ALTSHELER JOSEPH ALEXANDER

THE LAST OF THE CHIEFS: A STORY OF THE GREAT SIOUX WAR

Joseph Altsheler

The Last of the Chiefs: A Story of the Great Sioux War

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=36362774
The Last of the Chiefs: A Story of the Great Sioux War:

Содержание

Chapter I The Train 4
Chapter II King Bison 22
Chapter III The Pass 43
Chapter IV Treasure-Trove 61
Chapter V The Lost Valley 74
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 88

Joseph A. Altsheler
The Last of the Chiefs: A Story of the Great Sioux War

Chapter I The Train

The boy in the third wagon was suffering from exhaustion. The days and days of walking over the rolling prairie, under a brassy sun, the hard food of the train, and the short hours of rest, had put too severe a trial upon his delicate frame. Now, as he lay against the sacks and boxes that had been drawn up to form a sort of couch for him, his breath came in short gasps, and his face was very pale. His brother, older, and stronger by far, who walked at the wheel, regarded him with a look in which affection and intense anxiety were mingled. It was not a time and place in which one could afford to be ill.

Richard and Albert Howard were bound together by the strongest of brotherly ties. Richard had inherited his father's bigness and powerful constitution, Albert his mother's slenderness and fragility. But it was the mother who lived the longer, although even she did not attain middle age, and her last words to her older son were: "Richard, take care of Albert." He had promised, and now was thinking how he could keep the

promise.

It was a terrible problem that confronted Richard Howard. He felt no fear on his own account. A boy in years, he was a man in the ability to care for himself, wherever he might be. In a boyhood spent on an Illinois farm, where the prairies slope up to the forest, he had learned the ways of wood and field, and was full of courage, strength, and resource.

But Albert was different. He had not thrived in the moist air of the great valley. Tall enough he was, but the width of chest and thickness of bone were lacking. Noticing this, the idea of going to California had come to the older brother. The great gold days had passed years since, but it was still a land of enchantment to the youth of the older states, and the long journey in the high, dry air of the plains would be good for Albert. There was nothing to keep them back. They had no property save a little money—enough for their equipment, and a few dollars over to live on in California until they could get work.

To decide was to start, and here they were in the middle of the vast country that rolled away west of the Missouri, known but little, and full of dangers. The journey had been much harder than the older boy had expected. The days stretched out, the weeks trailed away, and still the plains rolled before them.

The summer had been of the hottest, and the heated earth gave back the glare until the air quivered in torrid waves. Richard had drawn back the cover of the wagon that his brother might breathe the air, but he replaced it now to protect him from

the overpowering beams. Once more he anxiously studied the country, but it gave him little hope. The green of the grass was gone, and most of the grass with it. The brown undulations swept away from horizon to horizon, treeless, waterless, and bare. In all that vast desolation there was nothing save the tired and dusty train at the very center of it.

"Anything in sight, Dick?" asked Albert, who had followed his brother's questioning look.

Dick shook his head.

"Nothing, Al," he replied.

"I wish we'd come to a grove," said the sick boy.

He longed, as do all those who are born in the hills, for the sight of trees and clear, running water.

"I was thinking, Dick," he resumed in short, gasping tones, "that it would be well for us, just as the evening was coming on, to go over a swell and ride right into a forest of big oaks and maples, with the finest little creek that you ever saw running through the middle of it. It would be pleasant and shady there. Leaves would be lying about, the water would be cold, and maybe we'd see elk coming down to drink."

"Perhaps we'll have such luck, Al," said Dick, although his tone showed no such hope. But he added, assuming a cheerful manner: "This can't go on forever; we'll be reaching the mountains soon, and then you'll get well."

"How's that brother of yours? No better, I see, and he's got to ride all the time now, making more load for the animals."

It was Sam Conway, the leader of the train, who spoke, a rough man of middle age, for whom both Dick and Albert had acquired a deep dislike. Dick flushed through his tan at the hard words.

"If he's sick he had the right to ride," he replied sharply.

"We've paid our share for this trip and maybe a little more. You know that."

Conway gave him an ugly look, but Dick stood up straight and strong, and met him eye for eye. He was aware of their rights and he meant to defend them. Conway, confronted by a dauntless spirit, turned away, muttering in a surly fashion:

"We didn't bargain to take corpses across the plains."

Fortunately, the boy in the wagon did not hear him, and, though his eyes flashed ominously, Dick said nothing. It was not a time for quarreling, but it was often hard to restrain one's temper. He had realized, soon after the start, when it was too late to withdraw, that the train was not a good one. It was made up mostly of men. There were no children, and the few women, like the men, were coarse and rough. Turbulent scenes had occurred, but Dick and Albert kept aloof, steadily minding their own business.

"What did Conway say?" asked Albert, after the man had gone.

"Nothing of any importance. He was merely growling as usual. He likes to make himself disagreeable. I never saw another man who got as much enjoyment out of that sort of thing."

Albert said nothing more, but closed his eyes. The canvas

cover protected him from the glare of the sun, but seemed to hold the heat within it. Drops of perspiration stood on his face, and Dick longed for the mountains, for his brother's sake.

All the train fell into a sullen silence, and no sound was heard but the unsteady rumble of the wheels, the creak of an ungreased axle, and the occasional crack of a whip. Clouds of dust arose and were whipped by the stray winds into the faces of the travelers, the fine particles burning like hot ashes. The train moved slowly and heavily, as if it dragged a wounded length over the hard ground.

Dick Howard kept his position by the side of the wagon in which his brother lay. He did not intend that Albert should hear bitter words leveled at his weakness, and he knew that his own presence was a deterrent. The strong figures and dauntless port of the older youth inspired respect. Moreover, he carried over his shoulder a repeating rifle of the latest pattern, and his belt was full of cartridges. He and Albert had been particular about their arms. It was a necessity. The plains and the mountains were subject to all the dangers of Indian warfare, and they had taken a natural youthful pride in buying the finest of weapons.

The hot dust burned Dick Howard's face and crept into his eyes and throat. His tongue lay dry in his mouth. He might have ridden in one of the wagons, too, had he chosen. As he truly said, he and Albert had paid their full share, and in the labor of the trail, he was more efficient than anybody else in the train. But his pride had been touched by Conway's words. He would not ride,

nor would he show any signs of weakness. He strode on by the side of the wagon, head erect, his step firm and springy.

The sun crept slowly down the brassy arch of the heavens, and the glare grew less blinding. The heat abated, but Albert Howard, who had fallen asleep, slept on. His brother drew a blanket over him, knowing that he could not afford to catch cold, and breathed the cooler air himself, with thankfulness. Conway came back again, and was scarcely less gruff than before, although he said nothing about Albert.

"Bright Sun says than in another day or two we'll be seeing the mountains," he vouchsafed; "and I'll be glad of it, because then we'll be coming to water and game."

"I'd like to be seeing them now," responded Dick; "but do you believe everything that Bright Sun says?"

"Of course I do. Hasn't he brought us along all right? What are you driving at?"

His voice rose to a challenging tone, in full accordance with the nature of the man, whenever anyone disagreed with him, but Dick Howard took not the least fear.

"I don't altogether like Bright Sun," he replied. "Just why, I can't say, but the fact remains that I don't like him. It doesn't seem natural for an Indian to be so fond of white people, and to prefer another race to his own."

Conway laughed harshly.

"That shows how much you know," he said. "Bright Sun is smart, smarter than a steel trap. He knows that the day of the red

is passing, and he's going to train with the white. What's the use of being on the losing side? It's what I say, and it's what Bright Sun thinks."

The man's manner was gross and materialistic, so repellent that Dick would have turned away, but at that moment Bright Sun himself approached. Dick regarded him, as always, with the keenest interest and curiosity mixed with some suspicion. Yet almost anyone would have been reassured by the appearance of Bright Sun. He was a splendid specimen of the Indian, although in white garb, even to the soft felt hat shading his face. But he could never have been taken for a white man. His hair was thick, black, and coarse, his skin of the red man's typical coppery tint, and his cheek bones high and sharp. His lean but sinewy and powerful figure rose two inches above six feet. There was an air about him, too, that told of strength other than that of the body. Guide he was, but leader he looked.

"Say, Bright Sun," exclaimed Conway coarsely, "Dick Howard here thinks you're too friendly with the whites. It don't seem natural to him that one of your color should consort so freely with us."

Dick's face flushed through the brown, and he shot an angry glance at Conway, but Bright Sun did not seem to be offended.

"Why not?" he asked in perfect English. "I was educated in a mission school. I have been with white people most of my life, I have read your books, I know your civilization, and I like it."

"There now!" exclaimed Conway triumphantly. "Ain't that an

answer for you? I tell you what, Bright Sun, I'm for you, I believe in you, and if anybody can take us through all right to California, you're the man."

"It is my task and I will accomplish it," said Bright Sun in the precise English he had learned at the mission school.

His eyes met Dick's for a moment, and the boy saw there a flash that might mean many things—defiance, primeval force, and the quality that plans and does. But the flash was gone in an instant, like a dying spark, and Bright Sun turned away. Conway also left, but Dick's gaze followed the Indian.

He did not know Bright Sun's tribe. He had heard that he was a Sioux, also that he was a Crow, and a third report credited him with being a Cheyenne. As he never painted his face, dressed like a white man, and did not talk of himself and his people, the curious were free to surmise as they chose. But Dick was sure of one thing: Bright Sun was a man of power. It was not a matter of surmise, he felt it instinctively.

The tall figure of the Indian was lost among the wagons, and Dick turned his attention to the trail. The cooling waves continued to roll up, as the west reddened into a brilliant sunset. Great bars of crimson, then of gold, and the shades in between, piled above one another on the horizon. The plains lost their brown, and gleamed in wonderful shimmering tints. The great desolate world became beautiful.

The train stopped with a rumble, a creak, and a lurch, and the men began to unharness the animals. Albert awoke with a start

and sat up in the wagon.

"Night and the camp, Al," said Dick cheerfully; "feel better, don't you?

"Yes, I do," replied Albert, as a faint color came into his face.

"Thought the rest and the coolness would brace you up," continued

Dick in the same cheerful tone.

Albert, a tall, emaciated boy with a face of great refinement and delicacy, climbed out of the wagon and looked about. Dick busied himself with the work of making camp, letting Albert give what help he could.

But Dick always undertook to do enough for two—his brother and himself—and he really did enough for three. No other was so swift and skillful at taking the gear off horse or mule, nor was there a stronger or readier arm at the wheel when it was necessary to complete the circle of wagons that they nightly made. When this was done, he went out on the prairie in search of buffalo chips for the fire, which he was fortunate enough to find without any trouble.

Before returning with his burden, Dick stood a few moments looking back at the camp. The dusk had fully come, but the fires were not yet lighted, and he saw only the shadowy forms of the wagons and flitting figures about them. But much talked reached his ears, most of it coarse and rough, with a liberal sprinkling of oaths. Dick sighed. His regret was keener than ever that Albert and he were in such company. Then he looked the other way

out upon the fathomless plains, where the night had gathered, and the wind was moaning among the swells. The air was now chill enough to make him shiver, and he gazed with certain awe into the black depths. The camp, even with all its coarseness and roughness, was better, and he walked swiftly back with his load of fuel.

They built a dozen fires within the circle of the wagons, and again Dick was the most active and industrious of them all, doing his share, Albert's, and something besides. When the fires were lighted they burned rapidly and merrily, sending up great tongues of red or yellow flame, which shed a flickering light over wagons, animals, and men. A pleasant heat was suffused and Dick began to cook supper for Albert and himself, bringing it from the wagon in which his brother and he had a share. He fried bacon and strips of dried beef, boiled coffee, and warmed slices of bread over the coals.

He saw with intense pleasure that Albert ate with a better appetite than he had shown for days. As for himself, he was as hungry as a horse—he always was on this great journey—and since there was plenty, he ate long, and was happy.

Dick went to the wagon, and returned with a heavy cloak, which he threw over Albert's shoulders.

"The night's getting colder," he said, "and you mustn't take any risks, Al. There's one trouble about a camp fire in the open —your face can burn while your back freezes."

