

Castlemon Harry

George at the Wheel



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Harry Castlemon

George at the Wheel / Life in the Pilot-House

CHAPTER I

UNCLE JOHN AND NED

"Well, Ned, I must say, that you have had some narrow escapes. Have you seen anything of those ranchemen lately? I mean the one who owns the stolen horse and his companion?"

"No, sir; and I don't want to see them, either. It is true that they might not recognise me in these clothes, for every time they described me, they spoke of my buckskin coat and silver buttons; but I have no desire to run the risk!"

"You say you haven't seen Gus Robbins since the day you reached town. Where do you suppose he is?"

"I haven't the least idea. All I know is, that he has not gone home. He got angry at some little thing I said, and left without bidding me good-by. But I say, father, I don't want to stay here any longer. I shall not feel safe until I am miles away from Texas!"

"Well, where do you want to go, and what do you want to do?"

"I don't know; I haven't thought about it. George and I talked of going up to the head-waters of the Mississippi, and coming back in a canoe. I should have enjoyed such a trip, but George had to go and get himself captured by those Greasers, and of course that put an end to *that* scheme."

"If Gus Robbins were here he might go with you. I suppose you wouldn't care to go back to Foxboro' under the existing circumstances?"

"No sir, I should not. All the folks there know that Gus ran away from home and came down here to visit us, and they would have too much to say about it. We couldn't call on Mr. Robbins, of course. He is perfectly well aware of the fact that I sent Gus the money to defray the expenses of his journey, and he'd give us the cold shoulder at once. But, father, what do you suppose those Greasers wanted of George? What did they intend to do with him after they had taken him across the river?"

"I am sure I don't know. I am sorry that Gus left you as he did, for there is no knowing what will become of him."

"What will the neighbors say when they learn that George is gone, and that you made no effort to find him? Won't they suspect something?"

"I can't help it if they do. If there is anything done about it, Mr. Gilbert must be the one to do it; for of course I can't go back there until those ranchemen and Mr. Cook are satisfied. Now, make up your mind where you want to go, and we will leave Brownsville to-night."

Uncle John Ackerman and his son Ned had been closeted in their room at the hotel for the last hour, talking over the exciting events that had happened since the latter left home. The boy, as we have already said, told a truthful story, but his father had very little to tell him in return. He did not want to talk about George, and every time Ned made inquiries concerning him, Uncle John answered his questions in as few words as he could, and made all haste to turn the conversation into another channel. He seemed to grow nervous and excited every time his nephew's name was mentioned; and this, taken in connection with his anxiety to avoid all allusion to him, which was much too palpable to escape Ned's notice, made the latter believe that his father knew more about George's capture than he was willing to reveal.

"He is keeping something from me," said Ned, to himself, over and over again; and the longer the interview continued, the firmer became his convictions on this point. He brought his cousin's name in at every opportunity, but could neither surprise nor coax his father into saying more than

he had already said, viz.: That he knew nothing whatever of the object the Mexicans had in view, when they captured George; and could not even guess what they intended to do with him. Those who have read the preceding volume of this series, know the statement to be false; and to enable those who have not read it to follow this story understandingly, we will spend a few moments upon the missing boy's past history.

George Ackerman, our hero, was born, and had spent the most of his life on his father's cattle ranche, which was located a few days' journey from one of the small frontier towns of Texas. When he was about thirteen years of age his father died, leaving his immense property in trust to his only brother, John Ackerman, who was named as George's guardian. Uncle John came to Texas at once, bringing with him his son, Ned; who, by the terms of the will left by George's father, was to be the heir to the property in case his cousin did not live to reach his majority. That provision of the will, was a most unfortunate one for George, for it was the means of bringing him into a great deal of trouble.

Uncle John was a poor man up to this time, and had been obliged to work hard for his living. He held the position of book-keeper in a dry-goods store in the town in which he lived, and Ned was clerk in the same store. The latter was anything in the world but an industrious boy, and when he learned that his father was to have the entire management and control of an estate worth forty thousand dollars a year, his astonishment and delight knew no bounds.

For awhile, Ned enjoyed the life of ease he led in his new home. The first thought that came into his mind when he awoke in the morning was, that during the whole of the long day before him, he need not turn his hand to labor of any kind. There were a good many servants about the ranche who were paid to work; and it was not even necessary that Ned should black his own boots or saddle his horse. He had nothing to do but enjoy himself. This was a glorious way to live, and Ned told himself that he should never grow tired of it. But he did; and he even learned to hate his life of inactivity and uselessness, as cordially as he had hated the life he led in the dry-goods store in Foxboro'. There was literally nothing he could do but ride on horseback, and Ned had found by experience, that that was hard work. There was nothing to be seen on the ranche; there was not a house in sight; no boys with whom he could associate; no books in the small, well-selected library that he cared to read; and the hours hung heavily on his hands.

To make matters worse, Ned learned that the other boys in the neighborhood, were not as lonely as he was; that they visited one another regularly; had hunting parties and barbecues, and were never at a loss to know how to pass the time in an agreeable manner. But they never asked Ned to join them. They slighted him on every occasion, just as their fathers and older brothers slighted Uncle John.

Nobody in that country liked the new-comers, and the reason was, because they would not work. The settlers, who were always busy at something, did not believe that people could spend their lives in doing nothing. Their creed was, that every man and boy must pass the time in some way; and if they did not devote it to some honest occupation, they would spend it in doing something dishonest. So, when they found that Uncle John and his son held aloof from work and dressed in the height of fashion, they became suspicious of them at once. There was only one class of men in that country who lived and dressed in that way, and they were rogues, every one of them.

Ned, being left entirely to himself, passed a most dismal winter. He never went out of sight of the house but once, and then he spent a few days with his cousin in camp; in the hope of finding an opportunity to try his rifle on some of the big game with which he had heard the plains were so well stocked; but he was caught out in a "norther," and so nearly frozen, that it was a long time before he could get thawed out again. He saw no game, and was glad to get back to the rancho.

When his cousin told him why it was that the boys in the settlement would have nothing to do with him, Ned made a feeble effort to show that he had something in him, and that he was capable of making an honest living. He fenced in fifty acres of land and planted it to wheat – or, rather, he sat on his horse and watched his father's hired men while they did the work. While he was wondering

how he should pass the long months that must elapse before his crop would be ready for the reapers, a bright idea occurred to him, and he lost no time in carrying it out.

Among the clerks belonging to the store in Foxboro' in which he had formerly been employed was a young fellow, Gus Robbins by name, the son of the senior partner, with whom he had once been on terms of the closest intimacy. Gus had faithfully promised to visit Ned in his Texas home, and while he was thinking about him, and the agreeable change his presence would make in the gloomy old rancho, it suddenly occurred to him that it was quite possible he could bring him there. He wrote to Gus at once, and was almost ready to dance with delight when he received a letter in reply stating that his friend would be only too glad to visit Texas, and that want of money was the only thing that prevented him from so doing. Ned promptly sent him a hundred dollars, urging him to come on at once, and then settled back into his old aimless life again. But it was not as gloomy as it had been, for he had something to occupy his mind. He laid out numerous plans for the amusement of his expected friend, and promised himself some exciting times when he arrived. But, as it happened, the exciting times began before Gus arrived, and Ned was the hero of a series of adventures that astonished everybody who heard of them. The incident that led to some of these adventures was so simple a thing as trading horses.

It was Ned's custom to ride every day to the top of a high swell, about five miles from home, and there stake out his horse and lie down on his blanket to watch the trail along which his expected friend Gus would have to pass in order to reach the rancho. One day he encountered on the top of this swell a flashily-dressed and splendidly-mounted stranger, who astonished Ned by offering to trade horses with him. The offer was promptly accepted, and the stranger rode hastily away, leaving Ned holding by the bridle the handsomest horse he had ever seen. The animal proved to be just as good as he looked, and Ned was delighted with the way he behaved under the saddle – so delighted, in fact, that he was willing to run a serious risk in order to keep him. He began to suspect, after a while, that the horse had been stolen, so he said nothing to his father about the trade he had made. His suspicions proved to be well-founded, for that same night a couple of men came along looking for this same horse, which they called Silk Stocking. Ned heard them describe the animal, but he did not surrender him, as he ought to have done, for the appearance of the two men, who were armed to the teeth, frightened him, and he was afraid that if he acknowledged he had the horse in his possession, they would do him some serious injury. He knew that the men lived a long distance away, and he hoped that they would go back to their own settlement and stay there; so he resolved to keep the horse, although his resolution did not amount to much, for that very night he lost him. A band of Mexicans, led by renegade Americans, who lived on the other side of the Rio Grande and gained a livelihood by stealing cattle from the Texas farmers and ranchemen, made a descent upon the rancho. They came after the strong box which Uncle John kept in the office, and which one of their spies had told them was filled with gold and silver.

The appearance of the attacking party was entirely unexpected and so sudden that Ned, who happened to be under the shed in which he had hitched his new horse, did not have time to run into the house. He concealed himself in the manger, from which he could obtain a fair view of the yard and see every move the raiders made. He was greatly astonished to discover that they were met at the porch by one of the servants, who seemed to be waiting for them, and who gave them instructions in regard to their future movements. This servant's name was Philip, and he was Uncle John's cook. He had left one of the doors open, and through it the raiders entered the rancho without opposition; but they had scarcely crossed the threshold when they were discovered, and a fierce battle ensued between them and the herdsmen, in which the robbers got the worst of it.

