

Stoddard William Osborn

**The Lost Gold of the
Montezumas: A Story of the
Alamo**



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William Osborn Stoddard

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CHAPTER I. THE GODS OF THE MONTEZUMAS

It was a gloomy place. It would have been dark but for a heap of blazing wood upon a rock at one side. That is, it looked like a rock at first sight, but upon a closer inspection it proved to be a cube of well-fitted, although roughly finished, masonry. It was about six feet square, and there were three stone steps leading up in front.

Behind this altar-like structure a vast wall of the natural rock, a dark limestone, had been sculptured into the shape of a colossal and exceedingly ugly human face, – as if the head of a stone giant were half sunken in that side of what was evidently an immense cave.

There were men in the cave, but no women were to be seen. Several of the men were standing near the altar, and one of them was putting fuel upon the fire. The only garment worn by any of them was a ragged blanket, the Mexican *serape*. In the middle of the blanket was a hole, and when the wearer's head was thrust through this he was in full dress.

There was no present need for carrying weapons, but arms of all sorts – lances, swords, bows and sheaves of arrows – were strewn in careless heaps along the base of the wall. Besides these, and remarkable for their shapes and sizes, there were a number of curiously carved and ornamented clubs. All the men visible were old and emaciated. They were wrinkled, grimy, dark, with long, black-gray hair, and coal-black, beady eyes. Withal, there was about them a listless, unoccupied, purposeless air, as if they were only half alive.

They seemed to see well enough in that lurid half light, and they wandered hither and thither, now and then exchanging a few words in some harsh and guttural dialect that seemed to have no dividing pauses between its interminable words.

Nevertheless, this was not the only tongue with which they were familiar, for one of the men at the altar turned to those who were near him and spoke to them in Spanish.

"The gods have spoken loudly," he said. "They have been long without service. They are hungry. Tetzcatl will go. He will find if the Americans are strong enough to strike the Spaniards in Texas. He will bring them to serve the gods in the valley of the old kings. He will stir up the Comanches and the Lipans. The Apaches in the west are already busy. The gods will be quiet if he can arouse for them the enemies of Spain."

For a moment the dark figures stood as still as so many statues, and then a sepulchral voice arose among them.

"The men of the North will not come," it said. "The Texans cannot defend their own towns from the locusts of Santa Anna. The Comanches and the Lipans are scalping each other. The Apaches have been beaten by Bravo's lancers. All white men need to be hired or they will not fight. We have nothing wherewith to hire them."

A hoarse and mocking laugh burst from the lips of Tetzcatl. "Hire them? Pay them?" he said. "No! But hunters can bait wolves. If the trap is rightly set, the wolves will never reach the bait. They will but fall into the pit they are lured to. Come! Let us look at the fire that was kindled for Guatamoczin. The Spaniards perished in the mountains when they came to hunt for the hidden treasures of the Montezumas."

Slowly, as if their withered limbs almost refused to carry them, the weird, dingy, ghastly figures followed him deeper into the cave, and each took with him a blazing pine-knot for a torch. Not one of them appeared to be aroused, as yet, to any especial interest, nor did they talk as they went. Tetzcatl, however, led the way with a vigor of movement that was in startling contrast to the listlessness of his dark companions.

There was no door to unlock, there were no bars to remove, at the end of their silent march. The distance travelled may have been a hundred paces. On either side, as they went, were stalagmites of glittering white, answering to the pointed stalactites which depended from the vaulted cave-roof above. It was a scene the like of which can be found in many another limestone formation the world over. There was nothing exceptional about it, only that the specimens presented were numerous and finely formed.

The torches flared in the strong currents of air which ventilated the cavern, and their smoky light was reflected brilliantly from all the irregular, alabaster surfaces.

The sculptured head of the great idol over the altar; the carefully maintained fire; the presence of the aged keepers, whether they were to be called priests of the shrine or only worshippers, were the distinguishing features of the place.

On went Tetzcatl until he reached a spot where the side walls approached each other, with a space of about thirty feet between them. Here he paused and waited until the others, with several who had not before made their appearance, arrived and stood beside him.

"There!" he said, loudly, pointing with outstretched hand. "Guatamoczin turned to ashes upon the coals of the Spanish furnace, because he refused to reveal this to their greed. Know you not that even now, if the Spaniards did but suspect, there would shortly be an army among the mountain passes? Aye! If the Americans believed that this were here, their thousands would be pouring southward. All Europe would come. Here is the god that they worship, but the secret of its presence has been guarded from them by the old gods of Mexico."