Content fell over the camp. Even rough men of savage

instincts are willing to lie quiet when they are warm and well fed. Jokes, coarse but invariably in good humor, were exchanged. The fires still burned brightly, and the camp formed a core of light and warmth in the dark, cold wilderness.

Albert, wrapped in the cloak, lay upon his side and elbow gazing dreamily into the flames. Dick sat near him, frying a piece of bacon on the end of a stick. Neither heard the step behind them because it was noiseless, but both saw the tall figure of Bright Sun, as he came up to their fire.

"Have a piece of bacon, Bright Sun," said Dick hospitably, holding out the slice to him, and at the same time wondering whether the Indian would take it.

Bright Sun shook his head.

"I thank you," he replied, "but I have eaten enough. How is Mr.

Albert Howard now?"

Dick appreciated the inquiry, whether or not it was prompted by sympathy.

"Good," he replied. "Al's picking up. Haven't seen him eat as he did to-night for months. If he keeps on this way, he'll devour a whole buffalo as soon as he's able to kill one."

Bright Sun smiled, and sat down on the ground near them. It seemed to the boy, a keen observer of his kind, that he wished to talk. Dick was willing.

"Do you know," asked Bright Sun, "that reports of gold in the region to the north, called by you the Black Hills, have come to

us?"

"I heard some one speak of it two or three days ago," replied Dick, "but I paid no attention to it."

Bright Sun looked thoughtfully into the fire, the glow of which fell full upon his face, revealing every feature like carving. His nose was hooked slightly, and to Dick it now looked like the beak of an eagle. The somber eyes, too, expressed brooding and mastery alike.

Despite himself, Dick felt again that he was in the presence of power, and he was oppressed by a sense of foreboding.

"It was worth attention," said Bright Sun in the slow, precise tones of one who speaks a language not his own, but who speaks it perfectly. "The white man's gold is calling to him loudly. It calls all through the day and night. Do these men with whom you travel go to anything certain far over on the coast of the Western ocean? No, they are leaves blown by the wind. The wind now blows in the direction of the Black Hills, where the gold is said to be, and to-morrow the wagon train turns its head that way."

Dick sat up straight, and Albert, wrapped in his blanket, leaned forward to listen.

"But the engagement with us all," said Dick, "was to go to the Pacific. Albert and I paid our share for that purpose. Conway knows it."

The Indian looked at Dick. The boy thought he saw a flickering smile of amusement in his eyes, but it was faint, and gone in a moment.

"Conway does not care for that," said the Indian. "Your contracts are nothing to him. This is the wilderness, and it stretches away for many hundreds of miles in every direction. The white man's law does not come here. Moreover, nearly all wish him to turn to the North and the gold."

Albert suddenly spoke, and his tone, though thin from physical weakness, was quick, intense, and eager.

"Why couldn't we go on with them, Dick?" he said. "We have nothing definite on the Pacific coast. We are merely taking chances, and if the Black Hills are full of gold, we might get our share!"

Dick's eyes glistened. If one had to go, one might make the best of it. The spirit of romance was alive within him. He was only a boy.

"Of course we'll go, Al," he said lightly, "and you and I will have a tone of gold inside a year."

Bright Sun looked at the two boys, first one and then the other, stalwart Dick and weak Albert. It seemed to Dick that he saw a new expression in the Indian's eyes, one that indicated the shadow of regret. He resented it. Did Bright Sun think that Albert and he were not equal to the task?

"I am strong," he said; "I can lift and dig enough for two; but Albert will also be strong, after we have been a little while in the mountains."

"You might have strength enough. I do not doubt it," said Bright Sun softly, "but the Black Hills are claimed by the Sioux.

They do not wish the white men to come there, and the Sioux are a great and powerful tribe, or rather a nation of several allied and kindred tribes, the most powerful Indian nation west of the Mississippi."

Bright Sun's voice rose a little toward the last, and the slight upward tendency gave emphasis and significance to his words. The brooding eyes suddenly shot forth a challenging light.

"Are you a Sioux?" asked Dick involuntarily.

Bright Sun bent upon him a look of gentle reproof.

"Since I have taken the ways of your race I have no tribe," he replied. "But, as I have said, the Sioux claim the Black Hills, and they have many thousands of warriors, brave, warlike, and resolved to keep the country."

"The government will see that there is no war," said Dick.

"Governments can do little in a wilderness," replied Bright Sun.

Dick might have made a rejoinder, but at that moment a burly figure came into the light of the fire. It was Sam Conway, and he glanced suspiciously at the Indian and the two boys.

"Are you telling 'em, Bright Sun, when we'll reach California?" he asked.

Bright Sun gave him an oblique glance. The Indian seldom looks the white man in the face, but it was obvious that Bright Sun was not afraid of the leader. Conway, as well as the others, knew it.

"No," he replied briefly.

"It's just as well that you haven't," said Conway briskly, "'cause we're not going to California at all—at least not this year. It's the wish and general consensus of this here train that we turn to the North, go into the Black Hills, and fill our wagons with gold."

"So it's decided, then, is it?" asked Dick.

"Yes, it's decided," replied Conway, his tone now becoming positively brutal, "and if you and your brother don't like it, you know what you can do."

"Keep on alone for the coast, I suppose," said Dick, looking him steadily in the face.

"If you put it that way."

"But we don't choose," said Dick, "Al and I have an interest in one wagon and team, and we're going to hold on to it. Besides, we're quite willing to try our luck in the Black Hills, too. We're going with you."

Conway frowned, but Dick also was not afraid of him, and knew that he could not turn the two boys out on the prairie. They had a full right to go with the train.

"That settles it," he said, turning away. "You can do as you please, but what happens after we get into the Black Hills is another thing. Likely, we'll scatter."

The sound of his retreating footsteps quickly died away in the darkness, and Bright Sun, too, slid among the shadows. He was gone so quickly and quietly that it gave Dick an uncanny feeling.

"What do you make of it, Al?" he asked his brother. "What does

Bright Sun mean by what he said to us?"

The glow of the flame fell across Albert's pale face, and, by the light of it, Dick saw that he was very thoughtful. He seemed to be looking over and beyond the fire and the dark prairie, into time rather than space.

"I think it was a warning, Dick," replied Albert at last. "Maybe Bright Sun intended it for only you and me. But I want to go up there in the Black Hills, Dick."

"And so do I. It'll be easier for you, Al, than the trip across the continent. When you are a mile and a half or two miles above the sea, you'll begin to take on flesh like a bear in summer. Besides, the gold, Al! think of the gold!"

Albert smiled. He, too, was having happy thoughts. The warm glow of the fire clothed him and he was breathing easily and peacefully. By and by he sank down in his blanket and fell into a sound sleep. Dick himself did not yet have any thought of slumber. Wide-awake visions were pursuing one another through his brain. He saw the mountains, dark and shaggy with pine forests, the thin, healing air over them, and the beds of gold in their bosom, with Albert and himself discovering and triumphant.

The fire died down, and glowed a mass of red embers. The talk sank. Most of the men were asleep, either in their blankets or in the wagons. The darkness thickened and deepened and came close up to the fires, a circling rim of blackness. But Dick was still wakeful, dreaming with wide-open eyes his golden dreams.

As the visions followed one after another, a shadow which was not a part of any of them seemed to Dick to melt into the uttermost darkness beyond the fires. A trace of something familiar in the figure impressed him, and, rising, he followed swiftly.

The figure, still nebulous and noiseless, went on in the darkness, and another like it seemed to rise from the plain and join it. Then they were lost to the sight of the pursuer, seeming to melt into and become a part of the surrounding darkness. Dick, perplexed and uneasy, returned to the fire. The second shadow must certainly have been that of a stranger. What did it mean?

He resumed his seat before the red glow, clasping his arms around his knees, a splendid, resourceful youth whom nature and a hardy life had combined to make what he was. His brother still slept soundly and peacefully, but the procession of golden visions did not pass again through Dick's brain; instead, it was a long trail of clouds, dark and threatening. He sought again and again to conjure the clouds away and bring back the golden dreams, but he could not.

The fire fell to nothing, the triumphant darkness swept up and blotted out the last core of light, the wind, edged with ice, blew in from the plains. Dick shivered, drew a heavy blanket around his own shoulders, and moved a little, as he saw the dim figure of Bright Sun passing at the far edge of the wagons, but quickly relapsed into stillness.

Sleep at last pulled down his troubled lids. His figure sank,

and, head on arms, he slumbered soundly.

Chapter II King Bison

"Up! Up, everybody!" was the shout that reached Dick's sleeping ears. He sprang to his feet and found that the gorgeous sun was flooding the prairie with light. Already the high, brilliant skies of the Great West were arching over him. Men were cooking breakfast. Teamsters were cracking their whips and the whole camp was alive with a gay and cheerful spirit. Everybody seemed to know now that they were going for the gold, and, like Dick, they had found it in fancy already.

Breakfast over, the train took up its march, turning at a right angle from its old course and now advancing almost due north. But this start was made with uncommon alacrity and zeal. There were no sluggards now. They, too, had golden visions, and, as if to encourage them, the aspect of the country soon began to change, and rapidly to grow better. The clouds of dust that they raised were thinner. The bunch grass grew thicker. Off on the crest of a swell a moving figure was seen now and then. "Antelope," said the hunters. Once they passed a slow creek. The water was muddy, but it contained no alkali, and animals and men drank eagerly. Cottonwoods, the first trees they had seen in days, grew on either side of the stream, and they rested there awhile in the shade, because the sun was now out in full splendor, and the vast plains shimmered in the heat.

Albert resumed his place in the wagon. Dick had a horse

which, on becoming foot-sore, had been allowed to rest for a few days, and was now well. He mounted it and galloped on ahead. The clouds were all gone away and the golden visions had come back. He felt so strong, so young, and the wonderful air of the plains was such a tonic that he urged his horse to a gallop, and it was hard for him to keep from shouting aloud in joy. He looked eagerly into the north, striving already for a sight of the dark mountains that men called the Black Hills. The blue gave back nothing but its own blue.

His horse seemed to share his spirits, and swung along with swift and easy stride. Dick looked back presently, and saw that the train which had been winding like a serpent over the plains was lost to sight behind the swells. The surface of the earth had become more rolling as they advanced northward, and he knew that the train, though out of sight, was nor far away.

He enjoyed for the moment the complete absence of all human beings save himself. To be alone then meant anything but loneliness. He galloped to the crest of a higher swell than usual, and then stopped short. Far off on the plain he saw tiny moving figures, a dozen or so, and he was sure that they were antelope. They had seen antelope before at a great distance, but had not bothered about them. Now the instincts of the hunter rose in Dick, and he resolved to make a trial of his skill.

He found in one of the depressions between the swells a stunted cottonwood, to which he hitched his horse, knowing it would be well hidden there from the observation of the herd. He

then advanced on foot. He had heard that the antelope was a slave to its own curiosity, and through that weakness he intended to secure his game.

When he had gone about half the distance he sank down on his hands and knees and began to crawl, a laborious and sometimes painful operation, burdened as he was with his rifle, and unused to such methods of locomotion. Presently he noticed a flutter among the antelope, a raising of timid heads, an alarmed looking in his direction. But Dick was prepared. He lay flat upon his face, and dug the point of the long hunting knife that he carried into the ground, while the wind blew out the folds of the red handkerchief which he had tied to the handle.

Mr. Big Buck Antelope, the chief of the herd and a wary veteran, saw the waving red spot on the horizon and his interest was aroused, despite his caution. What a singular thing! It must be investigated! It might be some new kind of food very good for Mr. Big Buck's palate and stomach, and no provident antelope could afford to let such an opportunity pass.

He was trembling all over with curiosity, and perhaps his excitement kept him from seeing the dark shape that blurred with the earth just beyond the red something, or he may have taken it for a shadow. At any event, his curiosity kept him from paying heed to it, and he began to approach. His steps were hesitating, and now and then he drew away a little, but that singular red object lured him on, and yard by yard he drew nearer.

He suddenly saw the black shadow beyond the fluttering red

object detach itself from the ground, and resolve into a terrible shape. His heart sprang up in his bosom, and he was about to rush madly away, but it was too late. A stream of fire shot forth from the dark object and the buck fell, a bullet through him.

