

JOHN GOLDFRAP

THE BORDER BOYS
WITH THE MEXICAN
RANGERS

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**The Border Boys with
the Mexican Rangers**

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CHAPTER I

AN IMPRUDENT BEAR

Professor Wintergreen sat bolt upright amidst his blankets and listened intently. Had it been daylight, the angular figure of the scientist would have made a laughable spectacle. But the canyon in the State of Sonora, in Western Mexico, in which the Border Boys and their preceptor were camped, was pitchy dark with a velvety blackness, relieved only by a few steely-looking stars shining from the open spaces of a fast overclouding sky.

The night wind soughed in melancholy fashion through the trees that clothed the sides of the rugged abyss in which the camp had been pitched that evening, and the tinkle of the tiny stream that threaded its depths was audible. But although these were the only sounds to be heard at the moment, it was neither of them that had startled the professor. No, what he had heard had been something far different.

Waking some hours after he had first fallen asleep, the man of science had indulged his sleepless moments by plunging into mental calculations of an abstruse character. He was deeply engrossed in these, when the sudden sound had broken in on the quietness of the night.

“Bless me, I could have sworn that I heard a footstep, and a stealthy one, too,” muttered the professor to himself, “I must be getting nervous. Possibly that is what made me wake up, and – wow!”

The ruminations of Professor Wintergreen broke off abruptly as he suddenly felt something warm and hairy brush his face.

“It’s a bear!” he yelled, springing to his feet with a shout that instantly aroused the others, – Jack Merrill, the rancher’s son; Ralph Stetson, his schoolmate from old Stonefell; Coyote Pete, and Walt Phelps.

“A b’ar!” yelled Coyote Pete, awake in a flash, “wha’r is ther varmint?” As he spoke, the plainsman drew forth his well-worn old forty-four and began flourishing it about.

Before the others could say a word a dark form bolted suddenly through the camp, scattering, as it went, the embers of the dying campfire.

“It’s a bear, sure enough!” exclaimed Ralph, as the creature, a small bear of the black variety, howled and stumbled amidst the hot coals.

All at once its shaggy coat burst into flame, and with a cry of intense agony it dashed off into the woods.

“Poor creature!” cried Jack Merrill, “it will die in misery unless it’s put out of its agony quickly. Pete, lend me your gun.”

The plainsman handed it over with a quick interrogation to which he received no reply. Instead, Jack made a swift dash for the spot, a few feet distant, in which the horses of the party were tethered. Throwing himself on the back of one, with a twisted halter for a bridle, he set off in hot pursuit of the unfortunate bear.

He could see it quite plainly as it lumbered along through the woods, crying pitifully. Its long coat, greasy and shaggy, burned like a torch.

“Get along, Firewater, old boy,” breathed Jack, bending over his animal’s neck to avoid being brushed off by the low-hanging branches, for, after a short distance, the tangle on the hillside at the canyon’s bottom grew thick and dense.

But Firewater, alarmed and startled at the spectacle of the flaming beast rushing along through the dark woods in front, balked and jumped about and misbehaved in a manner very foreign to him when he had his young master on his back.

But Jack never made the mistake of allowing a pony or horse to think it could get the upper hand of him, and, consequently, Firewater soon quieted down and realized that there was no help for it but to go whither he was directed.

At length Jack arrived within pistol shot of the frenzied bear. Aiming as carefully as he could for a death shot, he pressed the trigger and the wretched animal, – the victim of its own curiosity, – plunged over and lay still.

“Poor creature,” quoth Jack to himself, “you are not the first to pay the toll of too much inquisitiveness. Gee whiz!” he broke off the next instant with one of his hearty, wholesome laughs, “I’m getting to be as much of a moralist as the professor.”

Having ascertained that the bear was quite dead and out of its suffering, the Border Boy remounted his pony and pressed back toward camp. But as he neared it, it was borne in upon him that the adventures of the night were by no means at an end, for before he reached the others, and while a thick screen of brush still lay between him and the glow of the newly made camp fire, a sudden volley of shots and the clattering of many horses’ hoofs broke the stillness.

A touch of the heel was enough to send Firewater bounding forward. The next instant the brush had been cleared, and a strange spectacle met Jack Merrill’s eyes. His companions, their weapons in hand, stood about the fire staring here and there into the darkness. A puzzled expression was on all their faces, and particularly was this true of the professor, who was scrutinizing, through his immense horn spectacles, a scrap of paper which he held in his hand. He was stooping low by the firelight the better to examine it.

“Oh, here you are,” cried Ralph, as the returned young adventurer came forward into the glow.

“Yes, here I am,” cried Jack, throwing himself from Firewater’s back. “I despatched that bear, too, but what on earth has been happening here?”

“Read this first, my boy, and then I will tell you,” said the professor, thrusting the not over-clean bit of paper into his hands.

“Read it aloud,” urged Pete, and Jack, in a clear voice, read the untidy scrawl as follows: —

“Señors; you are on a mission perilous. Advance no further but turn back while you are safe. The Mountains of Chinipal are not for your seeking, and what you shall find there if you persevere in your quest will prove more deadly than the Upas tree. Be warned in time. Adios.”

“Phew!” whistled Jack, “that sounds nice. But what was all the firing – for I suppose that had something to do with it?”

“Why, the firing was my work,” struck in Walt Phelps, looking rather shamefaced, “and I’m afraid I wounded the man I shot at, too.”

“You see it was this way,” went on Ralph Stetson. “We were watching the woods for your coming when, suddenly, a horseman appeared, as if by magic, from off there.”

He pointed behind him into the dark and silent trees.

“Under the impression that we were attacked, I guess, Walt opened fire. But the man did not return it. Instead, he flung that note, which was tied to a bit of stone, at our feet, and then dashed off as suddenly as he had come. What do you make of it?”

“I don’t know what to think,” rejoined Jack in a puzzled tone; “suppose we ask the professor and Pete first.”

“A good idea,” chorused the other boys. “Well, boys,” said the professor anxiously, “not being as well versed in such things as our friend Mr. Coyote, I shall defer to him. One thing, however, I

noticed, and that was that the note is worded in fair English, although badly written in an uneducated hand.”

“Maybe whoever wrote it wished to disguise his writing,” ventured Walt Phelps.