Being driven out of the house, the raiders concealed themselves behind wagons and lumber piles and opened fire on the herdsmen, which the latter returned with their revolvers. One of them ran into the shed and took refuge in the very manger in which Ned was concealed; but he was quickly routed by some sharpshooter in the rancho, who sent his bullets crashing through the planks altogether too

close to Ned's head for comfort. The robbers were finally obliged to mount and ride away without accomplishing their object, and Ned's new horse went with them. The boy had released the animal when the raiders first made their appearance, for fear that by his neighing he would lead some of the band to his place of concealment. He was glad to see him go, and hoped from the bottom of his heart that he had seen and heard the last of him. He had seen the last of him, but he was destined to hear a good deal more concerning him. That same horse afterward came pretty near getting George Ackerman into trouble, and how it happened shall be told in its proper place.

A few days after this the long-expected visitor made his appearance. He was met at Palos – that was the name of the nearest settlement – by one of Uncle John's herdsmen, who showed him the way to the rancho. He had left home without his father's knowledge, thus adding another to the list of runaways whose adventures are to be described in this series of books. Ned met him on the top of the swell before spoken of, and the two rode homeward, talking over old times, and dwelling with a good deal of pride and enthusiasm upon the numerous "scrapes" in which they had been engaged in Foxboro'. Gus seemed eager to appear as the hero of new ones, and Ned promised him that his ambition should be fully gratified. And he kept his promise.

A few days afterward, the two boys rode over to look at Ned's wheat field, and found the fence broken down, the crop entirely ruined, and the enclosure in the possession of a small herd of half-wild cattle, which acted as if they were fully sensible of the mischief they had done and were elated over it. Here was a chance for Gus to get himself into business, and he did it by shooting down one of the herd, Ned following his example by severely wounding another. Then they drove the herd out of the field and rode gaily homeward, all unconscious of the fact that the owner of the cattle, Mr. Cook, had been looking at them over the top of a neighboring ridge, watching their every movement. Ned knew better than to do this. He knew, for his cousin George had told him so, that such an act as he had just performed had once set the whole settlement in an uproar, and brought about a reign of terror, the like of which nobody there wanted to see again.

CHAPTER II

A SURPRISE

The settlement in which Uncle John and Ned lived was composed of two classes of men, the farmers and the ranchemen. The former devoted themselves to tilling the soil, and the ranchemen to raising cattle for market. The ranchemen did not like their neighbors, for every farm that was located and fenced in took away just so many acres of their pasture, and the farmers did not like the ranchemen, because their cattle broke down the fences and destroyed the crops. The little difficulties that were constantly arising between these two classes of men gradually gave way to greater ones, until at last the farmers began shooting the stock that broke into their fields, and the ranchemen revenged themselves by shooting the farmers. This led to a state of affairs that can hardly be described; but the troubles had all been satisfactorily settled, and would, perhaps, never have been thought of again if Ned Ackerman's evil genius had not put it into his idle brain to raise another "neighborhood row," as he called it, just to be revenged upon the settlers for paying so little attention to him. His Cousin George urged him to abandon the idea, telling him in so many words that, if he persisted, the country would be made too hot to hold him; but Ned would not listen. He and Gus Robbins shot the cattle, as we have described, and their punishment followed close upon the heels of it.

George Ackerman was unlike his Cousin Ned in every respect. He was industrious and saving, and by his own unaided efforts he had accumulated property in stock worth six thousand dollars. He spent almost all his time in company with his herdsman, Zeke, in taking care of these cattle. He preferred living in camp to living at the rancho, for the old house did not seem like home to him any longer, and neither did his relatives act as though they wanted him there. The truth of the matter was they did not want him there, and they had not been long at the rancho before they began laying plans to drive him away. In order to accomplish this, Ned urged his father to take George's herd of cattle away from him, believing that if it were done, George would be too badly discouraged to raise another, and that he would go off somewhere to seek his fortune, leaving him and his father to manage the estate as they saw fit. But George positively refused to surrender the herd for which he had worked so long and faithfully, and said, more by his manner than by words, that if Uncle John attempted to take it from him by force, he and Zeke would make a most desperate resistance.

The conversation our hero had with his uncle on this subject took place one morning just as George was getting ready to start out with a fresh supply of provisions to join his herdsman, whom he had left on the prairie with his cattle. It was some days before he found him, for Zeke, having seen signs of an Indian raiding party, had moved the herd farther away from the river, in order to insure its safety. But it was not safe even then, as George soon learned to his cost.

The same band of cattle-thieves who had made the attack on the ranche for the purpose of securing the strong box in which Uncle John kept his money, found the herd and stampeded it. They drove the cattle right over George, who threw himself into an old buffalo wallow, and thus escaped being trampled to death. Two of the raiders kept on after the herd to turn it towards the river, while the others provided themselves with blazing brands from the camp-fire and searched the woods until daylight.

George, who could see all their movements, thought they were looking for Zeke. The old fellow carried a repeating rifle, and when the raiders appeared he made a stubborn fight, severely wounding several of their number, and George thought they wanted to capture him, in order that they might take revenge on him for it.

When the cattle-thieves went away, George filled his haversack with the bacon and crackers they had left in camp, and set out for home on foot, his horse and pack-mule having been driven off with the herd. A few days afterwards he fell in with one of the wounded raiders, who had been left

behind by his companions, and from his lips he received some items of information that astonished him not a little. He learned that an attack had been made upon the rancho, that his Uncle John was laying plans to get him out of the way so that Ned could inherit the property, and that Philip, the Mexican cook, a man of whom George had always been suspicious, was assisting him in carrying those plans into execution.

Springer (that was the name of the wounded cattle-thief, who had once worked for George's father) assured the boy that it was through Uncle John's connivance that the raiders knew where to find George's cattle, and that it was George himself, and not Zeke, whom they were looking for when they were searching the woods with their firebrands. If they had found him, they would have taken him across the river into Mexico – what they would have done with him after they had got him there, Springer said he didn't know – and Uncle John would have rewarded them for it by bringing in a thousand head of cattle and pasturing them near the river, so that the raiders could come over and capture them at their leisure.

When the man had finished his story, George divided his small stock of provisions with him, put him on his horse, and resumed his journey toward home. He did not know what to think of the news he had just heard, and he finally decided that he would go straight to Mr. Gilbert, who was an old friend of his father's, lay the matter before him, and be governed by his advice. He was obliged to camp one more night on the prairie before he reached Mr. Gilbert's rancho, but he did not pass the night alone. He had two visitors, one of whom was the owner of the stolen horse for which Ned had traded, and to which he had held fast, even after he knew that the man of whom he received him had no lawful right to him.

The visitors did not know who George was, and consequently they were very communicative. They told him all about Silk Stocking, and threatened to do something terrible to Ned when they found him. They were sure they would recognise him anywhere by the clothes and ornaments he wore. They were looking for a boy wearing a Mexican sombrero, a buckskin coat with silver buttons, high patent leather boots, the heels of which were armed with silver-plated spurs, and who carried a riding-whip with an ivory handle. They found a boy after a while who answered to this description pretty nearly, and they – well, we have not come to that yet.

George was greatly alarmed by what the men told him. He knew that his cousin had got himself into serious trouble by holding fast to the horse after he knew the animal had been stolen, and he could see no way to get him out of it. If he had been satisfied that the men intended to punish him in some lawful manner, it is probable that he would not have thought of trying to save him from the consequences of his folly; for George was a law-abiding boy, and he did not believe in assisting a culprit to escape, even though that culprit might be his own cousin. But he had the best of reasons for believing that his visitors had made up their minds to take the law into their own hands, and knowing that they had no right to do that, he resolved to save his cousin from their fury, or at least to delay them in their search until he could see Mr. Gilbert, and ask him what he thought about it.

When morning came the men, who had lost their way, asked George to put them on the road to Mr. Ackerman's rancho, but he didn't do it. He sent them thirty-five miles out of their course, after which he set out for Mr. Gilbert's house, where he arrived just at dark. He told his old friend all his troubles, not forgetting to repeat what Springer had said about Uncle John and his plans, and Mr. Gilbert, in return, told him some bad as well as some good news. The good news was that George's horse and mule were safe in his (Mr. Gilbert's) corral; that Zeke was unharmed, and that, with the assistance of some of the settlers he had recaptured every one of George's lost herd. The bad news was, that Ned and his friend, Gus Robbins, had been shooting Mr. Cook's cattle, that all the ranchemen in the neighborhood were very angry at them for it, and that they were going to meet at Cook's on the following day and decide how they would punish them.

This last piece of intelligence made George all the more anxious to reach home in order to warn his cousin, and Mr. Gilbert urged him to lose no time in doing it. The best thing Ned and Gus could

do, he said, would be to go North and stay there until the events of the last few days were forgotten; and as for Uncle John, he wasn't fit to be any boy's guardian, and George had better take measures at once to have a new one appointed. Our hero thought this advice worth acting upon, all except that portion of it relating to the selection of a new guardian. He could not bear the idea of disgracing his father's only brother. Uncle John might be guilty of the offences with which he was charged, and then again he might not. He had nothing but Springer's word for it, and he would wait until he had better evidence than that before he took any action in the case.

While the two were talking the matter over, the owner of the stolen horse and his companion arrived. They had learned that they had been sent a long distance out of their way, and they were in very bad humor over it. While Mr. Gilbert entertained them, George slipped out of the house, mounted his horse, which one of the herdsmen had saddled for him, and started for home with all haste. Every body there was surprised to see him, for Zeke had brought the news of his disappearance, and he was given up for lost. More than that, the trail along which he had just passed was watched by men who had orders to make a prisoner of him and take him across the river. They were instructed to watch for a boy on foot; but George came on horseback, and so passed them in safety.

Ned and his friend, Gus Robbins, were greatly alarmed when they heard what George had to say to them, and so was Uncle John. They agreed to every thing he had to propose, and in a very few minutes the three boys were mounted and riding away in the darkness. George had used extra care to enter and leave the house without Philip's knowledge, but the crafty Mexican knew just what was going on. His first act, when the boys were out of sight, was to put the owner of the stolen horse and his companion on the wrong trail, and his next, to hunt up the two men who had been ordered to capture George, and tell them that he had started for Brownsville. Then he came back and told his employer what he had done, and if George could have overheard their conversation, he would have needed no better evidence that his uncle was his enemy. There was one who *did* overhear it, and who showed what he thought of it by knocking Philip down.