Dick prepared the animal for dressing, thinking of the tender, juicy steaks that Albert would enjoy, and then throwing the body across the horse, behind him, rode back to the train, proud of his success.

Conway frowned and said grudging words. He did not like, he said, for anybody to leave the train without his permission, and it was foolish, anyhow, for a boy to be galloping about as he pleased over the prairie; he might get lost, and there would be nobody to take care of the other boy, the sick one. Dick made an easy diplomatic reply. He knew that Conway merely wished to be unpleasant, but Dick was of a very good nature, and he was particularly averse just then to quarreling with anybody. He was too full of the glory of living. Instead, he offered some of the antelope steaks to Conway, who churlishly accepted them, and that night he broiled others for Albert and himself, dividing the rest among the men.

Albert found antelope steak tender and juicy, and he ate with an increasing appetite. Dick noted the increase with pleasure.

"I wish I could go out and kill antelope," said Albert.

Dick laughed cheerfully.

"Kill antelope," he said. "Why, Al, in six months you'll be taking a grizzly bear by the neck and choking him to death with

your two hands."

"Wish I could believe it," said Albert.

But Dick went to sleep early that night, and slept peacefully without dreams or visions, and the next morning the train resumed its sanguine march. They were still ascending, and the character of the country continued to improve. Bunch grass steadily grew thicker and buffalo chips were numerous. The heat in the middle of the day was still great, but the air was so dry and pure that it was not oppressive. Albert dismounted from the wagon, and walked for several miles by the side of his brother.

"Shouldn't be surprised if we saw buffalo," said Dick. "Heard 'em talking about it in the train. Bright Sun says these are favorite grazing grounds, and there's still a lot of buffalo scattered about the plains."

Albert showed excitement.

"A buffalo herd!" he exclaimed. "Do you think it can really happen, Dick? I never thought I'd see such a thing! I hope it'll come true!"

It came true much sooner than Albert hoped.

Scarcely a half hour after he spoke, Bright Sun, who was at the head of the column, stopped his pony and pointed to indistinct tiny shadows just under the horizon.

"Buffalo!" he said tersely, and after a moment's pause he added:

"A great herd comes!"

Dick and Albert were on foot then, but they heard his words

and followed his pointing finger with the deepest interest. The tiny black shadows seemed to come out of the horizon as if they stepped from a wall. They grew in size and number, and all the west was filled with their forms.

The train resumed its march, bending off under the guidance of Bright Sun a little toward the west, and it was obvious that the herd would pass near. Dick and Albert rejoiced, because they wished to see the buffaloes at close quarters, and Dick was hoping also for a shot. Others, too, in the train, although their minds were set on gold, began to turn their attention now to the herd. The sport and the fresh meat alike would be welcome. It was Dick's impulse to mount his horse and gallop away again, gun in hand, but he made a supreme conquest over self and remained. He remembered Albert's longing words about the antelope, his wish that he, too, tireless, might be able to pursue the game. Dick remained quietly by his brother's side.

The whole train stopped presently at Conway's order on the crest of a swell, and drew itself up in a circle. Many of the men were now mounted and armed for an attack upon the herd, but at the suggestion of Bright Sun they waited a little, until the opportunity should become more convenient.

"It is a big herd," said Bright Sun; "perhaps the biggest that one can ever see now."

It certainly seemed immense to Dick and Albert. The great animals came on in an endless stream from the blue wall of the horizon. The vast procession steadily broadened and lengthened

and it moved with unceasing step toward the south. The body of it was solid black, with figures which at the distance blended into one mass, but on the flanks hung stragglers, lawless old bulls or weaklings, and outside there was a fringe of hungry wolves, snapping and snarling, and waiting a chance to drag down some failing straggler.

Far over the plain spread the herd, thousands and tens of thousands, and the earth shook with their tread. Confused, bellowings and snortings arose, and the dust hung thick.

Dick and Albert stared with intent eyes at the wonderful scene. The herd was drawing nearer and nearer. It would pass only a few hundred yards from the crest on which the train stood. Already the hunters were shouting to one another and galloping away, but Dick did not stir from Albert's side. Albert's eyes were expanded, and the new color in his face deepened. His breath cam in the short, quick fashion of one who is excited. He suddenly turned to his brother.

"The men are off! Why aren't you with them Dick?" he exclaimed.

"I thought I wouldn't go," replied Dick evasively. "There'll be enough without me."

Albert stared. Not hunt buffalo when one could. It was unbelievable. Then he comprehended. But he would not have it that way! It was noble of Dick, but it should not be so for a moment. He cried out, a note of anxiety in this voice:

"No, Dick, you shall not say here with me! My time will come

later on! Jump on your horse, Dick, and join 'em! I won't forgive you if you don't!"

Dick saw that Albert was in earnest, and he knew that it would be better for them both now if he should go.

"All right, Al!" he cried, "I'll pick out a good fat one." He jumped on his horse and in a moment was galloping at full speed over the plain toward the great herd which now rushed on, black and thundering.

Dick heard shots already from those who had preceded him, and the exultant shouts of the men mingled with the roar of mighty tramplings. But it was not all triumph for the men, few of whom were experienced. Two or three had been thrown by shying horses, and with difficulty escaped being trodden to death under the feet of the herd. The herd itself was so immense that it did not notice these few wasps on a distant flank, and thundered steadily on southward.

Dick's own horse, frightened by such a tremendous sight, shied and jumped, but the boy had a sure seat and brought him around again. Dick himself was somewhat daunted by the aspect of the herd. If he and his hose got in the way, they would go down forever, as surely as if engulfed by an avalanche.

The horse shied again and made a mighty jump, as a huge bull, red-eyed and puffing, charged by. Dick, who was holding his rifle in one hand, slipped far over, and with great difficulty regained his balance on the horse's back. When he was secure again, he turned his mount and galloped along for some distance

on the flank of the herd, seeking a suitable target for his bullet. The effect was dizzying. So many thousands were rushing beside him that the shifting panorama made him wink his eyes rapidly. Vast clouds of dust floated about, now and then enveloping him, and that made him wink his eyes, too. But he continued, nevertheless, to seek for his target a fat cow. Somehow he didn't seem to see anything just then but old bulls. They were thick on the flanks of the herd either as stragglers or protectors, and Dick was afraid to press in among them in his search for the cow.

His opportunity came at last. A young cow, as fat as one could wish, was thrown on the outside by some movement of the herd, caught, as it were, like a piece of driftwood in an eddy, and Dick instantly fired at her. She staggered and went down, but at the same instant a huge, shaggy bull careened against Dick and his horse. It was not so much a charge as an accident, the chance of Dick's getting in the bull's way, and the boy's escape was exceedingly narrow.

His horse staggered and fell to his knees. The violence of the shock wrested Dick's rifle from his hand, and he was barely quick enough to grasp it as it was sliding across the saddle. But he did save it, and the horse, trembling and frightened, recovered his feet. By that time the old bull and his comrades were gone.

Dick glanced around and was relieved to see that nobody had noticed his plight. They were all too much absorbed in their own efforts to pay any heed to him. The body took a deep, long breath. He had killed a buffalo, despite his inexperience. There was the

cow to show for it.

The herd thundered off to the southward, the clouds of dust and the fringe of wolves following it. About a dozen of their number had fallen before the rifles, but Dick had secured the fattest and the tenderest. Albert, as proud as Dick himself of his triumph, came down on the plain and helped as much as he could in skinning and cutting up the cow. Dick wished to preserve the robe, and they spread it out on the wagon to dry.

The train made no further attempt to advance that day, but devoted the afternoon to a great feast. Bright Sun showed them how to cook the tenderest part of the hump in the coals, and far into the night the fires blazed.

"We will see no more buffaloes for a while," said Bright Sun. "To-morrow we reach another little river coming down from the hills, and the ground becomes rough."

Bright Sun told the truth. They reached the river about noon of the next day, and, as it flowed between steep banks, the crossing was difficult. It took many hours to get on the other side, and two or three axles were broken by the heavy jolts. Conway raged and swore, calling them a clumsy lot, and some of the men refused to take his abuse, replying to his hard words with others equally as hard. Pistols were drawn and there was promise of trouble, but it was finally stopped, partly by the persuasion of others, and partly of its own accord. The men were still feeling the desire for gold too strongly to fight while on the way to it. Dick and Albert kept aloof from these contentions, steadily minding their

own business, and they found, as others do, that it paid.

They came presently into a better country, and the way led for a day or two through a typical part of the Great Plains, not a flat region, but one of low, monotonous swells. Now and then they crossed a shallow little creek, and occasionally they came to pools, some of which were tinged with alkali. There were numerous small depressions, two or three feet deep, and Dick knew that they were "buffalo wallows." He and Albert examined them with interest.

"This is buffalo country again," said Dick. "Everything proves it. The grass here is the best that we have seen in a long time, and I imagine that it's just the sort of place they would love."

The grass was, indeed, good, as Dick had said, not merely clumps of it, but often wide, carpeted spaces. It was somewhat dry, and turning brown, but so big and strong an animal as the buffalo would not mind it. In fact, they saw several small groups of buffaloes grazing at a distance, usually on the crest of one of the low swells. As they already had plenty of buffalo meat, the men of the train did not trouble them, and the great animals would continue to crop the grass undisturbed.

About a week after the buffalo hunt they camped in a great plain somewhat flatter than any that they had encountered hitherto, and drew up the wagons in a loose circle.

The day had been very hot, but, as usual on the plains, the night brought coolness. The fire which Dick made of buffalo chips was not only useful, but it felt pleasant, too, as they sat

beside it, ate their supper, and watched the great inclosing circle of darkness creep up closer and closer to the camp. There was not much noise about them. The men were tired, and as soon as they ate their food they fell asleep in the wagons or on the ground. The tethered horses and mules stirred a little for a while, but they, too, soon rested in peace.

"You take the wagon, Al," said Dick, "but I think I'll sleep on the ground."

Albert said good night and disappeared in the wagon. Dick stood up and looked over the camp. Only two or three fires were yet burning, and not a dozen men were awake. He saw dark figures here and there on the ground, and knew that they were those of sleepers. Three sentinels had been posted, but Dick was quite sure from the general character of the train that later on they would sleep like the others. All his instincts of order and fitness rebelled against the management of this camp.

Dick rolled himself in his blanket and lay down by the little fire that he had built. The dry, clean earth made a good bed, and with his left elbow under his head he gazed into the fire, which, like all fires of buffalo chips, was now rapidly dying, leaving little behind but light ashes that the first breeze would scatter through space.

He watched the last blaze sink and go out, he saw the last coal die, then, when a few sparks flew upward, there was blank darkness where the fire had been. All the other fires were out, too, and only the dim figures of the wagons showed. He felt, for

a little while, as if he were alone in the wilderness, but he was not afraid. All was darkness below, and the wind was moaning, but overhead was a blue sky filled with friendly stars.

Dick could not go to sleep for a long time. From the point where he lay he could now see two of the sentinels walking back and forth, rifle on shoulder. He did not believe that they would continue to do so many hours, and he had a vague sort of desire to prove that he was right. Having nothing else to do he watched them.

The nearer sentinel grew lazier in his walk, and his beat became shorter. At last he dropped his rifle to the ground, leaned his folded arms on its muzzle, and gazed toward the camp, where, so far as he could see, there was nothing but darkness and sleep. The other presently did the same. Then they began short walks back and forth, but soon both sat down on the ground, with their rifles between their knees, and after that they did not stir. Watching as closely as he could Dick could not observe the slightest movement on the part of either, and he knew that they were asleep. He laughed to himself, pleased, in a way, to know that he had been right, although it was only another evidence of the carelessness and indifference general throughout the train.

He fell asleep himself in another half hour, but he awoke about midnight, and he was conscious at once that he had been awakened not by a troubled mind, but by something external and unusual. He was lying with his right ear to the ground, and it seemed to him that a slight trembling motion ran through the

solid earth. He did not so much hear it as feel it, and tried to persuade himself that it was mere fancy, but failed. He sat up, and he no longer observed the trembling, but when he put his ear to the ground again it was stronger.

