

Stratemeyer Edward

**Boys of The Fort: or, A  
Young Captain's Pluck**



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### PREFACE

"Boys of the Fort" is a complete story in itself, but forms the fifth volume of a line of works issued under the general title of "Flag of Freedom Series."

In penning this tale I had it in mind to acquaint my young readers with the ins and outs of military life at one of our Western forts of to-day, showing what both officers and privates are called upon to do, and what troubles the Indians and the bad men of that locality are still in the habit of making. The field is one about which little has been written, although abounding in interest, and one which is worthy the attention of all who have the proper development of our country at heart.

To some, certain scenes in this book may appear overdrawn, yet such is far from being the case. In this wild territory there are those who have lived all their lives beyond the pale of civilization, men who grow up dwarfed and crooked in mind, and who resent every effort made to better their condition.

The young captain is a fine specimen of the wide-awake

American army officer, yet he is no more brave and dashing than are thousands of others, officers and privates, who serve under our Flag of Freedom. He is trained to do his duty, and he simply does it, regardless of possible consequences.

Once more I take this opportunity to thank my young friends for the kindness with which they have received my former stories, and I earnestly hope this present tale merits equal commendation.

Captain Ralph Bonehill.

*July 1, 1901.*

# CHAPTER I

## BOUND FOR THE FORT

"How many miles have we still to ride, Benson?"

"About fifty, Joe. But the last half is pretty much uphill, lad."

"Can we make the fort by to-morrow night?"

"Well, we can try," answered the old scout, who sat astride of a coal-black horse and rode slightly in advance of his two youthful companions. "It will depend somewhat on what the weather does."

"Why, do you think it is going to rain?" put in Darry Germain. "I'm sure it looks clear enough."

"Aint no telling what the weather will do in this valley," answered Sam Benson. "It may stay clear for a week, but to me the signs don't exactly p'int that way," and he shook his head gravely.

"A little rain wouldn't hurt," said Joe Moore. "A couple of miles back the road was fearfully dusty."

"The trouble is, when it rains out here it rains," answered the old scout. "The clouds come a-tumbling over yonder mountains, and inside of half an hour you'd fancy the water was going to drown out everything."

"Then if it rains we'll have to put up somewhere," said Darry Germain.

"Aint no cabin on this trail short of Hank Leeson's place, twenty miles this side of the fort. If we can get that far I reckon we can make the fort."

"Then where will we stop to-night?" asked Darry with interest.

"At the Star Hotel – if the sky is clear," said Sam Benson, with a laugh at what he considered his little joke.

"You mean in the open, under the stars!" cried the boy; and, as the old scout nodded, he went on: "That will be nice. I've been wanting to camp out in regular trapper style ever since we left Riverton."

"So have I," put in Joe Moore. "But I don't know as I care to camp out and get soaked."

"If it rains we'll find some kind of shelter," answered Benson. "But come, let us make the most of the daylight while it lasts," and he urged his steed forward, and the two boys did the same.

The three were pursuing their way along a gap in the Rocky Mountains, where the so-called valley was broken up by tiny water-courses, walls of rock, and dense patches of forest and underbrush. It was midsummer, and the hot air was filled with the scent of green growing things. Deep in the forest the song-birds sang gayly and the wild animals had full play to come and go as they pleased, for to get at them in those vast fastnesses was next to impossible.

The party of three had left the town of Riverton four days before. They were bound for Fort Carson, – so named after Kit Carson, the celebrated scout and Indian fighter, – and Sam

Benson carried messages of importance to Colonel Fairfield, the commandant at the fort.

Joe Moore and Darry Germain were cousins, and both were boys of sixteen, well built and well trained in outdoor athletic sports. Joe came from Chicago and Darry from St. Louis, and each had graduated from his local high school but a few weeks before.

It was while Darry was spending a brief vacation with his cousin Joe that a plan for visiting the fort was formed. Joe's older brother, William, was a West Point graduate and a captain at the fort, and he wrote on stating that he had received permission to have Joe visit him, and Darry could come too if he desired. Colonel Fairfield was an old friend of both families, and promised to treat the lads well should they make the trip.

"Hurrah! just the thing!" Joe had cried. "Of course you'll go, Darry. We couldn't have a grander outing."

"I'll go if father and mother will let me," had been Darry's answer, and he had at once written home concerning the affair. Two weeks later the boys were off, the parents of each cautioning them to be careful, and wishing them the best of luck.

The journey westward as far as the mining-town of Riverton had occurred without special incident. They had been told to hire a guide at this point, and while looking for a man had fallen in with Sam Benson. Benson knew Captain William Moore well, and he at once promised to take the boys along with him and do the best he could by them.

"You'll want good hosses," Benson had said, and had aided them in selecting their animals and in getting together the necessary outfit. The start was made one fine morning in August, and all three of the party were in the best of spirits.

The four days in the mountains had opened the eyes of both lads. The traveling had been rather hard, yet they had enjoyed every minute of the journey. They had stopped once to do some fishing, and Benson had brought down a small mountain deer. At night they had put up at the cabins of hunters and trappers, and before retiring had listened to thrilling tales of adventures with wild beasts and with the Indians.

But now Joe was anxious to get to the fort and see his brother, from whom he had been separated for nearly two years. Darry was also anxious to reach the outpost, to meet not only his cousin William, but likewise Colonel Fairfield, who was an old friend not easily forgotten. Once at the fort the two boys felt that a vacation full of fun and pleasure would follow. Never once did they dream of the perils which awaited them in that wild region, which was not as civilized as it was to become a handful of years later.

"It seems to me it is growing hotter," remarked Darry, after riding a quarter of a mile in silence.

"It is growing hotter," answered the old scout. "And that makes me more certain than ever that a storm's at hand."

"We'll have to take what comes," said Joe. "But I did hope we'd reach the fort by to-morrow."

On they went, around a bend of the trail and over some rough rocks, where the horses had to step with care, for fear of slipping into a gully on the left. Then they reached a patch of timber and plunged beneath the low-drooping trees. Here it was both dark and cool, and Darry breathed a long sigh of relief.

"How delicious!" he murmured. "It's almost like going into a cave. Benson, there must be lots of caves in these mountains," he went on reflectively.

"There are," answered the old scout. "I've been in a score or more."

"I should like to explore a big cave," came from Joe. "It would be a novelty to me."

"You may get the chance, lad," said Benson; "and get it soon."

"What do you mean? Are we going to ride by a cave?"

"There are a dozen or more ahead, and we may have to seek one of 'em for shelter. Do you hear that?"

Benson threw back his head to listen, and the two boys did likewise. From a great distance came the rumble of thunder, echoing and re-echoing throughout the mountains. To the westward the sun was hidden by a dense mass of black clouds which grew more ominous each instant.