“That’s my idee of it,” grunted Coyote Pete; “yer see,” he went on, “ther thing looks this yer way ter me. Some chap who knows of a plot on foot ter keep us frum the Chinipal, wanted to do us a good turn, but didn’t dare be seen in our company. So he hits on this way of doing it and gits drilled with a bullet fer his pains.”

Walt Phelps colored brilliantly. He felt ashamed of his haste.

“Don’t be upsot over it,” said Pete, noticing this, “it’s ther chap’s own fault fer dashing in on us that way. I reckon, though, he kalkerlated on finding us asleep, an’ so we would have bin if it hadn’t a bin fer Mister flaming b’ar.”

“The question is, are we to heed this warning, or is it, what I believe is sometimes termed a bluff?” asked the professor anxiously. He drew his blankets about his skinny figure as he spoke, and stood in the firelight looking like a spectacled and emaciated ancient statue.

Coyote Pete considered a minute.

“Suppose we leave that till the morning fer discussion,” he said. “In my judgment, it will be best fer you folks ter turn in now and sleep ther rest of ther night.”

“And you, Pete?” asked Jack.

“I’ll watch by the fire in case of another visit. I don’t think there’ll be one, but you cain’t most gen’ally always tell. Gimme my gun back, Jack; I might need it.”

There was no dissuading Coyote from his plan, so the others turned in once more, and, despite the startling interruption to their slumbers, were soon wrapped in sleep.

As for Coyote, he sat by the fire till the stars began to pale and the eastern sky grew gray and wan with the dawn. Except for an occasional swift glance about him the old plainsman’s eyes were riveted on the glowing coals, seemingly searching the innermost glowing caverns for some solution of the situation that confronted them.

CHAPTER II

RUGGLES – THE DERELICT

But you lads who are not already acquainted with the adventurous Border Boys, must be wishing, by this time, to know something about them and of the quest which brought them into this wild and rugged part of the great Mexican Republic. In the first volume of this series “The Border Boys on The Trail,” it was related how Ralph Stetson, a somewhat delicate young easterner, – the son of “King Pin” Stetson, the railroad magnate, – came out west to visit his school chum Jack Merrill, the only son of a ranch owner.

The lads’ adventures in pursuit of a band of cattle rustlers, – headed by Black Ramon de Barros, – were related in full in that volume. There also, it was told how they escaped from the mysterious old mission and found a rich treasure in a secret passage of the mouldering structure. Jack’s bravery in preventing Black Ramon from destroying a dam and flooding the country was also an incident of that book. But although the boys had succeeded in routing Black Ramon for the nonce, that scourge of the border was destined to be re-encountered by them.

How this came about we told in the second volume of this series, “The Border Boys Across The Frontier.” Beginning with their discovery of the subterranean river leading from the Haunted Mesa across the border, the lads were plunged into an amazing series of adventures. These culminated in the attack on the Esmeralda, – a mine owned by Jack’s father, – and the gallant defense of it by our lads and their faithful friends. The attacking force was composed of Mexican rebels and they were only repulsed by an unexpected happening. Black Ramon was active in this part of the boys’ adventures, too. For a time it looked as if they at last had brought the rascal with the coal black horse to book. But it proved otherwise, and Black Ramon once more made good his escape from the arm of the law.

Their adventures in Mexico over, and the revolution brought to a termination by the abdication of President Diaz, the Border Boys settled down to spend the rest of their vacation in comparative monotony. A few weeks before the present story opens, however, an incident had occurred which seemed destined once more to provide some excitement for them.

Mr. Stetson, whose railroad interests had brought him to Mexico during the fighting days, had paid a hasty visit to the ranch and spent some time in consultation with Mr. Merrill. Professor Wintergreen had also been summoned to the conference. It appeared that the railroad king had, some years before, materially aided a young college friend who had fallen on hard times. The beneficiary of his aid had, however, ultimately wandered away from the position with which Mr. Stetson had provided him, without leaving a word or a sign of his destination. The years rolled by and Mr. Stetson had practically forgotten all about the man, when, during his stay in El Paso, a wretched, ragged figure had confronted him on the street one day and disclosed his identity as Stewart Ruggles, the outcast.

Mr. Stetson, shocked at his old friend’s abject appearance of misery and illness, ordered a carriage and took him to his hotel. Here, after Ruggles had been suitably clothed and fed, Mr. Stetson listened to his story. After wandering off so many years before, Ruggles, it seems, had fallen in with bad company. He finally had become connected with a bank robbery and had been compelled to seek refuge in Mexico. After knocking about for many lonely years, he became a prospector.

One spring had found him in the mountains of Chinipal, with his burros and prospecting outfit. He met with indifferent luck and was about to vacate the country, when, one day, in a rugged pass, he heard groans coming from the trailside. Investigating, he found a Yaqui, who had been swept from his horse by an overhanging branch, and whose leg was broken. With characteristic brutality and callousness, the rest of the tribe had passed on, leaving the wounded man to shift as best he might.

Ruggles, who had some rough knowledge of surgery, set the man’s leg and tended him for several days. At last one day the Yaqui was ready to ride on. But before he left he confided to Ruggles

the location of a mountain known to the Indians as the Trembling Mountain. In a cavern in the interior of this eminence, – so the Indian legend had it, – a vanished race of aborigines had hidden vast treasures of gold and sacrificial emblems of great value. Asked why, if this was the case, his own tribesmen had not sought for it, the Yaqui had declared that rather than enter the mountain his fellows would cut off their right hands. It was, according to their belief, guarded by the spirits of the dead and gone race, and terrible vengeance would light on the head of the luckless mortal who offended them.

Under the Indian's direction Ruggles had drawn up a rough map of the location of Trembling Mountain and then, determined to investigate it, had set out for the north to find proper equipment for his quest. But he found the land in the throes of revolution, and where he was not laughed at as a lunatic he was told to wait till times became more settled. In poverty and despair he was wandering the streets of El Paso when chance threw him across the path of his old college mate.

Mr. Stetson, who had been known as one of the most daring operators on Wall Street, believed where others had scoffed. He agreed to back Ruggles in his quest to any amount. But while active preparations were still on foot, a fever seized the prospector. His impoverished frame was unable to resist the attack, and in a few days he breathed his last, not before, however, he had confided to Mr. Stetson his wish that the latter would carry out the quest.

