

Goldfrap John Henry

The Border Boys with the Texas Rangers



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Fremont B. Deering

The Border Boys with the Texas Rangers

CHAPTER I.

“IN TEXAS DOWN ON THE RIO GRANDE.”

“Yip! Yip! Y–e–e–e–ow!”

“Gracious! What’s coming, a band of circus Indians?”

“Not knowing, can’t say; but there is evidently something to the fore in the strenuous line.”

“Well, I should say so. Hark, what’s that?”

“Shooting; maybe some of those Mestizos from over the Rio Grande are attacking the town.”

“Hardly likely. The last heard of them they were fifty miles from the Border fighting hard with the Federals. But it’s something, all right.”

“Hullo! Look there. It’s – it’s the Rangers!”

The red-headed, sun-burned last speaker reined in his impetuous, plunging, gray broncho and, shielding his eyes with his hand, gazed down the dusty main street of San Mercedes. Above the trio of lads who had halted their cayuses at the sudden sound of distant uproar, the sun hung in the steely blue sky like a red hot copper ball. Jack Merrill, alert and good-looking, with his frank, bronzed face and easy seat in the saddle, followed the direction of red-headed Walt Phelps’ gaze. Ralph Stetson, equally excited, studied the situation with equivalent interest.

And now at the end of the street, which had suddenly become thronged as if by magic with slouching Mexicans, blue-bloused Chinese and swinging-gaited cow-punchers with jingling spurs on their high-heeled boots, a novel procession swept into view.

Out of a cloud of yellow dust, which hung like a saffron curtain against the burning cobalt of the sky, appeared the foremost of a group of riders.

“Here they come! Look out, fellows! Let’s sidetrack ourselves and let the Texas limited go by!”

As he shouted this advice Ralph Stetson, a lad of slightly more delicate build than his youthful companions, swung his wiry little pony in a pivotal sweep, and made as if to retreat.

“Hurry, boys!” he shouted.

But Jack Merrill stood his ground, and Walt Phelps, seeing that the leader of the three Border Boys did not swerve in the face of the onrush, did not budge an inch either. But on the street excitement was rife. Cayuses, hitched to the long, strong hitching racks, or simply left to stand with the reins dropped to the ground over their heads, plunged and squealed. Men ran about and shouted, and even the usually stolid Chinese restaurant keepers and laundry men seemed stirred out of their habitual state of supreme unconcern. As for the Mexican residents of San Mercedes, they merely drew their serapes closer about them and from beneath their broad brimmed, cone-crowned sombreros gazed with a haughty indifference at the group of galloping, shouting horsemen.

As Ralph Stetson cantered off, Jack Merrill backed his pony up to the very edge of the raised wooden sidewalk. The little animal was wildly excited and plunged and whinnied as if it felt the bit and saddle for the first time. But Jack maintained his easy, graceful seat as if he had formed part of the lively little creature he bestrode. Walt Phelps, also undisturbed, controlled his equally restive mount.

“Why don’t we cut and run, too, Jack?” asked Walt, as the hind feet of their ponies rattled on the wooden walk. “Those fellows are taking up the whole street. They’ll run us down.”

“Inasmuch as they are just the men that we are here to meet,” responded Jack, “I propose to stand my ground.”

The Border Boys had arrived in San Mercedes that morning, having ridden from El Chico, the nearest town on the Southern Pacific Railroad. They had come almost directly from a short rest following their exciting adventures across the Mexican Border, as related in “The Border Boys With the Mexican Rangers.” In this book, it will be recalled, they had aided the picturesque mounted police of Mexico in running down a band of desperadoes headed by Black Ramon, a famous Border character.

We first met the boys in the initial book of this series, “The Border Boys on the Trail.” This volume set forth how Jack Merrill, the son of an Arizona rancher, and Ralph Stetson, the rather delicate son of an Eastern Railroad magnate and an old school chum, had shared with Walt Phelps, a cattleman’s son, some astonishing adventures, including much trouble with the hard characters who formed the nucleus of a band of cattle rustlers. They assisted in putting them to rout, but not before they had encountered many stirring adventures in a ruined mission church in Chihuahua used as a gathering place by the band. The treasure they discovered secreted in the catacombs under the ruined edifice had given each boy a substantial little nest egg of his own.

In “The Border Boys Across the Frontier” they were found aiding Uncle Sam. They happened to find a strange subterranean river by means of which arms and ammunition were being smuggled to Mexican revolutionists. In trying to put a stop to that work they were captured, and escaped only after a ride on a borrowed locomotive and a fight in the stockade of the Esmeralda mine.

We now find them in San Mercedes awaiting the arrival of the Texas Rangers, a detachment of whom had been ordered to the little settlement on the banks of the Rio Grande Del Norte to put down any disturbances, and to keep the warring Mexicans from committing outrages on Uncle Sam’s soil. The boys, always anxious for anything that might offer in the way of adventure, had begged their fathers to allow them to see something of the work of the Rangers. At first this had been absolutely refused. But finally Mr. Stetson gave his permission, and then Mr. Merrill fell in line, as did Walt Phelps’ parents. Captain Moseby Atkinson of the Rangers being an old friend of Mr. Merrill’s, the rest was easy, and it had been arranged that the boys were to meet Captain Atkinson at San Mercedes. Though they looked only for fun and novel experiences, the Border Boys were destined, while with the Rangers, to pass through adventures more thrilling, and hardships more severe than they dreamed.

On dashed the Rangers, the hoofs of their mounts thundering like artillery. It was a sight calculated to stir the heart and quicken the pulse of any wholesome, active lad. There were fully twenty of them, riding six abreast. Their sombreros, blue shirts, rough leather chaps and the rifles slung in each man’s saddle holster, showed them to be men of action in the acutest sense of that word; men whose bronzed faces and keen, steady eyes bespoke them of the best type of plainsman; worthy descendants of Fremont, Lewis and Clarke.

“Yip! Yip!” the foremost of the riders shouted as they saw the boys.

Jack’s fiery little pony began to show signs of frantic alarm. It bucked and tried to throw itself backward, but each time the young horseman’s skill checked it.

“Captain! Captain!” called Jack, as the Rangers swept by.

But above the thunder of hoofs, and in the midst of the yellow dust clouds, Captain Atkinson did not hear nor see the two boys.

