rage or fear; Frank could not tell which. With the next words he uttered, he threw off the mask entirely, and appeared in his true character.

“This is von grand shwindle,” he exclaimed, making a sudden effort to seize Frank by the collar. “I know now why you come here to mine house. Hi, Bedro! make dat gate shut. It’s petter you don’t go, leetle poys.”

“It is better I *do* go,” replied Frank, quickly. “I want you to understand that it will take a man with more muscle than you have got to detain me.”

During the next two minutes the Don learned more of the qualities that go to make up a sixteen-year-old Young America, than he had ever known before. Frank was as quick as a cat in his movements, and he knew that if he hoped to escape from the rancho now was his time or never. Pedro was already hurrying toward the gate, to execute the commands of his employer, and if that gate was once closed on him, he was a prisoner. While the Old Spaniard was speaking, he thrust out his arm; but his fingers, instead of fastening upon Frank’s collar, closed only upon the empty air. An instant afterward the boy was half way across the court, and he and Pedro were having a lively race for the gate; while the Don stood watching them, his body bent forward, and his mouth and eyes open to their widest extent. He could not understand how Frank had escaped. The ease with which he had slipped out of his clutches bewildered him. But his inactivity did not long continue, for he speedily became aware that the clumsy Pedro was no match, in a hurried, off-hand foot-race, for the nimble young hunter.

“Hi! hi!” he yelled, stamping his foot frantically on the

pavement; “catch him! catch him! Vat you making dere, Bedro? Von dousand tollars to de mans vot catches dat leetle poys! Two! dree! five dousand!” he added, in a still louder tone, seeing that Frank was rapidly leaving Pedro behind, and nearing the gate. “Ach! mine heavens! *Ten dousand!*”

The fugitive heard every word he said, and his wonder, astonishment, and alarm increased proportionately with the rewards the Spaniard offered for his capture; and how intense must have been his amazement and terror when he heard the Don declare in frantic tones that he would give twenty, forty, and finally, fifty thousand dollars, if he was captured alive and unharmed.

“It is some consolation to know that he doesn’t mean to kill me,” thought Frank. “I don’t intend to let him take me prisoner, either. The offer of every cent he is worth, could not make those awkward Mexicans run fast enough to beat me in a fair race.”

If Frank had run swiftly before, his headway was fairly astonishing now. He exerted himself to the utmost, and flew over the ground at a rate of speed that the fleet-footed Dick Lewis himself would not have been ashamed of. A few leaps brought him to the gate, through which he went like an arrow from a bow, and bent his steps toward the nearest patch of woods, which was about a quarter of a mile distant. The Rancheros followed him, but they might as well have tried to overtake a railway train, or a bird on the wing.

Don Carlos was almost beside himself. He stood in the gate-

way gazing after the fugitive, flourishing his arms wildly about his head, shouting orders to his men in Spanish and English, and calling upon Frank to stop and surrender himself a prisoner, or he would do something terrible to him.

“I think it would be a good plan to catch me first,” said Frank, to himself, looking back at his pursuers. “I am like Dick Lewis now: my enemies are all behind me, and I know I am safe. Hallo! What’s that?”

It was a bullet, which whistled through the air most uncomfortably near his head. Another followed close after, and plowed up the ground in front of him, and then came the crack of two rifles in quick succession. Frank felt the cold chills creeping all over him; and the next time he looked back he discovered several men, whom he had not seen before, hurrying out of the rancho with their weapons in their hands, followed by three on horseback. This was a most discouraging prospect. He did not stand in much fear of the bullets (although it was by no means pleasant to hear them whistling around him), but he was afraid of those mounted men. He could not hope to distance them, and he trembled when he thought of the fate in store for him when they came near enough to reach him with their lassos. If they did not choke him to death, they would take him back to the rancho a prisoner, and that would be almost as bad. Of course he did not intend that they should do either if he could prevent it. He was armed, and if they succeeded in overtaking him, he would show them how he could use a revolver.

Frank had accomplished more than half the distance that lay between him and the woods before the horsemen came out; and he hoped to be able to reach its friendly shelter before they could come up with him. He did it, too, although his escape was a very narrow one. As he dashed into the bushes he heard the lassos whistling through the air behind him, and he even felt the "wind" of one as it flew past his ear. But once fairly in the woods he was safe from those dreaded weapons. The Rancheros could not use their lariats among the trees, and neither did they attempt to follow him farther. They fired their pistols at him, and then began circling around the woods to cut him off from the creek, and place themselves between him and his home.

Frank kept straight on into the woods for at least two miles, without once slackening his speed, and then turned and ran toward the creek. When he came within sight of it, he sat down on a log to recover his breath, and to listen for the sounds of pursuit.

"I thank my lucky stars that they are all Mexicans," panted he, glancing suspiciously through the bushes on all sides of him. "If there had been a few such rifle-shots among them as Dick Lewis and old Bob Kelly I should not be here now. Fifty thousand dollars! I little dreamed that I should ever have a price set upon my head."

For ten minutes Frank sat on the log, resting after his long run, and thinking over the incidents that had transpired at the rancho. He believed now that Don Carlos was one of the robbers; the evidence against him was strong enough to satisfy any one of his

guilt. The air of mystery with which every thing was conducted; the unusual number of men on the rancho; the magical manner in which they had appeared the instant their services were needed; the Spaniard's unreasonable alarm at Archie's absence; and his attempts to detain Frank – all these things were against him. Frank understood now what the Don meant when he said that he knew why the boys had come there. He probably mistrusted that the settlers were suspicious of him, and had sent Frank and Archie to his rancho to spy out something. If that was his idea, Frank thought it a very ridiculous one; for he might have known that two boys would not have been selected to carry out so dangerous an enterprise, while there were such men as Dick and Bob in the country. His guilty conscience made him betray himself – that was the secret of the matter.

Frank was not yet safe by any means. He knew that Don Carlos and his men would leave no stone unturned to effect his capture – it would be dangerous to them to allow him to go home after what had transpired at the rancho – and that they would search every nook and corner of the mountains, and hunt him down as they would a wolf. Still he had no fears for his own safety; but, now that the excitement of the race was over, he was deeply concerned about his cousin. There was a mystery attending his disappearance that he could not fathom. He hoped that Archie had left the room while he was reading, and that he had slipped out of the rancho and gone home. That was not much like his cousin's way of doing business, but it was the only reasonable

way in which he could explain his absence.

“That boy could not long exist without getting into some sort of a scrape,” said Frank; “and if I ever put eyes on him again, I’ll watch him more closely than I have done heretofore.”

“Stand where you are; don’t move hand or foot,” said a gruff voice, breaking in upon his reverie.

Frank sprang up, and found himself face to face with a Ranchero, who stood holding his rifle to his shoulder, with his finger resting on the trigger.

CHAPTER VIII

ARCHIE LEARNS SOMETHING

If Don Carlos had only known where his missing guest was all this while, and what he was doing, and what he was seeing, he would have had good cause for alarm. Archie was not at home, as Frank fondly hoped, nor was he outside the rancho. He was in a worse predicament than he had ever been in before, and was learning some things about Don Carlos and his house that greatly astonished him.

We said that the last time Frank saw him, he was standing before a large oil-painting in the room where the Spaniard had left them. It was a life-size picture of an Indian warrior; and so well was it executed that, as Archie stood looking at it, he almost expected to see the savage open his lips to give the war-whoop, and then draw the bow which he carried in his hand, and discharge an arrow at him.

“The man who painted that was an artist, and understood his business,” said Archie, to himself. “I have seen lots of those fellows, and that’s just the way they look.”

Something in the picture, which he had not before noticed, caught his eye at this moment, and interrupted the thread of his soliloquy. The handle of the warrior’s hunting-knife, which he wore in his belt, was rounded off into a knob at the end, and

Archie was sure that it stood out a little way from the canvas. He leaned forward and looked at it more closely, and sure enough it was a wooden button, which fitted into the end of the handle of the knife, and not a painted one. He stepped up and examined it with his fingers, and to his surprise it yielded to his touch.

“Now I’d like to know what this means,” thought he, pressing the knob harder than before. “This thing must be attached to a spring, because it comes back when I let go of it. Well – by – gracious!”

It was very seldom indeed that Archie used any slang words, but sometimes, when he was greatly excited or astonished, he did like other boys – forgot all the good resolutions he had made regarding this bad habit. It was no wonder that he was amazed now, for the painting began to move as if it had been suddenly endowed with life. It opened before him like a door, swinging swiftly back on a pair of invisible hinges, and revealing a narrow, winding stairway which seemed to run down into a cellar beneath the outer wall. Archie stood like a wooden boy for a few seconds, his neck outstretched, his eyes dilating and trying to pierce through the thick darkness which enveloped the stairs, and then, scarcely knowing what he was about, he stepped cautiously into the passage. An instant afterward he would have given every thing he possessed, or ever expected to possess, if he had been a little more prudent; but then it was too late. The painting swung back to its place as swiftly and noiselessly as it had opened, and the smooth click of a spring-lock told Archie

that he was a prisoner. He did not intend to remain one long, however. He understood the mystery of that secret door, and it would not be many seconds before he would get out again. Perhaps Frank would now be willing to look up from his book long enough to hear him tell of this wonderful discovery he had made; and perhaps, too, he would be ready to believe that he had some foundation for his suspicions.

Talking thus to himself, Archie groped his way back to the painting (for now that the opening was closed the passage was as dark as midnight), and began to pass his hands over it, searching hurriedly for the concealed spring. He now found that the back of the picture was formed of heavy oak planks, nearly a foot in thickness; or, to make the matter clearer, the whole contrivance was simply a ponderous door, with the painting spread over one side of it to conceal it. But where was the spring? Archie ran his fingers over every inch of the door, from top to bottom, but could not find it. He examined every one of the planks separately, and finally turned his attention to the huge blocks of stone which formed the walls, in the hope that he might find the spring imbedded in one of them. Five minutes – ten minutes – a quarter of an hour were passed in this way, and then Archie sank down upon the floor, all in a heap, panting and sweating as though he had been engaged in the most violent exercise. His face was very pale, his hands trembled as though he were suffering from an attack of the ague, and one to have seen him at that moment would have believed that he was almost overcome with fear. His

words, however, did not indicate the fact.

“Now here’s fun,” said he, with a desperate attempt to keep up his courage; “here’s sport – here’s joy by the wagon-load. I am cornered easy enough, and it serves me just right for prying about where I had no business. What will the Don say when he comes back and finds me gone?”

As this thought passed through Archie’s mind, he sprang to his feet, the cold perspiration starting out anew from every pore in his body, and his heart beating fast and furiously. What *would* the old Spaniard think when he found that one of his guests was missing, and, above all, what would he *do*? If he was an innocent man, and Archie’s suspicions regarding him were without any foundation, he would hunt him up and release him; there would be a hearty laugh all around; and the Don would have a long story to tell about the passage-way, the reasons why he had built it, and the use he had made of it. But suppose that Archie’s suspicions were correct – that Don Carlos was really one of the robbers, and that the passage led to some underground cavern where he and his men concealed their plunder – what would he do when he found that his secret had been discovered? Archie did not stop to answer this question, but once more searched all over the door for the spring; but with no better success than before. Then he pounded upon the door, and called his cousin; but the walls were thick, and the sound of his voice did not reach Frank, who read on in blissful ignorance of what was transpiring on the other side of the painting.

“He must have gone out,” said Archie, now beginning to be thoroughly alarmed, “and I am left to my own resources, which are scarce, I can tell you. What if one of the band should come up here with a light?”

Archie pulled his revolver from his pocket, faced about, and peered through the darkness in the direction of the stairs, listening intently, and almost imagining that he heard light footsteps approaching. But he was alone in the passage-way, and having satisfied himself on this point, he leaned against the wall to think over the situation, and determine upon some course of action.

“It would be awkward to be caught here – for the robber, I mean, for it is my opinion that he would go down those stairs with much greater haste than he came up. Of course there must be two ends to this passage, and as I can not get out here, I must try some other way of escape. I can’t be in a much worse fix than I am now.”

As Archie said this, he put his revolver into his pocket again, and began feeling his way along the wall toward the stairs. It was a dangerous undertaking, for the floor might be full of trap-doors, for all he knew, and one of them might open beneath his feet at any moment, and let him down into some dungeon; or, he might run against one of the robbers in the darkness, who would slip a lasso around his neck, and make a prisoner of him before he could raise an arm to defend himself. He reached the head of the stairs, however, without any such misfortune, and slowly and

cautiously felt his way to the bottom. There he found himself in a passage-way which ran at right angles with the one above. After a moment's deliberation, he decided that if he followed it to the left it would lead him under the court (through which Frank was, at that very moment, running a race with Pedro for the gate), and that was the way Archie did not want to go. By turning to the right, if the passage ran far enough in that direction, he would reach the bank of the creek, and there he might find some way of escape. Having decided this point, he was about to move on again, when he was frightened nearly out of his senses by hearing a whisper close at his elbow:

“Beppo, is this you?”

The fight for which Archie had been bracing his nerves ever since he first made up his mind to visit Don Carlos' rancho, was to come off now – he was sure of that. He was much calmer than he had thought he could be under such circumstances, but still he trembled violently in every limb as he drew his revolver, and thrust it straight out before him in the direction from which the voice came. A person thinks rapidly when in danger, and during the moment's pause that followed the question thus unexpectedly propounded to him, Archie thought over and rejected a dozen wild schemes which suggested themselves to him. One, however, he accepted. He would reveal himself to the man, and if the latter would agree to show him the way above ground, it would be all right; he would then be willing to believe that Don Carlos was an honest man, and that there was nothing wrong about him or

his rancho. But if the man made an outcry, and began shouting for help, or tried to secure him, he would give him some idea of American pluck and muscle.

“Beppo, is that you?” asked the voice again, in the same cautious whisper. Then, before Archie had time to act on the resolution he had just formed, the man, whoever he was, continued: “here are the keys. We shall be ready in half an hour. Follow this gang-way, and enter the first door on your left. Be sure and lock the door after you, because there’s always somebody roaming about here, and you might be discovered. Do your work well, now, and the revolver is yours.”

A moment afterward Archie stood holding a bunch of keys in his hand, and listening with beating heart to the retreating footsteps of the man, who was hurrying toward the other end of the passage. He had never been more excited and alarmed in his life. If the man had brought a lantern with him, the fight he had been expecting would certainly have come off.

When the sound of the footsteps had died away, Archie drew a long breath of relief, and began to congratulate himself on his escape, and to repeat what the man had said to him. Two things were evident: one was that he had been mistaken for Beppo, a Mexican boy about his own age who was employed on the rancho; the other, that he had some sort of a secret commission to execute, and that for the faithful performance of his work, he would be rewarded by the present of a revolver. What that commission was, Archie neither knew or cared; he had

something of much more importance to think about. Suppose the man should happen to meet the genuine Beppo, and should find out that he had given the keys to somebody else! Would he not try to ascertain who that some one else was, and wouldn't he call for help, and begin a thorough search of the rancho?

"I haven't a single instant to lose," said Archie, to himself. "Let me see! I must follow this gang-way and open the first door on my left, and be sure and lock it after me. I don't much like to do it, for there is no knowing what I may find in that room. I hope one of these keys will let me out of this den of robbers."

So saying, Archie began to feel his way along the left wall of the passage, and presently came to the door of which the man had spoken, and which he succeeded in opening after trying several of his keys. Hastily passing through the door, he closed and locked it, and then began to feel a little more secure; although he did not know which way to turn next. If he kept straight ahead, he might come in contact with some object, or step upon one of those trap-doors he so much dreaded. After a little hesitation he placed his hands upon the wall, and began moving slowly around the apartment, but had not taken more than half a dozen steps before he ran against something. A moment's examination showed him that it was a table, with several articles upon it – a bowie-knife, a brace of pistols, two or three lassos, a lantern, and a box of matches. These last were just what he had been wishing for. He lighted the lantern, and then turned to take a survey of the room. It proved to be a sort of armory and depot of supplies. The

walls were covered with weapons, and saddles, bridles, blankets, ponchos, and numerous other articles of like description, were scattered about over the floor. A hundred horsemen could have been equipped from that room.

As soon as Archie had satisfied himself that he was alone, he began to examine the objects about him a little more closely; and almost the first thing his eyes rested on was a piece of property belonging to himself.

“Isn’t it lucky that I didn’t speak to that man?” he soliloquized. “Didn’t I say that old Spaniard was one of the robbers? That’s my saddle. I would know it among a million. It is the very one that was on Sleepy Sam when Uncle James bought him in St. Joseph. Now, my horse is in this very rancho; and he isn’t far off, either. This settles the question of Don Carlos’ guilt.”

Archie now became doubly anxious to effect his escape from the rancho. The man who had given him the keys had told him that some one was always roaming about those passage-ways, and as long as he remained there he was in danger of discovery. But he had said that if his horse was in that rancho, he would have him out, and he was going to keep his word. He would not think of going home until he had found him. Once on his back, and outside of the walls of the rancho, he could laugh at the robbers. If Roderick was there, he would take him, too. He hoped to be able to secure both horses, and make good his retreat without being discovered; and if he could do that, wouldn’t he astonish his cousin when he came home in the morning? But something

prevented Archie from carrying out this plan. As it happened, Frank was the one who recovered the horses; and if it had not been for him and Roderick, Archie would never have mounted King James again.

Archie's first care was to take possession of the weapons he found on the table; then he raised his lantern, and took another survey of the room. He saw a door opposite to the one by which he had entered; and when he had opened it, he found that it led into a long, low apartment, which was used as a stable. It contained several horses, which the robbers had selected and kept on account of their great speed and endurance, and conspicuous among them stood Roderick and King James.

“Aha!” exclaimed Archie.

“Santa Maria!” cried somebody else.