The railroad king faithfully saw the remains of his unfortunate and erring friend to the grave, and then began to consider the feasibility of the enterprise to which he stood committed. It was clear, he decided, that the mission was no ordinary one. It could only be performed by trustworthy agents, for, in the event of the treasure being there, the temptation to play him false would be tremendous. Then, too, it must be kept secret, because, on the face of it, the venture appeared such a far-fetched and desperate one that unless success crowned it its promoter was likely to be heaped with ridicule from one end of the country to the other.

Altogether, Mr. Stetson was at a standstill till he suddenly bethought himself of the Border Boys and their companions, Coyote Pete and Professor Wintergreen.

With his customary promptitude, he had lost no time in getting to the Merrill ranch. At first the rancher was unwilling that his son should embark on such an enterprise, but on Jack's pleadings to be allowed to participate, he finally agreed on the condition, however, that no unnecessary risks were to be run.

The fact that Coyote Pete and Professor Wintergreen were to go along played no small part in enabling the rancher to make up his mind. As for Mr. Stetson, he remarked:

“Ralph will have to play his part in the world before very long now, and such adventures are good for him. They form character and make him quick in action and decision.”

And so it came about, that a week before, our party had disembarked from, the queer little narrow-gauge train at Esmedora, on the borders of Sonora, – the starting point of their three hundred and fifty mile trip into the unknown. Not unnaturally, some excitement had been created at Esmedora by the arrival of so many strangers. It had been given out by Professor Wintergreen that the expedition was a scientific one and their real destination was, of course, carefully concealed. Firewater, – Jack's favorite pony, – had been the only animal brought from the States by the party, as it was understood that excellent animals could be purchased in Esmedora. This proved to be the case.

Coyote Pete was provided with an excellent little buckskin, while Ralph and Walt Phelps each secured a calico pony. The professor's mount was a tall, bony animal, almost as lanky as himself, but one which Coyote Pete pronounced a “stayer.” Its color was a sort of nondescript yellow, and the man of science, when mounted on it with all his traps and appendages, cut an odd figure. Besides the horses and ponies, two pack burros were purchased to carry the somewhat extensive outfit of the party.

Naturally, in that sleepy part of the country, such purchases and preparations caused quite a stir. By that species of wireless telegraphy which prevails in parts of the world unprovided with other means for the transmission of news, the information was, in fact, in the few days the party remained in Esmedora, diffused over a considerable part of the country round about.

In due course it reached the ears of a person to whom it was of peculiar interest. This individual was one whom we have met before, and whose presence in the vicinity would have caused the Border Boys considerable anxiety had they known of it. Who this man was, and what effect his presence was to have upon events in the immediate future we shall see before very long.

And now, after this considerable, but necessary digression, it is high time we were getting back to the camp in the canyon where we left the lads and the professor enjoying peaceful repose, and Coyote Pete hard at work thinking. Before the morning was far advanced, however, the plainsman aroused his comrades and a great scene of bustle was soon going on.

While the professor visited the creek to indulge in a good wash in its clear, cool waters, Walt Phelps, who had already performed his ablutions, cleaned up the “spider” with sand, and having scoured it thoroughly he set about getting breakfast. Coyote Pete attended to the horses and the two burros, and Ralph Stetson, always fastidious, “duded up,” as Jack called it, before a small pocket mirror he had affixed to a tree.

As for Jack, while all this was doing, he set off for a stroll.

“Too many cooks spoil the broth,” he remarked laughingly, as he started. With him he carried a light rifle thinking that he might encounter an opportunity to bring down something acceptable in the way of a rabbit or other “small deer,” for breakfast.

His path took him by the spot on which the night before he had killed the bear. The animal, charred and blackened to a crisp, still lay there. As he neared the place, however, a heavy flapping of wings as several hideous “turkey buzzards” arose heavily, apprised him that the carrion birds had already gathered to the feast. The lad noted that, before rising, the glutted creatures had to run several yards with outspread wings before they could gain an upward impetus.

The crisp beauty of the morning, the smiling greenery of the trees, and the thousand odors and sounds about him all combined to make Jack wander rather further than he had intended. Then, too, a boy with a rifle always does go a longer distance than he means to. That’s boy nature.

All at once he found himself emerging from the brush at a point rather higher up the canyon side than their camp in the abyss. So gentle had been the rise, however, that he had not noticed it. Before him lay a sort of roughly piled rampart of rocks. The boy was advancing toward these to peer over their summits into the valley below, when something suddenly arrested his footsteps as abruptly as if a precipice had yawned before him.

The sharp, acrid odor of tobacco had reached his nostrils. At the same instant, too, he became aware of the low hum of voices. The sounds came from immediately in front of him, and seemingly just below the rock rampart. With a beating heart, and as silently as possible, the lad crept forward to ascertain what other intruders besides themselves had come into the primeval fastnesses of the Sonora country.

CHAPTER III

JACK'S ADVENTURE

A few stealthy footsteps served to bring him to the edge of the natural rampart, and then, removing his sombrero, he peered over. What he saw a few feet below him caused him to exercise all his self-control to avoid uttering a sharp exclamation. Around a smoldering fire, above which hung an iron pot that emitted a savory odor, lay several men. Swarthy Mexicans they were, with villainous countenances for the most part, although, to Jack's astonishment, one of the party had a fair Saxon skin and reddish hair, which, with his blue eyes, made him seem oddly out of place in the midst of the dark-skinned, black-orbed group.

But Jack had little time to note these details, for something else entirely occupied his attention. This object was nothing less than one of the party who sat somewhat apart, trying the edge of a hunting knife he had been sharpening upon a bit of madrone wood. In the hawk-like countenance and slender, active form, Jack Merrill had not the least difficulty in recognizing Black Ramon de Barros himself. At a short distance from the swarthy rascal grazed his famous coal-black horse. Even in his somewhat awkward position Jack could not repress a thrill of admiration as he gazed at the splendid proportions and anatomy of the glossy-coated beast, through whose delicate nostrils the light shone redly.

"Lucky thing I'm down the wind from that outfit," thought the Border Boy. "I've heard it said that Black Ramon's horse can detect the presence of a stranger as readily as a keen-scented fox."

Most of the Mexicans were rolling and smoking slender cigarettes of powdered tobacco and yellow corn paper. These had occasioned the acrid smell which had luckily betrayed the existence of the camp to Jack before a false step could make them aware of his presence. Expelling a cloud of blue smoke from his thin lips, Black Ramon began speaking. He was addressing the red-haired man who looked so oddly out of place although he wore Mexican garb, red sash, flowing trousers, short jacket and cone-crowned sombrero with a mighty rim.