"What good?" asked a cracked voice near him. "It cannot be used to buy Texans. It must remain where it is until the gods come up."

"Aye! So!" shrieked Tetzcatl. "We will keep their secret chamber until they come. But the wolf does but need to smell the bait, – not to eat it. He will come, if he has only the scent. If the Texans were stirred to hunt for the gold they will never find, they would but gather offerings for the long hunger of those who dwell below."

"Hark!" responded the other speaker. "If they ask for it, it must go to them. Much has been paid them already. Hark!"

Before them, in regularly arranged rows, were a number of stacks of what seemed to be bars of metal, showing here and there dull gleams of yellow. The ingots were not large, but their aggregate weight and value would be enormous, if they were gold.

Opposite, across the passage, were other and larger stacks of ingots, but these presented no yellow surfaces. Black rather than white was the prevailing tint of what Tetzcatl had declared to be silver bullion.

Not all of the gold had been smelted and cast, for there were small heaps of nuggets, such as come from rich placer washings.

Tetzcatl had stepped forward, lifting his torch and peering into the gloom. Only a step or two beyond him, the floor of the cave was cut off, sharply, by one of the breaks or "faults" common to all rock formations, the token of some old-time upheaval or depression. The rugged level began again a few yards farther on, but there was no bridge across the yawning chasm which separated the corresponding edges. Three or four heavy planks which lay near indicated a possible means of crossing, if need should be, but no hand was laid upon them now.

The dismal-looking companions were all leaning forward in listening attitudes, intent upon a roaring, booming sound that came up from the chasm.

"They are calling," said Tetzcatl. "But we have none to give them. Well did I say that I must go."

"It is too loud!" exclaimed the watcher, who had followed him most closely. "They have called my name!"

Tetzcatl turned quickly, but he addressed yet another of the old men by a long, many-syllabled, vibrating invocation, and added to it, in Spanish, —

"Wilt thou go down to the gods, or shall he take thy place?"

"He is gone!" was the quick but entirely unexcited rejoinder.

Tetzcatl whirled again toward the gulf, but the rock-floor at his left was vacant. The withered old devotee had not hesitated for a moment, but had plunged down headlong.

During a number of slow seconds no word was uttered, and all the while the booming roar from below diminished in volume until it nearly died away.

"The gods are satisfied," said Tetzcatl.

So seemed to think and say his associates, and they turned away to walk slowly toward the altar, as if nothing noteworthy or unusual had occurred.

It is not always easy to give satisfactory explanations of the sounds which are to be heard, more or less intermittently, among the chasms and recesses of great caves. The flow of subterranean waters, the rush of air-currents, the effects of echoes, and many other agencies have been taken into account. As for Tetzcatl and his friends, they had but formed and expressed an idea which was anciently universal. This voice from the deep was but one of the oracles which have been so revered by the primitive heathenisms of many nations.

As for the treasure, from whatever placers it had been gathered, its presence in such a place required no explanation. The Aztec kings had but exhibited commonplace prudence in choosing for it so secure a hiding.

The cave was not at all more mysterious than might be the underground vault of a great city bank or a United States Sub-Treasury. It was as safe even from burglary, if the vault-entrance was well guarded.

More than a score of the grisly, blanketed shapes were now gathered at the altar. Its fire was blazing high, and shed its red, wavering radiance upon their faces, while Tetzcatl stood upon the lower of the steps and addressed them. He spoke altogether in their own tongue, and they listened without reply or comment.

When at last he ceased speaking, they all sat down upon the rock-floor, and not one of them turned his head while their exceptionally vigorous and active leader strode swiftly away in the direction opposite to the chasm and the treasure.

It was an ascent, gradual at first and then more rapid, until his walk became a climb and there were broken ridges to surmount at intervals. Before long he reached a ragged wall of rock, where the great hall of the cave abruptly ended. Farther progress would have been shut off but for a narrow cleft at the left, into which he turned. This still led upward until it became little better than a burrow. He was compelled to stoop first, and then to go, for several yards, on all-fours. Then there was an increasing sunlight, and he stood erect amid a tangled copse of vines and bushes.