George was overtaken and captured the next day while he and his companions were in camp, and the last time we saw him his captors were just starting to take him across the river. Before he took leave of his cousin he received permission to change clothes with him, and it was a very fortunate thing for Ned that he did so. The latter was twice brought face to face with the owner of the stolen horse, who was following him with the greatest perseverance, and if he had been dressed in his nobby suit, he would have been recognised and pounced upon at once.

When George was taken from them, Ned and Gus were left to find their own way to Brownsville, which they reached in due time, and a very unsociable pair they were, too. Ned very unreasonably charged his friend with being the cause of all his troubles, and told him that he had better go home and stay there. This made Gus so angry that he scarcely spoke to Ned during the journey, and when they reached Brownsville he left him without saying good-by. It was a long time before Ned heard of him again. Where he went, and what he did, we have yet to tell.

As soon as Ned reached Brownsville he "dressed himself up like a gentleman," as he expressed it, and waited impatiently for the arrival of his father. Uncle John came at last, and took Ned around to his hotel and up to his room, where we now find them, and where they had spent an hour or more in talking over the incidents of the last few days. Ned was surprised at the anxiety his father exhibited to learn all the particulars of George's capture. He was obliged to tell the story over and over again, and when Uncle John had heard all he wanted to know, he dropped George entirely, and would not speak of him if he could help it.

"He is glad George has gone," thought Ned, "and it wouldn't surprise me in the least to know that he had something to do with his disappearance. Well, if he *has* gone for good, I don't see what I can do about it. I don't see why I should cry over it, either, for I am master of a cool forty thousand a year. I little thought, while I was handling the yard-stick in old Robbins's store and working for starvation wages, that I should ever be a millionaire. Forty thousand a year! How in the world am

I going to spend it, I'd like to know! Of course I must go to Europe – all the gentlemen go there – but first I'll go to Foxboro' and lord it over some of those fellows who used to slight me because I was nothing but a dry-goods clerk. But, after all, I don't know that I blame them. I shall not renew my association with those clerks, for a millionaire ought to be particular in regard to the company he keeps."

"Now make up your mind where you want to go and we will leave Brownsville to-night," repeated Uncle John, slapping his son familiarly on the shoulder and breaking in upon his meditations. "We have nobody but ourselves to look out for now that George is gone, and we can do as we please."

"But he might escape and come back, you know," suggested Ned.

"I hardly think – I am afraid he will not be so fortunate," replied Uncle John. "Those cattle-thieves are a desperate lot of men."

"Don't you think you ought to go back to the rancho and make some effort to find him?" inquired Ned.

He asked the question simply to see what answer his father would make, and not because he wanted him to act upon the hint thus thrown out.

"And put myself in danger for nothing?" exclaimed Uncle John. "That would be the height of folly. How could I help him while he is across the river in the hands of those desperadoes? They may have made an end of him already. Mr. Gilbert, who thoroughly understands the temper of the people in that settlement, advised me to go away for a while, and I shall certainly do so."

"And when we come back I shall be the lawful master of the finest estate in Texas," exclaimed Ned, with great enthusiasm.

"I confess that it looks that way now," replied Uncle John, who, although he was as highly elated as Ned was, controlled himself better. "Have you any idea what you will do with your wealth?"

"I know one thing," answered Ned, "and that is, I'll not live in Texas. I'll leave an agent in charge of the ranche and go up north where white folks live. They won't snub me because I wear good clothes. Who's there?"

The bell-boy, who knocked at that moment, evidently took this question for an invitation to enter. At any rate he opened the door, saying as he thrust his head into the apartment —

"A gentleman to see you, sir."

Uncle John and Ned jumped to their feet in the greatest surprise and consternation. The former could not have told just what he stood in fear of, but Ned could. He fully expected to see the owner of that stolen horse stalk into the room; but if that gentleman had made his appearance, Ned would not have been so utterly confounded as he was at the sight of the visitor who came in. Uncle John and Ned took just one look at him and dropped back into their chairs without speaking. It was George Ackerman. He looked as natural as life, and was apparently none the worse for his short sojourn among the cattle-thieves. His presence there proved quite conclusively that Ned was not yet lawful master of the finest estate in Texas.

CHAPTER III

THE CONTRA-GUERRILLAS

The last time we saw George Ackerman he was dressed in his cousin's nobby suit, and was riding away from camp between the two cattle-thieves, whom Philip, his uncle's cook, had placed upon his trail. He was their prisoner, and they seemed determined to keep him too; for one of them, in order to prevent all attempts at escape, held fast to one end of a lariat, the other end of which was tied around the neck of George's horse.

The boy was not frightened in the least – he never was, unless he saw something to be frightened at – but he was anxious and uneasy, as any body would have been under the same circumstances. He began to believe now, that Springer told the truth; and that his capture was the result of the plans his uncle had laid to get him out of the way, so that Ned could lay claim to the property. But beyond that he was all in the dark.

As long as George remained within sight of the camp he turned in his saddle, now and then, to look back at the boys from whom he had been so unexpectedly separated. They were disconsolate enough, if one might judge by their actions. Gus Robbins was standing in the edge of the timber gazing stupidly after the prisoner and his captors, as if he had not yet been able to make up his mind, whether he was awake or dreaming; and Ned was walking back and forth, wringing his hands and making other demonstrations indicative of a very agitated state of mind.

"There is nothing for him to cry over," thought George, who was surprised at his cousin's want of pluck. "He can't get lost if he tries; and he will be sure to meet his father in Brownsville. He had no business to shoot those cattle, for I told him he would get himself into trouble by it."

When the camp and its two unhappy occupants had been left out of sight behind the swells, George turned to take a good look at his captors. They were dressed in Mexican costumes; but for all that, he knew that they were Americans. They were a hard-looking pair; and if he had had any intention of appealing to their sympathies, one glance at their faces would have been enough to drive all such thoughts out of his mind.

"I always heard that the Ackermans was a plucky lot, but I didn't allow to find a kid like you so mighty cool an' keerless like," said one of the men, after he had looked in vain for some signs of alarm in his captive's countenance. "Look here! You said that you knew all about Fletcher, an' I ax you again, who told you about him?"

"And I give you the same reply that I did before," returned George, "It's my own business. Were you with Fletcher on the night he made the attack on our rancho?"

"Mebbe we was, an' mebbe we wasn't," replied the man.

"I hardly thought you would confess it," said George. "Philip thought he was doing a very smart thing when he left that door open, so that you could go into the house; didn't he?"

George's captors seemed greatly astonished at this question. They stared fixedly at him for a moment and then they looked at each other.

"You didn't succeed in getting the money-box, did you?" continued George, who knew that the men would have given something handsome to know where he received all his information. "You got nothing at the ranche but a horse – a dark chestnut with white mane and tail, and four white feet."

"He is over the river now," said one of the men, who was so amazed, that he spoke before he thought what he was doing.

"I know it."

"Wal, go on. What else do you know?"

"I know that you expect to receive a thousand head of fat cattle, as your reward, for making a prisoner of me. You can tell Fletcher, for his satisfaction, that the next time he wants to put a spy

into any of the ranches in this country, he had better select a more reliable man than that Mexican cook. There!" added George, to himself, "If I am not very much mistaken, Philip is in a fair way to see as much trouble as he has tried to get me into."

There could be no doubt about that, if the expression on the faces of the boy's captors, was any index of the thoughts that were passing through their minds. He had purposely aroused their suspicions against the cook, and the significant glances they exchanged with each other, had a volume of meaning in them.

"When I get home, the first thing I do will be to tell Jake to kick Philip out of the house," said George, again communing with himself. "Of course, Fletcher will want to know who told me all these things, and it would never do to say that I got my information from Springer. I say," he added, aloud, "where do you fellows make your home, anyhow?"

"You'll see when you get thar," replied one of the men.

"I suppose you were with Fletcher on the night he jumped down on me and stampeded my cattle, were you not?" continued George.

"Mebbe we was, an' mebbe we wasn't."

"I know who was there."

"Who?"

"Springer. He used to herd cattle for my father, you know, and I recognised him the moment I put my eyes on him. He was shot right there," said George, placing the forefingers of each hand on his legs to indicate the spots where Zeke's bullets had found a lodgement. "He was badly injured, too, and I don't believe he ever got back across the river."

"Wal, he did," said one of the men. "He had a hard time of it, but he got through all right, an' he's thar now."

"I am very glad to hear it," said George, to himself. "That's just what I was trying to get at. If I can find him, perhaps he will help me escape."

George held no further conversation with his captors during the ride, for they were busy talking with each other. As they conversed wholly in the Spanish language, George could not understand what they said, but still he knew that they were talking about Philip, for he heard his name mentioned now and then, and it was almost always coupled with an oath. They seemed to think that their trusted spy had been guilty of treachery, and they made a report to that effect when they got across the river.

It was five miles to the nearest belt of timber, and while they were travelling toward it, the cattle-thieves exercised the utmost caution, stopping on the top of every swell and sweeping their eyes around the horizon to make sure that there was no one in sight. But they reached the timber without being seen by anybody, and there they camped to wait until dark. They did not think it safe to approach the ford in broad daylight. George now had an opportunity to finish the nap from which he had been so rudely awakened, and the cattle-thieves took turns in standing guard.

When night came, he was ordered into the saddle again and led toward the ford, his captors taking the same precautions as before to prevent his escape. They crossed the river in safety, and as soon as their horses had mounted the opposite bank, they were put to their full speed. There was no need of concealment now, for the cattle-thieves were among friends who, had they been pursued by ranchmen or troops from Texas, would have done everything in their power to aid them to escape.