"You are sure that this Ruggles was not mistaken, Senor Canfield?" he was saying.

The other shook his head.

"I'd take my oath to that on a stack of Bibles," he said. "Ruggles was a pretty level-headed chap although he led a fool's life, and if he says the In'jun told of a treasure in the Trembling Mountain he was right."

"What puzzles me, though, is that he should have told you of it as well as this Americano Stetson, – curses be upon him," – grumbled Black Ramon. "If he was, as you say, 'on the level,' why should he have betrayed his friend's confidence?"

"Well, you see," responded the man addressed as Canfield, slowly, "Ruggles and I had roughed it together a bit, and I reckon he was a little off his head with worry and the approach of the fever when I met him in El Paso. Anyhow, he spun out the whole yarn, with the exception of the plan."

"We can do without that," said Black Ramon, "I have often heard of the Trembling Mountain, and can, I believe, find it without difficulty. But you are sure that Senor Stetson has the plan?"

"I know it for a fact. That was the reason that I hastened to dig you up as soon as I knew he was fitting out an expedition to go after the treasure. I thought you were the most likely man in Mexico to carry out the job."

"And you were not mistaken, Senor Canfield," rejoined the other with a gratified smile. "If the treasure is there we will get it out, even if it were only to obtain revenge on those Gringos, Jack Merrill and his chums. They drove me off the border, they tricked me in Chihuahua, but now the cards have changed, and I hold the trumps. But you are certain we are far ahead of them?"

"Positive," was the rejoinder, "they are at least two days' march behind, and with our swift animals we shall make the strike first, do not fear."

Jack was puzzled.

Clearly, from what he had heard, the Mexican leader knew nothing of their doings, but that they had started from Esmedora. On the other hand, it appeared equally positive that Canfield was the man who had carried the message into their camp the night before and created so much excitement. Jack noticed now, too, as a further means of identification, that Canfield's hand was bandaged. Ramon seemed to notice this also at the same instant.

"Your hand is hurt, *senor*," he said sharply, with a suspicious inflection.

"I cut it this morning while closing my knife," rejoined Canfield glibly.

Ramson nodded and said nothing. In the meantime one of the Mexicans had been busy dishing out the contents of the pot and handing portions about. The smell reminded Jack that he was excessively hungry and concluding that he had heard about all he wanted to, he prepared to depart as silently as he had come. But as he moved his legs an alarming thing happened. The rock upon which he had been resting gave way without the slightest warning. Jack made a desperate effort to avoid crashing down with it, but he was unsuccessful. With a roar and crash, amid a flying cloud of dust, stones and twigs, the rock and the Border Boy slid together into the midst of the camp of the man whom Jack had every reason on earth both to fear and detest.

But even as he was making his avalanche-like slide down the steep bank. Jack's active mind was at work.

The instant his feet touched solid ground he sprang upright with a terrific yell: —

"Yee-ow-ow-ow!"

"*Todos Santos!* It is *El Diablo*," shrilled some of the Mexicans. But Ramon, superstitious as he was, was not to be thus easily alarmed.

"It's a man!" he shouted, and then the next instant: —

"*Santa Maria!* It's one of the Border Boys!"

But so quickly had Jack moved that by the time Ramon, the first to regain his wits, had recovered from his surprise, the lad was already among the Mexicans' horses which were tethered at some little distance. Jack's quick eye had noted that one of them was saddled and bridled. Like a flash he was in the saddle, and plying the quirt with might and main. Behind him came a fusilade of shots, and he could feel the bullets whistle as he crouched low on his stolen steed's neck. But he had assumed, and the event proved correctly, that the Mexicans would not risk killing one of their horses.

"Don't hit the horse!" the fleeing boy heard Ramon shout, as he dashed off. He really had no idea in what direction he was going, but flogging his mount with unmerciful ferocity for the kind-hearted Jack, the lad made all speed from the vicinity of the Mexican camp.

"Hooray, I've shaken them off, anyhow," he thought to himself, as, after ten minutes or so of hard riding he heard the shouts and cries of the Mexicans grow faint behind him.

But in this assumption Jack had reckoned without his host, in the shape of Black Ramon's famous sable steed.

As he drew rein he heard distinctly the sound of a horse coming toward his halting place at a terrific gait. No other horse than Black Ramon's could have kept up such a speed over such ground, and Jack, with a sinking heart, realized that if he did not act quickly he was likely to fall into the outlaw's hands once more.

The spot where he had halted was a small rocky eminence surrounded by the luxuriant fern and scrub growth which clothed the rugged floor of the canyon.

To turn his panting animal and head off into the dense growth was the work of an instant. Hardly had he vanished, however, before the fern parted once more and disclosed the form of Ramon's black horse with the outlaw himself upon his glossy back.

Like Jack, Ramon halted as he reached the little eminence, and listened intently. Despite the speed he had made in pursuit, the black showed hardly a trace of fatigue. His finely carved nostrils dilated a little more than usual and his large, intelligent eyes shone more brightly perhaps, but that

was all. He pricked his delicate ears and seemed to be as keenly on the alert as his master, whose face, just now, wore an expression of almost diabolic rage and baffled fury.

In the meantime, Jack was loping along at as fast a pace as he dared to go. The ground, as has been said, was rough and stony to a degree, – the worst sort of going for one who wished to conceal the sound of his advance. But there was no help for it; press on the boy must, or fall into the hands of men whom he knew would give him short shrift indeed.

“If ever this old plug stumbles – ”

Such was the thought in Jack’s mind when the exact event he had dreaded transpired.

His purloined animal gave a plunge forward as its feet caught in a rock and a tangle of fern.

The next instant Jack was shot like a projectile through space, while the horse, with an almost human groan of pain, sank to the ground. At the same time Ramon, halted on the little hill, caught the sound of the crash.

A cruel smile curled his thin lips, exposing his long yellow teeth – almost like those of some beast of prey. With a whispered word to his black horse the Mexican outlaw plunged into the brush in the direction of the sound which had just reached his ears.

CHAPTER IV

A BATTLE ROYAL

Jack struggled to his feet and surveyed the scene of his disaster with dismay. A brief examination of his fallen horse told him that it would be impossible to continue his flight on the animal. Its knees were cut and bruised, and it lay with an expression of dumb suffering in its eyes that touched the sorely-tried lad's heart. If he had not dropped his little rifle in the excitement of his escape he would have despatched the creature, – risking the chance of detection from the sound of the report.