"The storm is coming, sure enough," muttered Joe. "What do you propose?"

"We'll ride on a bit, lad. It won't hit us right away. Come!"

The horses were urged forward at an increased speed, and soon they passed the patch of timber and came out to where a

thick fringe of brush skirted a long, high cliff. The sky was now dark on every side, and the wind was rising with a dull, humming sound.

"We'll catch it in a few minutes!" cried Benson; and hardly had he spoken when the big drops came splashing down, hitting the broad leaves in the underbrush with resounding smacks.

The old scout continued to lead, and presently he turned to the left, where the cliff parted. Here was an opening, lined on either side with rocks and dirt, and a short distance further was the entrance to a cave of unknown depths.

"We'll stop here," said the old scout, leaping to the ground, followed by the boys. "This aint the best place in the world, but it's better than the open, in such a blow as is coming."

He was right about the blow – already the wind was rising, and hardly had the three led their horses into the cave, the entrance to which was over a dozen feet high, when there came a crashing through the timber left behind, which sent many a frail limb and sapling to the ground and carried the leaves and twigs in all directions.

"I'm glad we didn't stay in the woods!" cried Darry. "We'd be in danger of falling trees."

"And lightning too," added Joe. "Oh, my! look at that!" he continued, as a blinding flash lit up the heavens. "That must have struck somewhere."

"We'll go back a little," said old Benson. "The lightning is just as bad here as it is in the woods. Wait till I get a torch."

Pine was plentiful in that locality, and soon he had a knot which was full of pitch and which burned well when a match was applied to it. With the torch in hand, he led the way further into the cave, and the boys followed with their animals.

## CHAPTER II

# CAVES IN THE MOUNTAIN

The two boys had expected to find the large cave damp and unwholesome, and they were surprised when they learned how dry the flooring and the sides were, and how pure the air was. There was no breeze in the place, but a gentle draught kept the air stirring. Of course the atmosphere was much cooler than it had been outside.

Hardly had the travelers gained the center of the first chamber of the cave, when the storm outside burst in all its fury. The lightning and thunder were almost incessant, and the rain came down in broad sheets which completely obliterated the landscape.

"It's little short of a flood," said Darry, after having gone to the mouth of the cave to investigate. "The water is already two or three inches deep on the trail."

"Well, such a downpour can't last long," returned Joe. "It's only a shower, or a cloud-burst."

"No, it's a regular rain, and it's good for all night," answered the old scout.

"All night!"

"Yes, lad, and we'll be lucky if it don't last through the morning, too. It don't rain very often out here, you see, but when

it does it tries to make up for lost time."

"Then we'll have to camp right here, won't we?"

"To be sure. Even if it did let up, you wouldn't want to camp in the wet timber."

"Then we might as well start up a fire," came from Darry, in something of a disappointed tone. "I was hoping we'd be able to camp under the stars just once before we got to the fort."

"Perhaps you'll get a chance to go out after you're at the fort," said the old scout, by way of comfort. "Yes, we'll start a fire, if we can find any dry wood."

The horses were tied up between some rocks, and then the three searched around. At the entrance to the cave was a mass of brush and tree limbs which previous storms had sent in that direction, and from this they gathered enough for a good-sized fire. It did not take long for the brush to blaze up, sending the sparks to the roof of the cave and throwing fantastic shadows all about them.

"I declare, the fire makes the cave look quite home-like!" was Joe's comment, as he threw himself down on a flat rock with his blanket under him. "Staying here won't be so humdrum as I anticipated."

"I'm going to explore the cave, now I am here," returned Darry. "Who knows but what I might locate a gold mine!"

"You be careful of where you go," cautioned old Benson. "These caves are full of pitfalls, and now you two boys are with me I don't want anything to happen to you. If something

did happen, neither Captain Moore nor Colonel Fairfield would forgive me."

"To be sure we'll be careful, Benson," answered Darry. "There'd be no fun in getting hurt – even if we did locate a gold mine."

"You won't find any gold mine here. This ground was prospected years ago – before even the fort was located. I came out here once myself, with a miner named Hooker Brown. Hooker was dead certain there was gold here, but although we stayed here about two weeks nosing around we never got even a smell of the yellow metal."

"Well, we'll have a look around, anyway," said Joe. "But we must get good torches first."

Pine knots were procured and lit; and, with another caution from the scout to be careful, they set off, leaving Benson to care for the horses and prepare such an evening meal as their stores afforded. Luckily the scout had brought down half a dozen good-sized birds, and these he now prepared to broil in true hunter style.

The front chamber of the cave was somewhat semi-circular, and behind this were several other irregular apartments, running down to a passageway which wound in and out between jagged rocks almost impossible to climb or explore in any manner. At a distance could be heard the trickling of water, but where this came from, or where it went to, nobody in the cave could imagine.

The boys advanced from one opening to another with care, one with his torch held high, that they might see ahead, and the other with the light close to the ground, to warn them of a possible pitfall.

"A regiment of soldiers could quarter in here," observed Darry, as they pushed on. "What a defense it would make!"

"An enemy could fire right into the entrance. And, besides, supposing the enemy started to smoke you out? I can smell the smoke from the camp-fire away back here."

At last the two boys reached the passageway back of the rear chamber, and here came to a halt. The dropping water could be plainly heard, and Joe flashed his torch in several directions in the hope of catching sight of the stream.

"I'm going to climb the rocks," he said, after a pause. "Perhaps there is another opening behind them."

"Remember what Benson said, and be careful," cautioned his cousin. "There is no use in taking a risk for nothing."

"Yes, I'll be careful," answered Joe, and crawled forward with care. Darry held his torch as high up as possible, to light the way.

The youth had advanced a distance of fifty feet when he came to a turn in the passageway. Here the side walls were not over two yards apart, while the roof could be touched with ease.

Thinking the walking better at this point, Joe struck out once more. The flare from his torch showed him something of a chamber ahead, and the water sounded closer than ever.

But hardly had the lad taken a dozen steps when the smooth

rock upon which he was advancing tilted up, sending him headlong. As he went down the torch was knocked from his hand. Then he slid forward into the darkness.

"Help!" he managed to cry. "Help!"

"What's up?" came from Darry, but the words were drowned out in the crashing of one stone against another. In the meantime Joe had fallen, he knew not whither. He landed on some soft ground, turned over and slid along, and then took a second drop. A stone fell beside him and pinned his jacket to the ground.

For the moment the lad was too dazed and bewildered to do anything but try to get back his breath. Then, as it gradually dawned upon him that he was not hurt in the least, he endeavored to arise.

"Fast!" he muttered, and tore his jacket away from under the rock. Then he turned about, trying to locate his torch. But that was missing, and all was dark around him.

