

Altsheler Joseph Alexander

The Great Sioux Trail: A Story of Mountain and Plain



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CHAPTER I THE SIOUX WARNING

The scene cast a singular spell, uncanny and exciting, over young Clarke. The sweep of plains on one side, and on the other the dim outline of mountains behind which a blood-red sun was sinking, gave it a setting at once majestic and full of menace. The horizon, as the twilight spread over its whole surface, suggested the wilderness, the unknown and many dangers.

The drama passing before his eyes deepened and intensified his feeling that he was surrounded by the unusual. The fire burned low, the creeping dusk reached the edge of the thin forest to the right, and soon, with the dying of the flames, it would envelop the figures of both Sioux and soldiers. Will's gaze had roved from one to another, but now it remained fixed upon the chief, who was speaking with all the fire, passion and eloquence so often characteristic of the great Indian leaders. He was too far away to hear the words, as only the officers of the troop were allowed at the conference, but he knew they were heavy with import, and the pulses in his temples beat hard and fast.

"Who is the Indian chief?" he said to Boyd, the scout and hunter, who stood by his side. "He seems to be a man."

"He is," replied Boyd with emphasis. "He's a man, and a great man, too. That's Red Cloud, the war chief of the Ogalala Sioux, Mahpeyalute, they call him in their language, one of the bravest warriors that ever lived, and a thinker, as well. If he'd been born white he'd be governor of a big state by this time, and later on he might become president of 'em all."

"I've heard of him. He's one of our most dangerous enemies."

"So he is, Will. It's because he thinks we're going to spread over the Sioux country – in which he's right – and not because he hates us as men. I've known him in more peaceful times, and we've done each other good turns, but under that black hair of his beats a brain that can look far ahead and plan. He means to close to us the main trail through the Sioux country, and the Sioux range running halfway across the continent, and halfway from Canada to Mexico. Mountain and plain alike are theirs."

"I can't keep from having a certain sympathy with him, Jim. It's but natural that they should want to keep the forests and the great buffalo ranges."

"I share their feelings, too, though white I am, and to the white people I belong. I hate to think of the continent ploughed into fields everywhere, and with a house always in sight. Anyhow, it won't happen in my time, because in the west here there are so many mountains and the Sioux and Cheyennes are so warlike that the plough will have a hard time getting in."

"And the country is so vast, too. But watch Red Cloud. He points to the west! Now he drops his hand, doubles his fist and stretches his arm across the way. What does it mean, Jim?"

"It's a gesture telling Captain Kenyon that the road is barred to soldiers, settlers, hunters, all of us. Far to the south we may still follow the gold trails to California, but here at the edge of this mighty wilderness we must turn back. The nations of the Dakota, whom we call the Sioux, have said so."

Mahpeyalute lowered his arm, which he had thrust as a barrier across the way, but his fist remained clenched, and raising it he shook it again. The sun had sunk over the dim mountains in the north and the burning red there was fading. All the thin forest was clothed now in dusk, and the figure of the chief himself grew dimmer. Yet the twilight enlarged him and lent to him new aspects

of power and menace. As he made his gesture of defiance, young Clarke, despite his courage, felt the blood grow chill in his veins. It seemed at the moment in this dark wilderness that the great Indian leader had the power to make good his threats and close the way forever to the white race.

The other Indians, ten in number, stood with their arms folded, and they neither stirred nor spoke. But they listened with supreme attention to every word of their redoubtable champion, the great Mahpeyalute. Will knew that the Sioux were subdivided into nations or tribes, and he surmised that the silent ones were their leaders, although he knew well enough that Red Cloud was an Ogalala, and that the Ogalalas were merely one of the Tetons who, federated with the others, made up the mighty Sioux nation. But the chief, by the force of courage and intellect, had raised himself from a minor place to the very headship.

Red Cloud was about fifty years old, and, while at times he wore the white man's apparel, at least in part, he was now clothed wholly in Indian attire. A blanket of dark red was looped about his shoulders, and he carried it with as much grace as a Roman patrician ever wore the toga. His leggings and moccasins of fine tanned deerskin were decorated beautifully with beads, and a magnificent war bonnet of feathers, colored brilliantly, surmounted his thick, black hair.

He was truly a leader of wild and barbaric splendor in surroundings that fitted him. But it was not his tall, powerful figure nor his dress that held Will's gaze. It was his strong face, fierce, proud and menacing, like the sculptured relief of some old Assyrian king, and in very truth, with high cheek bones and broad brow, he might have been the reincarnation of some old Asiatic conqueror.

The young officer seemed nervous and doubtful. He switched the tops of his riding boots with a small whip, and then looked into the fierce eyes of the chief, as if to see that he really meant what he said. Kenyon was fresh from the battlefields of the great civil war, where he had been mentioned specially in orders more than once for courage and intelligence, but here he felt himself in the presence of an alarming puzzle. His mission was to be both diplomat and warrior. He was not sure where the duties of diplomat ceased and those of warrior began.

Meanwhile his protagonist, the Indian chief, had no doubt at all about his own intentions and was stating them with a clearness that could not be mistaken. Captain Kenyon continued to switch his boot uneasily and to take a nervous step back and forth, his figure outlined against the fire. Young Clarke felt a certain sympathy for him, placed without experience in a situation so delicate and so full of peril.

The Ogalala stopped talking and looked straight at the officer, standing erect and waiting, as if he expected a quick answer, and only the kind of answer, too, that he wished. Meanwhile there was silence, save for an occasional crackle of burning wood.

Both young Clarke and the hunter, Boyd, felt with all the intensity of conviction that it was a moment charged with fate. The white people had come from the Atlantic to the great plains, but the mighty Sioux nation now barred the way to the whole Northwest, it was not a barrier to be passed easily. Will, as he said, understood, too, the feelings of Mahpeyalute. Had he been an Ogalala like the chief he would have felt as the Ogalala felt. Yet, whatever happened, he and Boyd meant to go on, because they had a mission that was calling them all the time.

The Captain at last said a few words, and Red Cloud, who had been motionless while he waited, took from under his blanket a pipe with a long curved stem. Will was surprised. He knew something of Indian custom, but he had not thought that the fierce Ogalala chief would propose to smoke a pipe of peace at a time like the present. Nor was any such thought in the mind of Red Cloud. Instead, he suddenly struck the stem of the pipe across the trunk of a sapling, breaking it in two, and as the bowl fell upon the ground he put his foot upon it, shattering it. Then, raising his hand in a salute to Captain Kenyon, he turned upon his heel and walked away, all the other Indians following him without a word. At the edge of the thin forest they mounted their ponies and rode out of sight in the darkness.

Captain Kenyon stood by the fire, gazing thoughtfully into the dying coals, while the troopers, directed by the sergeants, were spreading the blankets for the night. Toward the north, where the

foothills showed dimly, a wolf howled. The lone, sinister note seemed to arouse the officer, who gave some orders to the men and then turned to meet the hunter and the lad.

"I've no doubt you surmised what the Indian meant," he said to Boyd.

"I fancy he was telling you all the trails through the Northwest were closed to the white people," said the hunter.

"Yes, that was it, and his warning applied to hunters, scouts and gold-seekers as well as settlers. He told me that the Sioux would not have their hunting grounds invaded, and the buffalo herds on which they live destroyed."

"What he told you, Captain, is in the heart of every warrior of their nation. The Northern Cheyennes, a numerous and warlike tribe, feel the same way, also. The army detachments are too few and too scattered to hold back the white people, and a great and terrible war is coming."

"At least," said Captain Kenyon, "I must do my duty as far as I may. I can't permit you and your young friend, Mr. Clarke, to go into the Sioux country. The Indian chief, Red Cloud, showed himself to be a fierce and resolute man and you would soon lose your lives."

Will's face fell, but the hunter merely shrugged his great shoulders.

"But you'll permit us to pass the night in your camp, Captain?" he said.

"Of course. Gladly. You're welcome to what we have. I'd not drive anybody away from company and fire."

"We thank you, Captain Kenyon," said Will warmly. "It's a genuine pleasure to us to be the guests of the army when we're surrounded by such a wilderness."

Their horses were tethered nearby with those of the troop, and securing their blankets from their packs they spread them on dead leaves near the fire.

"You'll take breakfast with us in the morning," said Captain Kenyon hospitably, "and then I'll decide which way to go, and what task we're to undertake. I wish you'd join us as scout, hunter and guide, Mr. Boyd. We need wisdom like yours, and Mr. Clarke could help us, too."

"I've been independent too long," replied the hunter lightly. "I've wandered mountain and plain so many years at my own free will that I couldn't let myself be bound now by military rules. But I thank you for the compliment, just the same, Captain Kenyon."

He and Will Clarke lay down side by side with their feet to the fire, their blankets folded about them rather closely, as the air, when the night advanced and the coals died completely, was sure to grow cold. Will was troubled, as he was extremely anxious to go on at once, but he reflected that Jim Boyd was one of the greatest of all frontiersmen and he would be almost sure to find a way. Summoning his will, he dismissed anxiety from his mind and lay quite still, seeking sleep.

The camp was now quiet and the fire was sinking rapidly. Sentinels walked on every side, but Will could not see them from where he lay. A light wind blowing down from the mountains moaned through the thin forest. Clouds came up from the west, blotting out the horizon and making the sky a curving dome of blackness. Young William Clarke felt that it was good to have comrades in the immense desolation, and it strengthened his spirit to see the soldiers rolled in their blankets, their feet to the dying coals.

Yet his trouble about the future came back. He and Boyd were in truth and reality prisoners. Captain Kenyon was friendly and kind, but he would not let them go on, because the Sioux and Cheyennes had barred all the trails and the formidable Red Cloud had given a warning that could not be ignored. Making another effort, he dismissed the thought a second time and just as the last coals were fading into the common blackness he fell asleep.

He was awakened late in the night by a hand pushing gently but insistently against his shoulder. He was about to sit up abruptly, but the voice of Boyd whispered in his ear:

"Be very careful! Make no noise! Release yourself from your blanket and then do what I say!"

The hand fell away from his shoulder, and, moving his head a little, Clarke looked carefully over the camp. The coals where the fire had been were cold and dead, and no light shone there. The

figures of the sleeping soldiers were dim in the dusk, but evidently they slept soundly, as not one of them stirred. He heard the regular breathing of those nearest to him, and the light step of the sentinel just beyond a clump of dwarf pines.

"Sit up now," whispered Boyd, "and when the sentinel passes a little farther away we'll creep from the camp. Be sure you don't step on a stick or trip over anything. Keep close behind me. The night's as black as pitch, and it's our one chance to escape from friends who are too hospitable."

Will saw the hunter slowly rise to a stooping position, and he did likewise. Then when the sound of the sentinel's step was lost at the far end of his beat, Boyd walked swiftly away from the camp and Will followed on his trail. The lad glanced back once, and saw that the dim figures by the dead fire did not stir. Weary and with the soothing wind blowing over them, they slept heavily. It was evident that the two who would go their own way had nothing to fear from them. There was now no bar to their departure, save the unhappy chance of being seen by the sentinel.

A rod from the camp and Boyd lay flat upon the ground, Will, without the need of instruction, imitating him at once. The sentinel was coming back, but like his commander he was a soldier of the civil war, used to open battlefields, and he did not see the two shadows in the dusk. He reached the end of his beat and turning went back again, disappearing once more beyond the stunted pines.

"Now's our time," whispered Boyd, and rising he walked away swiftly but silently, Will close behind him. Three hundred yards, and they stopped by the trunk of a mountain oak.

"We're clear of the soldiers now," said the hunter, "but we must have our horses. Without 'em and the supplies they carry we'd be lost. I don't mean anything against you, Will. You're a likely lad and you learn as fast as the best of 'em, but it's for me to cut out the horses and bring 'em here. Do you think you can wait patiently at this place till I come with 'em?"

"No, Jim, I can't wait patiently, but I can wait impatiently. I'll make myself keep still."

"That's good enough. On occasion I can be as good a horse thief as the best Sioux or Crow or Cheyenne that ever lived, only it's our own horses that I'm going to steal. They've a guard, of course, but I'll slip past him. Now use all your patience, Will."

