

Spearman Frank Hamilton

The Mountain Divide



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CHAPTER I

Night had fallen and a warm rain drifting down from the mountains hung in a mist over the railroad yards and obscured the lights of Medicine Bend. Two men dismounting from their drooping horses at the foot of Front Street threw the reins to a man in waiting and made their way on foot across the muddy square to the building which served the new railroad as a station and as division head-quarters. In Medicine Bend, the town, the railroad, everything was new; and the broad, low pine building which they entered had not yet been painted.

The public waiting-room was large, roughly framed, and lighted with hanging kerosene lamps. Within the room a door communicated with the agent's office, and this was divided by a wooden railing into a freight office and a ticket and telegraph office.

It could be seen, as the two men paused at the door of the inner room, that the first wore a military fatigue-cap, and his alert carriage as he threw open his cape-coat indicated the bearing of an American army officer. He was of medium height, and his features and eyes implied that the storms and winds of the plains and mountains were familiar friends. This was Park Stanley, charged at that time with the construction of the first transcontinental railroad.

The agent's office, which he and his companion now looked into, was half-filled with a crowd of frontiersmen, smoking, talking, disputing, asking questions, and crowding against the fence that railed off the private end of the room; while at the operator's table next to the platform window a tall, spindling boy was trying in the confusion behind him to get a message off the wire.

Stanley, eying the lad, noticed how thin his face was and what a bony frame spread out under the roundabout jacket that he appeared already to have outgrown. And he concluded this must be the new operator, Bucks, who for some days had been expected from the East.

The receiver clicked insistently and Bucks endeavored to follow the message, but the babel of talking made it almost impossible. Stanley heard the boy appeal more than once for less noise, but his appeals were unheeded. He saw symptoms of fire in the operator's eyes as the latter glared occasionally at the crowd behind him, but for what followed even Stanley was unprepared. Bucks threw down his pen and coming forward with angry impatience ordered the crowd out of the room.

He pushed the foremost of the intruders back from the rail and followed up his commands by opening the wicket gate and driving those ahead of him toward the door of the waiting-room. "Get out where you belong," he repeated, urging the crowd on. Stanley turned to the man at his side. "I will go upstairs to write my message. This must be the new boy, Bob," he added; "he acts as if he might make things go."

His companion, Bob Scott, smiled as he followed Stanley out upon the platform and up the narrow stairway leading to the division offices. But Bob Scott was conservative. He never spoke above an undertone and naturally took the conservative side: "If he only doesn't make them go too fast, Colonel," was his comment.

A tall young man, spare but almost gigantic in stature, standing back in one corner of the agent's office as the men about him were hustled along, likewise regarded Bucks with surprise as he saw him start single-handed to expel the intruders. This was the mountain telegraph lineman, Bill Dancing, as simple as he was strong, and ready at any time to be surprised, but not often disconcerted. In this instance, however, he was amazed, for almost before he realized it the energetic operator was hustling him out with the others.

When Bucks thought the room cleared he turned to go back to his table, but he saw that one man had been overlooked. This man was still sitting on a stool in the farthest corner of the dimly lighted room. The spindling operator without hesitation walked over to him and laid his hand on the man's shoulder. Dancing, looking back through the door, held his breath.

"Move out of here, please," said Bucks, "into the public waiting-room." The man rose with the utmost politeness. "Sorry to be in your way," he returned mildly, though there was a note not quite pleasant in his voice.

"Your place is outside," continued the operator. "I can't do anything with a mob in here all talking at once."

"I haven't done my talking yet," suggested the man, with a shade of significance. This, however, was lost on Bucks, who looked sharply at the stool from which the man had risen.

"I think this stool is mine," said he, picking it up and examining it. "It is mine," he added, after a moment's inspection. "Please move on."

"Perhaps before I go," returned the man with the same unpleasant irony, "you will tell me whether you have an express package here for Harvey Levake."

"Of course I will, Harvey," responded the operator in a matter-of-fact way. "Just wait a minute."

Levake's lips stretched into a ghost of a smile, and his white-lashed gray eyes contracted with an effort at amiability.

The operator, going inside the railing, ran over the express way-bills which, not yet entered up, lay on the freight desk.

"There is a package here for you," he announced a moment later, and turning to a heap of parcels thrown under the desk he searched among them until he found and produced the one he sought.

"Here it is—a box of cartridges."

"What are the charges?" asked the man.

"Four dollars and sixty cents."

The man laid down a twenty-dollar bank-bill. The operator hesitated: "I haven't the change."

Levake showed no sympathy: "That is not my fault," he returned.

The operator looked at him: "Do you want the package to-night?"

"If I didn't, do you suppose I would waste an hour here waiting for it?"

The boy considered a moment and made a decision, but it chanced to be the wrong decision. "Take the package along. Bring me the charges in the morning."

Levake made no response beyond a further glance at the boy somewhat contemptuous; but he said nothing and picking up his package walked out. No one opposed him. Indeed, had the operator been interested he would have noticed with what marked alacrity every man, as he passed through the waiting-room, got out of Levake's way. Dancing, standing at the door and with his hair on end, awaited the close of the incident. He now re-entered the inner office and shut the waiting-room door behind him with an audible bang. Bucks, who had returned to his table, looked around. "Well, who are you?" he demanded as he regarded Dancing. "And what are you doing here?"

"Who are you?" retorted Dancing bluntly. "And what are you doing here?"

"My name is Bucks and I am the new night operator."

"You look new. And you act all-fired new. My name is Bill Dancing and I am the telegraph lineman."

"Why, you are the man I am looking for."

"So I thought, when you pushed me out of here with the rest of your visitors."

"Why didn't you speak up, Bill?" demanded Bucks calmly.

A quizzical expression passed over Dancing's face. "I didn't want to break the calm. When I see a man walking around a powder magazine I hate to do anything that might set it off."

“So your name is Bucks,” continued Dancing, as he walked through the wicket and threw his wet hat among the way-bills on the freight desk. “Well, Mr. Bucks, do you know what was most likely to happen to you any minute before you got through with that crowd, just now?”

“No, I don’t know. Why?” asked Bucks, busy with his messages.

“Have you ever seen a shooting mix-up in Medicine Bend?” demanded Dancing in a tone of calculated indifference.

“No,” answered Bucks in decided but off-hand manner, “I never saw a shooting mix-up anywhere.”

“Never got shot up just for fun?” persisted Dancing. “Do you know,” he continued without waiting for an answer, “who that polite man was, the last one you shouldered out of here?” Dancing pointed as he spoke to the corner from which Levake had risen, but the operator, straightening out the papers before him, did not look around.

“No, Bill, I don’t know anybody here. You see I am a stranger.”

“I see you are a stranger,” echoed Dancing. “Let me tell you something, then, will you?”

“Tell it quick, Bill.”

“There is no cemetery in this town.”

“I have understood it is very healthy, Bill,” returned the operator.

“Not for everybody.” Bill Dancing paused to let the words sink in, as his big eyes fixed upon the young operator’s eyes. “Not for everybody—sometimes not for strangers. Strangers have to get used to it. There is a river here,” added the lineman sententiously. “It’s pretty swift, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you have got to be careful how you do things out in this country.”

“But, Bill,” persisted the lad, “if there is going to be any business done in this office we have got to have order, haven’t we?” The lineman snorted and the operator saw that his appeal had fallen flat. “My batteries, Bill,” he added, changing the subject, “are no good at all. I sent for you because I want you to go over them now, to-night, and start me right. What are you going to do?”

Dancing had begun to poke at the ashes in the stove. “Build a fire,” he returned, looking about for material. He gathered up what waste paper was at hand, pushed it into the stove, and catching up the way-bills from the desk, threw them in on the paper and began to feel in his wet pockets for matches.