“Well, here's where I take to Shank's mare,” murmured Jack, setting off once more, – when something whistled through the air and settled about his neck in a stifling coil.

It was a rawhide lasso, hurled with deadly accuracy by Ramon, who had entered the glade just as Jack arose from his examination of the fallen horse.

Before the boy had time to realize what had occurred, he was yanked from his feet and thrown violently to the ground for the second time.

“So I've got you fast and tight, at last, eh,” sneered Ramon vindictively, gazing down from his great horse at the crestfallen, dust-covered boy.

“Well, my young senor,” he continued, with a vicious intonation, “I can promise you that this time you will not escape so easily. This will be a treat for the boys.”

Jack answered nothing. He struggled to rise but the rope was given a jerk by his captor which brought him to the ground once more. He could almost have cried with humiliation. At the moment this was his overmastering feeling. Of fear he felt little, but he would have given a lot just then to stand up with Black Ramon in a twenty-four-foot ring!

Having “thrown” poor Jack very much as he might have done a refractory calf, the outlaw turned his attention to the injured horse.

“So you have ruined one of our horses, too, you Yankee pig,” he snarled; “well, it only makes one more score to settle up with you.”

He drew one of his big revolvers from its chased leather holster, and carefully aiming it, shot the mortally injured animal between the eyes. The creature gave a convulsive shudder and straightened out, – dead. Without another word Ramon swung his black around, and before he could make a move Jack found himself being dragged over the rough ground at a swift pace. Within a few yards his side was bruised and cut, and the clothing torn from him.

“Great heavens, if this keeps up I shall be unable to move hand or foot,” thought Jack in dismay.

For a moment his heart failed him, and then he suddenly bethought himself of his knife. To reach it in his side pocket – for his arms were partially free, – was the work of an instant, and with one quick slash he cut the rawhide that bound him.

Released of its burden thus suddenly, the sure-footed black lost its footing and almost stumbled.

“Diablo!” Jack heard Ramon shrill out as the Border Boy gave one quick leap into the dense woods.

When Ramon looked around there was not a trace of the lad he had had at the end of his lariat. Instead, a broken end of the rope dangled on the ground, its ends frayed out.

“Maledictions!” he yelled, all the fury of his Latin blood boiling to the surface in an ungovernable flood. “That cursed gringo pup has fooled me once more.”

In one of those meaningless frenzies of rage into which his countrymen are apt to fall when thwarted in anything, Ramon began to vent his rage on the first animate object to hand. This was the black horse. On the beautiful creature's shiny coat the cruel blows of the Mexican's lariat fell furiously, raising great welts across the glossy surface.

For an instant the black quivered and stood motionless. The suddenness of the attack dazed it. But the next moment, its rage, – as uncontrolled as that of its master, surged up in its equine heart. With an angry squeal it gave a succession of huge bucks which would have unseated any ordinary – or extraordinary rider, – but which did not even disturb the Mexican's seat.

Then followed a magnificent exhibition of man versus horse. And it was not without its watchers – this Homeric struggle for supremacy between maddened man and maddened beast.

Jack, from his hiding place in the ferns and brush, heard the sounds and almost unconsciously he drew closer to the scene of the combat. Parting the ferns he peered through cautiously, and then was held spellbound.

If he were to have been captured for it the next instant he could not have withdrawn his gaze from the spectacle.

With clenched teeth and face that was yellow and drawn with rage, Ramon plied quirt and spur. The big rowelled instruments he wore tore great streaks in the black's glossy hide. All the time his quirt fell in a perfect hailstorm of blows about the noble animal's flanks.

But if Ramon's rage was impressive from its very vindictiveness, how much more so was the just anger of the big horse.

Its delicately pointed ears were pressed close back to its shapely head, while its eye gleamed whitely. As the big silver-mounted bit of the barbarous Mexican pattern cut and gored its sensitive mouth, the animal champed and snapped, – like a rabid dog, – till its great chest was flecked with blood and foam. But it was unsubdued, as unconquered as its master.

“By George, what a rider!” was the involuntary exclamation of admiration forced from Jack as he watched.

And the next moment.

“Gracious, what a horse!”

Suddenly the black reared straight upward, beating the air with its forelegs. For a breath it swayed and balanced perfectly, and then, losing its equilibrium – perhaps purposely – it fell backward.

A cry of alarm broke, against his will, from Jack's whitened lips. Ramon's death seemed certain. But instead of the black crushing his body in its fall, the agile Mexican was out of the saddle with the agility of an eel, and as the black leaped erect once more its master was back in the saddle breathing fresh maledictions and flogging and rowelling more unmercifully than ever.

But from that time on, there was no question but that the animal realized that it had met its match. Its bucks were no longer great, animated, splendid leaps, driven by the force of its powerful muscles. Instead, they were limp and dispirited.

But Ramon seemed bent on thoroughly humiliating the animal. Jack's blood began to boil as he saw the brutal punishment increasing in violence as the black grew more and more subjugated. Its sunken flanks heaved, its limbs trembled and actual tears rolled down its cheeks; but Ramon still flogged and beat and spurred as furiously as ever.

“Oh, that such a rider should be such a brute!” thought Jack, watching the scene from his place of concealment.

“This has got to stop,” he determined the next instant. So great was his anger at the brutal exhibition that had he had his small rifle he would almost have risked crippling one of the Mexican's arms or legs in order to end the sickening brutality.

But if Jack had not a rifle, he had another weapon perhaps even more efficacious in his hands. It will be recalled that Jack had performed some remarkable feats of pitching at Stonefell College, notably in the great game between West Point and Stonefell. What more natural then than that he should select from the plenty about him, a small, well-rounded stone, somewhat smaller than a league ball.

Feeling sure that Ramon was too intent on his punishment to notice anything else, Jack stepped boldly to the edge of the little clearing, and with a preliminary twist he sent the stone hurtling straight and true at the head of the black's tormentor.

Like a tree that has felt the woodsman's axe, Ramon threw up his hands as the stone struck him, and without a sound pitched out of the saddle, crashing in a heap on the ground.

Jack felt rather alarmed as he saw this. He had not intended to throw quite so hard. For an instant a dreadful fear that he had killed Ramon – rascal though the man was, – clutched at his heart.