It could not be fancy. It was something real and extraordinary. He glanced at the sentinels, but they were sound asleep. He felt a desire to rouse somebody, but if it proved to be nothing they would laugh at him, or more likely call him hard names. He tried ear to earth once more. The trembling was still growing in strength, and mixed with it was a low, groaning sound, like the swell of the sea on the shore. The sound came with the wind from the north.

Dick sprang to his feet. There, in the north was a faint light which grew with amazing rapidity. In a minutes almost it seemed to redden the whole northern heavens, and the groaning sound became a roll, like that of approaching thunder.

A shadow flitted by Dick.

"What is it, Bright Sun?? What is it?" exclaimed the boy.

"The dry grass burns, and a mighty buffalo herd flees before it."

Then Bright Sun was gone, and the full sense of their danger burst upon Dick in overwhelming tide. The flames came on, as fast as a horse's gallop, and the buffaloes, in thousands and tens of thousands, were their vanguard. The camp lay directly in the path of fire and buffalo. The awakened sentinels were on their feet now, and half-clad men were springing from the wagons.

Dick stood perfectly still for perhaps a minute, while the fire grew brighter and the thunder of a myriad hoofs grew louder. Then he remembered what he had so often read and heard, and the crisis stirred him to swift action. While the whole camp was a scene of confusion, of shouts, of oaths, and of running men, he sped to its south side, to a point twenty or thirty yards from the nearest wagon. There he knelt in the dry grass and drew his box of matches from his pocket. It happened that Conway saw.

"What are you doing, you boy?" he cried, threateningly.

But Dick did not care for Conway just then.

"Back fire! Back fire!" he shouted, and struck a match. It went out, but he quickly struck another, shielded it with one hand and touched the tiny flame to the grass. A flame equally tiny answered, but in an instant it leaped into the size and strength of a giant. The blaze rose higher than Dick's head, ran swiftly to right and left, and then roared away to the south, eating up everything in its path.

"Well done," said a voice at Dick's elbow. "It is the only thing that could save the train."

It was Bright Sun who spoke, and he had come so silently that Dick did not see him until then.

Conway understood now, but without a word of approval he turned away and began to give orders, mixed with much swearing. He had a rough sort of efficiency, and spurred by his tongue and their own dreadful necessity, the men worked fast. The horses and mules, except three or four which had broken

loose and were lost, were hitched to the wagons in half the usual time. There were no sluggards now.

Dick helped, and Albert, too, but to both it seemed that the work would never be done. The back fire was already a half mile away, gathering volume and speed as it went, but the other was coming on at an equal pace. Deer and antelope were darting past them, and the horses and mules were rearing in terror.

"Into the burned ground," shouted Conway, "an' keep the wagons close together!"

No need to urge the animals. They galloped southward over earth which was still hot and smoking, but they knew that something was behind them, far more terrible than sparks and smoke.

Dick made Albert jump into their own wagon, while he ran beside it. As he ran, he looked back, and saw a sight that might well fill the bravest soul with dread. A great black line, crested with tossing horns, was bearing down on them. The thunder of hoofs was like the roar of a hurricane, but behind the herd was a vast wall of light, which seemed to reach from the earth to the heavens and which gave forth sparks in myriads. Dick knew that they had been just in time.

They did not stop until they had gone a full quarter of a mile, and then the wagons were hastily drawn up in a rude circle, with the animals facing the center, that is, the inside, and still rearing and neighing in terror. Then the men, rifle in hand, and sitting in the rear of the wagons, faced the buffalo herd.

Dick was with the riflemen, and, like the others, he began to fire as soon as the vanguard of the buffaloes was near enough. The wagons were a solid obstacle which not even King Bison could easily run over, but Dick and Albert thought the herd would never split, although the bullets were poured into it at a central point like a driven wedge.

But the falling buffaloes were an obstacle to those behind them, and despite their mad panic, the living became conscious of the danger in front. The herd split at last, the cleft widened to right and left, and then the tide, in two great streams, flowed past the wagon train.

Dick ceased firing and sat with Albert on the tail of the wagon. The wall of fire, coming to the burned ground, went out in the center, but the right and left ends of it, swinging around, still roared to the southward, passing at a distance of a quarter of a mile on either side.

Dick and Albert watched until all the herd was gone, and when only smoke and sparks were left, helped to get the camp into trim again. Conway knew that the boy had saved them, but he gave him no thanks.

It took the ground a long time to cool, and they advanced all the next day over a burned area. They traveled northward ten days, always ascending, and they were coming now to a wooded country. They crossed several creeks, flowing down from the higher mountains, and along the beds of these they found cottonwood, ash, box elder, elm, and birch. On the steeper

slops were numerous cedar brakes and also groves of yellow pine. There was very little undergrowth, but the grass grew in abundance. Although it was now somewhat dry, the horses and mules ate it eagerly. The buffaloes did not appear here, but they saw many signs of bear, mule deer, panther or mountain lion, and other game.

They camped one night in a pine grove by the side of a brook that came rushing and foaming down from the mountains, and the next morning Albert, who walked some distance from the water, saw a silver-tip bear lapping the water of the stream. The bear raised his head and looked at Albert, and Albert stopped and looked at the bear. The boy was unarmed, but he was not afraid. The bear showed no hostility, only curiosity. He gazed a few moments, stretched his nose as if he would sniff the air, then turned and lumbered away among the pines. Albert returned to camp, but he said nothing of the bear to anybody except Dick.

"He was such a jolly, friendly looking fellow, Dick," he said, "that I didn't want any of these men to go hunting him."

Dick laughed.

"Don't you worry about that, Al," he said. "They are hunting gold, not bears."

On the twelfth day they came out on a comparatively level plateau, where antelope were grazing and prairie chickens whirring. It looked like a fertile country, and they were glad of easy traveling for the wagons. Just at the edge of the pine woods that they were leaving was a beautiful little lake of clear, blue

water, by which they stayed half a day, refreshing themselves, and catching some excellent fish, the names of which they did not know.

"How much long, Bright Sun, will it take us to reach the gold country?" asked Conway of the Indian, in Dick's hearing.

"About a week," replied Bright Sun. "The way presently will be very rough and steep, up! up! up! and we can go only a few miles a day, but the mountains are already before us. See!"

He pointed northward and upward, and there before them was the misty blue loom that Dick knew was the high mountains. In those dark ridges lay the gold that they were going to seek, and his heart throbbed. Albert and he could do such wonderful things with it.

They were so high already that the nights were crisp with cold; but at the edge of the forest, running down to the little lake, fallen wood was abundant, and they built that night a great fire of fallen boughs that crackled and roared merrily. Yet they hovered closely, because the wind, sharp with ice, was whistling down from the mountains, and the night air, even in the little valley, was heavy with frost. Dick's buffalo robe was dry now, and he threw it around Albert, as he sat before the fire. It enveloped the boy like a great blanket, but far warmer, the soft, smooth fur caressing his cheeks, and as Albert drew it closer, he felt very snug indeed.

"We cross this valley to-morrow," said Dick, "and then we begin a steeper climb."

"Then it will be mountains, only mountains," said Bright Sun. "We go into regions which no white men except the fur hunters, have ever trod."

Dick started. He had not known that the Indian was near. Certainly he was not there a moment ago. There was something uncanny in the way in which Bright Sun would appear on noiseless footstep, like a wraith rising from the earth.

"I shall be glad of it, Bright Sun," said Albert. "I'm tired of the plains, and they say that the mountains are good for many ills."

Bright Sun's enigmatic glance rested upon Albert a moment.

"Yes," he said, "the mountains will cure many ills."

Dick glanced at him, and once more he received the impression of thought and power. The Indian's nose curved like an eagle's beak, and the firelight perhaps exaggerated both the curve and its effect. The whole impression of thought and force was heightened by the wide brow and the strong chin.

Dick looked back into the fire, and when he glanced around a few moments again, Bright Sun was not there. He had gone as silently as he had come.

"That Indian gives me the shivers sometimes," he said to Albert.

"What do you make of him?"

"I don't know," replied the boy. "Sometimes I like him and sometimes I don't."

Albert was soon asleep, wrapped in the buffalo robe, and Dick by and by followed him to the same pleasant land. The wind,

whistling as it blew down from the mountains, grew stronger and colder, and its tone was hostile, as if it resented the first presence of white men in the little valley by the lake.

Chapter III The Pass

They resumed the journey early the next day, Bright Sun telling Conway that they could reach the range before sunset, and that they would find there an easy pass leading a mile or two farther on to a protected and warm glen.

"That's the place for our camp," said Conway, and he urged the train forward.

The traveling was smooth and easy, and they soon left the little blue lake well behind, passing through a pleasant country well wooded with elm, ash, birch, cottonwood, and box elder, and the grass growing high everywhere. They crossed more than one clear little stream, a pleasant contrast to the sluggish, muddy creeks of the prairies.

The range, toward which the head of the train was pointing, now came nearer. The boys saw its slopes, shaggy with dark pine, and they knew that beyond it lay other and higher slopes, also dark with pine. The air was of a wonderful clearness, showing in the east and beyond the zenith a clear silver tint, while the west was pure red gold with the setting sun.

Nearer and nearer came the range. The great pines blurred at first into an unbroken mass, now stood out singly, showing their giant stems. Afar a flash of foamy white appeared, where a brook fell in a foamy cascade. Presently they were within a quarter of a mile of the range, and its shadow fell over the train. In the west

the sun was low.

"The pass is there, straight ahead," said Bright Sun, pointing to the steep range.

"I don't see any opening," said Conway.

"It is so narrow and the pines hide it," rejoined Bright Sun, "but it is smooth and easy."

Albert was at the rear of the train. He had chosen to walk in the later hours of the afternoon. He had become very tired, but, unwilling to confess it even to himself, he did not resume his place in the wagon. His weariness made him lag behind.

Albert was deeply sensitive to the impressions of time and place. The twilight seemed to him to fall suddenly like a great black robe. The pines once more blurred into a dark, unbroken mass. The low sun in the west dipped behind the hills, and the rays of red and gold that it left were chill and cold.

"Your brother wishes to see you. He is at the foot of the creek that we crossed fifteen minutes ago."

It was Bright Sun who spoke.

"Dick wants to see me at the crossing of the creek! Why, I thought he was ahead of me with the train!" exclaimed Albert.

"No, he is waiting for you. He said that it was important," repeated Bright Sun.

Albert turned in the darkening twilight and went back on the trail of the train toward the crossing of the creek. Bright Sun went to the head of the train, and saw Dick walking there alone and looking at the hills.

"Your brother is behind at the creek," said Bright Sun. "He is ill and wishes you. Hurry! I think it is important!"

"Albert at the creek, ill?" exclaimed Dick in surprise and alarm. "Why, I thought he was here with the train!"

But Bright Sun had gone on ahead. Dick turned back hastily, and ran along the trail through the twilight that was now fast merging into the night.

"Al, ill and left behind!" he exclaimed again and again. "He must have overexerted himself!"

His alarm deepened when he saw how fast the darkness was increasing. The chill bars of red and gold were gone from the west. When he looked back he could see the train no more, and heard only the faint sound of the cracking of whips. The train was fast disappearing in the pass.

But Dick had become a good woodsman and plainsman. His sense of direction was rarely wrong, and he went straight upon the trail for the creek. Night had now come but it was not very dark, and presently he saw the flash of water. It was the creek, and a few more steps took him there. A figure rose out of the shadows.

"Al!" he cried. "Have you broken down? Why didn't you get into the wagon?"

"Dick," replied Albert in a puzzled tone, "there's nothing the matter with me, except that I'm tired. Bright Sun told me that you were here waiting for me, and that you had something important to tell me. I couldn't find you, and now you come running."

Dick stopped in amazement.

"Bright Sun said I was waiting here for you, and had something important to tell you?" exclaimed Dick. "Why, he told me that you were ill, and had been left unnoticed at the crossing!"

The two boys stared at each other.

"What does it mean?" they exclaimed together.

