

Aimard Gustave

The Red River Half-Breed: A Tale of the Wild North-West



Gustave Aimard

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CHAPTER I

THE CREST OF THE CONTINENT

We stand on the loftiest peak of the Big Wind River Mountains, that highest and longest chain of the Northern Rockies, a chaos of granite fifteen thousand feet towards the firmament from the sea.

Around us the lesser pinnacles hold up heads as fantastic in shape as an Indian's plumed for battle, and, below a little, diamonds of ice deck the snowy ermine of the colossal giant's robe.

Far beneath, the mosses are grown upon by sparse grasses, and they by scrub evergreens, gradually displaced in the descent to the warm alcoved valleys by taller and taller pines, spruce, larch, and cedar. But the ancient ocean wash here shows lines alone of the constant west and southwest winds, which never bring a seed or grain into this calm frigidity.

In the placid afternoon, the beats are audible of the wings of the king of the air, that proud eagle which Milton chose as the finest emblem of the American people who, in their vigorous youth, had lit their eyes in the unclouded sunbeams; and the song of the Arctic bluebird, startled by the unwonted squeaking of the dry ice powder intermixed with ground fossils and granite, as horses in the uneven line of a new and breakneck trail crunch antediluvian shells to atoms as they follow a daring man up the heights along chasms of ten thousand feet, from the western acclivity to the actual summit divide, not two yards wide.

It was November, a time when the almost impossible crossing was alone in the power of man, since in the thaws of summer the ravines are choke full of resistless water, and, later, the snowstorms are overwhelming.

The guide of the little train stood on the monstrous pedestal, firm and unblenching as a statue, and contemplated with an impassioned but unflinching eye the sublime spectacle four hundred miles in diameter. Like the jags of a necklace, the peaks of the sierra protruded, and like gems glittered the pure lakes of the mountain tops, those that feed to both hands the western and eastern rivers: towards the Pole, the Athabasca's Devil's Punchbowl, and the Two-world Pond under our eyes, into which the salmon trout leap from the Orient, and flash down into the Missouri for the Mexican Gulf!

Like steps of an immense staircase, the Plains of the Missouri, Cheyenne, and Laramie extended, monotonous, drying up the mountain flow in insatiate rocks and sands, and heaving up stone barriers to the prairie ocean. Like a thin thread of water gleams the rails of the Pacific Railroad, twenty thousand miles of metal over which the dolefully hooting steam engine capers to connect the Iron and Coal States with those of Gold and Corn.

But the presumptuous pigmy soon ceases to be impressed with the grandeur and the magnificence, and lets an admiring glance dwell on the shining face of the never-freezing Lake of the Yellowstone Valley, and seems to feel no such awe as an Indian would have at viewing the inimitable hues and fanciful wreaths of smoke which overhung the mysterious Firehole Basin – the Geyser land of the scientific, the haunt of the red man's demons and gods.

"Huh-la!" he cries to the horses and mules, and up they come in his dauntless footsteps, and, the loads telling on them in the rarity of the air, gladly snicker as they take the downward path at last, spite of the peril.

Sunset impends, and the adventurer still urges the train till the last arrival appears, goaded by a second pioneer, who seems of Indian blood.

The two men silently exchange a grasp of the hand, as if their task were nearly accomplished, and plunge into the darkness, commencing to climb the steeps as they commence what appears a mad descent. The stony spires and domes glow like orange shaded lamps at a Chinese festival along the chain for hundreds of miles, and, after one moment of mezzotint, so scant is the twilight here, the stars of the Great Bear stand out sparkling so near and so detached in the dark blue ether, that the sound of the auroral lights dancing seems the crackle of the orbs' own axles.

Surely it is worth while to follow two men so daring as to surmount the greatest obstacle of Nature, and who carry themselves as if they, and not the grizzly bear and eagle, were monarchs of this weird domain.

CHAPTER II

THE FALSE PILOT

To the north of the trappers, approaching, but out of their reach of vision, a singular train was skimming over the snows. From a distance one might have supposed it a flight of birds, for no four-footed creatures could have travelled at that surprising pace.

But it was a procession of *carrioles*, or dog sledges, preceded by two large ones. These were impelled by the wind alone, caught in sails, which would be the tent canvas by night, fastened to masts set in the breadth of the beam like that of an "ice yacht." The runners, on the principle of a mail coach's, shoes were formed of thin wood turned up in front; their width prevented the sledges sinking materially. But the speed was what saved them better from being submerged in the twenty-five feet dead level snow. Moreover, the steersmen, so to call them, of the queer craft, were both fitted for their posts. The second sledge was governed, thanks to the adroit manipulation of a tough pole, by one of those Scotch-Americans who are the indisputable rulers of the Northwest. At the cold they never wince; they are sober, prudent, rather silent than talkative, as firm as a rock in defence, and as trusty as a dog.

In the foremost snow ship an Indian was pilot and helmsman too. Upon him depended the lives of all in those two vehicles. Those following might swerve off from any danger they met by whipping the dogs to turn quickly.

This savage seemed less thickly clad than the white men, who, however, crouched down, but he flinched as little from the cutting blast as a bronze statue. Now and again a whirl of wind caught up the ice crystals and encircled his erect figure within the cruel clouds. The next moment he was seen again, his face as sternly set, his eyes as rigidly bent ahead, as before his disappearance.

The sense of safety he inspired and the glorious thrill which the rapidity of the course provided left the passengers in a placid joy.

The dog sledges contained the provisions necessary in these uninhabited wilds, with the hunters, servants, and guards of the party leader. The second snow ship carried the more valuable property and the "new hands," who could not be trusted with the semiwild dogs; under the steersman, it was commanded by the secretary of the chief.

This gentleman was in the foremost conveyance with his daughter and the most "reliable" men. He was an important man, as this escort, nearly thirty strong, abundantly manifested.

Sir Archie Maclan was a retired shipping merchant, enriched by the Eastern tea and silk trade. He was chairman of a land purchase company that contemplated founding a city on the line of the British Pacific Railway. He never invested his money on hearsay, and he would not ask his friends to do so either. Hence, having volunteered to go and investigate, at his own expense, the shareholders had voted him thanks and unanimously approved.

He was a widower, and took with him the sole object of his affection in his daughter.

Miss Ulla Maclan was one of those fair Northern beauties, born types of "Norma," though the black-haired and swart-complexioned Italians do their most to mar our proper conception of that ideal of the druidess. At the officers' ball at Québec, and the Mayor and Council ball in Montreal, she had carried away the palms for grace, amiability and loveliness.

Ofttimes dreamy and somewhat superstitious, Ulla had insisted upon not being left behind when her father prepared to push west for the Red River. As she was indomitable, he compromised as usual when they disputed. He put off the original project till spring; and, in the meanwhile, assented to her wish to see something of the marvels which were currently reported of the Yellowstone Basin. By the greatest good luck, an Indian was at Fort Sailor King who had come up that way. The officers

recommended him. In a few days he had proven himself weather-wise, brave, devoted, cautious as Sandy Ferguson himself, and more ingenious than nine out of ten of his race.

Little by little he had risen in esteem till no one was hurt by his having charge of the patron and his precious daughter, for whom any man would gladly have died. If there were one exception to this universal homage to talent in the scorned aborigine, it was the English secretary of Sir Archie, and that distrust seemed to be caused by a kind of jealousy at being consigned to the other sailing sledge, remote from the charming girl. But then, had he exhaled any plaint, who would have listened to him – a raw Old Country sportsman, who carried his rifle slung across his shoulders when he went gunning?

There was one drawback to the full enjoyment of the fleet course: the immense and oppressive silence. All the deer were stripping the trees of bark and moss in secret coverts; even the Arctic fox kept secluded behind the tops of trees buried in the snow, so that they seemed mere topknots of Indians. The dogs wore no bells; the men talked in whispers.

Nevertheless, the complete desert offered no cause for alarm. But the illimitable white field, the ice-clad mountains, the mighty wind that hurried the two ponderous sledges onward as if they were feathers – these struck the rudest with awe as the short day closed in.

As darkness threatened the men brightened in their chat. Visions of hot tea made lips water, where, alas, the frost seized the moisture instantly.

For hours the uninterrupted rush had been maintained. Few obstacles cropped up which the Indian had not avoided with dexterity and warned his successor of by a sharp cry.

The wind strengthened with the dusk. A faint dark blue line at length revealed the limit of the snowy plateau. It was so swiftly "lifted" that in an hour or so all believed they would be camping down in shelter of a forest which would furnish the welcome fire.

The Indian himself relaxed his muscles, for they saw him faintly smile too.

All at once he began to murmur, and then to utter audibly a curious monotonous chant, which amused Miss Maclan. Her father had dozed off in the warm furs that muffled them both.

"Oh, the Chippeway is singing," she remarked. "What a funny song! I cannot call it lively, though."

"Lively be hanged!" burst out the Canadian at her elbow, who had never been so rude before. "It's a death song. Look out, mates. *Au guet, camarades!*" with a great shout, "This red nigger's turned 'bad!'"

The savage responded to the accusation by a defiant whoop. Fifty different spots sent up its echo, and what seemed wolves bounded up out of the snow here and there in the gathering gloom.

It was too late for the hunters to attempt a seizure of the steersman. Already they were paralyzed, as they had partly arisen, by beholding the snow plain unexpectedly end in a sheer descent. Two seconds after the first sledge was over the precipice; in five the second followed. Three or four men leaped out of this – of the other it was impossible to do so in time, and it sank in the snow of which their leap broke the crust. The conductors of the dog sledges began plying their whips, and the yelping of the dogs rent the frosty air. Upon these fugitives, scattered on each side, the fifty dark figures shot arrows with almost a fatal aim.

By night, in about half an hour only, no living representative of the party seemed forthcoming. Till then the assailing force had not relaxed their murderous intentions. Dragging the dog sledges to a hollow, where they could light a fire unobserved, they greedily feasted on the provisions, with the additional dainty of one of the dogs roasted for "fresh meat!"

In the morning they descended into the chasm where the Indian guide had so deliberately wrecked the "canoes-that-slide-on-the-snow." None of the fallen had survived the descent as far as they could be found in the snow. They were smothered, or the cold had killed them in the long night. Over the whites the Indians showed no emotion save a brutal rejoicing. But it was different when they discovered the body of their countryman. Not only were they a little perplexed how to regard a suicide which so profited the tribe, for the Indian rarely commits that crime, but Sandy Ferguson,

chancing to be hurled near the villain, had dragged himself, though his limbs were dislocated, so as to fall on him, and had half torn off his scalp when death had fastened his icy grip on him.