Above him arose a craggy mountain-side. Below him, a thousand feet, was a wooded valley through which a narrow river ran. Along the mountain-side, not far below where he stood, there wound a plainly marked pathway. With a quickness that was cat-like, he descended to this path, and, as he reached it, he looked back toward the now perfectly concealed burrow he had emerged from.

"He has gone down to the gods!" he exclaimed, aloud. "He must have Spaniards to follow him. Tetzcatl will bring upon them the scalpers of the plains and the riflemen of the North. He will lure the Texans with the gold they will never find. Ha! They will gather none of the treasures of the Montezumas, unless the gods come up to tell them of the sands in the secret watercourses beyond the mountains and toward the sunset. Huitzilopochtli covered the gold gullies when the Spaniards came."

He had a foundation of fact for his declaration. Up to that hour no search had succeeded in accounting for the quantities of yellow metal captured by Cortez, or for the larger deposits declared to have been hidden from him by the obstinate chiefs whom he had slain for refusing to tell.

CHAPTER II. THE ALAMO FORT

"Ugh!"

Two paths came out within a few yards of each other from the tangled mazes of a vast, green sea of chaparral. For miles and miles extended the bushy growth, with here and there a group of stunted trees sticking up from its dreary wilderness. It was said that even Indians might lose themselves in such a web as that. Not because it was pathless, but because it was threaded by too many paths, without way-marks or guide-boards.

At the mouth of one of these narrow and winding avenues sat a boy upon a mustang pony. At the mouth of the other path, upon a mule not larger than the pony, sat one of the strangest figures ever seen by that or any other boy. He was short of stature, broad-shouldered, but thin. His head was covered by a broad-brimmed, straw *sombrero*. Below that was a somewhat worn *serape*, now thrown back a little to show that he also wore a shirt, slashed trousers, and that in his belt were pistols and a knife, while from it depended, in its sheath, a *machete*, or Mexican sabre. He carried no gun, but the saddle and other trappings of his mule were very good. He wore top-boots, the toes thrust under the leather caps of his wooden stirrups, and from his heels projected enormous, silver-mounted spurs. His hair was as white as snow, and so were the straggling bristles which answered him for beard and moustaches.

He may have been grotesque, but he was not comical, for his face was to the last degree dark, threatening, cruel, in its expression, and his eyes glowed like fire under their projecting white eyebrows. He had wheeled his mule, and he now sat staring at the boy, with a hand upon the hilt of the *machete*. He did not draw the weapon, for the boy was only staring back curiously, not even lowering his long, bright-bladed lance.

As for him, his clothing consisted of a breech-clout and fringed deerskin leggings. His belt sustained a quiver of arrows, a bow, and a knife, but he seemed to have no fire-arms. Neither did he wear any hat, and he rode his mustang with a piece of old blanket in place of a saddle.

The most remarkable thing about him, upon a closer study, excepting, perhaps, his brave and decidedly handsome face, was his color. Instead of the tawny darkness common to older Indians, he had retained the clear, deep red which is now and then to be seen among squaws and their very young children. He was a splendid specimen, therefore, of a young red man, and he had now met an old fellow of a race which had never been red. He seemed to know him, also, for he spoke to him at once.

"Ugh!" he said. "Tetzcatl. Mountain Panther. Young chief, Lipan. Son of Castro. Heap friend."

The response was in Spanish, and the boy understood it, for he replied fairly well in the same tongue.

"Good! Tetzcatl go to the Alamo," he said. "All chiefs there. White chiefs. Lipan. Comanche. Castro. Mexican. Heap fighting birds."

At the last words the face of Tetzcatl lighted up, and he touched his mule with a spur. It was time to push forward if there was to be a cock-fight at the fort, but he asked suspiciously how the young Lipan knew him. Had he ever seen him before?

"Ugh! No!" said the boy. "Heard tell. No two Panther. Heap white head. No tribe. Ride alone. Bad medicine for Mexican. Stay in mountains. Heap kill."

He had recognized, therefore, the original of some verbal picture in the Lipan gallery of famous men.

"Sí!" exclaimed the Panther, looking more like one. "Tlascalan! People gone! Tetzcatl one left. Boy, Lipan, fight all Mexicans. Kill all the Spaniards."

From other remarks which followed, it appeared that the warriors of the plains could be expected to sympathize cordially with the remnants of the ancient clans of the south in the murderous feud which they had never remitted for a day since the landing of Cortez and his *conquistadores*.