Archie looked up, and there was Beppo. His mouth and eyes were wide open, and he stood gazing at the intruder as if he could not quite make up his mind whether he was a solid flesh-and-blood boy, or only an apparition. The fight must come off now, and Archie was ready for it.

CHAPTER IX

ARCHIE AND BEPPO

“**Santa Maria!**” exclaimed Beppo again, and this time in a very different tone of voice. He was frightened now, and that was not to be wondered at; for Archie stood holding a pistol in each hand, and both of them were pointed straight at the Mexican’s breast. “Don’t shoot,” said he, drawing his head down between his shoulders, and raising one arm before his eyes.

“You are in no danger as long as you keep perfectly quiet, and do just as I tell you,” replied Archie, glancing about the stable to make sure there was no one else present.

This assurance seemed to remove an immense load of apprehension from Beppo’s mind. He looked all over Archie, from head to foot, as if taking his exact measure, and finally demanded:

“What do you want, and how did you get in here?”

“Don’t talk so loud,” commanded Archie, making a significant motion with his pistols. “If you speak above a whisper again, you are a gone Greaser.”

“Well, what do you want here?” repeated Beppo, in a lower tone.

“I have no time to waste in answering questions. Crawl out of that jacket.”

The Mexican seemed to be very much astonished at this order, but, without an instant's hesitation, he divested himself of his greasy, tattered garment, and threw it on the floor.

"Now that sombrero," continued Archie. "That's all right. I shall be obliged to borrow these articles for a little while, but, as I shall leave my own in their place, you will not lose much in case I fail to return them. When I get them on, I think I shall have no trouble in passing myself off for you. What are you doing in here?"

"I came after the gray and black," replied Beppo, pointing toward Roderick and King James.

"Well, if it is all the same to you, I will take charge of them myself. I have a better right to one of them, than you or any body else about the rancho. He was stolen from me, Greaser, and when I get home, I am going to make somebody smart for it."

"I didn't do it," said Beppo.

"It is fortunate for you that you didn't," replied Archie. "If I thought you had a hand in it, I would take you down and give you a good drubbing. I'd like to have a long talk with you about the strange things that are done here every night," he continued, pulling off his neat jacket, and picking up the one Beppo had thrown upon the floor; "but just now I am too deeply interested in getting away from here, to bother my head about any thing else. I will put the saddles on the horses, and then I want you to show me" —

"Santa Maria!" yelled Beppo again. "Help! help!"

There was no astonishment or terror in his voice this time. His favorite expression was uttered in a tone of triumph. Things looked exceedingly dark for Archie now, for he was lying on his back in the middle of the floor, Beppo was kneeling on his breast, and the stable was echoing with his lusty calls for assistance. Archie was greatly astonished, but he was not frightened. He was as cool as a cucumber.

“That’s your game, is it?” said he. “I wouldn’t be afraid to wager King James against any mustang in the country, that it won’t succeed, for you’ve got hold of a Yankee now. I’ll open your eyes for you, in about a minute.”

Archie had come to believe, with Dick Lewis and Bob Kelly, that there was not a Mexican in the world who possessed the least particle of courage; and consequently he did not watch his prisoner as closely as he ought to have done. Although Beppo was very much terrified at the sight of the pistols, he kept his wits about him, and while his captor was talking to him in his free-and-easy way, the young Mexican’s mind was busy with plans for escape. While Archie was exchanging his jacket and sombrero for those belonging to Beppo, the latter thought he saw a chance to turn the tables on him.

Archie had a peculiar way of putting on a coat. He thrust both arms half way into the sleeves, then threw the coat over his head, straightened out his arms, and gave himself a shake or two to settle the garment into its place. It was when he had got the jacket about half way on, and both his arms were fast in the sleeves,

that Beppo sprang forward like a young tiger, and catching him around the body, threw him to the ground. He accomplished this with so much ease, that he thought he was sure to win a decided victory.

“Give up that pistol,” said he, savagely. “I’ve got you now.”

“That remains to be seen,” replied Archie, with a coolness that astounded the Mexican. “There’s no knowing who is governor until after the election.”

Archie, although taken at great disadvantage, struggled desperately, and to such good purpose that he succeeded in freeing his arms from the jacket; and then the matter was quickly decided. Beppo was turned over on his back in a twinkling, and Archie, holding him down with one hand, drew the lantern toward him with the other, and extinguished it; for he heard footsteps approaching. Beppo’s cries had reached the ears of some of the people of the rancho, and they were hurrying to his assistance. He would have continued to shout for help, but the cold muzzle of a pistol, which he felt pressed against his head, restrained him.

Archie did not know what to do now. His first impulse was to spring up and take to his heels; but, if he did, what should he do with his prisoner? He might have compelled him to accompany him in his flight, but Beppo was a clumsy fellow, and having no reasons for wishing to conceal his movements, he would, no doubt, make noise enough to guide the Rancheros in the pursuit. If Archie left him behind, he would begin shouting for help

again; and if he had not already alarmed every one on the rancho, it would not take him long to do so. The only plan he could think of was to remain with his captive, and keep him quiet by threatening him with his pistol, trusting to the darkness to prevent his discovery.

“Don’t dare open your head,” said Archie, fiercely.

There was scarcely any need of this injunction. Beppo never once thought of moving a muscle, while that pistol was so near him, and he lay as silent and motionless upon the floor as if he had been turned into a block of stone.

The footsteps continued to approach, and presently the light of a lantern flashed through the darkness, revealing to Archie a grated door at the farther end of the stable, which he had not before noticed. Looking through the door, he saw two Rancheros hurrying along the passage, one of them holding his lantern above his head, and both trying to peer through the darkness to see what was going on in the stable. They had not yet seen Archie, but they certainly would discover him when they reached the door, for he was close in front of it. He must get back out of sight, and he had but a single instant in which to do it. Springing quickly to his feet, he seized the astonished Beppo by the collar, with both hands, and before he could make up his mind what was going to happen, he was lying on his back in Roderick’s stall, with Archie on top of him; and the mustang was looking down at them as if wondering what they were doing there. Scarcely had this movement been accomplished, when the Rancheros arrived

at the door; but, to Archie's immense relief, they did not attempt to open it. The reason was because the door was locked, and the key was attached to the bunch in Archie's pocket. They held the lantern close against the bars, and peered into the stable.

"He isn't here," Archie heard one of them whisper, at length.

"He must be," replied the other. "I know those shouts came from the stable. Beppo, are you in there?"

The young Mexican heard the question, and would have been glad to answer, if Archie's pistol had not been held so close to his head. The men waited and listened for a reply, but hearing none, the one who had last spoken continued:

"I can see those horses in there, and they are not saddled. He has had plenty of time to bring them out, for I gave him the keys ten minutes ago."

"Santa Maria!" said Beppo, in an astonished whisper.

"Silence!" commanded Archie.

"But he didn't give me any keys," persisted the prisoner, whose surprise was so great that he forgot all about the dangerous proximity of the pistol.

"Keep still, I say!" repeated Archie; and as the order was followed by a firmer pressure of the muzzle of the weapon against his head, the young Mexican thought it best to comply.

"Where do you suppose those shouts came from?" asked one of the men at the door.

"I don't know," replied the other; "and, what is more, I don't care. What could have become of that rascal Beppo; and why

don't he bring out those horses? that's what's troubling me. If we don't find him very soon, our plans will all be knocked in the head."

The men seemed to be very much concerned about the young Mexican, and that was a point in Archie's favor; for they did not remain long at the door, but set out in search of him. Archie watched the light through the grated door until it disappeared, and then began to question his prisoner.

"What's up here, any how?" he demanded. "What did those men want you to do?"

"Nothing," replied Beppo.

"Yes they did. You can't fool me, for I am better posted than you think I am. Where do you suppose those keys are?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I do; and I know, too, that those men promised you a revolver for doing some work for them."

"Who told you so?" asked Beppo, more astonished than ever.

"No matter. I have a way of finding out such things. What did those men want you to do? No fooling, now."

Beppo felt the muzzle of the pistol again, and the secret came out all at once.

"They wanted me to bring those two horses out of the stable for them," said he. "They are tired of staying here, and want to go away. They intend to take the Don's money, too – the gold he keeps in his bed-room. They want the gray and black horses because they are the swiftest in the country; and if they

are followed, they can't be caught."

"Well," said Archie, when his prisoner paused, "go on, and tell me what else you know."

Beppo knew a good deal, and it took him some time to tell it; but Archie, impatient as he was, listened attentively to all he had to say – not because he was curious to learn something of the every-day life of the robbers, but for the reason that he hoped his prisoner would let fall some item of information that would assist him in making his escape from the rancho. He learned that Beppo was the stableboy, and that it was a part of his duty to bring out the "gray and black" every evening, at sunset, for two of the Rancheros, who mounted them and rode off somewhere; and the next morning Beppo would find two or three, and sometimes half a dozen, strange horses in the stable. The stolen nags were driven into Texas every week, and sold there; and the reason why Roderick and King James had been kept, was because they were known to be very fleet, and the robbers wanted to use them. One piece of information that greatly astonished Archie was, that, although there were fifty men on the Don's rancho, they did not number a third of the band. The others were scattered all over the southern part of the State, and were employed as herdsmen by the farmers, who little suspected that they were in league with the robbers. Beppo said there were some on Mr. Winters's rancho, but he did not know who they were. Their business was to send the Don, who was chief of the band, any information they might gain concerning the fast horses on their own and neighboring

ranchos, and Pedro and another herdsman would go out and steal them. These two men did all the stealing; and Archie judged from Beppo's description of their exploits that they were very expert at the business. They always rode Roderick and King James, and the swift animals brought them home in safety, in spite of the most desperate attempts that had been made to capture them.

The keys to the stable and to all the rooms in the underground part of the rancho, were kept in the Don's bed-room. One of the discontented members of the band had stolen them, and, as he supposed, given them to Beppo, whom he had hired with the promise of a revolver to bring the horses out about half an hour before the usual time. When the mutineers saw the horses in the court, they were to make a sudden raid on their employer's bed-room, secure as much gold as they could carry, and then rush out, jump into their saddles, and leave the rancho with all possible speed.

Archie was silent for some minutes after Beppo ceased speaking. He was thinking what a skillful manager the Spaniard must have been to have successfully conducted the operations of so extensive an organization, without even exciting suspicion. And what astonishing impudence the old fellow had, too! Archie remembered that upon one occasion, during a general hunt after the horse-thieves, in which the Don had taken an active part, he had invited a dozen men and boys to his rancho, and served them up an excellent dinner. What would those guests have thought if they had known that they were being entertained by the chief of

the very robbers they were trying to hunt down? And to think, too, that some of the band were employed on his uncle's rancho – that he had seen them every day, and talked and ridden with them! Archie told himself that there would be some exciting times in the settlement before all these robbers could be brought to justice, and the probabilities were that somebody would get hurt. He did not care how soon the fight began, for then he would have a chance to take satisfaction out of somebody for stealing his horse. Archie pondered upon these things, until it occurred to him that it would be a good plan for him to effect his escape before he began his war upon the robbers, and this thought once more aroused him to a sense of his situation.

“Where did these mutineers intend to go?” he asked, at length.

“To Texas,” replied Beppo.

“Well, they sha'n't do it – that's settled. Before I will allow them to take these horses out of the country, I will hunt up the Don and blow the whole thing.”

“O, don't do that,” pleaded the prisoner, who seemed terror-stricken at the bare thought. “He will shoot me.”

“I wouldn't like to have you shot, Greaser,” replied Archie, “but I tell you that my horse is not going to Texas. There is one way in which you can save yourself, and that is by leading me out of this hole by the safest and most direct route. Then the Don need know nothing about it; but just as surely as I am captured down here, I'll repeat to him every thing you have said to me.”

“I can't lead you out,” replied Beppo. “The doors are all

locked.”

“We don’t care if they are. I’ve got the keys.”

“You! Santa Maria!”

“It’s a fact,” answered Archie; “but how I got them I need not now stop to explain. What do you say, Greaser? Will you show me the way out?”

“Yes,” gasped the young Mexican, who knew, from the peremptory manner in which the pistol was pressed against his head, that it was dangerous to hesitate longer. “Don’t shoot! I will.”

“That’s all right,” said Archie. “Now, to put it out of your power to play any tricks upon me, I shall tie your hands behind your back with your own sash – so. Then I will take mine, and pass it around your ankles, in this way.”

“I can’t walk, if you do that,” interrupted Beppo; “and if I can’t walk, how can I show you the way out?”

“Don’t you be uneasy. I sha’n’t draw the sash tight enough to interfere much with your walking; but if you try to run, it is probable that you will be tripped up very suddenly. Now, then,” he continued, after he had satisfied himself that his prisoner was secure, and that he could not possibly free himself from his bonds, “stand here until I put the saddles on those horses. Who’s that?”

At this moment heavy footsteps sounded on the floor overhead, and a light suddenly flashed down into the stable. Archie looked up, and saw a pair of feet descending a ladder,

leading down from a small trap-door which opened into the apartment over the stable. Shortly afterward a villainous looking Ranchero came in sight, and holding his lantern at arm's length before him, stooped down and glanced all around the stable, as if he were looking for some one. Archie was so badly frightened that he could not move; and his alarm increased, and his heart seemed to stop beating, when the man's eyes, after roving all about the stable, rested on his face. This was the time to test his disguise.

“Beppo,” said the Mexican, in a gruff voice, “bring out the horses.”

As he spoke he placed his lantern upon one of the steps of the ladder, and ascended out of sight through the trap-door.

CHAPTER X

ARCHIE MAKES A BOLD DASH

“Who was that?” whispered Archie, in a trembling voice.

“Pedro,” replied the young Mexican.

“What did he want?”

“He told me to bring up the gray and black; he is going out to steal horses, now,” said Beppo, with the same indifference he would have manifested if he had said that Pedro was about to drive up a herd of cattle.

For a moment Archie stood, almost without breathing, looking up at the trap-door through which the Ranchero had disappeared. His heart beat so fast and furiously that he was almost afraid the man might hear it, and come back to see what was the matter. At first he did not know what to do; but, after a few seconds' reflection, the details of a scheme which he had matured while Beppo was telling him about the plans of the mutineers, flashed through his mind, and he began to bestir himself.

Since he entered the stable and found his horse there, he had more than once told himself that if he could only contrive some way to get the animal above ground, he could laugh at all the Rancheros in Southern California. He would jump on his back, and go through the court, and out of the gate, at a rate of speed

that would make Don Carlos and his band of rascals wonder; but the difficulty was to get the horse up there without being obliged to answer questions. As far as his disguise was concerned, he was not at all uneasy. He was so nearly Beppo's size that the jacket fitted him exactly; and his journey across the plains, and constant exposure to the hot sun, had tanned his face until it was almost as brown as an Indian's. It was just the color of Beppo's – not quite so dirty, of course, but that was something the Mexicans would not be likely to notice. Besides, Archie was a capital mimic, and he knew that, if he was questioned, he could imitate his prisoner's way of talking, Spanish twang and all. He had the keys, too, with which he could open any doors he might find in his way; but suppose he should meet some of the band, and they should ask him where he was going, and what he intended to do with the horses – what reply could he make? Now, however, he had no fears on that score. Pedro had made every thing easy for him. Mistaking him for Beppo, he had ordered him to bring up the horses; and if he met any one who took an interest in his movements, he would know how to answer them.

“I'll soon be out of here,” said Archie, to himself; “and when I once find myself fairly in that court, won't I astonish these Greasers? Uncle said this morning that if we could shoot Old Davy and arrest the horse-thieves, he would be glad of it. We've finished the grizzly, and if we can't capture the robbers, we will at least have the satisfaction of knowing that we have broken up the band, and got our horses back. But I believe we can gobble

up every one of them. When I get home I'll tell Carlos to send out uncle's herdsman, and we will arouse the settlement, and raise a crowd of men, and come here and storm the rancho. I'll have a chance then to see a fight and smell powder."

Many a time, while talking over the particulars of the battle which had taken place years before at Mr. Winters's rancho, Archie had expressed the hope that another band of freebooters would turn up before he left California, and make a second attack on the building. He had passed through a fight with hostile Indians; had heard the whistle of their bullets and arrows; and he thought that all that was needed to complete the list of his adventures, was the opportunity of taking part in a siege of a week or two. If every thing worked according to his calculations, it was probable that his wish would be gratified. How the robbers would fight when they found their stronghold surrounded by the settlers; and what desperate attempts they would make to cut their way out! How the rifles would crack! and how Dick Lewis and Bob Kelly would yell and exult at finding themselves once more in their natural element! Archie became highly excited over the prospect.

Archie's first care was to provide for the safe keeping of his prisoner, which he did by binding his handkerchief over his mouth, and pushing him under Roderick's manger, where he tied him fast; Beppo submitting to the operation without a murmur. His next work was to prepare the horses for their plundering expedition, which he had fully determined should not prove a

success that night. A saddle, which hung upon a peg close at hand, was soon strapped on the mustang's back; but when Archie had slipped the bridle over his head, a thought struck him, and he stopped and looked reflectively down at his prisoner.

"I shall have to untie this fellow again," said he, "for I don't know which way to go. These passage-ways run about in every direction, and I might get lost; then, if some of the band should meet me, they would know in a minute that I wasn't Beppo. Whoa, there! Where are you going, Roderick?"