The joy of the victors was thus damped. They sang over their martyr-hero, and, bestowing on his corpse the prizes he would have won if alive, gave him a chief's burial.

"He was a great man, and *Ahnemekee* (the Thunderbolt) gives up his own trophy, the English gun, to adorn his last sleeping place. May the fear inspiring Crow nation never know the son who would not do as much to lead a prey into their grasp. Ahnemekee salutes thee!"

They had rigged up a kind of bed with crosspieces in the united apex of fern pines. These were within reach of the men on the snow at present. When the thaws came, the dead Crow, laid upon this platform, would be forty feet in the air. About him was laid and hung his share of the spoil due to his long and patient plotting.

In times of distress, the funereal offerings to any Indian of mark may be as symbolical and worthless, intrinsically, as the cut paper of the Chinese. But when valuables can be afforded, they themselves are left with the dead, and dogs and horses are sacrificed.

On the completion of this mournful ceremony the Crows departed, sure that they had made a clean sweep of the party, so skilfully and daringly decoyed to their doom by the pretended Chippeway. Not till the stealing up of the whitened wolves proved they had long since left the wind untainted with their odour did the rubbish heap of a large decayed tree move as if a gigantic mole were in operation, and the apprehensive face of Miss Maclan showed itself.

Apparently she alone had escaped the butchery following the hurling of the large sledges over into the snowy gulf.

Spilt out, like all the other occupants of the vehicle except two or three, when it "turned turtle" in its leap, the sail had chanced to embosom her in its folds as the circularly rising column of cold air from below caught it and momentarily swelled it out. By this accident the swiftness was lessened. Nevertheless, the sail was soon snatched from her and rent to shreds, whilst she landed on the touchwood of the storm felled cedar.

When she recovered consciousness it was night. She fancied she heard a voice calling, but that may have been pure fancy. On the height above she could hear only too plainly the ghoulish merriment of the Indians over their carouse, and the moans of some wretch being tortured to add a zest to their regale. All she had heard of the redskin's merciless treatment of women captives impressed her. She crept still more deeply into the cavity of the rotten tree, and waited with little hope. Not a sound to cheer her in her neighbourhood. Absorbed in prayers, to drive away the poignant anxiety for her father, she did not feel the intense cold. As for that, she was well garbed in superb furs, the double clothing which Canadian ladies had chosen for her with their experience, when she announced her resolve to accompany her father.

When dawn came, her fears were harrowing. Around and even over her head in her ambush, the ravenous foe scampered and scuttled like the beasts of rapine and carnage they were. They probed the snow and every cleft of the rocks to secure the hairy trophies from the hapless crews of the snow ships. Not one could have been found alive, for at each unearthing, Ulla judged by the tone that the finders experienced disappointment. On the other hand, the spoil of the sledges was embarrassing in its quantity for the band.

She dared not peep out; she dreaded that the feeble blue thread of condensed breath from her nook would betray her. She did not see, therefore, that, unable to bear away more than a tenth of the plunder, the rest was hidden under the precipice.

At last came the time when hunger drove her forth. The desolation and stillness in this hollow were overwhelming. The snow was trampled and pulled about by the searchers. Dead bodies, gashed and unlimbed, strewed the late virgin white expanse, amid the broken boxes and disrupted cases.

Ulla shuddered to tread among these hideous corpses, where it was impossible for her to recognise her late companions. To find her father was a vain idea. She took a smashed tin of meat and some chocolate, and ate ferociously.

On high, the stars glittered with a cold brightness, which revealed they saw her misery and grief, but offered no consolation. On the edge of the precipice, gorged wolves, that had devoured the *voyageurs* up there, were lazily contemplating the solitary form with motion in the wreck, and among the human remains of the expedition so gay and gallant fifty hours before.

Her ungovernable appetite appeased, and her thirst far from quenched by sucking a snowball, she mournfully reflected on her plight.

A child of luxury, it was more a nightmare than reality that she could be here, in the Northwestern desert, the great mass of the Rocky Mountains looming up beyond, impressive, insurmountable, and on the other three points, a thousand miles of snow! And she a young girl, alone!

A company of sappers and miners would have had a week's work in the ironbound soil under the snow to inter this mangled *débris* of mortality. For her to attempt the pious duty was a mockery.

Nevertheless, when the moon rose, a frenzied impulse to veil the poor creatures, with at least a little shrouding snow, would have set her in action. But at the first step towards the nearest corpse, with its trunk bristling with arrows, and its eyeless sockets appealing to the Creator against the barbarous outrage, Ulla stopped short.

She was fascinated by the spectacle presented at the junction of protruding pines where the deceptive Indian guide reposed upon the platform. The moon inundated it with tremulous beams.

Suddenly she was sure that the body was animated. So do the vampires spring to life when the moon bathes them in radiance. Certainly the figure sat up cautiously; the pale face was even visible; with a steady hand some of the trophies which adorned the monument were unhanged from the branches – the knife of Sandy Ferguson, the English rifle and cartridge container of her father, diverse appurtenances which had been left to equip the departing spirit for the happy hunting ground "over the range" yonder.

Thus armed, the ghastly phantom leaped down, and threatened to march upon the horrified observer. Already three wolves, descending the face of the bluff, sniffed danger. As the spectre proceeded, the largest squatted, and emitted a lugubrious howl. All the others echoed it. For some minutes the scene was filled with this bloodcurdling concert, loud enough to have awakened still more dead.

But Ulla did not hear the infernal chorus any longer. On beholding the course of the appalling apparition to be aimed indubitably at her, the conviction was too strong for her overtasked nerves. She murmured a prayer, and turned to flee frantically; but the snow was treacherous, and she slid down in a soft gap, where the feathery particles closed over her head.

Perfectly unconscious, she did not hear the supposed Indian halt almost at the edge of the sealed up cavity which concealed her from even his eagerly questioning eyes.

"What a terrible tragedy," he exclaimed, with the deepest emotion, in English.

It was the secretary of Sir Archie.

"All torn to pieces by those odious villains!" he continued. "On the dead they vented their spite; on the goods they have inflicted all the wanton damage possible, so that they might not benefit even some starving traveller who came into this Pit of Abomination. That generous old gentleman, these brave, patient, devoted, cheerful hunters and campmen, that young lady never to be too much pitied! It brings the tears into my eyes – miserable solitary mourner that I am to try to do so much barbarity justice. Heaven knows that I came out here with no prejudice against the red man. This same Indian who enlisted merely to lure the expedition to destruction, accepted my courtesies with a grateful mien. And yet he was a monster! I glory to have profaned his resting place – to rob the robber of the weapons with which, God aiding me, I shall avenge my massacred comrades!"

He perambulated the valley of death till sunrise. He called and examined every spot with care; but all the time no response was given him. Then, having made a meal on the height, where the same fatal tale was displayed in the bones with which the wolves sported, he doggedly took up the trail of the victors.

But at the woods, where the snow presented a different aspect and was absent in tracts, he found that the wily savages were not to be followed by an inexperienced man, however brave, vigorous, and determined.

CHAPTER III

THE MOUNTAINEERS' SNUG CABIN

The two hunters, red and white, who had taken eight days to ascend the western slope of the Rocky Mountains, were only one reaching a reasonable approach to the level of the plateau of the Yellowstone Basin.

A little above them shone the snow line belting the giants of granite, and here the timberline spread in brown. The breath of numberless icy caverns murmured of the stupendous crystal founts, sources of powerful streams which would be on their way to enrich regions remote.

The declining sun glimmered along the smooth steeps and glittered on the jagged ones, reflected from ice, softened by snows, sparkling in torrents as the scattered diamonds leaped so far that finally they were dissipated in humid dust.

Through all the difficulties of the way, where no trodden way existed, the two guides and guards of the little train proceeded with the perfection of experience to be acquired only by bearing fatigues and danger with which that magnificent mountain chain abounds.

In fact, it was impossible, even among the host of Western pioneers, more numerous than those imagine who never can see them collected, to find two mountain men more keen, skilled, and resolute than "Old Jim" Ridge and "Cherokee Bill."

Ridge was a taller man than ordinarily met, even in the West; but too well proportioned, though a little spare, to reveal to the careless eye how enviably he was gifted by nature. His features were handsome, though worn and weather-beaten; after a course of Turkish baths and fine toilet appliances, he would have eclipsed the showiest cavaliers in a Paris, London, or Vienna opera house ball. His forehead, high and broad, was creased rather by play of emotions than effect of age. His blue eyes were mild enough in repose to charm the most timid maid; but in action they became fierce and sharp as a buffalo's at bay. They were eyes that could follow a trail without his getting out of the saddle or leaning over much. His nose was long, rather curved than straight, with pliant nostrils which rose and fell freely in his liberal respiration for the supply of a massive chest. The mouth was full of teeth, strong, sound and white, as only garnish those who are mostly meat eaters; the lips were red, but almost concealed in a moustache and beard, trimmed rarely, yet well kept, of a warm flaxen striped with silver; this tint also gleamed in his long locks from under a blue fox skin cap. Erect, something like a Mars who inclined towards Apollo rather than Hercules, sturdy, firm, energetic, any beholder knew that he stood before an exceptional man, full of goodness, courage, and simple belief in man being no merely inspired *animal*.

In "citizen's dress" he would have seemed confined; hence, his hunting costume suited him far better. It was – from the fur cap mentioned to the moccasins fortified with rawhide soles – composed of a leather frock, caught in at the waist to support his small arms by its belt, fringed with its own buckskin; a red flannel shirt, with a black silk neckerchief carelessly fastened by a diamond pin of California gold, such as an ingenious miner himself may shape; the leggings were also of buckskin, fringed like the frock, and similarly so "worked up in grease" as to have lost the tendency to stretch in the wet which plays the mischief with leather garments. Balancing a sword bayonet on one hip, not unlike a machete, hung a hatchet, whilst his six-shooters were of a size that promised damage at a longish range. His gun was peculiar. It was a "yager," or short rifle of the old United States dragoons, sending a large ball; he had had it converted into a breechloader, a "fourteen shoot," with the availability to reserve the store and load at the muzzle with any particular charge independently. The stock was fortified with homemade rawhide bands. Thanks to long and continual practice, knowing how to humour all "her leetle peculiarities," as he would affectionately say, the rifle was used by him afoot or on horse, offhanded or in a rest, with long and calculated aim or at a snap shot with a

fatality that made it dreaded. As often as by any other title, Jim Ridge was called "the Yager of the Yellowstone." As far south as the mysterious sun-worshipping Indians' secluded homes, this name was the backbone of camp stories, in which our mountaineer's marksmanship was not unduly praised.