"I will," said the lad, as he leaned against the trunk of the oak. Then he became suddenly aware that he no longer either saw or heard Boyd. The hunter had vanished as completely and as silently as if he had melted into the air, but Will knew that he was going toward the thin forest, where the horses grazed or rested at the end of their lariats.

All at once he felt terribly alone. He heard nothing now but the moaning of the wind that came down from the far mountains. The camp was gone, Boyd was gone, the horses were invisible, and he was the only human being in the gigantic and unknown Northwest. The air felt distinctly colder and he shivered a little. It was not fear, it was merely the feeling that he was cut off from the race like a shipwrecked sailor on a desert island. He took himself metaphorically by the shoulders and gave his body a good shake. Boyd would be coming back soon with the horses, and then he would have the best of comradeship.

But the hunter was a long time in returning, a half hour that seemed to Will a full two hours, but at last, when he had almost given him up, he heard a tread approaching. He had experience enough to know that the sound was made by hoofs, and that Boyd was successful. He realized now, so great was his confidence in the hunter's skill, that failure had not entered his mind.

The sound came nearer, and it was made by more than one horse. Then the figure of the hunter appeared in the darkness and behind him came four horses, the two that they rode, and the extra animals for the packs.

"Splendidly done!" exclaimed the lad. "But I knew you could do it!"

"It was about as delicate a job as I ever handled," said Boyd, with a certain amount of pride in his tone, "but by waiting until I had a good chance I was able to cut 'em out. It was patience that did it. I tell you, lad, patience is about the greatest quality a man can have. It's the best of all winners."

"I suppose that's the reason, Jim, it's so hard to exercise it at times. Although I had nothing to do and took none of the risk, it seemed to me you were gone several hours."

Boyd laughed a little.

"It proves what I told you," he said, "but we want to get away from here as quick as we can now. You lead two of the horses, I'll lead the other two, and we won't mount for a while yet. I don't think they can hear us at the camp, but we won't give 'em a chance to do so if we can help it."

He trod a course straight into the west, the ground, fortunately, being soft and the hoofs of the horses making but little sound. Although the darkness hung as thick and close as ever, the skillful woodsman found the way instinctively, and neither stumbled nor trod upon the fallen brushwood. Young Clarke, just behind him, followed in his tracks, also stepping lightly and he knew enough not to ask any questions, confident that Boyd would take them wherever they wished to go.

It was a full two hours before the hunter stopped and then they stood on a low hill covered but thinly with the dwarfed trees of that region. The night was lightening a little, a pallid moon and sparse stars creeping out in the heavens. By the faint light young Clarke saw only a wild and rugged country, low hills about them and in the north the blur that he knew to be mountains.

"We can stand up straight now and talk in our natural voices," said Boyd, in a clear, full tone, "and right glad I am, too. I hate to steal away from friends, as if you were running from the law. That Captain Kenyon is a fine fellow, though he and his men don't know much about this wild country."

"Isn't this about the same direction that Red Cloud and his warriors took?" asked Will.

"Not far from it, but we won't run into 'em. They're miles and miles ahead. There's a big Sioux village two or three days' journey farther on, and it's a certainty that their ponies are headed straight for it."

"And we won't keep going for the same village?"

The big hunter laughed infectiously.

"Not if we know what is good for us," he replied, "and we think we do. Our trail leads far to the north of the Sioux town, and, when we start again, we'll make an abrupt change in our course. There's enough moonlight now for you to see the face of your watch, and tell me the time, Will."

"Half-past one, Jim."

"And four or five hours until morning. We'll move on again. There's a chance that some pursuing soldier might find us here, one chance in a thousand, so to speak, but slim as it is it is well to guard against it. Mount your horse. There's no reason now why we shouldn't ride."

Will sprang gladly into the saddle, leading his pack-animal by the lariat, and once more followed Boyd, who rode down the hill into a wide and shallow valley, containing a scattered forest of good growth. Boyd's horse raised his head suddenly and neighed.

"What does that mean?" asked Will, startled. "Sioux?"

"No," replied the hunter. "I know this good and faithful brute so well that he and I can almost talk together. I've learned the meaning of every neigh he utters and the one you have just heard indicates that he has smelled water. In this part of the world water is something that you must have on your mind most of the time, and his announcement is welcome."

"If there's a stream, do we camp by it?"

"We certainly do. We won't turn aside from the luck that fortune puts in our way. We're absolutely safe from the soldiers now. They can't trail us in the night, and we've come many miles."

They descended a long slope and came into the valley, finding the grass there abundant, and, flowing down the centre, a fine brook of clear cold water, from which horses and horsemen drank eagerly. Then they unsaddled and prepared for rest and food.

"Is there no danger here from the Sioux?" asked Will.

"I think not," replied the hunter. "I've failed to find a pony track, and I'm quite sure I saw a buck among the trees over there. If the Indians had passed this way there would have been no deer to meet our eyes, and you and I, Will, my lad, will take without fear the rest we need so much."

"I see that the brook widens and deepens into a pool a little farther on, and as I'm caked with dust and dirt I think I'll take a bath."

"Go ahead. I've never heard that a man was less brave or less enduring because he liked to keep clean. You'll feel a lot better when it's done."

Will took off his clothes and sprang into the pool which had a fine, sandy bottom. The chill at once struck into his marrow. He had not dreamed that it was so cold. The hunter laughed when he saw him shivering.

"That water comes down from the high mountains," he said, "and a few degrees more of cold would turn it into ice. But splash, Will! Splash! and you'll feel fine!"

Young Clarke obeyed and leaped and splashed with great energy, until his circulation grew vigorous and warm. When he emerged upon the bank his whole body was glowing and he felt a wonderful exhilaration, both physical and mental. He ran up and down the bank until he was dry, and then resumed his clothing.

"You look so happy now that I'll try it myself," said Boyd, and he was soon in the water, puffing and blowing like a big boy. When he had resumed his deerskins it was almost day. A faint line of silver showed in the east, and above them the sky was gray with the coming dawn.

"I'll light a little fire and make coffee," said Boyd, "but the rest of the breakfast must be cold. Still, a cup of coffee on a chill morning puts life into a man."

Will, with the zeal characteristic of him, was already gathering dead brushwood, and Boyd soon boiled the grateful brown liquid, of which they drank not one cup but two each, helping out the breakfast with crackers and strips of dried beef. Then the pot and the cups were returned to the packs and the hunter carefully put out the fire.

"It's a good thing we loaded those horses well," he said, "because we'll need everything we have. Now you roll up in your blanket, Will, and get the rest of your sleep."

"And you feel sure there is no danger? I don't want to leave all the responsibility to you. I'd like to do what I can."

"Don't bother yourself about it. The range of the Sioux is farther west mostly, and it's not likely we could find a better place than this for our own little private camp."

The coming of a bright, crisp day removed from Will the feeling of desolation that the wilderness had created in his mind. Apprehension and loneliness disappeared with the blackness of the night. He was with one of the best scouts and hunters in the West, and the sun was rising upon a valley of uncommon beauty. All about him the trees grew tall and large, without undergrowth, the effect being that of a great park, with grass thick and green, upon which the horses were grazing in deep content. The waters of the brook sang a little song as they hurried over the gravel, and the note of everything was so strongly of peace that the lad, wearied by their flight and mental strain, fell asleep in a few minutes.

It was full noon when he awoke, and, somewhat ashamed of himself, he sprang up, ready to apologize, but the hunter waved a deprecatory hand.

"You didn't rest too long," said Boyd. "You needed it. As for me, I'm seasoned and hard, adapted by years of practice to the life I lead. It's nothing to me to pass a night without sleep, and to catch up later on. While you were lying there in your blanket I scouted the valley thoroughly, leaving the horses to watch over you. It's about two miles long and a mile broad. At the lower end the brook flows into a narrow chasm."

"What did you find in the valley itself, Jim?"

"Track of bear, deer, wolf and panther, but no sign of human being, white or red. It's certain that we're the only people in it, but if we need game we can find it. It's a good sign, showing that this part of the country has not been hunted over by the Indians."

"Before long we'll have to replenish our food supply with game."

"Yes, that's certain. We want to draw as little on our flour and coffee as we can. We can do without 'em, but when you don't have 'em you miss 'em terribly."

The stores had been heaped at the foot of a tree, while the pack horses, selected for their size and strength, nibbled at the rich grass. Will contemplated the little mound of supplies with much satisfaction. They had not started upon the path of peril without due preparation.

Each carried a breech-loading, repeating rifle of the very latest make, a weapon yet but little known on the border. In the packs were two more rifles of the same kind, two double-barreled, breech-loading shotguns, thousands of cartridges, several revolvers, two strong axes, medicines, extra blankets, and, in truth, everything needed by a little army of two on the march. Boyd, a man of vast experience in the wilderness, had selected the outfit and he was proud of its completeness.

"Don't you think, Jim," said young Clarke, "that you might take a little sleep this afternoon? You've just said that we've nothing to dread in the valley, and I can watch while you build yourself up."

Boyd gave him a quick but keen glance. He saw that the lad's pride was at stake, and that he was anxious to be trusted with an important task. Looking at his alert face, and knowing his active intellect, the hunter knew that he would learn swiftly the ways of the wilderness.

"A good idea," he said in tones seemingly careless. "I'll change my mind and take a nap. Wake me up if you see strange signs or think anything is going to happen."

Without further word he spread his blanket on the leaves and in a minute or two was off to slumberland. Will, full of pride, put his fine breech-loader over his shoulder and began his watch. The horses, having eaten their fill, were lying down in the grass, and his own nuzzled his hand as he stroked their noses.

He walked some distance among the trees, and he was impressed more and more by the resemblance of the valley to a great park, a park hitherto untrodden by man. Although he was not lonely or depressed now he felt very remote from civilization. The cities of the East, so far as his mind was concerned, were now on the other side of the world. The unknown, vast and interminable, had closed about him.

Yet he felt a momentary exultation. Boyd and he would find a path through every peril. His walk brought him back to the edge of the brook, where for a little space thick bushes grew, and he heard a snarling growl, followed by a rush that could be made only by a heavy body. He started violently, the pulses beat hard in his temples and he promptly presented his rifle. Then he laughed at himself. He caught a glimpse of a long, yellowish body and he knew it was a mountain lion, much more alarmed than he, and fleeing with all speed to the hills.

He must be steadier of nerve and he gave himself a stern rebuke. Farther down the valley the brook widened again into a deep pool, and in the water, as clear as silver, he saw fine mountain trout, darting here and there. If they stayed a day or two in the valley he would come and catch several of the big fellows, as they were well provided with fishing tackle, which Boyd said would be a great resource, saving much ammunition.

He went farther, and then climbed the hill which enclosed the valley on that side, obtaining from its crest a northern view of rolling plains, with the dim blue outline of the high mountains far beyond. He surmised that the group of hills in which they now lay was of limited area, and that when they continued their journey they must take once more to the plains, where they would be exposed to the view of roving Sioux. His heart throbbed as he looked over that great open expanse, and realized anew the danger. The pocket in the hills in which they lay was surely a safe and comfortable place, and one need be in no hurry to abandon it.

When he went back to the camp Boyd was just awakening, and as he looked at Will his eyes twinkled.

"Well, what did you find?" he asked. "Anything besides tracks of animals?"

"I found an animal himself," replied the lad. "I scared him up in the bushes at the brook's edge. It was a mountain lion and he ran away, just as I felt like doing at first."

The hunter laughed with genuine pleasure.

"I'm glad you kept down the feeling and didn't run," he said. "You'll get over such tremors in time. Everybody feels 'em, no matter how brave, unless he has a lot of experience. Now, since you've been scouting about, what do you think we ought to do?"

"I looked from a hill and saw open plains, extending maybe forty or fifty miles. Red Cloud and his men may have gone that way and I'm in favor of giving 'em a good start. Suppose we stay here another night and day and let 'em reach the mountains."

"Seems a good plan to me."

"Besides, there's some fish in a pool farther down that I want to catch."