"I'm in a pickle now," he thought. "I wish I had taken old Benson's advice and remained around the camp-fire. But who would have imagined that big rock would play a fellow such a trick? How in the world am I to get back again?"

From a great distance he could hear Darry shouting to him. He tried to answer his cousin, but whether or not his voice was heard he could not tell.

With his hands before him, he moved around, and scarcely had he taken a dozen steps when he slid down a rocky incline. Here there was water; and he shivered, thinking he might be

dropping into an underground stream from which there would be no escape. But when a pool was gained it proved to be but several inches deep.

As Joe stood in the pool there came a sudden rumble of thunder to his ears. He listened, and by the sounds became convinced that an opening into the outer air could not be a great way off. Then came an unexpected flash of reflected light on the rocks by his side.

"Hurrah, that light came from outside!" he cried. "I'm not buried alive, after all. But I may be a good way from daylight yet."

He had some matches in his box, and lighting one of these he discovered a passageway below him, running off to his left. Further on he picked up a bit of dry wood and lit this. It made rather a poor torch, but proved better than nothing.

"Now to get out, and then to find my way back to where I left old Benson," was his mental resolve.

With extreme caution he stole forward to where the lightning revealed a distant opening. He did not leave one foothold until he was sure of the next, for he had no desire to experiment with another moving rock.

The thunder now reached his ears plainly, and the lightning at times made the front of the cave as bright as day.

"It's quite another place," was his thought. "That dangerous passage connects the two."

Suddenly, as Joe was advancing, he heard a clatter of horses' hoofs, and into the cave ahead rode three rough-looking men,

all armed with rifles and pistols and each carrying small saddlebags across his steed.

At first Joe thought to call out to the newcomers, but he checked himself, for their appearance was decidedly against them.

"I'll try to find out something about them first," he muttered. "Perhaps they belong to that gang of bad men Benson was telling us about yesterday." And then, as the three came to a halt in the center of the outer cave and dismounted, he crept closer, in the shadow of some sharp rocks, to overhear what they might have to say.

## CHAPTER III

# AN IMPORTANT CONVERSATION

"Who ever saw such a downpour before?" growled one of the three men, as he switched the water from his soft felt hat. "I'm wet to the skin."

"I'm no better off," replied one of the others. "I think we were fools to leave Macklin's place, Gilroy."

"Just what I think, Fetter," said the third man. "We could have waited as well as not."

"Yes, we could have waited, Potts," answered Matt Gilroy; "but, to tell the truth, I don't want to trust Macklin too far. He might play us foul."

"He wouldn't dare to do that," returned Gus Fetter.

"Why not – if he thought he would get a reward?" came from Nat Potts, the youngest of the trio. "One thing is certain, Macklin is crazy to make money."

"I know a thing or two of Macklin's past – that's why," went on Gus Fetter. "If he got us into trouble I wouldn't keep silent about him, and he knows it."

"Macklin is slippery, no two ways about it," said Matt Gilroy, as he took off his jacket and wrung the water out. "I am not inclined to trust him, and that is all there is to it."

"Did he ever belong to the old gang?" questioned Nat Potts.

"Some say he did, and some say he didn't."

"He was a hanger-on, that's all," came from Matt Gilroy. "He was always afraid to take the chances of being shot, but was on hand when the spoils were divided. They used him as a messenger and a spy, but I don't believe he ever really helped to hold up a coach."

"Humph, then it's a wonder the old crowd had anything to do with him!"

"Oh, they had to have messengers and spies, and they never gave Macklin more than was coming to him, you can bet on that! I understand that when the Riverton coach was held up six years ago, and the gang got twenty-two thousand dollars, they gave Macklin five hundred, and he was glad to get that."

"That was a big haul!" cried Nat Potts enthusiastically. "I wish I had been in it."

"The gang was followed for two days – by the soldiers under Colonel Fairfield," went on Matt Gilroy, as he threw himself on the rocks, leaving his companions to start up a fire. "They had a hot time of it over to Bear Pass, I can tell you. Two men were shot, and one of them, Dan Hickey, my old chum, died from his wounds. They say Colonel Fairfield himself fired the shot that took poor Hickey in the head, and if that's so – well, I've got an account to square with the colonel, that's all."

"You can square that after we've had our little interview with the quartermaster," returned Gus Fetter with a hard laugh.

"That's right – we'll be sure to have the soldiers after us," put

in Nat Potts. "They'll be doubly mad when they learn that the hold-up resulted in the emptying of the box with their wages."

"It will be a good haul if it goes through, boys. The quartermaster will be carrying not less than twelve thousand dollars of the government's money besides his other stuff," returned Matt Gilroy.

Here the conversation came to a temporary end, for Nat Potts had produced a black flask, from which each of the men took a deep draught. Then Potts and Fetter started in to build a roaring fire at which all might dry their clothing, leaving Gilroy, the leader of the crowd, to do as he pleased.

Joe had listened to the talk with mingled interest and horror. It did not take him long to realize the truth – that these men were thoroughly bad, and that they had been mixed up in road robberies of the past and were contemplating another robbery some time in the future.

"They mean to rob the quartermaster of the fort, when he is bringing in the soldiers' wages from Rockspur," he thought. "And that leader is going to shoot down the colonel if he can. Who would imagine men could be so bad! And that leader seems to be educated, too!"

Joe would have been very much surprised had he known the truth, which was that Matt Gilroy, often called The Shadow, was a college-bred man, having passed through one of the leading institutes of learning of the Pacific coast. But, following this college career, Gilroy had forged checks and committed

a burglary, in company with an old chum named Hickey, and then the two had left Sacramento "between two days." Hickey had immediately joined the "knights of the road" and been shot down, as previously mentioned. Gilroy had drifted first to the Mississippi and then to Denver, and had not gone into the mountains until later. Now he was at the head of a desperate gang, numbering ten or a dozen, who had already committed several "hold-ups" of importance.

Soon the fire was burning brightly, and the three men took off part of their wearing apparel, that the articles might dry. They had brought some food with them, and as they sat eating and drinking they continued to discuss their plans. Nat Potts, who was not over nineteen or twenty, was evidently something of a new member, and asked many questions regarding the organization, and as he took in what was told him, so did Joe, listening with "all ears," as the saying goes.

"They must be as bad a crowd as can be found anywhere," thought the youth. "I wonder what they would do with me, if they found out I had been listening to their talk? Perhaps they'd kill me on the spot." And he gave a shiver.

The thunder and lightning had gradually abated, but with the coming of night the rain continued as steadily as ever. Fortunately for the desperadoes, however, the rocks sloped away from the entrance to the cave, so that no water came inside, while the fire made everybody quite comfortable.

Hardly knowing what to do, Joe continued behind the rocks,

taking care to remain in the shadow. More than once he was afraid one or another of the men would start to investigate the surroundings and that he would be discovered.