Jim Ridge looked the man to make history, but his time had not come, he would have modestly said, if reproached therefore.

As for his comrade, he was clad as an Indian rover, with better underclothing and equipments than the red man obtains. His gun was a formidable and costly Winchester rifle. He was tall and slender, rather forbidding and haughty, gloomy and imperturbable; but his small beadlike black eyes sparkled with daring cunning and a kind of nourished hatred. Spite of his savage airs and war paint, the close observer must have perceived that he had enjoyed civilisation at one period. He was not an "unwashed Injin." Indeed, Cherokee Bill was the best pupil in a St. Louis college, where his intelligence, courtesy quite charming, kindness, and devotion to study gained the esteem of his tutor and the respect of the white students, who, Southerners though they were, never objected to his blood.

One day, when he was about eighteen, an old Indian woman, whom he passed at the college gate, followed him to a lonely street, and called him affectionately. It was his mother, whom he had rarely seen, and whose latest absence had lasted nearly a year. She had not wasted those ten months; they were spent on his behalf.

She was a Cherokee, daughter of a chief; she had been united gladly to the celebrated South and Northwestern trapper and mountain adventurer, Bill Williams, one of those excellent shots whose gains in the fur trade were seldom capped by any other three, though "there were giants in those days" – 1830-50. There was no doubt that he possessed some secret knowledge of the winter refuges of the wild animals valuable in commerce. Hither he went, always alone, to slay the pick at leisure. Quaint, hearty, "whole-souled," "Old Bill" Williams had not an enemy, spite of this "certainty," and even the hunters who tried to follow him and discover the sources of his fortune, would turn away laughingly when, at some mountain pass, where one man could keep back a multitude, they would abruptly run up against Williams' trusty rifle, and hear him challenge.

"D'ye h'ar, now, boys! Go 'way from fooling with the old mossback when he has his shooting iron loaded – it may hurt some o' ye; mind that, boys!"

Nevertheless, at last, Bill Williams failed to come to St. Louis or Santa Fe with the well-known pack; and, as year after year passed, the old hunters would sadly shake their frosting brows and feelingly mutter, "Old Billy's gone up, sure! 'Tell 'ee for a true thing, they've rubbed out the old marksman. See! H'yar goes for a sign on my stock; I've a bullet for the nigger that sent him under, mind that!"

At length the mountains yielded up the mystery in part. Bill Williams' squaw, penetrating snow filled gorges where, assuredly, no woman had ever stepped, came into a glade where a skeleton of a horse gleamed yellow like old alabaster in the icy crust. In a snowbank, half fallen open like a split nut, was visible a kind of human figure, mummified by dry cold. It was the veteran trapper. He was in the position of a hunter awaiting a prowling foe ambushed in the shrub, his rifle in advance, his shrunken face still leaning out eagerly. In the leather shirt and breast, almost as tanned with sun and wind, was a bullet's wound: the squaw could even chisel it out of the frozen flesh, where blood had long since ceased to flow. That was the only clue to the tracker and slayer of the trapper, and that was the single token and heritage which altered the entire course of young Williams' life. School and cities saw him no more; he took to the wilds, and lived on the warpath as far as the still unpunished murderer of his father was concerned.

He was rich, like Jim Ridge, for they had penetrated the very "mother pocket" of the Rocky Mountains' gold store; but he, no more than his pure white partner, would renounce the existence of peril, but also of independence.

Suddenly a deep "Hugh!" of attention from Cherokee Bill attracted the white man's ear.

"What?" said he, peering around, but seeing nothing to alarm him; nor had the animals, usually acute observers, perceived anything even novel.

"A solitary man," answered Bill, who spoke good English, of course.

Ridge shook his head, not in doubt of his comrade's ability, but in self-blame.

On the highlands, nothing but long habit endows one with the power to calculate distances exactly. Rarefaction gives the atmosphere a clearness which seems to bring the horizon to hand – the sight is extended indefinitely, and masses of shadows in vast valleys look like mere specks in the expanses of light, so that the space between the standpoint and a distant object is usually mistaken. There are also fantastic effects from the vapour being frozen or expanded, and presenting apparently solid forms, where, in fact, unsubstantially reigns.

"I am going for him," proceeded Cherokee Bill; "after all, it's no odds – we are 'to home!'" with a smile at his own imitation of the Yankee twang.

Wrapping his gun in his buffalo robes, taken off his pony, the half-breed slid down the declivity at the side of the "road," so to flatter it, and scrambling along an icy torrent of lovely blue water, suddenly sprang in under the cascade from an arching rock and disappeared.

Ridge did not even glance after him; besides, he had arrived, indeed. He suddenly took the bell mare by the bridle, and swerved her into an apparently impenetrable thicket – a "wind-slash," where the maze of deadwood was increased by the prostration of many tough evergreens, blown down by an irresistible tornado. But there had been traced here a kind of way, through which the pack animals insinuated themselves with the sureness of a cat, brushing off nothing of their loads. As for the two horses, they were more familiar with the strange path, and threaded its sinuosities like dogs tunnelling under the walls of a meat smokehouse. It is probable they scented their stable, and knew rest and food would shortly reward them for terrible toil and tribulation. Having pierced the tunnel of vegetation, there was one of stone, still more curious.

It was an almost regular tube, in black lava stone, four feet wide, seven or eight in height, smooth as glass mostly. Invisible fissures, however, must have supplied sweet air, for it was not hard breathing in all the extent, nearer three quarters of a mile than a half on the straight. No human hand had fashioned it; one must presume that, in the days when Vulcan swayed over Neptune on the earth, a torrent of lava was rushing down the steeps, when, suddenly, an immense snowfall smothered the fiery river and chilled it into a casing of stone around a still molten interior. That inner flow had continued, and left the tubular crust intact.

The ground was a fine sand, heavy with iron, so that it did not rise far. At the end of this channel a star suddenly gleamed, welcome in the complete darkness, into which, assuredly, the bravest of men would have hesitated to follow a foe. It was the outer air again, filling a basin, rock-engirt to a great height. In this lonely spot there was not a scrap of moss, not one blade of grass, and no shrub, however hardy. The calcined "blossom rock" wore a yellow hue, streaked with red and black; but here and there rose separate boulders of quartz, disintegrated by time and rain and whirling winds, which danced these Titanic blocks like thistles, and squeezed out those dull misshapen lumps. Those lumps were gold, however; this was a "mother-source" – one of those nests of Fortune for which the confirmed gold seeker quits home, family, wealth itself in other mines that content the less ravenous. Ridge traversed this placer – no pleasure to him, lonely Man of the Mountain – with a foot as reckless as those of the string of animals. The night was coming. He hurried them on into a second but short subterranean passage, with a couple of turnings, which finally opened into a cavern. At its far end a natural doorway afforded a view of the deep blue sky, where the brilliant stars seemed all of a sudden to be strewn. In those few moments the sun had gone down, and darkness come.

Ridge laid aside his gun, and started a fire, already laid, in a cavity of the grotto. The walls gleamed back the rising firelight; here amber studs in coal, there patches of mica-schist, varied gold and silver in hue.

After unpacking the animals, whose stores he carefully placed in caves, he sent them after the bell mare and the hunting horses, in through a channel to a sort of enclosed pasturage. Returning, he put some jerked meat down to broil, some roots to roast like so many potatoes, and added to the setting-out of a rude but hearty meal several of the delicacies brought in the train from Oregon. He was calmly smoking, reclining at great ease, with the air of one who felt he had earned the repose, lulled by the sweet murmur of underground streams, pouring out of ancient glaciers. The approach of footsteps made him glance round. The steps he knew to be Cherokee Bill's; so it was their being heavier than usual that alone roused him.

The half-breed was carrying a man over his shoulder with no more delicacy than if it had been a deer's carcase.

"Got him, Bill!" remarked Ridge.

"I should smile not to capture such a tenderfoot," was the rejoinder, as he flung his human prize upon the cavern floor.

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN WHO RAN RIGHT INTO TROUBLE

The prisoner of the Cherokee half-breed was in a forlorn state, more particularly as regarded apparel. Hardly suited for mountaineering at their best, his clothes were sorry rags, which an attempt at mending with bark fibre and rawhide had even rendered more lamentable. A horsehair lasso, of remarkable fineness and strength, was wound round and round him with a care which a Chinese would have envied. A handful of moss was the gag which nearly choked him, but his eyes were more full of rage than supplication, and they seemed to burn with enhanced indignation when he found the Indian was in concert with a white hunter.

Young Bill Williams flung his captive down on some dry rushes, and, laying aside his gun and the stranger's, which was broken, he sat down at the fire.

"It was a coyote," he remarked, scornfully. "But the Cherokee did not give him even time to yelp."

"Ah!" said Ridge, "I wonder you did not shoot him thar. Thar will always be plenty of that game on the prairie for the greenhorn hunter, I opine. It is all very well our discovering this country, but we don't want any raw Eastern fellows, with Boston dressing, discovering *us*!" Bill made no comment. He had pulled the soused bears' paws over to him, poured out some coffee – from which the full aroma was extracted by a sudden chill at the height of its boiling with cold water – and was thus beginning his meal.

The silence that fell was broken only by the champing of the two men as they repaid themselves for the travail since Monday. Each had a brandy flask, and their supplies included spirits, but neither drank anything but the sweet, pure water of the snow torrent. Ridge was naturally abstemious, the half-Cherokee sober from having seen the mischief wrought his mother's race by the firewater.

After the meal, the two smoked, and the white man faintly whistled a lively tune. Neither gave heed to the prisoner, who had ample leisure to gaze on the strange resort into which he had been unceremoniously conveyed.

The firelight illuminated the grotto; several gaps were outlets or storehouses; bales of furs, bundles of army and trade guns, kegs of powder, pigs of lead, packages of fancy goods used in Indian trading, harness, simple cooking utensils, these encumbered the place; but one could guess that they would form a barricade at emergency in case the enemy penetrated to this inmost hold. At first glance, and even at the leisure gaze of the prisoner, it seemed the den of a bandit.

"What did you bring him into the ranche for, chief?" inquired Ridge, in that pigeon-English of the Northwest, called the "Chinnook" dialect, though composed of Chinnook, Scotch, English, and Canadian-French, as well as hunters' English, to which confusing medley these two friends imparted still another zest by an infusion of Cherokee, Creole, French, and Spanish-American, for which good reason we forbear the sentences verbatim.

"Because," replied the other, "it was too dark to see the trail, and he must tell whether he is alone or the spy of a band. At all events, it doesn't look as if he had been in to the fort for his pay lately," added Bill, with a quiet fleeting smile, "and bought any clothes!"