While Archie was talking to himself, the mustang backed out of his stall, and walked quietly to the grated door at the farther end of the stable, where he stopped, and seemed to be waiting for some one to come and let him out. He had become quite familiar with his new quarters; and Archie knew then that he had only to let Roderick take his own course, and he would lead him straight to the court. He quickly put the saddle on his own horse, and he also backed out of his stall, and took his stand beside Roderick, in front of the grated door. So far every thing was working to Archie's satisfaction; but the dangerous part was yet to come, and he trembled when he thought of it. He carefully examined his revolver, hid his bowie-knife in his boot, and put the pistols, which he had found on the table, into his trousers' pockets. Then he pulled out his bunch of keys, picked up the lantern, and started toward the door. He regretted an instant afterward that he had not left the lantern; for as he glanced toward the door, he saw a face pressed close against the bars, and a pair of eyes glaring at

him with a most ferocious expression. Archie stopped suddenly, undecided how to act. Had the man penetrated his disguise? That question was quickly answered to his satisfaction by the Ranchero, who clenched his hand and shook it at him, saying, in a savage whisper:

“You haven’t heard the last of this, my young friend. I’ll settle with you as soon as you have taken those horses up.”

The man gave his fist another shake to emphasize his words, and then left the door and hurried down the passage; but, before he disappeared in the darkness, Archie obtained a good view of him, and recognized him as one of the mutineers whom he had seen at the door a few minutes before. Archie understood his words perfectly. The Ranchero was very angry at Beppo for his failure to carry out his part of the contract, and had made up his mind to punish him for it at some future time. He did try to whip somebody; but, as it happened, he got hold of the wrong man, and came out second best.

“He’s gone,” said Archie, drawing a long breath of relief, “and I think I may venture out. I wouldn’t be in Beppo’s boots for a quarter, when that man meets him. I believe I am the luckiest fellow in the world; for whenever I get into a scrape, I always find an easy way out of it.” As he said this, he thought of the “scrape” he had had that morning with Old Davy, and told himself he had not come out of that so very easily after all. He still felt the effects of his fall in his nose and shoulder. “If any body had asked me half an hour ago what I thought of the situation,” he continued,

“I should have said that the prospect was not very flattering. I expected to have a terrible fuss with these Greasers; but, just in the nick of time, a mutineer comes up, mistakes me for an accomplice, gives me a bunch of keys, and thus makes it the easiest matter in the world for me to effect my escape. It is really wonderful.”

Archie at last succeeded in finding a key to fit the lock, the door swung open, and the horses went out and started down the passage-way, Archie following close at their heels. Now that he had a light, and could distinguish objects about him, he wondered at the number and extent of the passages. They ran about in all directions, and the horses turned first into one, and then into another, and twisted about until he began to believe that they had lost their way. But they knew where they were going, and in a few minutes they brought Archie in sight of a door which led into the court. The door was open, and there were half a dozen men standing in front of it, among whom was Don Carlos, who seemed to be highly excited about something; for he was flourishing his arms wildly around his head, and talking at the top of his voice. If Archie had known what a race Frank had had through that court a little while before, and what had happened to him since, it would have increased his own excitement and alarm, if such a thing were possible. He believed that his cousin was still seated comfortably in the room where he had left him, reading his book, and all unconscious of Archie's absence.

“He will stay here all night in perfect security,” Archie had

said, whenever he thought of Frank, "and to-morrow, when he comes home, he will hardly be willing to believe me when I tell him what I have seen, and what I have been through. The Don will treat him like a gentleman, of course; but what would he do to me if he should find that I am down in this cellar learning all his secrets? I'd be gone up, sure. I wonder if the old fellow has discovered my absence, and what he thinks of it!"

The Don, as we know, had discovered his absence, and was greatly alarmed thereat, fearing that Archie might have found his way into the underground portions of the rancho, and learned something that was not intended for him to know. Having returned from his chase after Frank (with what success we shall see presently), he was determined to ascertain what had become of Archie; and a dozen of his Rancheros were at that very moment searching for him in every nook and corner of the passage-ways.

When Archie discovered the men at the door, he knew that the tug of war was coming. His disguise had already been tested by Pedro and one of the mutineers, and their suspicions had not been aroused in the slightest degree; but how would it be when he came out into the court, which was brilliantly lighted up with lanterns? He was quite certain of one thing, and that was, if the Don recognized him, and wanted to stop him, he must do it before he reached the court; for after that it would be impossible. If he could only put his eyes on the gate, he was safe. That was what Archie thought as he extinguished his lantern, and spoke

in a low tone to the horses, which stopped instantly. Mounting King James, he gathered the reins firmly in his left hand, seized the mustang's bridle with his right, and in another moment was dashing at full speed up the declivity that led to the door. He was right in the midst of the Mexicans before they knew it. Two of them were sent headlong to the ground, and the Don only saved himself from being run down, by a jump that was remarkable for one of his years. They were all scattered right and left, and the way was clear to the gate.

"Good-by, Don Carlos!" shouted Archie, so excited and elated that he could scarcely speak; "I'll be back in half an hour."

No words could describe the Spaniard's bewilderment and alarm. He recognized Archie's voice, knew in an instant that his worst fears had been realized, and saw the necessity of preventing him from leaving the rancho. He stood gazing in astonishment at the swiftly moving horses and their daring rider; and before he could recover the use of his tongue, they were half way across the court.

"Ach, mine heavens!" roared the Don, jumping about over the ground like one demented; "*mine* dear heavens! Here ish dis leetle poys! Shtop him, dere! Dis ish von grand shwindle!"

There were half a dozen Rancheros in the court, besides those who had been conversing with the Spaniard, and Archie's sudden appearance created a great commotion among them. They ran about in every direction, some shouting for their pistols, and others calling for their lassos; but not one among them was daring

enough to attempt to stop him. They might as well have tried to stop a locomotive or a steamboat. The horses bounded across the court with terrific speed, and nothing short of a rifle-ball or lasso would have checked them. Archie's face was very pale, but it betrayed not the slightest sign of fear. It wore a determined, reckless look, and it was easy enough to see that he was not to be daunted by any obstacles or dangers he might find before him. He would have remorselessly run down all the herdsmen on the rancho, if they had placed themselves in his way.

Archie thought now that his escape was but a question of time – of seconds; but there was one obstacle in his way that he had not calculated upon, and that was the gate. When he came in sight of it, what was his dismay to find that it was closed! The heavy oak bars were in their places; and the gate was so well secured, that before he could dismount and open it, the yelling, angry Mexicans, who were closing in from all sides, would be down upon him in a body. He was cornered – caught. His desperate plan for escape, which had been so brilliantly commenced, and which at first promised to succeed even beyond his expectations, had resulted in utter failure. He wished now that he had remained hidden in some of the underground rooms until dark.

The horses stopped when they reached the gate, and Archie turned in his saddle and took a survey of the situation. The court was filled with men now – for the most of those who had been searching the passage-ways had come up – and they were all running toward him, swinging their lassos, and brandishing their

knives and pistols as if they intended to use them as soon as they could get their hands upon him. A more ferocious looking set of men he had never seen.

Had Archie been placed in this situation a few months before, it is probable that he would have been frightened out of his wits, and that he would have surrendered without making any further attempts at escape. But he had been the hero of some exciting adventures since he left Lawrence, and, to some extent, he had become familiar with danger. Besides, he was naturally brave and resolute, and believing from the actions of his enemies, and the expression he saw in their faces, that it was their intention to take a summary vengeance upon him, he resolved to fight for life and liberty as long as he had strength enough to move an arm. He had nothing to gain by surrendering himself into the hands of the Mexicans; he might gain every thing by resisting them to the last.

“Now, dis ish *all* right!” yelled the Don, when he saw Archie hesitating at the gate, and his men closing around him. “We have got dis leetle poys. Hi! Bedro, vat you makin’ dere? Ah! Mine heavens!”

The change in the old Spaniard’s tone was caused by an action on the part of Archie, which astonished every body in the court. Dropping Roderick’s bridle, he suddenly wheeled his horse and dashed furiously toward the Rancheros, who scattered before him like a flock of turkeys. As he passed through their ranks, several lassos were thrown at him; but Archie had learned how to avoid these weapons, and by lying flat along his horse’s neck,

he escaped being pulled from his saddle. He galloped toward the nearest door, and without trying to stop his horse, threw himself to the ground, and disappeared in the hall like a flash. A few rapid steps brought him to the room to which the Don had conducted him on his arrival at the rancho. He did not stop to look for his cousin, for he knew that if Frank had been there, the confusion and noise in the court would have brought him out. He ran straight to the painting of the Indian warrior, pressed the button in the handle of the knife, and when the door opened before him, he dashed through and ran along the dark passage with reckless speed; – the smooth click of the spring-lock telling him that the picture had swung back to its place. He still had the bunch of keys, which he intended to preserve as a memento of his visit to Don Carlos' rancho, and his object now was to reach the room adjoining the stable, and lock himself in. He concluded, from something Beppo had said, that there was but one set of keys to all these rooms; and he had the satisfaction of knowing that if that was the case, the robbers could not capture him until they had cut down every door in the rancho. He would retreat as they advanced, locking all the doors behind him; and when at last he was brought to bay, he would use his revolver.

The passage was so dark that Archie could not see his hand before him; and how he ever got down the stairs without breaking his neck he did not know. He accomplished the descent in safety, however, and there his good fortune ended. As he jumped into the passage at the foot of the stairs, he came in violent contact

with some one who instantly seized him and held him fast.

“Who’s this?” demanded a gruff voice.

“Santa Maria!” cried Archie.

“You young rascal!” continued the man, in a tone of great satisfaction. “I’ve got you now, and I am going to give you the best dressing down you have had in a twelve-month.” Something whistled sharply in the darkness, and Archie felt the effects of a stinging blow from a rawhide in the hands of his invisible antagonist.

CHAPTER XI

A COMPANION IN TROUBLE

Archie recognized the voice which addressed him, and knew who his antagonist was. He was one of the mutineers – the same who had given him the keys, and who had shaken his fist at him as he was leading out the horses. Supposing Archie to be Beppo, he had loitered about in the passage awaiting his return to the stable, intending to take an ample revenge upon him. The horses not being on hand at the right time, the plans of the mutineers were completely upset; and of course they were highly enraged.

Although Archie was greatly astonished and alarmed at finding himself thus unceremoniously assaulted, he comprehended the situation in an instant, and acted accordingly. He knew that as long as the man supposed him to be Beppo, he would use nothing but his rawhide on him, and Archie thought he could stand that; but, if he made himself known, the Ranchero would drop his whip, and resort to his knife, and that was something Archie could not stand. When he uttered Beppo's favorite expression, he exactly imitated his voice; and the man, believing that he had got hold of the right one, clung to his collar, and belabored him most unmercifully with his rawhide.

“Santa Maria!” yelled Archie, smarting under the blows, and writhing like an eel in the strong grasp that held him.

“You’ll fool me again, will you?” said the Ranchero, with grim satisfaction. “You’ll break your promise, won’t you? Why didn’t you bring up those horses? How does that feel, you rascal?”

The sensation was by no means an agreeable one. The herdsman, who was a powerful fellow, showered his blows with all his strength, and his victim struggled in vain to escape from his clutches. Then he tried to slip out of his jacket; but the Ranchero detected the move, and shifted his grasp from Archie’s collar to his hair. The torture soon became almost unbearable, and Archie was more than once on the point of losing heart and crying out; but just at the right time his courage came again to his aid, and shutting his teeth firmly together, he braced his nerves, and took the punishment without a murmur. But he did not cease his struggles. He ducked his head, and jumped and squirmed about in a way that made it extremely difficult for his antagonist to hit him; but if he escaped one blow, the next one he received came with redoubled force; and becoming satisfied at last that it was the man’s intention to whip him to death, he grew desperate, and did something that ended the battle in an instant. Thrusting his hand into his pocket, he drew out one of the long, heavy pistols which he had found on the table, and grasping it by the barrel, he struck his enemy a blow in the face which felled him like an ox under the ax of the butcher. In falling, he pulled Archie to the floor with him, but he did not hold him there, nor did he attempt it. He raised both hands to his head, and set up a roar that awoke a thousand echoes in the passage; and Archie, finding

himself at liberty, scrambled to his feet and ran for life. He did not know where or in what direction he was going, nor did he give the matter a moment's thought. His only desire was to get as far away from his antagonist as possible, and to conceal himself in one of the rooms. He would have given something now to have had a lantern, for it was far from being a pleasant thing to stumble about in that intense darkness, through those unknown passages. A light might have discovered him to his enemies, but he told himself that he would much rather run that risk, than be continually harassed by the fear of running against some of the band before he knew it, or of falling through some secret trap-door. But luck was on his side. There were no trap-doors in his way, and the robbers were all up-stairs, overturning every thing in their frantic search for him. He groped his way along with all possible speed, and finally, believing himself safe from pursuit for the present, he stopped to take breath, and to determine upon his future course.

What was to be done now? that was the question. He was in a bad scrape, and could see no way to get out of it. He rubbed his aching shoulders, and thought of the remark he had so often made since his adventure with Pierre and his band – that he did not care to remain longer in California, because the fun and excitement were all over. He thought differently now. He had had plenty of excitement during the day, much more than he wanted, but he had not seen a great deal of fun. Bruised and battered, smarting in a hundred places from the effects of the beating

he had received; surrounded by a net-work of secret passages and caverns, among which he was as effectually lost as though he had been in the heart of the Rocky Mountains; in the midst of enemies who would show him no mercy if captured; his situation was certainly a disheartening one. He could not hope for assistance from his friends, for they were ignorant of his whereabouts. He and Frank had often camped out among the mountains for a week at a time, enjoying the fine shooting to be found there; and now the trappers, if they noticed his absence at all, would probably think he had gone off on one of his hunting expeditions, and instead of making any attempt to find him, would leave him to return home when he got ready. Frank might be captured, confined in one of those rooms, and die a lingering death there, and no one would ever know what had become of him.

“I wish I had never seen or heard of California,” said Archie, bitterly, allowing himself for a moment to become utterly disheartened. “If I had only known that I was going to get myself into this miserable scrape, I’ll bet you that I would have let the robbers take my horse, and welcome. There they are!”

Archie’s soliloquy was interrupted by the sound of voices and footsteps. The Don and his men, having thoroughly ransacked the upper part of the house, were now beginning to search the underground portion. The noise grew louder, and the conversation more distinct, as the Rancheros approached, and Archie knew it was high time he was hunting up a place of

concealment. Putting his hands against the wall, he groped his way along the passage until he came to a door. This he unlocked with one of his keys, and lifting the latch, he opened the door a little way, and listened. While he stood there, hesitating and afraid to enter, the Rancheros approached rapidly; and presently Archie saw the light of a lantern dancing along the passage. There were four men in the party, and they were coming directly toward the fugitive, who, knowing that there was but one way of escape open to him, stepped cautiously into the room and locked the door. Scarcely had this been done when the Rancheros hurried past, searching every-where for Archie, and little dreaming that he was so near, and that the door alone stood between them and him. He distinctly heard their angry words, and understood enough of their conversation to know that the events of the last half hour had greatly astonished them; and that, if he was captured, something terrible would be done to him. They passed out of hearing at last, and Archie drew a long breath of relief, and braced up his nerves to encounter any new perils that might be in his way.

There was one thing that had thus far kept him in a state of intense anxiety and suspense, and that was the fear of running into some terrible danger while he was roaming about in the darkness – something that would take him by surprise, and end his existence before he would have time to comprehend its nature. How did he know but there was a chasm yawning at his very feet; and that if he advanced a single step he would find

himself plunging headlong to destruction? Or how could he tell but there were some of the band standing within reach of him, with their knives uplifted ready to strike? He took a match from his pocket, but hesitated to light it for fear that it might reveal some new terror. He knew, however, that he had nothing to gain by standing there inactive, and summoning all his courage to his aid, he drew the match along the wall; but, no sooner had the flame blazed up, so that he could distinguish objects about him, than he staggered back against the door with a cry of terror, and stood trembling in every limb. The single instant that the room was lighted up by the match, was enough to reveal to him a sight that filled him with horror – a familiar form, lying bound and helpless on the floor, and a wounded and bleeding face, which, save where it was reddened by the little streams of blood that had flowed over it, was as pale as that of the dead. But Archie, to his immense relief, soon found that his companion in trouble had plenty of life left in him. His body was battered and bruised, but his spirit was as undaunted as ever.

“Well, what are you doing here?” asked a voice, in tones of great amazement.

“Frank Nelson!” exclaimed Archie, scarcely believing that he was awake. He did not stop now to think that there might be some one else in the room – he did not care if there was. It was enough for him to know that his cousin stood in need of assistance. He pulled his bowie-knife from his boot, and kneeling down by Frank’s side quickly relieved him of his bonds. His astonishment

at finding his cousin there kept him quiet; but as soon as he had freed his arms, he greeted him as though he had not met him for years.

“What do you think now?” asked Archie, as he assisted Frank to his feet. “Don Carlos’ connection with the robbers is all in my eye, isn’t it? Didn’t I tell you that they kept Roderick and King James here, and rode them every night on their plundering expeditions? Well, it’s a fact. I’ve seen the horses.”

“You have!” exclaimed Frank.

“Yes, sir; and I’ve had hold of them. I’ve been on King James’s back, too; and I tell you it felt natural to find myself flying through the air once more, like a bird on the wing. I would have got them out of here, if the gate hadn’t been shut. I am afraid you can’t stand,” added Archie, who was holding fast to his cousin’s arm. “Your face is all bloody.”

“It is nothing serious. If I get a chance, I will show you that I am still able to beat the swiftest runner on the rancho in a fair race.”

“But you are trembling like a leaf,” continued Archie, anxiously. “If you are not badly hurt, what is the matter with you? Are you frightened?”

“Yes, I am. I wish we had never come near Don Carlos’ rancho.”

“So do I. I’ve wished that more than a hundred times during the last hour. We’ve got ourselves into a pretty mess.”

“And not only ourselves, but somebody else, also. We have

thus far escaped with our lives, but he didn't. He's dead."

"He! Who?"

"Dick Lewis."