“Hold on,” cried Bucks. “What do you mean? You must be crazy!” he exclaimed, running to the stove and pulling the way-bills out.

“Not half so crazy as you are,” replied Dancing undisturbed. “I’m only trying to show you how crazy you are. Burning up way-bills isn’t a circumstance to what you did just now. You are the looniest operator I ever saw.” As he looked at Bucks he extended his finger impressively. “When you laid your hand on that man’s shoulder to-night—the one sitting on your stool—I wouldn’t have given ten cents for your life.”

Bucks regarded him with astonishment. “Why so?”

“He’s the meanest man between here and Fort Bridger,” asserted Dancing. “He’d think no more of shooting you than I would of scratching a match.” Bucks stared at the comparison. “He is the worst scoundrel in this country and partners with Seagrue and John Rebstock in everything that’s going on, and even they are afraid of him.”

Dancing stopped for breath. “Talk about my making a fire out of way-bills! When I saw you lay your hand on that man, I stopped breathing—can’t breathe just right yet,” he muttered, pulling at his shirt collar. “Do you know why you didn’t get killed?”

“Why, no, Bill, not exactly,” confessed Bucks in embarrassment.

“Because Levake was out of cartridges. I heard him tell Rebstock so when they walked past me.”

“Thank you for posting me. How should I know he was Seagrue’s partner, or who Rebstock is? Let’s make a bargain. I will be more careful in clearing out the office, and you be more careful

about building fires. There's wood in the baggage-room. I couldn't get out to get it for fear the crowd would steal the tickets."

"Well, you are 'out' four dollars and sixty cents charges on the cartridges," continued Dancing, "and you had better say nothing about it. If you ever ask Levake for the money he will kill you."

Bucks looked rebellious. "It's only right for him to pay the charges. I shall ask him for them the next time I see him. And what is more he will have to pay, I don't care whose partner he is."

Dancing now regarded the operator with unconcealed impatience. "I suppose there are more where you came from," he muttered. "They will need a lot of them here, if they carry on like that. How old are you?" he demanded of Bucks abruptly.

"Seventeen."

"How long have you been in this country?"

Bucks looked at the clock. "About five hours, Bill."

"Reckon time close, don't you?"

"Have to, Bill, in the railroad business."

Dancing reflected a moment. "Five hours," he repeated. "If you don't get killed within the next five you may live to be a useful citizen of Medicine Bend. Where are you from, and how did you happen to come away out here on the plains?"

"I am from Pittsburgh. I had to quit school and go to work."

"Where did you go to school?"

"Well, I didn't go—"

"Quit before you went, did you?"

"I mean, I was preparing for Van Dyne College. One of my brothers teaches there. I couldn't start there after I lost my father—he was killed in the Wilderness Campaign, Bill. But when I can earn money enough, I am going back to Van Dyne and take an engineering course."

"Got it all figured out, have you?"

"Then I heard they were building the Union Pacific, and I knew something about telegraphing—Jim Foster and I had a line from the house to the barn."

"Had a line from the house to the barn, eh?" chuckled Dancing.

"So I bought a railroad ticket to Des Moines from Pittsburgh and staged it to Omaha, and General Park gave me a job right away and sent me out on the first train to take this office, nights. I didn't even know where Medicine Bend was."

"Don't believe you know yet. Now that's right, I don't believe you know yet. You're a good boy, but you talk too much."

"How old are you, Bill?"

"I am twenty."

"Twenty!" echoed Bucks, as if that were not very much, either.

"Twenty!" repeated the lineman. "But," he added, drawing himself up in his tremendous stature, with dignity, "I have been on the plains driving wagons and building telegraph lines for seven years—"

"Seven years!" echoed Bucks, now genuinely admiring his companion.

"My father was a Forty-niner. I was a line foreman when I was seventeen, for Edward Creighton, and we put the first telegraph line through from the Missouri River to the Pacific," continued Dancing, ready to back his words with blows if necessary.

"You *are* an old-timer," cried Bucks enviously. "Any good rabbit-shooting around here, Bill?"

"Rabbit-shooting?" echoed Dancing in scorn. "The only rabbits they shoot around here, young fellow, are Pittsburgh rabbits, that don't keep their ears hid proper. When we go hunting, we go antelope-hunting, buffalo-hunting, grizzly-bear hunting, elk-hunting. Now I don't say I don't like you and I don't say you won't do. What I say is, you talk too much. I'll tell you what I've learned. I've learned not to say too much at a time. And when I say it, I don't say it very loud. And if you don't

get killed, in advance, you will learn the same thing in the same way I learned it. Where are your blamed batteries?”

“Bill, you are all right.”

“I am, am I?”

“First help me enter these way-bills and check up the express packages so I can deliver them to this mob.”

“My business isn’t checking up express; but I like you, young fellow, so, go ahead. Only you talk too much.”

“Just a moment!”

At these words coming from the other end of the office, the lineman and the operator looked around. The military-looking man and his companion had entered the room unobserved and stood at the counter listening to the colloquy between the Eastern boy and the plainsman—for neither of the two were more than boys. Dancing saluted the new-comers. “It’s Colonel Stanley and Bob Scott,” he exclaimed.

Bucks walked forward. Stanley handed him a message. “You are the night operator? Here is a despatch for General Park. Get it out for me right away, will you?”

Dancing came forward to the railing. “How are you, Bill?” said Stanley, greeting the lineman as Bucks read the long message. “I am going up into the mountains next week, and I am just asking General Park for a cavalry detail.”

“Going to need me, Colonel?”

“Better hold yourself ready. Can you read that, young man?” he asked, speaking to Bucks.

“Yes, sir.”

“Lose no time in getting it off.”

With the words he turned on his heel and leaving the office went upstairs to the despatcher’s rooms. During the interval that the message was being sent, Dancing worked at the express matter. While the two were busy, Bob Scott, moving so quietly that he disturbed no one, laid carefully upon the smouldering paper in the stove such chips as he could pick from the wood-box, nursing and developing a little blaze until, without noise or fuss, he soon had a good fire going. In all of the mountain country there was but one kind of men who built fires in that way and these were Indians.

Such was Bob Scott, who, wet to the skin from his ride down the hills with Stanley, now stood slowly drying himself and watching Dancing and the new operator.

Scott was a half-blood Chippewa Indian, silent as a mountain night and as patient as time. He served Colonel Stanley as guide and scout wherever the railroad man rode upon his surveys or reconnoissances. Dancing, emerging presently from the batteries, greeted Scott again, this time boisterously. The Indian only smiled, but his face reflected the warmth of his friendship for the big lineman. And at this juncture Dancing, slapping him on the shoulder, turned to introduce him to Bucks. The three stood and talked a moment together, though, perhaps, without realizing what they were almost at once to go through together. The outgoing Eastern passenger train now pulled up to the platform and Bucks was kept busy for some time selling tickets.

His buyers were all sorts and conditions of men. And one forlorn-looking woman, with a babe in her arms and a little girl clinging to her skirt, asked the price of a ticket to Omaha. When told, she turned away to count her money. Among the men were traders and frontiersmen going to Missouri River markets with buffalo robes; trappers from the Big Horn country with furs; Mormon elders on their way from Utah to their Eastern settlements; soldiers on furlough and men from the railroad-construction camps on the front; adventurers, disgusted with the hardships of frontier life, and gamblers and desperadoes, restless and always moving.

Bucks needed his wits to watch the money that was pushed under his little wicket and to make change without mistake. There was elbowing and contention and bad language, but the troublesome crowd was finally disposed of, and when the last of the line had left the ticket window the waiting-

room was pretty well cleared. There remained only a black-bearded man half-asleep in a chair by the stove, and in one corner on a bench the woman, who was trying to quiet the child she held in her lap.