"You are right. Loose him, and we'll try him. By the way, that's a beauty lariat, I can tell you."

Indeed, as before hinted, the lasso confining the captive was composed of selected horsehair, and toilsomely and deftly plaited.

"I was still on the scout," said Bill, whilst engaged undoing the bonds, rolling the man to and fro as suited his desires, "when suddenly a movement of a scrub pine half a pistol shot off made me bring my rifle to bear on it. I was just about to pull, when up pops my man, crying: 'Hold hard, or you're a dead Injun!' *Me*? It looked as if we were going to make our bullets kiss in midair, but I reckon I was

a leetle the quicker, and while his ball whistled upon the top storeys of the sierra, mine cut his barrel in half, right there at the stock, which remained in his hand. So, as he staggered in surprise, I sprang on him, took off from his belt the lasso – a real article, and no mistake! Worth a war pony! – and girdled him like a papoose. Moreover, I wrapped my robe round his head, so that he should not see how we glide into the Rocky Mountain House, proprietors, Messrs. Ridge and Williams, and here he is dumped down."

The man was hardly able to stand when unbound. He wiped his mouth with the tattered sleeve of his old army overcoat, shook himself, and reeled round toward the fire, whither the half-breed had given him a gentle push.

"We don't often meet a white man away here," said Ridge, sitting up like a judge. "Let me have a good long look."

The firelight fell full upon him. Already, whilst waiting, the stranger had fortified himself: he was cold, calm, save for his lips curling in a mocking smile, though he very well saw that his confronters were his judges, and, possibly, executioners, if they determined on death.

He was a man about five and forty, rather tall, with legs "split up so far" as to be as good a walker almost as Ridge himself. He was the more gaunt from recent privations. His "weather skin" seemed newly assumed, and, seen in the town, he would have been taken for a schoolmaster of the Indian Reservations or a trader's bookkeeper.

"You are a white, an American, from the Eastern States," said Ridge, after a couple of minutes. "You are not a hunter or trapper, a gentleman sportsman, or a squaw man. What brings you out here up in the mountains?"

"You are a white, an American of these Western States," returned the other, quietly, "whence your right to pull me about and question me? If this Indian is on the land of his forefathers, I will pay him tribute as far as in my power. As for you, why stop my wandering? Have I sought to run against you? Have I done anything more than essay to defend my life when a firearm was levelled at my breast? State anything that gives you a right to deal with a citizen of the United States in the United States?"

"These are big words," replied Ridge, puzzled whether to be angry or amused, though there was no doubt that Cherokee Bill felt the first sentiment; "but I am not exchanging Fourth of July speeches with you, but asking questions."

"To answer? 'Spose I don't choose?"

"You'll be made to, I guess," rejoined the mountaineer, hotly.

"You mean you two will cut my throat in this den, or hang me in my own lasso! The latter will serve me right, as I took it at the cost of a life from the redskin who hurled me off my horse with the same. Well, suppose you do kill me, will you know more about me than you do now?"

"What! Killed an Indian for the rope?" said Ridge, turning to the Cherokee. "What breed?"

"Comanche!" said the latter, examining the lasso critically.

"The lasso is of Comanche make," went on the mountain man, severely frowning again. "And I'll swear your cheek has never been burnt south of the Platte."

"That's so. It was a 'foot Indian' who tried to kill me. I boast no knowledge of these gentry. That's one of his shoes. The other I wore to death on these cursed flinty hills."

"Crow!" cried the Half-breed, with a glance at the moccasin. "Mountain Crow! And a war shoe!"

"The Crows 'out,'" repeated Ridge, biting his lips. "You see, we are getting information, though you are so stingy. Come, as your news leads off so good, continue it. Who are you, I say? And what is your business where few of us who are regular trappers venture?"

"A trapper?"

"An honest trapper! What did you take us for? – robbers and murderers?" said the hunter, indignantly.

"Well, I kind o' don't know," rejoined the stranger, with a significant glance at Cherokee Bill, whose savage eyes were not reassuring like the other's. "My name is no value out here, four thousand miles from my folks, I guess; but if you are a regular trapper – "

"I am called the Old Man of the Mountain," said Ridge, sadly rather than proudly. "I am about the last of the old guard – I fear one of the oldest men. I am Jim Ridge. That's the young man's best companion out here, that's called the Yager – same name put on me, too, by the hearing of it; the Yager of the Yellowstone. When I handled that first in '42, I bent a trifle under the weight. Them was the grand, good old times! The sort of men we get now don't grade up with the brand that passed up to 1850. They don't hunt now – they butcher. They don't trap – they surround and slaughter. They'll be clearing out a beaver lake with a diving bell, next! I wonder! Yes, I am the Old Man, the Yager of the Yellowstone," he repeated, a little piqued at his fame falling on a dead ear – "Injin or white, they all know this child."

The stranger seemed easier; but, unfortunately, the ghost of a smile on his wan features was assumed to be impudence.

"Answer, then," went on Ridge, testily, "for I don't want none of your blood on my knife, though it is itching to be in at your ribs."

"Nonsense. You are neither hasty nor bloodthirsty, Mr. Ridge. One question from me first, if you please – "

Old Jim waved his hand disgustedly at this polite address, and the "Mistering."

"I just want to know if you know Mr. Brasher, of Varina?"

"Do I know 'Trading Jake?' Muchly; and ever so long. Those bales are for him," pointing to a stack against the walls.

"Then I have a message for you, Mr. Ridge," went on the prisoner, relieved entirely.

"A letter?"

"The letter is lost; I ate it up when a gang of Digger Indians played the joke of making me exchange a good outfit for these rags. Luckily, they thought it was a talisman, and that to cook me and eat me with that medicine paper in my gullet was an error, and so I got away, together with my gun. But I know the contents, and they are important, Mr. Brasher said."

"Fire away!" said Ridge, more and more thawed out towards the speaker.

"But first, some proof I am not being deceived."

"Hang the man!" laughed Jim, amused at being an unknown to one person in this world. "Show him my brand on those packs, Bill."

"'J. Ridge' – hem! Well," said the captive, "this is the communication: 'The man they call *Captain Kidd* and a gang of border troublers slid out of town with tools, stores, and firearms galore, and I want the Old Man of the Mountain to know that they are bound for the Big Placer in the Yellowstone Region.' That is what I was to tell every regular hunter and trapper until Mr. Ridge heard of it."

"Oh, call me Jim! I am much obliged to Brasher. Well, stranger, you are too deep for me if this is a getup of your'n. Resave your own secret, and meanwhile there's sage ile and snake grease for your bruises, and fire and meat and Injin 'taters; and you can have whiskey if your appetite calls that way. Fall on! As the soldiers say."

Then vacating the fireside, he drew aside with the Indian, and the two eyed the captive inquisitorially while he devoured the supper, which represented probably two or three meals he had missed.

"Drink free!" said Ridge, offering a horn cup. "You need fear nothing now. One who has shared the trapper's hospitality has to be a precious mean skunk to deserve kicking out."

"Nobody's going to say a word against your hospitality," retorted the stranger, sarcastically. "The feed's capital, and the liquor a revival, for, though a temperance man, I need it as medicine, I can tell you. But the way the trapper introduces guests to his hospitality by shooting a welcome

at him, trussing him up like a turkey, and tossing him down on the floor like a roll of carpet to be beaten, is not what a simple traveller from the Atlantic seaboard approves of."

"Stranger," said Ridge, sitting down on a buffalo skull stool covered luxuriously with furs which a Russian grand duchess might give her earrings to possess, "this is our home round here by all the rights the first discoverer and the constant defender may claim. My *companyero* was not to know with what intentions you were making yourself a neighbour. You may think yourself lucky that his shot did not pierce your brain or heart, and that he did not use the slipknot of your lariat to decorate the nearest larch with you. It is necessary that our mountain fort should be kept hid from everybody. Gentlemen like Mr. Brasher do not know it, sir. Tell me your name, show that you are no evildoer, and after you have rested you may equip yourself and go your way. We can trust to your being led out, hoodwinked as you were brought, to maintain our secret. So much I will do for Trading Jake's messenger. Anything else, stranger?"

The ex-prisoner was surprised at so much confidence, and the promise to place him on a fair footing for the task upon his shoulders.

"You will do this, eh?" cried he with frank joy; "A good rifle instead of that broken musket, food and powder, clothes against this searching air?"

"Jim Ridge never yet broke his word," remarked the Cherokee, for the first time relenting in his suspicion so as to address his late captive.

"My name goes for nothing, but I will tell you my mission out here, and why your gift will put me under a great obligation. Besides, you have the experience which I lack, and who knows but that your comments on my story may be of service."

"Make yourself at home, then," said the old mountaineer, pleasantly; "there's a pipe for you, too, and the night is only begun. We so seldom have company, eh, Bill? that a couple of hours for a storyteller will be a real treat. Stranger, we listen, if the grub has put you in pretty good shape again."

"One moment," demurred the other; "you talk of the need to guard this place from spies. Now, I can't compliment you on your vigilance and prudence when you squat here in the broad firelight with the cavern gaping open yonder – an Indian boy could riddle us with arrows."

Ridge laughed.

"If you don't mind getting up and coming to the opening, you shall see that – but not so near the brink – the crust is shaky. See, how readily I detach a chunk. Don't lean forward. Look forth – it is a clear night."

It was serene and lovely. The stars shone unveiled, and that was all in the deep indigo black, where, beneath, the deep-rooted pines could be heard slowly swaying, not seen, like a field of grain in a zephyr.

"I see nothing."

"No trees, no rocks?"

"No. Nothing but stars."

"You would see nothing but stars if you were to step after that stone. Hark!"

Jim trundled the rocky lump out of the cave; but not the faintest sound or echo betokened that it touched bottom or anywhere.

"Heaven preserve us!" ejaculated the guest, recoiling. "'Tis the Bottomless Pit!"

"Pretty nigh," answered the mountaineer, laughing; "that's fallen five thousand feet. This is not a precipice sheer down, but a peak hollowed out – a cut-off, *we* say; the Injins say a devil's jump. Stranger, on this side, we shall not be invaded. Now for your tale! Stir up the fire brightly, Bill."

"Yes, for it is a dark and horrid story, gentlemen."