From the dark pass before them came a sound which in the distance resembled the report of a firecracker, followed quickly by two or three other sounds, and then by many, as if the whole pack had been ignited at once. But both boys knew it was not firecrackers. It was something far more deadly and terrible—a hail of rifle bullets. They looked toward the pass and saw there pink and red flashes appearing and reappearing. Shouts, and mingled with them a continuous long, whining cry, a dreadful overnote, came to their ears.

"The train has been attacked!" cried Dick. "It has marched straight into an ambush!"

"Indians?" exclaimed Albert, who was trembling violently from sheer physical and mental excitement.

"It couldn't be anything else!" replied Dick. "This is their country! And they must be in great force, too! Listen how the fight grows!"

The volume of the firing increased rapidly, but above it always rose that terrible whining note. The red and pink flashes in the pass danced and multiplied, and the wind brought the faint odor of smoke.

"We must help!" exclaimed Dick. "One can't stand here and see them all cut down!"

He forgot in his generous heart, at that moment, that he disliked Conway and all his men, and that he and Albert had scarcely a friend in the train. He thought only of doing what he could to beat back the Indian attack, and Albert felt the same impulse. Both had their rifles—fine, breech-loading, repeating weapons, and with these the two might do much. No one ever parted with his arms after entering the Indian country.

"Come on, Albert!" exclaimed Dick, and the two ran toward the pass. But before they had gone a hundred yards they stopped as if by the same impulse. That terrible whining note was now rising higher and higher. It was not merely a war whoop, it had become also a song of triumph. There was a certain silvery quality in the night air, a quality that made for illumination, and Dick thought he saw dusky forms flitting here and there in the mouth of the pass behind the train. It was only fancy, because he was too far away for such perception, but in this case fancy and truth were the same.

"Hurry, Dick! Let's hurry!" exclaimed the impulsive and generous

Albert. "If we don't, we'll be too late to do anything!"

They started again, running as fast as they could toward that space in the dark well where the flashes of red and blue came and went. Dick was so intent that he did not hear the short, quick gasps of Albert, but he did hear a sudden fall beside him and

stopped short. Albert was lying on his back unconscious. A faint tinge of abnormal red showed on his lips.

"Oh, I forgot! I forgot!" groaned Dick.

Such sudden and violent exertion, allied with the excitement of the terrible moment, had overpowered the weak boy. Dick bent down in grief. At first he thought his brother was dead, but the breath still came.

Dick did not know what to do. In the pass, under the shadow of night, the pines, and the mountain wall, the battle still flared and crackled, but its volume was dying. Louder rose the fierce, whining yell, and its note was full of ferocity and triumph, while the hoarser cries of the white men became fewer and lower. Now Dick really saw dusky figures leaping about between him and the train. Something uttering a shrill, unearthly cry of pain crashed heavily through the bushes near him and quickly passed on. It was a wounded horse, running away.

Dick shuddered. Then he lifted Albert in his arms, and he had the forethought, even in that moment of excitement and danger, to pick up Albert's rifle also. Strong as he naturally was, he had then the strength of four, and, turning off at a sharp angle, he ran with Albert toward a dense thicket which clustered at the foot of the mountain wall.

He went a full three hundred yards before he was conscious of weariness, and he was then at the edge of the thicket, which spread over a wide space. He laid Albert down on some of last year's old leaves, and then his quick eyes caught the sight of a

little pool among some rocks. He dipped up the water in his felt hat, and after carefully wiping the red stain from his brother's lips, poured the cold fluid upon his face.

Albert revived, sat up, and tried to speak, but Dick pressed his hand upon his mouth.

"Nothing above a whisper, Al," he said softly. "The fight is not yet wholly over, and the Sioux are all about."

"I fainted," said Albert in a whisper. "O Dick, what a miserable, useless fellow I am! But it was the excitement and the run!"

"It was doubtless a lucky thing that you fainted," Dick whispered back. "If you hadn't, both of us would probably be dead now."

"It's not all over yet," said Albert.

"No, but it soon will be. Thank God, we've got our rifles. Do you feel strong enough to walk now, Al? The deeper we get into the thicket the better it will be for us."

Albert rose slowly to his feet, rocked a little, and then stood straight.

Only a few flashes were appearing now in the pass. Dick knew too well who had been victorious. The battle over, the Sioux would presently be ranging for stragglers and for plunder. He put one arm under Albert, while he carried both of the rifles himself. They walked on through the thicket and the night gradually darkened. The silvery quality was gone from the air, and the two boys were glad. It would not be easy to find them now. In the

pass both the firing and the long, whining whoop ceased entirely. The flashes of red or blue appeared no more. Silence reigned there and in the valley. Dick shivered despite himself. For the moment the silence was more terrible than the noise of battle had been. Black, ominous shadows seemed to float down from the mountains, clothing all the valley. A chill wind came up, moaning among the pines. The valley, so warm and beautiful in the day, now inspired Dick with a sudden and violent repulsion. It was a hateful place, the abode of horror and dread. He wished to escape from it.

They crossed the thicket and came up against the mountain wall. But it was not quite so steep as it had looked in the distance, and in the faint light Dick saw the trace of a trail leading up the slope among the pines. It was not the trail of human beings, merely a faint path indicating that wild animals, perhaps cougars, had passed that way.

"How are you feeling, Al?" he asked, repeating his anxious query.

"Better. My strength has come back," replied his brother.

"Then we'll go up the mountain. We must get as far away as we can from those fiends, the Sioux. Thank God, Al, we're spared together!"

Each boy felt a moment of devout thankfulness. They had not fallen, and they were there together! Each also thought of the singular message that Bright Sun had given to them, but neither spoke of it.

They climbed for more than half an hour in silence, save for an occasional whisper. The bushes helped Albert greatly. He pulled himself along by means of them, and now and then the two boys stopped that he might rest. He was still excited under the influence of the night, the distant battle, and their peril, and he breathed in short gasps, but did not faint again. Dick thrust his arm at intervals under his brother's and helped him in the ascent.

After climbing a quarter of an hour, they stopped longer than usual and looked down at the pass, which Dick reckoned should be almost beneath them. They heard the faint sound of a shot, saw a tiny beam of red appear, then disappear, and after that there was only silence and blank darkness.

"It's all over now," whispered Albert, and it was a whisper not of caution, but of awe.

"Yes, it's all over," Dick said in the same tone. "It's likely, Al, that you and I alone out of all that train are alive. Conway and all the others are gone."

"Except Bright Sun," said Albert.

The two boys looked at each other again, but said nothing. They then resumed their climbing, finding it easier this time. They reached a height at which the undergrowth ceased, but the pines, growing almost in ordered rows, stretched onward and upward.

Dick sent occasional glances toward the pass, but the darkness there remained unbroken. Every time he turned his eyes that way he seemed to be looking into a black well of terror.

Both Dick and Albert, after the first hour of ascent, had a feeling of complete safety. The Sioux, occupied with their great ambush and victory, would not know there had been two stragglers behind the train, and even had they known, to search for them among the dense forests of distant mountain slopes would be a futile task. Dick's mind turned instead to the needs of their situation, and he began to appreciate the full danger and hardship of it.

Albert and he were right in feeling thankful that they were spared together, although they were alone in the wilderness in every sense of the word. It was hundreds of miles north, east, south, and west to the habitations of white men. Before them, fold on fold, lay unknown mountains, over which only hostile savages roamed. Both he and Albert had good rifles and belts full of cartridges, but that was all. It was a situation to daunt the most fearless heart, and the shiver that suddenly ran over Dick did not come from the cold of the night.

They took a long rest in a little clump of high pines and saw a cold, clear moon come out in the pale sky. They felt the awful sense of desolation and loneliness, for it seemed to them that the moon was looking down on an uninhabited world in which only they were left. They heard presently little rustlings in the grass, and thought at first it was another ambush, though they knew upon second thought that it was wild creatures moving on the mountain side.

"Come, Al," said Dick. "Another half hour will put us on top

of the ridge, and then I think it will be safe for us to stop."

"I hope they'll be keeping a good room for us at the hotel up there," said Albert wanly.

Dick tried to laugh, but it was a poor imitation and he gave it up.

"We may find some sort of a sheltered nook," he said hopefully.

Dick had become conscious that it was cold, since the fever in his blood was dying down. Whenever they stopped and their bodies relaxed, they suffered from chill. He was deeply worried about Albert, who was in no condition to endure exposure on a bleak mountain, and wished now for the buffalo robe they had regarded as such a fine trophy.

They reached the crest of the ridge in a half hour, as Dick had expected, and looking northward in the moonlight saw the dim outlines of other ridges and peaks in a vast, intricate maze. A narrow, wooded valley seemed to occupy the space between the ridge on which they stood and the next one parallel to it to the northward.

"It ought to be a good place down there to hide and rest," said Albert.

"I think you're right," said Dick, "and we'll go down the slope part of the way before we camp for the night."

They found the descent easy. It was still open forest, mostly pine with a sprinkling of ash and oak, and it was warmer on the northern side, the winds having but little sweep there.

The moon became brighter, but it remained cold and pitiless, recking nothing of the tragedy in the pass. It gave Dick a chill to look at it. But he spent most of the time watching among the trees for some sheltered spot that Nature had made. It was over an hour before he found it, a hollow among rocks, with dwarf pines clustering thickly at the sides and in front. It was so well hidden that he would have missed it had he not been looking for just such a happy alcove, and at first he was quite sure that some wild animal must be using it as a den.

He poked in the barrel of his rifle, but nothing flew out, and then, pulling back the pine boughs, he saw no signs of a previous occupation.

"It's just waiting for us, Al, old fellow," he said gayly, "but nothing of this kind is so good that it can't be made better. Look at all those dead leaves over there under the oaks. Been drying ever since last year and full of warmth."

They raked the dead leaves into the nook, covering the floor of it thickly, and piling them up on the sides as high as they would stay, and then they lay down inside, letting the pine boughs in front fall back into place. It was really warm and cozy in there for two boys who had been living out of doors for weeks, and Dick drew a deep, long breath of content.

"Suppose a panther should come snooping along," said Albert, "and think this the proper place for his bed and board?"

"He'd never come in, don't you fear. He'd smell us long before he got here, and then strike out in the other direction."

Albert was silent quite a while, and as he made no noise, Dick thought he was asleep. But Albert spoke at last, though he spoke low and his tone was very solemn.

"Dick," he said, "we've really got a lot to be thankful for. You know that."

"I certainly do," said Dick with emphasis. "Now you go to sleep,

Al."

Albert was silent again, and presently his breathing became very steady and regular. Dick touched him and saw that he was fast asleep. Then the older boy took off his coat and carefully spread it on the younger, after which he raked a great lot of the dry leaves over himself, and soon he, too, was sound asleep.

Dick awoke far in the night and stirred in his bed of leaves. But the movement caused him a little pain, and he wondered dimly, because he had not yet fully come through the gates of sleep, and he did not remember where he was or what had happened. A tiny shaft of pale light fell on his forehead, and he looked up through pine branches. It was the moon that sent the beam down upon him, but he could see nothing else. He stirred again and the little pain returned. Then all of it came back to him.

Dick reached out his hand and touched Albert. His brother was sleeping soundly, and he was still warm, the coat having protected him. But Dick was cold, despite the pines, the rocks, and the leaves. It was the cold that had caused the slight pain in his joints when he moved, but he rose softly lest he wake Albert,

and slipped outside, standing in a clear space between the pines.

The late moon was of uncommon brilliancy. It seemed a molten mass of burnished silver, and its light fell over forest and valley, range and peak. The trees on the slopes stood out like lacework, but far down in the valley the light seemed to shimmer like waves on a sea of silver mist. It was all inexpressibly cold, and of a loneliness that was uncanny. Nothing stirred, not a twig, not a blade of grass. It seemed to Dick that if even a leaf fell on the far side of the mountain he could hear it. It was a great, primeval world, voiceless and unpeopled, brooding in a dread and mystic silence.

Dick shivered. He had shivered often that night, but now the chill went to the marrow. It was the chill the first man must have felt when he was driven from the garden and faced the globe-girdling forest. He came back to the rock covert and leaned over until he could hear his brother breathing beneath the pine boughs. Then he felt the surge of relief, of companionship—after all, he was not alone in the wilderness!—and returned to the clear space between the pines. There he walked up and down briskly, swinging his arms, exercising all his limbs, until the circulation was fully restored and he was warm again.