"That settles it. We stay. Everything else must stand aside when a real fisherman wants to show what he can do."

Will took the fishing tackle from his pack, and returned in a short time with three splendid trout. It was now nearly sunset and Boyd thought it safe to build a fire after dark and cook the catch.

"I think there's no doubt that Red Cloud and his warriors are now a full day's journey ahead," he said, "but, as a wandering Indian might come into the valley, we'll take no more chances than we can help."

A low fire of dead sticks was lighted in a gulch, well screened by bushes, and the fish were broiled, proving very welcome, as they were the first warm food Will and Boyd had tasted since their flight from the troops. The hunter made coffee again, and they were well satisfied with their supper.

"It's a good idea to help ourselves out with as much fish and game as we can," he said, "and it's likely that we can find plenty of it up here. The horses, too, have had all the grass they want and we'll tether 'em for the night, though there's not one chance in a thousand that they'll wander from the valley. Animals have instinct, and if there's no powerful enemy near they always stay where food and water are to be had. I tell you what, Will, if a man could only have all his own senses coupled with those of a deer or a wolf, what a mighty scout and hunter he could be. Suppose you could smell a trail like a wolf, and then think about it like a man! Maybe men did have those powers a hundred thousand years ago."

"Maybe they did, Jim, but they didn't have rifles and all the modern weapons and tools that help us so much."

"You're right, Will. You can't have everything, all at the same time, and just now you and me are not so bad off, lying here comfortable and easy in our own particular valley, having just finished some fine trout that would have cost us four or five dollars in a fine New York restaurant, but for which we paid nothing."

"You don't have any fear that the troops will come after us and make us go back?"

"You can clear your mind of that trouble and keep it cleared. We're in the Indian country, and Captain Kenyon has orders to make no invasion. So he can't pursue. Missing us he'll just have to give us up as a bad job."

"Then we'll have only the Indians to guard against, and your opinion, Jim, that they're far ahead, seems mighty good to me. Perhaps we ought to stay three or four days here."

The hunter laughed.

"I see you're falling in love with the valley," he said, "but maybe you're right. It will depend on circumstances. To-morrow we'll get out those big field glasses of yours, go to the highest hill, and examine all the country."

"Suppose it should rain, Jim. Then we wouldn't think so much of our fine valley."

"Right you are, Will. But lucky for us, it doesn't rain much up here at this time of the year, and we can call ourselves safe on that score. Full night is at hand, and there isn't a cloud in the heavens. We'll both sleep, and build up our nerves and strength."

"Don't we need to keep a watch?"

"Not now, I think, at least not either of our two selves. That horse of mine, that I ride, Selim, is a sentinel of the first class. He's been with me so much and I've trained him so long that he's sure to give an alarm if anything alarming comes, though he'll pay no attention to small game, or even to a deer."

Selim was at the end of a long lariat about fifty feet away, and having eaten for a long time and having rested fully he had taken position as if he realized thoroughly his duties as watcher of the little camp. He was a powerful bay with brilliant, alert eyes that young Clarke saw shining through the dusk, and he walked slowly back and forth within the range allowed by his tether.

"Didn't I tell you?" said Boyd, with delight. "Look at him now, taking up his duties as a man. That horse can do everything but talk, and for that reason, while he does many wise things, he never says a foolish one. Doesn't he fill you chock full of confidence, Will?"

"He certainly does, Jim. I know he'll be a much better sentinel than I could make of myself. I'll go to sleep, sure that we'll be well protected."

Although the hunter found sleep soon, Will, who did not need it so badly, lay awake long and he was interested in watching Selim, who was justifying his master's praise. The horse, for all the world like a vigilant sentinel, walked back and forth, and whenever his head was turned toward the little camp the lad saw the great eyes shining.

"Good Selim!" he said to himself. "Good and watchful Selim!"

In all the immensity and loneliness of the wilderness he felt himself drawn to the animals, at least to those that were not beasts of prey. It was true not only of Selim but of the other horses that they could do everything but talk, and they were the best friends of Boyd and himself.

His trust in the sentinel now absolute, he followed Boyd into peaceful oblivion, and he did not come out of it until dawn.

CHAPTER II

THE NARROW ESCAPE

When he awoke a sun of great brilliancy was shining, and over him arched the high skies of the great west. The air was thin and cool, easy to breathe and uplifting, and in the bracing morning he did not feel the loneliness and immensity of the wilderness. Boyd had already built a little fire among the bushes, and was warming some strips of dried beef over the flames.

"Here's your breakfast, Will," he said. "Beef, a few crackers, and water. Coffee would taste mighty good, but we can't afford to be taking it every morning, or we'd soon use up all we have. This is one of the mornings we skip it."

"I can stand it if you can," said Will cheerfully, "and it seems to me we ought to be saving our other stores, too. You'll have to kill a deer or a buffalo soon, Jim."

"Not until we leave the valley. Now fall on, and when we finish the beef we'll take another look at that map of yours."

They ate quickly and when they were done Will produced from an inside pocket of his waistcoat, where he always carried it, the map which was his most precious possession. It was on parchment, with all the lines very distinct, and the two bent over it and studied it, as they had done so often before.

It showed the Mississippi, flowing almost due south from Minnesota, and the Missouri, which was in reality the upper Mississippi, thrusting its mighty arm far out into the unknown wilderness of the Northwest. It showed its formation by the meeting of the Jefferson, the Madison and the Gallatin, but these three rivers themselves were indicated by vague and faint traces. Extensive dark spaces meant high mountains.

"My father served in the northwest before the great Civil War," said Will, telling it for the fiftieth time, "and he was a man of inquiring mind. If he was in a country he always wished to know all about it that was to be known, particularly if it happened to be a wild region. He had the mind of a geographer and explorer, and the vast plains and huge mountains up here fascinated him. If there was a chance to make a great journey to treat with the Indians or to fight them he always took it."

"And he'd been in California in '49," said Boyd, saying, like Will, what he had said fifty times before. "It was there I first met him, and a fine, upstanding young officer he was."

The lad sighed, and for a moment or two his sorrow was so deep that it gave him an actual thrill of physical pain.

"That's so, Jim. I've often heard him speak of the first time he saw you," he resumed. "He was tempted to resign and hunt gold in California with the crowd, and he did have some experience in the mines and workings there, but he concluded, at last, to remain in the army, and was finally sent into the Northwest with his command to deal with the Indians."

"And it was on the longest of his journeys into the mountains that he found it!"

"Yes. He noticed in a wild place among the ridges that the earth and rock formations were like those of California where the richest gold finds were made. He was alone at the time, though the rest of his command was only a few miles away, but he picked among the rocks and saw enough to prove that it was a mother lode, a great gold seam that would make many men millionaires. It was his intention to resign from the army, get permission from the Sioux to come in, organize a company, and work what he meant to be the Clarke mine. But you know what happened, Jim."

"Aye, Will, I do. By the time he got back to civilization the Civil War broke like a storm, and he went east to fight for his country."

"He could do no less, and he never thought of doing anything else. Bearing in mind the risks of war, he drew this map which he carried on his person and which when he was dying he sent by you to me."

"Aye, Will, he died in my arms at the Wilderness before the Bloody Angle. It was a glorious death. He was one of the bravest men I ever saw. He gave me the map, told me to be sure to reach you when the war was over, and then help you to find the great mine."

Water came again into Will's eyes. Though the wounds of youth heal fast, the hurt made by the death of his heroic father had not yet healed. The hunter respected his emotion and was silent while he waited.

"If we find the great mother lode and take out the treasure, part of it is to be yours, of course," said the boy.

"You can pay me for my work and let it go at that. Your father found the lode and the map telling the way to it, drawn by him, is yours now."

"But we are partners. I could never get through these mountains and past the Indian tribes without you. We're partners and there'll be plenty for all, if we ever get it. Say right now, Jim, that you share and share alike with me, or I won't be easy in my mind."

"Well, then, if you will have it that way. I suppose from all your brave father, the Captain, said, there's so much of it we needn't trouble ourselves about the shares if we ever get there. It would be better if we had another trusty friend or two."

"Maybe we'll pick 'em up before we're through with this job, which is going to last a long time. I think we're still on the right trail, Jim. This line leads straight west by north from the Mississippi river far into western Montana, where it strikes a narrow but deep mountain stream, which it crosses. Then it goes over a ridge, leads by a lake which must be several miles long, goes over another ridge, crosses another stream, and then winding many ways, as if penetrating a maze, comes to a creek, with high mountains rising on either side of it. But the mine is there, Jim, and we've got to follow all these lines, if we ever reach it."

"We'll follow 'em, Will, don't you worry about that. Gold draws men anywhere. Through blizzards, over mountains, across deserts, right into the face of the warlike Indian tribes, and the danger of death can't break the spell. Haven't I seen 'em going to California, men, women and children pressing on in the face of every peril that any army ever faced, and it's not likely, Will, that you and me will turn back, when women and children wouldn't."

"No, Jim, we couldn't do that. We're in this hunt to stay, and I for one have the best of reasons for risking everything to carry it to a successful end."

"And I'm with you because the Northwest is my natural stamping ground, because I wouldn't mind being rich either, and because I like you, Will. You're a good and brave boy, and if you can have the advantage of my teaching and training for about fifty years you'll make a first rate man."

"Thanks for the endorsement," laughed Will, "and so we stick together 'till everything is over."

"That's it."

The boy continued to look at the map.

"We've got a long journey over plains," he said, "but it seems to me that when we pass 'em we'll enter mountains without ending. All the west side of the map is covered with the black outlines that mean ridges and peaks."

"It's right, too. I've been in that region. There are mountains, mountains everywhere, and then more mountains, not the puny mountains they have east of the Missip, a mile, or at best, a mile and a half high, but crests shooting up so far that they hit right against the stars, and dozens and dozens of 'em, with snow fields and glaciers, and ice cold lakes here and there in the valleys. It's a grand country, a wonderful country, Will, and there's no end to it. The old fur hunters knew about it, but they've always kept it as secret as they could, because they didn't want other people to learn about the beaver in there."

"But we're going to visit it," exclaimed young Clarke with enthusiasm, "and we're going to find something the fur hunters have never found. I feel, Jim, that we're going to stand where my father stood and get out the gold."

"I've feelings of that kind, too, but we've got to prop up feeling with a power of work and patience and danger, and it's likely too, Will, that it will be a long time before we reach the end of the line on that map."

Young Clarke folded up the parchment again and put it back in the inside pocket of his waistcoat, the hunter watching him and remarking:

"Be sure it's in your pocket tight and fast, Will. We couldn't afford to lose it. Maybe it would be a good idea to make a copy of it."

"I could draw every line on it from memory."

"That being the case we don't exactly need a duplicate, and, as you're a young fellow, Will, and ought to work, you can take the horses down to the brook and let 'em drink."

The lad was willing enough to do the task and the horses drank eagerly and long of the pure stream that had its source in melting snows. All four had been selected for size, power and endurance, and they were in splendid condition, the rich and abundant grass of the valley restoring promptly the waste of travel.

Boyd's great horse, Selim, rubbed his nose in the most friendly manner against Will's arm, and the lad returned his advances by stroking it.

"I've heard the truth about you," he said. "You can do everything but talk, and you'll be a most valuable ally of ours on this expedition."

The horse whinnied gently as if he understood and Will, leading the four back to the rich grass, tethered them at the ends of their long lariats.

"Now, suppose you get out your big glasses," said the hunter, "and we'll go to the top of the hill for a look. The day is well advanced, the sky is brilliant and in the thin, clear atmosphere of the great plateau we'll be able to see a tremendous distance."

Will was proud of his glasses, an unusually fine and powerful pair, and from the loftiest crest they obtained a splendid view over the rolling plain. The hunter at his request took the first look. Will watched him as he slowly moved the glasses from side to side, until they finally rested on a point at the right edge of the plain.

"Your gaze is fixed at last," the boy said. "What do you see?"

"I wasn't sure at first, but I've made 'em out now."

"Something living then?"