CHAPTER II

As Bucks looked through his embrasure to see if all had been served, his eye fell on the group in the corner and he heard the woman suppressing the sobbing of her little girl. He walked out into the waiting-room to ask what the trouble was. He learned afterward that she was the wife of a gambler, but she told him only that she had followed her husband to Medicine Bend and was now trying to get back with her two children to her parents in Iowa. When she had ascertained the price of the railroad ticket she found that she lacked five dollars of the sum needed to make up the fare. Bucks had just a little money of his own, but he had counted on using that for his meals. While he was debating what to do, the elder child tugging still at the mother's dress asked for something to eat, and while the mother tried to quiet it Bucks felt he could manage somehow without the price of the ticket better than this woman could.

"Give me what money you have," he said. "I will get you a ticket."

"But isn't the train gone?"

"No."

The black-bearded man dozing near the stove had his ears open although his eyes were closed. He had heard fragments of the talk and saw the boy dig into his own pocket, as he would have expressed it, to start the woman home. After Bucks had given her the ticket and she was trying to thank him and to quiet again the tired child, the drowsy man rose, picked up the woman's hand-bag and told her gruffly he would put her on the train. As he started with her out into the drizzling rain, he carried her little girl, and, stopping down the platform at a sheltered lunch-counter, he bought a bag of doughnuts big enough to sink a ship. He offered no money to the man at the counter, but his credit seemed unquestioned. In the train the seats appeared all to be taken, but the drowsy man again showed his authority by rolling a tipsy fellow out of a seat and piling him up in a corner near the stove—which fortunately had no fire in it.

During all this time he had not said a word. But at the last, having placed the woman and the children in two seats and made them comfortable, he asked the mother one question—her husband's name. She told him, and, without any comment or good-bys, he left the car and started through the rain uptown.

After the train pulled out, the wind shifted and the rain changed into a snow which, driven from the mountains, thickened on the wet window in front of the operator's table. A message came for the night yardmaster, and the operator, seeing the head-light of the switch-engine which was working close by, put on his cap and stepped out to deliver the message. As he opened the waiting-room door, a man confronted him—the bearded man who had taken the woman and children to the train. Bucks saw under the visor of a cloth cap, a straight white nose, a dark eye piercingly keen, and a rather long, glossy, black beard. It was the passenger conductor, David Hawk. Without speaking, Hawk held out his hand with a five-dollar bank note in it.

"What is this?" asked Bucks.

"The money you gave the woman."

Bucks, taking the bill, regarded his visitor with surprise. "Where did you get this?"

"What's that to you?"

"But—"

"Don't ask questions," returned Hawk brusquely. "You've got your money, haven't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"That's enough." And with Bucks staring at him, Hawk, without a word or a smile, walked out of the station.

But Bill Dancing had seen the incident and was ready to answer Bucks's question as he turned with the money in his hand. "That is Dave Hawk," explained Dancing. "Dave hates a sneak. The way

he got the money from the woman's husband was probably by telling him if he didn't pay for his wife's ticket and add enough to feed her and her babies to the river he would blow his head off. Dave doesn't explain things especially."

Bucks put the money in his pocket and started on with his message. The yards covered the wide flat along the river. Medicine Bend was then the western operating point for the railroad and the distributing point for all material used in the advancing construction through the mountains.

Not until he left the shelter of the station building did he realize the force of the storm that was now sweeping across the flat. The wind had swung into the northwest and blew almost a gale and the snow stung his face as he started across the dark yard. There were practically no lights at all beyond the platform except those in the roundhouse, too far away to be seen, but the operator saw the moving head-light of the switch-engine and hastened across the slippery tracks toward it. The crew were making up a material train to send west and the engine was snorting and puffing among long strings of flat cars loaded with rails, ties, stringers, and bridge timbers.

As Bucks neared the working engine it receded from him, and following it up he soon found his feet slipping in the wet mud and the wind at times taking his breath. Conscious of the folly of running farther, he halted for a moment and turning his back to the storm resolved to wait till the engine returned. He chose a spot under the lee of a box-car, and was soon rewarded by hearing a new movement from the working engine. By the increasing noise of the open cylinder cocks he concluded it was backing toward him. He stepped across the nearest track to reach a switch-stand, a car-length away, whence he thought he could signal the engine with his lantern. He had nearly reached the switch when his foot slipped from a rail into a frog that held him fast. Holding his lantern down, he saw how he was caught and tried to free his heel. It seemed as if it might easily be done, but the more he worked the faster caught he found himself. For a moment he still made sure he could loosen his foot. Even when he realized that this was not easy, he felt no alarm until he heard the switch-engine whistle. Through the driving snow he could see that it was coming toward him, pushing ahead of it a lead of flat cars.

Bucks was no stranger to railroad yards even then, and the realization of his peril flashed across his mind. He renewed his efforts to loosen his imprisoned heel. They were useless. He stood caught in the iron vice. A sweat of fear moistened his forehead. He hoped for an instant that the moving cars were not coming on his track; but almost at once he saw that they were being pushed toward the very switch he was trying to reach. Even where he stood, struggling, he was not six feet away from the switch-stand and safety. It seemed as if he could almost reach it, as he writhed and twisted in his agony of apprehension.

He swung his lantern frantically, hoping to catch the eye of one of the switching crew. But the only answer was the heavy pounding of the loaded cars over the rail joints as they were pushed down upon the helpless operator. Worst of all, while he was swinging his lantern high in the air, the wind sucked the flame up into the globe and it went out and left him helpless in the dark. Like the hare caught in the steel teeth of a trap, the boy stood in the storm facing impending death.

The bitterest feelings overwhelmed him. After coming hundreds of miles and plunging into his work with the most complacent self-confidence, he stood before the close of the first day about to be snuffed out of existence as if he were no more than the flame of his useless lantern. A cruel sense of pain oppressed his thoughts. Each second of recollection seemed to cover the ground of years. The dull, heavy jolting of the slow-coming cars shook the ground. He twisted and writhed this way and that and cried out, knowing there were none to hear him: the wind swept away his appeal upon its heedless wings; the nearest car was almost upon him. Then a strange feeling of calm came over him. He felt that death was knocking at his heart. Hope had gone, and his lips were only moving in prayer, when a light flashed out of the darkness at his very side and he felt himself seized as if by a giant and wrenched away from where he stood and through the air.

He heard a quick exclamation, saw a lighted lantern fall to the ground, felt a stinging pain in his right foot, and knew no more.

When he recovered consciousness, three lanterns shone in his eyes. He was lying in the mud near the switch with the engine crew standing over him. One of the men knelt at his side and he saw the thin, strong features of a face he had seen among the railroad men, but one that he knew then he was never to forget—the face of the yardmaster, Callahan. Callahan knelt in the storm with a good-natured expression. The men about the yardmaster were less kindly.

“Who are you, tar heels?” demanded the engineman angrily.

Resentment, which would have been quick in the operator a little earlier, had died in the few moments in which he had faced death. He answered only in the quietest way:

“I am the night operator.”

“The deuce you are!” exclaimed the man bending over him.

“Who are you?” demanded the operator, in turn.

“I am Callahan, the night yardmaster.”

“I have an order for you to send a car of spikes on No. 7, Callahan. I was trying to find you when I got caught in the frog.” The pain in his foot overcame Bucks as he spoke. Another dread was in his mind and he framed a question to which he dreaded to hear the answer. “Is my foot gone?” he faltered.

The yardmaster hesitated a moment and turned to an older man at his side wearing a heavy cap. “How about it, doctor?” he asked.

Doctor Arnold, the railway surgeon, a kindly but stern man, answered briefly, “We won’t take it off this time. But if he is that careless again we will take his head off.”

“How old are you, boy?” demanded Callahan.

“Seventeen.”