Coming boldly out from his place of concealment he hastened to the fallen man's side.

CHAPTER V

CAUGHT IN A TRAP

But Ramon was not dead, – far from it, in fact. As Jack bent above him he reached back, and with a swift, cat-like motion, whipped out a knife and, balancing it on his palm for the fraction of a second, sent it whistling past the lad's ear.

Before he could rise the boy was upon him, and for a space of several minutes they struggled on the uneven ground, the exhausted horse looking disinterestedly on. Had it not been for its recent punishment it is likely that the brute might have interfered, for some of the oft told tales along the border concerned the black's love for its master. But as it was, it made no move, not even when Jack, holding Ramon pinned to the ground with one hand, with the other jerked loose the lasso from the saddle, by its hanging end, and rapidly proceeded to bind the Mexican fast.

“Adios, Ramon!” cried the boy, as, his task completed, he turned away.

Had the black horse not been so completely worn out it is likely that Jack might have commandeered him. But as it was, he deemed it wisest not to bother with him.

And so he slipped away, leaving the exhausted horse and helpless master side by side.

After traveling some distance Jack began to realize that his woodcraft was seriously at fault somewhere. He had intended to make a detour which would bring him around the outlaw's camp and enable him to reach their own bivouac unobserved.

Instead of this, as he now began to dread, he had apparently headed altogether in the wrong direction, for the country into which he emerged after traversing the fern-brake and scrub-coppice, was of a kind distinctly foreign to anything they had as yet encountered in Mexico.

Almost bare of vegetation, it was riven and split as if by volcanic action. The earth was of a reddish color, as if it had been seared by elemental fires, and the beetling cliffs rose threateningly on either side.

“What a gloomy place,” thought Jack, “it reminds me of that valley in which Sinbad the Sailor found the snakes and the diamonds. Wonder if there are any diamonds here? Tell you what, though, I'd give a whole handful of the gems right now for a good square meal.”

The thought of the appetizing breakfast which had been preparing when he left camp made Jack hungrier than ever, a fact which he had not had time heretofore to realize in the rapid march of events which had occurred since his departure.

The Border Boy looked about him carefully. He realized that if not actually lost, he was in grave danger of being so. The thought quickened his faculties and he set about gauging his position in real earnest. Having, by the aid of the sun, calculated the direction in which the Border Boys' camp ought to lie, Jack struck out for it. His way led him across a corner of The Baked Land, as he had mentally christened the dreary valley.

He was hastening forward when, suddenly, as he stepped into what seemed a patch of ferns and high grass, the solid ground seemed to vanish from under his feet.

Straight down shot the Border Boy, clutching desperately, as he fell, at projecting rocks and bits of growth; but none of these remained firm in his grasp.

For twenty feet or more the boy fell, and then suddenly his drop was arrested by a heap of dried vegetation at the bottom of the pit or crevasse into which his hurrying feet had led him.

So well had the deceitful growth on the edges of this gulf hidden it, that it was small wonder that Jack, in his haste, had not perceived it. It was dark with a gloomy, damp sort of dusk in the bottom of the crevasse, only a dim, greenish light filtering in from the top.

The reaction from his hopes of a few minutes before almost unnerved the lad for the nonce, but presently he marshalled his faculties and set himself to the task of ascertaining exactly what had happened to him, and what means of escape presented itself.

At a single glance he could see that there was no hope of getting out of the subterranean trap by means of climbing up the walls. Although they were rough and might have afforded a foothold, they overhung the floor of the pit at such an angle that even a fly would have found it difficult to maintain a foothold on them.

Yet rescue himself he must, or face death in that gloomy place. Without any definite idea in his mind, Jack struck off along the bottom of the abyss, which was overgrown with a short, coarse sort of grass of a pallid green color.

As he moved along his progress was suddenly arrested. His foot had encountered something that wriggled and squirmed horribly under his sole. It was a sickening sensation, this, of feeling that squirming mass under his foot.

Jack stepped hastily back. As he did so something brown and mottled slid off through the grass, hissing angrily. As it went there came a dry sort of sound, like the rattling of peas in a bladder. At the same time a nauseating musky odor filled the air.

“This place may be alive with rattlers!” thought Jack, glancing nervously about him.

As he spoke he thought that from a dark corner at the further end of the rocky pit he could hear a sort of scuffling and rustling, unpleasantly suggestive of intertwined masses of scaly bodies writhing and contorting in snaky knots. At any rate, he decided to explore the rift no further in that direction. Instead, he turned back and sitting down on a projecting bit of rock, – after first carefully reviewing the surroundings, – Jack set himself to some hard thinking.

If only he had possessed a rifle or a revolver, – or even a knife, – his situation would have been different. By firing the weapons he might have attracted attention to his dilemma, and with the knife it might have been feasible to cut steps in the walls at some other part of the crevasse.

Then, too, there is something in the mere feel of the good wood and steel of a rifle that gives a fellow confidence and courage. It seems like a friend or at least a protector. But poor Jack had none of this comfort. He was trapped in the bowels of the earth with only his bare hands to aid him out of his difficulties.

As it was unthinkable to dream of exploring the pit further in the direction in which he felt sure lay the den of snakes, Jack finally decided on striking off the other way. That he went carefully, you may be sure. He did not want again to experience that wriggly, crawly feeling under his foot.

The crevasse seemed to be of considerable length. In fact, he estimated that he had walked some half mile or more before he reached what seemed to be its confines. It ended abruptly in a steep wall of rock, and with its termination Jack’s hopes of escape vanished also. Fairly unnerved, the boy sank down on a heap of dried fern and buried his face in his hands.

Was he to be buried alive in this horrible place?

Then he fell to shouting. He yelled and hulloed till his throat was dry and sore, and his lips cracked. He knew that he ran considerable risk of attracting the attention of the outlaws, but in his present predicament he didn’t much care what happened so long as he got out of the terrible place. But all his shouting came to naught, and after an interval of waiting Jack realized that it had all been in vain.

What was he to do next? Nothing but to wait for rescue or – But Jack would not allow himself to complete the sentence.

“While there is life there is hope,” he murmured to himself, and involuntarily recalled the night when he had stood upon the tower of the old mission, a hundred feet above the ground, and deemed that his end had come. Yet he had escaped from that dilemma, and more impossible things had happened than that he should get out of his present scrape alive.