"Well – by – gracious!" exclaimed Archie, as soon as he could speak. "Why – how – Eh! It can't be possible."

"That is just what I thought, even while I was seeing the thing done," replied Frank. "He was pulled down by a lasso; and the Mexican who caught him wheeled his horse and galloped off, dragging Dick after him. If his neck had been made of iron, it must have been broken."

"But how did he happen to be around where the Mexicans were?" asked Archie, who could not bring himself to believe his cousin's story. "Why didn't he stay at home, where he belonged?"

"Why didn't we stay at home where we belonged?" retorted Frank. "If we had done that, Dick would have been alive and hearty, now. He lost his life in trying to save me. But we have wasted time enough in talking. How did you get in here?"

"I don't understand it at all," said Archie, who could not have been more astounded and terrified if he had suddenly been knocked over by some invisible hand. "I shan't go on that hunting expedition with Captain Porter, even if I do recover my horse."

"If we don't find some way to get out of this den of robbers, we'll never have a chance to go with him," replied Frank. "How did you get in here?"

"Didn't you hear me unlock the door? I've got a key to every room in the rancho. Well! *Well!* I can't get over that piece of

news. I wish we had a light.”

“The men who brought me in here left their lantern,” said Frank. “We might look around and find it, but don’t you think it would be dangerous to light it?”

“We couldn’t be in a worse fix than we are in now. We don’t know how many miles of rooms and passage-ways we must travel through before we can get out of here; and I’d rather be discovered, and take my chances for escape, than to run the risk of breaking my neck before I know it.”

The boys threw themselves on their hands and knees, and began creeping about the floor, searching for the lantern. Frank found it at last, and when it had been lighted, Archie held it up, and took a good look at his cousin.

“I am sorry to see you here,” said he; “but since you are here, I am glad I have found you. What’s the first thing to be done?”

“Have you any weapons?” asked Frank. “These people don’t seem to think much of me, and if I am doomed to fall into their hands again, I want something with which to defend myself.”

“You must have had a terrible fight,” said Archie, again glancing at his cousin’s face; “and I should judge that you had come out second best.”

Frank shrugged his shoulders and felt of his head, but had nothing to say. Archie hesitated a moment before he spoke again. He was wondering who had got the worst of the encounter – he or the *Rancho*. He had not quite made up his mind which was the most severe punishment – twenty-five or thirty cuts over the

head and shoulders with a rawhide, or a single well-directed blow from the butt of a heavy pistol, delivered with the full power of an arm that was all muscle. After a few seconds' reflection, he decided that he would rather be in his own boots, than in those of the man he had knocked down; and that, taking all things into consideration, he could truthfully say that he had given the mutineer a good drubbing.

"I've just had a terrible whipping," said Archie, "but I didn't get the worst of the fight. I hit somebody a crack that he will remember for a day or two, I guess. I've got plenty of weapons – three pistols and a bowie-knife. Put this revolver in your pocket."

At this moment the cousins were startled by a noise at the door – not the one by which Archie had entered, but another on the opposite side of the room. Somebody was trying to open it. The door was not locked, but it held at the bottom.

"We must run for it now," whispered Archie. "We'll go out at this other door; and by the time he gets in here, we'll be safe in another hiding-place."

Handing his lantern to his cousin, Archie pulled out his keys and began fitting one to the lock; but his operations were suddenly interrupted by the sound of voices and footsteps in the passage, telling him that the Rancheros, from whom he had escaped a few minutes before, were returning. Their retreat in that direction was cut off. The boys looked at each other in dismay. There were but two doors in the room, and while their enemies were at each one, which way should they go? The noise

at the door grew louder. Some one was certainly trying to get in, and, what was more, he seemed determined to accomplish his object; for his pulls at the door grew stronger, and the boys could hear him grumbling to himself in Spanish because it would not open. It yielded a little with every pull, however, and it was evident that he would soon succeed in effecting an entrance. Archie drew his pistols, and looked to his cousin for advice.

“Put away those weapons,” said Frank, earnestly. “If you should fire one of them here, it would show our enemies where we are, and destroy our last chance for escape. Hide yourself, and blow out that lantern.”

Archie had barely time to act upon this suggestion, when the door flew open with a jerk, and looking over the top of a box, behind which he had crept for concealment, he saw a Mexican enter the room. By the light of the lantern he carried in his hand, Archie also discovered his cousin stretched upon the floor, his feet crossed, and his hands placed behind his back. The latter knew why the Ranchero had come in there.

“You’re safe yet, are you?” said the Mexican. “That’s all right. So many strange things have happened here to-night, that I should not have been surprised if I had not found you. Santa Maria! How’s this?”

The man had bent over to examine his prisoners bonds, and for the first time discovered that he had been liberated. Astonished and alarmed, he acted upon his first impulse, and started for the door; but Archie was there before him. The Ranchero, who

was wholly intent of making good his retreat, did not see him, however; and the first intimation he had of Archie's presence, was a pair of strong arms thrown around his legs, which were pulled from under him, causing him to fall backward upon the floor. He struggled furiously, and opened his lips to shout for help; but, before any sound came forth, a hand grasped his throat, and the cry was effectually stifled.

CHAPTER XII

FRANK'S ADVENTURES

Frank had had some exciting adventures since we last saw him, and had witnessed scenes that it was not probable he would soon forget. We left him standing face to face with one of his pursuers, whose gun was at his shoulder, his finger on the trigger, and the muzzle of the weapon pointing straight at Frank's breast. The chances of escape from such a situation were small indeed. True, Frank's revolver was safe in his pocket, and he was too sure a shot to miss so large a mark as the Mexican at that distance; but he knew, from the next words his enemy spoke, that any attempt on his part to draw the weapon, would be the signal for his death.

"Put your hands above your head," commanded the Ranchero, sternly. "Now, if you move an eyelid, I will send a ball through you."

The very appearance of the man was enough to convince Frank that he would not hesitate to carry his threat into execution, should occasion require it; but, large and strong as he was, and savage as he looked, he was afraid of his captive, and had no intention of approaching nearer to him until he had put it out of his power to do any mischief. Keeping his eyes fastened upon Frank, and holding his gun in position with one hand, he uncoiled with the other a lasso which hung over his shoulder. The prisoner

began to tremble in every limb. He understood the meaning of this movement, and told himself that there would be a desperate fight in those bushes before the Mexican should use that lariat on him. He did not intend to allow himself to be strangled half to death if he could prevent it. Having already had some experience in that line, he did not care to have it repeated.

“Look here!” said he, when the Ranchoero, after coiling a portion of the lasso in his hand, began swinging it around his head; “don’t attempt that.”

“Stand where you are!” exclaimed the Mexican.

“I haven’t moved an inch, and I have no desire to do so, as long as you keep that gun pointed at me. But you sha’n’t put that lasso around my neck; you may depend upon that.”

The Ranchoero was evidently astonished. Here was a fellow, who acknowledged himself a prisoner, and yet had the audacity to tell his captor what he should do, and what he should not do. The tones of Frank’s voice, his attitude, and the expression of his countenance, all bore evidence to the fact that he was quite in earnest; and the Mexican seemed to be in no hurry to come to close quarters with him. The hand in which he held the lasso fell to his side, and he stood looking at his captive, measuring him with his eye, and trying to decide upon some course of action.

Frank was no stranger to the Ranchoero. The latter had often seen him, and he had heard of him, too. He knew the particulars of some of his exploits, and he had a wholesome respect for him. A boy who had courage enough to keep a secret with death

staring him in the face, and who, after being nearly strangled, could fight with the desperation which Frank had exhibited in his encounter with Pierre Costello, was not one to be approached with impunity. The Mexican had never taken the trouble to look closely at him before, and now he was astonished to discover what a powerful young fellow he was. Although he was not quite seventeen years old, he stood five feet nine inches in his stockings; and the violent sports and exercises to which he had been accustomed from his earliest boyhood, had developed his muscles until they were as large as those of a blacksmith. He looked like a young Hercules as he stood there, drawn up to his full height, his arms extended above his head, his hands clenched, and his fingers moving nervously, as though they were aching to take the Rancho by the throat.

“Hadn’t you better make up your mind what you are going to do about it?” asked Frank, who was beginning to get impatient. “You might as well put up that lasso, for you shall never catch me with it.”

“Stand where you are!” repeated the Mexican.

These words were addressed, not to the prisoner, but to the empty air. The spot on which Frank had been standing was vacant, and he had disappeared from the view of his captor as completely as though he had never been in the woods at all. While the Rancho was looking at Frank, the latter was narrowly watching the Rancho. He kept his eyes fastened upon the gun, and finally he saw the muzzle turned a little aside, so that it no

longer pointed at his breast. That was enough for Frank, who now repeated the trick he had tried with so much success upon Don Carlos. Gathering all his strength for the effort, he made two or three tremendous bounds, and vanished.

Like an inexperienced young sportsman, who, seeing a flock of quails suddenly arise from the bushes at his very feet, stands gazing after them with open mouth, too astonished to think of the gun he holds in his hand, so stood the Ranchero. There was something almost magical in the escape of his prisoner. It was so sudden and unexpected! There he was, holding a loaded gun in one hand, a lasso in the other, and standing almost within reach of his prize; and yet he had effectually eluded him.

“Santa Maria!” yelled the Ranchero, arousing himself as if from a sound sleep. “Stop, or I fire!”

“Whoop!” yelled another voice. “Hooray fur the boy that fit that ar’ robber! Put in your best licks, youngster, fur the timber’s full of the varlets.”

How Frank’s heart bounded at the tones of that familiar voice! Friends had been near him all the while, and he had not been aware of it. He could not, however, waste much time in thinking about the trapper. He had imagined that his escape from the Ranchero had placed him beyond the reach of danger for the present, but now he found that he was running straight into it. There were other persons in the woods, of whose presence he had been ignorant, and now they began to show themselves. The trapper’s wild Indian yell was answered by an order shouted in

Spanish; and then was presented a scene that reminded Frank of some passages in one of his favorite books – Sir Walter Scott’s “Lady of the Lake.” When the outlaw and King James were conversing, and the latter expressed a desire to see the rebel chieftain and his band, Roderick gave one shrill whistle, and —

“Instant, through heath and copse, arose
Bonnets and spears and bended bows.
On right, on left, above, below,
Sprung up at once the lurking foe.
From shingles gray their lances start;
The bracken bush sends forth the dart;
The rushes and the willow wand
Are bristling into ax and brand;
And every tuft of broom gives life
To plaided warrior, armed for strife.”

In short, the Scottish braves sprung into view in a way that was utterly bewildering, and so did the men who had been creeping up through the bushes while Frank was parleying with his captor. The fugitive had never seen so many Mexicans together before, and it was a mystery where they all came from. It seemed to him that every bush and tree within the range of his vision, was turning into a villainous looking Ranchero. They arose on all sides, and with loud yells rushed forward intent upon capturing Frank alive and unharmed. Not a shot was fired at him, but the trapper was a target for a dozen rifles and pistols; and some of the

bullets, that were intended for him, whistled through the bushes uncomfortably near to Frank's head. If Archie had been in his cousin's place just then, he would have smelt powder to his heart's content.

Frank's first impulse was to stop and surrender himself a prisoner; but a rapid glance around showed him that one portion of the woods was still left open to him. Toward this he dashed with the speed of a frightened deer – paying no heed to the loud commands to halt that were shouted after him, but trembling in every limb when he heard the lassos of his pursuers whistling through the air – and in less time than it takes to tell it, he had once more distanced the fleetest of the herdsman. In ten minutes not one of them was to be seen or heard. The reports of the firearms had ceased, the shouts had died away in the distance, and the woods were as silent as midnight.

Frank was now rapidly nearing the creek – the only barrier that stood between him and his home. Once safe on the opposite shore, and his escape was assured. The five miles that lay between the creek and his uncle's rancho, were no obstacle to such a runner as he had proved himself to be. He reached the bank at last, and, without stopping to reconnoiter the ground before him, dashed through the bushes at the top of his speed, and plunged into the water. His movements were so rapid that the Rancheros, who were concealed in the bushes awaiting his approach, did not have time to seize him as he passed; but their lassos were longer than their arms, and before the fugitive had

made half a dozen strokes, one of these dreaded weapons flew through the air, and the noose settled around his neck. He tried to avoid the danger by diving under the water; but it was too late. The lariat was tightened up with a jerk, and he was pulled back to the shore, gasping for breath, and struggling desperately.

“Here you are again, Fifty-Thousand-Dollars,” exclaimed a familiar voice; and the instant Frank touched the bank, a stalwart Mexican, whom he recognized as the one from whom he had escaped a short time before, threw himself upon him and held him fast; two more bound him hand and foot; while a fourth searched all his pockets, and took possession of his revolver. Of course he was easily overpowered, but it was only after a furious and determined resistance.

The Rancheros were very jubilant over their success. They danced about their captive like so many savages; and when one seized him by the collar and jerked him to his feet, the others set up a loud shout of triumph. Then they held a hurried consultation in their native tongue, and the prisoner understood enough of what was said to know that they were talking about the money they expected to receive when they delivered Frank into the hands of Don Carlos. They seemed to be afraid that they might be called upon to divide the reward with some of their companions; and, in order to avoid that, they told one another that they would take their captive to the rancho by some round-about way. No sooner was this plan agreed upon, than the Mexicans proceeded to carry it out. Two of them seized Frank by the arms and hurried

him into the woods, dragging him roughly over fallen logs, and through thick bushes, which tore his clothing and scratched him severely.

“Now, see here,” he exclaimed, when he thought he could no longer endure their harsh treatment; “if you will untie my feet, so that I can walk, you will save yourselves and me a great deal of trouble.”

The Mexicans were deaf to his words. They did not mind the trouble in the least. Their prisoner was worth a fortune to them; and having seen him make two remarkable escapes that night, they did not intend to give him an opportunity to make another.

If they hoped to reach the rancho without meeting any of their companions, they were destined to be disappointed; for, when they arrived at the edge of the prairie where they had left their horses, they were joined by three more of the Don’s band, who, upon discovering Frank again in confinement, set up a terrific yell.

“No more herding cattle or stealing horses for me,” cried one of the new-comers. “I am off for Frisco this very night.”

“You can go now, for all we care,” growled one of the men, who was holding Frank by the collar.

“Yes, but I want my share of the reward first.”

“It’s little of the reward you’ll get. Must we do all the work, risk all the danger, and then share our hard earnings with you who have kept yourselves out of harm’s way? Not if we know ourselves.”

This was the beginning of an angry altercation, which did not continue more than a minute before the disputants came to blows. Frank's captors insisted that no one but themselves should touch a cent of the money; and the new-comers declared that if they did not agree to divide, they should never take their prisoner to the rancho. As the debate progressed, the Mexicans began to grow angry. Their voices rose higher and higher; they flourished their arms in the air, and shook their clenched hands in one another's faces; and finally one of them drew his knife and emphasized his words by making a savage thrust at the man nearest him. That brought the discussion to a close at once; and an instant afterward Frank was standing there, the solitary spectator of the most thrilling scene he had ever witnessed in his life – a furious hand-to-hand conflict among the Rancheros.

The rapidity with which this state of affairs had been brought about was astonishing. One moment the Mexicans were all standing erect, engaged in an angry war of words; the next, they were rolling about on the ground, struggling madly with each other, pistol balls were flying about, reeking knife-blades flashing in the air, and the woods were echoing with cries of pain and shouts of anger. Frank stood speechless, almost breathless, and unable to move hand or foot. He was in danger of being knocked down by some of the struggling men, and of being struck by the bullets which whistled about so recklessly; but he could not get out of the way. He never once thought of his own peril, for he was too horrified at what was going on before him

to think of any thing. He was the cause of all this trouble. The herdsmen were destroying one another to secure possession of the reward that had been offered for him.

The fight, desperate as it was, did not long continue. It seemed to Frank that it had scarcely begun before it was over. His captors came off victorious, but there were not many of them left to rejoice over their success – only a single man, who, as he arose from the body of his late antagonist, first looked toward his prisoner, to satisfy himself that he was safe, and then coolly ran his eye over the prostrate forms around him. Frank expected to see him manifest some regret at the fate of his companions, but he did nothing of the kind. He did not even take the trouble to see if any of them were still alive. He wiped his knife on a bunch of leaves which he pulled from a neighboring bush, and then hurried toward the horses, which were tied to the trees in the edge of the woods. Mounting his own horse, he rode up beside his prisoner, and, seizing him by the collar, pulled him up in front of him, and laid him across the horn of his saddle, as if Frank had been a bag of corn, and he was about to start off to mill with him. Then he spoke for the first time since the fight, and Frank knew why it was that he felt no regret at the death of his companions.

“The reward is mine,” said he, with a chuckle. “I have no one to divide with now.”

He dashed his spurs into the flanks of his horse, and set off at a rapid gallop toward the rancho, which was in plain sight, and not more than a quarter of a mile distant. Frank turned his eyes

toward its gloomy walls, and wondered what sort of a reception he would meet with when he arrived there. It was not likely that the Don would greet him as kindly as he had done before – that he would conduct him into the house with ceremony, and ask him to make himself comfortable until supper time. Perhaps, in his rage, the old Spaniard would dispatch him at once. Frank was prepared for the worst; but he would have submitted to his fate with much better grace, if his hands and feet had been unbound for one moment, so that he could have made just one more attempt at escape.

“It’s of no use for you to kick about so,” said the Ranchero, as Frank began struggling with his bonds. “You’re as safe now as though you were locked up in one of Don Carlos’ dungeons.”

The Mexican was a good deal surprised at the reply his prisoner made. Frank had turned his head, and was looking back toward the woods, as if he half expected to see help coming from that direction, and he had discovered a tall figure in buckskin standing in the bushes. A moment afterward a long rifle was leveled, and Frank thought that the muzzle was pointed straight at his head. That occasioned him no uneasiness, however, for he knew that Dick Lewis’s eagle eye was glancing along the weapon, and that its contents would do no harm to him.