But one of his men, a rather squat, dark-skinned, dark-haired little fellow, did.

“Y – e – ow! Out of the way, you tenderfoot kid!” he exploded.

“I’m trying to get out of the way,” responded Jack good humoredly.

“What’s that, you long-legged cayuse,” bellowed the little chap, whose sleeves were tied round above the elbows with gorgeous pink ribbons, and whose black silk shirt was embroidered with pink rosebuds, “what’s that? Can you ride, kid? Can you ride?”

At the same instant Jack’s pony swung around, presenting its flank toward the little Ranger. As it did so the Texan brought down his quirt with all its force on the startled little creature’s rump.

“Wow! now for fireworks!” he shouted, while his comrades checked their ponies to see the fun.

Jack said nothing. In truth, he had his hands full. Excited before, his pony was now half mad with frenzy. It bucked as if its insides had been made of steel springs. But Jack stuck to it like a burr to a maverick's tail.

"Wow! Wow!" shouted the Rangers, as the pony gathered its feet together, sprung into the air, and came down with legs as stiff as hitching posts.

"Stick to him, kid! Don't go to leather!" (meaning, "grab hold of the saddle"), encouraged some of the Rangers struck by Jack's manful riding. But the dark-skinned little chap seemed to wish nothing more than to see the youthful leader of the Border Boys ignominiously toppled into the dust. He spurred his pony alongside Jack's and whacked it again and again with his rawhide quirt.

"That's enough!" shouted Jack. "Stop it!"

"You're scared!" jeered the Ranger. "Mammy's little pet!"

The taunt had hardly left his lips before something very unexpected happened. Jack, for a flash, managed to secure control of his pony. He swung it round on its hind legs and rode it right at the scornful, jeering Ranger. As he did so the other leaned out of his saddle to give Jack's pony another blow with the quirt as it dashed by him. But he miscalculated. Jack drove his pony right in alongside his tormentor's, and the shock of the collision, added to the position the Ranger now occupied in the saddle – leaning far over – proved too much for his equilibrium.

His animal plunged, as if shot from a catapult, halfway across the street from Jack's pony. As it did so its rider made a vain attempt to save himself by grabbing its withers. But quick as he was he could not regain his balance.

Off he shot, landing in the street and ploughing a furrow with his face in the soft dust. As for the pony, it dashed off, while a dozen Rangers pursued it, yelling and swinging lariats.

Those who remained set up a yell of delight. It tickled the fancy of these free and easy sons of the plains to see their companion unhorsed by a slip of a boy.

"Good for you, kid!" shouted some.

"Say, Shorty," admonished others, "why don't you pick a fellow your own size?"

In the meantime "Shorty," as he had been addressed, scrambled to his feet. He was a sorry object. His elaborate black silk shirt was torn and dust covered, and one of his carefully tied ribbons was missing. His sombrero lay six feet away, and his black hair fell in a tangle over his dark forehead. As he got to his legs again, crowning humiliation of all, a Chinaman picked up his broad-brimmed hat and tendered it to him. Shorty aimed a blow and a curse at the well-meaning Mongolian, who quickly dodged.

With a roar of rage he rushed at Jack. Then Jack and the others saw what they had not noticed before.

In his fall Shorty's revolver had fallen from its holster into the dust. But he had recovered it, and now, with his lips set viciously, he was rushing at Jack, the weapon poised for a shot.

"You dern young coyote, I'll do fer you!" he shouted hoarsely, beside himself with fury, intensified by the taunts of his companions over his downfall.

As if in a trance Jack saw the revolver raised above the fellow's head, and then brought down to the firing position.

CHAPTER II.

THE HUMBLING OF SHORTY

But at the very instant that the Ranger's finger pressed the trigger something came swishing and snaking through the air, falling in a loop about him and pinioning his arms. The gun cracked as Shorty was yanked from his feet, but the bullet merely ploughed a little furrow in the ground. The next minute he was rolling in the dust for the second time, roped as neatly as ever he had lassoed a yearling, by the rawhide of Captain Atkinson himself.

The captain, who had been in advance, as we know, had not witnessed the first part of the drama which had so nearly ended in a tragedy, but had been apprised of it when Shorty's pinto pony had flashed by him with half a dozen shouting Rangers at its heels. The minute it had been roped he instituted inquiries, and hearing what had occurred, he judged from his acquaintance with Shorty's character that his presence might be needed at the scene of the Ranger's unhorsing.

At top speed he had galloped back, arriving just in time to see Shorty's revolver flash in the air as he brought it down for a shot. Almost as by magic the captain's hand had sought and found his lariat and sent its coil swishing through the air.

"Get up!" he thundered to the disgruntled Shorty, who, thoroughly humiliated, did as he was told.

"Let me alone! Let me git at that cub!" he snarled, under his breath.

"See here, Shorty Swift!" flashed Atkinson, "this isn't the first trouble I've had with you. You're a disgrace to the Rangers."

"He was pickin' on me," began the Ranger; but his commander cut him short with a sharp word.

"Buncombe! Is this the way you obey orders to conduct yourself properly? Do you mean to tell me that you can give me any good reason why a kid like that should annoy a Texas ranger?"

"Well, he did. It was his fault. He – he –"

"See here, Shorty, are you going to tell the truth?"

"I am telling the truth, cap."

"You're not. Some of you other boys tell me what happened."

One of the Rangers who had applauded Jack's horsemanship gave a plain, unvarnished account of the whole scene. Captain Atkinson's brow darkened as he heard.

"So," he snapped, "that's the sort of fellow you are. Well, all I've got to say is that you and your kind are a disgrace to the name of Texas. I've warned you before, Shorty, of what you might expect if you got into disgrace again. That was the last time. Now I find you bullyin' a kid who hadn't done you any harm, and when he gave you what you deserved you tried to shoot him. I've only got one thing to say to you –"

He paused.

There was a vibrant silence, during which the trampling of the restless ponies' hoofs and the hard breathing of Shorty were the only sounds to break the stillness.

"Git!"

The order came like the crack of a rifle.

Shorty seemed to wither and grow smaller and darker as he heard.

"Captain, I –" he stammered out. But Atkinson cut him short abruptly.