"I wish they would go to sleep," he said to himself. "Then I might get a chance to slip past them and their horses."

With great impatience he watched the men finish up their supper, get out their pipes, and fall to smoking. In the meantime the horses had been led to the opposite side of the cave and fastened to the rocks.

As Joe waited for a chance to get away he wondered what Darry and old Benson were doing. More than likely they were looking for him. But were they in that other cave, at the narrow passageway, or did the old scout know of this second cave and the secret entrance to it?

"If Benson leads the way around to here there may be trouble," he mused. "It would be better if I could get out and head him off. But if I do get out, how shall I turn to find the trail we were pursuing? In this darkness a fellow couldn't see his hand before his face."

At last Fetter threw himself down on a blanket to rest, leaving Gilroy and Potts still conversing earnestly by the fire. The two desperadoes talked in a low tone, so that Joe now caught but little of what was said.

The backs of both men were turned toward the side of the cave where Joe was in hiding; and, plucking up courage, the youth started forward on tiptoe, bent upon getting out of the cave before

the men should make some move which would expose him.

Step by step he advanced, until he reached a point where he was within a dozen feet of Gilroy and almost as close to Potts. He hardly dared to breathe, and his heart thumped madly beneath his jacket. But the men continued to smoke and talk, unconscious of his proximity.

At the entrance to the cave the rocks were somewhat rough and the mist had made them slippery. Joe was crawling forward rapidly, when one foot slipped, and he pitched headlong, making considerable noise.

"What was that?" cried Matt Gilroy, and leaped to his feet. He had been gazing into the fire, and for the moment could make out little in the darkness.

"I don't know," returned Nat Potts. "Something moving around out there, I think." And the younger man reached for his pistol, which still remained in his belt.

As rapidly as he could Joe sprang to his feet. A good bit of his wind had been knocked out of him, but he felt that he must not delay, and he ran for the outer air gasping for breath.

"Hi! stop!" roared Matt Gilroy, catching sight of him at last. "Stop, I tell you!"

"A boy!" ejaculated Nat Potts. "He must have been hiding in here!"

"If he was he overheard too much," growled Gilroy. "Come, we must catch him by all means," and he ran after Joe, with Potts following.

# CHAPTER IV

## LOST IN THE FOREST

"I must get away from them!"

This was the one thought which surged through Joe Moore's brain as he dashed from the cave in the mountain. He felt that if he was captured it would go hard with him. Did the desperadoes learn that he had overheard their conversation, they might make his very life pay the forfeit.

Forward he pitched, into the rain and the inky darkness, not knowing in what direction and just then caring but little. His one idea was to put distance between himself and his pursuers.

"Stop!" he heard the men call, and heard the clicking of a pistol hammer. Then he reached some brushwood, and, crouching low, continued to move on. No shot came, for the reason that the desperadoes could not locate him with certainty.

At length Joe reached a clump of trees. Had he not had his hands before him he might have run into them head first. He glided around them, and then continued onward, down a slope leading into a broad belt of timber. Still with his hands before him, he advanced through the undergrowth and between the stately trees for a distance of several hundred feet.

He was now exhausted with running and with fighting the entangling vines, and had to halt to catch his breath. As he

came to a stop he listened attentively, to learn if the men were following, but the downpour of rain drowned out every other sound.

Soaked to the skin, hatless, and still short of breath, he went on once more, feeling that he was not yet far enough from the cave for safety. He tried to steer a course in the direction of the cave where he had left Darry and the old scout, but whether he was successful or not he could not tell.

A hundred yards further and Joe came to another slope, covered with prairie grass. Down this he rolled in the darkness, to bring up in more brush below. Then he climbed out of the hollow at the opposite side, and, reaching a large fallen tree, sat down to rest and think over his situation. The tree lay partly under one with wide-spreading branches, so the boy was somewhat sheltered from the storm.

It must be confessed that Joe's heart sank within him as he reviewed the situation. Where he was he could not tell, nor could he form any definite plan for rejoining his cousin and old Benson. More than this, he was afraid that the desperadoes might come up at any minute and pounce upon him.

But as the minutes slipped by, and he neither saw nor heard anything of those in pursuit, he grew easier. Evidently they had given up the chase.

"I hope they have," was what he thought. "I never want to get so close to them again. They are a hard crowd, if ever there was one. If I can get to the fort and tell Colonel Fairfield of what I've

heard, I'll be doing a good thing."

An hour went by slowly, and then Joe looked around to find some means of making himself comfortable for the balance of the night, knowing it would be useless to pursue his course through the forest in the darkness.

"This is camping out with a vengeance!" he muttered grimly. "Darry ought to be along; I guess he'd soon get enough of it. I'll be lucky if I don't fall in with some savage animal."

The thought of wild beasts gave him another shiver, and he concluded to climb into a nearby tree, which was low-drooping and had a spot where several branches made a sort of platform. He was soon up in a comparatively dry place, and here he fell asleep, being too tired to hold his eyes open longer.

When Joe awoke the storm had cleared away and the sun was struggling through the scattering clouds. The forest still dripped with the rain, and with this dripping were mingled the songs of the birds and the hum of insects.

Stiff from the wet, he climbed slowly to the ground and looked around. On every side were the tall trees and the dense undergrowth, shutting off the distant view of everything but a towering mountain to the westward. This was the mountain he and the others had been ascending when the storm had overtaken them.

"I suppose I may as well head in that direction," he mused. "If I can strike the trail that will be something. But I'll have to keep my eyes open, or I may fall into the hands of that Gilroy gang."

He was hungry, but there were no means at hand with which to satisfy the cravings of his stomach, and so he had to move forward without eating.

Getting into the forest had been difficult, but getting out was even more of a task. The underbrush at certain points was positively impassable, and he had to make long detours, which took time and tired him greatly. At noon he was still in the forest, and the mountain seemed as far off as ever.

"I am lost, that is all there is to it!" he burst out with a groan. "I am lost, and perhaps I'll never get out!"

The sun shone down directly on his head, and even though still wet he was glad enough to seek the shelter the stately trees afforded. Here and there he saw some berries of various hues, but they were strange to him, and he did not dare touch them for fear of being poisoned.

Toward the middle of the afternoon he reached a tiny brook, flowing between the rocks, and here he again rested. He reached the conclusion that the brook came down from the mountain side and by following it up he must sooner or later run across the lost trail.

"I'll follow it, anyway," he told himself, and, hungry and footsore, set out along the water-course.

Here the walking was somewhat better, for he had no brushwood and vines to tear aside. The brook was clear, and he often saw trout and other fish darting hither and thither. This gave him an idea, and, picking some berries he had seen, he

dropped them in. At once some of the fish darted forward and swallowed the berries.