Moreover, no Indian of any tribe could fail to respect an old chief like Tetzcatl, who had won renown as a fighter, even if he had taken no scalps to show for his victories.

The mustang had moved when the mule did, with a momentary offer to bite his long-eared companion, while the mule lashed out with his near hind hoof, narrowly missing the pony. Not either of the riders, however, was at all disturbed by any antics of his beast.

Tetzcatl, as they rode on, appeared to be deeply interested in the reported gathering at the Alamo. He made many inquiries concerning the men who were supposed to be there, and about the cock-fight. The boy, on the other hand, asked no questions except with his eyes, and these, from time to time, confessed how deep an impression the old Spaniard-hater had made upon him.

"Mountain Panther kill a heap," he muttered to himself. "Cut up lancer. Cut off head. Eat heart. No take scalp."

Beyond a doubt he had heard strange stories, and it was worth his while to meet and study the principal actor in some of the worst of them.

One of the old man's questions was almost too personal for Indian manners.

"Why go?" sharply responded the young Lipan. "Son of Castro. Great chief. Go see warrior. See great rifle chief. See Big Knife! Fort. Big gun. Old Mountain Panther too much talk."

That was an end of answers, and Tetzcatl failed to obtain any further information concerning an assembly which was evidently puzzling him. They were now nearing their destination, however. They could see the fort, and both pairs of their very black eyes were glittering with expectation as they pushed forward more rapidly.

The strongest military post in all Texas was an old, fortified mission, and it had been well planned by Spanish engineers to resist probable attacks from the fierce coast-tribes which had now disappeared. An irregular quadrangle, one hundred and fifty-four yards long by fifty-four yards wide, was surrounded by walls eight feet high that were nowhere less than two and a half feet thick. On the southeasterly corner, opening within and without, was a massive church, unfinished, roofless, but with walls of masonry twenty-two and a half feet high and four feet thick. Along the south front of the main enclosure was a structure two stories high, intended for a convent, with a large walled enclosure attached. This was the citadel. Next to the church was a strong exterior stockade, with a massive gate. There were many loop-holes and embrasures in the enclosing wall. No less than fourteen cannon were actually in position, mostly four-pounders and six-pounders.

It had been many a long year since a shot had been fired at any red enemy, for the remaining tribes, forced westward, were not fort-takers. Their incursions, rarely penetrating so deep into the nominally settled country, had reference to scalps, horses, cattle, and other plunder.

As for other Texas Indians, the Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and other "United States redskins," about eight thousand of whom were estimated to have crossed the northern border and taken up permanent abodes, none of their war-parties ever came as far south as the Guadalupe River and the Alamo.

Of Comanches, Lipans, Apaches, and the like, the old Mexican State of Texas had been estimated to contain about twenty thousand, with numerous bands to hear from in the unknown regions of southern New Mexico, Chihuahua, Durango, Sonora, and Arizona. As yet, the strength of these tribes had not been broken. They were independent nations, not recognizing Spain, Mexico, or any other power as entitled to govern them. Added to the continual perplexities of whatever authority might at any time assume to control the lost empire of the Montezumas, were sundry remnants of the very fiercest of the old Mexicans clans.

They were not understood to be numerous, but they held unpenetrated valleys and mountain ranges and forests. The boldest priests had failed to establish missions among them. It was said that

no white man venturing too far had ever returned, and there were wild legends of the wonders of those undiscovered fastnesses.

During several years prior to this winter of 1835, there had been an increasing immigration of Americans from the United States. These settlers now numbered thirty thousand, or more than six times the Spanish-Mexican population, and they had brought with them five thousand negro slaves. Almost as a matter of course, they had refused to become Mexicans. They had set up for themselves, had declared their independence, and the new provisional republic of Texas, with Sam Houston for its leading spirit, was now at war with the not very old republic of Mexico, under the autocratic military presidency of General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna.

It was toward the middle of a warm and lazy day, more like a northern October than anything that should be called winter. The sun was shining brightly upon the walls, the fort, the church, and upon the gray level of the enclosure. It was getting almost too warm for active exercise, but there was nothing going on that called for hard work from human beings.