"You heard me. Git! This isn't a cow camp, but a regularly organized troop to enforce law and order. You set a fine example of lawlessness right in the town we have been sent to protect from that very thing. There's your pony and here's the pay that's coming to you. Hit the trail, and hit it quick."

"Don't be too hard on him, captain. Give him one more chance. I guess it was only meant as horse play and not viciousness."

Captain Atkinson turned his bronzed countenance on the speaker. It was Jack. Beside him Walt Phelps had reined up and Ralph Stetson, too, the latter having been attracted by the excitement from the side street where he had sought refuge at the boisterous entrance of the Rangers.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said. "Well, young chap, you've got nerve and sense; but this fellow doesn't deserve any pity."

"I'm sure he won't do it again," Jack assured the captain; "let him off this time. He's been punished enough."

At this Captain Atkinson could not resist a smile. Shorty's woebegone appearance assuredly bore testimony to the truth of Jack's statement.

As for the Rangers, some of them broke into an open guffaw of amusement.

"You're sure right, young chap," agreed Captain Atkinson, "but right now I'd like to ask you who you and your two friends are. You don't look as if you belonged about here."

"We don't. My name is Jack Merrill, this is Walt Phelps and yonder is Ralph Stetson, a school chum and –"

"Waal, by the Lone Star! So you're the kids I'm to take along, eh? Shake, boy, shake! I thought you were a lot of blithering tenderfeet, but you're regular punchers. Put it there, Jack. I'm Captain Atkinson, your father's friend, and –"

"I guessed as much," smiled Jack, shaking hands with the grizzled leader of the Rangers who, in turn, almost wrung the lad's fingers off. "It's for the sake of your friendship, captain, that I ask you to give this man another chance."

"Boy, you're a real sport. Shorty, apologize to this lad here and take your place in the ranks."

"I – I'm sorry," muttered Shorty, hanging his head sullenly and forcing the words from unwilling lips.

"That's all right, Shorty," said Jack heartily, "and I'm as sorry as you are. I didn't mean to give you such a bump."

Shorty took the outstretched hand with limp fingers, barely touched it, and then, remounting his pony, which had been led up, rode off to the rear of his comrades. His face was contorted with humiliation and angry shame.

"I hope you won't judge the Rangers by that fellow," said Captain Atkinson to Jack when Shorty had gone; "we may appear rough but our hearts are in the right place, as I hope we shall prove to you."

"I'm sure of it," rejoined Jack heartily. "Are we going to camp far from the town?" he asked, by way of changing the subject.

"Yes, in the outskirts, on the banks of the river. Alameda and his men are giving the Federal troops a hard tussle, and we want to be on the job if they try to cross."

"Then you won't be in one place?"

Captain Atkinson laughed.

"No; we Rangers are supposed to be like the Irish bird that flew in two places at the same time," he said.

Then, in a more serious tone, he went on:

"We have twenty-five miles of the Rio Grande to patrol and see that the life and property of Americans along the Border are protected. It is also our duty to keep the revolutionists or Federals from getting into American territory or receiving supplies."

"We had some experience in that line when we were in Northern Chihuahua," responded Jack.

"So I have heard. That is one reason I consented to have you along. Raw tenderfoots would be out of place on a job of this kind. But now we must be pushing on. I want to get into camp and map out my plan of campaign before night."

In a few minutes the column was reformed, and the Rangers, at an easy pace, were riding out of the town toward the river. The three boys rode together.

“Well, Jack,” remarked Ralph Stetson, as soon as they found themselves alone, “you’ve made a nice mess of it.”

“How’s that?” inquired Jack unsuspectingly.

“Getting in a muss with that Ranger. From the look he gave you as he went away I could see he bore you no great affection.”

“Well, I’m not going to lose any sleep over it,” declared Jack.

“I should think not,” chimed in Walt Phelps, “you only did what you were compelled to do. My dad says, ‘Don’t go looking for trouble and always avoid it if you can; but if you have it forced on you, why then make the other fellow remember it.’”

“Don’t worry about that Shorty not remembering it,” admonished Ralph seriously; “he’s not of the forgetting kind.”

And Ralph was right – Shorty wasn’t, as we shall see before long.

CHAPTER III.

AN ATTEMPT AT “GETTING EVEN.”

The Rangers, still overshadowed by that pall of yellow dust that seemed inseparable from them, and almost as much a part of themselves as their horses or accouterments, dashed gallantly out of the town and across the rather dreary expanse of mesquite and thorny cactus that lay between San Mercedes and the Rio Grande. On the brink of the stream, which at that point flowed between steep bluffs of a reddish hue, they drew rein.

The boys peered curiously over the bluff on the edge of which they had halted. They saw a shallow, slowly flowing stream obstructed with sand bars and shallows. On its banks grew scanty patches of brush and dull-colored, stunted trees; but the scene was a dreary, almost melancholy one.

“So this is the Rio Grande!” exclaimed Ralph, in a disappointed voice, “I always thought of it as a noble river dashing along between steep banks and – ”

“Gracious, you talk like Sir Walter Scott,” grinned Jack; “the Rio Grande at this time of the year, so I’ve been told, is always like this.”

“Why, it’s not much more than a mud puddle,” complained Walt Phelps.

“I’m not so sure about that, young men,” put in Captain Atkinson, who had overheard their conversation, “at certain times in the early spring, or winter you’d call it back east, or when there is a cloud burst, the old Rio can be as angry as the best of them.”

“What’s a cloud burst?” asked Ralph curiously. “I’ve read of them but I never knew just what they were.”

“Well, for a scientific explanation you’ll have to ask somebody wiser than me,” laughed Captain Atkinson, “but for an everyday explanation, a cloud burst occurs when clouds, full of moisture, come in contact with mountain tops warmer than the clouds themselves. This causes the clouds to melt all at once – precipitation, I believe the weather sharps call it – and then if you are in this part of the country, look out for squalls along the river.”

“But I don’t quite understand,” remarked Walt. “I guess I’m dense or something. I mean there are no mountains here.”

“No; but up among the sources of the Rio there are,” explained the leader of the Rangers, “and a cloud burst even many hundred miles away means a sudden tidal wave along this part of the Rio.”

“Well, it certainly looks as if it could stand quite a lot more water without being particularly dangerous,” commented Jack.