They now had a journey of eighteen miles before them, and it required but a little over two hours for them to accomplish it. It was so dark at first that George could not see his hand before him; but the moon arose after a while, and then he was able to see that they were following a well-beaten trail, which ran in a tortuous course through the hills. This trail finally led them into a wide valley, from the middle of which arose the whitewashed walls of what had been a comfortable rancho. Their horses' hoofs rang out loudly on the pavement as they rode unchallenged into the open gateway and along the arched passage that led to the spacious *patio* or court-yard. It was deserted, save by a few goats

that were feeding at a pile of fodder in one corner, and a disconsolate dog or two which, having been awakened from his sleep, was stealing off under the shadow of the walls to find a new resting-place.

On the four sides of the court-yard, doorways without doors yawned darkly at the intruders. In front of one of these doors the cattle-thieves dismounted, and while one remained outside to guard the prisoner, the other entered with the horses, which he hitched there and supplied with a feed of corn. When he came out again, he brought the saddles and blankets with him.

"Now then," said he, as he led the way into one of the adjoining apartments, "we'll go in here. Thar's plenty of room in our hotel, and thar's no need of crowdin' the boarders. Spread your blanket down anywheres, young fellow, and don't try to skip outen here durin' the night, fur we always sleep with one eye open."

As if to put all attempts at escape out of the question, the speaker spread his own couch in front of the door and stretched himself upon it.

A bed which consists simply of a blanket and saddle is quickly made up, and George, who had not yet recovered from the fatigue of his five days' journey on foot, fell fast asleep almost as soon as he took possession of it. When he awoke at daylight he was not a little astonished at what he saw. The rooms opening off the court-yard, which had been so silent and apparently deserted when he rode into the rancho had, during his sleep, given up a most unexpected tenantry – men, women, children, goats and dogs, so many, in fact, that it was a wonder where they all came from. A confused babel of voices saluted his ears, and finally awoke his captors, who made no effort to restrain him when he put on his sombrero and walked out into the courtyard.

Having heard some astonishing stories told of the almost regal state maintained by wealthy Mexican rancheros before the war, George looked about him with the greatest interest. On every side he saw the lingering remains of departed grandeur. In the centre of the court-yard was a ruined fountain, and beyond it was a long column of fluted pillars, with gaily-carved capitals. In front of these pillars were the remains of a garden, now trodden hard with the pressure of many feet, but still affording a little sustenance to a few flowerless shrubs and one or two sickly orange and fig trees. Upon the broad stone verandah on the other side of the fluted columns the master of the house had doubtless feasted his guests, or smoked and dozed away the time in his hammock, while the fountain played merrily and the air was redolent of the perfume of flowers. Now slouching figures, clad in rusty leather trousers and velvet jackets, and smoking villainous cigarettes, swaggered through the court-yard, and from the adjoining rooms, with their tessellated floors and frescoed ceilings, came the impatient calls of hungry cattle and horses, which were growing tired of waiting for their breakfast.

While George was wondering where the master was, and what had happened to bring about so great a change in the house, he walked slowly along the court-yard, glancing into all the rooms as he passed, and no one spoke to him, or even seemed to notice him. He took a survey of the verandah, which was littered with blankets, ponchos, saddles and weapons, and was about to retrace his steps, when he heard a suppressed exclamation of astonishment near him, and turned quickly to find himself face to face with his father's old herdsman, the cattle-thief who had warned him against his Uncle John. He sat on his blanket, with his back against the wall, and the crutches which lay by his side proved that he had not yet fully recovered from the wounds that had been inflicted upon him by Zeke's Winchester.

"Hallo, Springer!" exclaimed George, starting forward; but as he was about to mount the steps leading to the verandah, the man threw up his hand, with a warning gesture.

"Keep your distance," said he, in a low tone. "We mustn't be too friendly, kase thar's too many watchin' you!"

"Humph!" exclaimed George. "There doesn't seem to be anybody watching me. I have been all around the court-yard, and nobody said a word to me."

"No difference," replied Springer. "They all know you, and have got their eyes on you. Don't you think now that I knowed what I was talking about when I told you that your uncle wasn't no friend of your'n? Where did they find you?"

"They surprised and captured me while I was on my way to Brownsville," replied George, who, still adhering to the resolution he had already made that he would not discuss private family matters with such a fellow as Springer, hastened to add, "Who runs this rancho, and what are these men doing here? Are they all cattle-thieves? There must be five or six hundred of them."

"The house belongs to Don Miguel de – something; I disremember the last name," answered Springer. "You see he thought when Max came over here, him and the French soldiers would be sure to clean out Juarez; so the Don, he accepts some kind of an office under the emperor, and Juarez, he confiscates his property, and Max, he sends a regiment here to watch things. But they don't find nothing much to watch, all the property 'ceptin' the house havin' been took away, an' so they settles down to cattle stealin'."

"Then these men are Maximilian's soldiers, are they?" said George.

"Yes; they're the contra-guerrillas, and a bad lot they are, too."

"I have heard of them," said George, with an involuntary shudder. "The people in Brownsville and Matamoras say there is not a man in the whole crowd who has not committed some crime."

"No more is there," replied Springer. "I'd oughter know, kase I belong to 'em."

"Is Fletcher the colonel of the regiment?"

"No. He's only the boss of the cattle stealin' expeditions, kase he knows the country and the ranches on the other side of the river better'n any body else. His idea of stealing you was a little private speculation of his'n, an' thar's only a few of us into it. Philip is the one that put him up to it. You see, he heard your uncle an' that boy of his'n talkin' agin you, an' wishin' you was out of the way so't they could have the ranche all theirselves, an' Philip, he skirmished around in that sly way of his'n till he got on your uncle's blind side, an' then he told him that if he'd promise to leave a thousand head of cattle where they could be stole easy, he'd see that you didn't never trouble him no more. I wouldn't tell you no lie about this business," added Springer, earnestly. "You give me grub and water when I was starvin' fur 'em, an' put me on my hoss, an' give me a chance for my life, when nobody else wouldn't a done it; an' I'm goin' to do you a good turn to pay you for it, if I can."

"Well, it is quite in your power to do me a good turn," said George, quietly. "You can help me get away from here."

"O, no, I can't do that," exclaimed Springer. "I want to put you on your guard against your uncle an' cousin, so that you will look out for them. They mean harm to you, sure's you're born!"

"And it seems that they have carried out their plans, too," said George, dolefully. "Have you any idea what these fellows intend to do with me?"

"They ain't agoin' to do nothing to you," said Springer, encouragingly. "They've just going to hold fast to you, that's all; an' as long as Fletcher has got you under his thumb, he's just as good as owner of the Ackerman ranche an' all the cattle that's onto it. You see?"

"No, I don't," answered George.

"Wal, then I'll make it plain to you. A'most all the beef we get for our army comes from over the river. The soldiers eat a power of it, an' when the quartermaster wants some more, he'll send word to Fletcher, an' Fletcher, he'll send word to your uncle by that Mexican cook of his'n to bring in another thousand head so't we can steal 'em, an' your uncle, he'll have to do it; kase if he don't, Fletcher, he'll blow the whole thing, an' what would the neighbors do to your Uncle John? They'd handle him rough, I tell you!"

George made no reply. He could not bear to think of what the settlers would do if they were acquainted with the fact that Uncle John had deliberately caused his nephew to be captured and carried off by the guerrillas in order that he might obtain possession of his property. It was very probable that they would "handle him rough," and that, too, without the aid of judge or jury.

"But look here, Springer," said George, after a moment's reflection. "You told me that you were to receive only a thousand head of cattle for capturing me. When you get them you can't demand any more."

"We can an' we will," said Springer, stoutly. "We'll ax for cattle just as often as we please, an' your Uncle John, he dassen't say no to us. That's Fletcher's plan."

"This is a pretty state of affairs," said George, angrily. "Must I pay for my capture out of my own pocket, and then stand still and allow myself to be stripped clean?"

Springer shrugged his shoulders as if to say that the boy could answer these questions in any way he pleased, and the latter, after turning the situation over in his mind, said with all the bitterness he could throw into his tones:

"I am not going to stay here and be robbed in this way. The Mexican government can't protect me, and my own government won't, for fear of hurting the feelings of you cattle-stealing gentlemen, and I am going to take care of myself. Springer, you must assist me to escape."

We must pause here for a moment to give the reader some idea of the state of affairs on our Texan border at the time of which we write, for George was quite correct when he said that the Mexican government could not protect him and that his own government would not.

From the days of Jacob Sadelmayer, who visited the Apache country about the year 1744, until within a few years past, the Mexican people allowed themselves to be regularly and systematically robbed by bands of raiding Indians who were armed with nothing more formidable than bows and arrows. During our civil war, and for years afterward, these Indians turned their attention to the frontier settlements of Texas, and forced them back a hundred and fifty miles. Our government uttered some feeble protests, but it was not to be expected that a people who had for so many years submitted to the forays of these savages, were going to make vigorous warfare upon them for our protection. It was not to their interest to do so, for the reason that as long as these raiders could find market for their plunder in Mexico, and could retreat there to get out of reach of our troops, they allowed the Mexicans themselves to rest in peace.

At the time George Ackerman was taken prisoner, Maximilian, having been abandoned by the French soldiers, who had been withdrawn on the demand of our government, was making his last stand against Juarez. His soldiers were deserting him by hundreds, and as the most of them would rather steal than work any day, they formed themselves into bands, and plundered their own countrymen and the Texans with the greatest impartiality. Fletcher and his band nominally belonged to one of Maximilian's regiments, but they were nothing better than professional thieves. They formed a sort of foraging party; but instead of foraging upon the enemy, they raided upon the Texans, drove off their cattle and sold them to Maximilian's commissary. These raiding parties were almost always pursued, and although some of them were overtaken and punished, the majority succeeded in crossing the river, where they were safe. The Mexican authorities would not arrest them, and our troops dared not follow them over the Rio Grande for fear of bringing on a war with Mexico. Texan ranchemen, when they passed through Mexican towns, often found property there that had been stolen from them, but their demands for it were met with derision and contempt.