CHAPTER V

THE LONE MAN'S STORY

"Gentlemen," began the enforced guest of Jim Ridge and the half-breed, "I was born in an Atlantic State, and my earliest memories relate to home events of so little moment now, that I have almost forgotten them. I remember, however, that a number of our young men formed a party and went West, and that the reading of some of their letters home, reflected into my boyish ears, fed the natural longings of one who lived sufficiently remote from the crowded town to know what a lake and the woods are like. Besides, an uncle of mine was said to have gone to the same marvellous backwoods, and I used to be promised a real wild Indian's bow-and-arrows at the least when he should return. All this is common enough in the East. About the year 1850 my mother died, and my father, as much to distract himself in his profound grief as to quench a thirst for fortune which he shared with New Englanders, departed with me, a stripling, around the Cape to California. Our ship was rather better than those rotten tubs which unscrupulous men fitted out as 'superb clippers,' and we outstripped many vessels that had anticipated our start. You must recall something of the sensation due to the startling discovery of gold in the extreme West. Even the fables of old whalers who visited the Pacific Coast, and who really had been blind, were outdone by reality. With indescribable furious madness, people flocked from the world's confines towards a tract hardly laid down in charts. They seemed to have become monsters in human form, as the playbooks say, with no impulse but avarice. We stepped ashore into a field of carnage, though lately a peaceable grazing ground; men sought to remove each other with steel and lead, whilst the few females, the vilest of their sex, freely employed poison. Luckily, these demons slew one another, and left no aftercrop of fiends and furies to blight the Golden State."

"Father and I had no experience in gold seeking, and he saw that money enough awaited an active, acute man, in supplying the returned miners with table delicacies. He was used to fishing, trapping, and gunning, and so we set to killing bears – any quantity on the Sierra Nevada 'spurs' then – and fishing in the Sacramento and San Joaquín. We built a ranche on the banks of the former stream, in a lonely spot, and only went to town to sell game and procure ammunition and other stores."

"One Saturday my father went on this duty, whilst I amused myself with tracking a young grizzly, with the hope of securing him alive, as a hotel keeper wanted a 'native attraction' for his barroom. Unfortunately, a huge grizzly intercepted my course, and wounded me in a scuffle, out of which I thought myself happy to escape so easily; and almost made me lose my prize. However, as this wound stung me in pride as well as flesh – for I daresay, gentlemen, you know how a grizzly's claws leave a smart!" (the two hunters nodded animatedly) – "I pressed on, after a circuit, at the tail of my first 'meat.' I overtook it at dark, had to kill it – it was so stubborn – dressed it, and carried away the paws and choice meat in the hide. The sun was down, and my load was too heavy for me to show much speed, though I believed my father would be impatiently awaiting me."

"It was nine o'clock when I sighted the ranche. The squally wind presaged a tempest. As no light shone at the window, I concluded my father, who must have got back, had gone to bed, weary of waiting. I pulled up the latch, entered, flung down the game, and was making for the hearth, to get a flare-up, when I heard a faint voice close by falter – "

"'Is that you, Sam?' My father's voice! The tone sent a shiver all over me till the blood ran cold from my heart."

"'Oh, that you had come an hour sooner!' he sighed."

"In an instant I had a blaze on the hearth with a handful of bears' grease upon the embers."

"There lay the old man, having tried to crawl to his couch. His face was livid; two wounds were on his breast – one of a firearm, one of a knife; and he was scalped as well. The blood from these

neglected wounds painted him thickly and hideously. I fell on my knees beside him, and tried, though vainly, to staunch those dreadful hurts."

"'It's no use, boy,' said he; 'nothing can fence off death. I thank Heaven I was allowed to linger till you came. Now, dash away your tears, and listen to me like a man. In half an hour I shall be no more; but that will do if you mean to see justice done me.'"

"He had started for San Francisco at one, so as to be home early enough to have a good meal against my return if I were out. He soon got through his business, and was going to leave, when he met a native Californian acquaintance – a *gambusino*, or confirmed gold hunter – a man he liked very well. To have a friendly glass at leisure, they dropped into the nearest public resort, the gamblers' and revellers' hotel, called the 'Polka' saloon. The place was crammed with drinkers taking their morning 'eye-openers,' or desperadoes relating their night's exploits, or miscreants hatching fresh schemes. Several kept 'cruising' round my father and his friend."

"Both were objects of more general interest than either, perhaps, believed; the Californian was suspected to have found more than one gold vein worth tapping; and my father, as a hunter, was likewise thought to have blundered upon the natural treasures of the mountains in his pursuit of b'ar. To both, schemes had been proposed by blacklegs, and both had repulsed them – the Spaniard with pride, and my father with some cutting jest or pure carelessness. Both had made enemies thereby."

"Three of these enemies now buzzed round their table. One was a Frenchman, known as 'Lottery Paul,' because he had drawn the passenger's ticket of a Parisian 'draw,' to enable the chosen subscriber to go free to San Francisco. He was a little bilious wretch, low and sneering, a sort of lynx and fox in combination. His partners were a huge English convict from Gibraltar, and called 'Quarry Dick,' and a Mexican, who had committed so many homicides, that he was glorified as 'Matamas the slayer.'"

"Perhaps it was too soon in the day for these debauched dogs to have shipped enough spirit to fall foul of two men well armed. In any case, they let my father and his friend leave the saloon unimpeded. The three scoundrels hovered about them; but, finally, seemed to be disgusted at their remaining on the alert, and left them."

"The two friends separated, and my father got home before dark without alarm. He had hardly stepped indoors, however, than three men fell on him, all in the dark. They were dressed like Indians; but, as they threatened to kill him unless he revealed where he knew gold was waiting for the digger, it was clear that was but a disguise 'for the road.' My father had been doubled as a man by his mountain life, and he gave them a serious half hour's diversion; twice he got free, and laid about him with a long knife. At last, one shot and another stabbed him; and, either from rage at having been baffled, or to carry out their assumption of the Indian character, they scalped him. He had the fortitude to pretend to be dead as he suffered this outrage. In the encounter he had snatched away the scapulary worn by one ruffian, laid open the cheek of another, and wounded a third in the side. The latter might escape me; but I had a clue to the others. Then, urging me to bring these murderers to justice, my father expired, the storm overwhelming his latest prayer and blessing."

"I buried him under the hearthstone, and fired the ranche over his head, determined that no one should dwell in the house where his blood had mingled with the murderers'. I went to San Francisco, but those three bandits were laid up from the effects of the struggle, or in mere terror of me, for the authorities were not yet in power to punish even the notoriously criminal. I continued the search without discouragement, being rather a pertinacious man, till, one day, my Mexican friend, as he had been my father's, warned me that I was in error: these three men were now *hunting me*, having transferred their enmity from my father to my head: and, in fact, it was a wonder I had not yet fallen a victim in one of their vicious circles where I had penetrated. Being on my guard from this out, our warfare continued long without result. At last, I heard they had separated, and gone who knows where – over the mountains, on the sea, up in the mines? Besides, the Mexican had opened his house to me, a favour not often accorded an American by one who reckoned us invaders and heretics and no

blessing to the country; and he had a fair daughter whom, in short, I wedded. I allowed my task of vengeance to rest, and the hatred of my foes seemed in the same way to be shelved."

"One summer, a French gentleman, who said he was on a scientific expedition, offered me remarkably handsome terms to be his guide to Oregon. I did not care to leave my wife, but my father-in-law was interested in the steamer line to the Columbia River, and I accepted the mission. However, a little over a week gave Monsieur all he wanted of roughing it in the sierras, and he said he had changed his mind, and wanted to back out. I made no difficulty, of course, and we took the back track merrily. When we left, and he handed me a forfeit, he said, kindly enough: 'I hope you will find Madame and the family all well at home!' and yet some presentiment made me take it as ironical."

"Within two weeks I returned to my *pueblo*. The forewarning was sound: my father-in-law's hacienda was devastated, and the farm buildings reduced to ashes; under that black heap my father-in-law, my wife and children were indistinguishably consumed."

As he got these words out by an effort, the speaker covered his face with his hands, and sobbed rather fiercely than mournfully. His two hearers remained quiet, fastening their eyes on the strong man in resentment, with irrepressible pity.

"This time they had overfilled my cup of woe," he resumed, lifting his head, and showing burning, tearless eyes. "I would not leave the punishment of their slaughter to the sworn minister of justice, but avenge my fourfold wrongs in person to the uttermost."

"I took a horse and galloped to San Francisco, where I sought the French consul. He knew nothing of the pretended scientific explorer: that was a sham; he was one of the gang! But he was really a newcomer, and had no skill in hiding his tracks. I was on them without any repose. They led me by nightfall to a lone ranche, where the roll of the sea came softly, and mingled with the whinnying of two horses picketed by the door, which welcomed mine. I rode him in at that door which I carried off the hinges. Two men were on stools at a dying fire, chuckling and drinking. One was Matamas, the other the Frenchman who had engaged me as guide. They sprang up in amazement. I flew at them with a tigerish yell. No doubt fury increased my forces, for in ten minutes I had trampled one down and lassoed the other. Both lay helpless under my knife."

"'Mister Frenchy,' said I, 'how much were you paid beyond the sum you gave me for guidance to lure me aside whilst your employers burnt my house and killed all those dear to me?'"

"'What, what!' said he, 'Is this the practical joke you played, Monsieur Matamas?'"

"The Mexican said not a word; his teeth were chattering with the general tremor. As the Frenchman saw I was merciless, and knew he was in my power, he told me the whole tale of how he had been hired in an hour of starvation to decoy me away from my home. He had no hand in the extreme consequences, and I let him go with the warning that I might not be so lenient if ever we met again. Whilst he rode away like mad, I returned to Matamas, whose hand I tied, open, on a plank, and I said:"

"'Well named as 'the killer,' tell me all about this plot, or I shall cut you up joint by joint!' and, though you shudder at the thought, sir," he interjected to Ridge, while Cherokee Bill greedily listened, "I should have done it; but at the third of his finger being severed, the coward fainted, and, on coming to, as I sawed at another articulation, he whined the complete confession. His was the scapulary which my father had inextricably grasped in the death 'scrimmage.' If I had regretted my cruelty, the list of his crimes would have steeled me anew. Worse than I suspected remained to tell, for his two accomplices had not only fled with the valuables of my father-in-law, but with the heart treasures of mine, which I had till then believed buried beside their mother: my son and my daughter, at present fifteen and seventeen, were abducted by these villains, and are now slaves to them and their kind in some robbers' ranche of the plains or whiskey mill shanty in these mountains. Never can I rest, you see, till they are rescued from these chains of vice, and their persecutors feed the turkey buzzards like Matamas did himself."

"Now, in telling you that a band of gold hunters are on their way hither, and that I have recently crossed Indian trails, I have served you. Help me, now, my friends, with your practical counsel – how can I soonest overtake those men?"