At this point of the conversation Captain Atkinson gave a quick look around as the rumble of approaching wheels was heard.

“Here comes the chuck-wagon, I guess,” he said; “you boys will have to excuse me while I ride off to tell them where to make a pitch.”

“Yes; I suppose a chuck wagon naturally would make a pitch,” grinned Ralph, as Captain Atkinson clattered off.

“The kind of pitch he means is a location,” rejoined Walt Phelps. “Look, boys! there she comes. Well, that means that we don’t starve, anyhow.”

The others followed the direction of Walt’s gaze and saw a big lumbering vehicle drawn by eight mules approaching across the mesquite plain. It was roofed with canvas, and through this roof stuck a rusty iron stove pipe. From this blue smoke was pouring in a cloud.

“Talk about a prairie schooner. I guess that’s a prairie steamer. Look at her smoke-stack,” cried Ralph.

“Yes; and look at the captain,” laughed Jack, pointing to the yellow face and flying queue of a Chinaman, which were at this moment projected from the back of the wagon.

“That’s the cook,” said Walt Phelps, “I guess he’s been getting supper ready as they came along.”

A loud cheer went up from the Rangers as their traveling dining-room came into sight.

“Hello, old Sawed Off, how’s chuck?” yelled one Ranger at the grinning Chinaman.

“Hey, there! What’s the news from the Chinese Republic?” shouted another.

“Me no Chinese ‘public. Me Chinese Democlat!” bawled the yellow man, waving an iron spoon and vanishing into the interior of his wheeled domain.

“They call him Sawed Off because his name is Tuo Long,” chuckled Captain Atkinson, when he had directed the driver of the cook wagon where to draw up and unharness his mules, “but he’s a mighty good cook – none better, in fact. He’s only got one failing, if you can call it such, and that is his dislike of the new Chinese Republic. If you want to get him excited you’ve only to start him on that.”

“I don’t much believe in getting cooks angry,” announced Walt Phelps, whose appetite was always a source of merriment with the Border Boys.

“Nor I. But come along and get acquainted with the boys. By-the-way, you brought blankets and slickers as I wrote you?”

“Oh, yes, and canteens, too. In fact, I guess we are all prepared to be regular Rangers,” smiled Jack.

By this time the camp was a scene of picturesque bustle. Ponies had been unsaddled and tethered, and presently another wagon, loaded with baled hay in a great yellow stack, came rumbling up. The Rangers, who had by this time selected their sleeping places and bestowed their saddles, at once set about giving their active little mounts their suppers.

First, each man mounted on his pony barebacked and rode it down to the river to get a drink of water. To do this they had to ride some little distance, as the bluffs at that point were steep and no path offered. At last, however, a trail was found, and in single file down they went to the watering place.

The boys followed the rest along the steep path, Jack coming last of the trio. The trail lay along the edge of the bluff, and at some places was not much wider than a man’s hand. Jack had reached the worst part of it, where a drop of some hundred feet lay below him, when he was astonished to hear the sound of hoofs behind him.

He was astonished because, he had judged, almost everybody in the camp had preceded him while he had been busy inspecting the different arrangements. He faced round abruptly in his saddle and saw that the rider behind him was Shorty.

It must have been at almost the same moment that, for some unknown reason, Shorty’s horse began to plunge and kick. Then it dashed forward, bearing down directly on Jack.

“Look out!” shouted Jack, “there’s only room for one on the trail. You’ll knock me off!”

“I can’t pull him in! I can’t pull him in!” yelled Shorty, making what appeared to be frantic efforts to pull in his pony. At the same time he kept the cayuse to the inside of the trail.

Jack saw that unless he did something, and quickly, too, his pony was likely to become unmanageable and plunge off the narrow path. But there was small choice of remedies. Already Shorty’s horse, which was coming as if maddened by something, was dashing down on him. Jack resolved to take a desperate chance. The others had by this time almost reached the bottom of the trail. As fast as he dared he compelled his pony to gallop down the steep incline. It was a dangerous thing to do, for the trail was too narrow to afford any foothold at more than a slow and careful walk.

Behind him, yelling like one possessed, came Shorty. Jack urged his mount faster.

“Goodness! I hope we get to the bottom safely!” he gasped out.

The words had hardly left his lips when he felt his pony’s hoofs slip from under him.

The next instant, amid a horrified shout from the men below, Jack and the pony went rolling and plunging off the trail down toward the river.

The last sound Jack heard was Shorty’s loud:

“Yip! yip! Ye-o-o-ow!”

CHAPTER IV. WITH THE RANGERS

From below, where Jack's companions had witnessed his fall with horrified eyes, it appeared almost impossible that he could escape without serious injury. But as his pony struck the ground at the foot of the cliff, amidst a regular landslide of twigs, rocks and earth, Jack succeeded in extricating himself from under the animal, and rolling a few yards he scrambled to his feet, unhurt except for a few slight cuts and bruises.

Ralph and Walt Phelps left their ponies and came running up to where Jack stood brushing the dirt from his garments.

"Hurt, Jack?" cried Ralph.

"No; never touched me," laughed the boy; "and look at that cayuse of mine, I guess he isn't injured, either."

As Jack spoke he nodded his head in the direction of his pony, which had risen and was now galloping off to join its companions at the watering place.

"How did it happen?" demanded Walt. "We saw you coming down the trail quietly enough one moment, and at the next look, behold, you were riding like Tam o' Shanter."

Jack looked about him before replying. But he and his companions were alone, for the Rangers were too busy watering their mounts to bother with the boys once it had been seen that Jack was not hurt.

"I guess you were right when you said that Shorty had it in for me," he remarked, turning to Walt Phelps.

"How do you mean?"

"Just this: Shorty was behind me on that trail. Suddenly his pony began to bolt. It was to avoid being forced from the narrow path that I spurred up my cayuse so as to keep ahead of him."

"What do you think he meant to do?"

The question came from Ralph.

"It's my opinion that he deliberately tried to get between me and the wall of the cliff and force me off the trail."

"Gracious! You might have been killed."

"Not much doubt that I'd have been badly injured, anyway. But Shorty miscalculated, and where I left the trail was further on and not so far to fall."

"Why don't you tell Captain Atkinson?"

"Why, I have nothing to prove that Shorty's pony really didn't get beyond his control."