"Hurrah, a good bait!" he cried, and quickly made himself a line out of threads from his clothing. To this he attached a pin bent into shape with infinite care. Then he baited with the berries, and dropped the line in over a rock near a cottonwood.

Hardly had his bait touched the water when a good-sized fish seized it, and in a twinkling he had his catch landed. His heart gave a bound, for here was the material for at least one square meal.

"I'll cook it right away," he told himself, after feeling to see if he had any matches. His hunger was beginning to make him desperate, and he did not much care even if the desperadoes did see his camp-fire.

With some trouble he got together a few sticks of wood and some moss which the sunshine had dried out, and soon he had a respectable blaze between two rocks. With his jackknife he cleaned the fish as best he could, and then broiled it on a green twig. When done the meat was slightly burnt on one side and underdone on the other, but to the half-famished lad nothing had ever tasted sweeter, and he continued to eat until the whole fish was gone.

"Now I feel like myself," he muttered, after washing down the repast with a drink from the brook. "On a pinch that meal ought to last me until to-morrow noon, and surely I ought to find my way back to the others by that time."

With renewed energy he continued his tramp along the brook, often wading in the water when the brushwood on either side was extra thick. He kept his eyes and ears on the alert, but no human being came into sight, and presently a great feeling of loneliness swept over him.

"I'm alone," he whispered to himself. "Alone! I must say I don't like it much," and he hurried on faster than ever.

The sun was shining over the distant mountain when he reached a bend in the brook and came out upon a rocky trail which crossed the water-course at a right angle. As he looked at the trail he was tempted to shout with joy.

"The place we crossed yesterday morning!" he exclaimed. "There is the very spot where we got a drink and watered the horses. Now I ought not to have such a hard time finding the cave."

He got down and examined the trail closely, hoping to discover some hoofmarks. But the heavy rain had washed everything clean. Nevertheless, he felt certain that he was right, and hurried along as fast as his tired limbs permitted.

Leaving the brook, the trail wound in and out along a series of rocks and then through some heavy brushwood and along the edge of a jagged cliff. The cliff was overgrown with heavy vines, which hung down and brushed Joe's head as he passed.

"I can't be more than three or four miles from the cave," thought the boy. "And if I hurry – "

He stopped short, and then gave a cry of terror, and with good

reason. He had seen the vines ahead suddenly part, and now there came to view the shaggy head of a black bear. As soon as the beast caught sight of the boy he leaped to the trail and advanced upon him.

# CHAPTER V

## THE BIG BLACK BEAR

Joe had never before met a black bear in the open air, but he had seen several in menageries and studied them at a safe distance, and he realized that he was in a perilous position. The bear looked both untamed and fierce and as if nothing would suit him better than to hug the lad to death and eat him up afterward.

Joe did not stand upon the order of his going, but went instantly, running as fast as his tired limbs would permit. After him came the bear, and it was astonishing what good time the beast could make considering his size and his general appearance of clumsiness. Looking over his shoulder, the lad soon saw that the beast was slowly but surely lessening the distance between them.

"Shoo!" he yelled, and waved his arm threateningly, but the bear did not mind in the least. He trotted on until less than two rods separated boy and beast. Then Joe reached some underbrush and rocks, with a low-hanging tree in their midst, and without stopping to think twice he climbed into the tree and to one of the upper branches.

Hardly had he reached what he thought might prove a temporary place of safety when he realized his mistake. The bear came up the tree after him, – slowly, it is true; but still up, – and

this caused Joe's hair to fairly stand upon end.

"I'm a gone one now!" he groaned, and then espied another tree growing not far away. A limb could just be reached, and as the bear almost gained the boy's foot Joe swung himself from the first tree into the second.

As the lad gained a safe spot on the tree limb, the bear, coming to a halt on the branch opposite, set up a growl of rage and disappointment. For a minute he surveyed the situation, then came out on the branch slowly, testing it inch by inch. As it bent down he retreated, letting out a second growl, louder than the other.

Joe was wondering if he could drop to the ground and escape in that manner, when he saw the bear descend and come quickly toward the tree he was on. He watched the beast closely, and waited until it was close to him. Then he made a leap back into the tree from which he had originally come.

Again the bear came out as far as possible on a limb, and again he let out a growl of rage and disappointment. In one way the situation was comical, and Joe might have laughed had he not felt so serious.

"We can keep this up a long time, I reckon," thought the boy. "And as long as you don't try to leap after me I'll be safe."

Finding he could not reach the boy by coming up one tree or the other, the black bear descended slowly to the ground. Then he walked around both trees several times, and at last came to a halt between the two. Here he sank down, as if to rest, but

nevertheless kept one eye open and fixed upon Joe.

"He's going on guard! He means to keep me treed!" muttered the boy, and again his heart sank. He remembered a story he had once read, in which a bear had starved a man to death and eaten him afterward. Would Mr. Bruin do so in this case?

He wished he had a pistol, or a hunting-knife, or even a fair-sized stone. But he had nothing except a thin club, which he had cut for himself with his jackknife. This he kept in hand, and also kept the knife open and where he could get at it readily if needed.

Half an hour went by, – a time that to Joe seemed a whole day, – and still the black bear remained between the two trees, dozing with one eye and watching with the other.

The sight of the beast taking it so easy was maddening under the circumstances, and at last the youth cut another club and hurled it down on top of the bear. At once the beast flew up with a roar, and, standing on his hind legs, snapped his teeth at Joe. Then he flew up the tree once more, faster than ever before.

As the bear came up, Joe went higher than before, having seen another friendly limb over his head. He was sorely tempted to reach for the beast with his club, but thought best not to run too much of a risk.

As before, the youth swung to the next tree, and again the bear gave a growl and went down. Then, being near the top of the tree, the lad took a good look around.

In a moment a sight caught his eye which caused his heart to jump with delight. There on the trail were Darry and old Benson,

riding along slowly.

"Hi! hi! This way!" he shouted, with all the strength of his lungs. "This way, Darry! This way, Benson!"

He saw his cousin and the guide bring their steeds to a halt and gaze around in wonder. To them the voice appeared to come out of the very air itself.

"It's Joe's voice!" exclaimed Darry. "But I must say I don't see him."

Both gazed around, and at last the scout caught sight of the boy's handkerchief fluttering among the tree branches.

"There he is!" he exclaimed. "But what's he doing up there?"

"This way!" went on Joe, and as they turned in the direction, he added, "Look out for the bear!"

"A bear!" came from Darry. "He must be treed!"

"I reckon you've struck it," muttered Benson, and hastily unslung his rifle, at which Darry did the same. "Follow me, but be on your guard," went on the old scout.

He advanced with caution, his horse lifting his ears sharply as the neighborhood of the trees was gained. Presently the animal came to a sudden halt. At the same moment Benson caught sight of the bear.