There was a long silence. Bill and Ridge conferred in the sign language as if their thoughts were too full of action to be diluted into verbiage.

"One question?" said the trapper. "In all your story you have manifested the greatest heed not to mention names except of the villainous. Those are no clue to me. But, may happen, those of yourself and kinsfolk may enlighten us. Who are you?"

"My name is Filditch, Samuel George Filditch, my father's George W., and my father-in-law's Don Tolomeo Peralta, well known in California and Sonora."

"Enough. What was the name of your father's brother, whom you never saw, but whom you remember to have heard spoken of in childhood. Was it not James? Come, come!" continued the old hunter, rising and kicking a log so that the freshened flame should flood him with radiance: "They used to say we were like as boys; can you see no trace of a likeness to my brother George in these features? Still silent? Ridge is only a 'mountain name'; but believe me, and Cherokee Bill will bear me out with gun and knife – there never was a deed of mine done under it which my real name would not proudly cover. It is Heaven that has brought you to my bosom, Sam! Come to my heart, where I had clean given up dreams of having a loving head pillowed! Heaven knows this was a wish long gnawing at my bones! We'll chip in together. Don't you carry any heaviness at your heart now. Your interests are mine. I am not a young chicken, but I am game, and with this new spirit, I feel thar's a lot o' living in me yet! We start on this manhunt together. Thar's my hand, Sam!"

"And here is mine!" added the Cherokee. "The Old Man and me always hold together like burrs," he continued, in a kind of apologetic tone. "And if this ain't the most remarkable fact I ever struck, then I don't want my breakfast in the morning."

Thereupon was sealed between the trio a compact that would bring about strange events, hidden under the veil of the future, so that the most imaginative could not foresee the incidents, far more surprising than this meeting of kindred, not at all an uncommon event in the West, where congregate the members of the Eastern families, so wondrously disrupted and attracted West.

Ridge – still to use that name – and his nephew were evoking home memories, when suddenly the latter felt a touch on the shoulder. Cherokee Bill was making the sign for silence, and pointing out of the cave opening.

There was a novel sound, indeed, in the stilly night air: music as from a seraphic choir, for a score of women's voices were singing a hymn at a distance which the limpidity of the air materially diminished:

"Come, tell the broken spirit That vainly sighs for rest There is a home in glory, A home forever blest; Still sound the gospel trumpet O'er hill and rolling sea, From chains of sin and blackness, To set the captive free!"

"Saints in the Mountain!" murmured Jim Ridge, astonished. "I never heard the likes hereabouts. It carries me away back fifty year', when I was a boy in the church! But what are white women doing here? I am staggered. And tuning up like that, too. That's first-class bait for Crows. The angels must ha' taken a fancy to them, or they are cracked to sing at top of the v'ice, an' redskins on the loose. What do you make of it, Bill?"

"See!"

The hunter stared forth. A yellow light appeared as a lining to a cold fog over a vale.

"Ah, a powerful camp! No Crow men will attack that in a hurry – those dogs want to be twenty to one, and, then, somebody has to kick them on to it. Things are bound to be interesting, but, I judge, we can wait till morning. At least, that's my way. I am ready to drop, myself."

"And I," said Filditch, indeed exhausted.

"I will take the first watch," observed the Cherokee, calmly.

In another few minutes, wrapped in fur and blankets, the two white men were profoundly reposing. Ridge chose the flat ground to which the body accommodates itself, whilst his newfound kinsman, less wise, made a kind of bed. The son of the assassinated trapper guarded them who had now the same vow as himself to be their life task.

CHAPTER VI IN HOSTILE HANDS

When Ulla Maclan came to her senses she found herself in darkness, but it was not that of the grave. The snow had been falling again, and all the night through; but the warmth of her body had hollowed out a cave around her, in the roof of which her breath had maintained an aperture. But, cruelly enough, the same blanched mantle that preserved her from freezing had sheltered her from the eager eyes of the only other survivor of her father's party.

With a suffocated feeling, she broke open the shell, and warily emerged into the more than ever wintry landscape. All the breakage of the sledge loads had been smoothly buried with the remains of the hapless Canadians.

Not a mark on the level snow revealed the substantiality of the form which she believed in her terror the spectre of the Indian Chief, but which we know as the secretary, so nearly discovering her, but going on his fruitless way, brokenhearted.

The musical trickling of melting snow tantalised her palate, and she scrambled through the soft drift to a cleft where a rivulet was beginning to run. The cool draught was delicious. She then set to reviving herself with a dash of it over her face, and was binding up her hair, when a loud and coarse laugh made her start and turn, blushing.

Three white men in hunters' garb stood on a crest of the rocks swept clear of the snow, where they travelled as well to avoid leaving traces as to be free of step. The mountains rose behind them, a sweet faint azure, with an opal edge, which was the last night's snow.

Two of the strangers were about the same age, some five-and-thirty; harsh and angular of feature, brutal and bullying, tall and burly. In their half wild, half border town dress, they were not to be taken for genuine trappers by anyone less new to this region than our heroine. They were what is called hide hunters, or skin scalpers, whose least shameful occupation is the slaughtering buffaloes for the hide alone, or even collecting their bones to be sent East for the best ivory knife handles.

The third and superior was more than ten years older, with piercing grey eyes and low forehead, a dirty yellow beard and long hair; the aspect of a confirmed rogue, sly, base, and wicked. They were all armed to the teeth, and their arms were a great deal better kept than their teeth, innocent of any attentions whatever, which did not add any attraction to their grins at surprising the young lady at her toilet.

Somehow, she would almost have preferred to see the red men themselves than these representatives of her race. Nevertheless, she named herself, related the disaster, and implored their help for Heaven's sweet sake.

"A da'ter of one of these top-shelf hunting gentlemen," remarked the old man, laughing; "and wants help mighty sudden? She's terribly fine, boys! Narrerly 'scaped being gobbled by the *friendlies*," in sarcasm, "and *corralled* all night by that equal-knocks-sial storm. Yes, it'd gi'n me a deal of cramp; but see what it *are* to be young and spry! She's 'mazingly lovely!" he exclaimed again in an audible aside to his fellows, amused at his playing the gallant. "I hain't seen no sech since I was an inch high and an hour old! It almost tempts a lone hunter not to 'bach' it anymore, but go into pardnership. She's 'prime fur.' Yes, Miss, you can come along o' us – you're the kind to be welcome anywhar' without a cent! How it will shorten up the ride, a 'greeable gal like you! Jerusha! We shall go back full-handed on the queen o' hearts!"

"Are you captain of some party, sir?"

"Why, not today, Miss. We 'lect our cap'en, and I did not treat the boys well enough to head the polls. But I am chief of the scouts; yes, that's my rank. However, it's a considerable show of white men. The cap's a gentleman, and you'll be as safe as in the Mint as soon as the captain sees you."

The others exchanged a merry look.

"A large party?" she repeated. "Was that your singing I heard in the night, or was that a dream?"

"Well, no, Miss, you never heard any singing in our camp. Stop a bit, when I went on my guard thar was some singing out of Quarry Dick, because they had sneaked away his pillow, which it was a whiskey bottle – no offence, Miss! No, no singing."

"It sounded like church music – a hymn."

"Church moosic? You must 'a been on the dream, sartin sure. 'Sides, thar are Injins squandrin' round hyar, a right few, say a leetle less than a thousand ton, over an' above the band you mentioned. This is a hard season for the redskin, and he's come up here to warm himself at the Firehole, I reckon. The only singer we hev is one young lady about your age, and she only sings to herself in Mexican lingo."

"A young lady," repeated Ulla, somewhat reassured. "At least, I see, you are not friends of the savages."

"No; we are our own friends!" returned the old man, grinning again, "And, individooally, our friends is in our belt," slapping his pistol and his knife as he spoke.

"And will your captain help me to learn the fate of my poor father, and the brave men he engaged – if any escaped from that horrid massacre?"

"The captain, miss, will do anything for a pretty face like yours. If you'll step this way, we'll put you on a pony – there's no possibility of your little feet gitting over this crust. It's not many miles, but the milestones are pesky far apart in this country."

"I would prefer to walk."

"That's downright onpossible. Sol Garrod hyar's got a foot like an army cartridge box lid; but even he would mire himself to the knees."

"Sol Garrod's foot can take care of itself, and you *sit down* with your opinions, unless you want to appreciate the beauties of it in kicking!" growled the subject of the criticism.

"When a gentleman talks about kicking," returned the second man, hitherto content to ogle the girl in silence, "he is to know that 'Niobraska Pete' is the champion kicker of the wide, wild West, and hyar's my hat in the corral –"

"Close up!" thundered the eldest of the three, so very garrulous himself, but not willing for the others to entertain the unfortunate girl with their eloquence; "You have a mouth like a set beaver trap! What's the drift of this stupid row? It's no use stringing it out, I tell 'ee! We've enough to take the back track upon. Whar' do 'ee think you are? Haven't we better things to do than go popping pistols off when the rocks swarm with redskins who have made a raise?" and, as the pair continued to glower at each other, their hands on their weapons, he went on: "Must I knock you both down to l'arn you manners? Don't you see we must cage this frightened bird, and then club up some of the boys to see what the reds have left worth picking at the wreck of the sporting swell? Ginerally these green 'galoots' yield up rich, and those red idiots leave the best goods as beyond their comprehension. Look at the gal trembling; what on airth must she think of your broughtens up?"

"I am trembling with cold, not with apprehension," said Miss Maclan, resolutely.

"Oh, hang her opinion; she's bright eyes, and she sees we are all rogues!" Mr. Garrod observed carelessly.

"Don't you paint us so black, Sol," returned the old man, winking; "the fact is, we only obey orders under our chief. If thar be any blame flying about, it must fall on the captain. When we hand the young lady over to the executive, I shall wash my hands of it, as she was a-doing when we surprised her; and I advise you to do the same for your sweet conscience!"

"You talk like an Injin orator, Mr. Cormick," said Sol Garrod; "if ever we are put in the wrong box – ha, ha! – I shall let you conduct my defence!"

"Come on, Miss," said Niobraska Pete; "in the meantime, them's the two wust-eddicated brutes in the band, and no average specimen idiots!"

They had three horses in hiding, and the 'capture' was lifted upon one behind Cormick, whom she was obliged to enclasp, spite of her loathing, to save herself from falling. They rattled off at a good pace as long as the soil was bare and stony. They soon had to traverse one of those narrow vales between a couple of rocky "divides," which are commonly halved themselves by a more or less broad ribbon of water, and which terminate in a basin, a series of steps, or a "cutoff." The riders were about to scramble down the ravine which yawned, in this case, to appal less venturesome cavaliers, when Cormick ordered a pulling up.