"Buffaloes. They're miles and miles away, but they've been lying down and rolling and scratching themselves until they make the wallows you see all over the plains. It's not a big band, two or three hundred, perhaps. Well, they don't mean anything to us, except a possible supply of provisions later on. No wonder the Indians hate to see the buffaloes driven back, because the big beasts are breakfast, dinner and supper on the hoof to them."

"And maybe to us, too, Jim. I've an idea that we'll live a lot on the buffalo."

"More'n likely. Well, we could do worse."

"What are you looking at now, Jim? I see that you've shifted your objective."

"Yes, I've caught some moving black dots to the left of the herd. They're obscured a little by a swell, but they look to me like horsemen, Sioux probably."

"If so then they must be hunters, taking advantage of the swell to attack the buffalo herd."

"Good, sound reasoning. You're learning to think as a scout and hunter. Yes, they're Sioux, and they're aiming for the herd. Now they've thrown out flankers, and they're galloping their ponies to the attack. There'll be plenty of good buffalo meat in some Sioux village before long."

"That means little to us, because after the hunt the warriors will pass on. What do you see elsewhere on the plain, Jim?"

"I can make out a trace of water. It's one of the little, shallow, sandy rivers, a long distance from here, but the presence of water is probably the reason why game is grazing in the neighborhood."

"You don't see any more Indians?"

"No, Will. To the west the horizon comes plumb in that direction are a long way off, which agrees with your map. But in the north the glasses have brought the ridges and peaks a sight nearer. They're all covered with forest, except the crests of some of the higher peaks, which are white with snow. I'm thinking, too, that in the woods at the bottom of one of the slopes I can see a trace of smoke rising. Here you, Will, you've uncommon keen eyes of your own. Take the glasses and look! There, where the mountains seem to part and make a pass! Is that smoke or is it just mist?"

Young Clarke looked a long time. He had already learned from Boyd not to advance an opinion until he had something with which to buttress it, and he kept his glasses glued upon the great cleft in the mountains, where the trees grew so thick and high. At last he saw a column of grayish vapor rising against the green leaves, and, following it with the glasses to its base, he thought he was able to trace the outlines of tepees. Another and longer look and, being quite sure, he said:

"There's an Indian village in the pass, Jim."

"That's what I thought, but I wanted you to say so, too. Now my last doubt is taken away. They're mountain Sioux, of course. I had an idea that we could go through that way and then curve to the west, but since the village is there, maybe it will be better to strike out straight across the plains."

"Perhaps those buffalo hunters will come in here to jerk their meat. They know of the valley, of course. Have you thought of that, Jim?"

"Yes, I have, and it troubles me. It seems to me that dangers we didn't expect are gathering, and that we're about to be surrounded. Maybe we'd better put the packs on the horses, and be ready to start to-night. What do you think?"

"You know what's best, Jim."

"Not always. We're full partners, now, and in all councils of war, though there are but two of us, both must speak."

"Then I'm for getting ready to leave to-night, as soon as it's dark. I suppose it's just chance, but enemies are converging on us. It's a fine valley, one that I could stay in a long time, but we'd better leave it."

"As the two who make up the council are agreed that settles it. When the full dark comes we'll go."

Boyd, who resumed the glasses, turned them back on the buffalo hunters, saw them chase the game toward the valley, and then bring down a half-dozen.

"They're nearer now to us than they are to the mountains," he said, "and they're sure to bring the meat in here, where they can hang it on the trees, or find plenty of firewood. If we had any doubts before, Will, we've got an order now to go and not be slow about our going."

They watched the Indians a long time, and saw them cleaning and cutting up the slain buffaloes. Then they retreated to the depths of the valley, put the packs on the horses, and made ready for flight at the first coming of dusk. Luckily the night gave promise of being dark, and, when the sun had set and its last afterglow was gone they mounted, and, each followed by his packhorse, rode for the western edge of the rim. There they halted and took a last glance at a retreat in which their stay had been so brief but so welcome.

"A fine little valley," said Boyd. "It must have been hunted out years ago, but if it's left alone a few years longer the beaver will return and build along that brook. Those pools will just suit 'em. If we don't find the gold we may turn to looking for beaver skins. There are worse trades."

"At least it provides a lot of fresh air," said Will.

"And you see heaps and heaps of splendid country, all kinds, mountains, rivers, lakes, valleys, plains. Fur hunters can't complain of the lack of scenery."

"Which course will we take, Jim?"

"I think we'd better ride due west. That Indian village shuts us off from the mountains. It's true we may meet 'em on the plains, but likely we can escape 'em, and then when we've gone far enough we'll turn north and seek the ranges, where the cover is good. Now, hark to that, will you!"

From a point to the northward rose a long, quavering shout, shrill in its texture, and piercing the night like a call. A quiver ran along the lad's spine.

"A Sioux made that cry!" he exclaimed.

"Beyond a doubt," replied Boyd, "but why he did so I can't tell. Wait."

They sat, silent, on their horses, and in a minute or two the cry was repeated, but farther toward the east. Will could have mistaken the note for the howl of a wolf, it contained so much animal quality, but since the nature of the first had been told to him he knew that the second was a reply to it.

"It's signals," said Boyd with conviction. "They're talking to one another, though I don't know what they're saying. But it means the sooner we get out of the valley the better for this white army of two."

"There's nothing to keep us from starting now."

"That's true. Because, if they find us here, all knowledge of the mine for which we are looking is likely to perish with us. I don't suppose the Sioux have made any formal declaration of war, but the warning of Red Cloud is enough. They wouldn't hesitate to put out of the way two wandering fellows like ourselves."

As they talked they rode slowly toward the west, the sound of their horses' hoofs deadened on the turf, and both watching among the trees for any hostile appearance. Young Clarke was rapidly learning the ways of the wilderness, from experience, and also because he had in Boyd a teacher not excelled anywhere in the West. The calls, the long, dying cries, came again and again, showing the Sioux were steadily approaching the valley, but the two were leaving it at an equal pace.

Will clutched the reins in his left hand and held the splendid repeating rifle across the saddle bow with the other. The pack horse, unled, but obedient to his training, followed close after. Boyd, just ahead of him, proceeded in the same manner, and now they began to descend the slope that ended in the open plain. In ten more minutes they would leave the cover of the last tree. Before them rolled the bare country, swell on swell, touched but faintly by the moon, yet keen eyes such as those of the Sioux could trace the figures of horses and men on it for a considerable distance.

Will felt little shivers as they were about to leave the final row of trees. He could not help it, knowing that they were going to give up shelter for those open spaces which, dusky though they were, were yet revealing.

"It's likely, in any event, that we'll be followed, isn't it?" he said. "If the Sioux search the valley, and they will, they're sure to find our traces. Then they'll come over the rim of the hills on our tracks."

"Well reasoned, Will," said the hunter. "You'll learn to be a great scout and trailer, if you live long enough. That's just what they'll do, and they'll hang on to our trail with a patience that a white man seldom shows, because time means little to the Indian. As I said before, when we're far out on the plains we must make an abrupt turn toward the north, and lose ourselves among the ranges. For a long time to come the mountains will be our best friends. I love mountains anyway, Will. They mean shelter in a wild country. They mean trees, for which the eyes often ache. They mean grass on the slopes, and cool running water. The great plains are fine, and they lift you up, but you can have too much of 'em."

They rode now into the open country and in its dusky moonlight Will could not at first restrain the feeling that in reality it was as bright as day. A few hundred yards and both gazed back at the circle of hills enclosing the valley, hills and forest alike looking like a great black blur upon the face of the earth. But from the depths of that circling island came a long, piercing note, instinct with anger and menace.

"Now that was plain talk," said Boyd. "It said that they had found our trail, that they knew we were white, that they wanted our scalps, and that they meant to follow us until they got 'em."

"Which being the case," said Will defiantly, "we have to say to them in reply, though our syllables are unuttered, that we're not afraid, that they may follow, but they will not take us, that our scalps are the only scalps we have and we like 'em, that we mean to keep 'em squarely on top of our

heads, where they belong, and, numerous and powerful though the Sioux nation may be, and brave and skillful though its warriors are, they won't be able to keep us from finding our mine."

"That's the talk, Will, my boy. It sounds like Red Cloud, the great Ogalala, Mahpeyalute himself. Fling 'em your glove, as the knights did in the old time, but while you're flinging it we'll have to do something besides talking. We must act. Trailers like the Sioux can follow us even in the night over the plains, and the more ground we gain in the beginning the better."

He urged his horses into a long, easy gallop and Will promptly followed at the same gait. The night darkened somewhat, at which they rejoiced, and then lightened again, at which they were sad, but they continued the long, swinging pace, which the horses could maintain for hours.

"Try your glasses again, Will," said the hunter. "They will cut through the dark a long way, and maybe they can tell if the Sioux are now in the plain."

Young Clarke slowed his pace, and bending in the saddle took a long look.

"I see nothing," he said. "Do you want to try 'em too, Jim?"

"No. Your eyes are of the best, and your news is good. It's likely that we've got a lead of seven or eight miles at least. Two or three miles more and we'd better turn for the mountains. Our horses are a lot bigger than those of the Sioux, but their ponies, though not much to look at, are made out of steel. They'd follow for days, and if we stuck to the plains they'd be sure to run us down at last."

"And we'd have little chance against a big Sioux band?"

"That's the ugly truth, and it's bound to be the mountains for us. I see a line on the prairie, Will. What do your glasses tell us about it?"

Young Clarke turned his gaze to the front, and after a single glance said:

"Water. It's one of those shallow prairie streams, I suppose, a foot of sand, and an inch of water on top."

"If there's not too much alkali in it it'll be mighty welcome to the horses. Ah, Selim smells it now!"

His great mount raised his head and neighed. Boyd smoothed his long, silky mane.

"Yes, old friend," he said, as if he were talking to a man, "I'm quite sure it won't have much alkali, you're going to have a nice, big drink, so are your friends, and then, ho! for the mountains!"

The stream was just what Will predicted it would be, a foot of sand and an inch of water, but it was only slightly brackish, and both horses and horsemen drank freely from it, took a rest and then drank as freely again. Another half hour and the two remounted.

"Now, Will," said Boyd, "the ridges are our target, and we'll shoot as straight at 'em as our horses can go, though we'll make the pace slow for the present. Nothing to be gained by tiring out our mounts before the race begins."

"And so you look for a real chase?"

"Surely. Those Sioux on their ponies will hang on like grim death and mighty glad I'll be when the trees on the first slopes reach out their boughs to hide us. About midnight now, isn't it, Will?"

The lad was able to see the face of his watch and announced that it was midnight and a half hour more.

"That's good," said Boyd, "because the darkest part of the night is now coming, and maybe some clouds floating up from the south will help us. Yes, I think I notice a change already. Three stars that I counted a little while ago have gone away."

"And about five million are left."

"Still, every little counts. Maybe in an hour or so two or three more will go away."

"You're certainly an optimist, Jim. You draw hope from very little things."

"It pays. Hope not only makes you stronger, it also makes you happier. There, didn't I tell you? I said that two or three stars might go away, but it's far better than two or three. All the skirmishers have left and now troops and battalions are departing, too. Maybe whole armies will leave before long, and give us an entirely black sky."

It grew visibly darker, although many of the stars remained twinkling in their places, but they were much encouraged, nevertheless, and trusting in the aid of the night, still saved the strength of their horses.

"It will make it a little harder for the Sioux to trail us," said Boyd, "and if, by any chance they should get near enough for a shot, the odds are about twenty to one they can't hit us. Suppose we stop here, give the horses another short rest, and you search the blackness back there with your glasses again."

Will was able to discern nothing but the sombre crests of the swells, and Boyd, dismounting, put his ear to the ground.

"I hear something moving," he said at last, and then, after a short pause, "it's the beat of hoofs."

"Can they be so near as that?" asked Will in alarm.

"At first I thought it was the Sioux, but now I'm sure it's running buffalo. I wonder why they're stampeding at this time of the night. Maybe a hunting party of Northern Cheyennes has wandered in here and knows nothing about the presence of the Sioux."

"That won't help us, since the Sioux and Northern Cheyennes are allies."