"So that's where ye are!" muttered the old scout.

The bear raised himself on his hind legs and let out a growl at the newcomers. Hardly had the sound arose upon the air when Benson's rifle cracked, and a bullet hit the beast in the breast. Down went the animal on all fours, but did not tumble further.

Instead, he made a swift bound for the scout's horse.

Crack! It was now Darry's rifle that spoke up, and the bear was hit again, this time in the right front knee. He dropped, but quickly arose, shaking the wounded leg in the air and uttering a tremendous roar of pain and rage.

Neither horse would now stand still, and both danced around so lively that each rider had all he could do to keep his saddle. But even while his steed pranced in this fashion, old Benson managed to draw his pistol, and two additional shots rang out, both hitting the bear in the side. The roars of the beast were now incessant, and the horses threatened to bolt in spite of all the riders could do to stop them.

"Come!" cried the old scout, and turned from the scene. Thinking he meant to go off to reload, Darry followed. But when at a safe distance Benson sprang to the ground and tied his horse to a tree.

"I'd rather finish him afoot," explained the old hunter, and slipped another cartridge into his rifle. "You can stay here if you wish."

"Not much!" murmured Darry, and came down also. In a minute he was following the old scout. When they came up a second time they found the bear crawling around, roaring in a lower tone. Evidently he was more than half exhausted.

"Another good shot will finish him," sang out Joe, from a bottom limb of the tree. "Why don't you give it to him in the ear?"

"I will," answered the old scout, and circled around, watching his opportunity. At length it came – the rifle cracked sharply, and Bruin fell on his side, to rise no more.

"Hurrah! That's a big haul!" cried Darry, much delighted. "I was wishing we'd get a bear some time while we were out here."

"It's lucky the bear didn't get Joe," remarked Benson. "They generally come up a tree after their victim."

"I jumped from one tree to the other," answered the youth. "But I had quite an exciting time, I can assure you."

"How in the world did you get here?" questioned Darry, as Joe leaped to the ground. "Did you get through to another cave? Benson thought that might be the case."

"That was the case, Darry. And I've had a wonderful adventure, too," added Joe earnestly. Then he told his story, to which the others listened with close attention. When he came to mention Gilroy, Fetter, and Potts, old Benson uttered a low whistle.

"So that gang has turned up again, eh?" muttered the old scout. "This will be news to Colonel Fairfield. I reckon he'll be glad to be put on guard. If the quartermaster was held up it would prove a big loss."

"Is it true that Colonel Fairfield killed this Gilroy's chum?"

"Perhaps he did. The colonel was in that mix-up, and after it was over Dan Hickey was found dead in the bushes. But it was a fair fight, and the desperadoes knew what to expect when they went in for it."

"When does the quartermaster expect to come through with the money?"

"I don't know, Joe. Like as not it will be soon. And that being the case, we had better not lose time here, but get to the fort just as soon as we can," concluded the old scout.

## CHAPTER VI

# DARRY MAKES A DISCOVERY

As pressed as they were for time, Darry and Joe begged that the bearskin be saved, and did all they could toward helping the old scout skin the beast. With the pelt they took along about twenty pounds of the juiciest steaks.

"It's a pity to leave the rest to the wolves!" sighed Joe. "But it can't be helped. What a feast they will have!"

"I'm going to sling the beast into a tree," replied old Benson. "That may help save it until somebody else comes this way. The soldiers from the fort use the trail yonder, you know."

Soon they were on the way to where Benson and Darry had left Joe's horse. As Joe was tired from his night's adventure, his cousin and the old scout took turns in carrying him behind them. Even then his eyes would occasionally close.

"We can't make the fort to-night, that's certain," said the old scout.

"Not if we pushed on hard?" asked Darry.

"Joe can't push on as fast as that, Darry. He'll want to rest as soon as sundown comes."

"Perhaps I can get a nap at noon, while you two get dinner ready," suggested Joe. "I wonder if we'll meet those rascals anywhere on the road? I hope not, for they'd be certain to

recognize me."

"We'll keep an eye open for 'em," responded Benson dryly. "And see to it that your shooting-irons are ready for use."

"Why – do you think they'd attack us?" asked Darry quickly.

"They might – if they thought we were carrying anything of value. To such desperadoes all are fish that swim near their net."

"It's a pity the government can't stamp such a gang out, Benson."

"The government has stamped out lots of 'em, lad. Why, ten years ago none of these trails was safe. Nearly every horseman and stage-coach was held up. To-day you don't hear of a hold-up once in six months."

"Is this Gilroy a very bad man?"

"He is – in a way. He's a well-educated fellow, so I've been told, and not as brutal as some. But he's committed some robberies that have no equal in the history of these parts. Once he painted himself as an Indian and went to the agency, and there collected a lot of money which was coming to the redskins, the agent taking him for Chief Snowbird of the Modocs. The trick wasn't discovered until three days later, when the real Snowbird turned up. Even then it wasn't known who did the trick."

"And how was Gilroy found out?"

"A fellow named Downes, who belonged to the gang, was captured, and he gave the secret away. But it cost Downes his life, for he got away from the soldiers, and while he was in the mountains some of his gang shot and killed him."

At this story both Joe and Darry shuddered.

"What a lawless set!" muttered Joe. "One could hardly believe it unless he saw it with his own eyes."

"In a rough country the men are bound to be more or less rough, lad. Look at California, for instance. To-day it's as quiet and orderly as Massachusetts or Illinois. But in the days of '49 it wasn't that way. Many a miner was held up for his gold dust, and many a miner's secret of a rich find was stolen from him and the miner himself murdered."

"And how long do you think it will take to make this territory perfectly safe?"

"There aint no telling about that, but probably when you are as old as I am now you'll be able to travel anywhere without fear of being stopped. The railroads are a-coming in, towns are building up, and one of these days the desperadoes and stage-coach robbers will all be a thing of the past – and a good job done."

The third horse had been found, and now Joe was riding in his own saddle. The rain of the night before had made the trail dustless, and the air was as pure and sweet as one could wish.

By noon they calculated that they had covered ten miles of the worst portion of the distance to the fort. The ride had been a strain to Joe, and when old Benson called a halt he was glad enough to slip to the ground and throw himself in the shade of a tree to rest. Darry and the old scout lit a fire, and soon had a nice steak preparing for dinner.

"He's asleep," said Darry, a little later, pointing to Joe. "Poor fellow! supposing we let him rest for a couple of hours? I haven't the heart to wake him up."

"All right," answered Benson. The pair ate their dinner without arousing Joe, and after it was over the scout sat down near at hand to smoke his stumpy brier-root pipe, filling it with cut-plug which was as black as coal, and puffing away with keen satisfaction.

Darry was more restless, and having put away the things used in preparing the meal he began an inspection of the neighborhood.