"I want to look ahead, that's all," he said; "maybe, it's a fool feeling; but we have been trotting along a leetle too smoothly for Injin country, and too much quiet I reckon suspicious."

"Some joke o'your'n, to let our coffee and corn cakes git cold!" sneered Pete.

"Say what you like; but let's have one of you scout up that hole."

"Very good, Cormick," said Garrod, tranquilly; "it's my turn. I'll bring you back the nigger's top feather!"

"With his hair, too, my boy; but caution; caution never costs too much, and it's a wise man that wakes up tomorrow morning, as the Spanish say."

"Oh, dry up, Cormick," cried Sol, impatiently reining in, after starting. "Do you raily think the red devils would browse so near *our* camp?"

"Not I, my lad; only I repeat, you cannot poke the bushes with too much prudence."

Garrod scrutinised the speaker's surly and scowling countenance with a puzzled expression; but he must have been encouraged, for he pushed his horse onwards and down, with a snatch of a Negro dance tune hummed between his teeth, and a chew of tobacco.

"He's pretty much a daring chap," said Pete, with a mocking glance at his companion as they slowly proceeded.

"Ay, ay, he does not go to market to sell courage with an empty basket," replied the chief scout, with a dubious grin; "but I prefer his showing the lead to this child."

Meanwhile Garrod had been spurred by the latter's air and tone into taking the precautions indispensable on ground sown with hostilities. His repugnance grew as he dived into the defile, though it was ample for cavalry to have ridden two abreast. The sides were wooded with pine, and gradually climbed to a fair height. The adventurer rode more and more hesitatingly, looking about him on each hand, and as well behind as before, his rifle ready to fire. But the complete calmness of the untrodden wind trap mocked his fears. The gorge had many an awkward turn; but nothing inimical appeared anywhere till the rider came clear out on the edge of a plain, across which a daring smoke advertised the site of his camp – one that defied attack, no doubt; for the wolf knows his bones are not worth the picking.

"What trash!" he muttered, reining in testily. "Old Cormick is in a cranky fit, or sick with too much alkali water in his whisky. Deuce take me if I have seen anything to make a flying squirrel chatter! We might have been at camp by this, where a darned good breakfast is about ready. Hang the old scared crow!"

Perfectly reassured, but still grumbling, Solomon – without the wisdom of his namesake – laid his rifle across his saddlebow, and slowly began to retrace his steps. But hardly had he gone fifty strides, when his horse's ears were trembling, and the animal pointed, like a dog, at the head of an Indian, smeared with red clay and covered with feathers, which arose in the thicket. Instantly a rude rope of bark fibre was cast over the horseman's head, and he was pulled, half strangled, out of the saddle, and dashed on the ground in the partly thawed mud and snow. This done, a man leaped at the horse, and secured it before it could turn away; when, no doubt, it would have exploded the gun against the trees in its flight. The assailant was only a red man in looks – it was Sir Archie Maclan's secretary. Thus far had he wandered, when he perceived from the wind trap, where he was bewildered, the chief object of his search. One glance at the ruffians, who affected to befriend her, had enlightened him on their standing.

Mr. Ranald Dearborn was no fool, if he had not enjoyed prolonged acquaintance with this region. The love for woodcraft had enlisted him under the rich Scotchman's banner, almost as much as his great, though sudden, admiration for his daughter.

For adventure, he had certainly a strong bitter taste at the outset; and what immediately ensued bid fair to be worthy that sample in peril.

Ensconced by the path, he had seized an excellent moment to overthrow Mr. Garrod.

CHAPTER VII

CHEROKEE BILL RECRUITING

Still upon the young Englishman were the rags which had been taken from the dead Indian for the need of warmth. These he was glad to cast off, donning in their stead, as a shade less repulsive, the outer garments of the senseless scout.

He dragged him out of the way. He mounted the horse and, filled with his idea of separating the two remaining bandits so as to have a single-handed battle in the end for the young lady, he returned towards the friends awaiting Garrod's report. They had come to a halt halfway down the abrupt slope. As soon as he beheld them, Ranald waved Sol's cap to beckon them to come on. The distance between, the gloom in the defile, and the well-remembered garments and horse, sufficed to destroy suspicion in any but Cormick.

"Thar you are," said Pete, laughing in relief, though he could not descry the features of the horseman; "thar's Sol beckoning us on – he hasn't been no time scouting the channel."

"He's been much too quick," objected Cormick, sulkily.

"Well, aren't you coming on? What's the matter? Does your *cayuse* kick at so little an added load as the young gal? 'Tell 'ee what, I'll be proud to have the charge of her!"

The old ranger shook his head dubiously.

"Are you sure that's Sol?"

"Am I sure of my being in my boots? What new 'skeeter's bit you?"

"Seems to this old man that Garrod bulks up larger in the saddle."

"So he will after the breakfast we are all sp'iling for. Let out your pony – don't you see he is waving his hand that all's clear?"

"Why don't he come back all the way, then?"

"Because he's no such ass as to want double trouble. You'd tire out a Salt Lake Saint, Cormick, you would! Car'fulness is the first thing to put in your bag when you come out on the plains, but you don't want to have car'fulness as pepper *and* salt *and* sugar in all your messes, morn, noon and night; *and* Thanksgiving, *and* New Year's, *and* Independence Day! Why, old father, you're getting skeered o' your shadder – which it ar' no beauty on the snow, by thunder! Here, I've had my full measure of this hanging back from breakfast, and if you freeze thar, I foller the thaw and let Sol carry me into camp."

"Go on, then!" replied Cormick. "I tell 'ee thar's some devilment awake afore us this morning! And that's not Sol Garrod drawing us into a trap. He's a bad egg, but he wasn't made to throw at a pardner's head. You'll see, you'll see!"

"Eggs or no eggs, I am going on! Follow at your own pace! But mind! If you gallop off with the young gal, in whose ransom I have my share as the fellow finder, I'll report you to Captain Kidd – and you'll not be safe this side o' the Jordan."

In very open order they resumed the march. The cavalier moved on away as they started, stride for stride.

"Look at that!" cried Cormick, triumphantly; "See him ride away."

"Why should he not ride on in front of us, and keep the way clear? He know's the picket's duty – a dragoon deserter, anyhow, he'd ought to."

Still wrangling, they penetrated the defile, where Niobraska Pete taunted his elder to press on. At a third of the course, nothing justified Cormick's apprehensions.

"Sol has got out of the way altogether now, though," he remonstrated.

"Pooh! He has darted on to tell cook to dish up, that's all."

"Well, I shan't be satisfied till I have had the first mouthful down," said the old man, with a still uneasy look around.

Presently he pulled up his horse, saying that he was in a good spot for defence; the rising ground over a bulging root of a large cedar crossing the narrowing path.

"You go on and give the call if all goes well and it is no bogus Sol," said he. "Here I stay till the way is safe to my belief."

"He's stubborn as a mule," muttered Pete. "A stamp crusher would not shake him. Old man," he said, angrily, "I *shall* git on, and tell the captain you are up to some trick as regards the young lady. Don't you fear, though, miss, the captain will stew him like a fish in the kettle if he plays any tricks on the fair prize of the band represented by its three scouts in company."

With that he disappeared in the forest cleft, and the snowy crust ceased to crackle under his horse's hoofs.

The stillness became oppressive, broken only by the swishing of the branches suddenly relieved of snowy burdens by the effect of the sunbeams and springing up gaily. All the beasts were hibernating or asleep; all the birds gone south except the Arctic robins and the sedately soaring eagles, whose white heads seemed frosted and presented to the sun to be freed of the chill.

Expectation weighed as poignantly upon the unfortunate girl as on the old border ruffian. Insensibly yielding to the desire to battle anxiety with even futile action, he was slowly pushing on his horse when a peculiar sound at last in advance caused him to check it. Within a few seconds, the horse of Niobraska Pete came back to its companion, with no thought but refuge from some startling horror. Pete had not raised an alarm; consequently that smear of blood on the mane denoted that he had been unhorsed by a deathblow. Nor did Sol, nor his mysterious personator appear, and Cormick felt assured that he was left alone, and that foes were planted between him and the camp, of which he almost inhaled the savory fumes. The situation was maddening.

"You are bad luck," he snarled at the girl, with the superstition of the low sort of white men, who soon equal the reds in such fancies. "It has cost two good men's lives just to have met you."

He waited a while longer, but there was no fresh alarm.

"Hark ye," said he, roughly. "I am going to put you on that horse, and we must circle round out of this accursed glade. If you try to 'part co.' I shall shoot you with my first shot. It strikes me, from the way that we have been beset, it is because of you, and hence you are worth as much money as I had concluded from your story; but thar's no calculating on what anybody says nowadays."

As he drew the riderless steed towards him, and tried to make it sidle up flank to flank, its ears were moved in affright. It sniffed some alarming taint on the air, and set up so furious a kicking that the headgear was detached, and left in the astonished bandit's grasp. Then, emitting a scream like a maimed warhorse on the battle field, it dashed into the first opening, and crashed on out of all perception.

"It smells the war paint, by all that's cruel! Injins!" muttered Cormick. "But why did I hear no whoops when they made their 'coups' on Sol and Pete?"

At the same instant, as if to warrant his reflection, a vibrating yell of triumph burst forth so clearly as to seem at their elbows – a war whoop of which Cormick had never heard the like. It was so provocatory in tone that, irresistibly, at least a hundred savage cries answered it inquiringly from all parts of the ravine traversed by the bandits.

"Why, it's a nest of them," groaned the old scoundrel, aghast, and only mechanically restraining his plunging steed.

In the lull which followed – painful by contrast with that hideous clamour – a horseman dashed into the glen and faced the paralysed scout. The clothes were of Sol Garrod; but at the cry of "Oh, Mr. Dearborn! You! Help, help!" from his saddle companion, Cormick was relieved of any doubt as to his previous surmise of a deception.

"Ah, ah," grunted he, "now I know why he never came back."

With one man, and a young white only before him, he recovered full sway of his homicidal acquirements, and his gun and that Ranald had snatched from the burial place were levelled at each other.

"Don't fire!" appealed Ulla, though not in fear for herself, and "Don't fire!" cried a louder and manly voice, as an additional personage for the group leaped down from a rock and fell beside the restless horse.

How it reared at this unannounced apparition! That rearing disturbed Cormick's aim, and whilst his shot passed above Dearborn's head, that of the latter buried itself in his groin, after scarring the horse's neck. The newcomer seized the bridle, and shook off the wounded man, whilst Ranald gladly received the half-swooning lady.