This was the way matters stood on the morning that George Ackerman found himself a prisoner among the Contra-Guerrillas. His chances for seeing home and friends again would have been much better if the United States and Mexico had been at war and he had been captured in battle, for then he might have looked forward to an exchange; but as it was, there was no such hope for him.

CHAPTER IV

MORE ABOUT SILK STOCKING

"Turn about is fair play, Springer," said George. "I fed you when you were hungry, put you on your horse and gave you a chance to escape to this side of the river, and you must help me in some way."

"I don't see how I can do it," replied the wounded cattle-thief, who seemed to be alarmed by the proposition. "If I do an' am ketched at it, I'm a goner. You didn't run no risk by helpin' me."

"I didn't!" exclaimed George. "I know a story worth two of that. What do you suppose the settlers would do to me, if they should find out that I had given aid and comfort to such a man as you are?"

"How are they goin' to find it out? It ain't likely that any one of us will tell 'em of it."

"And neither is it likely that I shall tell Fletcher if you assist me," answered George. "You see, Springer –"

"Easy! easy!" whispered the man, raising his hand warningly. "He's coming."

"Who is coming?"

"The boss."

George faced about and saw a tall fellow, dressed in Mexican costume, picking his way among the recumbent guerrillas who were stretched out on their ponchos in the court-yard, waiting for breakfast. As he came nearer, George turned away from Springer, and looked at him with a good deal of curiosity. He was not a Mexican – there was that much to be said in his favor – but there was nothing in his face that induced the captive to appeal to his sympathies. When the boy descended the steps leading down from the verandah, the robber chief stood at the foot waiting for him.

"So you're George Ackerman, are you?" said he, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets and looking down at the boy. "Now, I want to know, who told you so much?"

The man spoke in an abrupt tone, but his face wore a good-natured smile, and George did not feel in the least afraid of him.

"The fellows who brought you in here last night, seem to think that Philip has been talking too much," continued Fletcher; "and if that is the case, I want to know it."

If the man had looked toward Springer, who at that moment appeared to be busily engaged in adjusting the bandages he wore about his wounded legs, he would have seen that his face had grown very white, and that he was listening intently for George's reply.

"You can ask Philip about that the next time you see him," was the answer, which was given in a tone that was calculated to strengthen Fletcher's suspicions against the cook. "I know why my uncle wants to get rid of me, and how he intends to accomplish his object; and whether or not he will succeed, depends entirely upon yourself. I am your prisoner, and you have the power to do with me as you please."

"Well, you are a cool one, that's a fact," exclaimed Fletcher, who seemed to be astonished at the boy's courage. "He will succeed, so far as getting rid of all his cattle is concerned, your uncle will; but –"

"They are not his cattle," interrupted George. "They belong to me individually."

"No odds. We don't care who belongs to 'em, so long as we get 'em," replied the guerrilla, cheerfully. "As I was going on to say, your uncle will get rid of all his cattle, but he won't get rid of you, by a long shot. We want the beef, and we don't care how we get it, if we don't have to fight for it; but I aint going to put an ugly hand on you, and I'll make it hot for anybody who does. I haint got nothing against you. You don't stand between *me* and a fortune. I reckon there are others in the settlement who know as much as you do?"

"There are some there who suspect as much as I know," replied George. "I had a long talk with one of my friends about it, night before last."

"Then Philip will have to come away from that ranche, for he won't be of no more use there," said Fletcher. "Now, I aint a going to be any harder on you than I can help. You can walk around the ranche as much as you please; but you can see for yourself, that it won't be of no use for you to try to get away. If we should catch you at that, we'd have to shut you up in one of those rooms and put a guard over you. Come on, and let's get some breakfast."

"What are you going to do with me, any how?" asked George, as he followed the guerrilla toward the other end of the court-yard.

"O, we'll let you visit with us, until we get all Ackerman's cattle; and then we'll set you back across the river, so that you can make it warm for the old rascal," replied Fletcher, with an encouraging wink.

"I don't want to stay here until my stock is all stolen," said George; and he added to himself: "I won't, either."

The boy breathed much easier after his interview with the robber chief. He had never expected to be so well treated by the man who always led the guerrillas on their plundering expeditions, and whose deeds of violence had much to do with the reputation those same guerrillas bore. He had the assurance that no harm was intended him, and consequently his mind was at rest on that score; but he did not want to stay there a passive prisoner, and, what was more, he was determined that he would not. If he saw a chance for escape he would improve it, and he would take some desperate risks, too.>

That day was a dreary one to George, who could find nothing to interest him. He could not smoke and doze away the long hours in his blanket, as the Mexicans did, and he had already seen every thing there was to be seen about the rancho. He was surprised at the manner in which the guerrillas performed garrison duty. There was no guard mount, such as he had seen at the fort on the other side of the river; there was no sentry at the gateway, no herdsmen to take care of the horses, the most of which were allowed to run loose in the valley; and if Springer had not told him that the regiment had been sent there to watch the rancho, he never would have known it from anything they did to indicate the fact. No one paid the least attention to him, not even Springer, who must have taken himself off to some safe hiding-place, for George could not find him again.

"He is afraid that I will ask him to assist me in making my escape," thought the boy, and he made a pretty shrewd guess as to the cause of the man's sudden disappearance. "Well, who cares? If they are going to allow me to run around as I please, I'll not ask help of any body. I wonder what they have done with my horse?"

George answered this question for himself by directing his course toward the room into which he had seen Ranger led the night before. The animal was still there. He greeted his master with a low whinny of recognition, and rubbed his head familiarly against his shoulders when the boy patted his glossy neck. He tried to follow George, too, when the latter went out, but he was tied to a ring in the wall, and his master dared not set him at liberty.

"I am afraid that our days of companionship are over, Ranger," said George, as he put his hands into his pockets and sauntered toward the gate. "Fletcher seems to think that I can't get away from here if he keeps you tied up. But there are other horses close at hand, some of them as good as you are, probably, and I must take one of them."

There was no one at the gate to stop him, and George went through it, and turning around an angle of the wall bent his steps towards the place where the horses belonging to the guerrillas were grazing, walking slowly and stopping now and then to look about him as if he had determined upon nothing in particular. He did not know how many pairs of eyes there might be watching him, and he was careful to do nothing to excite the suspicions of his guard, if he had any. He moved leisurely around the building and then went back through the gate and lay down upon his blanket, which he had spread in front of the room that had served him and his captors for a sleeping apartment. His

short walk outside the walls had satisfied him that unless some restraint was put upon his actions his captivity would be of very short duration. If he could leave the rancho after dark, it would be no trouble at all for him to capture one of the horses that were feeding on the plain, and set out for the nearest ford. He resolved that he would attempt it that very night.

George made three or four more excursions outside the rancho that afternoon, each time going a little farther away from the building than before, and when he came in from his last ramble he had been gone two hours, and Fletcher was looking for him.

"O, here you are," he exclaimed, as George approached him. "I reckoned that perhaps you had skipped out."

The man said this with a grin which made George believe that perhaps his escape could not be accomplished so easily after all. It told him as plainly as words that he was watched.

"Skipped out!" repeated George, "I guess not. I have no desire to be shut up in one of these rooms with a guard over me."

"I saw you looking at the horses," continued Fletcher. "Did you notice that fellow with the white mane and tail, and four white feet?"

Yes, George had noticed him, and with the eye of a horseman, too. The animal would have been conspicuous for his beauty in a drove of thoroughbreds; and among the shaggy, ill-conditioned beasts that the guerrillas owned, he looked like a well-dressed gentleman surrounded by a crowd of ragamuffins.

"That's the fellow that followed us off on the night we went to your rancho after that money box," said Fletcher. "He's just lightning, and if some of those rich fellows down there with Max don't offer me something handsome for him, I'll keep him myself."

"It must be the stolen horse that goes by the name of Silk Stocking," thought George. "I wonder if he would let me catch him? If he would, I could get Ned out of one scrape easily enough."

"I reckon you won't be lonesome to-night while I am gone, will you?" continued Fletcher, as he led the way into one of the rooms in which a dozen or more guerrillas were sitting on the floor eating their supper of broiled beef and tortillas. These, as George afterward learned, were the men whom Fletcher had selected to accompany him on a raid he intended to make that night. "Well, I can't help it if you are lonesome, for business is business, and has got to be attended to while the moon shines. We can't go but two or three times more, and then we'll have to stop for a whole month," added the boss cattle-thief, with a deep sigh of regret.

"That knocks me," said George, to himself. "I can't carry out my plans while these fellows are off on a raid, for while I am looking around for a ford I might run right into them. If I don't succeed in the very first attempt I am done for." Then aloud he said: "You'll not hurt any body while you are gone, will you?"

"Not if we can help it," replied Fletcher, in the most unconcerned manner possible. "We're bound to have the cattle, and those who don't want to get popped over will stay in doors, where they belong."

It was all George could do to refrain from telling the nonchalant robber that things would not always be so – that if he lived, he would see the day that he could not rob and shoot honest settlers without being followed across the river and punished wherever he was found – and if he had told him so, he would have uttered nothing but the truth. The time did come, sure enough, and Fletcher lived to see it, when the simple crossing of the Rio Grande did not insure the safety of the raiders. They were pursued into their own territory and soundly thrashed there, and George Ackerman himself was the first guide who led the troops in the pursuit. But, angry as he was, the boy did not give utterance to the thoughts that were flashing through his mind. He knew that it would be folly to irritate the guerrilla, for the latter might put him in close confinement, and then there would be no such thing as escape for him.