"Be careful," said old Benson, as the youth moved around. "Don't get into trouble, as Joe did."

"I'll keep my eyes open," replied Darry.

Opposite the trail was a tall spur of rocks with something of a series of natural steps leading to the top. Up these steps went the youth. Some of the climbing was difficult, but this he did not mind.

When the top was gained a magnificent panorama was spread out before him. To one side were the tall mountains, hidden in a bluish mist, to the other the vast forests and plains. Northward was the continuation of the gap they were traveling, and southward was a series of foothills, with here and there a stream or waterfall glinting brightly in the sunshine.

"How grand!" he murmured. "What a vast country this is! Thousands upon thousands of people could live here, and nobody

be crowded. This would make splendid pasture for cows and sheep, and yet there isn't a single animal in sight."

Beyond the rocky spur was a similar elevation, and presently Darry crossed to this. Here there was a lone pine with several low branches, and he drew himself up and climbed to the top. He could now see much further than formerly, and his view took in a portion of the trail passed several hours before, as it wound, serpent-like, between the foothills.

"Hullo!" he cried, as he caught sight of something moving on the trail. "Three people on horseback. Can they be the desperadoes Joe met?"

He watched the riders with interest, and at last felt certain they were three men fully armed and wearing slouch hats and light-colored coats. This description tallied with that given by his cousin, and he hastened down to acquaint old Benson with the news.

"Must be the gang," said the scout. "Are they moving this way?"

"Yes."

"Then we had better move on."

Joe was awakened, and leaped to his feet, looking rather bewildered.

"I – I thought I'd take a little nap," he stammered. "I suppose I've slept a good while, haven't I?"

"About an hour and a half," answered his cousin. "Here's your dinner," and he passed it over. "We've got to move on. Those

rascals are behind us."

"Behind us!"

"Don't get scared," put in old Benson. "They are a good distance back. Darry discovered 'em from yonder p'int. Eat what you want, and then it will be time enough to start."

The repast was quickly disposed of by Joe, and soon they were in the saddle once more. The long nap had refreshed the lad greatly, and he said he would now be able to ride as far as anybody.

On they went, the trail growing more difficult as the top of the mountain was gained. Here there was a stiff breeze that at times was positively cold, and both boys were glad enough to button their jackets tightly around them.

If all went well Benson calculated that they could reach Hank Leeson's place with ease before dark. This was the cabin of an old hunter and trapper who was known from one end of the Territory to the other. As mentioned at the beginning of this tale, Leeson's place was twenty miles from the fort.

"I could ride right through," said the old scout. "But you boys couldn't do it. If you tried it, you'd be so sore and stiff the next day you couldn't stand up."

## CHAPTER VII

# AT HANK LEESON'S CABIN

At first the boys were inclined to think that the old scout was mistaken – that they could ride as far as anybody. But when, shortly after sunset, they came within sight of Hank Leeson's place both were glad to think that they would have to ride no more for the present.

"I'm sore already," whispered Darry to his cousin.

"So am I – but I didn't want Benson to know it," was the low answer. "That last mile of the trail was awfully rough."

Hank Leeson had seen them coming, and stood at the doorway of his cabin, rifle in hand. He was a tall, thin man, with black eyes that were exceedingly sharp and shrewd. When he recognized Sam Benson he dropped his firearm into a corner and ran to meet the scout.

"Downright glad ter see ye!" he said, shaking hands. "Sam, yer a sight fer sore eyes, thet's wot!"

"And I'm glad to see you, Hank," responded Benson, just as warmly. "How have things been with you?"

"Putty slow, to tell the truth." Leeson looked at the boys. "Two tenderfoots along, I see."

"Yes. This is Joe Moore, brother to the captain up at the fort, and this is Darry Germain, his cousin. Boys, this is Hank Leeson,

the best trapper and all-around shot in these parts."

"Oh, come, don't be a-praisin' me so much!" cried Leeson, as he took the boys' hands in a grip that made them wince. "As fer shootin', ye kin do thet yerself as good as anybody, Sam." He looked the boys over. "Glad to know ye, lads. I know Captain Moore downright well, and he's a good soldier."

"I've got news, Hank," put in the old scout. "Joe fell in with Matt Gilroy's gang down near Buckwater Run."

"What!" roared the old trapper. "Do you mean to tell me thet measly crowd is around here ag'in?"

"Three of 'em are – Gilroy, Fetter, and a young fellow named Potts. I think Potts comes from Denver."

"I know him. His father was Ike Potts, the card-sharp. Thet blood is about as bad as any in the gang. What are they up to?"

"They are laying a trap for the quartermaster when he comes through with the soldiers' money. Joe heard part of their talk by accident. Do you know when the quartermaster is expected?"

"I do not. Ye see, ever since old Cap'n Bissile was held up the army officers keep mum about the movements of the cash-box. I reckon they have orders from Washington to do it."

"I want to warn Colonel Fairfield as soon as I can," went on the old scout.

"Yes, he ought to be warned."

"Can you lend me a fresh hoss?"

"I can."

"Then I'll be off as soon as I've had a bit of supper. The boys

can stay with you all night, can't they?"

"They can, an' welcome," replied Hank Leeson.

"You are going to leave us?" queried Joe.

"Don't see any other way to do, lad. The sooner I get the news to the fort the better. I'll come back in the morning after you – or send your brother or somebody else."

"We can ride it alone, can't we?" questioned Darry.

"I wouldn't try it, if I were you. The trail is a rough one, and there are several forks where you might go astray."

"Better stay with me, lads," put in Leeson. "I'll treat ye well, never fear," and he smiled broadly.

"Thank you," returned Joe. "I was only thinking I'd like to see my brother soon, that's all."

"A few hours more or less won't make much difference," said Darry. He had looked around the trapper's cabin, and was interested. "Let us wait." And so it was arranged.

It did not take long to get a bit of supper, and in less than half an hour Sam Benson was off, astride of a powerful steed which had been Hank Leeson's pride for years.

"Jest tell him to go to the fort," said Leeson, "and he'll carry ye thar with his eyes shet," and he gave a parting salute to the old scout.

The cabin was a primitive affair of rough logs, with the chinks filled with dried clay. It contained two rooms, each about twelve feet square. Back of the cabin was a lean-to where Leeson kept his horses, two in number. There was room for more animals, so

the beasts ridden by our friends were easily accommodated.

Night had fallen by the time the horses had been rubbed down and fed and the boys had finished their evening repast, and it was dark when they gathered around the doorstep to rest. Hank Leeson sat on a chopping-block, cleaning his rifle and smoking at the same time, and as the three rested Joe told of his adventure in the cave, and Darry took up the tale of the bear.

"You had a lucky escape, lad," said the trapper. "A lucky escape, an' no error. Like as not them desperadoes would have killed ye, had they caught ye."