“Well, your foot isn’t hurt,” he continued gruffly. “But it’s only God’s mercy that I got here in time to pull you out of the frog.”

The operator was already up. “I hope I shan’t forget it,” he said, putting out his hand. “Will you remember the spikes?”

“I will,” responded Callahan grimly. “And I guess—”

“Say it,” said the operator gamely, as the yardmaster hesitated.

“I guess you will.”

CHAPTER III

Bucks, after his eventful first night on duty, slept so heavily that on the following afternoon he had only time to eat his supper, walk haltingly up the main street of Medicine Bend and back to the square, when it was time to relieve the day man at the station.

But the few minutes in the narrow business street filled him with interest and at times with astonishment. Medicine Bend, still very young, was a mushroom railroad town of frame store buildings hastily thrown together, and houses, shanties, and tents. It was already the largest and most important town between the mountains and the Missouri River. The Union Pacific Railroad, now a double-tracked, transcontinental highway, laid with ninety and one hundred pound steel rails, and ballasted with disintegrated granite, a model of railroad construction, equipment, and maintenance, was, after the close of the Civil War, being pushed with light iron rails and heavy gradients across what was then known to geographers as the Great American Desert, and the project of a transcontinental railroad was meant at that time to unite the chief port of the Pacific coast, San Francisco, with the leading cities of the Atlantic seaboard.

A railroad in building across a country considers first the two uttermost cities (its principal terminals), or those two portions of the country which it seeks to connect for the interchange of traffic.

The Union Pacific and its companion road, the Central Pacific, afforded, too, the first and last instance of the United States Government's becoming responsible for the building of a railroad. Although the project of aiding a railroad to be built somewhere between and connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean ports had been discussed by Congress for thirty years before the fall of Fort Sumter, the extraordinary feeling caused by the Civil War alone made possible so unusual an undertaking. President Lincoln himself had given the subject careful thought, and when, after much controversy and discouraging political intrigue, the Union and Central Pacific Railroad bills were ready to pass Congress, Abraham Lincoln was appealed to to decide a long-standing controversy concerning the gauge, or width of track, for the new lines.

After painstaking consideration, he decided on a gauge of five feet, but the promoters of the line then persuaded Congress to reduce the figures to four feet eight and one-half inches, and that gauge is now the standard gauge for all American railroads. It would have been better if the railroad builders had followed Lincoln's suggestion, since the traffic of American railroads has outgrown the possibilities of their gauges. And within a few years one of the greatest of present-day railroad builders has declared with emphasis that a six-foot gauge must one day come to provide our railroads with the necessary facilities for handling the enormous and constantly expanding volume of American railroad traffic.

The young operator, who, in spite of his efforts to conceal his hurt, now limped a little as he walked up the street of the new railroad town might well look with curiosity and amazement on what he saw. The street he walked in was no more than a long assemblage of saloons, restaurants, boarding-houses, gambling-houses, dance-halls and shops. Nearer the station and fronting on the open square, there were barber-shops and so-called hotels. Up and down the side streets he saw livery-stables and roughly built warehouses for contractors' supplies, army supplies, and stage-line depots.

The main street was alive with strange-looking frontiersmen, trappers, hunters, scouts, soldiers, settlers, railroad laborers, outlaws, prospectors, and miners. Every face that Bucks looked into presented a study. They were sometimes faces bronzed with the clear, dry sunshine of the plains and mountains, rugged with adventure and keen with dangers met and passed, but others were furrowed with dissipation and seamed with vice, or merely vacant with the curiosity of the wanderer.

Nearly every man carried a fire-arm of some sort. Indians were a continual menace upon the frontier to the north and west and on the front where the road was being built; and in the train-service and construction work railroad men usually went armed. Moreover, when the frontiersmen were not

arming against the Indians they were arming against one another; it being difficult at times to tell whether the white men or the savages were the more dangerous to the peaceful pursuit of happiness. As Bucks, returning down Front Street, neared the square that opened before the station a group of army officers were walking across it. They were the first regular officers he had ever seen and he regarded them with interest. At the station the chief despatcher, Baxter, met him at the door. "Bucks, I've been waiting for you. Can you ride a horse?"

Bucks smiled.

"Colonel Stanley," continued Baxter, "is going to the front to-night. He wants to take an operator with him. Giddings isn't well enough to go, but he can take your key to-night; you can go with the colonel instead. He will take Dancing and a detail of cavalymen with Leon Sublette and Bob Scott for guides."

The suddenness of the call was not unpleasant. It was such continual excitement and new adventure that Bucks liked and he said he was ready. The despatcher told him to hunt up Bill Dancing, who would give him the details.

Within an hour the cavalry horses were being loaded into a box-car up at the stock chute, and while Bucks and big Bill Dancing watched them an engine and the chief engineer's car were backed down the yard to make up the special train. At the same moment, the two saw Stanley walking across the yard with two engineers who were going to the front with him.

Bucks looked with admiration at the soldier-constructionist. He was slight in figure, wore the precise-looking military cap, and was dressed with extreme care. He stepped with a light briskness that implied an abundance of native energy, and his manner as he greeted the two railroad men was intimate and gracious, putting them at once at their ease. His smooth-shaven face, bronzed with service, and his brown eyes, were alive every moment. Whatever the enterprise, Stanley could call forth the loyalty and the best in those under him, and in Dancing and Scott he had two men that worked well together and had in their chief the unquestioning faith that insures devotion.

To these two more experienced men was now to be added a third, Bucks. The train started almost at once, and Oliver, the colonel's cook, prepared supper in his box-like kitchen and chopped his potatoes, for frying, in muffled ragtime, as the puffing engine slowly drew the train up the long gorge into the mountains. Bucks sat down at table with the engineers and Stanley asked him many questions. He wanted to know where Bucks had gone to school, why he had quitted at fifteen, and what had brought him away out on the Desert to begin railroading.

When it appeared that Stanley as well as he himself was from Pittsburgh, and even that Bucks had been named after the distinguished officer—John Stanley Bucks—Bucks was happier than at any time since he had left home.

The talk went on till very late. Stanley and General Park, who also had been a regular-army man, told stories of the Civil War, just then ended, and the giant lineman, Dancing, entertained the company with stories of adventure incurred in the mountains and on the plains in building the first transcontinental telegraph line.

Bucks sat for hours in silence while the three men talked; but he had good ears and was a close listener. All the adventure books of his boyhood reading had been bound up with this very country and with these rugged mountains through which they were riding. The tales of the people all about him during his youth had been of the far and mysterious West—of the overland trail and the gold seekers, of Pike's Peak and California, of buffaloes and trappers and Indians, and of the Mormons and the Great Salt Lake. These had been his day-dreams, and at last he was breathing the very air of them and listening to men who had actually lived them.

The sleeping-bunks in the car could hardly be called berths, but they served to lessen the fatigues of the night, and when Bucks woke in the morning he saw from his window a vast stretch of rough, desert country bordered by distant mountain peaks, some black, some brown, some snow-capped in

the morning sun. The train stopped in a construction camp, near the end of the rails, and after a hasty breakfast Bucks walked with the engineers up the track to the head-quarters of the rail-laying gang.

The air was frosty. During the night snow had fallen, and as Bucks followed his party the sun burst over the plain that they had crossed in the night and lighted the busy camp with a flood of gold. It was a camp such as few American boys had ever seen and of a type that no boy will ever see again. Everywhere along the cuts and hillsides and in sheltered spots the men had made temporary quarters by burrowing into the clay or soft rock and making dugouts and canvas-roofed huts, with earthen sides for walls.

But not all were so enterprising as this. Some laborers were camping in old hogsheads. Even packing-boxes served others for shelter, but were all so disposed within the cuts and among the ridges of the railroad grade as to be safe from Indian forays. And along the completed railroad, all the way from the Missouri River, material and supply trains were moving to supply this noisy, helter-skelter camp, which seemed to Bucks all confusion, yet was in reality all energy.