“Did you ever see that fine horse of mine – the one you fellows stole from me?” asked Frank. “Well, I will stake him against the worthless animal you are riding, that you don’t take me to Don Carlos.”

“Eh!” exclaimed the Ranchero, facing quickly about in his saddle, and gazing back at the woods.

That move was all that saved his life. Just then a sheet of flame shot out from the bushes, and the bullet came humming through the air; but instead of finding a lodgment in the body of the Mexican, it was buried in the brain of the horse, which dropped dead in his tracks, dashing the Ranchero and his prisoner violently to the ground.

Frank, stunned by the fall, and blinded by the blood which flowed freely from a wound on his forehead, could not have told what had happened. He lay motionless for a moment, and then, after a few ineffectual attempts, succeeded in raising himself to a sitting posture, and began to look around for his enemy. He saw him seated on the ground at a little distance, holding both hands to his head, and gazing about him with a bewildered air, as if he had not quite made up his mind how he had come to be unhorsed so suddenly. But he was not long in comprehending the matter. Glancing toward the trapper, who was approaching with long strides, and then toward his prisoner, he whipped out the knife which had done him such good service in his recent battle.

“Santa Maria!” he shouted.

That was all he said then, but his actions supplied the place of words, and indicated the desperate resolve he had formed. He jumped to his feet and rushed toward Frank, with his knife uplifted ready to strike.

“Whoop! Bars an’ buffaler! Stop thar, you tarnal Greaser!”

cried the trapper. "If you touch that youngster with that we'pon, I'll raise your har fur you."

The Mexican paid no heed to the warning. He came on as fiercely as ever, and Frank, unable to lift a finger in his own defense, sat there on the ground and watched those two frantic men who were racing toward him – one intent on taking his life, the other on saving it. Which would reach him first? The Mexican was the nearer to him, but the fleet-footed trapper was getting over the ground at the rate of ten feet to his one. If Dick's rifle had been loaded, Frank would have had no fears as to the result; but the trusty old weapon was empty, and his friend might approach within reach of him, and still be unable to prevent the Mexican from accomplishing his purpose.

"There are fifty thousand dollars wrapped up in your hide," hissed the Ranchoero, "and if I don't get it nobody shall."

A few hurried steps brought him to Frank's side, and, uttering a yell of triumph, he seized him by the throat, and threw him backward upon the ground. Frank saw him shake the knife at the trapper, and when it was raised above his breast, he closed his eyes that he might not see it when it descended. But the knife never touched him. Something fell heavily upon him, and when he opened his eyes he saw the Mexican lying motionless by his side, and Dick Lewis bending over him.

The trapper's tomahawk, thrown with unerring aim, had saved Frank's life.

CHAPTER XIII

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE

“**Bars** an’ buffaler! You keerless feller!” exclaimed the trapper, pulling out his knife and liberating Frank’s hands and feet. “I reckon you’ve seed fun enough fur one day, haint you? You’ll never come nigher to bein’ rubbed out nor you were a minit ago without goin’; I can tell you that. Now toddle. We aint out of danger yet, by no means.”

There was no time for greetings and congratulations. Scarcely had the trapper lifted Frank to his feet, when a clatter of hoofs was heard, and upon looking up the two friends saw a squad of Rancheros coming toward them at the top of their speed. Frank, without an instant’s hesitation, acted upon the trapper’s suggestion, and started for the woods; while Dick ran off in the opposite direction, loading his rifle as he went.

Frank, wearied with his former exertions, and aching in every limb from the effects of the rough treatment he had received at the hands of his enemies, was in no condition for a long run; but, even had he been in the best of trim, he could not have hoped to escape. The Rancheros were mounted, and they had thrown themselves between him and the woods. Still, he exerted himself to the utmost, and his speed, although greatly diminished, would have carried him ahead of every one of his enemies had they

been on foot. But the swift horses quickly overtook him, and one of his pursuers, without in the least slackening his pace, galloped up beside him and seized him with both hands.

“You’re caught now,” said he, in a tone of great satisfaction, “and I am a poor herdsman no longer. I’m rich.”

The Ranchero did not attempt to lift Frank upon his horse, but held fast to his collar, and dragged him over the ground. He went at the top of his speed, and whenever Frank tried to regain his feet, so that he could run along beside his captor, the latter would touch his horse with his spurs, and the animal would spring forward so suddenly that Frank would be thrown back again. It was a most uncomfortable and painful situation to be in, but, strange as it may appear, Frank made no attempt at escape; indeed, he scarcely bestowed a thought upon himself. A scene which he had witnessed just after his enemy seized him, had deprived him of every particle of courage and strength. He had seen the friend who had stood by him through innumerable dangers strangled before his very eyes.

We said that, when Frank ran toward the woods, the trapper started off in the opposite direction. He had done this, hoping to draw the attention of the Mexicans to himself, and thus give Frank a chance for escape. He had succeeded in one part of his object, and failed in the other. Three of the Rancheros wheeled their horses and started in pursuit of him, while the others kept on after Frank. They had no desire to take the trapper alive, for the Don had not offered a reward of fifty thousand dollars for him;

but they believed that he was quite as dangerous to them as Frank was, for he was acquainted with their secret. They had tried their best to shoot him when they met him in the woods, but Dick had escaped unhurt. Now they had caught him on the open prairie, where they could use their lassos, and they were determined that he should not return home to tell his friends what he knew about Don Carlos and his rancho. They charged toward the trapper with loud yells, discharging their pistols at him with one hand, and swinging their lariats around their heads with the other. One of their number rode to his death, for when Dick's rifle cracked, the foremost Mexican threw up his arms, and fell heavily from his saddle; but before the trapper could turn to run, a lasso was thrown over his head, and he was pulled to the ground. A yell of defiance rang out on the air, and then the Ranchero wheeled his horse and galloped off, dragging his victim after him.

Frank could scarcely credit his senses. Was it possible that the redoubtable Dick Lewis, the hero of a thousand desperate encounters, had met his match at last, and in these cowardly Mexicans, too? It did not seem to him that it could be so, and yet the whole thing had transpired in plain view. If Dick had possessed the strength of a dozen men, he could not have escaped while that lasso was around his neck. Beyond a doubt, Frank had seen the last of him. The brave fellow had lost his life in trying to save him, and the boy could not have been more horrified if he had heard his own doom pronounced. He closed his eyes, that he might not see the terrible sight; and when he opened them again,

his captor was on the point of dragging him into the woods. Still urging his horse forward with reckless speed, he now lifted Frank from the ground and laid him across the horn of his saddle and held him there with one hand, while, with the other, he guided his horse through the bushes. Arriving at the creek, he dashed in, and upon reaching the opposite bank, again entered the woods, and continued his flight as rapidly as ever.

All this while the prisoner's mind had been so fully occupied with the scene he had witnessed on the prairie, that he scarcely knew what was going on; but now he became aware that his captor was not taking him to the rancho, but that he was making the best of his way toward the mountains. Frank was at a loss how to account for this, until he glanced at the dark, lowering face above him. Could he believe his eyes? He raised his head and looked again; and it is hard to tell whether he was the more astonished or alarmed. That one look was enough to satisfy him that his troubles were but just beginning. He would much rather have found himself in the power of Don Carlos, than in the hands of the man who was bending over him.

"Ah! You know me, do you?" exclaimed the Mexican, glancing triumphantly down at his captive. "I'm glad to meet you again."

"Pierre Costello!" cried Frank, in dismay.

"Ay! It's Pierre, alive and well, no thanks to you or your friends!"

Frank gazed long and earnestly at the Ranchero. The last time

he saw him he was on his way to the prison at San Diego, bound hand and foot, and guarded by trusty men; but here he was, in full possession of his liberty, and ready to carry out the scheme in which he had been foiled a few weeks before.

“Oh, it’s I,” said the robber, seeing that his prisoner was looking at him in utter bewilderment. “We were pretty well acquainted at one time, and it is strange that you do not recognize me.”

“I would know that villainous face of yours among a thousand,” replied Frank. “I was wondering how you escaped from the prison.”

“Easy enough. It wasn’t strong enough to hold me – that’s all. I didn’t stay there three days. I came back here, and set myself to watch you; and now that I have found you, I do not intend to lose sight of you very soon. When the Don gives me the reward he has offered for you, I will deliver you up to him. I am taking you to the mountains, because I want to see the color of the money, before I give you up; and because I don’t want to be compelled to divide with any one.”

There was no need that Pierre should take the trouble to explain his plans. Frank knew what they were before he said a word about them, and he could see no way to prevent them from being carried out. He was satisfied that it was quite useless to think of escape, and knowing that it would be the height of folly to provoke Pierre’s anger, he did not make the slightest show of resistance.

“I shall always hold a grudge against you,” said the Ranchero, tightening his grasp on Frank’s collar, “and, if it were not for the money you are worth, I would settle accounts with you in a hurry. I’ve had two chances to make myself rich, but you knocked my calculations higher than a kite. I am all right now, however, and if I ever meet you, after I deliver you up to Don Carlos, you are a goner. But that is not at all likely,” added the Mexican, “for when the gate of that rancho once closes upon you, it will never open for you again. The Don knows how to deal with men who learn his secrets. You are always meddling with other people’s business, but you have done it now for the last time.”

Frank listened in silence to this disheartening speech, and told himself that this was the worst predicament he had ever got into. When he was delivered into the Don’s hands, the latter would make an end of him; and if he did not, Pierre would. It was plain that if his captor could have his own way in the matter, Frank had not much longer to live.

The course which Pierre was taking to reach the mountains, lay through a dense forest, which, even in the day-time, was almost impassable for horsemen. He might have chosen an easier route, but knowing that he would be followed by his companions, who would not willingly surrender their claims to a share of the reward, he kept in the deepest part of the woods to elude their pursuit. His horse went at the top of his speed, and Frank was jolted about, and dashed against the trees, until it seemed to him that he could not possibly survive a moment longer. To his great

relief, Pierre brought him to the edge of the woods at last; and after carrying him some distance up a ravine, stopped his horse, and began making preparations to bind his captive.

“I shall leave you here for an hour or two,” said he. “I am going back to the Don, and, if he comes down with the fifty thousand, I’ll turn you over to him; and if he doesn’t, you and I will lead a free and easy life here in the mountains, until your uncle ransoms you. I’ve got two strings to my bow this time.”

Pierre pulled his prisoner to a tree, to which he tied him securely with his lasso, Frank offering no resistance. He was too weak to lift a finger in his defense, and, as for remonstrance, he knew that would be useless, and so he held his peace.

“You take it very coolly,” remarked Pierre. “Why don’t you say something?”

“If I hadn’t been knocked about until the strength was all beaten out of me, I should have *done* something before this time,” replied Frank, boldly. “Give me my liberty, and fifteen minutes’ rest, and I’ll make trouble for you.”

“H’m!” said Pierre. “I can’t see it. You have made trouble enough for me already.”

“And you haven’t seen the last of me yet,” added Frank.

“I know it. I told you that I should come back to you, didn’t I?”

“I mean that you will meet me under very different circumstances. We will change places in less than twenty-four hours.”

Frank said this with no other object in view, than to let Pierre

know that he still kept up a brave heart, if the future was dark before him. There was nothing in his prospects, just then, to encourage the hope that he and his enemy would “change places,” and he little dreamed that such would be the case; but, after all, something very like it did happen, and in less than half the time Frank had mentioned. Pierre, however, happy in the belief that his dreams of wealth were about to be realized, had no misgivings. He laughed at his prisoner’s warning, and springing into his saddle, disappeared in the darkness. Frank listened to the sound of his horse’s feet until it died away in the distance, and then rested his aching head against the tree, and thought over his situation. What an eventful day it had been! What astonishing adventures had been crowded into the short space of ten hours! Frank’s mind was in a perfect whirl; and, if he could have freed his hands, he would have pinched himself to see if he was really wide awake. But, after all, he knew that the events of the day were no dream – his aching limbs and throbbing head assured him of that. The fight with Old Davy, Archie’s mishap, and his mysterious disappearance at Don Carlos’ rancho, the death of the trapper, and the unexpected encounter with Pierre Costello – all were realities. It was no dream, either, that he had been bound to a tree and left in those dark woods; and it was equally certain that he was not the only living thing there. He heard a stealthy step on the leaves, and a moment afterward, saw a pair of eyes, which shone like two coals of fire, glaring at him from a thicket not far distant.

“It’s a panther!” exclaimed Frank, trembling all over with terror, and much more alarmed now than he had been when he found himself in the power of his old enemy; “and here I am perfectly helpless. Hi! hi!”

Acting upon his first impulse, which was to frighten away his disagreeable neighbor, he uttered a series of yells which awoke the echoes far and near. The result greatly astonished him. An answering shout came from the farther end of the ravine, and hasty footsteps were heard approaching. Frank’s heart beat high with hope. Had friends been following him? More likely they were some of the settlers, who had been out hunting, and were returning to their homes. In either case he would soon be free once more, and his first care would be to show Pierre that, if he had come back to the settlement, expecting to have things all his own way, he had reckoned without his host. He shouted again, and the eyes in the bushes disappeared, and he heard the panther bounding up the mountain.

“Hallo!” called a voice through the darkness.

“Hallo!” replied Frank. “This way. Here I am.”

The unknown persons were prompt to answer the call, and came through the bushes with all possible speed. Presently, Frank saw two dark forms approaching, and in a few seconds they were close at his side, and peering into his face. Why was it that he did not speak to them and tell them what had happened to him? Simply because there was no need of it. The men knew quite as much about it as he did. He had seen them before, and

knew that they were members of Don Carlos' band. The first words they uttered explained their presence there, and told Frank that they perfectly understood the matter.

"Pierre thinks he is smart," said one, untying the lasso with which Frank was bound to the tree; "but he will find that there are men in the world as sharp as he is. We knew what was up when we saw him ride into the woods, instead of going toward the rancho. He tried to swindle us out of our share of the money, and now we will see how much of it he'll get."

In less time than it takes to tell it, Frank had been tied upon a horse behind one of the Mexicans, and was being carried back to the rancho. He did not experience much inconvenience from the ride, for the Mexicans traveled slowly, and avoided the woods altogether. At the end of half an hour they stopped in front of the walls of the rancho; and when the ponderous gate closed behind him, Frank shuddered and thought of the prediction Pierre had made. He glanced around the court, and saw that it was lighted up by numerous dark-lanterns, and filled with men, who seemed to be highly excited and enraged about something. They were all talking at the top of their voices, and the babel of English and Spanish was almost deafening. Archie had been the cause of this disturbance. Not more than half an hour before he had been flying about that court with all the speed his horse could command; and, having failed in his attempt at escape, he had taken refuge in the house. The Mexicans had seen him run through the hall, and into the Don's reception-room, and

had, of course, expected to capture him there; but they found the room empty, and could not imagine where Archie had gone. His disappearance astonished and alarmed them. They did not know that he was acquainted with the secret of that spring in the painting of the Indian warrior.

Conspicuous among a group of men who occupied the center of the court, stood the Don, who was, if possible, more excited and noisy than any of his band. He looked up when Frank's captors stopped in front of him, and rubbed his hands gleefully together.

"Ach! Here is von of dese leetle poys," said he. "Now dis ish *all* right!"

As soon as the lasso, with which Frank was confined to the horse, had been untied, he was assisted rather roughly to the ground. He put on a bold front, and unflinchingly met the angry glances that were directed toward him from all sides; but his heart was sinking within him, and he waited anxiously for the chief to speak.

"Vel," said the latter, at length, "you peen trying to shpy out somethings about mine house, aint it? You peen von grand, leetle rascal. Vare ish dis other leetle poys?"

"Who – Archie? I don't know where he is; and, if I did, it is not likely that I should tell you. I hope he is safe at home."

"Oh no, he don't peen at home," said the Don, shaking his head vehemently; "he ish somevares in dis house. Dake him down and lock him up."

The chief's looks had prepared Frank for some terrible sentence. He would not have been much surprised if he had heard that he was to be hanged or shot immediately; but, when he found that he was to be locked up, his courage rose again, and he began to indulge in the hope that a chance for escape might yet be offered him. In obedience to the Don's order, the Rancheros conducted him to one of the rooms in the underground portion of the rancho, and after tying him hand and foot, left him to his meditations. But he was not destined to remain there long, for Archie fortunately stumbled upon him and released him.

We left the boys struggling with the Ranchero who had come in to satisfy himself that Frank had not yet found means to effect his escape. Archie was holding fast to his legs, and Frank had grasped him by the throat and stifled his cry for help.

"I can hold him now," said the latter. "Shut that door, and get something to tie him with."

The ropes with which Frank had been bound were brought into requisition, and in a few seconds, the Mexican, in spite of his furious struggles, was helpless. Archie had shown considerable generalship in the part he had played in this transaction. If the Ranchero had been permitted to return to his friends, he would, of course, have informed them that Frank had been liberated by somebody, and that would have told the Don just where to search for Archie. He knew that Archie was somewhere in the rancho, but thus far he had been unable to get on the track of him. The building was large, the underground rooms and passage-ways

numerous, the doors all locked, and as long as the boys could keep their enemies from learning their exact whereabouts, there was little danger of capture.

“Now, then, what is to be done with this fellow?” asked Frank, when his cousin had securely bound the prisoner.

“Let’s give him one for Dick Lewis,” said Archie, brandishing his heavy pistol in the air. “A crack over the head with this would do him a wonderful sight of good.”

“No! no!” exclaimed Frank. “He took no part in that affair.”

“No doubt he would if he had had the chance. Let’s lock him in here, and leave him.”