Dick felt the immensity of the problem that lay before him —one that he alone must solve if it were to be solved at all. He and Albert had escaped the massacre, but how were they to live in that wilderness of mountains? It was not alone the question of food. How were they to save themselves from death

by exposure? Those twinges in his knees had been warning signs. Oddly enough, his mind now fastened upon one thing. He was longing for the lost buffalo robe, his first great prize. It had been so large and so warm, and the fur was so soft. It would cover both Albert and himself, and keep them warm on the coldest night. If they only had it now! He thought more of that robe just then than he did of the food that they would need in the morning. Cast forth upon a primeval world, this first want occupied his mind to the exclusion of all others.

He returned to the rocky alcove presently, and lay down again. He was too young and too healthy to remain awake long, despite the full measure of their situation, and soon he slept soundly once more. He was first to awake in the morning, and the beam that struck upon his forehead was golden instead of silver. It was warm, too, and cheerful, and as Dick parted the branches and looked out, he saw that the sun was riding high. It had been daylight a full three hours at least, but it did not matter. Time was perhaps the only commodity of which he and Albert now had enough and to spare.

He took his coat off Albert and put it on himself, lest Albert might suspect, and then began to sing purposely, with loudness and levity, an old farm rhyme that had been familiar to the boys of his vicinity:

"Wake up, Jake, the day is breaking.
The old cow died, her tail shaking."

Albert sat up, rubbed his eyes, and stared at Dick and the

wilderness.

"Now look at him!" cried Dick. "He thinks he's been called too early. He thinks he'd like to sleep eight or ten hours longer! Get up, little boy! Yes, it's Christmas morning! Come and see what good old Santa has put in your stocking!"

Albert yawned again and laughed. Really, Dick was such a cheerful, funny fellow that he always kept one in good spirits. Good old Dick!

"Old Santa filled our stockings, all right," continued Dick, "but he was so busy cramming 'em full of great forests and magnificent scenery that he forgot to leave any breakfast for us, and I'm afraid we'll have to hustle for it."

They started down the mountain slope, and presently they came to a swift little brook, in which they bathed their faces, removing, at the same time, fragments of twigs and dried leaves from their hair.

"That was fine and refreshing," said Dick, "but it doesn't fill my stomach. Al, I could bite a tenpenny nail in half and digest both pieces, too."

"I don't care for nails," said Albert, "but I think I could gnaw down a good-sized sapling. Hold me, Dick, or I'll be devouring a pine tree."

Both laughed, and put as good a face on it as they could, but they were frightfully hungry, nevertheless. But they had grown up on farms, and they knew that the woods must contain food of some kind or other. They began a search, and after a while they

found wild plums, now ripe, which they ate freely. They then felt stronger and better, but, after all, it was a light diet and they must obtain food of more sustenance.

"There are deer, of course, in this valley," said Dick, fingering his rifle, "and sooner or later we'll get a shot at one of them, but it may be days, and—Al—I've got another plan."

"What is it?"

"You know, Al, that I can travel pretty fast anywhere. Now those Sioux, after cutting down the train and wiping out all the people, would naturally go away. They'd load themselves up with spoil and scoot. But a lot, scattered here and there, would be left behind. Some of the teams would run away in all the shooting and shouting. And, Al, you and I need those things! We must have them if we are going to live, and we both want to live!"

"Do you mean, Dick, that you're going back down there in that awful pass?"

"That's just about what I had on my mind," replied Dick cheerfully; "and now I've got it off, I feel better."

"But you can never get back alive, Dick!" exclaimed Albert, his eyes widening in horror at the memory of what they had seen and heard the night before.

"Get back alive? Why, of course I will," responded Dick. "And I'll do more than that, too. You'll see me come galloping up the mountain, bearing hogsheads and barrels of provisions. But, seriously, Al, it must be done. If I don't go, we'll starve to death."

"Then I'm going, too."

"No, Al, old boy, you're not strong enough just yet, though you will be soon. There are certainly no Sioux in this little valley, and it would be well if you were to go back up the slope and stay in the pine shelter. It's likely that I'll be gone nearly all day, but don't be worried. You'll have one of the rifles with you, and you know how to use it."

Albert had a clear and penetrating mind, and he saw the truth of Dick's words. They went back up the slope, where he crept within the pine shelter and lay down on the leaves, while Dick went alone on his mission.

Chapter IV Treasure-Trove

When Dick passed the crest of the ridge and began the descent toward the fatal pass, his heart beat heavily. The terror and shock of the night before, those distant shots and shouts, returned to him, and it was many minutes before he could shake off a dread that was almost superstitious in its nature. But youth, health, and the sunlight conquered. The day was uncommonly brilliant. The mountains rolled back, green on the slopes, blue at the crests, and below him, like a brown robe, lay the wavering plain across which they had come.

Dick could see no sign of human life down there. No rejoicing Sioux warrior galloped over the swells, no echo of a triumphant war whoop came to his ear. Over mountain and plain alike the silence of the desert brooded. But high above the pass great black birds wheeled on lazy pinions.

Dick believed more strongly than ever that the Sioux had gone away. Savage tribes do not linger over a battlefield that is finished; yet as he reached the bottom of the slope his heart began to beat heavily again, and he was loath to leave the protecting shadow of the pines. He fingered his rifle, passing his hand gently over the barrel and the trigger. It was a fine weapon, a beautiful weapon, and just at this moment it was a wonderful weapon. He felt in its full force, for the first time in his life, what the rifle meant to the pioneer.

The boy, after much hesitation and a great searching of eye and ear, entered the pass. At once the sunlight dimmed. Walls as straight as the side of a house rose above him three of four hundred feet, while the distance between was not more than thirty feet. Dwarf pines grew here and there in the crannies of the cliffs, but mostly the black rock showed. Dwarf pines also grew at the bottom of the pass close to either cliff, and Dick kept among them, bending far down and advancing very slowly.

Fifty yards were passed, and still there was no sound save a slight moaning through the pass, which Dick knew was the sigh of the wind drawn into the narrow cleft. It made him shudder, and had he not been of uncommon courage he would have turned back.

He looked up. The great black birds, wheeling on lazy pinions, seemed to have sunk lower. That made him shudder, too, but it was another confirmation of his belief that all the Sioux had gone. He went eight or ten yards farther and then stopped short. Before him lay two dead horses and an overturned wagon. Both horses had been shot, and were still in their gear attached to the wagon.

Dick examined the wagon carefully, and as he yet heard and saw no signs of a human being save himself, his courage grew. It was a big wagon of the kind used for crossing the plains, with boxes around the inside like lockers. Almost everything of value had been taken by the Sioux, but in one of the lockers Dick was lucky enough to find a large, heavy, gray blanket. He rolled it up

at once, and with a strap cut from the horse's gear tied it on his back, after the fashion of a soldier on the march.

"The first great treasure!" he murmured exultantly. "Now for the next!"

He found in the same wagon, jammed under the driver's seat and hidden from hasty view, about the half of a side of bacon—ten pounds, perhaps. Dick fairly laughed when he got his hands upon it, and he clasped it lovingly, as if it were a ten-pound nugget of pure gold. But it was far better than gold just then. He wrapped it in a piece of canvas which he cut from the cover of the wagon, and tied it on his back above the blanket.

Finding nothing more of value in the wagon, he resumed his progress up the pass. It was well for Dick that he was stout-hearted, and well for him, too, that he was driven by great need, else he would surely have gone back.

He was now come into the thick of it. Around him everywhere lay the fallen, and the deeds done in Indian warfare were not lacking. Sam Conway lay upon his side, and brutal as the man had been, Dick felt grief when he saw him. Here were others, too, that he knew, and he counted the bodies of the few women who had been with the train. They had died probably in the battle like the rest. They, like the men, had been hardened, rough, and coarse of speech and act, but Dick felt grief, too, when he saw them. Nearly all the animals had been slain also in the fury of the attack, and they were scattered far up the pass.

Dick resolutely turned his face away from the dead and began

to glean among the wagons for what the Sioux might have left. All these wagons were built like the first that he had searched, and he was confident that he would find much of value. Nor was he disappointed. He found three more blankets, and in their own wagon the buffalo robe that he had lamented. Doubtless, its presence there was accounted for by the fact that the Sioux did not consider a buffalo robe a trophy of their victory over white men.

Other treasures were several boxes of crackers, about twenty boxes of sardines, three flasks of brandy, suitable for illness, a heavy riding cloak, a Virginia ham, two boxes of matches, a small iron skillet, and an empty tin canteen. He might have searched further, but he realized that time was passing, and that Albert must be on the verge of starvation. He had forgotten his own hunger in the excitement of seek and find, but it came back now and gnawed at him fiercely. Yet he would not touch any of the food. No matter how great the temptation he would not take a single bite until Albert had the same chance.

He now made all his treasures into one great package, except the buffalo robe. That was too heavy to add to the others, and he tied it among the boughs of a pine, where the wolves could not reach it. Then, with the big pack on his back, he began the return. It was more weight than he would have liked to carry at an ordinary time, but now in his elation he scarcely felt it. He went rapidly up the slope and by the middle of the afternoon was going down the other side.

As he approached the pine alcove he whistled a familiar tune, popular at the time—"Silver Threads Among the Gold." He knew that Albert, if he were there—and he surely must be there—would recognize his whistle and come forth. He stopped, and his heart hammered for a moment, but Albert's whistle took up the second line of the air and Albert himself came forth jauntily.

"We win, Al, old boy!" called Dick. "Just look at this pack!"

"I can't look at anything else," replied Albert in the same joyful tones. "It's so big that I don't see you under it. Dick, have you robbed a treasure ship?"

"No, Al," replied Dick, very soberly. "I haven't robbed a treasure ship, but I've been prowling with success over a lost battlefield—a ghoul I believe they call such a person, but it had to be done. I've enough food here to last a week at least, and we may find more."

He put down his pack and took out the bacon. As Albert looked at it he began unconsciously to clinch and unclinch his teeth. Dick saw his face, and, knowing that the same eager look was in his own, he laughed a little.

"Al," he said, "you and I know now how wolves often feel, but we're not going to behave like wolves. We're going to light a fire and cook this bacon. We'll take the risk of the flame or smoke being seen by Sioux. In so vast a country the chances are all in our favor."

They gathered up pine cones and other fallen wood, and with the help of the matches soon had a fire. Then they cut strips of

bacon and fried them on the ends of sharpened sticks, the sputter making the finest music in their ears.

Never before had either tasted food so delicious, and they ate strip after strip. Dick noticed with pleasure how the color came into Albert's cheeks, and how his eyes began to sparkle. Sleeping under the pines seemed to have benefited instead of injuring him, and certainly there was a wonderful healing balm in the air of that pine-clad mountain slope. Dick could feel it himself. How strong he was after eating! He shook his big shoulders.

"What are you bristling up about?" asked Albert.

"Merely getting ready to start again," replied Dick. "You know the old saying, Al, 'you've got to hit while the iron's hot.' More treasure is down there in the pass, but if we wait it won't stay there. Everything that we get now is worth more to us than diamonds."

"It's so," said Albert, and then he sighed sadly as he added,

"How I wish I were strong enough to go with you and help!"

"Just you wait," said Dick. "You'll be as strong as a horse in a month, and then you'll have to do all the work and bring me my breakfast in the morning as I lie in bed. Besides, you'd have to stay here and guard the treasure that we already have. Better get into the pine den. Bears and wolves may be drawn by the scent of the food, and they might think of attacking you."

They put out the fire, and while Albert withdrew into the pine shelter, Dick started again over the mountain. The sun was setting blood red in the west, and in the east the shadows of twilight were

advancing. It required a new kind of courage to enter the pass in the night, and Dick's shudders returned. At certain times there is something in the dark that frightens the bravest and those most used to it.

Dick hurried. He knew the way down the mountain now, and after the food and rest he was completely refreshed. But as fast as he went the shadows of twilight came faster, and when he reached the bottom of the mountain it was quite dark. The plain before him was invisible, and the forest on the slope behind him was a solid robe of black.