All at once, while he sat thus meditating, the boy spied, not far above his head and only a short distance away, a dangling vine some two inches in circumference, and seemingly tough and fibrous.

“It ought to bear my weight,” thought Jack, “and if only it will, I’ll get out of this hideous place yet.”

He began making brave efforts to reach the trailing tendon. Time and again, with hands that were cut and bleeding from the rough surface of the rock, he was compelled to desist in his efforts, but at last, mustering his waning strength, he made a mighty leap. His fingers closed on the vine and he drew himself upward. But as the boy’s full weight came upon the green trailer it snapped abruptly, and Jack was thrown violently to the ground.

He fell with such force that he was stunned and helpless. Claspings the broken bit of treacherous vine in his hands, the Border Boy lay on the floor of the crevasse, senseless.

CHAPTER VI

AN EXCITING QUEST

In the meantime, the keenest anxiety prevailed in the camp. After awaiting breakfast for a long time, it was at last eaten and the tin dishes scoured, without there being any sign of the missing boy.

“We must organize a search at once,” declared the professor. “Following on the top of that warning last night, it begins to look ominous.”

“Maybe he has lost himself, and will find his way back before long,” suggested Ralph hopefully. Coyote Pete gloomily shook his head.

“Jack Merrill ain’t that kind,” he said; “I tell yer, I don’t like the looks of it.”

“Why not fire guns so that if he is in the vicinity he can hear them?” was Walt Phelps’ suggestion.

“Yep, and bring the whole hornets’ nest down on our ears, provided they are anywhar near,” grunted Coyote Pete. “No younker, we will have to think up a better way than that.”

“Would not the search party I suggested be the best plan?” put in the professor.

“Reckon it would,” agreed Coyote Pete; “what you kain’t find, look fur, – as the flea said to ther monkey.”

But nobody laughed, as they usually did, at Pete’s quaintly phrased observations. There was too much anxiety felt by them all over Jack’s unexplained absence.

“Shall we take the horses?” inquired Walt.

“Sartin, sure,” was the cow-puncher’s rejoinder, “don’t want ter leave ’em here for that letter writer and his pals to gobble up.”

So the stock was saddled and the pack burros loaded and “diamond hitched,” and the mournful and anxious little party got under way. It so chanced that their way led them to the little hill where Jack had stopped on the stolen horse and listened for sounds of the pursuit. Coyote’s sharp eyes at once spied the tracks, but naturally he could make nothing of them.

Suddenly Ralph Stetson, who had ridden a little in advance, gave a startled cry.

“Come here, all!” he shouted.

“What’s up now?” grunted Coyote Pete, spurring forward, followed by the others.

“Why, here’s a horse, – a dead horse, shot through the head, lying here,” was the unexpected reply.

“Well, Mr. Coyote, what do you make of it?” asked the professor, after Pete had carefully surveyed the ground in the vicinity.

“Dunno what ter make uv it yit,” snorted Pete. “Looks like ther’s something back of this, as the cat said when she looked in the mirror, and – wow!”

“What is it?” they chorused as they pressed about the spot where Coyote was pointing downward, an unusual expression of excitement on his ordinarily unemotional features.

“See that?” he demanded.

“Yes, I see several footsteps,” said the professor, “but what have they – ”

“Ter do with it? Everything. Them’s Jack Merrill’s footmarks or I lose my guess. And see here, this little wavy line, – a lariat’s dragged here. Oh, the varmints!”

“How do you construe all this?” asked the professor.

“Easy enuff. Them rascals, whoever they be, hev roped Jack, hog-tied him and dragged him off.”

“O-oh!”

The exclamation, half a groan, burst from all their throats. Examining the ground further, it seemed likely that Coyote’s construction of the case was a correct one. All of which goes to show how very far wrong a theory can go.

“Let’s hurry after them, whoever they are, and put up a fight,” cried Ralph.

“Yes, we must rescue Jack,” echoed Walt Phelps.

“Now, hold your broncs, youngsters,” warned Coyote, “in the fust place we dunno how many of them there be, and in the second we dunno jus’ whar they air. Am I right?”

“Indeed, yes,” said the professor. “Boys, you should not be so impetuous. Julius Caesar, when he – ”

“Dunno the gent,” struck in Pete, “but my advice is to kind of hunt around this vicinity and maybe we’ll find some more clews. Go easy, now, boys, and make as little noise as possible.”

A few moments later the ashes of the camp fire near which Jack had so suddenly alighted were found, but of the outlaws no trace remained. As a matter of fact, Ramon’s shouts had attracted them, and as soon as they had rescued him the camp had been abandoned in a hurry. It did not suit Ramon just then to try conclusions with the Border Boys.

“Wall, here’s whar they camped,” muttered Coyote Pete, “we certainly had some close neighbors last night.”

The boys examined the camp site with interest, while the professor and Coyote Pete conversed earnestly apart. At the conclusion of their confab, Coyote Pete spoke.

“It’s up to us to go forward, boys,” he said. “Ain’t no use lingering ’bout these diggin’s.”

“But mayn’t the bad men have turned back down the canyon?” asked Ralph.

Coyote shook his head.

“Think agin, son,” he admonished, “the floor of the gulch is too narrow for ’em to hev got by us without our knowing it.”

“That’s so,” said Walt, while Ralph colored up a bit. He didn’t like to be looked upon as a tenderfoot.

It was some time later that they reached the volcanic-looking stretch of country into the pitfalls of which Jack had fallen.

“Ugh! What a dreary place!” stammered Walt, a bit apprehensively.

Somehow they all felt the oppressive gloom in the same way. It depressed and made them silent. When they spoke at all it was in hushed tones, like folks use in church or a big museum. This is the effect of most awe-inspiring scenery, be it beautiful and grand, or merely gloomy and threatening.

“In past ages volcanic energy was at work here,” said the professor, gazing about with interest; “the formation of yonder cliffs tells an interesting story to the scientist. I wish my geological hammer was not in the packs, and I could get some specimens of the rocks. They would be excessively interesting.”

“Not half so interesting ter me as a peek at Jack Merrill,” grunted Pete. “I wish your science was capable of finding that lad for us, professor.”

“Indeed, I wish so, too,” sighed the professor, “but that is outside the realm of science. She can tell you of the past but is silent as to the future.”