"I've been thinking – do you imagine they'll come here to-night?" asked Darry.

Hank Leeson shook his head.

"Don't allow as they will. About a year ago I gave thet Fetter fair warnin' if he showed his face about my cabin I'd plug him full o' holes, an' I sent Gilroy the same message. They know me, an' know I won't stand any nonsense. They'll be likely to give me a wide berth. They know I aint got much worth stealin'."

"Then we ought to be safe until the soldiers get the news."

"Reckon you will be, lad," answered the trapper.

He was very much of a quaint character, and for two hours the boys sat up, listening to his tales of encounters with wild animals, desperadoes, and Indians.

"I've had my own little fun with b'ars," he said. "Got in a tree onct, and a b'ar kept me there fer a whole day. I had wounded him in the leg, and in running over a brook I dropped my gun."

"How did you get away?" asked Darry.

"I didn't know what to do fust. The b'ar had me foul, and kept right at the bottom of the tree all the time. With his wounded leg he couldn't come up, and I didn't dare to go down, and there we was – a-lookin' at each other, he a-growlin' and I a-sayin' all kind o' unpleasant things about him."

"Didn't you have a pistol?"

"No, all I had with me at the time was a powder-horn, a matchbox, and my pocket-knife. What to do I didn't know, and I was a-thinkin' I'd be starved out, when a thought struck me to blow him up with powder."

"Blow him up!" cried both boys.

"Thet's wot, lads – blow him up. I had a handkerchief, ye see, an' into this I dumped 'bout half my powder, an' into the powder I put three matches, with the ends pointing out. Then I tied powder an' matches into a hard lump and watched my chance. There was a flat rock near the roots of the tree, and putty soon Mr. B'ar squatted on this rock. Then I let drive fer the rock, an' the powder an' matches landed good an' hard, I can tell ye."

"And exploded?" put in Joe eagerly.

"Yes, exploded with a noise ye could hear 'most a mile, I calkerlate. The powder flashed straight up into thet ba'r's face, blindin' him and tearing his jaw half off, and the way he ran to save himself was a caution. As soon as he was gone I dropped down and ran for my gun. Then I made after the b'ar and caught him between the rocks and finished him."

This was the last story told that night, and soon after the tale was concluded Leeson showed the boys into the inner room of the cabin, where there was something of a rough bed with a straw mattress.

"Make yerselves ter hum," he said. "It aint no hotel, but it's the best I've got to offer ye."

"But we don't want to turn you out," said Darry.

"I'll make myself comfortable near the door," answered Leeson. "I want to sleep with one eye open – in case those rascals should take a notion to come this way."

The boys were glad enough to rest indoors again and take off the clothing they had worn during the storm.

"Camping out is well enough," declared Joe; "but I don't want too much of it."

"Oh, we've seen the worst side of it," returned Darry. "I expect lots of good times when we get to the fort."

"Oh, so do I, for the matter of that."

After turning in it did not take long for the cousins to get to sleep, and a little while later Hank Leeson also threw himself down to rest. But the old trapper remained close to the doorstep, and slept with his rifle near at hand.

An hour went by, and the darkness and silence continued. There was no moon, and only a few stars were visible. At a distance a few night birds were calling, and occasionally the howl of some lonely wolf could be heard, but that was all.

At last from out of the darkness of the trail came three men

on foot. They were Matt Gilroy and his companions. They had tethered their horses in the bushes some distance away. They stole toward the cabin like so many grim and silent shadows.

## CHAPTER VIII

# THE STEALING OF THE HORSES

"Go slow, men," came softly from Gilroy. "You know what kind of a man Leeson is."

"Reckon I do know," came in a growl from Fetter. "And I've got an account to settle with him, too."

"I'm pretty certain the boy is here," went on the leader. "But we must make sure if the others are here too, or if they have ridden off to the fort. If they have gone to the fort – "

"Hist!" came in warning from Potts. "You're talking too much. I've heard that this Leeson sleeps with his ears wide open."

"He does," grumbled Fetter; and then the three desperadoes relapsed into silence.

They were advancing upon the cabin from the rear, and each held a ready pistol in his hand, while his rifle was slung over his back. They had seen the boys and Benson head for the trapper's home while it was still light and they were on a high cliff; but darkness had closed in on the scene, and they had come up to the spot in ignorance of what had followed.

Tiptoeing their way they reached the lean-to where the horses had been stabled, and with caution Gilroy went inside. By feeling the animals he soon learned that three had been in use but a few hours before, while the fourth was cool and comfortable.

"Their horses are here," he announced. "And a fourth is here, too."

"That's Leeson's," answered Fetter. "But I thought he had two or three."

"Might as well take them while we have the chance," murmured Potts. "Four nags will bring some money over at Highwater. We can get Gingo to sell 'em."

"Let them out," answered Gilroy. "Without horses they'll have their hands full trying to follow us."

It was no easy task to untie the horses in a place that was pitch-dark, and it took some time to get even the horses belonging to our friends released.

As Fetter and Potts took the animals out, Gilroy worked to untie the sturdy mare belonging to Hank Leeson. This was a pet animal, and not used to strangers. As Gilroy caught hold of the halter she gave a neigh of suspicion.

"Hush!" murmured the desperado, and ran his hand down the mare's nose. But this made her skittish, and she stamped sharply half a dozen times.

"What's up thar?" came in Hank Leeson's voice, and the trapper was wide awake on the instant. "Whoa, Nancy, whoa!"

"Hang the luck!" muttered Gilroy, and ran outside after Fetter and Potts. "He must have been on the watch."

"We must get out!" responded Fetter. "He's a sure-shot, remember. Nothing but the darkness can save us."

"I'm going!" came from Potts, and he leaped on the back of

one of the horses – that which Joe had been riding.

"I'm with you," said Fetter, and mounted old Benson's steed. "Come, Matt, and be quick about it."

By this time Hank Leeson was running around the corner of the cabin, gun in hand. His call had aroused Joe and Darry, and they were pulling on their clothing with all speed.

"Something is wrong!" exclaimed Joe.

"It must be those desperadoes," responded his cousin.

The boys were not yet dressed, when they heard a clatter of hoofs and a shot, followed by another.

Then they came out, rifles in hand, to find Leeson reloading near the stable.

"Those desperadoes have been here!" exclaimed the old trapper. "They ran off with your hosses, consarn 'em!"

"Went off with the horses?" repeated Darry. "Did you shoot at them?"

"I did, but the light's against me, and I don't reckon as how I hit anything." Hank Leeson meditated for a moment. "I've half a mind ter do it – yes, I have!" he muttered.

"Do what?" asked Joe.

"Go after 'em on my mare. Would you be afraid to stay here alone if I went?"

"No; go ahead!" cried both boys.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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