"No, it won't. If the Cheyennes meet the Sioux they'll join 'em in the pursuit of us. It's a new danger and I don't like it."

Boyd remounted and they rode on slowly. Presently he stopped, and Will, of course, stopped too.

"Listen, boy," he said, "and you'll hear the thunder of the buffalo. It's a big herd and they're running our way. I'm as sure as I sit here in this saddle that they're being driven by hunters."

Will heard a low, rolling sound like that of distant thunder. It was approaching rapidly, too, and it seemed to his heightened imagination that it was bearing straight down upon them.

"If they are Cheyennes we may be in the middle of 'em soon," he said.

"If we sit still here," said Boyd, "but that's just what we won't do. We'll gallop ahead until we come to a deep dip between the swells."

"And then?"

"Dismount, keep low, and let the storm drive by."

They did not have much time to spare, as the rumbling sound was growing fast beneath the tread of the flying herd, and they urged their horses into a gallop until they came to a dip, which they thought was deep enough to hide them. Here they dismounted and holding the lariats, watched as the thunder of the running herd increased, until they saw its van of lowered heads, short, curved horns and great, shaggy manes, and then the dark mass stretching back out of sight.

"There are tens of thousands of 'em," said the hunter. "They'll be some time in going by, and then, I think, we'll see the Indians hanging on the rear."

The multitude drove on for a period somewhat longer than Boyd had predicted, and then Will saw naked horsemen crouched low on ponies, some firing with rifles and others with bows and arrows.

"They're Cheyennes, as I thought," said Boyd, "and they're enjoying a mighty killing. There'll be huge feasts for days and days in their lodges. They're so intent on it, too, that there isn't one chance in a thousand they'll see us."

"But I'm glad I see them," said Will. "It's a wonderful sight. I never thought I'd look upon its like, the chase of the buffalo herd under a midnight moon. It makes my blood leap."

"And mine, too, though I've seen it before. This wild country with its vast plains and its high mountains takes hold of you, Will. It grips you with fetters of steel. Maybe, when you find the gold you won't want to go back to civilization."

"If we find it, it will be easy enough to decide what we wish to do. But the whole herd is disappearing in the moonlight in the west, and I can barely make out the last of the Indian hunters who are following 'em. I can see, though, a lot of beasts running low."

"The wolves. They're always hanging on the rear of a herd, hoping to cut out calves or buffaloes weak from old age. Now they're expecting to reap a little from the harvest made by the hunters. There, they've gone too, though for a long time you'll hear the herd thundering away to the west. But we don't mind the sound of a danger when the danger itself has passed. We'll mount and start again on our particular little excursion to the mountains, where we hope the fresh, cool air will help two fellows like ourselves, in failing health, no strength, no appetite, no anything."

The big hunter laughed aloud in pleasure.

"That herd was a help to us," he said. "It passed to the south of us, and so cut across our trail. If the Sioux are pursuing, as we think they are, it'll take 'em a long time to find our traces again. We'll take advantage of it, as our horses are thoroughly rested, and make some speed."

They swung into an easy gallop, and went on without further talk for a long time. When two or three hours had passed Will raised his glasses and gazed into the north.

"I think I see there a blur which is not of the night itself," he announced. "It may be the loom of the mountains that we're so anxious to reach."

"But a long way off yet," said the hunter. "Day will come hours before we can strike the first slopes, and we may have the Sioux hanging on our trail."

As a faint, gray light in the east told of the coming dawn, they came to another of the shallow streams of the plains and both horses and horsemen drank again. Will and Boyd also ate a little food.

"Now turn your glasses to the south and tell me what you see," said the hunter.

Will gazed and then lowered the glasses, a look of alarm on his face.

"I know from your eyes what you've seen without your telling me," said Boyd. "The Sioux are there. In some way they've picked up our trail and are coming. It's a mighty good thing that we've saved our horses. They're in splendid trim now for a long run, and we'll need every ounce of their speed and courage."

He did not seek to disguise the full measure of the danger from Will, who, he knew, would summon his utmost courage to meet it. The lad looked again through the glasses, and was able now to see a full score of men coming on their ponies. The dawn had just spread to the south and against its red and gold they were shown sharply, a long line of black figures on the crest of a swell.

"Take a look, Jim," said young Clarke, handing him the glasses. "You'll be able to tell more about 'em than I can."

Boyd studied the picture carefully – it was in reality a picture to him – and after due deliberation, said:

"They are thirty-two, because I've counted 'em. They're comparatively fresh, because their ponies are running straight and true. They're Sioux, as I know from the style of their war bonnets, and they're after us, as I know from the way they're riding."

"But look the other way, Jim, and see how much nearer the mountains have come!"

"Aye, lad! They stand up like a fort, and if we reach 'em in time we may stave off our pursuers. They're coming fast, and they're spreading out in a long line now. That helps 'em, because it's impossible for fugitives to run exactly straight, and every time we deviate from the true course some part of their line gains on us."

"I see a huge, rocky outcrop on the mountain side. Suppose we always ride for that."

"Something to steer by, so to speak. A good idea. We won't push the horses hard at first, because it will be a long time before they come within rifle shot of us. Then maybe we'll show 'em a spurt that'll count."

But it was hard for Will not to use the utmost speed at once, as every time he looked back he saw that the Sioux were gaining, their figures and those of their horses, horse and rider seemingly one, always standing out black and clear against the rosy dawn. But he knew that Boyd was right, and he tried hard to calm the heavy beating of his pulses.

The whole horizon was now lighted by a brilliant sun and the earth was bathed in its beams. Flight and pursuit went on, unabated, and the hunter and the boy began to increase the speed of their horses, as they saw that the Sioux were gaining. They had been riding straight as they could toward the stony outcrop, but in spite of everything they curved a little now and then, and some portion of the following line drew closer. But they were yet a full two miles away, and the mountains were drawing much nearer. Trees on the slopes detached themselves from the general mass, and became separate and individual. Once Will thought he caught a flash of water from a mountain torrent, and it increased the desirability of those slopes and ridges. How sheltered and protecting they looked! Surely Boyd and he could evade the Sioux in there!

"We'll make it easily," said Boyd, and then he added with sudden violence. "No, we won't! Look, there on your right, Will!"

Four warriors on swift ponies suddenly emerged from a swell scarcely a quarter of a mile away, and uttered a shout of triumph. Perhaps they were stray hunters drawn by the spectacle of the pursuit, but it was obvious that, in any event, they meant to co-operate with the pursuers.

"They're Sioux, too," said Boyd. "Now, steady, Will. It's a new and pressing danger, of course, but it may help us, too."

"How so?"

"I think I can give 'em a healthy lesson. We all learn by experience, and they'll take notice, if I make a good example. They're bearing down on our flank. You lead, Will, and keep straight for our rock. The four will soon be within range, as this repeating rifle of mine is a beauty, and it carries mighty far. The old muzzle loader is just a pistol by the side of it. Come on, my fine fellows! The nearer you are the better! I learned long ago to shoot from a running horse, and that's more than many Sioux can do."

The four Sioux on the right, bent low, were urging their ponies forward at their utmost speed. From the band behind came a tremendous yell, which, despite the distance, reached Boyd and young Clarke, and, apparently, they had full warrant in thus giving utterance to their feeling of triumph. The sudden appearance of the warriors coming down the dip was like the closing of a trap and it seemed that all chance of escape was cut off from the two who rode so desperately for the mountains.

The hunter shut his teeth tightly and smiled in ironic fashion. Whenever he was highly pleased he grew rather talkative, and now he had much to say for a man whose life was about to turn on a hair.

"If the four on the ponies off there knew the peril into which they were riding they wouldn't ride so hard," he said. "But the Sioux are not yet acquainted with the full merits of a long range repeating rifle, nor do they understand how well I can shoot. I'm as good a marksman as there is in the West, if I do say it myself, and lest you may think me a boaster, Will, I'll soon prove it."

He dropped the reins on the neck of Selim, who, though unguided, ran on straight and true, and grasped the splendid rifle with both hands. Will ceased to think of the band behind them and began to watch the hunter, who, though still smiling, had become one of the most dangerous of human beings.

"Yes, my four friends, you're overhauling us fast," murmured the hunter, "and I'm glad of it, because then I don't have to do so much waiting, and, when there's ugly work at hand, one likes to get it over. Ah, I think they're near enough now!"

The rifle sprang to his shoulder, a jet of flame leaped from the muzzle, and, with the sharp crack, the foremost Sioux rolled to the ground and lay still, his frightened pony galloping off at an angle. The hunter quickly pulled the trigger again and the second Sioux also was smitten by sudden death. The other two turned, but one of them was wounded by the terrible marksman, and the pony of the fourth was slain, his rider hiding behind the body. A dismal wail came from the Sioux far back. The hunter lowered his great weapon, and one hand resumed the bridle rein.

"A rifle like mine is worth more than its weight in gold," he said. "It's worth its weight in diamonds, rubies, emeralds and all the other precious jewels at a time like this. I can say, too, that's

about the best shooting I ever did, and I think it'll save us. Even the band behind, thirty or so in number, won't want to ride full tilt into rifles like ours."

"The first slopes are not more than three or four miles away now," said young Clarke, "and no matter how hard they push they can't overtake us before we reach the trees. But Jim, how are we to ride through those high mountains, and, if we abandon the horses, we might as well give up our quest."

"I chose these horses myself, Will," said Boyd, "and I knew what I was about. I trained Selim, and, of course, he's the best, but the others are real prize packages, too. Why, they can walk up the side of a cliff. They can climb trees, and they can jump chasms fifty feet wide."

"Come down to earth, Jim. Stay somewhere in the neighborhood of truth."

"Well, maybe I do draw a rather long bow, but horses learn to be mountain climbers, and ours are the very best of that kind. They'll take us up through the ridges, never fear. The Sioux will follow, for a while, at least, but in the deep forest you see up there we'll shake 'em off."

"Hear 'em shouting now! What are they up to?"

"Making a last rush to overtake us, while we're yet in the plain. But it is too late, my gay scalp hunters!"

The mountains were now drawing near very fast, and with the heavy forest along their slopes they seemed to Will to come forward of themselves to welcome them. He became suddenly aware that his body ached from the long gallop, and that the dust raised by the beating hoofs was caked thickly on his face. His lips were dry and burning, and he longed for water.

"In five more minutes we'll be on the first slope," said Boyd, "and as we'll soon be hidden in the forest I think I'll say farewell to our pursuers."

"I don't understand you, Jim."

"I'm going to say only one word, and it'll be short and sharp."

He turned suddenly in his saddle, raised the repeating rifle and fired once at the band.

He had elevated the sight for a very long shot, regarding it as a mere chance, but the bullet struck a pony and a few moments of confusion in the band followed. Now Boyd and young Clarke made their horses use the reserves of strength they had saved so prudently, and with a fine spurt soon gained the shelter of the woods, in which they disappeared from the sight of the pursuing horde.

They found themselves among oaks, aspens, pines, cedars, and birch, and they rode on a turf that was thick, soft and springy. But Selim neighed his approval and Boyd pulled down to a walk. A little farther on both dismounted at his suggestion.

"It'll limber us up and at the same time help the horses," he said. "Knowing what kind of rifles we carry and how we can shoot, the Sioux won't be in any hurry to ride into the forest directly after us. We've a big advantage now in being able to see without being seen. As we needn't hurry, suppose we stop and take another look with those glasses of yours, Will. I never thought they'd prove so useful when you insisted on bringing 'em."

Will obeyed at once.

"They're a mile or so away," he said, "and they've stopped. They're gathered in a semi-circle around one man who seems to be a chief, and I suppose he's talking to 'em."

"Likely! Most likely. I can read their minds. They're a little bit bashful about riding on our trail, when we have the cover of the forest. Repeating rifles don't encourage you to get acquainted with those who don't want to know you. I can tell you what they'll do."

"What, Jim?"

"The band will split into about two equal parts. One will ride to the right and the other to the left. Then, knowing that we can't meet both with the rifles, they'll cautiously enter the mountains and try to pick up our trail. Am I right or am I wrong?"