“He’ll call for help, won’t he?”

“We don’t care if he does. Even if he succeeds in making himself heard through these thick walls, his friends can’t release him until they have cut down one of these doors; and by the time they get that done, we may be out of this den of robbers, and half way home.”

Archie began trying his keys in the lock of of the door, and finally found one that would fit it. Then, after the prisoner had been pulled into one corner, the cousins passed out of the room, locking the door after them.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DON IN TROUBLE

“What is to be done now?” asked Frank, as he and Archie walked slowly along the dark passage-way.

“There’s only one thing we can do,” replied the latter, “and that is, to explore every room we come to until we find our way out of the rancho. Of course there is danger in it, but – There’s one of the rascals!”

A slight noise, a little in advance of them, attracted the attention of Archie, who elevated his lantern, and peered through the darkness just in time to catch a glimpse of a Ranchero, running swiftly toward the other end of the passage. Frank’s revolver was cocked and leveled in an instant, but he was too late to stop the man, who had no sooner been discovered than he vanished from their sight. He did not go far, however, but stopped at the end of the passage, and keeping his eyes fastened upon Archie’s lantern, called loudly for help.

“We’re discovered at last,” whispered Frank.

“But we’re not caught,” was Archie’s encouraging reply. “Let’s go into this room.”

Archie had noticed one thing that night, and that was, that the greater the hurry he was in to find a key to open any of the doors, the more time he wasted in finding it. There must have been

twenty-five or thirty keys on the bunch, and he tried nearly all of them, before he found one that would turn the bolt. His hand trembled so violently that he could scarcely insert the keys into the lock, and, in his haste, he dropped the bunch more than once.

“How thankful I would be if that fellow should lose the power of speech for about five minutes,” said Archie, who seemed to be very much disconcerted by the Mexican’s furious yells. “I might as well give it up,” he added, in despair. “If the right key is on this bunch, I can’t find it.”

“Never say die,” replied Frank, who stood close at his cousin’s side, holding the lantern in one hand, and his revolver in the other. “We’ll not give up until we are bound hand and foot.”

All this while the Mexican had never once ceased his calls for assistance. He kept up a continuous roar, and presently answering shouts, and the tramping of numerous feet, told the fugitives that he had succeeded in attracting the attention of some of his companions. The reinforcements came on rapidly, and arrived in sight, and Archie had not yet been able to find a key that would open the door.

“Take it easy,” said Frank, who began to fear that his cousin’s nervousness and impatience would prove their ruin. He spoke calmly enough, but his face was very pale, and the lantern trembled in his grasp. This was the severest test that had been applied to his courage since he stood at that log awaiting the approach of the wounded and enraged grizzly; and yet he could speak in his ordinary tone of voice, without the least impatience,

and advise his terrified and excited cousin to “take it easy.” It showed what nerve he had. He was getting desperate; and while he kept one eye upon Archie, and the other turned toward the farther end of the passage, he was calculating his chances for emptying his six-shooter among the Mexicans, before they could close around him. “There is nothing to be gained by being in such a hurry,” he added, as his cousin once more dropped the keys. “The more haste the less speed, you know.”

At this moment lights flashed in the passage, and dark forms came on at a rapid run. The prospect was certainly disheartening. Their only chance for escape was through that door, which refused to open for them, and there were their enemies, at least half a dozen of them, not more than twenty feet distant. But their good fortune had not yet deserted them. The right key was found, just in the nick of time – not a single instant too soon – the door flew open, and Frank and Archie, uttering a simultaneous cry of joy, slipped through and slammed it behind them. The moment it was closed Frank braced himself against it, and Archie inserted the key into the lock; but, before he could turn the bolt, a strong hand grasped the latch, and a stalwart Mexican threw his weight against the door, which was forced partly open, in spite of all Frank’s efforts to prevent it. A moment afterward, a hand holding a murderous looking bowie-knife appeared, followed first by a dark, scowling face, and then by a pair of broad shoulders. One of the Mexicans, who had reached the door a little in advance of his companions, was trying to squeeze himself into the the room;

and he seemed in a fair way to accomplish his object.

“Here’s fifty thousand dollars,” said he, exultingly. “Come here, somebody. He’s got a pistol.”

The boys jammed the door against the *Ranchero*, with all their strength, but he was a match for both of them, and besides he had a great advantage. Frank and Archie could find no foothold upon the hard dirt floor. Their feet slipped about in every direction, and the Mexican, having braced himself against the door-post, was slowly but surely pushing them back. He would certainly have succeeded in working his way into the room, had it not been for Frank’s revolver. The sight of the cocked weapon, thrust full in his face, drove him back, and before the rest of the Mexicans could come to his assistance, the door was closed and fastened.

“Whew!” whispered Archie, drawing a long breath, and wiping the big drops of perspiration from his forehead, “that was a close shave, wasn’t it? It doesn’t seem to suit them very well.”

If one might judge by the uproar that arose in the passage, the Mexicans were certainly very much disappointed. They yelled at the top of their lungs, and some struck the door with their knives, while others threw themselves against it and tried to burst it open. But that door was not a common door. It was made of heavy planks, and was strong enough to successfully resist all their attacks. There was but one way in which they could effect an entrance, and that was by cutting the door down with an ax. Before that could be done, the fugitives would have ample time to hunt up a new hiding-place.

The boys had been so terrified by their recent danger, and so intent on preventing their enemies from following them into the room, that they had not thought of any thing else. They had not had time to look about the apartment in which they had taken refuge; and if there had been a dozen men in there, they would not have known it. As soon as they had somewhat recovered their composure, and satisfied themselves that their enemies in the passage-way could not immediately effect an entrance, they began an examination of the room, and found that, like most of the others in the underground portion of the rancho, it was used as a receptacle for various odds and ends, being filled with boxes, bales of goods, and articles of like description. They noticed also that the room communicated with another, and that the door between them stood wide open; and scarcely had they observed these points, before they became aware that there were men on the opposite side of that door. They could not see them, but they could distinctly hear their voices. One was angrily demanding something, and another was answering in an imploring tone. The men, whoever they were, had evidently got into some difficulty; for, with the voices, was occasionally mingled the sounds of a furious struggle.

“There’s a fight going on in there,” whispered Archie. “I hope they will keep one another employed until we can get out of here. Which way shall we go?”

That was the very question Frank was asking himself, and it was one he could not answer. If they went back into the passage,

they would run directly into the clutches of their enemies; and if they retreated into the adjoining room, they would be captured by the men who were quarreling there. It would be useless for them to conceal themselves among the boxes and bales of goods, for two men could thoroughly ransack the room in half a minute's time, and their hiding-place would speedily be discovered.

"Oh, we are caught at last," said Archie, after he had thought the matter over. "We can't stir a step, for our enemies are all around us."

Thump! thump! Both boys jumped as if some one had suddenly fired a pistol close to their ears. The Rancheros in the passage had secured an ax, and were beginning the work of cutting down the door. The blows fell fast and furiously, and before the cousins had fairly made up their minds what was going on, the door began to shake and tremble violently. Something must be done at once; for in two minutes more the room would be filled with Rancheros. The boys looked at each other, and both seemed to have decided upon the same course of action; for, with one accord, they started toward the opposite side of the room. They moved swiftly, but noiselessly, and when they reached the door, they stopped and looked in and beheld a scene that filled them with astonishment. By the light of a lantern, which stood on a table in the center of the room, they saw a man lying upon the floor, and another kneeling upon his breast, and holding him by the throat with one hand, while, with the other, he flourished a knife in the air. The prostrate man was the chief of the robber

band, and his antagonist was Pierre Costello. They were talking in angry, excited tones, and during the few seconds the cousins stood at the door, undecided how to act, they caught enough of the conversation to understand the cause of the trouble.

Pierre had boasted to Frank, before he left him in the ravine, that he had two strings to his bow this time. In case Don Carlos refused to pay him the reward he had offered for Frank's capture, he would keep his prisoner safe, until his uncle ransomed him. If one failed, the other would not, for Mr. Winters would willingly give every cent he was worth, rather than permit harm to befall his nephew. But something was always happening to upset Pierre's plans. The Rancheros, whom he had tried to cheat out of their share of the money, had followed him to the mountains, and taken charge of the prisoner themselves. Pierre was in the court when Frank was brought in, and although he said nothing, he was highly enraged. He could, of course, have claimed a portion of the reward, but that would not satisfy him – he wanted it all; and he mentally resolved that, before morning, he would smuggle Frank out of the rancho, and carry him back to the mountains.

While thinking the matter over, and trying to decide upon the best plan for accomplishing his object, he came to the conclusion that it would be well to make a change in his programme. He was satisfied that the events of the night had broken up the robber band (the disappearance of Frank and Archie would create a great commotion in the settlement, and the Don's secret would be certain to leak out somewhere), and Pierre determined to secure

his own safety by deserting his friends, and leaving the country. He would not, however, go empty handed. The Don had plenty of gold stowed away in some secret cavern; Pierre wanted some of it; and the only way he could get it was to compel the chief to conduct him to its place of concealment. This he had decided to do; and when the Don went below to renew his search for Archie, Pierre accompanied him; and after leading him into a deserted room in a remote corner of the rancho (one of the few which happened to be unlocked), he ordered the Don to show him where the coveted gold was hidden. Frightened by the sight of the knife which Pierre brandished before his eyes, the chief would have gladly complied with the demand, but, for the simple reason, that he could not get into the room where his treasure was concealed. The key was attached to the bunch in Archie's pocket. He had long ago missed the keys from their accustomed nail in his room, but he did not know what had become of them.

"I don't can do it, Meester Bierre," groaned the Don, for the twentieth time. "I don't got de key. It's lost."

"You can't make me believe that story," replied Pierre, tightening his grasp on the Don's throat, and raising his knife as he spoke. "Once more, and for the last time, where is it?"

The Don's answer was cut short by an interruption that was as sudden as it was unexpected. Two figures glided quickly into the room, and while one stopped to close and lock the door, the other ran straight up to Pierre, and presented a cocked revolver in his face. The robber, who had been so fully occupied with

the Don that he had not heard the sounds of the ax, or the noise occasioned by the struggle at the door, was astonished beyond measure. The hand in which he held the knife fell slowly to his side, his under jaw dropped down, and he shrunk away from the muzzle of the revolver without uttering a word.

“Ach!” exclaimed the Don, who was no less amazed than Pierre, “here ish von of dese leetle poys!”

“Here are both of them,” said Archie, who, having succeeded in finding a key to lock the door, now hurried up with a pistol in each hand. “Well – by – gracious! Pierre Costello!”

Archie was as much astonished at finding himself in the presence of his old enemy, as his cousin had been. He bent down and gazed earnestly into Pierre’s face, and then straightened up and leveled both his pistols at the robber’s head. “Why, Frank!” he exclaimed, “it’s he, sure enough.”

“I know it. This is not the first time I have met him to-night. Drop that knife,” he added, sternly, addressing himself to Pierre. “Now, stretch yourself out on the floor, face downward, and put your hands behind your back.”

The Ranchero, at this moment, did not act much like the reckless, desperate man he had appeared a short time before. The sight of the pistols took all the courage out of him; and he obeyed both Frank’s commands without an instant’s hesitation. The sash, which the latter wore around his waist, answered all the purposes of a rope, and Pierre speedily found himself as helpless as though he had been in double-irons.

The Don, in the meantime, had regained his feet, and stood watching all that was going on with a smile of great satisfaction on his face. The astonishment occasioned by the unexpected appearance of the boys, was, for the moment, lost sight of in the delight and thankfulness he felt at finding himself released from the power of his enemy.

“Now, dis ish all right,” said he, gleefully. “It’s petter you makes dat rope pooty fast, leetle poys. Ach! I fix you, Meester Bierre,” he added, shaking his clenched hand at the prostrate robber; “I makes blenty droubles for you, mine friend. Come mit me, leetle poys; I shows you de way out, now.”

Frank and Archie were not in the least surprised at this proposition. It was a part of their plan to compel the Don to guide them out of the rancho, and they knew that he would readily consent. They knew, too, that he was as treacherous as an Indian, and that he would bear watching. It was their intention to keep as close to him as possible.

“Go ahead, Don,” said Archie, taking the lantern from the table; “but bear one thing in mind, and that is, at the very first exhibition of treachery on your part, we will shoot you with as little hesitation as we shot Old Davy this morning.”

The chief earnestly protested that the boys need have no fears on that score. They had done him a great service in saving him from the knife of Pierre Costello, and he would repay it by showing them the way out of the rancho. Besides, he was not foolish enough to attempt any treachery, while those three loaded

pistols were so near him. The boys listened to all he said, but did not believe a word of it. It was not reasonable to suppose that he would permit them to escape, when he knew that, as soon as they reached home, they would tell their friends every thing that had happened at the rancho. They were as well satisfied that he had some plan in his head, as if he had told them so; but they were resolved to watch him so closely that he would have no opportunity to carry it out.

When Archie picked up the lantern, the Don started toward a door at the farther end of the room, which, upon being opened, revealed a narrow stone stairway leading up to the rooms above. As they were about to ascend these stairs, a loud crash in the adjoining room, followed by a chorus of hoarse yells, told the boys that the Rancheros had at last succeeded in cutting down the door. The Don would have stopped to inquire into the cause of the disturbance, but his companions pushed him on; and while Frank watched him to see that he did not escape, Archie overhauled his keys until he found one that would lock the door. This done, the Don led the way up the stairs, the boys following close at his heels.

CHAPTER XV

THE BRIDGE OF CLOUDS

There seemed to be no end to the stairway. It wound and twisted about in a bewildering fashion, and, before they reached the top, Frank and Archie came to the conclusion that they had either been a long way under the ground, or else that the rancho was a much taller building than they had imagined it to be. At last, however, their guide pushed open a door, and the boys found themselves in the same room to which he had conducted them when they first arrived at the rancho. Still closely followed by his watchful companions, the Don went straight across the room, and stopped in front of a wardrobe.

“Now, leetle poys,” said he, addressing himself to Archie, “you got the keys. Make dis door open.”

Archie quickly found a key that would fit the lock, and when the boys entered the wardrobe, they discovered that, although it was used as a receptacle for clothing, it was intended to conceal a door that led into some secret apartment. When this door had been opened – it was so heavy that it taxed Archie’s strength to the utmost to move it – the cousins found themselves in a room, about twenty feet square, which had one peculiarity that they noticed as soon as they crossed the threshold. There was not a single opening in it; and when Archie had shut the door, they

found themselves surrounded on all sides by rough stone walls. Even the door itself, which closed behind them with the sharp click of a spring lock, could not be seen.

“I say, Don,” exclaimed Frank, “what use do you make of this dungeon? I don’t see any thing stowed away here.”

The chief’s answer was not given in words. He was standing close by Frank’s side, and before the latter could move, he had suddenly jerked the lantern from his hand, and dashed it upon the floor, smashing it into a thousand pieces, and extinguishing the light. As quick as thought Frank bounded forward, and made a blind clutch at the place where he had last seen the Don, but with no other result than to come in violent contact with the wall. A moment afterward, the astonished and bewildered boys heard a grating sound at the other side of the room, and the Don’s voice calling to them through the darkness.

“Dis ish all right,” said he. “Dere’s somethings shtowed away here now, ain’t it? It’s petter you shtays here awhile.”

The truth flashed through the boys’ minds at once – they were prisoners again. In spite of all their vigilance, the chief had succeeded in carrying out the plan he had formed while he was watching the operation of binding Pierre Costello. His movements had been so rapid, that, even had his captives been aware of his intention, they could not have prevented him from carrying it into execution. Before they could tell what was the matter, the lantern had been smashed, their treacherous enemy had made his exit from the room in some mysterious manner,

and they were alone in the darkness.

“We’re in for it now,” panted Archie, sinking down upon the floor all in a heap. “We’ve got out of some tight places to-night, but there is no escape from this predicament. The Don will soon be back with his men.”

“And if they once get their hands upon us, we need never expect to see home again,” said Frank. “Give me some of your matches, and we will examine the walls of this dungeon. There’s a spring to that door, and if we can find it, we can get out.”

After the matches had been lighted, the boys found that the first difficulty to be overcome was the finding of the door. They did not know where to look for it, for the walls appeared to be as solid as the ground. They made the circuit of the room several times, lighting new matches as fast as the old ones were consumed, and carefully examining each separate stone in the wall, from the floor up to a level with their heads; but nothing in the shape of a spring or lock rewarded their search. Then they turned their attention to the floor; but, if there was any opening in the solid oak planks, it could not be found. Five minutes – it seemed much longer to the frightened and excited boys – were passed in this way, and then, for the first time that night, Frank’s courage and fortitude were utterly exhausted.

“It’s no use,” said he. “The Don got out somewhere, but it is very evident that we can’t. We might as well sit down, and wait for him to come in and dispose of us. Do you see any thing encouraging?” he added, noticing that his cousin was holding

a match above his head, and closely examining the roof of the dungeon.

“I believe I do,” replied Archie. “Isn’t that a scuttle?”

“That’s just what it is,” exclaimed Frank, joyfully; “and it is fastened with hooks.”

“Oh, if we could only get up there,” cried Archie. “But there isn’t a thing here for a fellow to stand upon.”

“I’ve got a pair of shoulders. Come here, and I will hold you up.”

After burning another match to determine the exact position of the scuttle, Frank took his stand directly beneath it, and in a moment more, Archie was balanced on his shoulders, and panting loudly, as he strove with nervous haste to unfasten the hooks. Every thing bothers when one is in a hurry, and one’s fingers are all thumbs. It was awkward working in that intense darkness, and, besides, the hooks had been driven into the staples so tightly, that it required the outlay of all Archie’s strength to start them. But patience and perseverance conquered at last, and in an excited voice he informed his cousin that he had unfastened the scuttle, and asked him if he should open it.