General Jack Casement, in charge, came forward to greet Stanley.

“And they tell me, general,” said Stanley, “you are laying a mile a day.”

“If you would give us the ties, colonel,” returned Casement, short-bearded and energetic, “we should be laying two miles a day.”

“I have turned the Missouri River country upside down for timber,” returned Stanley. “The trouble is to get the material forward over a single track so many hundred miles. However, we shall be getting ties down the Spider Water within two weeks. I am on my way up there now to see what the contractors are doing.”

It was the first intimation Bucks had had as to the object of the trip. Casement had a number of subjects to lay before his superior while within consulting distance, and Bob Scott, an hour later, announced that Stanley would not move on for two days. This left his attendants free, and when Scott, low-voiced and good-natured, asked Bucks if he wanted to go out on the Sweet Grass Plains with him after an antelope, Bucks accepted eagerly. The two saddled horses and Bucks, with a rifle borrowed from Sublette, followed Scott across a low-lying range of hills broken by huge stone crags and studded with wind-blown and stunted cedars, out upon the far-reaching expanse of an open plain. The scene was inspiring, but impressions crowded so fast one upon another that the boy from the Alleghanies could realize only that he was filled with sensations of delight as his wiry buckskin clattered furiously along the faint trail that carried him and his guide to the north and west. The sun was high when Scott reined up and, dismounting, tethered his horse in a glade hidden by a grove of aspens and bade Bucks do the same.

“Getting hungry?” asked Scott, smiling at his companion. An answer was written pretty plainly on Bucks’s face.

“Didn’t bring anything to eat, did you?” suggested Scott.

Bucks looked blank. “I never thought of it,” he exclaimed. “Did you bring anything?”

“Nothing but this,” answered Scott, holding up a small buckskin sack fitted with drawing strings.

“What is that, Bob?”

“It is what I carry wherever I ride. I carry nothing else. And it is only a little bag of salt.”

“A bag of salt!” cried Bucks. “Do you eat salt?”

“Wait and see,” answered the scout. “Pull your belt up a notch. We’ve got a little walking to do.”

Scott, though of Chippewa blood, had been captured when a boy by the Sioux and, adopted into the tribe, had lived with them for years. He knew the mountains better than any man that served Stanley, and the latter trusted him implicitly—nor was the confidence ever betrayed.

Walking rapidly over a low-lying divide beyond which lay a broad valley marking the course of a shallow creek, Scott paused behind a clump of cedars to scan the country. He expected to find antelope along the creek, but could see none in any direction. Half a mile more of scouting explained

the absence of game, and Scott pointed out to Bucks the trail of an Indian hunting party that had passed up the valley in the morning. They were Cheyennes, Scott told his companion, three warriors and two squaws—reading the information from signs that were as plain to him as print—though Bucks understood nothing of it. In the circumstances there was nothing for it but a fresh venture, and, remounting, the Indian led the boy ten miles farther north to where the plains stretched in a succession of magnificent plateaus, toward the Sleepy Cat Mountains.

“We are in real Sioux country now,” observed Scott, as he again dismounted. “And we are as likely now to uncover a war party as a herd of antelope.”

“What should you do, Bob, if we met Sioux?”

“Run,” smiled Bob, with Indian terseness. Yet somehow the boy felt that Bob, in spite of what he said, would not run, and he realized for a moment the apprehension of one but newly arrived on the frontier, and still subject to tremors for his scalp. The scout took his stand near a thicket of quaking asp and almost at once sighted a band of antelope. Taking Bucks, he worked around the wind toward the band, and directed him how and when to shoot if he got a chance. Bucks, highly wrought up after the long crawl to get within range, did get a chance, and with his heart beating like a trip-hammer, covered a buck and fired. The scout shot immediately afterward, and the herd broke swiftly for the timber along the creek. But Bucks, as well as his experienced companion, had brought down an antelope.

Scott, as he joined his companion, looked at him with curiosity. “Where did you learn to shoot?”

“I couldn’t do it again, Bob,” exclaimed Bucks frankly. “The only shooting I’ve ever done is rabbit-shooting, or squirrel-shooting. I was lucky for once, that’s all.”

“I hope your luck stays with us. If it does we may get back with all of our hair,” returned Scott. “The thing to do now is to lose no time in leaving here. We are farther from camp than we ought to be. When I get to running antelope I am apt to go as far as they do.”

The two hunters got the carcasses across their horses, and acting on Scott’s admonition started to cover a good bit of the distance toward camp before stopping.

The sun was already low in the west and Bucks realized that they had been out all day. The hunters rode due southeast, to put every mile possible between them and the Indian country before dark. They were riding along in this manner at dusk, when Scott, leading, pointed to a canyon that offered a hiding-place for the night, and directed his horse into it. Scarcely had the two passed within the canyon walls when Scott halted and, with a quick, low command to the boy, sprang from his horse. Bucks lost no time in following suit: they had ridden almost into an Indian camp, and when Bucks’s feet touched the ground Scott was covering with his rifle a Sioux brave who with two squaws rose out of the darkness before him. Quick words passed between Scott and the Indian in the Sioux tongue. Bucks’s hair rose on end until the confab quieted, and the scout’s rifle came down. In an instant it was all over, but in that instant the Easterner had lived years.

“It is all right,” said Bob, turning to reassure his charge. “He is a young chief—Iron Hand. I know his father. These three are alone. Eight of them went out after buffalo five days ago. The second day they fell in with Turkey Leg and a Cheyenne war party. Two of Iron Hand’s warriors were killed. The rest got separated and these three lost their horses. Iron Hand,” Scott nodded toward the silent Indian, “was hit in the arm, and with his squaw and her sister has been trying to get north, hiding by day and travelling by night. He can’t shoot his rifle; he thinks his arm is broken; and the squaws haven’t been able to kill anything. They are hungry, I guess.”

“And did they tell you all this in those few words?” demanded Bucks incredulously.

“It doesn’t take many words to tell stories in this country. If a man talked much he would be dead and buried before he got through.”

“Bob, if they are hungry, give them some antelope.”

Scott, who had meant to suggest the same thing, was pleased that the offer should come from his companion, and so told the wounded Indian. The latter drew himself up with dignity and spoke

a few rapid words. “He says he is glad,” translated Bob, “that your heart is big. And that it will be safer to go farther into the canyon. The Cheyennes are hunting for them all around here, and if you are not afraid to camp with the Sioux, we will stay with them here to-night. While the Cheyennes are hunting them, they might find us. It will be about the safest thing we can do.”

“You know best,” said his companion. “Can you trust this man?”

“Trust him?” echoed Bob mildly. “I wish I could trust the word of a white man half as far as I can that of a Sioux. He understands everything you say.”

“Can he talk English?” asked Bucks in surprise.

“Better than I can.”

It was with queer sensations that Bucks found himself in a hostile country and with the deadliest enemies of the white man going into camp for the night. Within a minute or two after Scott and the wounded brave had picked a defended camp near a rivulet of water, the two squaws had a fire going, and they set to work at once dressing an antelope.

Savory morsels were cut from choice spots on the carcasses and these were broiled by impaling them on long sticks over the fire. Bucks, learning very fast with his eyes, saw how surprisingly small an affair an Indian camp-fire is, and how much could be done with a few buffalo chips, if one understood how to keep them renewed. Both safety and convenience were served by the tiny blaze, and meat never tasted as good to Bucks as it did on that clear, frosty night, broiled by the two women and garnished from Bob Scott’s provident salt bag.