"Right, O, true prophet! They've divided and already they're riding off in opposite directions. And what's the best thing for us to do?"

"We'll lead the horses up this valley. I see through leaves a little mountain stream, and we'll drink there all the water we want. Then we'll push on deeper and deeper into the mountains, and when we think we're clear out of their reach we'll push on."

They drank plentifully at the brook, and even took the time to bathe their hands and faces. Then they mounted and rode up the slopes, the pack horses following.

"Didn't I tell you they were first class mountain climbers?" said Boyd with pride. "Why, mules themselves couldn't beat 'em at it."

When twilight came they were high on the slopes under the cover of the forest, pushing forward with unabated zeal.

CHAPTER III

THE LITTLE GIANT

Boyd rode in front, Will was just behind, and then came the two heavily laden pack horses, following their masters with a faith that nothing could shake. The hunter seemed to have an instinct for choosing the right way, or else his eyes, like those of an owl, were able to pierce the dark. He avoided chasms and cliffs, chose the best places on the slopes, and wherever he wound he always led deeper and deeper into the vast maze of high mountains.

Will looked back toward the plains, but he could see no trace of them now, and he did not believe that the Sioux, however skilled they might be, could follow their trail up the ridges in the dark. Meanwhile the stars came out, and a half moon rode in a medium sky. The boy's eyes, grown used to the night, were now able to see quite clearly, and he noticed that the region into which they were riding was steadily growing wilder. Now and then they passed so close to the edge of chasms that he shivered a little, as he looked down into the dark wells. Then they passed up ravines where the lofty cliffs, clothed in stunted pine and cedar, rose high above them, and far in the north he caught the occasional glimpses of white crests on which the snow lay deep.

Boyd became quite cheerful, and, for a while, hummed a little air under his breath. When he ceased singing he said:

"I don't know where we're going, Will, but I do know that we're going away from the Sioux. They'll try to trail us tomorrow when the light comes, and they may be able to do it, but we'll be moving on again, and, however patient trailers may be, a trail that lengthens forever will wear out the most patient trailer of them all."

"Isn't that a creek down there?" asked Will, pointing to a silver flash in the dusk.

"So it is, and while these mountain streams usually have rough beds, scattered with boulders, we'll ride up it as far as we can. It may be a great help in hiding our trail."

They rode down the slope and urged the horses into the water, although the good beasts showed reluctance, fearful of the boulders and the rough footing, but, when they were in, the two riders allowed them to pick the way, and thus they advanced slowly and with extreme caution a distance of five full miles. They heard a roaring and approached a fine fall of about thirty feet, over which the creek tumbled, sending up much white foam.

"This watery road is now blocked, that's quite sure," said Boyd. "But we've been able to use it a much greater distance than I thought, and it may throw off the Sioux entirely."

They emerged from the water and the horses climbed a steep slope to the crest of a ridge, where they stood panting. Boyd and young Clarke slipped from the saddles and stood by. The half moon and clusters of stars still made in the sky a partial light, enabling them to see that they stood upon a sort of broad shelf, sprinkled with large trees without undergrowth, but well covered with long grass. The only way of approach from the south was the rocky brook, along the bed of which they had come. What lay to the north they did not know, but the shelf seemed to narrow there.

"A large part of the night is spent," said Boyd, "and as it's not possible for the Sioux to overtake us before dawn I vote we camp here, because we're pretty well worn out, and the horses are dead tired. What does the other half of the army say?"

"It says this place was just made for us," replied Will, "and we shouldn't go forward another inch tonight."

"Then we'll unsaddle, tether the horses and take to our blankets, though, if you say so, we will first draw a little on the commissariat."

"No. I'm too tired to eat. I'd rather go to sleep."

"The two halves of the army are in agreement. So will I."

The horses fell to cropping the rich grass, but their riders, seeking the softest place they could find, folded themselves in their blankets and soon slumbered as soundly as if they were in the softest beds civilization could furnish.

Will awoke before dawn, and instantly remembered where he was. But while all had been strife and strain and anxiety before he slept, he felt now an immense peace, the great peace of the mountains. The horses having eaten their fill were lying down. The murmurs of the swift brook below came up to his ears, and with it the sound of a faint breeze playing in just a whisper among the leaves. Far above him soared peaks and ridges, so many and high that they seemed to prop up the eternal blue.

Will realized that he loved the mountains. Why shouldn't he? They had given him refuge when he needed it most, saving him and Boyd from dreadful torture and certain death. Somewhere in the heart of them lay the great treasure that he meant to find, and they possessed a majesty that appealed not merely to his sense of beauty, but to a spiritual feeling that was in truth an uplift to the soul.

He was awake scarcely a minute, but all the events of the last few days passed in a swift panorama before his mind – the warning of Red Cloud, the silent departure by night from the camp of the troops, the pursuit by the Sioux, and the escape into the high ranges. Rapidly as it passed it was almost as vivid as if it were happening again, and then he was asleep once more.

When he awoke the dawn was an hour old, and Boyd was kindling a low fire down by the edge of the stream.

"We'll draw on the coffee once more this morning," he said. "After all that we've passed through we're entitled to two cups of it apiece. I'll make bread and warm some of the dried beef, too. Suppose, while I'm doing it you climb to the crest over there, and use those glasses of yours for all they're worth."

It was a stiff climb to the summit, but once there Will had a tremendous view in all directions. Far to the south he was able to catch through the powerful lenses the dim line of the plains, but on all other sides were mountains, and yet more mountains. In the north they seemed very high, but far to the west was a mighty rounded peak, robed at the top in white, towering over every other. The narrow valley and the ridges were heavy with forest, but the glasses could find no sign of human life.

He descended with his report, and found the coffee, the bread and the meat ready, and while he had been too tired to eat the night before he had a tremendous appetite now. When breakfast was over they sat by the stream and considered the future. Boyd was quite sure the Sioux were still following, and that they would eventually strike the trail, though they might be two or three days in doing so. He was of the opinion that they should go farther into the high ranges.

"And what becomes of our quest?" asked Will.

"You know, lad," responded the hunter, whimsically, "that the longest way round is sometimes the shortest way through, and those that are in too great a hurry often fall over their own feet. If you are careful about your health and don't get shot you ought to live sixty or seventy years yet, because you are surely a robust youngster, and so you're richer in time than in anything else. I am, too, and for these reasons we can afford to go into the very heart of the high mountains, where we'll be well hidden, and bide until the danger of the Sioux pursuit has passed."

"A long speech, Jim, but probably a true one. Do we start right away?"

"Aye, lad, the sooner the better. Both the horses and ourselves are fed and refreshed. We don't know what this shelf leads to, but we can soon find out."

They resaddled, but did not mount, letting the well-trained horses follow, and proceeded along the shelf, until they entered a narrow pass, where they were compelled to go in single file, the hunter leading the way. Far below him Will heard the creek roaring as it foamed forward in rapids, and he was glad that the horses were, what Boyd had declared them to be, trained mountain climbers, walking on with even step, although he felt an instinctive desire to keep as far as he could from the cliff's edge, and lean against the slope on the other side. But Boyd, made familiar with such trails by his years of experience in the mountains, whistled gaily.

"Everything comes our way," he said. "If we were at the head of a trail like this we could hold it against the entire Sioux nation, if we had cartridges enough."

"I hope it won't go on forever," said Will. "It makes me feel a little dizzy."

"It won't. It's opening out now. The level land is widening on either side of the creek and that means another valley not much farther on."

But it was a good four miles before they emerged into a dip, covering perhaps two square miles, covered heavily with forest and with a beautiful little blue lake at the corner. Will uttered a cry of pleasure at the sight of the level land, the great trees green with foliage, and the gem of a lake.

"We couldn't have found a finer place for a camp," he said. "We're the children of luck."

But the wise hunter shook his head.

"When the morning's cold we hate to pull ourselves out of comfortable beds," he said, "and for mountaineers such as we've become I'll admit that this valley looks like the Garden of Eden, but here we do not bide."

"Why not?"

"Because it's too good for us to live in. The Sioux, of course, know of it, and what draws us draws them, too. For a long time the finer a spot becomes the more dangerous it is for us. No, we'll ride on past this happy valley straight into the mountains."

"But at least let me take a little swim in that blue lake."

"Well, there's no harm in that, provided you're quick about it. When you come out I'll take one myself."

Will undressed in a couple of minutes and sprang into the water, which he found extremely cold, but he swam joyously for five minutes or so, when he emerged and was followed by Boyd. When they were in the saddle again both felt that their strength had been renewed and Will waved one hand in farewell to the little blue lake.

"Good-bye, Friend Lake," he said. "You're not large, but you're very beautiful, and some day I hope to come back and bathe in you again."

"The great ranges of mountains which run all about over the western part of the continent are full of such pleasant valleys and cool little lakes," said the hunter. "Often the lakes are far up the slopes, many thousands of feet above the sea, and sometimes you don't see 'em until you break right through the trees and bushes and come square up against the water. If we keep on, as I intend we shall, it's likely that we'll see a lot of 'em."

The lad's eyes kindled.

"That being so," he said, "I don't mind turning aside a while from our real hunt, because then we'll be explorers. It will be glorious to find new lakes and streams."

"Yes, it'll make the waiting easier, provided, of course, that we don't have rain and storms. Rain can turn a wilderness paradise in fifteen minutes into a regular place for the condemned. We've almost as much to fear now from the sky as we have from the Indians on the ground. When you see a little cloud up there you can begin to worry."

"But I don't see any, and so I refuse to worry yet."

They reached the farther edge of the valley and began to climb a slope, which, easier at first, soon became rather stiff. But the horses once more justified the hunter's praise and pressed forward nobly. He and Will dismounted again, and they let Selim lead where he would.

"All horses have wilderness sense," said Boyd, "and Selim, having both an educated sense and a wild sense, is sure to pick out the best way."

His confidence was not misplaced, as the horse instinctively chose the easiest path, and, before the twilight came, they reached the crest of a lofty ridge, from which they saw a sea of mountains in all directions, a scene so majestic that it made Will draw a sharp breath.

"I think we'd better go down the slope until it becomes too dark for us to see a way," said Boyd, "because we're up so high now that the night is sure to be biting cold here on the very top of the ridge."

In an hour they found a glen sheltered well by high trees all about and with a pool of icy cold water at the edge. It was a replica on a small scale of the valley and lake they had left behind, and glad enough they were to find it. They drank of the pool, and the horses followed them there with eagerness. Then, eating only cold food, they made ready for the night.

"Get an extra pair of blankets from your pack, Will," said Boyd. "You don't yet know how cold the night can be on these mountains, at any time of the year."

The hunter's advice was good, as Will the next morning, despite two blankets beneath him and two above him, felt cold, and when he sprang up he pounded his chest vigorously to make the circulation brisk. Boyd laughed.

"I'm about as cold as you are," he said, "and, in view of the winter into which we've suddenly dropped, we'll have hot coffee and hot food for breakfast. I don't think we risk anything by building a fire here. What's the matter with our horses?"

They had tethered the horses in the night, and all four of them suddenly began to rear and stamp in terror.

"There's a scout watching us!" exclaimed Will.

"A scout?" said Boyd, startled.

"Yes! See him standing on the big rock, far off there to the right."

The hunter looked and then drew a breath of relief.

"Old Ephraim!" he said.

A gigantic grizzly bear was upreared on a great rocky outcrop about three hundred yards away, and the opalescent light of the morning magnified him in the boy's eyes, until he was the largest beast in the world. Monstrous and sinister he stood there, unmoving, gazing at the strange creatures in the little camp. He seemed to Will a symbol of this vast and primeval new world into which he had come. Remembering his glasses he took them and brought the great grizzly almost before his eyes.

"He appears to be showing anger and a certain curiosity because we're here," he said. "I don't think he understands us, but he resents our invasion of his territory."

"Well, we're not going to explain who we are. If he don't meddle with us we won't meddle with him."

The grizzly did not stay long, retreating from the rock, then disappearing in the underbrush. Will had qualms now and then lest he should break through the bushes and appear in their little glen, but Boyd knew him better. He was content to leave alone those who left him alone.