“Of course,” replied Frank.

“But how do we know what we shall find on the other side? Perhaps it leads into a room full of Mexicans.”

“We must run that risk. Venture nothing, gain nothing, you know.”

Frank awaited the issue of events with a good deal of anxiety.

He heard the heavy scuttle lifted slowly and cautiously from its place, then a smothered cry of exultation, and the weight was suddenly lifted from his shoulders. Upon looking up, he saw the stars shining down upon him through the scuttle-hole, and his cousin's heels disappearing over the combings.

"We are safe now," whispered Archie, thrusting his head into the opening, and extending his hand down into the darkness. "I am on the roof of the rancho. Give us your fist."

"I can't reach you," replied Frank.

Archie hesitated a moment, and then pulled off his jacket, and firmly grasping one of the sleeves, threw the other down to his cousin. One hundred and fifty pounds was no light weight for a boy of his size to sustain, but he clung manfully to the jacket, while Frank went up, hand-over-hand, as a sailor goes up a rope. He soon ascended high enough to seize the combings of the scuttle, and in a moment more stood safe upon the roof.

The cousins did not stop to congratulate themselves upon their good fortune. Time was much too precious for that, and, besides, they did not yet regard their escape as a settled thing. There was the creek to be crossed; a belt of timber to be passed; and five miles of lonely prairie to be traversed, before they reached their uncle's rancho; and there was no knowing what might happen to them while they were making this journey. Their first care was to put the scuttle back in its place, so that the Don, when he returned to the dungeon, should not immediately discover the manner of their escape, and the next to reconnoiter the ground before them.

They found themselves on the roof of a wing of the rancho – a space about twenty feet square. On three sides was a stone parapet, two feet high, and on the fourth loomed up the walls of the main building. In this wall was a door, which opened upon the wing. The boys merely glanced at it, and scarcely thought of it again; but they afterward had good cause to remember it. They looked all around them, but there was no one in sight; they listened intently, but could hear nothing.

“The coast seems to be clear,” said Archie, walking to the parapet and looking cautiously over, “and we had better be off. It isn’t more than fifteen or twenty feet to the ground, and we can hang by our hands and drop without much danger of injuring ourselves.”

“Be careful,” said Frank. “A sprained ankle wouldn’t be a funny thing, just now.”

The boys jumped upon the wall, and were on the point of swinging themselves over, when an interruption they had not dreamed of arrested their movements. Frank’s quick ear caught the faint tramping of horses’ hoofs. He laid his hand upon his cousin’s arm, and they sprang back to the roof, and concealed themselves behind the parapet.

“Something is always bothering us,” said Archie, straining his eyes through the darkness in the direction from which the sound came. “What’s up now, I wonder!”

If Frank had known just what was about to transpire, he could not have described it in less time than the scene occupied

in taking place. While Archie was speaking, the sound of the horses' hoofs ceased, and a faint light, like that emitted by a match, blazed up in the bushes on the opposite side of the creek. The signal (for the boys were sure it was a signal) was repeated twice, and then arose a commotion in the house, as if men were running hurriedly about. This continued for a few seconds, and then a flatboat suddenly made its appearance in the creek. Where it came from, the boys could not imagine; but there it was, and there was a man in it, who was sculling it toward the opposite bank.

“By – gracious!” whispered Archie, in great excitement. “We are going to witness the very scene that frightened old Bob so badly.”

“But Bob must have been dreaming,” answered Frank. “He said the boat was ferried across without hands, and that man is using an oar.”

Our heroes were too deeply interested in what was going on to continue the conversation. Archie pulled off his sombrero, and pushed back his sleeves, as if he were preparing for a trial of strength with somebody, while Frank settled himself into a comfortable position behind the parapet, after the manner of a boy who had selected his favorite book from the library, and seated himself in an easy chair to enjoy it. They kept a sharp lookout, for they were determined that not even the smallest incident should escape their notice. They had an opportunity now to learn the secret of these strange doings, and, when they

were over, they would know as much about them as Don Carlos himself.

At the same moment that the flatboat appeared, the boys heard the grating noise below them, and suddenly the banks of the creek and the woods, for two hundred yards around, which had been shrouded in darkness an instant before, were flooded with light.

“I know what Bob’s ‘streaks of fire’ are now,” said Frank.

“That light comes from a dark-lantern,” chimed in Archie. “There’s only one thing, so far, that I can’t understand, and that is, where that boat came from in such a hurry. What’s that?”

Just then a large white object, which appeared to unfold itself as it moved along, came into view, and rolled down the bank toward the creek. It stopped when it reached the water’s edge, thus forming a walk, which extended from the creek to the walls of the rancho. This was another thing that Archie could not understand, and neither could Frank. They knew that it was what the trapper had called the “bridge of clouds,” – and there it was, “rolling and tumbling, like the smoke from the mouth of a cannon,” just as Dick had described it to them – but what was it made of? that was the question. Of course it couldn’t be a cloud, but it certainly looked like one. Archie sank lower behind the parapet, and muttered his favorite expression a good many times, and Frank puffed out his cheeks, and scratched his head to stir up his ideas.

While the bridge of clouds (the boys did not know what else

to call it) was placing itself in position on that side of the creek, a similar operation had been going on on the opposite bank. The boat had by this time crossed the creek, and a white object, like the one just described – another bridge of clouds – extended from it into the woods. Presently, two horsemen appeared, riding down the bridge toward the boat. One was mounted on Roderick, and the other on King James; and each led a horse which had doubtless been stolen that night. They rode upon the flatboat, the bridge along which they had just passed rolled itself up after them, and the boat began to move across the creek. It was plain, now, that the old trapper had not been dreaming. The horsemen were still in their saddles; the Mexican, who had gone over in the boat, was standing quietly in the stern; the oar lay upon the bottom where he had thrown it; and yet the boat moved rapidly through the water. There was no mistake about it, for the boys could see the whole proceeding as plainly as though it had been broad daylight. The boat was certainly coming across the creek, and it was equally certain that not one of its three passengers was propelling it. A dozen oarsmen could not have sent it through the water as rapidly as it was moved by that invisible power. It was not more than half-a-minute in crossing the creek, and as soon as it touched the bank, the horsemen rode out on the bridge of clouds, and came toward the rancho. Frank and Archie kept close watch of their movements, thrusting their heads as far over the parapet as they dared, and it seemed to them that the horsemen went into the wall. They suddenly disappeared somewhere very

suddenly; and no sooner were they out of sight, than the bridge of clouds rolled itself up behind them, the light was extinguished, and darkness once more settled down over the rancho.

These various incidents followed one another with a rapidity that was utterly bewildering. The horsemen had crossed the creek, and were safe in the rancho, almost before the boys knew it. They had moved as swiftly and silently as spirits; and when they had passed out of sight, Archie struck the parapet with his fist, to make sure that he was awake. He felt the cold chills creeping along his back, and he did not wonder now that old Bob had been frightened. He was willing to confess that he was frightened himself.

“Well!” said Frank, after a moment’s pause.

“Don’t ask me any questions,” replied Archie. “I don’t know any more about it now than I did before. Where did those fellows go?”

“What was that white thing the horses walked on, and what moved it? I didn’t see any one near it!”

“Where did that flatboat come from, and where could it have gone so suddenly? It disappeared the instant the horsemen left it.”

“No doubt we shall know all about it some day,” said Frank – “that is, if we succeed in making our escape. I wonder if the coast is clear now?”

“No, it isn’t,” answered Archie. “See there!”

Frank looked over the parapet, and saw a Mexican standing in the shadow of the wall beneath them. He had doubtless been

stationed there to see if the horsemen were pursued. The boys wished him a thousand miles away, for he was sadly interfering with their arrangements. They waited impatiently for him to follow the robbers into the rancho, but he seemed to have no such intention. He stood there as upright as a post, and as silent and motionless.

“Are we not having miserable luck?” asked Archie, impatiently. “Let’s jump down on him, before he knows it. We can both manage him.”

“But we would alarm the rest of the band,” replied Frank. “Let’s drop down on the other side, and go around the rancho.”

The attention of the boys had been so fully occupied with what had just transpired, that they had not thought of looking for enemies in their rear. While they were watching the Mexican beneath them, the door in the wall of the main building, of which we have before spoken, was noiselessly opened, and several Rancheros, headed by Don Carlos, came out and approached the boys on tip-toe. As the latter arose to their feet to carry out the plan Frank had suggested, Archie’s collar was seized in a strong grasp, and his cousin looked up just in time to see a long, bony hand stretching out toward him. It was the robber chief’s hand; but it was much too slow in its movements to make a prisoner of Frank Nelson. The boy lingered just long enough to see that the Don was backed up by a force too strong to be successfully resisted, and then, striking up the threatening hand, he jumped to the parapet and swung himself over. He did not immediately

let go his hold, but looked down to take a survey of the ground beneath him. He wanted to strike squarely on his feet, in order to be on equal terms with the sentinel who would doubtless pounce upon him at once. He hung suspended in the air but a moment, but that was long enough for the Don to reach the parapet, and bend over and seize him by the collar.

“Hold on, leetle poys,” exclaimed the chief. “It’s petter you comes back here. Ach! Dis ish von grand shwindle,” he yelled, changing his tone very suddenly. “Vat you making here, leetle poys?”

The Don was greatly alarmed now, for he was being dragged over the parapet. When he seized Frank, he did not attempt to pull him back upon the roof, but braced himself, intending to hold fast to his prisoner until some of his men could come to his assistance. Frank understood his plans; and knowing that the loss of a single instant might be fatal to him, he quickly loosened his grasp upon the wall, and seized the Don by the hair. He hoped by this move to compel his enemy to let go his hold; but it had a very different result. The chief, not being equal to the task of sustaining a dead weight of one hundred and fifty pounds by the hair of his head, suddenly lost his balance, and he and Frank fell whirling through the air.

CHAPTER XVI

A RACE IN THE DARK

It seemed to Frank that while he was falling he lost his senses. When he came to himself, he was sitting on the ground about ten feet from the wall, the Don was lying motionless by his side, and the Mexican, with whom Frank expected to have a desperate fight, or a hotly-contested foot-race, was kneeling upon him and holding him down. More than that, a huge door in the wall of the rancho – the same one through which the horsemen had disappeared a few minutes before – had been thrown open; the light of a locomotive lamp was streaming out; and a crowd of mounted men, all armed to the teeth, were charging up the bank with furious yells. Frank gazed at them with mouth and eyes wide open; and so bewildered was he, that the Mexican, if he had felt so inclined, might have bound him hand and foot without the least difficulty. But it was plain that he was not there for that purpose; he was devoting himself entirely to Don Carlos.

“That was well done, Master Frank,” said he, as he passed his sash around the chiefs arms. “But there’s going to be a fight here, and you had better get out of the way.”

It was Carlos who spoke, and his words brought Frank to his feet immediately. He understood it all now. The men, who were pouring through the door into the rancho, were the settlers, who

had come there to rescue him and Archie. Frank, however, was not disposed to run away because there was going to be a fight. A dozen or two men, at least, would be killed or wounded, and his cousin might be one of the number, unless he was immediately liberated. The last Frank saw of him, he was struggling in the grasp of a powerful Mexican, who had thrown him upon the roof, and was holding his hands behind his back, while a companion was getting ready to bind him. And there were Roderick and King James to be looked after, too. During the confusion some of the robbers might make off with them, and that would be a misfortune indeed. Frank thought of all these things, and to the utter amazement of Carlos, pulled his revolver from his pocket, and followed the settlers into the rancho.

When he reached the door he stopped, astonished at the scene presented to his view. The court was filled with men, some on foot, and some on horseback; rifles and pistols were cracking in every direction; knives were flashing in the air; and the din that arose was almost deafening. One thing Frank noticed immediately, and that was, that the fight was not so much of a fight after all. The robbers, taken by surprise, and alarmed at the numbers and determination of the attacking party, did not stop to resist, but made every exertion to escape. Some, of course, succeeded; while others were pulled down by lassos, and bound hand and foot before they could realize what was going on.

Frank stood at the door but a moment, but that was long enough for a friend of his to find and recognize him. It was

Marmion. The dog jumped upon him with every demonstration of joy, and then turned and attacked the first man he came to, who happened to be none other than Carlos. The latter had taken care of his prisoner, and was hurrying in to assist the settlers. Marmion discovered his mistake after he had bitten the Ranchero, but did not seem to be sorry for it. He, no doubt, considered it his duty to bite somebody, and it made little difference to him who it was. He afterward had an opportunity to try his teeth upon an old enemy of his, and he made the most of it.

Frank's first care was to look around for Archie. He was not in sight, but something else was. Roderick was standing near the middle of the court, and one of the robbers had just grasped the bridle, preparatory to springing upon his back. There was not a single instant to be lost. That man must not be allowed to mount the horse, for, if he once got fairly into the saddle, he would go out of the court with the speed of the wind, and that would be the last of Roderick. Frank bounded forward, discharging his revolver at the robber as he ran; but, although the man looked around to see where the bullet came from, he was not frightened from his purpose. His leg was already over the saddle, and Roderick was beginning to move.

"Stop, there!" yelled Frank, who was so close to the horse that he could almost seize him by the tail. "Stop, I say!"

The noise in the court was so great that he could scarcely hear his own voice. The Mexican did not hear it, and it is not probable

that he would have paid any attention to it if he had. The revolver cracked once more, but something made Frank's hand unsteady, and the bullet went wide of the mark. Roderick was certainly lost to him. Again and again the six-shooter spoke in decided tones, until the last load was discharged; and still the robber rode on. With a cry of impatience Frank dashed the now useless weapon to the ground, and, scarcely knowing what he was doing, started in hot pursuit of the mustang; but Marmion, his friend and ally, was swifter than he, and now beginning to understand that the Mexican ought to be stopped, he ran up beside the horse, bounded into the air, seized the man by the shoulder, and pulled him from the saddle in a twinkling.

The wild Indian yell to which Frank gave utterance as he witnessed this proceeding, would have done credit to Dick Lewis himself. He did not stop to see what Marmion was going to do with the robber, but kept on after the mustang, which he now believed would make straight for the gate. Roderick, however, seemed to be in no hurry to leave the rancho; nor was he frightened by the noise and confusion around him. On the contrary, he appeared to enjoy it. He arched his neck, laid back his ears, and pranced about among the excited, struggling men as though he were in his natural element; but, being well-trained and obedient, he stopped when his master succeeded in making him hear his voice, and in a few seconds more Frank was safe in the saddle. How proud the boy was then! He was not afraid of Don Carlos' whole band.

“Hurrah for me!” he shouted. “I am all right now. I’d like to see somebody try to take you away from me again, old fellow. Hallo, here!”

A horse interrupted Frank’s soliloquy – a little black horse, which galloped by almost within reach of him, and disappeared in the darkness outside the gate. He was in sight long enough for Frank to see that he carried two men on his back, one being seated in the saddle, and the other hanging helplessly across the pommel. The horse was King James; the man in the saddle was Pierre Costello; and the other was Archie Winters.

The cousins had left Pierre bound hand and foot in one of the underground rooms of the rancho; but he did not remain there long, for the herdsmen, from whom the boys had so narrowly escaped, soon cut down the door and released him. Pierre explained matters in a few words, by saying that the boys had taken him unawares, and made a prisoner of him; but he forgot to mention the fact that they had caught him almost in the act of murdering Don Carlos.

Pierre, finding himself once more at liberty, ran frantically about the rancho, up stairs and down, searching every-where for the boys. He found one of them at last, and it was Archie, who had been captured on the roof of the wing, and was being carried below. From the men who had him in charge, Pierre learned that Frank had again escaped, and that the Don had been pulled over the parapet. He was greatly excited over the news. He did not give a second thought to the old Spaniard’s misfortune – he

did not care if the fall had broken his neck – but he was highly disgusted and enraged to learn that Frank had once more slipped through his fingers. He assisted his companions in disposing of their prisoner, and, when the latter had been locked up, Pierre managed to retain possession of the keys. It was his intention to go out with the others, and assist in recapturing Frank; but if that could not be done – if Frank succeeded in eluding them – he would take Archie to the mountains in his place. Pierre thought this a decided improvement on his old programme. Archie was not so large and strong as his cousin, and consequently he could be more easily managed. He would also bring the same amount of money in the shape of a ransom.

Pierre hurried to the court, and, when he arrived there, what was his amazement to find it filled with settlers! He did not stop to take a second look, but returned with all possible haste to the room in which Archie was confined. Lifting him in his arms as if he had been an infant, Pierre ran back to the court, and the first object that met his eyes was Archie's horse. To his infinite delight the animal did not attempt to elude him; and when he had swung himself into the saddle, and pulled his prisoner up in front of him, he began to believe that his plans might, after all, prove successful. There was only one person in all that crowd who saw him as he dashed through the gate, and that was Frank Nelson. Pierre knew that some one was watching him, for he heard a loud command to halt, followed by the angry bark of a dog, and a clatter of hoofs behind him. He looked over his

shoulder, and began to lose heart again. He knew, if Archie did not, that Roderick was a better horse than the one he was riding; and that as long as Marmion was on his trail, he could not hope to elude his pursuer. But he did not stop. He kept straight on toward the woods, and a few rods behind him came the swift mustang, bounding along as easily as though he had been furnished with wings.

During the race that followed, nothing but the clatter of the horses' hoofs, and an occasional angry yelp from Marmion, broke the stillness of the night. Across the prairie went pursuer and pursued at furious speed, into the woods, over logs and rocks, up hill and down, through darkness so intense that one could scarcely see his hand before him, and finally Frank began to wonder at the endurance exhibited by the little black under his double load. But the furious pace was telling on him, and with all the whipping and spurring he received, he could not prevent the mustang from overtaking him. Pierre saw this, and hastily drawing rein, prepared to carry out a plan he had determined upon.