Dick set foot in the pass and then stopped. It was not dread but awe that thrilled him in every vein. He saw nothing before him but the well of darkness that was the great slash in the mountains. The wind, caught between the walls, moaned as in the day, and he knew perfectly well what if was, but it had all the nature of a dirge, nevertheless. Overhead a few dim stars wavered in a dusky sky.

Dick forced himself to go on. It required now moral, as well as physical, courage to approach that lost battlefield lying under its pall of night. Never was the boy a greater hero than at that moment. He advanced slowly. A bush caught him by the coat and held him an instant. He felt as if he had been seized in a man's grasp. He reached the first wagon, and it seemed to him, broken and rifled, an emblem of desolation. As he passed it a strange, low, whining cry made his backbone turn to ice. But he recovered and forced an uneasy little laugh at himself. It was only a wolf,

the mean coyote of the prairies!

He came now into the space where the mass of the wagons and the fallen lay. Dark figures, low and skulking, darted away. More wolves! But one, a huge timber wolf, with a powerful body and long fangs, stood up boldly and stared at him with red eyes. Dick's own eyes were used to the darkness now, and he stared back at the wolf, which seemed to be giving him a challenge. He half raised his rifle, but the monster did not move. It was a stranger to guns, and this wilderness was its own.

It was Dick's first impulse to fire at the space between the red eyes, but he restrained it. He had not come there to fight with wolves, nor to send the report of a shot through the mountains. He picked up a stone and threw it at the wolf, striking him on the flank. The monster turned and stalked sullenly away, showing but little sign of fear. Dick pursued his task, and as he advanced something rose and, flapping heavily, sailed away. The shiver came again, but his will stopped it.

He was now in the center of the wreckage, which in the darkness looked as if it had all happened long ago. Nearly every wagon had been turned over, and now and then dark forms lay between the wheels. The wind moaned incessantly down the pass and over the ruin.

Overcoming his repulsion, Dick went to work. The moon was now coming out and he could see well enough for his task. There was still much gleaning left by the quick raiders, and everything would be of use to Albert and himself, even to the very gear

on the fallen animals. He cut off a great quantity of this at once and put it in a heap at the foot of the cliff. Then he invaded the wagons and again brought forth treasures better than gold.

He found in one side box some bottles of medicine, the simple remedies of the border, which he packed very carefully, and in another he discovered half a sack of flour—fifty pounds, perhaps. A third rewarded him with a canister of tea and a twenty-pound bag of ground coffee. He clutched these treasures eagerly. They would be invaluable to Albert.

Continuing his search, he was rewarded with two pairs of heavy shoes, an ax, a hatchet, some packages of pins, needles, and thread, and a number of cooking utensils—pots, kettles, pans, and skillets. Just as he was about to quit for the purpose of making up his pack, he noticed in one of the wagons a long, narrow locker made into the side and fastened with a stout padlock. The wagon had been plundered, but evidently the Sioux had balked at the time this stout box would take for opening, and had passed on. Dick, feeling sure that it must contain something of value, broke the padlock with the head of the ax. When he looked in he uttered a cry of delight at his reward.

He brought forth from the box a beautiful double-barreled breech-loading shotgun, and the bounty of chance did not stop with the gun, for in the locker were over a thousand cartridges to fit it. Dick foresaw at once that it would be invaluable to Albert and himself in the pursuit of wild ducks, wild geese, and other feathered game. He removed some of the articles from his

pack, which was already heavy enough, and put the shotgun and cartridges in their place. Then he set forth on the return journey.

As he left the wagons and went toward the mouth of the pass, he heard soft, padding sounds behind him, and knew that the wolves were returning, almost on his heels. He looked back once, and saw a pair of fiery red eyes which he felt must belong to the monster, the timber wolf, but Dick was no longer under the uncanny spell of the night and the place; he was rejoicing too much in his new treasures, like a miser who has just added a great sum to his hoard, to feel further awe of the wolves, the darkness, and a new battlefield.

Dick's second pack was heavier than his first, but as before, he trod lightly. He took a different path when he left the pass, and here in the moonlight, which was now much brighter, he saw the trace of wheels on the earth. The trace ran off irregularly through the short bushes and veered violently to and fro like the path of a drunken man. Dick inferred at once that it had been made, not by a wagon entering the pass, but by one leaving it, and in great haste. No doubt the horses or mules had been running away in fright at the firing.

Dick's curiosity was excited. He wished to see what had become of that wagon. The trail continued to lead through the short bushes that covered the plain just before entering the pass, and then turned off sharply to the right, where it led to an abrupt little canyon or gully about ten feet deep. The gully also was lined with bushes, and at first Dick could see nothing else, but

presently he made out a wagon lying on its side. No horses or mules were there; undoubtedly, they had torn themselves loose from the gear in time to escape the fall.

Dick laid down his pack and descended to the wagon. He believed that in such a place it had escaped the plundering hands of the hasty Sioux, and his belief was correct. The wagon, a large one, was loaded with all the articles necessary for the passage of the plains. Although much tossed about by the fall, nothing was hurt.

Here was a treasure-trove, indeed! Dick's sudden sense of wealth was so overpowering that he felt a great embarrassment. How was he to take care of such riches? He longed at that moment for the strength of twenty men, that he might take it all at once and go over the mountain to Albert.

It was quite a quarter of an hour before he was able to compose himself thoroughly. Then he made a hasty examination of the wagon, so far as its position allowed. He found in it a rifle of the same pattern as that used by Albert and himself, a sixteen-shot repeater, the most advanced weapon of the time, and a great quantity of cartridges to fit. There was also two of the new revolvers, with sufficient cartridges, another ax, hatchets, saws, hammers, chisels, and a lot of mining tools. The remaining space in the wagon was occupied by clothing, bedding, provisions, and medicines.

Dick judged that the wolves could not get at the wagon as it lay, and leaving it he began his third ascent of the slope. He

found Albert sound asleep in the pine alcove with his rifle beside him. He looked so peaceful that Dick was careful not to awaken him. He stored the second load of treasure in the alcove, and, wrapping one of the heavy blankets around himself, slept heavily.

He told Albert the next day of the wagon in the gully, and nothing could keep him from returning in the morning for salvage. He worked there two or three days, carrying heavy loads up the mountain, and finally, when it was all in their den, he and Albert felt equipped for anything. Nor had the buffalo robe been neglected. It was spread over much of the treasure. Albert, meanwhile, had assumed the functions of cook, and he discharged them with considerable ability. His strength was quite sufficient to permit of his collecting firewood, and he could fry bacon and make coffee and tea beautifully. But they were very sparing of the coffee and tea, as they also were of the flour, although their supplies of all three of these were greatly increased by the wagon in the gully. In fact, the very last thing that Dick had brought over the mountain was a hundred-pound sack of flour, and after accomplishing this feat he had rested a long time.

Both boys felt that they had been remarkably fortunate while this work was going on. One circumstance, apparently simple in itself, had been a piece of great luck, and that was the absence of rain. It was not a particularly rainy country, but a shower could have made them thoroughly miserable, and, moreover, would have been extremely dangerous for Albert. But nights and days alike remained dry and cool, and as Albert breathed the

marvelous balsamic air he could almost feel himself transfused with its healing property. Meanwhile, the color in his cheeks was steadily deepening.

"We've certainly had good fortune," said Dick.

"Aided by your courage and strength," said Albert. "It took a lot of nerve to go down there in that pass and hunt for what the Sioux might have left behind."

Dick disclaimed any superior merit, but he said nothing of the many tremors that he felt while performing the great task.

An hour or two later, Albert, who was hunting through their belongings, uttered a cry of joy on finding a little package of fishhooks. String they had among their stores, and it was easy enough to cut a slim rod for a pole.

"Now I can be useful for something besides cooking," he said. "It doesn't require any great strength to be a fisherman, and I'm much mistaken if I don't soon have our table supplied with trout."

There was a swift creek farther down the slope, and, angling with much patience, Albert succeeded in catching several mountain trout and a larger number of fish of an unknown species, but which, like the trout, were very good to eat.

Albert's exploit caused him intense satisfaction, and Dick rejoiced with him, not alone because of the fish, but also because of his brother's triumph.

Chapter V The Lost Valley

They spent a week on the slope, sleeping securely and warmly under their blankets in the pine alcove, and fortune favored them throughout that time. It did not rain once, and there was not a sign of the Sioux. Dick did not revisit the pass after the first three days, and he knew that the wolves and buzzards had been busy there. But he stripped quite clean the wagon which had fallen in the gully, even carrying away the canvas cover, which was rainproof. Albert wondered that the Sioux had not returned, but Dick had a very plausible theory to account for it.

"The Sioux are making war upon our people," he said, "and why should they stay around here? They have cut off what is doubtless the first party entering this region in a long time, and now they have gone eastward to meet our troops. Beside, the Sioux are mostly plains Indians, and they won't bother much about these mountains. Other Indians, through fear of the Sioux, will not come and live here, which accounts for this region being uninhabited."

"Still a wandering band of Sioux might come through at any time and see us," said Albert.

"That's so, and for other reasons, too, we must move. It's mighty fine, Al, sleeping out in the open when the weather's dry and not too cold, but I've read that the winter in the northwestern mountains is something terrible, and we've got to prepare for it."

It was Dick's idea to go deeper into the mountains. He knew very well that the chance of their getting out before spring were too slender to be considered, and he believed that they could find better shelter and a more secure hiding place farther in. So he resolved upon a journey of exploration, and though Albert was now stronger, he must go alone. It was his brother's duty to remain and guard their precious stores. Already bears and mountain lions, drawn by the odors of the food, had come snuffing about the alcove, but they always retreated from the presence of either of the brothers. One huge silver tip had come rather alarmingly close, but when Dick shouted at him he, too, turned and lumbered off among the pines.

"What you want to guard against, Al," said Dick, "is thieves rather than robbers. Look out for the sneaks. We'll fill the canteen and all our iron vessels with water so that you won't have to go even to the brook. Then you stay right here by the fire in the daytime, and in the den at night. You can keep a bed of coals before the den when you're asleep, and no wild animal will ever come past it."

"All right, Dick," said Albert courageously; "but don't you get lost over there among those ranges and peaks."

"I couldn't do it if I tried," replied Dick in the same cheerful tone. "You don't know what a woodsman and mountaineer I've become, Al, old boy!"

Albert smiled. Yet each boy felt the full gravity of the occasion when the time for Dick's departure came, at dawn of a cool

morning, gleams of silver frost showing here and there on the slopes. Both knew the necessity of the journey, however, and hid their feelings.

"Be back to-morrow night, Al," said Dick.

"Be ready for you, Dick," said Albert.

Then they waved their hands to each other, and Dick strode away toward the higher mountains. He was well armed, carrying his repeating rifle and the large hunting knife which was useful for so many purposes. He had also thrust one of the revolvers into his belt.

Flushed with youth and strength, and equipped with such good weapons, he felt able to take care of himself in any company into which he might be thrown.

He reached the bottom of the slope, and looking back, saw Albert standing on a fallen log. His brother was watching him and waved his hand. Dick waved his in reply, and then, crossing the creek, began the ascent of the farther slope. There the pines and the distance rendered the brothers invisible to each other, and Dick pressed on with vigor. His recent trips over the lower slopes for supplies had greatly increased his skill in mountain climbing, and he did not suffer from weariness. Up, up, he went, and the pines grew shorter and scrubbier. But the thin, crisp air was a sheer delight, and he felt an extraordinary pleasure in mere living.

Dick looked back once more from the heights toward the spot where their camp lay and saw lying against the blue a thin gray thread that only the keenest eye would notice. He knew it to be

the smoke from Albert's fire and felt sure that all was well.

While the slope which he was ascending was fairly steep, it was easy enough to find a good trail among the pines. There was little undergrowth and the ascent was not rocky. When Dick stood at last on the crest of the ridge he uttered a cry of delight and amazement.

The slope on which he stood was merely a sort of gate to the higher mountains, or rather it was a curtain hiding the view.