After satisfying his ravenous hunger, which the Indians considered not even a fair appetite, Bucks asked to look at the warrior’s injured arm, explaining that his father had been an army surgeon in the great white man’s war, as Bob Scott designated the Civil War in translating for the Sioux. The arm, which was badly swollen, he found had indeed been broken by a bullet near the wrist, but only one bone was fractured, and, finding no trace of the bullet, the confident young surgeon offered to set the fracture.

Iron Hand, nothing loath, accepted the offer, and after cleansing the wound as well as it could be cleansed in running water hard by, Bucks took the rough splints handily supplied by Scott’s hunting-knife, and pulling the bone into place with the scout’s aid—though the brave winced a little at the crude surgery—he soon had the forearm set and was rewarded with a single guttural, “Wa-sha-ta-la!” from the stalwart warrior, which, Bob explained, meant, “Heap good.”

Sitting afterward by the camp-fire, Scott and Iron Hand, since the young chief would not talk English, conversed in the Sioux tongue, the scout translating freely for his younger companion, while the squaws dressed the second antelope and cut it up for convenience in carrying on the horses to Casement’s camp. Scott reserved only the hind-quarters of each animal for himself and Bucks, giving the rest to their hosts.

When it was late, Scott showed the boy how to pillow his head on his saddle and then stretched himself out to sleep. Bucks lay a long time looking up at the stars. When he fell asleep, he woke again very soon. His companion was sleeping peacefully beside him, and he saw Iron Hand sitting by the fire. Bucks easily imagined his arm would keep him awake. The squaws were still broiling pieces of antelope over the little blaze, which was neither bigger nor smaller than before, and together with the chief they were still eating. Bucks slumbered and woke again and again during the night, but always to see the same thing—the three Indians sitting about the fire, broiling and eating the welcome and wholly unexpected venison.

CHAPTER IV

Before daybreak the scout roused his companion, and, after breakfast with the three Sioux, who, according to Bob, were still eating supper, the two hunters left their chance companions in the canyon, rode rapidly south, and, with their antelope haunches as trophies, reached Casement's camp about ten o'clock.

Stanley, who was conferring with Casement, came out of the tent greatly amazed at his scout's venturing so far on a hunt as to expose himself and his companion to danger.

"We were safe every minute, colonel," declared Scott.

"Safe?" echoed Stanley incredulously. "No man is safe, Bob, a mile from the track-layers. The Sioux killed and scalped one of our engineers not ten miles from here, when we were running this very line last winter."

"This lad," nodded Scott, "is as good a shot as I am. He brought down the first antelope. We get along with the Sioux all right, too, don't we, Bucks?" he demanded, appealing to his fellow-hunter. "We ate supper with them last night," he added to mystify his listeners, "and camped with Iron Hand."

Even General Casement stared at this and waited to hear Scott tell Stanley the story of their night's adventure. "However, colonel," concluded Scott, "there is a war party of Cheyennes near here. It is a good time to be careful."

"All right, Bob," retorted Stanley, looking at his scout keenly, though no one could be angry at Scott long. "You set the example."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when an operator came running down the track from the telegraph tent with a message for General Casement. It contained word from the operator at Peace River that section men reported a war party of Indians, crossing the railroad near Feather Creek, had attacked an emigrant party camped there.

In an instant the whole construction camp had the news and the work was thrown into confusion. Feather Creek was twenty miles away. Orders flew fast. A special train was made up, and Stanley taking command, with Casement to aid, made ready instantly to leave for the scene of the disaster.

The men running from the grade fell into line like veteran soldiers. Indeed, most of them had seen service in the war just closed and the smell of powder was no novelty. Bob Scott turned the venison over to Oliver and loaded his horse in the car with those of the cavalrymen. Under Stanley's orders he himself rode as pilot in the cab with the engine crew. Bucks also reported to Stanley, and within twenty minutes the relief train carrying two hundred men was plunging down the long hill toward Feather Creek. Heads were craned out of the car windows, and in rounding every curve Bucks, with the scout Leon Sublette, sitting greatly wrought up behind Stanley and Casement, expected momentarily to see Cheyenne war bonnets spring up out of the stunted cedars that lined the hills along the right of way.

But not a sign could be seen of any living thing. The train reached Feather Creek, and slowly crossed the bridge before Scott signalled the engineman to stop. His eye had detected the scene of the fight, and the ground beyond—a low cut—was favorable for getting the men safely out of the cars.

As the engine slowed, a little scene of desolation beside the right of way met Bucks's eye, and he caught sight of the ghastly battle-field. A frightened section crew emerged from the wild-plum thickets along the creek bottom, as the cavalrymen, followed by Casement's armed men, poured out of the three cars. Stanley with his scouts led the way to the emigrant camp, where the fight had taken place. The wagons had been burned, the horses run off, and the three unfortunate men butchered.

Bucks experienced a shock when Scott came upon the three dead men whose mutilated bodies had been dragged from the scene by the section men and who lay with covered faces side by side under a little plum-tree, fragrant with blossoms and alive with the hum of bees. The sunshine and the beauty of the spot contrasted strangely with the revolting spectacle upon the grass.

Stanley gave the orders by which the bodies were conveyed to the train and with the scouts and cavalymen reconnoitering the surrounding country, Casement's men lay on their arms in the shade of the cut. Dancing rigged a pony instrument to the telegraph wires, which had not been disturbed, and Bucks transmitted messages to Fort Kearney advising the commanding officer of the murders and adding afterward the report of Scott and Sublette as to the direction the marauders had taken in flight.

"Who were the beasts, Bob, that could treat men like that?" demanded Bucks in an angry undertone, when he had clicked the messages over the wires.

"Bad Indians," answered Scott sententiously. "You have that kind of white men, don't you? These fellows are probably Turkey Leg's thieving Cheyennes. We shall hear more of them."

In the meantime the scouts and the cavalry detail rode out again trying to unmask the Cheyennes, but without success. It was a week before they were even heard of, and after an all-day attempt to do something, the train backed up to camp and work was resumed as if nothing had happened.

After waiting a few days, Stanley, always restive under idleness, determined to push on across the Sweet Grass country with horses, to learn how the timber cutters on the river were faring with their slender military guard. The party, consisting of the detail of ten men and the two scouts and Bucks, started one morning at sunrise and made their way without molestation into the little-known mountain range called then, as far south as Colorado, the Black Hills.

Stanley explained to Bucks during the morning how the chief engineering difficulty of the whole transcontinental line confronted the engineers right where they were now riding. Here the mountains were thrown abruptly above the plain to a great height and the locating engineers were still at their wits' ends to know how to climb the tremendous ascent with practicable grades. Stanley became so interested in studying the country during the day, as the difficulties of the problem presented themselves afresh to him, that the party made slow progress. Camp was pitched early in the afternoon under a ridge that offered some natural features for defence. Here the cavalymen were left, and Stanley, taking Scott, started out after some venison for supper. Bucks stood by, looking eager as the two made ready for the hunt.

"Come along if you like," said Stanley at length. "You won't be happy, Bucks, till you get lost somewhere in this country."

Sublette lent Bucks a rifle, and the three men set out together, riding rapidly into the rough hills to the northwest. Scott covered the ground fast, but he searched in vain for sign of antelope. "Indians have been all over this divide," he announced after much hard riding and a failure to find any game. "It doesn't look like venison for supper to-night, colonel. Stop!" he added suddenly.

His companions, surprised by the tone of the last word, halted. Leaning over his pony's neck the scout was reading the rocky soil. He dismounted, and walking on, leading his horse, he inspected, very carefully, the ground toward a dry creek bed opening to the east.

He was gone perhaps five minutes. "Colonel," he said, smiling reassuringly, when he returned, "this is no place for us."

"Indians," said Stanley tersely.

"Cheyennes. Back to camp."

"Down the creek?" suggested Stanley.