“I wonder if there are any volcanoes ’round about here now?” asked Ralph, looking about rather apprehensively.

“No, indeed, the fires are long extinct,” declared the professor, “this valley was formed at a remote period when no doubt hot water geysers and fires spouted through the earth’s crust. But that will never occur again. In fact – ”

“Look! Look there!” shouted Walt, suddenly pointing off to one side of the valley.

“By Jee-hos-o-phat – smoke!” yelled Pete, fairly startled out of his usual composure.

“A volcano!” cried Walt “Hadn’t we better be getting away from here?”

“This is most extraordinary,” exclaimed the man of science, “there is every evidence here that the internal fires have been long extinct and yet, as if to confound us, smoke comes pouring from that fissure yonder.”

“Wall, my vote is that we git right out of hyar quick,” declared Pete, “volcanoes and Peter de Peyster never did agree.”

But the professor, filled with scientific ardor, was already spurring his bony animal across the scarred and arid plain toward the smoke.

The others, watching him, saw him approach the fissure carefully and dismount. The next instant he uttered a yell that startled them all.

“Hez ther fireworks started?” asked Coyote anxiously.

The professor was waving his bony arms around like one of those wooden figures that you see on barns. He was evidently in a state of great excitement.

“What’s that he’s shouting?” asked Walt. “Hark!”

“Boys! boys! I’ve found him – Jack!”

This was the cry that galvanized them all into action. Without seeking for explanations, in fact, without a word, they spurred toward the professor’s side. They found him peering down into the fissure, the edge of which was concealed by grass and ferns. Craning their necks, they, too, could spy a figure in the depths of the crevasse.

“Jack! Jack, old boy! Are you all right?” they cried anxiously.

“Bright and fair!” came up the cheery answer, “but almost dead. I thought you’d never come. Got anything to eat?”

“Anything your little heart desires,” Walt assured him.

In the meantime Pete had been busy getting a lariat in trim to lower to the beleaguered boy. Presently it was ready, and after much hauling and struggling, they got their companion once more to the surface. Jack reeled for an instant as he gained the brink, but Ralph’s arms caught him. The next minute he had recovered his self-possession, however, and after eating ravenously of such provisions as could be got together hastily, he related the story of the strange things that had happened to him since leaving camp that morning.

“If I hadn’t thought of those matches in my pocket and of igniting a fire of that dried grass, I doubt if I’d have been here now,” he concluded.

“I think you are right,” said the professor gravely, “I am glad that that fire at least was not extinct.”

CHAPTER VII

THE CLOUDBURST

Our adventurers, after a council of war, decided to press right on. As Coyote Pete put it:

“We’ve got a plumb duty ter perform and we’ll see the game through, if it’s agreeable to all present.”

It was, and after Jack had fully recovered, which, aided by his natural buoyancy, did not take as long as might have been expected, the start was made.

“It’s a race for the Trembling Mountain, now,” cried Jack, as he once more bestrode brave little Firewater.

“So it is,” cried Walt Phelps.

“And may the best man win,” struck in Ralph rather pointlessly, as Pete reminded him.

“There’s only one bunch of best men on this trip,” he said, “and they’re all with this party.”

It did not take long to leave the dreary volcanic valley behind them, and they soon emerged on a rolling plain covered with plumed grasses of a rich bluish-green hue, on the further margin of which there hung like dim blue clouds, a range of mountains.

“There is our goal,” cried the professor, with what was for him a dramatic gesture. He waved his arm in the direction of the distant hills.

“Yip-yip-y-e-e-e!” exploded the boys, in a regular cowboy yell.

“A race to that hummock yonder!” shouted Jack.

The others needed no urging. After their rough journey among the mountains the ponies, too, seemed to enter into the pleasure of traversing this broad open savannah.

Off they dashed, hoofs a-rattling and dust a-flying. But it was Firewater’s race from the start. The lithe little pony easily distanced the others, and Jack, laughing and panting, drew rein at the goal a good ten seconds before the others tore up with quirts and spurs going furiously. Jack decided it was a dead heat between Walt and Ralph, and both declared themselves satisfied.

As the sun dropped lower, and hung like a red ball above the distant mountains, the question of finding a suitable camping place became an urgent one. Finally, however, on reaching the dried-up bed of a river, Coyote Pete decided that they had reached the proper spot.

“What about water?” inquired Walt rather anxiously.

“Plenty of that,” said Pete, sententiously.

They looked about at the dry sand and rocks in the river bed and at the waving grass on either hand.

“You must have splendid eyesight,” laughed Ralph, “I don’t see a drop, unless it’s in those clouds ’way off there above the mountains.”

“I, too, must confess that I’m puzzled,” put in the professor. “A more arid spot I have rarely seen.”

“Wall, I’ll guarantee that if you dig down a few feet right hyar you’ll get all the water you want,” said Coyote Pete calmly.

“Soon proved,” cried Ralph, and aided by Walt he unpacked one of the burros and the two lads selected long-handled shovels.

How the dirt did fly then! Maybe it was an accident, and then again maybe it wasn’t, when the professor, deeply immersed in a book he carried in his pocket, found himself the center of a regular gravel storm. He hastily moved out of the radius of the energetic diggers. But presently a loud cry from them announced a discovery.

“Struck oil?” asked Jack.

“Better still, – water!”

Sure enough, from the steep sides of the big holes they had dug, water was beginning to ooze. It was brownish in hue, alkaline in taste and distinctly warm, but still it was water, and men, boys and beasts drank eagerly of it.

But it ran in very slowly, and, as Jack observed, it was a long time between drinks.

“Wish some of that rain off in the mountains would strike hereabouts,” observed Walt, as they sat down to supper.

“How do you know it’s raining off there?” asked Ralph belligerently.

“I can see the dark clouds, Mister Smarty, and also, I have observed the fact that lightning is flashing among them.”

“Hear the thunder, too, I suppose?” asked Ralph sardonically.

“Might if my ears were as big as yours,” parried Walt.

Immediate hostilities were averted by the professor, who said:

“Boys! boys! Let us change the subject.”

“The ears, you mean,” muttered Walt, but he didn’t say it out loud, and the meal passed off merrily after the little passage-at-arms. As it grew dark, they could see the lightning flashes in the far distance quite distinctly. It had a weird effect, this sudden coming and departure of blue flares on the horizon. Against the radiance the serrated outlines of the mountains stood out as if they had been cut from cardboard.

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