"Then you suspect that it was not really running away, but that he made it appear that he was unable to manage it?"

"That's it exactly. However, let's join the men. If I get a chance I want to examine Shorty's horse."

"What's the idea in that?" asked Walt.

"You'll see what my plan is if I get an opportunity to put it into execution," was the reply.

The three boys, arm in arm, sauntered up to the group of Rangers. Some of them were now remounted, and two men had charge of the boys' ponies, including Jack's, which had joined its comrades. Shorty was still watering his animal, but when he saw the boys he came up to Jack with an outstretched hand, and every appearance of great affability.

"Say, Pard'ner," he exclaimed, as if genuinely remorseful, "I hope you ain't mad with me on 'count of that accident."

"No; I never harbor a grudge," responded Jack, with emphasis.

“That critter of mine jes’ nat’ly ran away from me,” pursued Shorty, in the same tone.

“And so that’s the reason you had to spur him till he bled,” flashed Jack, in a low tone. The boy had seized his opportunity to look over Shorty’s pony and saw at once that it had been cruelly rowelled. Shorty went pale under his tan. His mouth twitched nervously.

“Why – why, you ain’t goin’ for to say I done it a–purpose?” he demanded.

“I’m not saying anything about it,” responded Jack; “all that I know is this, that I shall take care how I ride in front of you again.”

So saying the boy turned on his heel and walked toward his pony, followed by Walt and Ralph, who had witnessed the whole scene. Shorty gazed after them. His alarm had gone from his countenance now, and he bore an expression of malignant rage.

“Dern young tenderfoot cubs,” he growled to himself, relieving his feelings by giving his pony a kick in the stomach, “blamed interferin’ Mammy boys! I’ll l’arn ‘em a lesson yet. I’ll jes’ bet I will, and it’ll be a hot one, too. One they won’t forget in a hurry.”

But of Shorty’s fury the boys were ignorant, for they quickly mounted and clattered back up the trail with the rest of the Rangers. On their return to the camp, as soon as each little pony had been given his generous allowance of hay, they found that supper was ready, the Chinaman announcing the fact by beating on a tin dishpan and shouting:

“Come getee! Come getee!”

None of the Rangers needed any second invitation; nor did the boys need any pressing to make hearty meals. Bacon, salted beef, beans, hot biscuits and strong coffee formed the bill of fare. After the meal had been dispatched Captain Atkinson beckoned to Jack and his companions, and they followed him a little apart from the rest of the Rangers who were singing songs and telling stories around a big camp fire, for the night was quite chilly.

“Since you lads have joined us to learn all you can of the life of a Texas Ranger,” he said, “I think that you had better start in as soon as possible.”

“Right away if necessary,” responded Jack enthusiastically.

“That’s my idea,” struck in Walt Phelps.

“Can’t make it too soon for me, captain,” added Ralph, not a whit less eager than the others.

“Very well, then,” smiled the captain of the Rangers, “you will go on sentry duty to–night, and to–morrow I shall see that you have some other work assigned to you.”

“Do we – do we have to do sentry duty all night?” asked Ralph, in a rather dubious tone.

“No, indeed. That would never do. You must get your sleep. For that reason we divide the hours of darkness into regular watches. There are four of these. I shall assign you to go out with the first guard,” said Captain Atkinson to Jack, and then in turn he informed Walt Phelps and Ralph Stetson that their assignments would come with the second and third watches respectively.

Jack was all eagerness to begin, and when at eight o’clock he and six of the Rangers rode out of the camp toward the river his heart throbbed with anticipation of the duty before him. The men were in charge of one of their number named “Baldy” Sears. This Baldy was quite a character and had determined to give Jack a thorough testing out. As they rode out, the boy questioned “Baldy” eagerly about his duties, but didn’t get much satisfaction.

As a matter of fact, Baldy entertained quite a contempt for “Tenderfeet,” as he called the boys, and was rather annoyed at having to take Jack out and act as “school marm,” as he phrased it.

They reached the river by the same trail that they had descended to water their ponies earlier that evening. As it was still dusk they rode down it without accident. In fact, the Rangers hardly appeared to notice its dangers. Jack, however, wondered how it would be possible to descend it in the dark without mishap. But, then, he recollected the sure-footedness and uncommon intelligence of the average western pony, and realized that if given a loose rein, there probably was not a cayuse in the outfit that could not negotiate it without difficulty.

“Now, then,” said Baldy, when they reached the bottom of the path, “line up and I’ll give you your orders. You, Red Saunders, ride east with Sam, and Ed. Ricky, you and Big Foot ride to the west and keep patrolling. I’ll take the young maverick here with me. If any of you gets in trouble or wants assistance fire three shots. I reckon that’s all.”

The men rode off into the night, and then Baldy and Jack were left alone.

“Got a shootin’ iron with you, young feller?” inquired Baldy.

“A what?” returned Jack.

“Waal, if you ain’t the tenderfootedest of tenderfeets,” scoffed Baldy; “a shootin’ iron – a gun!”

“Why, no, I didn’t think it necessary to bring one,” rejoined Jack. “I don’t like carrying firearms unless they are needful. Do you think that anything will happen in which firearms would be useful?”

“Firearms is always useful along the Rio,” returned Baldy, “I dunno if the cap told you, but we’re here on special duty to–night.”

“Dangerous duty?” asked Jack.

“You can’t most gen’ally sometimes allers tell,” vouchsafed Baldy, examining the magazine of his rifle which he had taken from its saddle holster for the purpose.

CHAPTER V. JACK'S CHANCE

"You mean that there is a chance of our being attacked?"

Jack put the question in rather an anxious tone. But for some reason Baldy only grunted in reply.

"I'm going back to camp to git you a gun," he said; "you stay right here till I get back."

"Very well, Mr. Baldy," rejoined the boy, in as conciliatory a tone as possible.

"Don't mister me. I ain't got no handle to my name and don't never expect to have," grunted Baldy, as he swung his pony and rode off.

As Jack listened to the retreating hoof beats he felt strangely lonely. It was very dark down in the cañon, and the steely blue stars seemed very far away. Only the rushing of the water of the river disturbed the boy's thoughts while he awaited Baldy's return.

"He's not very lively company," he admitted to himself, "but it's better than being all alone. Wish Ralph or Walt had been ordered to share my watch."