Supper over, the cattle-thieves went out to saddle their horses, and when everything was ready for the start, they mounted and rode away, Fletcher pausing long enough to ask his captive if he had any word to send across the river. George replied that he had not, adding, in undertone;

"I wish I could send word to the settlers to be on the alert, to give you the worst whipping you ever had."

But, if George had only known it, there was no need of sending warning to the settlers. Fletcher came back just before daylight with no cattle, and three men less than he had when he went out. The noise the guerrillas made on their return awoke George, who gleaned from the few scraps of their conversation that he was able to catch, that they had had their trouble for their pains – that the ranchemen were waiting for them, and whipped them beautifully before they fairly gained a footing on Texas soil.

"Good for the ranchemen," thought George, as he rolled himself up in his blanket and tried to find an easy place for his head on his hard pillow. "If that is the way they are going to do business, it will be a long time before you get your pay for making a prisoner of me."

The boy did not leave his blanket the next morning until Fletcher came in to tell him that breakfast was ready. He could hear the guerrillas grumbling lustily over the ill-luck that had attended their companions the night before, and he was in no hurry to mingle with them, for fear they might vent their spite upon him in some way; but they showed no disposition to do anything of the kind. Fletcher looked very savage and was not as talkative as usual; the men in his mess swore a little more over this meal, and that was all George saw or heard to indicate that anything had gone wrong with them.

Although the raiders had been badly punished, they were by no means disheartened. As soon as breakfast was over, they took fresh horses, and reinforced by a dozen or more companions, set out to try another ford twenty miles further up the river. They came back early the next morning, and this time they were very jubilant, for they had met with glorious success. They had brought five hundred head of stock back with them, and some unfortunate rancheman on the other side of the river was ten thousand dollars poorer than he had been a few hours before.

Fletcher and his men spent two more nights in this way, and to George's intense disgust, they came back full handed each time. He had the opportunity to look at the cattle before they were sent into the interior, and had the satisfaction of seeing that none of them bore his brand.

On the fifth morning of his captivity, George encountered Springer on the verandah. He had sought an interview with him every day, but Springer had taken good care to keep out of his way, because he knew that he could not assist him in his efforts to escape without running the risk of bringing himself into trouble with the boss cattle-thief. On this particular morning, however, he purposely intercepted the boy while the latter was taking his usual walk around the court-yard. He had something of importance to say to him.

"Wal, George, you ain't gone yet, have you?" said Springer, after he had looked all around to make sure that there was no one within ear-shot.

"No, but I haven't been wasting any time," was the reply. "I have learned that I can go in and out of the rancho whenever I please, and I have made a friend of Silk Stocking."

"Who's that?" inquired Springer.

"That is the name of the horse you raiders brought away with you on the night you made the attack on our rancho," replied George. "I have fed him crackers every day until he has learned to know me, and will let me catch him any where. I got on his back last night, and if I had been certain that the road was clear, you wouldn't have seen me here this morning. I would have made a bold dash for home and freedom."

"It's just as well that you didn't try it," said Springer, hastily, "kase the road wasn't cl'ar. You might have run plump into Fletcher's gang afore you knowed it. Now I'll tell you what's a fact: I can't help you none only by giving you good advice, an' I am risking my life by doin' that. The road will

be clear to-night, an' if you are bound to start for the other side of the Rio, you'd best do it afore you see the sun rise agin. Fletcher aint goin' on no more raids till next full moon, but he's goin' to start with the regiment, bright an' 'arly to-morrow morning, for our old camp at Queretaro; an' I'll just tell you what's a fact, if you ever let yourself be took so far into the country as that, it will be a long time afore you see Texas agin. Fletcher don't mean no harm to you, but thar's fightin' goin' on down thar, an' I don't know what may happen to us."

"I am glad you told me," said George. "I'll be off this very night. Good-by, Springer. Don't go on any more cattle raids, will you?"

"I aint likely to go on any more for a while," said Springer. "I shall be laid up for another month at least."

He looked all around the court-yard to make sure that there was no one watching him, and then cordially shook the hand that George extended toward him.

"If you had been engaged in some honest business that night you would not have received those wounds," said the boy. "Now, when you get well, cut loose from such fellows as these with whom you are now associating, and turn over a new leaf. Good-by!"

"Good-by, an' good luck to you," said Springer, heartily.

George walked slowly across the court-yard, passed out of the gate and went toward the place where the horses were feeding. Silk Stocking was cropping the grass a little apart from the others – he seemed to be a high-toned horse, and to look upon himself as something better than the rest of the drove – and when George whistled to him he promptly raised his head and came up to receive the piece of cracker which the boy had taken care to put into his pocket that morning.

"I don't wonder that those men were so determined to recover possession of you, old fellow," said George, as he ran his fingers through the animal's long white mane. "You are a regular pet and as gentle as you are handsome. Now don't go back on me when I come out to catch you to-night, and I will see that you find your way back into the hands of your lawful master."

George did not dare spend a great while in Silk Stocking's company, for fear that some of the guerrillas might see him and suspect something; so he walked slowly toward the rancho, after seeing him eat the cracker, and the horse began cropping the grass again.

The hours always pass away slowly when one is impatient, and this was the longest and gloomiest day of George's captivity. He spent it, as the most of the guerrillas spent all their unemployed moments, lying at his ease on his blanket; but to a boy of George's active habits this was anything but an agreeable way of killing time. He found an opportunity during the day to secure his lasso, which he tied around his waist, buttoning his buckskin coat over it so that it was concealed from view.

George went to bed at dark, but of course he did not go to sleep. For long hours he rolled uneasily about on his blanket, alternating between hope and fear, and waiting impatiently for the guerrillas to retire to their rooms; but there seemed to be more than the usual number of wakeful and talkative ones among them, and it was almost midnight before silence settled down over the rancho. Then he sat up on his blanket and looked about him.

CHAPTER V

"HOLD UP THERE, SILVER BUTTONS!"

During the time that George had been a prisoner among the guerrillas, he had made it a point to leave the rancho two or three times during the night, his object being to accustom his guards, if he had any, to seeing him go and come at all hours. The fact that no one had ever attempted to interfere with him in any way, encouraged the belief that no one ever would interfere with him; but somehow he felt a strange sinking at his heart as he arose from his blanket and proceeded to arrange it, so that one to have taken a casual glance at it, would have supposed that it still concealed a human figure.

"I can't imagine what is the matter with me," said George, to himself, as he moved to the door with noiseless footsteps, and gazed about the silent and deserted court-yard. "I never have been stopped while passing through that gate, and I don't see why I should stand so much in fear of being stopped to-night. Perhaps it is because I know that if I don't escape the first time trying, I never shall. Yes, that must be it. Well, I must make the attempt successful."

So saying, George stepped boldly out of the door, and after assuring himself that his lasso was securely fastened about his waist, he thrust his hands into his pockets and walked along with the greatest deliberation, as he always did when taking his airings about the court-yard. But he did not go straight toward the archway that formed the gate. He drew up behind the wall and peeped cautiously around the corner of it. As he did so he drew a long breath and his courage gave away altogether. There was a sentinel at the opposite end of the archway. He was leaning in an easy attitude against the wall, his feet crossed and his hands clasped at a "parade rest" over the muzzle of his carbine. His sombrero was pushed on the back of his head, and he was gazing in a dreamy sort of way toward the hills that bounded the western end of the valley.

The officer in command of the guerrillas (George did not know who he was, for since he had been at the rancho he had heard orders given by nobody except Fletcher), had stationed the sentry at the gate to keep his men from straying away to visit some of the neighboring haciendas. He wanted them all there when he was ready to begin the march for Queretaro in the morning, and the measures he had taken to secure their presence had shut up George's only avenue of escape.

So thought the prisoner, as he took another look at the sentinel and walked back toward his quarters. He had scarcely moved away from the wall when a loud yawn broke the stillness, and a moment later the door which opened into the room next to the one he occupied as a sleeping-apartment, was filled by a tall figure, who stretched his arms and rubbed his eyes vigorously. It was Fletcher. George was really alarmed by this unexpected encounter, but the cattle-thief's first words proved that he did not suspect anything.

"Hallo, there!" he exclaimed, when he saw the boy coming toward him. "What's the matter with you. Can't you sleep?"

"No," replied George. "I don't do enough during the day to make me tired enough to sleep at night."

"You'll have enough to do to-morrow," replied the boss cattle-thief, encouragingly; "so you had better go back to your blanket. We shall be in the saddle at daylight."

"Where are we going?" asked George, who was not supposed to know anything of the contemplated movement on the part of the guerrillas.

"Down to join old Max," was the reply. "Wouldn't wonder if we saw lively times down there, too. They say that Max is on his last legs, now that the Frenchmen have left him; and if that is the case, we are going to leave him, too, and strike hands with Juarez. You see, there is going to be some shooting done before this little matter is settled; and we don't want to be found on the losing side."

"It is no more than I should expect of you," said the boy, to himself, as he passed on toward his own room. "You joined your fortunes with Maximilian when you thought he was sure to succeed; and stand ready to desert him at the very time when he needs you the most. For downright meanness, commend me to a renegade of your stamp."

But, after all, Fletcher and his men were not more despicable than some who held higher positions in the army. One of Maximilian's trusted native officers, General Lopez, betrayed him; and on the 19th day of the following June, he was led out of his prison at Queretaro, to be shot. The contra-guerrillas did, indeed, see lively times at that place, being almost cut to pieces while they were on their way to join Juarez.

George afterward heard all about it from Springer, who came out of the fight in safety, and profiting by the severe lesson he had received at the hands of George's herdsman, made efforts to lead an honest and respectable life.