“Stop where you are!” he exclaimed, in a most savage tone of voice. “If you advance another step” —

The robber was about to say that if Frank came any nearer he would bury his knife in Archie's body; but Marmion did not give him time to finish the sentence. He sprang straight at his throat, and, before Pierre could think of resistance, he was flat on the ground.

“Hold fast to him, old fellow!” shouted Frank, dismounting from his horse. “That makes amends for the cowardly manner in which you deserted me this morning. Archie, where are you?”

“Here’s all that’s left of me,” replied a faint voice. “O, my head!” groaned Archie, as Frank knelt down by his side, and cut the ropes with which he was bound. “There’s no fun in being carried with railroad speed through a thick woods on a dark night like this. But I want you to understand one thing: That wasn’t a fair race, because my horse had a double load to carry.”

Frank had been astonished a good many times that night, but he was utterly amazed, now. Here was Archie, who was aching in every limb, and bleeding profusely from the wounds he had received during his rapid ride through the woods – who, during the last few hours, had been the hero of more hair-breadth escapes than had ever before fallen to the lot of a boy of his age – who had but just been delivered from the power of a reckless and determined foe – here he was talking about the speed of his horse, and declaring that the race the animal had just run was not a fair test of his abilities!

“This is a pretty time to talk about such things, isn’t it?” asked Frank. “I suppose you hoped that Roderick would be beaten, didn’t you?”

“I can’t say that I did,” replied Archie, as his cousin lifted him to his feet; “but I could not help telling myself that if Pierre wanted to save himself, all he had to do was to drop me overboard, and he would leave you behind so rapidly that you

would never boast of Roderick's speed again."

(We may here remark that the question of the relative merits of the two horses remained for a long time undecided; but still it was settled, at last, and to the satisfaction of both the boys. It was an exciting race, and a long one; and the history of it shall be given in its proper place.)

Archie, in spite of his wounds and bruises, was as lively and plucky as ever. One desire was uppermost in his mind, now, and that was to effect the capture of the robber; but he need not have troubled himself on that score, for Pierre had already been secured. When the cousins reached the place where he was lying, they found him motionless and helpless, Marmion's powerful jaws being closed upon his throat. The dog barked and whined furiously when compelled to let go his hold, and it was all his master could do to prevent him from again attacking his enemy.

"Santa Maria!" gasped the robber, when he found himself free from the teeth of the dog.

"That's what I say," exclaimed Archie, who, having removed Pierre's sash from his waist, proceeded to confine his hands and feet. "I think you are at the end of your rope now, my hearty. You may make up your mind to start for your old quarters at San Diego, to-morrow morning, by the early train. What shall we do with him?"

"We'll leave him here until we can procure assistance, and come back for him," replied Frank. "Now, let's start for home."

But for one thing, Frank and Archie would have been two of

the happiest boys that ever existed. Their wounds, their aching bones, the dangers they had passed through, were all forgotten in the joy they felt at finding themselves once more in undisputed possession of their long-lost horses. They had much to talk about as they rode toward the rancho. Archie told Frank what had happened to him during his short captivity, and plumed himself on having been in the very midst of his enemies for more than seven hours (it was then long after midnight), and having made one prisoner alone and unaided, and assisted in capturing two more before he fell into the hands of his enemies. As for the misfortune that had befallen their old friend Dick Lewis, Archie declared that it did not trouble him in the least, for he knew his cousin had been mistaken; and Frank, ready to catch at straws, said he certainly hoped it would turn out so.

After a fifteen minutes' ride, the boys once more found themselves in the rancho, and this time with no fear of being made prisoners. The fight was over, and the settlers were in full possession of the robbers' stronghold. They were in a state of great excitement and alarm, however, for they had ransacked the building from top to bottom, without discovering any signs of Frank and Archie; and they were on the point of abandoning the search in despair, when the boys appeared. The settlers crowded about them as they rode into the court, shook them warmly by the hand, asked them a multitude of questions, and cheered them uproariously. Presently, two tall fellows, dressed in Mexican costume, and carrying long rifles in their hands, elbowed their

way through the crowd. One was old Bob Kelly – the cousins would have recognized his long, white beard any where – but who was the other? They had seen those broad shoulders and that rifle before, but they could not tell who the man was, for his face was so badly battered and scarred that his own mother, if she had been there, would not have known him. He did not offer to shake hands with the boys, but dropped the butt of his rifle to the ground, clasped his fingers over the muzzle of the weapon, and said:

“You amazin’ keerless fellers! I knowed this mornin’ that it was my bounden duty to give you a good trouncin’.”

“What did I tell you?” screamed Archie, turning triumphantly to his cousin, who opened his mouth and eyes, and gazed at the man in stupid bewilderment.

CHAPTER XVII

CONCLUSION

“**I reckon** you don’t speak to common fellers any more,” continued Dick, for it was he, notwithstanding that Frank had told his cousin, in such positive language, that he had seen him pulled down and strangled on the prairie. “You needn’t be so tuk back, youngster, ’cause it’s me, an’ ’taint nobody else.”

During the next few minutes the settlers, who were standing around, gained some idea of the strength of the affection the boys cherished for the trapper. They threw themselves from their saddles and actually embraced him; and while they remained at the rancho, they kept close at his side, clinging to his arms as though they were afraid some one might try to take him away from them.

“Why, Dick,” said Frank, as soon as he could speak, “I never expected to see you again.”

“Youngster,” replied the trapper – and, as he spoke, he drew himself up to his full height, extended his long arms above his head, and doubled up a pair of fists which looked as though they might have knocked down an ox – “we don’t look fur nothing else – me an’ ole Bob don’t – but to have our har riz by the Injuns some day; but you’ll never hear tell of one of us bein’ rubbed out by Greasers – mark that. Now, I’ve had more ’n one of them ar

lariats over my head, but I never had one around my neck yet, an' I never will. When I fight Mexikins, I allers look out fur them lassos, an' when that feller slipped his'n over my head, I was ready fur him. I cut it with my knife quicker'n he could say 'Gin'ral Jackson,' with his mouth open. As I riz to my feet, I see that the other feller was purty clost to me, an' I knocked him out of his saddle with my tomahawk, as clean as a whistle. Thar wasn't but one left then, an' he wasn't no 'count, fur his lasso was ruined; an', without that we'pon, a Mexikin aint a thing fur a ten year ole boy to be afearred of. He tuk to his heels, an' so did I; an' here I am."

To Archie, who had fully expected to see the trapper again, alive and well, this story of his escape seemed probable enough; but to Frank, who had seen him, as he believed, powerless in the midst of his enemies, it seemed almost incredible. Many a time, during the next three or four days, it was noticed that he earnestly regarded the trapper as if he had not quite made up his mind that he was the genuine Dick Lewis after all.

"I say, youngsters," said Bob, when the trapper ceased speaking, "I've found out what it was that skeered me so bad, that night."

"An' he was skeered at jest nothing at all," exclaimed Dick. "I reckon the ole feller feels the least bit ashamed of himself. If he don't, he had oughter."

The trappers, followed by the boys and a few of the settlers, led the way to a recess in the wall opposite the gate. The only articles in this recess that attracted the attention of the cousins, were a

huge roll of canvas, and a post which supported a locomotive lamp. The face of this lamp was not turned toward the court, but outward, toward the wall.

“I told you, youngsters,” said Dick, “that the walls of this yere rancho are five foot thick; and so they be, in every place except this. Right thar is a door. It can’t be seed from the outside, nor from the inside, nuther; but it’s thar.”

Frank knew there was a door somewhere about there, for he had followed the settlers through it; but he could not tell where it was now, for the wall appeared to be as solid there as any where else. The trapper knew where to look for it, however, and when he placed his hands upon the wall, one of the stones began to move. One end moved outward, and the other inward, showing that the stone worked upon a pivot in the center. The opening thus made was about six feet long, and a foot high.

“Humph!” exclaimed Archie. “I’d like to see a man on horseback go through that little hole.”

“Easy, easy,” replied the trapper. “I haint got done yet.”

The door was composed of at least a half a dozen stones (one above the other, some longer, and some shorter, in order to “break joints” in the wall), and when they had all been moved from their places, two openings were formed, the stones being in the middle of the doorway, one end pointing toward the creek, and the other toward the court. The space on each side was amply sufficient to admit of the passage of a horseman.

“You know ole Bob said, that arter them two fellers crossed

the creek, they rid up the bridge of clouds, an' went through the wall of the rancho," remarked Dick. "Wal, they didn't, 'cause they went in at the door. Bob swum the creek, an' hunted high an' low fur the door, but couldn't find it; an' that's what skeered him."

From the door, the boys turned their attention to the bundle of canvas before spoken of. It was neatly rolled up, and in the middle was a stick of round wood, to each end of which was fastened a small wheel, with a deep groove in the circumference. In each of these grooves was a rope, about the size of a clothesline, which was passed once around the wheel, and the longer end of which was coiled down on the ground, so that it would run out rapidly. The trappers pushed the canvas outside the door, made the shorter ends of the ropes fast to two rings in the wall, which seemed to have been placed there for that especial purpose, then gave the canvas a push, and it went rolling down the bank toward the creek. When it reached the water's edge it had all run out, and of course it stopped. The strong breeze that was blowing gave to it a gentle undulating motion, and this it was that the old trapper had compared to the "rolling and tumbling of the smoke from the mouth of a cannon." This was the bridge of clouds; and what a simple thing it was to have frightened a man like Bob so badly! The old veteran evidently thought so, for he leaned on his rifle and looked foolish enough. When the settlers had laughed at him to their satisfaction, he and Dick seized the ropes, and hauling in hand-over-hand, rolled up the canvas without going outside the

door.

“Well! well!” exclaimed Archie. “Frank and I watched this thing as closely as ever two cats watched a mouse, and we couldn’t begin to see through it. It’s all plain enough now; but how about the boat?”

The trapper replied that he would soon show them all about that; and picking up a lantern, led the way into the underground portion of the rancho. After threading numerous passage-ways, and turning several corners, he ushered them into an apartment that might have been called the engine-room, for it contained the power that had propelled the flatboat so rapidly. It was not an engine, however, but a windlass, something like those used for moving houses. It was plain that it had been worked by horses, for there were prints of hoofs all over the floor.

The next thing was to find the boat; and that could be easily done by following the rope which was attached to the windlass. The rope led them through a long narrow passage-way, and when they arrived at the end of it, Dick opened a small door, about the height of his head from the floor, and the boys climbed up and found the boat before them. It was snugly hidden in a little cove, which had been dug into the bank, and walled up with stones to prevent it from caving in. The mouth of the cove was so effectually concealed by thick bushes, that a fleet might have sailed along the creek without discovering it. In the bow of the boat was a bundle of canvas, like the one already described, only it was much smaller; and the ropes with which it was rolled up

were attached to a horizontal windlass, so that they could be controlled by one man.

The trappers and some of the settlers followed the boys into the boat, and assisted them in pushing it out of the cove. Frank got out the oar, and sculled it across, and, when it reached the opposite shore, Dick seized the canvas and ran up the bank with it, the canvas unrolling itself as he went.

“It’s all plain enough now,” repeated Archie; “but it seems to me that the Don put himself to a good deal of trouble for nothing.”

“I think he managed affairs just about right,” said one of the settlers. “The object of this canvas is to conceal the trail. When my horses were stolen, I followed them very easily for a while, but lost the scent about a hundred yards from the bank of this creek. That must have been the place where they got on the canvas. Of course they left no more trail, and I couldn’t follow them any farther.”

“But I don’t see why it is necessary to have this boat moved by a windlass,” said Frank. “If one man could bring it over here, what’s the reason he couldn’t take it back?”

“That can also be easily explained,” replied the settler. “The current in the creek is so strong that one man can’t scull the boat straight across. It makes no difference where he lands on this side, because he brings his canvas with him, and can put it out any where; but the canvas on the other side is stationary, you know, and the boat must be stopped at one particular place, so

that the horsemen can get out on it.”

“Oh, I see,” said Frank.

“Thar’s another thing that mebber the comp’ny would like to know something about,” said Dick. “Arter we come back from that bar hunt this mornin’, I went out to tend to some cattle, an’ seed these yere two keerless fellers go into Don Carlos’ rancho. I hung round watchin’ the house, ’cause I kind o’ thought that mebber something was agoin’ to happen, an’ that’s the way I come to be in the woods when Frank an’ them Greasers had that race. An’ fellers,” added Dick, turning to the settlers, “I seed the hul of that ar runnin’ match, an’ I never in my life seed a boy pick up his feet quicker’n Frank did. I’ll match him agin any hoss in Californy. I was goin’ to say, that arter I got licked by them Greasers, an’ seed that Frank was ketched an’ tuk to the rancho —”

Frank, at this point, begged pardon for interrupting Dick, and told him that he had not then been taken to the rancho, but was carried to the mountains by Pierre Costello. This announcement created great excitement among the settlers, and it was increased wonderfully, when Archie said that they had left Pierre in the woods, a prisoner.

“Who tuk him pris’ner?” demanded the trapper.

“Archie and I, and Marmion,” replied Frank.

“Fellers!” exclaimed Dick, who seemed to be utterly confounded, “don’t this yere night’s work beat any thing you ever hearn tell on? If any of you know of two boys that can lay over

them ar youngsters of mine, jest trot 'em out; I'd like mighty well to see 'em. But they haint been born yet, an' never will be."

The trapper pounded the ground with the butt of his rifle, gazed proudly at the boys, and went on with his explanation.

"I seed that Frank was ketched agin," said he, "an' knowin' that I couldn't do nothing more by myself, I rid hum an' told ole Bob what had been goin' on; an' him an' Carlos, an' a few other herdsmen whom we knowed we could trust, set out to bring the settlers together, while I come back to watch the rancho. In an hour's time we had a hundred men here in the bushes.

"The fust thing to be done was to study up a plan to get into the rancho. We knowed we couldn't whip the Greasers while they were inside the house, an' we outside – we must get inside too; an' that could only be done by takin' them by surprise. While we were talkin' the matter over, up come two Mexikins b'longin' to the band, who had been out somewhere stealin' hosses. They run right among us afore they knowed it, an' it was the easiest thing in the world fur us to captur' 'em, an' make 'em tell us all we wanted to know. Arter a leetle talk it was decided that me an' ole Bob should take the place of the Mexikins, an' go into the rancho; an', that while we were goin' in, the settlers should swim the creek, an' get ready to make the attack. Me an' Bob were to give 'em time to get clost up under the walls, an' then open the door, an' the settlers would rush in an' make pris'ners of the robbers afore they knowed it.

"Wal, we swapped clothes with them ar two dirty Greasers –

me an' ole Bob did – mounted Roderick an' King Jeemes, tuk the two stolen hosses by the bridle, crossed the creek on the flatboat, went up that ar canvas thing that Bob called the bridge of clouds, an' rid straight into the rancho – just as though we had a right thar – an' nobody didn't suspect that we wasn't real Greasers. We seed a few men arter we got into the house, but none on 'em had a word to say, or even looked at us. The fellers who hauled up the bridge shut the door an' went off about their business, leavin' me an' Bob to 'tend to our'n; which we did, I reckon. We jumped off our hosses, an' opened the door agin; an' the settlers come pourin' in. Every thing worked jest as we had planned it.”

There was one mystery that remained to be explained, and that was the signal made by the flag. The boys, afterward found out all about it from one of the prisoners. The robbers, knowing that they were not suspected, had become very bold; and horses which had been stolen at a distance, were not unfrequently brought into the rancho in broad daylight. The flag flying at the mast-head, signified that the coast was clear, and that the animals could be safely brought in. When the flag was not to be seen, it was understood that there were strangers about; and, in that case, the horses were concealed in the woods until dark, when they were brought in through the secret door.

During the next three hours the boys, in company with the trappers, explored every nook and corner of the rancho. Archie first led them to the stable, to show them his prisoner; but, when they got there, they found that Beppo was gone. He had

been discovered and released by some of the band, and in the confusion attending the attack, had made good his escape. From the stable they went to the Don's reception-room; and while they were examining the painting of the Indian warrior, Archie entertained them with a glowing account of his discovery of the spring, and the adventures which had resulted from it. After that they went to the secret room, from which they had made their escape through the scuttle, and spent an hour in trying to find the place where the Don had got out. But their efforts were unsuccessful; and being particularly desirous to have the mystery solved, they went in search of the chief, whom they found lying in one corner of the court securely bound. To their request that he would explain the matter, he replied that it was "one grand swindle," and that was all they could get out of him. The manner of his escape from that room was a secret that never was revealed.

While the boys were thus engaged, the settlers and their herdsmen were busying themselves in removing various articles of value from the building, such as provisions, weapons, ammunition, and bales of goods; and at daylight a long string of wagons, and a longer string of mounted men, crossed the creek, and slowly wended their way toward the settlement. Just as the cavalcade entered the woods, huge volumes of flames burst from the doors and windows of the rancho, and in a few hours nothing but blackened and crumbling ruins remained to mark the spot whereon had stood the robbers' stronghold.

It was breakfast time when Frank and Archie reached home,

but they went to bed immediately, and slept until long after midnight. When they awoke, they felt very sensibly the effects of the rough treatment they had received; and when Uncle James arrived two days afterward, he found them with their heads tied up, Frank with his arm in a sling, and Archie hobbling around with a cane. But then they had covered themselves with glory. They had shot Old Davy, and assisted in breaking up the robber band, and no general ever felt prouder of his victories than the boys did over these exploits. The story of their adventures is, however, not yet complete. According to arrangement, they accompanied Captain Porter on his trading expedition; and what they saw, and what they did while they were gone, shall be told in "Frank in the Mountains."

THE END