The breakfast with its hot coffee and hot food was very grateful, and continuing the descent of the slope they passed through other narrow passes and over other ridges, but all the while ascending gradually, the world about them growing in majesty and beauty. Four days and a large part of four nights they traveled thus after leaving the little valley with the blue lake, and the bright air was growing steadily colder as they rose. Boyd talked a little now of stopping, but he did not yet see a place that fulfilled all his ideas of a good and safe camp, though he said they would soon find it.

"How far do you think we've come into the mountains?" asked Will.

"About a hundred miles, more or less," replied the hunter.

"Seems to me more like a thousand, chiefly more. If the Sioux find us here they'll have to be the finest mountain climbers and ravine crossers the world has ever seen. Just what are you looking for, Jim?"

"Four things, wood, water, grass and shelter. We've got to have 'em, both for ourselves and the horses, and we've got to find 'em soon, because, d'you see, Will, we've been wonderfully favored by Providence. The rains and storms have held off longer than they usually do in the high mountains, but we can't expect 'em to hold off forever just for our sakes. Besides, the hoofs of the horses are getting sore, and it's time to give 'em a long rest."

They were now far up the high slopes, but not beyond the timber range. The air was thin and cold, and at night they always used two pairs of blankets, spreading the under pair on thick beds of dry

leaves. In the morning the pools would be frozen over, but toward noon the ice under the slanting rays of the sun would melt. The march itself, and the air laden with odors of pine and spruce, and cedar and balsam, was healthful and invigorating. Will felt his chest expand. He knew that his lung power, already good, was increasing remarkably and that his muscles were both growing and hardening.

Another day and crossing a ridge so sharp that they were barely able to pull the horses over it, they came to a valley set close around by high mountains, a valley about three miles long and a mile wide, one-third of its surface covered by a lake, usually silver in color, but varying with the sky above it. Another third of the valley was open and heavy in grass, the remainder being in forest with little undergrowth.

"Here," said Boyd, "we'll find the four things we need, wood, water, grass and shelter, and since it's practically impossible for the original band of Sioux to trail us into this cleft, here we will stay until such time as we wish to resume our great hunt. What say you?"

"Seems to me, Jim, that we're coming home. This valley has been waiting for us a great many years, but the true tenants have arrived at last."

"That's the right spirit. Hark to Selim, now! He, too, approves."

The great horse, probably moved by the sight of grass and water, raised his head and neighed.

"If we had felt any doubts the horses would have settled it for us," said Will. "I understand their language and they say in the most correct English that here we are to bide and rest, as long as we wish. The presence of the lake indicates a running stream, an entrance and exit, so to speak. I think, Jim, it's about the most beautiful valley I ever saw."

They descended the last slope, and came to the creek that drained the lake, a fine, clear, cold current, flowing swiftly over a rocky bottom. After letting the horses drink they forded it, and rode on into the valley. Will noticed something white on the opposite slope, and examining it through his glasses saw that it was a foaming cascade.

"It's the stream that feeds the lake," he said. "It rushes down from the higher mountains, and here we have a beautiful waterfall. Nature has neglected nothing in preparing our happy valley, providing not only comfort and security but scenic beauty as well."

The hunter looked a moment or two at the waterfall, and the tremendous mountains about them with a careful eye.

"What is it, Jim?" asked Will.

"I'm looking for tracks."

"What tracks? You said we wouldn't find any Sioux in here."

"Not the footprints of the Sioux."

"It's not in the range of the Crows, Blackfeet or Assiniboines. Surely you don't expect them."

"I don't expect Crows, Blackfeet or Assiniboines."

"Then what do you expect?"

"Wild animals."

"Why bother about wild animals? Armed as we are we've nothing to fear from them."

"Nothing to fear, but a lot to hope. I think we're likely to stay here quite a spell, and we'll need 'em in our business. Remember that for the present, Will, we're wild men, and we'll have to live as wild men have lived since the world began. We want their meat and their skins."

"The meat I understand, because I'd like to bite into a juicy piece of it now, but we're not fur hunters."

"No, but we need the skins of big animals, and we need 'em right away. This weather can't last forever. We're bound to have a storm sometime soon. We must first make a wickiup. It's quite simple. The Sioux always do it. A Sioux warrior never sleeps in the open if he can help it, and as they've lived this sort of life for more hundreds of years than anybody knows they ought to know something about it."

"But I don't see that cloud you told me several days ago to watch for."

"It will come. It's bound to come. Now here's the lake ahead of us. Isn't it a beauty? I told you we'd find a lot of these fine little lakes all along the slopes of the ridges, but this seems to be the gem of them all. See how the water breaks into waves and looks like melted silver! And the banks sloping and firm, covered with thick green turf, run right down to the water's edge, like a gentleman's park."

"It's all that you claim for it," said Will, making a wide, sweeping gesture, "and, bright new lake, I christen thee Lake Boyd!"

"The lake accepts the name," said the hunter with a pleased smile, and then he added, also making a wide, sweeping gesture:

"Green and sheltered valley, I christen thee Clarke Valley."

"I, too, accept the compliment," said Will.

"The far side of the valley is much the steeper," said the hunter, "and I think it would be a good idea for us to build the wickiup over there. It would be sheltered thoroughly on one side at least by the lofty cliffs."

"Going back a moment to the search you were making a little while ago, have you noticed the footprints of any wild animals?"

"Aye, Will, my lad, so I have. I've seen tracks of elk, buffalo and bear, and of many smaller beasts."

"Then, that burden off your mind, we might as well locate the site of our house."

"Correct. I think I see it now in an open space under the shelter of the cliff."

They had ridden across the valley, and both marked a slight elevation under the shadow of the cliff, a glen forty or fifty yards across, protected by thick forest both to east and west, and by thin forest on the south, from which point they were approaching.

"It's the building site that's been reserved for us five hundred years, maybe," said the hunter. "The mountain and the trees will shelter us from most of the big winds, and if any of the trees should blow down their falling bodies would not reach us here in the center of the open space. There is grass everywhere for the horses, and water, both lake and running, for all of us."

They unsaddled the riding horses, took the packs off the others and turned them loose. All four neighed gratefully, and set to work on the grass.

"They've done a tremendous lot of mountain climbing, and they've carried heavy burdens," said Boyd, "and they're entitled to a long rest, long enough to heal up their sore feet and fill out their sides again. Now, Will, you'll make a great hunter some day, but suppose, for the present, you guard the packs while I look for an elk and maybe a bear. Two of them would furnish more meat than we could use in a long time, but we need their skins."

"I'm content to wait," said Will, who was saddle-tired.

He sat down on the thick, soft grass by the side of the packs, and his physical system, keyed up so long, suffered a collapse, complete but not unpleasant. Every nerve relaxed and he sank back against his pack, content to be idle as long as Boyd was away. But while his body was weak then, his mind was content. Clarke Valley, which had been named after him, was surely wonderful. It was green and fresh everywhere and Boyd Lake was molten silver. Not far away the cataract showed white against the mountainside, and its roar came in a pleasant murmur to his ears.

He heard a distant shot, but it did not disturb him. He knew it was Boyd, shooting something, probably the elk he wished. After a while he heard another report, and he put that down as the bear. His surmise was correct in both instances.

Boyd, with his help, skinned both the bear and the elk, and they hung great quantities of the flesh of both in the trees to dry. Boyd carefully scraped the skins with his hunting knife, and they, too, were hung out to dry. While they were hanging there Will also shot a bear, and his hairy covering was added to the others.

A few days later Boyd built the wickiup, called by the Sioux tipiowinja. Taking one of the sharp axes he quickly cut a number of slender, green poles, the larger ends of which he sharpened well

and thrust deep into the ground, until he had made with them a complete circle. The smaller ends were bent toward a common center and fastened tightly with withes of skin. The space between was thatched with brush, and the whole was covered with the skins of elk and bear, which Boyd stitched together closely and firmly. Then they cut out a small doorway, which they could enter by stooping. The floor was of poles, made smooth and soft with a covering of dead leaves.

It was rude and primitive, but Will saw at once that in need it would protect both their stores and themselves.

"I learned that from the Sioux long ago," said Boyd, not without some admiration of his handiwork. "It's close and hot, and after we've put the stores in we'll have to tuck ourselves away in the last space left. But it will feel mighty good in a storm."

The second night after the wickiup was finished his words came true. A great storm gathered in the southwest, the first that Will had seen in the high mountains, and it was a tremendous and terrifying manifestation of nature.

The mountains fairly shook with the explosions of thunder, and the play of lightning was dazzling on the ridges. When thunder and lightning subsided somewhat, the hunter and the lad crept into the wickiup and listened to the roaring of the rain as it came. Will, curled against the side upon his pack, heard the fierce wind moaning as if the gods themselves were in pain, and the rain beating in gust after gust. The stout poles bent a little before both wind and rain, but their elasticity merely added to their power of resistance, as the wickiup, so simple in its structure and yet so serviceable, stood fast, and Boyd had put on its skin covering so well that not a single drop of water entered.

In civilization he might have found the wickiup too close to be supportable, but in that raging wilderness, raging then at least, it was snug beyond compare. He had a thought or two for the horses, but he knew they would find shelter in the forest. Boyd, who was curled on the other side of the wickiup, was already asleep, but the lad's sense of safety and shelter was so great that he lay awake, and listened to the shrieking of the elements, separated from him only by poles and a bearskin. The power of contrast was so great that he had never felt more comfortable in his life, and after listening awhile he, too, fell asleep, sleeping soundly until day, when the storm had passed, leaving the air crisper and fresher, and the earth washed afresh and clean.

They found the horses already grazing, and their bear and elk steaks, which they had fastened securely, safe on the boughs. The valley itself, so keen and penetrating was the odor of balsam and pine, seemed redolent with perfume, and the lake itself had taken on a new and brighter tint of silver.

"Boyd Lake and Clarke Valley are putting on their best in our honor," said Will.

Then they ate a huge breakfast, mostly of elk and bear meat, and afterward considered the situation. Will had the natural impatience of youth, but Boyd was all for staying on a couple of weeks at least. They might not find another such secure place, one that furnished its own food, and nothing would be lost while much could be gained by waiting. It was easy enough to persuade the lad, who was, on the whole, rather glad to be convinced, and then they turned their thoughts toward the improvement of a camp which had some of the elements of permanency.

"We could, of course, build a good, strong cabin," said Boyd, "and with our stout axes it would not take long to do it, but I don't think we'll need the protection of logs. The wickiup ought to serve. We may not have another storm while we're here, but showers are pretty sure to come."

To provide against contingencies they strengthened the wickiup with another layer of poles, and Boyd spread over the leaves on the floor the skin of a huge grizzly bear that he killed on one of the slopes. They felt now that it was secure against any blizzard that might sweep through the mountains, and that within its shelter they could keep warm and dry in the very worst of times. But they did not sleep in it again for a full week, no rain falling at night during that period. Instead they spread their blankets under the trees.

"It's odd, and I don't pretend to account for it," said Boyd, "but it's only progressive white men who understand the value of fresh air. As I told you, the Sioux never sleep outside, when they can help

it. Neither do the other Indians. In the day they live outdoors, but at night they like to seal themselves up in a box, so to speak."

"Rushing from extreme to extreme."

"Maybe, but as for me, I want no better bed than the soft boughs of balsam, with blankets and the unlimited blue sky, provided, of course, that it isn't raining or hailing or sleeting or snowing. It's powerful healthy. Since we've come into Clarke Valley I can see, Will, that you've grown about two inches in height and that you're at least six inches bigger around the chest."

"You're a pretty big exaggerator!" laughed Will, "but I certainly do feel bigger and stronger than I was when I arrived here. If the Sioux will only let us bide in peace awhile I think I may keep on growing. Tell me more about the Sioux, Jim. They're a tremendous league, and I suppose you know as much about 'em as any white man in this part of the world."