George did not forget his own affairs, while commenting upon the perfidy of Fletcher and his guerrilla companions. While he was thinking about that, he was preparing to try another way of escape. He did not go into his own room again, but passed on to the apartment that served as a stable for his horse, which had never been allowed to run at liberty with the others. It will be remembered, that Philip had warned the men who captured George, to look out for that same horse, for he was very swift; and if they allowed him the least chance, he would carry his master so far out of their sight, that they would never see him again. These men had, in turn, warned Fletcher, and that was the reason the horse had been kept confined. But there was another steed about there that was quite as fleet as Ranger, and which could be as readily caught when running at large, and George was impatient to be on his back.

In the room in which Ranger was secured, was a window that was high and narrow —*very* narrow, the boy thought, as he looked at it, and then took a survey of his broad chest. It had more the appearance of a port-hole than a window; for the stones of which the thick wall was built, were laid at such an angle, that the opening was much wider in the room than it was on the outside of the building. Fortunately, there were neither bars nor window-sash to impede his movements.

"It will be hard work," thought George, "but I must get through or go to Queretaro."

He quickly pulled off his coat, which, with his sombrero and lasso, he thrust through the window. Then having further reduced his proportions by removing all his outer clothing, he crawled into the opening, feet first, and after a good deal of effort and some very tight squeezing, he worked himself through and dropped to the ground on the outside.

To put on his clothing again, catch up his lasso and leave the building out of sight in the darkness, was the work of but a very few minutes. It took him longer to find the horses, and he approached them with the greatest caution, for fear of creating a stampede among them; but when he found them, his troubles were over, for almost the first one he saw was Silk Stocking. The animal allowed himself to be caught, raised not the slightest objection as the lasso was forced into his mouth and tied about his lower jaw, and when the boy flung himself upon his back, he moved off without waiting for the word.

Now came the most dangerous part of the whole undertaking. In order to reach the road that led to the river, he was obliged to pass along the valley within easy gun-shot of the sentry at the gateway, who would certainly have discovered him had it been even moonlight; but fortunately the night was very dark – so dark, that the only way in which George could tell when he reached the road was by listening to the sound made by his horse's hoofs. That intelligent animal seemed to know just what was expected of him. He kept in a rapid walk until he reached the road, and then he turned into it without any guidance from his rider, and of his own free will broke into a gallop.

Although George had passed along this road but once before, he had no fear of losing his way. His bump of locality was so well developed, that he could find in the darkest of nights any place which he had once visited, and while he trusted to his horse to keep in the road, he trusted to his own senses to keep him from straying off into the wrong trail. He travelled as a river-pilot guides

his vessel at night – by the *shape* of the trees and bushes on each side of the way, and they were all familiar to him, although he had seen them but once. He stopped occasionally to listen for sounds of pursuit, but if there was any attempted, those who were following him never came within hearing.

For the first few miles George kept his horse moving along at an easy gait, holding his speed in reserve for an emergency; but when half the distance to the river had been passed over, and Silk Stocking, warming to his work, showed an inclination to go faster, the boy did not try to check him. He had not been long on his back before he told himself that he didn't wonder that Ned's desire to keep him had been strong enough to get him into trouble. The animal's speed was equal to his beauty and docility.

As soon as George became satisfied that his escape had been accomplished, he began to think of the future. Where should he go and what should he do after he got across the river? His uncle and cousin did not want him at home (he had heard and experienced enough to remove all his doubts on that point), and George was too high-spirited to go where he was not welcome. He knew that it was in his power to bring about a different state of affairs at the rancho, and that he could do it by simply applying for a new guardian; but his friend and counsellor, Mr. Gilbert, had told him that the change would have to be made by process of law, and George was afraid that before the matter was settled, some very damaging disclosures regarding his uncle's way of doing business would be brought to light. It would never do, he thought, to allow his father's only brother to be disgraced, and if he permitted him to stay there in charge of the estate, it was quite probable that when George reached his majority he would step into a very small patrimony.

"I don't know what to do," thought the boy, after he had racked his brain in the unsuccessful effort to find a way out of the difficulty. "I must either come down on Uncle John, or stand quietly by and see him pocket all my money. I don't see why he and Ned can't behave themselves! They will make enough out of me in an honest way, according to the terms of father's will, to make them independent, and I do wish they would stop stealing from me and laying plans to get me out of the way. I'll speak to Mr. Gilbert about it."

Silk Stocking might have made quicker work of the eighteen miles that lay between the rancho and the river, if his rider had urged him to do it, but being allowed to choose his own gait, he accomplished it in about two hours and a half, so that it was about four o'clock in the morning when George crossed the ford and found himself again on Texas soil. Feeling perfectly safe from pursuit, he jogged along at a very easy pace, directing his course toward Mr. Gilbert's rancho. He did not know that Uncle John had followed Ned to Brownsville, or rather, he was not certain of it, and he did not want to see him again, until he had had an interview with the only man in the settlement who was unprejudiced enough to give him sensible advice.

It was twenty-five miles to his friend's rancho, and before he had gone half that distance, he was aroused from a reverie into which he had fallen by a quick movement on the part of his horse, which suddenly threw up his head, and after turning his ears back as if he were listening to some sound behind him, set off at the top of his speed. At the same moment George heard the muffled sound of horses' hoofs in the grass behind him. That was a most alarming sound, but it was accompanied by one that was still more alarming – the sharp crack of a revolver and the noise made by a bullet as it passed through the air close by his side.

"Hold up, there, Silver Buttons!" shouted a voice that sounded strangely familiar to the boy's ears. "That's only a warning! the next one will strike centre, sure!"

Believing that Fletcher and his men were upon him, and that the time had come for the exhibition of all the speed which Silk Stocking had thus far held in reserve, George threw himself flat upon his horse's neck, dug his heels into his side, and looking back over his shoulder, saw that he was pursued by two men, who, by keeping their nags in the long grass that grew on each side of the trail, had succeeded in coming quite close to him before their approach was discovered. But they were not Fletcher's men; they were Texans.

A single glance at them was enough for George, who, seeing one of the men raise his revolver and take a steady aim at his head, brought himself to an upright position, stopped his horse with a word and faced about. The man lowered his revolver, and he and his companion rode up and scowled fiercely at George, who knew who they were and whom they supposed him to be, before they said a word to him. One of them was the owner of Silk Stocking; and as George had his cousin's clothes on, of course they supposed him to be Ned Ackerman, the boy who had given them so much trouble. George remembered how savagely they had talked while they were smoking at his camp-fire, that they had threatened to snatch Ned so bald-headed that the next time he saw a stolen horse he would run from it, and he wondered what they would do to him, now that they had caught him with the stolen animal in his possession. Of course, it would be no trouble at all for him to prove that he wasn't Ned Ackerman, and that he had never had anything to do with the stolen horse, if they would only give him the opportunity; but the probability was that they would take vengeance on him first and listen to his explanation afterward, if there was life enough left in him to make it.

There was another disagreeable thought that came into George's mind while he was sitting there waiting for the men to approach (one thinks rapidly when he is in danger, you know), and it was this: If he proved that he wasn't Ned Ackerman, wouldn't it also be necessary for him to prove who he was? And while he was doing it, wouldn't the men learn that he had had something to do with Ned's escape? They would certainly be very angry at him for that. In fact, it will be remembered that while he was in Mr. Gilbert's library, he had overheard one of these same men say, as he and his companion passed through the hall, that he would like to get his hands on that rascally boy who had sent them so far out of their course. Taken altogether, it looked as though George was in a fair way to be punished both for what he did as well as for what he didn't do.

"Well, my young Silver Buttons, you stopped just in time," said one of the men, as he rode up and seized the lasso which served George for a bridle. "If I had sent one more bullet after you, it would have struck something, sure. Get off that horse before I knock you off. You have backed him for the last time!"

George lost not a moment in obeying this order. The man carried a loaded riding-whip, and as he uttered these words he wound the lash about his hand, in readiness to strike the boy with the heavy butt, if he did not move on the instant.

"A pretty chase you have led us," exclaimed the other horseman, whom we have heard addressed as "Joe." "How did you get back from Brownsville so quickly?"

"I haven't been to Brownsville yet," answered George, "but I hope to go there to-morrow or next day."

"Perhaps you will, and then again perhaps you won't," said the owner of the stolen horse, who answered to the name of Lowry. "It's my opinion, that when we are through with you, there won't be enough of you left to go any where."

"Very well," replied George, with a calmness that surprised himself. "If you have made up your minds to that, of course you can carry out your resolution, for I haven't the power to resist you. If I had, I should use it. I confess that appearances are against me –"

"Yes; I should say they were," interrupted Joe.

"But I can explain everything to your satisfaction," continued George, "and more than that, I can prove every statement I make."

"By whom will you prove it?"

"By people living right here in this settlement, who have known me ever since I was born."

"Wouldn't trust 'em," exclaimed Mr. Lowry, quickly. "We know, by experience, that the most of them are rascals who are in league with you. One night, when we were lost on the prairie, we camped with a cow-boy who told us a cock-and-a-bull story about having been robbed by the raiders, and who sent us thirty-five miles out of our way; Gilbert sent with us, as guide, a herdsman who lost us again on purpose; and finally, we were met by one of Ackerman's servants, who told us, that his

employer had just started for Palos to be gone two or three weeks, and that his son went with him riding this very horse. We went in pursuit as soon as we got our own horses out of Ackerman's corral; and we might have been riding toward Palos yet, if we hadn't been set right by a man of the name of Cook. We knew that he wouldn't deceive us, for he was very angry at you for shooting some of his cattle. He's the only white man in the settlement."

"I am glad to know that you have confidence in somebody," answered George, wondering who that servant was who sent Mr. Lowry and his companion off toward Palos, "and I am perfectly willing to go to his rancho with you. When you know all the circumstances connected with this miserable business, you will not have so poor an opinion of the people living in this settlement."