"The bottom is alive with Indians."

"Up then, Bob?"

"Their camp is just above the bend. They have spotted our trail, too, somehow. It may be they are riding easy to close in on us," smiled Scott, while Bucks's hair began to pull. "Our way out is over this divide." He indicated the rough country east of the creek as he spoke.

"Divide!" exclaimed Stanley, looking up at the practically sheer walls of rock that hedged the course of the creek. "We can't climb those hills, if we never get out."

"They're not quite so bad as they look. Anyway, colonel, we've got to."

“They can pick us off our horses like monkeys all the way up!”

“It’s a chance for our scalps, colonel. And it will be as hard riding for them as it is for us.”

Stanley looked at Bucks with perplexity. “This boy!”

“I can make it, Colonel Stanley,” exclaimed Bucks, who felt he must say something.

Stanley still hesitated.

“We’ve no time to lose,” smiled Scott significantly.

“Then go ahead, Bob.”

They had half a mile of comparatively level ground to cross before they began their climb, and this strip they rode very hard. When they reached the hills, Scott headed for a forbidding-looking canyon and urged his horse without ceasing through the rocky wash that strewed its floor. Stanley, with an excellent mount, could have kept well up, but he had put Bucks ahead of him in the safe place of the little procession, and the boy had difficulty in keeping within call of their active leader. The minute they were out of sight of the creek bottoms, Scott, choosing an apparently unscalable ascent, urged his horse up one of the canyon walls and the three were soon climbing in order.

Happily, Bucks’s scrub horse gave a better account of himself in climbing than he had done in covering better ground. As their horses stumbled hurriedly along the narrow ledges, they made noise enough to wake the Indian dead and the loose rock tumbled with sinister echoes down the canyon wall. But progress was made, and the white men felt only anxious lest pursuit should catch them exposed on the uncovered height up which they were fast clambering.

Secure in their escape, the three were nearing the coveted top when a yell echoed through the canyon from below. There was no mistaking such a yell. Bucks, who had never heard anything so ferocious, had no need to be told what it was—it, so to say, introduced itself. And it was answered by another yell, more formidable still, and again by a chorus of yells. Then it seemed to Bucks’s unaccustomed ears as if a thousand lusty throats were opened, and scared rigid he looked behind him and saw the canyon below alive with warriors.

They were riding helter-skelter to reach a range where they could pick the fugitives off the crest of the canyon side. Within a minute, almost, their rifles were cracking. Scott had already reached a point of concealment, and above the heads of Bucks and Stanley fired his rifle in answer. An Indian brave, riding furiously to a rock that would have commanded Stanley and Bucks as they urged their horses on, started in his saddle as Scott fired and clutched his side instantly with his rifle hand. His pony bolted as the half-hitch of the rawhide thong on its lower jaw was loosened and the rider, toppling, fell heavily backward to the ground. The riderless horse dashed on. The yelling Indians had had their blunt warning and now scurried for cover. The interval, short as it was, gave Bucks and Stanley a chance.

Spurring relentlessly and crouching low on their horses’ necks, they made a dash across the exposed wall of rock near the top, that lay between them and safety. A renewed yell echoed the rage and chagrin of their pursuers, and a quick fire of scattering shots followed their rapid flight, but the Indians were confused, and Bucks, followed by his soldier champion, flung himself from his saddle in the clump of cedars behind which Scott, safely hidden, was reloading his rifle. Choosing his opportunity carefully, Stanley fired at once at an exposed brave and succeeded in disabling him. Bucks was forbidden to shoot and told to hold his rifle, if it were needed, in readiness for his companions. With the bullets cutting the twigs above their heads, Stanley and Scott held a council of war. Scott insisted on remaining behind to check their pursuers where they were, while the two with him rode on to safety.

“I can hold this bunch, colonel,” declared Scott briefly. “There may not be a second chance as good. Get on with the boy before another party cuts you off. They can cross below us and save two or three miles. Get away.”

“But how will you get away?” demanded Bucks.

Stanley laughed. “Never mind Bob. He could crawl through a Cheyenne village with a campfire on his back. It’s what to do with you, Bucks, that bothers us.”

“Just you get on, colonel,” urged Bob. “I’ll manage all right. Leave your horse,” he added, turning to Bucks, “and you take mine.”

Bucks protested and refused to leave Scott with an inferior mount, but his protests were of no avail. He was curtly directed by Stanley to do as he was told, and unwillingly he turned his horse over to Scott and took the scout’s better steed. Scott added hurried and explicit directions to Stanley as to the course to follow back to camp, and without loss of time Stanley and Bucks crouching behind friendly rocks led their horses up the inner canyon wall and, remounting at the top, galloped hurriedly down a long ridge.

At intervals, shots from the Indians reached their ears, and long-drawn yells, followed by the sharper crack of Scott’s rifle, echoed from the west as the scout held the wall against the enemy. Bucks did not understand the real danger that the scout feared for his party. It was that other parties of the marauding Cheyennes might, by following the creek, gain the divide in time to cut off the railroad men from their line of escape. The sounds of the stubborn contest behind them died away as their straining horses gradually put miles between them and the enemy. The fugitives had reached the summit of the hills and with a feeling of safety were easing their pace when Bucks discerned, almost directly ahead of them, dark objects moving slowly along the foot of a wooded hill. The two men halted.

CHAPTER V

“Indians,” announced Stanley after a brief moment of inspection.

“We are cut off,” he added, looking alertly over the landscape about them. “This way, Bucks. Ride as low as you can.” Without further words he made an abrupt turn to the right, striking south to get behind a friendly butte that rose half a mile away.

“The question now is,” said Stanley, as they held their horses up a little after getting somewhat farther out of sight, “whether they have likewise seen us.”

The harried pair were not long in doubt. They had hardly changed their course when there was immediate activity on the hill-side. The railroad men spurred on; the distant horsemen, now on their flank, dashed out upon the broad slope that lay between the two parties and rode straight and hard after the fleeing men. Stanley steadied his inexperienced companion as the latter urged his horse. “Not too hard just now. Your pony will need all his wind. It’s a question of getting away with our scalps and we must be careful. Follow me.”

Bucks’s heart, as he looked back, crowded up into his throat. A long skirmish line of warriors had spread across the unbroken plateau to the east, and Stanley, with nothing but instinct for a guide, was making at top speed to the south to get away from them.

As the two dashed on, they found to their consternation that the country was growing smoother and affording fewer hiding-places from the sharp eyes behind them. Stanley knew they must either ride through the hills ahead or perish. He sought vainly for some break in the great black wall of low-lying mountains toward which they were riding, yet from what he knew of the country he hardly dared hope for one.

He had reconnoitred these hills time after time when running the railroad lines and knew pretty well where he was. The pursuers, too, apparently sure of their prey, rode hard, gradually lessening the distance that separated them from the wary soldier and his companion. The Indians had ceased yelling now. It was beyond that. But even in his excitement and fear the inexperienced boy could not but admire the composure and daring of his companion.

As Stanley glanced now and again back at his enraged enemies he was every inch a soldier. And he watched the distance between the Cheyennes and himself as coolly as if calculating a mere problem in geometry. While saving every possible breath for his horses, he yet managed to keep the Cheyennes at a distance. The Indians, bent on overhauling the fleeing men before they could reach even the scant protection of the scattered timber they were now approaching, redoubled their efforts to cut off the escape.

Forced by the desperation of his circumstances, Stanley bent more and more to the west of south, even though in doing so he seemed to be getting into a more hopeless country. The veteran campaigner eyed Bucks’s horse carefully as he turned in his saddle, but Scott’s wiry beast appeared quite fresh, and Stanley, turning his eyes, again swept the horizon for a friendly break in the black walls ahead. As he did so he was startled to see, directly in front, Indians riding at full speed out of the hills he was heading for. He reined his galloping horse and turned straight into the west.