But the next moment he was scolding himself.

"For shame, Jack Merrill," he said, "here's the first bit of duty you've been put to, and here you are complaining already. It's got to stop right here and now, and – hello, what was that?"

The boy broke off short, as through the darkness of the cañon he caught an odd sound from the river.

"What can that sound be?" he said to himself. "It seems familiar, too. Where have I heard something like it before?"

Then all of a sudden it dawned upon him what the odd noise was.

It was the splash of oars. But what could a boat be doing on the river at that time of night, and in such a place? Jack was asking himself these questions when he became aware of some words being spoken at a short distance from him. He recognized the language instantly. The men who were conversing were talking in Spanish, of which tongue Jack had a fair working knowledge, as we know.

He was in the darker shadow of the cañon wall and therefore, of course, quite invisible to whoever was on the river, and who had apparently come to a stop almost opposite to his station. He quickly slipped from his pony, and taking advantage of the brush that grew almost to the water's edge, he crawled along on his stomach in the direction of the unseen men.

At last he gained a position where he could hear them quite distinctly, and could even see their figures bulking up blackly in the general gloom. But what they were doing he could not imagine, and when he finally did find out he received the surprise of his life.

Listening to their talk, Jack heard them speaking of Rosario, the leader of the insurgents in that quarter of the Mexican Republic, and apparently they were discussing some mission on which they had been dispatched.

He heard the Rangers mentioned, and then came some information that was new to him. The Federal troops of Mexico were hot on the heels of the insurgent army, and the rebels were planning to bring the coming battle on to American soil if possible, in order to force the interference of Uncle Sam.

Evidently the men knew of the presence of the Rangers in the locality, and, by listening, Jack soon learned that they were there acting as spies in order to find out how strongly the Border was guarded at that point. Finally they strode off cautiously into the darkness, apparently with the object of reconnoitering the vicinity.

This was Jack's chance. Without a moment's hesitation he made his way to the river bank and found that a large raft had been moored there. It was evidently on this that the spies had made their way down the stream from some point above. The raft was formed roughly of tree trunks, but

appeared to be of stout construction. Some long oars for navigating it lay on the logs; but Jack, in his hasty search, could not see anything on board that might be of interest to Captain Atkinson.

He had just completed his examination and was preparing to go back on shore when something happened that changed his plans. As if by magic the figures of the men who had left the raft reappeared at the water's edge.

At the same instant that Jack spied them the men became aware of the intruder on their raft. They did not dare to fire the weapons they carried, owing to the nearness of the Rangers; otherwise they would undoubtedly have done so. Instead, they made a simultaneous leap at Jack, the leader aiming a savage blow at him.

The boy dodged the man's swing, springing backward on the raft. The contrivance had not been securely fastened to the bank. In fact, it had merely been tied carelessly up at the water's edge. Jack's sudden spring gave the raft a violent jolt. The current caught it and whirled it round as the strain came upon one side of it.

Before either Jack or the Mexicans exactly realized what had occurred, the raft was swept out into midstream, the current hurrying it along swiftly.

But Jack was not alone on the swaying, pitching craft. The Mexican who had aimed the blow at him had had one foot on the raft when Jack's backward spring caused it to drift from the bank. By a desperate effort he had managed to maintain a foothold, and now he was crouching back on his haunches like a wild-cat about to spring, while in his hands gleamed a wicked looking knife.

Jack had just time to see this when the fellow, hissing out a torrent of Spanish oaths, sprang at him. Jack dodged the knife blow, and before the Mexican could recover his equilibrium the boy's fist had collided with the lower part of the Mexican's jaw.

The blow was a heavy one, and had landed fair and square. With a grunt of pain and rage the fellow reeled backward, almost pitching off the raft. But in a jiffy he recovered from his shock and rushed at Jack, snarling like a wild beast.

The boy realized that he was in for a fight for life, and in that moment he bitterly regretted the curiosity that had caused him to board the raft, although he had done it with the idea of performing a service for the Rangers. Now, however, he found himself facing a desperate situation.

Unarmed, and alone, he was on a drifting raft with an armed and singularly ferocious foe.

"Yankee pig!" snarled out the Mexican, as he flung himself at the boy.

Jack's blood boiled at the insult. It acted as a brace to his sinking heart. As the man lunged at him the boy's hand struck up the arm that held the knife and the weapon went spinning into the night. But the Mexican, a large man of uncommon strength and activity, did not cease his attack. He rushed at Jack as if to annihilate him.

This was just what Jack wanted. The angrier the Mexican was the worse he would fight, as Jack knew. He met the onrush with coolness, and succeeded in planting two good blows on the man's body. But muscular as Jack was the blows appeared to have little effect on the Mexican. He tore in more savagely than ever.

Without his knife the Mexican was not much of a fighter. He knew nothing of the art of boxing, and Jack's "gym" training stood him in good stead. At last, in one of the Mexican's frantic rushes, Jack's fist met the point of his chin with deadly effect. With a wild swinging of his arms the fellow reeled backward.

He would have fallen from the raft into the current had not Jack leaped forward and saved him. But the Mexican was a formidable foe no longer. Jack's blow had effectually stunned him for a time, and as the boy saved him from pitching overboard he sank in a heap on the floor of the raft.

In the first opportunity he had had for observation of his situation since the raft had got loose, Jack looked about him. Then, for the first time, he realized that the rough craft was proceeding at an extremely swift rate. It was spinning round dizzily, too, as though caught in some sort of whirlpool.

Jack was still wondering how far they had come and what was to be the outcome of this odd adventure, when something happened that effectually put all other thoughts out of his head.

The air became filled with a roaring sound, and spray began to dash upon the floor of the raft. With a sharp thrill of alarm Jack recognized that the roaring sound was the voice of a waterfall, and that the raft was being swept toward it at lightning speed. He seized up one of the oars and attempted to head the raft for the shore. But the oar might have been a straw for all the effect it had against that rapid current.

All at once it snapped, almost hurling Jack overboard. The next instant raft, boy and unconscious man were swept into a vortex of waters. Jack felt himself falling through space. Simultaneously there came a crashing blow on his head. A million constellations seemed to swim before his eyes, and then, with a blinding flash of fire, his senses left him.