"What the thunder did you fire for?" demanded he, angrily.

The young people stared at him in surprise. He spoke perfect English, but, we know, Cherokee Bill as perfectly resembled a full-blooded Indian when animated with ferocity. Besides, his buffalo robe was tucked up into his belt to leave his legs free, and a ruddy scalp dangled in a tuck of it.

"A dog of a Crow!" he explained, seeing that it caught their eyes. "He'll beg no more powder and ball at the Agency to shoot the two legged buffalo in 'store' clothes, that the wise style a *fresh* from the States."

Perplexed by this singular speech, so unlike either an Indian's or a white man's, the young people had immediately turned their offended eyes aloof. Ulla must have believed she was saved on ascertaining that Dearborn had never relaxed his endeavours to come up with her and her captors. She laughed and sobbed hysterically like one aroused from a nightmare and excessively delighted; it was but a play of fancy. Alas! There was to be another waking, and that not long delayed.

Suddenly the Cherokee's hand was laid upon the Englishman's shoulder, and he said:

"Rouse, sir! That horse must have cantered into the gold seekers' camp – they are already in the ravine."

"Gold seekers?"

"Robbers, thieves, and all that!" explained Bill Williams, hastily. "There is no safety for you that way. On the other hand, there are the Crows – four score at least. I have been counting their noses, so near that I could have killed more than that one decently."

"Oh, what must we do?" ejaculated Miss Maclan.

"The lady asks you what'll we best do?" repeated the half-breed sarcastically, eyeing the young man as if to "value him up."

"Cut our way through them!"

"That's good to say, but how can it be done? The gold seekers number two hundred, and perhaps half of them are crowding in off the plain now. You and I may trust these horses as far as horses can travel, but encumbered with the lady, that one will run double risk as a bigger mark of an arrow and bullet."

"I dare!" said Ulla simply.

But Dearborn shuddered at the idea.

"Take her, man! I will trust you," said he, "stranger though you are, in all senses of the word; and leave me to detain them from an instant pursuit."

"Oh, they have their own roasting pieces to spit," said Bill.

"What is your advice, sir? Your tone is that of a commander here," said Ulla, regarding the Cherokee steadily as he bore himself nobly erect and unaffected, though, better than either, he estimated the dangers of the situation aright.

"I say, in the hands of these robbers you will run no risk for the present, whilst I guarantee this man's safety if we but reach a certain point on these horses."

"I flee, and abandon the lady into the power of disreputable men? No such coward, sir!"

"Coward, when I want you to run the double gauntlet of Indians and desperadoes! I don't see what she could despise you for. Hark! They come on both sides – stealthily, but I hear them! The young woman cannot accompany me where I must lead – are we all to be uselessly crumpled up, or all to be saved?"

"Go!" said Ulla; "Who will save me if you are slain?" in a voice meant for Dearborn's ear alone. But the Cherokee overheard her, and instantly subjoined:

"You're the queen trump! I have offered to help you in this strait because you are white, and your enemies are dogs! But now, on the soul of my fathers! Supposed to be chasing the phantom buffalo in the aerial realm which those mountaintops support – I swear to save you from this hellish crew, or my bones shall swing in the hangman's loop!"

"I hear you, believe you, and I thank you!" exclaimed Miss Maclan, forcing a smile through tears. "But *our* enemies come! Hasten away, in Heaven's name! Dearborn, we shall meet again under that heaven, or within its golden gates!"

She threw him a kiss with a pretence of playfulness, and bounded away in the direction of the plain, crying:

"Do not shoot! It is only a woman! I surrender!"

At the same time Cherokee Bill leaped on the free horse over the tail up, *à l'Indienne*, and catching the other reins, plunged into the thicket, bidding the Englishman bend low to elude thorns and missiles, and heedless of his reproaches. In their rapid course, it seemed to the latter that he saw groups and pairs of grappling men plying clubs and knives, but no reports of firearms cracked the icicles off the boughs. Each contesting party showed a respectful dislike to bringing on a regular engagement.

"What's your horse good for still?" queried the half-breed in a whisper.

"Five or six minutes more at this headlong pace."

"We are nearing an ambush, through which we must cleave our way. Do no less than I do, and we shall be safe!"

"With heaven my aid, I shall do more!"

The half-breed found a broad way by a miracle of knowledge and faultless application.

"To the right – wheel to the right!" vociferated he abruptly, as half a dozen arrows and a light spear or two whizzed under the noses of the suddenly turned horses.

"Ride them down! Now! Hurrah!"

"Hurrah!" cried Dearborn, firing a shot and hurling his gun in his frenzy at the row of dark faces that grinned with flaming eyes like a wall before him.

Few men, except with a long spear, can steadily receive cavalry. Only one Indian really awaited the English youth on his approach; his lance snapped in in the horse's chest. It fell on him, enclosing him between the forelegs. Dearborn was dismounted; but Bill was before him, on the ground, steadied him as he rose, put a revolver in his hand, and bade him fire "low and fast." They had passed through the ambuscade at the cost of the two horses, and the ten shots they poured forth enabled them to have a start in their retreat on foot. They were speedily in a hollow of the rocky bluffs, where no sane Indian would follow an armed foe. The ground was sandy, now mingled with dry snow as hard, and at random rose needles of stone of varied dimensions, among which the half Indian trapper serenely threaded his way. At the foot of a nearly perpendicular mountain they were brought to a standstill. The face seemed smooth as if polished at first glance, but there ran a ledge, or cornice, as Alpine climbers call it, along that level spread.

"I see now why a woman could not have accompanied us in our flight," said Dearborn.

"No, you don't quite," replied Bill, drily, as he led the young man slowly upwards on this narrow footway. No quadruped could have mounted, for these men had to proceed with their backs to the wall, or face to it, in the case of the inexperienced Englishman. (He feared vertigo if he looked out or

down on the abyss.) At last the ledge ended abruptly. But, about breast high, the granite was cracked horizontally, just wide enough for one's finger to be hid in it.

"Watch me," said Bill, calmly. "If you do not think you can follow me in such a spider's way, cling where you are till I bring a friend and a lasso that we may swing you over here. It was necessary that we should leave no trail those dogs dare pursue," he added apologetically.

"Go on," said Ranald, who felt his blood boil with the determination to show this strange hybrid that he had, at least the bravery of the white race, if not the athletic craft of the aborigines.

Thus adjured, the Cherokee inserted his hands in the prolonged crevice, let his body hang at the end of his arms with no other hold; and gradually worked himself along some twenty feet.

The watcher suffered more than he with the suspense. After a period seeming immeasurable, the way was clear; the rock was untenanted save by the young man, and he might have believed he was abandoned in this horrific site by a deluding demon. He looked up: a thousand feet of granite seemed bowing out to fall and entomb him; he looked outward – miles of ether intervened betwixt him and the tops of gigantic trees; he looked down, just for an instant's fraction, and felt his heart shrink; he was some three thousand feet over a cup of frozen water – a lake diminished thus by the space.

"Come!" said the Cherokee's voice, designedly emotionless that he might not affect the young man in any way.

The latter breathed a prayer to live for the sake of the bereaved daughter of his patron, and steadily swung himself over the chasm by his eight fingers alone; the thumbs seemed useless; the cliff fell away insensibly beneath him, so that his feet failed to touch. It was the dream of a man-fly acted out.

Finally, the end of the crack was attained. Here the climber without an assistant was a doomed man, unless he could retreat as he came – almost an impossibility. But, on this occasion, Cherokee Bill was waiting, with the loop of a counterbalanced rope in his hand, which he lowered over the young man and drew up so as to engirdle him. More than his pair of arms were not needed, considering the size of the boulder which weighed the farther end of the cord; but, none the less, two other men were hauling on it. In a few minutes the young man stood on the threshold of the cavern of the Old Nick's Jump. This was the only other way in.

With a cordial wave of the hand, Cherokee Bill presented his protégé to Jim the Yager and Mr. Filditch.

"A recruit," said he, laconically, "and *A one!* We are going to have some rare tussles, right soon and right here; but this friend o' ours will keep up his end o' the board, and don't you forget who says so!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE GOLD GRABBERS

The Cherokee and his young friend had barely vanished from the defile before some twenty men rushed in upon Miss Maclan. They had left her in a growing trepidation lest she had committed a great blunder in not sharing their flight. The newcomers were on horse and afoot. In this rugged way, expert footmen could keep pace with the riders. The principal was a tall, thin man, about fifty, rather bowed than straight; his tawny hair fell in locks thickly upon his shoulders in the style of the adopters of the Indian fashion; his face was bloodless in the third part not hidden by a red beard; as a guard against snow blindness, he wore green goggles, which gave him the air of a student or professor on a most guileless scientific enterprise. Spite of this, he was the Western desperado who had taken the notorious name of "Captain Kidd," that of the most ferocious pirate known on the Atlantic coast in the 18th century. He had already seen Sol Garrod inanimate, and the view of Old Cormick, a much more prized member of his band, doubled the malignity of his scowl. Nevertheless, he was surprised into some courtesy on seeing nobody but the young lady, for he removed his fur cap a little, and faltered:

"Who are you? This is never your work, is it?" pointing to the dead bandit. "Oh, I see," he went on, quickly. "The rogues quarrelled over the plum, and they would have deprived their captain of his option to redeem it at the band's estimation."

"Sir," said she haughtily, "you are right to call them rogues; they professed no great respect for me, and they have been punished for it by men who, on the contrary, have acted like honourable gentlemen."

"That will do. This is no time or place for such pages out of the Book of Elocution! What is it, my boys?" as his men returned quickly from the track of the horses.

An uproar in the woods, where the flyers burst through the Indians, enlightened them on the danger of prosecuting their researches too far.

"Our red brother!" he exclaimed, jestingly. "You'd better fall back before he extends the tomahawk of friendship."

"But the slayers of our mates and stealers of their horses are not Indians," added a scout who most recently came in.

"Never mind. Return to camp. Neither in the sky or along the land now is the lookout serene, and we shall meet any mishap better there. Two of you take care of that saucebox. Hang me if she be not, though fair as a lily, as pert and disdainful as a Mexican."

Lighting a cigar, he rode back, meditatively smoking, among his sullen and apprehensive men, without appearing to remember he had made a prisoner.

They were not the kind of characters to whom a young lady's protection should have been confided. On the contrary, their dissipated faces, truculent carriage, and noisy talk, proclaimed them the scum of the dross of the mining camp. Not worthy the name of gold seeker, they deserved that of horse thief, secret stabber, and "gold grabber."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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