“Bucks,” he exclaimed, looking with concern at the rider now by his side, “it’s a case of obey orders now. If I stop at any time, you ride straight on—do you understand? You’ve got a revolver?” Bucks tapped the big Colt at his side. “Don’t let them take you alive. And hold your last shot till a buck rides in for your scalp.”

The straining horses seemed to understand the sharp words that passed from saddle to saddle. The Indians were already within gunshot, but too sure of their game to lose any time in shooting; nor was Stanley willing to waste a shot upon them. As he dodged in between a broken wall of granite and a scrubby clump of cedars, closely followed by Bucks, their pursuers could have picked either man from his saddle.

Stanley had no longer any fixed purpose of escape. He meant merely to dismount when he could ride no farther and sell his life as best he could, while Bucks took such further chance of escape as his companion's last stand might afford. The hard-driven fighter was even looking for a well-placed rock to drop behind, when the horse plunging under him lurched to one side of the cedars and a gulf in the walls suddenly opened before his surprised rider.

A rotten ledge of burned granite seemed to head a mountain wash directly in their path. There was a sheer drop of twenty feet to the crumbling slope of disintegrated stone under the head of the draw itself, but Stanley, without looking back, never hesitated. Urging his panting horse, he made a flying leap down into space, and horse and rider landed knee-deep in the soft, gravelly granite below them.

Bucks's mustang shied on the brink. He spurred him excitedly, and the trembling beast, nerving himself, leaped far out over the ledge, following Stanley so closely that he almost struck him with his hoofs as he went flying over the engineer's head. Bucks rolled headlong as his horse plunged into the loose débris. He scrambled to his feet and, spitting the gravel from between his bruised lips, caught the bridle of his horse as the latter righted himself.

No legs were broken and much was already gained.

"Quick!" cried Stanley. "Ride for your life!" he shouted as Bucks regained his saddle. The two spurred at the same time and dashed down the draw at breakneck speed just as the Indians yelling on the brink of the ledge stopped to pour a volley after the desperate men. Unable to land an effective shot, the Cheyennes, nothing daunted, and hesitating only a moment, plunged over the precipice after their quarry.

But they had lost their great advantage. The dry watercourse proved unexpectedly good riding for the fleeing railroad men. It was a downhill run, with their hopes rising every moment. Moreover, the draw soon turned sharply to the south and put a big shoulder of granite between the pursuers and the pursued. The horses of the latter were now relieved, and the wary Stanley, riding with some reserve speed, held his rifle ready for a stern shot should one become necessary. He found himself riding between two almost perpendicular walls washed by the same granite gravel into which they had plunged on the start, but with the course again turning, to his surprise, to the east. Once, Stanley checked the flight long enough to stop and listen, but the two heard the active Indians clattering down the canyon after them, and rode on and on.

As they could see by the lengthening shadow on the mountain-sides far above them, the sun was setting.

"Cheer up," cried Stanley, who had put his companion ahead of him. "We've got the best of them. All we need is open country."

He did not mention the chances of disaster, which were that they might encounter an obstacle that would leave them at bay before their tireless pursuers. Mile after mile they galloped without halting again to see whether they were being chased. Indeed, no distance seemed too considerable to put between them and the active war-paint in the saddles behind.

A new turn in the canyon now revealed a wide valley opening between the hills before them. Far below, golden in the light of the setting sun, they saw the great eastern slope of the Black Hills spreading out upon a beautiful plain.

Stanley swung his hat from his head with an exulting cry, and Bucks, without quite understanding why, but assuming it the right thing to do, yelled his loudest. On and on they rode, down a broad, spreading ridge that led without a break from the tortuous hills behind them into the open country far below. Stanley put full ten miles between himself and the canyon they had ridden out of before he checked his speed. The Indians had completely disappeared and, disappointed in their venture, had no doubt ridden back to their fastnesses to wait for other unwary white men. Stanley chose a little draw with good water and grass, and night was just falling as they picketed their exhausted horses and stretched themselves, utterly used up, on the grass.

“We are safe until morning, anyway,” announced Stanley as he threw himself down. “And this Indian chase may be the luckiest thing that has ever happened to me in the troublesome course of an unlucky life.

“You don’t understand,” continued the engineer, wiping the sweat and dust from his tired face. Bucks admitted that he did not.

“No matter,” returned his companion; “it isn’t necessary now. You will sometime. But I think I have done in the last hour something I have been trying to do for years. Many others have likewise failed in the same quest.”

Bucks listened with growing interest.

“Yes, for years,” Stanley went on, “incredible as it may sound, I have been searching these mountains for just such a crevice as we have this moment ridden down. You see how this range”—the exhausted engineer stretched flat on his back, but, with burning eyes, pointed to the formidable mountain wall that rose behind them in the dusk of the western sky—“rises abruptly from the plains below. Our whole grade climb for the continental divide is right here, packed into these few miles. Neither I nor any one else has ever been able to find such a pass as we need to get up into it. But if we have saved our scalps, my boy, you will share with me the honor of finding the pass for the Union Pacific Railroad over the Rocky Mountains.”

They were supperless, but it was very exciting, and Bucks was extremely happy. Stanley watched that night until twelve. When he woke Bucks the moon was rising and the ghostly peaks in the west towered sentinel-like above the plains flooded with silver. The two were to move at one o’clock when the moon would be high enough to make riding safe. It was cold, but fire was forbidden.

The horses were grazing quietly, and Bucks, examining his revolver, which he had all the time felt he was wretchedly incompetent to shoot, sat down beside Stanley, already fast asleep, to stand his watch. He had lost Sublette’s rifle in falling into the wash-out. At least he had found no leisure to pick it up and save his hair in the same instant, and he wondered now how much he should have to pay for the rifle.

When the sun rose next morning the two horsemen were far out of the foot-hills and bearing northeast toward camp—so far had their ride for life taken them from their hunting ground. They scanned the horizon at intervals, with some anxiety, for Indians, and again with the hope of sighting their missing guide. Once they saw a distant herd of buffalo, and Bucks experienced a shock until assured by Stanley that the suspicious objects were neither Cheyennes nor Sioux.

By nine o’clock they had found the transcontinental telegraph line and had a sure trail to follow until they discovered the grade stakes of the railroad, and soon descried the advance-guard of the graders busy with plough and shovel and scraper. As they rode into camp the very first man to emerge from Casement’s tent, with his habitual smile, was Bob Scott.

Casement himself, who had heard Scott’s story when the latter had come in at daybreak, was awaiting Stanley’s return with anxiety, but this was all forgotten in the great news Stanley brought. Sublette and Scott now returned to the hunting camp for the cavalry detail, and, reinforced by these, the two heroes of the long flight rode back to reconnoitre their escape from the mountains. Bucks rode close to Bob Scott and learned how the scout had outwitted his assailants at the canyon, and how after they had all ridden out of it, he had ridden into it and retraced with safety in the night the path that the hunters had followed in riding into the hill country.

The second ride through the long defile, which itself was now the object of so much intense inspection, Bucks found much less exciting than the first. The party even rode up to where the first flying leap had been made, and to Bucks’s joy found Sublette’s rifle still in the wash; it had been overlooked by the Indians.

What surprised Bucks most was to find how many hours it took to cover the ground that Stanley and he had negotiated in seemingly as many minutes.

CHAPTER VI

After a week in Casement's camp, Stanley and his cavalrymen, accompanied by Dancing, Scott, and Bucks, struck north and east toward the Spider Water River to find out why the ties were not coming down faster. Rails had already been laid across the permanent Spider Water Bridge—known afterward as the first bridge, for the big river finished more than one structure before it was completely subdued—and the rail-laying was hampered only by the lack of ties.

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