CHAPTER VI.

THE POOL OF DEATH

The blow that had been dealt the boy came from one of the timbers of the raft, which had been torn to pieces as it was swept over the falls. How long Jack remained insensible he did not know; but when he recovered his senses he found himself struggling in a seething pool of water at the foot of the falls. Luckily he was able to catch hold of one of the logs of the raft as it was swept by him, and clinging to this he began to strike out with his legs, hoping to make his way to the edge of the pool.

Many times during that desperate struggle for existence Jack felt certain that death would intervene before he could accomplish his purpose. Once another log, that was being swept round like a straw in that boiling vortex of foaming waters, was dashed against the one to which he clung. The shock almost forced the lad to relinquish his hold. But he hung on like grim death.

Blinded by foam and half choked, the boy, with bull-dog grit, stuck to his purpose, and at last was rewarded by feeling ground under his feet. A moment later, bruised, breathless and drenched to the skin, he flung himself panting on the sandy shore of the pool, too exhausted to move further.

He lay there, actually feeling more dead than alive, for a long time before he felt capable of moving. But at last he found strength to drag himself further up the bank. Fumbling in his pocket, he found that his water-tight match box was in its proper place, and in the darkness he set about making preparations to build a fire. Luckily, on the brink of the pool there was any quantity of dry wood cast up by the maelstrom of waters, and the boy soon had a roaring blaze kindled. Stripping to his underclothing he hung his other garments on sticks in front of the blaze while he basked in its cheery rays.

By the glow he could see a part of the pool, and as he gazed at its troublous surface and foaming fury he marveled that he had been able to escape with his life. The firelight also showed him that he was in a sort of rock-walled bowl, with steeply sloping sides scantily clad in places with stunted bushes. He was still sitting by this fire, trying to think of some way out of his dilemma, when exhausted nature asserted herself and he sank into a deep slumber beside the warm blaze.

When he awoke the sun was shining down on his face. The daylight showed him that he had blundered into an astonishing place indeed. As he had guessed, by what he could see of the place by firelight, he was at the bottom of a rocky bowl into which the falls over which he had tumbled roared and thundered unceasingly as they had been doing for uncounted centuries.

Jack estimated the height of the falls as being fully sixty feet. The boiling pool appeared to be about an acre or so in extent, and was furiously agitated by the constant pouring of the mighty falls. And now Jack became aware of a curious thing.

All about the edges of the pool, where the circular motion of the water had evidently cast them up, were myriads of bones. They appeared to be the remains of cattle and various kinds of game; but some of them caused Jack to shudder as he had a distinct notion that they were of human origin.

All at once, while he was still exploring the strange place into which he had fallen, he came across a bleached skull lying amid a pile of bones and débris. The ghastly relic gave him a rude shock as he gazed at it.

"Gracious!" the boy exclaimed, with a shudder, "this place might well be called a Pool of Death. How fortunate I am to be alive; although how I am going to get out of this scrape I don't know. One thing is certain, I cannot remount by the falls. I must see what lies in the other direction."

Up to that moment, so agitated had the castaway boy been that he had almost entirely forgotten the Mexican with whom he had had the battle on the raft. The thought of the man now suddenly recurred to him. Jack sighed as he realized that the Mexican could hardly have been so fortunate as he had been. In all probability he had forfeited his life to the Pool of Death.

With such melancholy thoughts in his mind Jack set about exploring the rocky basin for some means of exit. Although he was determined not to give way to despair, the boy could not but own that his situation was well-nigh desperate. He was many miles from his friends, and probably in an uninhabited part of the country. He had no food; nor even if there had been any game had he the means of shooting it.

His hunger was now beginning to make itself painfully manifest. On some bushes that clung to the walls of the Pool of Death were some bright-colored berries, but Jack dreaded to try them. For all he knew they might be deadly poison.

Searching for an exit, Jack was not long in finding one. The pool was drained by a narrow crevice in the rocky walls, forming a passage. On the brink of the water was a strip of beach, not much wider than a man's hand. Beside this pathway the water roared and screamed in its narrow bounds, but Jack knew that if he was to get out of this place at all he must dare the rocky passage.

Stifling his fears as well as he could, the famished, bedraggled lad struck pluckily out. Sometimes the passage grew so narrow that he could have bestridden the stream. At other points it widened out and, looking up, Jack could see the blue sky far overhead. In reality the passage was not more than half a mile in length but, so carefully did Jack have to proceed, it appeared to be four times that length at least.

The passage ended with almost startling abruptness. Jack could hardly repress an exclamation of amazement as he saw upon what a strange scene it opened. Beyond its mouth lay a broad valley, carpeted with vivid green grass and dotted here and there, like a park, with groups of trees. Viewed in the sparkling sunlight it was indeed a scene of rare beauty and Jack's heart gave a throb of delight as he beheld it.

"Surely," he thought, "some rancher must live hereabouts who will give me food and lend me a horse to ride back to San Mercedes."

For the first few minutes following his discovery of the valley the boy did not doubt but that he should find an easy and speedy means of escaping from his difficulties. But it gradually began to dawn upon him that the place upon which he had so oddly blundered was not inhabited at all. At least, he could see no sign of a human habitation.

Then, too, somewhat to his dismay, he noticed another feature of the valley which had at first escaped his attention altogether.

The place was completely enclosed by steep, lofty cliffs, and appeared as if, at some early period of the world's growth, it had been dropped below the level of the surrounding country by some mighty convulsion of nature.

For the rest the valley appeared to be about a mile in length and half a mile wide at its broadest part. Through the center of it the stream that issued from the passage beyond the Pool of Death meandered leisurely along.

"Well," exclaimed Jack, to himself, gazing somewhat disconsolately about him, "this is a beautiful spot into which I have wandered; but somehow it doesn't appear to solve my difficulties. In the first place, I don't believe it is frequented by human beings, and in the second, so far as I can see, there is no way out of it. I wonder where on earth I can be? Certainly not on the Rio Grande itself. I begin to suspect that that current hurled the raft off into some side stream which terminated in the falls."

It may be said here that Jack's theory was correct. The valley in which he found himself had been caused by a convulsion of nature similar to that which effected the wonderful Yosemite Valley in California. It was, in fact, a miniature reproduction of that famous scenic marvel. As the boy likewise suspected, the raft had indeed been hurried by the stream from the main current of the Rio Grande and drawn into a side fork of the river.