"Well, I must say that you ring a pretty oily tongue," said Mr. Lowry, who was plainly surprised at the ease with which the boy expressed himself. "Go on now, and explain why you didn't give Silk Stocking up on the night Joe and I came to your father's rancho and got fresh horses there?"

"Because I wasn't at the rancho that night, and neither was the horse in my possession," answered George.

"You *were* there," exclaimed Joe, in angry tones, "and the horse was in your possession. You had him hitched under an open shed close by the house, and you heard us say that he had been stolen."

"I can prove that I never heard you speak that night. I couldn't, for I was miles away attending to my herd of cattle."

Joe seemed ready to boil over with rage when he heard this, and his companion turned white with anger. The former would at once have fallen upon the boy with his riding-whip if he had not been restrained by Mr. Lowry; but the latter's forced calmness was more alarming than Joe's belligerent demonstration, for it told George, as plainly as words, that when his anger broke forth, it would be all the more terrible from being so long restrained.

"Do you mean to tell us that we can place no dependence upon our senses?" demanded Mr. Lowry, while an ominous light shone in his eyes.

"No, sir; I mean to tell you that you are mistaken as to my identity. On the night you got those fresh horses I was at Catfish Falls, watching my cattle which had been stolen from me, as I told you."

"As you told us!" echoed Joe. "Great Moses! Are you the scamp that sent us to Dickerman's when we wanted to go to Ackerman's?"

"Hold on, Joe!" said Mr. Lowry, extending his arm to interrupt the riding-whip which was brandished threateningly in the air. "He can't get out of this scrape by pretending to be somebody else. We saw him standing on his father's porch, and he had these same clothes on, too."

"These are not my clothes."

"Whose are they then, and what are you doing in them?"

"They belong to my cousin, Ned Ackerman, who, if he has had good luck, is safe in Brownsville by this time. He was the one who traded for Silk Stocking, and the reason why he would not give him up, was because he was afraid that you would lay violent hands upon him. I exchanged my clothes for his at the time I was captured by the Greasers, and I did it for his protection, little dreaming that I should get myself into trouble by it. I knew that you would follow him, and that if you came up with him you would recognise him by his dress."

"What do you mean by saying that you were captured by Greasers?" asked Joe, whose anger seemed to have given away to astonishment.

"I mean just what I say. I have been a prisoner on the other side of the river since last Thursday, and it was there I found Silk Stocking."

The ranchmen looked at each other for a moment, and then broke out into loud peals of laughter. George's story was too ridiculous for belief.

CHAPTER VI

GEORGE PROVES AN ALIBI

"Young fellow," exclaimed Joe, who was the first to speak. "I have often said that when I came across the champion liar, I would give him my hat. I think you are fairly entitled to it. Here, take it!" he added, pulling off his sombrero and extending it toward George, who was forced to smile in spite of himself. "I'll go home bareheaded!"

"You are a good one, I declare," remarked Mr. Lowry. "I said you should never back my horse again, but I think you have earned a ride. Jump on and come with us."

Without a moment's hesitation George swung himself upon Silk Stocking's back and rode away with the ranchemen, who burst out into fresh peals of laughter every time they looked at him.

"Do you know any more funny stories?" asked Joe, at length.

"I have only made a beginning," answered George.

"Got more of them back, have you?" exclaimed Mr. Lowry. "If I wasn't so mad at you I would let you go on, just to see how big a story you can tell."

"I could tell you one that would make you open your eyes," said George, "and it would be nothing but the truth. But I know you wouldn't believe a word of it, and perhaps it would be better that you should hear it from somebody besides myself. You will give me a chance to prove that I am not the boy you take me for, will you not?"

"O, yes," replied Mr. Lowry, who seemed to have recovered his good-nature all of a sudden. "We'll give you all the chance you want."

"Then let's turn off here to the right. This is my ranche – or rather it will be mine if I live to be twenty-one years old – and that house you see over there was my home when my father was alive."

There was something in those words that touched Joe's heart. He looked steadily at George for a moment, and then asked in a much kinder tone of voice than he had thus far used in addressing him.

"Where is your home now?"

"I have none," replied George sadly. "But that is a part of my story, and, as I said before, I would rather that somebody else should tell it to you. Then perhaps you will believe it."

After this the three relapsed into silence, and did not speak again until they rode around the house and drew rein in front of the porch. Jake, who was acting as manager of the ranche during Uncle John's absence, and Bob, another herdsman, who was officiating as cook, hearing the sound of their horses' hoofs, came out to see who the visitors were. At that moment George was just dismounting. The men took one look at his sombrero, ornamented with its gaudy cord and tassel, and at the patent-leather boots, with their silver-plated spurs, and were about to walk away with an exclamation of disgust, when George turned his face toward them. Then they uttered ejaculations indicative of the greatest astonishment, and springing forward caught him in their arms.

"Why, Mr. George, *is* this you?" cried Jake, when he had given the boy two or three bear-like hugs, during which he swung him clear off the ground. "It is, aint it? We thought the Greasers had got you, sure."

"And so they did have me," answered George, after he had brushed back his hair and replaced his sombrero, which had fallen from his head. "I have only just escaped from them. Now, Jake, I want you to answer a few questions for me."

"Heave ahead, Mr. George," replied Jake. "Thar's been a heap of things goin' on here since you've been away."

"I don't care anything about that. I want you to tell my friends here who I am."

"Who you be?" The herdsman backed away and gave the boy a good looking over, as if to make sure of his identity, and continued almost indignantly: "Why, you are George Ackerman, the

young gentleman who will some day own this yere ranche an' everything what's onto it. An' a mighty fine piece of property it is, too, gents," he added, nodding to the two horsemen, who had not yet dismounted. "Worth a clean forty thousand a year."

"Never mind that," said George, hastily. "Whose clothes are these I have on?"

"They are Ned Ackerman's," replied Jake, throwing as much contempt as he could into his tones. "But how you came by 'em, and how you can bring yourself to wear that feller's duds, beats my time all holler. Don't it your'n, Bob? He's the chap, gents, Ned is, who traded for this very hoss, an' who held fast to him arter he knowed that he had oughter give him up. He's the fine lad that shot Cook's cattle, too, Ned is. Oh, he's meaner'n – meaner'n – "

Jake flourished his clenched hand over his head and glared wildly about, being utterly at a loss for a simile.

"Remember who he is and say nothing hard against him," said George quietly. "He has never injured you in any way. Was Ned at home on the night these gentlemen came here in search of Silk Stocking?"

"Course he was. He stood right here on the porch an' heard everything they had to tell about the hoss bein' stole. That's why I say he had oughter give him up."

"What was the reason he would not surrender him?"

"Cause he dassent, the coward. He was afeared they'd trounce him. An' served him right if you had, too, gents. That boy oughter have some sense pounded into him."

"Hold on, Jake. Where was I on the night in question?"

"You? You was off to Catfish Falls, a'most a hundred miles from here, whar the Greasers jumped down on you an' stampeded your cattle."

"Then they did rob me of my cattle, did they?"

"Mr. George!" exclaimed the herdsman, who had been every moment growing angrier under this catechising, of which he could not see the object, "what be you tryin' to get through yourself, any how?"

"Nothing at all. I only want you to answer my questions. Did the raiders run off any of my cattle?"

"They run 'em all off; but Zeke, he put the settlers on the trail an' got 'em all back agin. Mighty pretty herd it is, too, gents. Three hundred head of 'em, an' all fit for market."

"You remember the night these gentlemen came here to punish Ned, and you assisted me to get him out of the house before they arrived, do you not?"

"I ain't likely to forget it," replied Jake, drawing himself up to his full height, and looking defiantly at the two horsemen, as if to say that if he and George had done anything wrong in assisting Ned in his extremity, and they felt like punishing them for it, they (Mr. Lowry and Joe) were quite welcome to attempt it.

"Have you any idea who it was that met these men before they reached the rancho, and sent them off toward Palos on a wild-goose chase?"

"I know who it was; it was Philip."

"Where was the horse at the time?"

"He was across the Rio, most likely. But if he was there, I don't know how you got him. Howsomever, I *do* know, gents, that he went off with the Greasers on the night they jumped down on this rancho."

"How do you know that it was Philip who sent them off towards Palos?"

The herdsman suddenly lost his defiant attitude, and became almost cringing.

"I really don't like to tell, Mr. George," said he, after making several ineffectual attempts to speak, "'cause, it's something I never did afore. But I s'pose I'll have to answer that question, won't I? Wal, the fact is, I never did like the way that chap Philip went snoopin' around while he was here. On the night these gents came to the rancho, I seed that he was riding about a good deal on hoss-

back, an' that was something I never knowed him to do afore. I seed him when he came back an' put his hoss into the corral, an' I seed him, too, when he walked into the house, an' straight to the office whar Mr. Ackerman was. He went without bein' asked, an' that made me think that he was up to something pizen; so I crept along the hall, an' looked in at the key-hole. I didn't see nothing, though, for the cunnin' rascal had hung his hat over the key-hole; but I heard something an' I – I listened, I did, Mr. George. I never done it afore, an' I'll never do it agin, if you don't want me to."

"All is fair in war," exclaimed Mr. Lowry.

He and his companion were so deeply interested, and so utterly amazed at what they heard, that neither of them had spoken before. George had proved that he had uttered nothing but the truth when he told them that he could make them open their eyes.

"What did you hear?" added Mr. Lowry.

"Wal, gents, in the first place I heard something private, which I don't tell to nobody but Mr. George," said Jake; and this answer proved him to be a discreet as well as a faithful friend. "In the next place I heard him tell Mr. Ackerman that he had met you on the trail, an' sent you off towards Palos. In the next place, he said that the trail was watched, so't George couldn't never come home agin."

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