Before him, range on range and peak on peak, lay mighty mountains, some of them shooting up almost three miles above the sea, their crests and heads hid in eternal snow. Far away to northward and westward stretched the tremendous maze, and it seemed to Dick to have no end. A cold, dazzling sunlight poured in floods over the snowy summits, and he felt a great sense of awe. It was all so grand, so silent, and so near to the Infinite. He saw the full majesty of the world and of the Power that had created it. For a little while his mission and all human passions and emotions floated away from him; he was content merely to stand there, without thinking, but to feel the immensity and majesty of it all.

Dick presently recovered himself and with a little laugh came back to earth. But he was glad to have had those moments. He began the descent, which was rougher and rockier than the ascent had been, but the prospect was encouraging. The valley between the ridge on the slope of which he stood and the higher one beyond it seemed narrow, but he believed that he would find in

it the shelter and hiding that he and Albert wished.

As he went down the slope became steeper, but once more the pines, sheltered from the snows and cruel winds, grew to a great size. There was also so much outcropping of rock that Dick was hopeful of finding another alcove deep enough to be converted into a house.

When nearly down, he caught a gleam among the trees that he knew was water, and again he was encouraged. Here was a certainty of one thing that was an absolute necessity. Soon he was in the valley, which he found exceedingly narrow and almost choked with a growth of pine, ash, and aspen, a tiny brook flowing down its center. He was tired and warm from the long descent and knelt down and drank from the brook. Its waters were as cold as ice, flowing down from the crest of one of the great peaks clad, winter and summer, in snow.

Dick followed the brook for fully a mile, seeking everywhere a suitable place in which he and his brother might make a home, but he found none. The valley resembled in most of its aspects a great canyon, and all the fertile earth on either side of the brook was set closely with pine, ash, and aspen. These would form a shelter from winds, but they would not protect from rain and the great colds and snows of the high Rockies.

Dick noticed many footprints of animals at the margin of the stream, some of great size, which he had no doubt were made by grizzlies or silver tips. He also believed that the beaver might be found farther down along this cold and secluded water, but he

was not interested greatly just then in animals; he was seeking for that most necessary of all things—something that must be had—a home.

It seemed to him at the end of his estimated mile that the brook was going to flow directly into the mountain which rose before him many hundreds of feet; but when he came to the rocky wall he found that the valley turned off at a sharp angle to the left, and the stream, of course, followed it, although it now descended more rapidly, breaking three times into little foamy falls five or six feet in height. Then another brook came from a deep cleft between the mountains on the eastern side and swelled with its volume the main stream, which now became a creek.

The new valley widened out to a width of perhaps a quarter of a mile, although the rocky walls on either side rose to a great height and were almost precipitous. Springs flowed from these walls and joined the creek. Some of them came down the face of the cliffs in little cascades of foam and vapor, but others spouted from the base of the rock. Dick knelt down to drink from one of the latter, but as his face approached the water he jumped away. He dipped up a little of it in his soft hat and tasted it. It was brackish and almost boiling hot.

Dick was rather pleased at the discovery. A bitter and hot spring might be very useful. He had imbibed—like many others—from the teaching of his childhood that any bitter liquid was good for you. As he advanced farther the valley continued to spread out. It was now perhaps a half mile in width, and well

wooded. The creek became less turbulent, flowing with a depth of several feet in a narrow channel.

The whole aspect of the valley so far had been that of a wilderness uninhabited and unvisited. A mule deer looked curiously at Dick, then walked away a few paces and stood there. When Dick glanced back his deership was still curious and gazing. A bear crashed through a thicket, stared at the boy with red eyes, then rolled languidly away. Dick was quick to interpret these signs. They were unfamiliar with human presence, and he was cheered by the evidence. Yet at the end of another hundred yards of progress he sank down suddenly among some bushes and remained perfectly silent, but intently watchful.

He had seen a column of smoke rising above the pines and aspens. Smoke meant fire, fire meant human beings, and human beings, in that region, meant enemies. He had no doubt that Sioux were at the foot of that column of smoke. It was a tragic discovery. He was looking for a home for Albert and himself somewhere in this valley, but there could be no home anywhere near the Sioux. He and his brother must turn in another direction, and with painful effort lug their stores over the ridges.

But Dick was resolved to see. There were great springs of courage and tenacity in his nature, and he wished, moreover, to prove his new craft as a woodsman and mountaineer. He remained awhile in the bushes, watching the spire, and presently, to his amazement, it thinned quickly and was gone. It had disappeared swiftly, while the smoke from a fire usually dies

down. It was Dick's surmise that the Sioux had put out their fire by artificial means and then had moved on. Such an act would indicate a fear of observation, and his curiosity increased greatly.

But Dick did not forget his caution. He crouched in the bushes for quite a while yet, watching the place where the smoke had been, but the sky remained clear and undefiled. He heard nothing and saw nothing but the lonely valley. At last he crept forward slowly, and with the greatest care, keeping among bushes and treading very softly. He advanced in this manner three or four hundred yards, to the very point which must have been the base of the spire of smoke—he had marked it so well that he could not be mistaken—and from his leafy covert saw a large open space entirely destitute of vegetation. He expected to see there also the remains of a camp fire, but none was visible, not a single charred stick, nor a coal.

Dick was astonished. A new and smoking camp fire must leave some trace. One could not wipe it away absolutely. He remained a comparatively long time, watching in the edge of the bushes beside the wide and open space.

He still saw and heard nothing. Never before had a camp fire vanished so mysteriously and completely, and with it those who had built it. At last, his curiosity overcoming his caution, he advanced into the open space, and now saw that it fell away toward the center. Advancing more boldly, he found himself near the edge of a deep pit.

The pit was almost perfectly round and had a diameter of

about ten feet. So far as Dick could judge, it was about forty feet deep and entirely empty. It looked like a huge well dug by the hand of man.

While Dick was gazing at the pit, an extraordinary and terrifying thing happened. The earth under his feet began to shake. At first he could not believe it, but when he steadied himself and watched closely, the oscillating motion was undoubtedly there. It was accompanied, too, by a rumble, dull and low, but which steadily grew louder. It seemed to Dick that the round pit was the center of this sound.

Despite the quaking of the earth, he ventured again into the open space and saw that the pit had filled with water. Moreover, this water was boiling, as he could see it seething and bubbling. As he looked, clouds of steam shot up to a height of two or three hundred feet, and Dick, in alarm, ran back to the bushes. He knew that this was the column of vapor he had first seen from a distance, but he was not prepared for what followed.

There was an explosion so loud that it made Dick jump. Then a great column of water shot up from the boiling pit to a height of perhaps fifty feet, and remained there rising and falling. From the apex of this column several great jets rose, perhaps, three times as high.

The column of hot water glittered and shimmered in the sun, and Dick gazed in wonder and delight. He had read enough to recognize the phenomenon that he now saw. It was a geyser, a column of hot water shooting up, at regular intervals and with

great force, from the unknown deeps of the earth.

As he gazed, the column gradually sank, the boiling water in the pit sank, too, and there was no longer any rumble or quaking of the earth. Dick cautiously approached the pit again. It was as empty as a dry well, but he knew that in due time the phenomenon would be repeated. He was vastly interested, but he did not wait to see the recurrence of the marvel, continuing his way down the valley over heaps of crinkly black slag and stone, which were age-old lava, although he did not know it, and through groves of pine and ash, aspen, and cedar. He saw other round pits and watched a second geyser in eruption. He saw, too, numerous hot springs, and much steamy vapor floating about. There were also mineral springs and springs of the clearest and purest cold water. It seemed to Dick that every minute of his wanderings revealed to him some new and interesting sight, while on all sides of the little valley rose the mighty mountains, their summits in eternal snow.

A great relief was mingled with the intense interest that Dick felt. He had been sure at first that he saw the camp fires of the Sioux, but after the revulsion it seemed as if it were a place never visited by man, either savage or civilized. As he continued down the valley, he noticed narrow clefts in the mountains opening into them from either side, but he felt sure from the nature of the country that they could not go back far. The clefts were four in number, and down two of them came considerable streams of clear, cold water emptying into the main creek.

The valley now narrowed again and Dick heard ahead a slight humming sound which presently grew into a roar. He was puzzled at first, but soon divined the cause. The creek, or rather little river, much increased in volume by the tributary brooks, made a great increase of speed in its current. Dick saw before him a rising column of vapor and foam, and in another minute or two stood beside a fine fall, where the little river took a sheer drop of forty feet, then rushed foaming and boiling through a narrow chasm, to empty about a mile farther on into a beautiful blue lake.

Dick, standing on a high rock beside the fall, could see the lake easily. Its blue was of a deep, splendid tint, and on every side pines and cedars thickly clothed the narrow belt of ground between it and the mountains. The far end seemed to back up abruptly against a mighty range crowned with snow, but Dick felt sure that an outlet must be there through some cleft in the range. The lake itself was of an almost perfect crescent shape, and Dick reckoned its length at seven miles, with a greatest breadth, that is, at the center, of about two miles. He judged, too, from its color and its position in a fissure that its depth must be very great.

The surface of the lake lay two or three hundred feet lower than the rock on which Dick was standing, and he could see its entire expanse, rippling gently under the wind and telling only of peace and rest. Flocks of wild fowl flew here and there, showing white or black against the blue of its waters, and at the nearer shore Dick thought he saw an animal like a deer drinking, but

the distance was too great to tell certainly.

He left the rock and pursued his way through dwarf pines and cedars along the edge of the chasm in which the torrent boiled and foamed, intending to go down to the lake. Halfway he stopped, startled by a long, shrill, whistling sound that bore some resemblance to the shriek of a distant locomotive. The wilderness had been so silent before that the sound seemed to fill all the valley, the ridges taking it up and giving it back in one echo after another until it died away among the peaks. In a minute or so the whistling shriek was repeated and then two or three times more.

Dick was not apprehensive. It was merely a new wonder in that valley of wonders, and none of these wonders seemed to have anything to do with man. The sound apparently came from a point two or three hundred yards to his left at the base of the mountain, and turning, Dick went toward it, walking very slowly and carefully through the undergrowth. He had gone almost the whole distance seeing nothing but the mountain and the forest, when the whistling shriek was suddenly repeated so close to him that he jumped. He sank down behind a dwarf pine, and then he saw not thirty feet away the cause of the sound.

A gigantic deer, a great grayish animal, stood in a little open space, and at intervals emitted that tremendous whistle. It stood as high as a horse, and Dick estimated its weight at more than a thousand pounds. He was looking at a magnificent specimen of the Rocky Mountain elk, by far the largest member of the deer tribe that he had ever seen. The animal, the wind blowing

from him toward Dick, was entirely unsuspicious of danger, and the boy could easily have put a bullet into his heart, but he had no desire to do so. Whether the elk was whistling to his mate or sending a challenge to a rival bull he did not know, and after watching and admiring him for a little while he crept away.

But Dick was not wholly swayed by sentiment. He said to himself

as he went away among the pines: "Don't you feel too safe, Mr. Elk, we'll have to take you or some of your brethren later on. I've heard that elk meat is good."

He resumed his journey and was soon at the edge of the lake, which at this point had a narrow sandy margin. Its waters were fresh and cold, and wold duck, fearless of Dick, swam within a few yards of him. The view here was not less majestic and beautiful than it had been from the rock, and Dick, sensitive to nature, was steeped in all its wonder and charm. He was glad to be there, he was glad that chance or Providence had led him to this lovely valley. He felt no loneliness, no fear for the future, he was content merely to breathe and feel the glory of it permeate his being.

He picked up a pebble presently and threw it into the lake. It sank with the sullen plunk that told unmistakably to the boy's ears of great depths below. Once or twice he saw a fish leap up, and it occurred to him that here was another food supply.

He suddenly pulled himself together with a jerk. He could not sit there all day dreaming. He had come to find a winter home

for Albert and himself, and he had not yet found it. But he had a plan from which he had been turned aside for a while by the sight of the lake, and now he went back to carry it out.

There were two clefts opening into the mountains from his side of the river, and he went into the first on the return path. It was choked with pine and cedars and quickly ended against a mountain wall, proving to be nothing but a very short canyon. There was much outcropping of rock here, but nothing that would help toward a shelter, and Dick went on to the second cleft.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.