Although Jack did not know it at the time, he was on Mexican soil and far removed from his friends, as he paced the strange secret valley.

“I guess my best plan is to follow that stream,” mused Jack, after a period of thought; “if I’m not mistaken there must be some way out of the valley at the spot where it emerges. At any rate I’ll try it.”

He had walked some distance from the bank of the stream in his explorations, and he now began to re-thread his footsteps. He directed his course toward a big rock that towered up by the bank of the stream, apparently dislodged at some remote time from the summit of the lofty cliffs that hedged the place all about.

When Jack was within a few feet of the rock he was brought to a sudden halt by a startling occurrence.

From behind the monster boulder a human figure emerged, and the next instant Jack was being hailed by the sudden apparition.

CHAPTER VII. A STRANGE VALLEY

Had he beheld the emergence of a supposedly dead man from his tomb, the boy could not have been much more startled. As it was the two cases would have had much in common, for the figure that now advanced toward him was that of a man he had given up for dead – namely, the Mexican who had shared that wild voyage on the raft.

For an instant Jack instinctively threw himself into an attitude of defense. But the next moment he saw that he had nothing to fear from the newcomer. In fact, a more woebegone figure than the Mexican presented it would be hard to imagine. There was a big gash over one of his eyes, his clothing was torn to ribbons and he limped painfully as he advanced toward Jack.

“How did you come here?” asked Jack in Spanish.

“Ah, señor, surely by a miracle of the saints,” was the reply, as the man raised his eyes to heaven. “I recollect your blow and then nothing more till I found myself cast up on the bank of yonder stream. Call it what you will, I believe that it was a true miracle of Providence that my life was saved.”

“We must both thank a higher power for our deliverance,” said Jack reverently. “I never thought that I should see you alive again.”

“But who are you?” demanded the Mexican. “How came you on our raft before it went adrift?”

Jack thought for a moment before replying, and then he decided that it could do no possible harm, under the circumstances, to tell who he was.

“I am the son of an Arizona rancher,” he said. “My name is Jack Merrill. With two companions I was accompanying the Texas Rangers on a scouting trip for the sake of the experience. While on guard duty I saw your raft land and thought it my duty to try to find out what you were doing on the American side of the river.”

To Jack’s surprise the other showed no trace of anger. Instead he appeared grief stricken.

“Alas, señor,” he said, “you may have been the cause of the death of my two companions, for if the Texas Rangers captured them they will assuredly shoot them.”

“I’m sure they would do no such thing,” rejoined Jack indignantly; “they are not inhuman wretches. If your companions can show that they were doing no harm on our side of the Border they will be released with a warning not to spy upon Americans again.”

“Ah, then, you knew that we were spying, señor?”

“Yes, I overheard your conversation at the river’s edge. But it is important now that we should get out of this valley as soon as possible. Have you any idea where we are?”

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders dubiously.

“Alas, señor, I am not certain, but I am inclined to think that we are in what is called the Lost Valley.”

“Lost Valley!” echoed Jack, struck by the dismal suggestion of the name. “Is there no way out?” His companion shook his head.

“The legend says that they who blunder into the valley never escape,” he declared.

Jack could not repress a shudder as he thought of the skull by the pool; but the next instant he regained his nerve, for he knew that the stream must emerge from the valley somewhere.

“But surely this river has to find a way out of the valley?” he asked.

“Si, señor,” was the reply, “but the stream, so they say, burrows its way through a tunnel by which no human being could hope to pass.”

“Then you mean that we are prisoners here?”

“Unless somebody discovers us – yes.”

“Are there many people dwelling in this part of the country?” inquired Jack, with a sinking heart, for, despite his effort to keep up his cheerfulness, his hope was fast ebbing.

“No, it is a wild section devoted to cattle raising, and only a few wandering vaqueros ever come this way. It is from them that the news of the Lost Valley, which this may be, reached the outer world.”

“But we must escape,” cried Jack wildly, “we can’t remain here. We have no food, no means of getting any, and – ”

“I have my revolver,” interrupted the Mexican, “also plenty of cartridges. Perhaps we can find some game.”

This at least was a spark of cheering news. Both Jack and the Mexican were almost famished and decided to set out at once to see if they could bring down anything to serve as food. A revolver is not much of a weapon to use in hunting; but the Mexican declared that he was highly proficient with it. Jack hadn’t much confidence in his own ability as a revolver shot, so it was agreed that his dark-skinned companion should do the shooting.

They ranged the valley for some time without seeing a sign of life, when suddenly, from a clump of trees, there sprang three deer – two does and a buck.

Bang! went the revolver, and the buck slackened speed and staggered. A crimson stream from his shoulder showed that he had been badly wounded. But it took two more shots to bring him down. He was then dispatched with Jack’s knife. No time was lost in cutting off some steaks from the dead buck, a fire was speedily kindled and an appetizing aroma of broiling venison came from it. The meat was cooked by being held over the glowing wood coals on sticks of hard wood. Jack could hardly wait till his was cooked to eat it.

Fresh deer meat is not the delicacy that some of my readers may suppose. It is coarse, stringy and rather tasteless; but neither Jack nor his companion were in a mood to be particular. They devoured the meat ravenously, although they had no salt, bread or any other relish. But the meat strengthened Jack wonderfully, and as soon as it had been eaten he proposed that they should explore the valley thoroughly in an attempt to find a way out.

The Mexican was nothing loath; but he was dubious about there being any avenue of escape. However, with the stoical fatalism of his race he appeared to accept the situation philosophically.

Before setting out on their expedition the deer meat was hung in one of the trees as a protection in case any wild animals should get scent of it. This done, the Border Boy and his oddly contrasted companion set off, trudging around the valley in a determined effort to effect their escape in some way.

Several cañons that opened off into the rocky walls were examined, but they all proved to be “blind” and impassable. In exploring one of these Jack had a thrilling adventure.

His foot slipped on a rock and he plunged into a deep hole among some boulders. He was about to scramble out again, when from one of the rock crevices a hideous flat head darted. At the same time a curious dry, rattling sound was heard on every side of him. The boy recognized the noise with a sharp thrill of alarm.

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