"I've been in their country long enough to learn a lot, and there's a lot to learn. The Sioux are to the West what the Iroquois were to the East, that is, so far as their power is concerned, though their range of territory is far larger than that of the Iroquois ever was. They roam over an extent of mountain and plain, hundreds and hundreds of miles either way. I've heard that they can put thirty thousand warriors in the field, though I don't know whether it's true or not, but I do know that they are more numerous and warlike than any other Indian nation in the West, and that they have leaders who are really big men, men who think as well as fight. There's Mahpeyalute, whom you saw and whom we call Red Cloud, and Tatanka Yotanka, whom we call Sitting Bull, and Gray Wolf and War Eagle and lots of others.

"Besides, the Sioux, or, in their own language, the Dakotas, are a great nation made up of smaller nations, all of the same warlike stock. There is the tribe of the Mendewakaton, which means Spirit Lake Village, then you have the Wahpekute or Leaf Shooters; the Wahpeton, the Leaf Village; the Sisseton, the Swamp Village; the Yankton, the End Village, the Yanktonnais, the Upper End Village, and the Teton, the Prairie Village. The Teton tribe, which is very formidable, is subdivided into the Ogalala, the Brule, and the Hunkpapa. Red Cloud, as I've told you before, is an Ogalala. And that's a long enough lesson for you for one day. Now, like a good boy, go catch some fish."

Will had discovered very early that Lake Boyd, which was quite deep, contained fine lake trout and also other fish almost as good to the taste. As their packs included strong fishing tackle it was not difficult to obtain all the fish they wanted, and the task generally fell to the lad. Now, at Boyd's suggestion, he fulfilled it once more with the usual success.

Game of all kinds, large and small, was abundant, the valley being fairly overrun with it. Boyd said that it had come in through the narrow passes, and its numbers indicated that no hunters had been there in a long time. Will even found a small herd of about a dozen buffaloes grazing at the south end of the valley, but the next day they disappeared, evidently alarmed by the invasion of human beings. But the deer continued numerous and there were both bears and mountain lions along the slopes.

Will, who had a certain turn for solitude, being of a thoughtful, serious nature, ceased to find the waiting in the valley irksome. He began to think less of the treasure for which he had come so far and through such dangers. They *had* found a happy valley, and he did not care how long they stayed in it, all nature being so propitious. He had never before breathed an air so fine, and always it was redolent with the odor of pine and balsam. He began to feel that Boyd had not exaggerated much when he talked about his increase in height and chest expansion.

Both he and the hunter bathed every morning in Lake Boyd. At first Will could not endure its cold water more than five minutes, but at the end of ten days he was able to splash and swim in it as long as he liked.

Their days were not all passed in idleness, as they replenished their stores by jerking the meat of both bear and deer. At the end of two weeks the hunter began to talk of departure, and he and Will walked toward the western end of the valley, where the creek issued in a narrow pass, the only road by which they could leave.

"It's likely to be a mighty rough path," said Boyd, "but our horses are still mountain climbers and we'll be sure to make it."

They went a little nearer and listened to the music of the singing waters, as the creek rushed through the cleft. It was a fine, soothing note, but presently another rose above it, clear and melodious.

It was a whistle, and it had such a penetrating quality that Will, at first, thought it was a bird. Then he knew it sprang from the throat of a man, hidden by the bushes and coming up the pass. Nearer and nearer it came and mellow and mellow it grew. He had never before heard anyone whistle so beautifully. It was like a song, but it was evident that someone was entering their happy valley, and in that wilderness who could come but an enemy? Nearer and nearer the whistler drew and the musical note of the whistling and its echoes filled all the pass.

"Wouldn't it be better for us to draw back a little where we can remain hidden among the brakes?" said Will.

"Yes, do it," replied the hunter, "just for precaution against any possible mistake, but I don't think we really need to do so. In all the world there's not another such whistler! It's bound to be Giant Tom, Giant Tom his very self, and none other!"

"Giant Tom! Giant Tom! Whom do you mean?" exclaimed Will.

"Just wait a minute and you'll see."

The whistler was now very near, though hidden from sight by the bushes, and he was trilling forth old airs of home that made the pulses in the lad's throat beat hard.

"It's Giant Tom. There's no other such in the world," repeated Boyd more to himself than to Will. "In another minute you'll see him. You can hear him now brushing past the bushes. Ah, there he is! God bless him!"

The figure of an extraordinary man now came into view. He was not more than five feet tall, nor was he particularly broad for his height. He was just the opposite of a giant in size, but there was something about him that suggested the power of a giant. He had a wonderfully quick and light step, and it was Will's first impression that he was made of steel, instead of flesh and blood. His face, shaven smoothly, told little of his age. He was dressed in weather-beaten brown, rifle on shoulder, and two mules, loaded with the usual packs and miner's tools, followed him in single file and with sure step.

Will's heart warmed at once to the little man who continued to whistle forth a volume of clear song, and whose face was perhaps the happiest he had ever seen. Boyd stepped suddenly from the shielding brushwood and extended his hand.

"Tom Bent," he said, "put 'er there!"

"Thar she is," said Giant Tom, placing his palm squarely in Boyd's.

"My young friend, Mr. William Clarke," said the hunter, nodding at the lad, "and this is Mr. Thomas Bent, better known to me and others as Giant Tom."

"Glad to meet you, William," said the little man, and ever afterward he called the boy William. "Anybody that I find with Jim, here, has got on 'im the stamp an' seal o' high approval. I don't ask your name, whar you come from or why you're here, or whar you're goin', but I take you fur a frien' o' Jim's, an' so just 'bout all right. Now put 'er thar."

He grinned a wide grin and extended a wide palm, into which Will put his to have it enclosed at once in a grasp so mighty that he was convinced his first impression about the man being made of steel was correct. He uttered an exclamation and Giant Tom dropped his hand at once.

"I never do that to a feller more than once," he said, "an' it's always the first time I meet him. Even then I don't do it 'less I'm sure he's all right, an' I'm goin' to like 'im. It's jest my way o' puttin' a stamp on 'im to show that he's passed Tom Bent's ordeal, an' is good fur the best the world has to offer. Now, William, you're one o' us."

He smiled so engagingly that Will was compelled to laugh, and he felt, too, that he had a new and powerful friend.

"That's right, laugh," said Giant Tom. "You take it the way a feller orter, an' you an' me are goin' to be mighty good pards. An' that bein' settled I want to know from you, Jim Boyd, what are you doin' in my valley."

"Your valley, Giant! Why, you never saw it before," said the hunter.

"What's that got to do with it? I wuz comin' here an' any place that I'm goin' to come to out here in the wilderness is mine, o' course."

"Coming here, I suppose, to hunt for gold! And you've been hunting for it for fifteen years, you've trod along thousands and thousands of miles and never found a speck of it yet."

The little man laughed joyously.

"That's true," he said. "I've worked years an' years an' I never yet had a particle o' luck. But a dry spell, no matter how long, is always broke some time or other by a rain, an' when my luck does come, it's goin' to bust all over my face. Gold will just rain on me. I'll stand in it knee-deep an' then shoulder deep, an' then right up to my mouth."

"You haven't changed a bit," said Boyd, grinning also. "You're the same Giant Tom, a real giant in strength and courage, that I've met off and on through the years. It's been a long time since I first saw you."

"It was in Californy in '49. I was only fourteen then, but I went out with my uncle in the first rush. Seventeen years I've hunted the yellow stuff, in the streams, in the mountains, all up an' down the coast, in the British territories, an' way back in the Rockies, but I've yet to see its color. Uncle Pete found some, and when he died he left what money he had to me. 'Jest you take it an' keep on huntin', Tom, my boy,' he said. 'Now an' then I think I've seen traces o' impatience in you. When you'd been lookin' only six or seven years, an' found nothin', I heard you speak in a tone of disapp'intment, once. Don't you do it ag'in. That ain't the way things are won. It takes sperrit an' patience to be victor'us. Hang on to the job you've set fur yourse'f, an' thirty or forty years from now you'll be shore to reap a full reward, though it might come sooner.' An' here I am, fresh, strong, only a little past thirty, and I kin afford to hunt an' wait for my pay 'bout thirty years more. I've never forgot what Uncle Pete told me just afore he died. A mighty smart man was Uncle Pete, an' he had my future in mind. Don't you think so, young William?"

"Of course," replied Will, looking at him in wonder and admiration. "I don't think a man of your cheerful and patient temperament could possibly fail."

"And maybe his reward will come much sooner than he thinks," said the hunter, glancing at the lad.

Will understood what Boyd meant, and he was much taken with the idea. The Little Giant seemed to be sent by Providence, but he said nothing, waiting until such time as the hunter thought fit to broach the subject.

"How long have you been here?" asked the Little Giant, looking at the valley with approving eyes.

"Quite a little while," replied Boyd. "It belonged to us two until a few minutes ago, but now it belongs to us three. We've been needing a third man badly, and while I didn't know it, you must have been in my mind all the time."

"An' what do you happen to need me fur, Jim Boyd?"

"We'll let that wait awhile, at least, until we introduce you to our home."

"All right. Patience is my strong suit. Do you mean to say you've got a home here?"

"Certainly."

"Then I'll be your guest until you take me into the pardnership you're talkin' 'bout. Do you know that you two are the first faces o' human bein's that I've seen in two months, an' it gives me a kind o' pleasure to look at you, Jim Boyd, an' young William."

"Come on then to our camp."

He whistled to his two mules, strong, patient animals, and then he whistled on his own account the gayest and most extraordinary variation that Will had ever heard, a medley of airs, clear, pure and birdlike, that would have made the feet of any young man dance to the music. It expressed cheerfulness, hope and the sheer joy of living.

"You could go on the stage and earn fine pay with that whistling of yours," said Will, when he finished.

"Others have told me so, too," said the Little Giant, "but I'll never do it. Do you think I'd forget what Uncle Pete said to me on his dyin' bed, an' get out o' patience? What's a matter o' twenty or thirty years? I'll keep on lookin' an' in the end I'll find plenty o' gold as a matter o' course. Then I won't have to whistle fur a livin'. I'll hire others to whistle fur me."

"He's got another accomplishment, Will, one that he never brags about," said the hunter.

"What is it?"

"I told you once that I was as good a rifle shot as there was in the West, over a range of a million and a half square miles of mountain and plain, but I forgot, for a moment, about one exception. That exception is Giant Tom, here. He has one of the fine repeating rifles like ours, and whether with that or a muzzle loader he's quicker and surer than any other."

The face of Giant Tom turned red through his tan.

"See here, Jim Boyd, I'm a modest man, I'm no boaster, don't be telling wild tales about me to young William. I don't know him yet so well as I do you, an' I vally his good opinion."

"What I say is true every word of it. If his bullet would only carry that far he'd pick off a deer at five miles every time, and you needn't deny it, Giant Tom."

"Well, mebbe thar is some truth in what you say. When the Lord sawed me off a foot, so I'd hev to look up in the faces o' men whenever I talked to 'em, He looked at me an' He felt sorry fur the little feller He'd created. I'll have to make it up to him somehow, He said to Hissself, an' to he'p me along He give me muscles o' steel, not your cast steel, but your wrought steel that never breaks, then He put a mockin' bird in my throat, an' give me eyes like an eagle's an' nerves o' the steadiest. Last, He give me patience, the knowin' how to wait years an' years fur what I want, an' lookin' back to it now I think He more than made up fur the foot He sawed off. Leastways I ain't seen yet the man I want to change with, not even with you, Jim Boyd, tall as you think you are, nor with you, young William, for all your red cheeks an' your youth an' your heart full o' hope, though it ain't any fuller than mine."

"Long but mighty interesting," said Boyd. "Now, you can see our wickiup, over there in the open. We use it only when it rains. We'll help you take the packs off your mules and they can go grazing for themselves with our horses. You are not saying much about it, but I imagine that you and the mules, too, are pretty nearly worn out."

"Them's good mules, mighty good mules, but them an' me, I don't mind tellin' it to you, Jim Boyd, won't fight ag'inst restin' an' eatin' awhile."

"I'll light the fire and warm food for you," said Will. "It's a pleasure for me to do it. Sit down on the log and before you know it I'll have ready for you the finest lake trout into which you ever put your teeth."

"Young William, I accept your invite."

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