About twenty yards from the church a long oval had been staked out, and a rope had been stretched around upon the stakes. Outside of this rope a throng had gathered which was to the last degree motley. It consisted, first, of nearly all the garrison. There were a number of other Americans, of all sorts, and half as many Mexicans, besides a few Spanish-Mexicans of pure imported blood. Not less noticeable, however, than any of the others were more than a dozen Indian warriors, in their best array, who stalked proudly hither and thither, pausing to speak only to white men of high degree. That is, they would condescend to recognize none but those whom they were willing to accept as their own equals, for the red man is a born aristocrat. At the same time they had watched as closely as had any others the exciting combats going on inside the roped amphitheatre.

These, indeed, were now completed, for their proper time had been the cool hours of the morning. It had been a grand cock-fight, almost the national pastime of the Mexicans, and decidedly popular among their red and white neighbors. Partly, at least, it had been gotten up in honor of the Comanche and Lipan dignitaries who were present, but it had drawn to the fortress the leading citizens of the nearest town, San Antonio de Bexar.

There were sentries at the open gate, of course, but there was no such severity of military discipline as would prevent any man from attending such an affair as that.

The utmost courtesy prevailed. In fact, the absolute good order was something remarkable. The lower classes might be supposed to be in awe of their superiors and of the military, but there was something more belonging to the men and the time.

Only the black men and some of the Mexican *peones* seemed to be without arms. Almost every white man wore a belt to which was secured a knife and at least one pair of pistols. Half of them carried rifles, unless, for the moment, they had leaned the long barrels against a handy wall. The bronzed and bearded faces expressed hospitality, civility, but every pair of eyes among them wore an expression of habitual watchfulness, for all these men were living in a state of daily, hourly readiness to stand for their lives. Their laws, their rights, their liberties, and their very breath depended upon their personal pluck and prowess, for here were the pioneers of the Southwest, the heroes of the American border.

Between the cockpit and the church stood a group toward which the rest now and then glanced with manifest respect. Central among them were two who were conversing, face to face.

The taller of this pair was a dark, scarred, powerful-looking savage, close behind whom stood another red man, every whit as dangerous looking but a head shorter.

The other of the talkers was a white man nearly as tall as the dark chief. He was blue-eyed, auburn-haired, handsome, and he had an almost unpleasant appearance of laughing whenever he spoke. Even while he laughed, however, his sinewy hand was playing with the hilts of the pistols in his belt as if it loved them.

"Travis," said the warrior, sternly, "Lipan fight Santa Anna, – now! What Texan do? How many rifle come?"

"Why, Castro, my old friend," replied Colonel Travis, "he is coming here. We needn't go to Mexico after him. We can clean him out of Texas when he comes in, but we won't go with you across the Rio Grande."

Castro turned and said a few words in Spanish to the shorter chief behind him, and most of the white men present understood the fierce reply that was made in the same tongue.

"Great Bear speaks for all the Comanches!" he exclaimed. "Ugh! We fight Santa Anna! Fight Travis! Fight Big Knife! No friend! Texans all cowards. Coyotes. Rabbits. They are afraid to ride into Chihuahua."

Just then, at his left, there glided near him a new-comer to whom all the rest turned, at once, as if his presence were a great surprise.

"Tetzcatl speaks for the tribes of the mountains," he loudly declared, and his deep, guttural voice had in it a harsh and grating tone. "We send for the Comanches. We will be with them when they come. We want the Lipans to come. We ask the Texans to come. They will strike the lancers of Santa Anna and save Texas. The chiefs will take scalps, horses, cattle. Travis, Tetzcatl will show him gold. Plenty! Texans want gold."

"There isn't any gold to be found in Chihuahua," laughed Travis, "or the Mexicans would ha' scooped it in long ago. I don't bite."

"Colonel," broke in a bearded, powerful-looking man, stepping forward, "I know what he means, if you don't. He said something to me about it, once. The old tiger is full of that nonsense of the hidden treasure of the Montezumas. It's the old Cortez humbug."

"Humbug? I guess it is!" laughed the colonel. "I can't be caught by such a bait as that. The Spaniards hunted for it, and the Mexicans, too. No, I won't go, Bowie. You won't, and Crockett won't. We should only lose our scalps for nothing. We'll stay and fight the Greasers on our own ground."

"Tell you what, colonel," responded his friend, "let's have him talk it out. You just hear what he's got to say."

"Well, Bowie," he said, "I don't object to that, but we've all heard it, many a time. I don't believe Cortez and his men left anything behind them. If they found it, they just didn't report it to the king, that's all. That's about what men of their kind would ha' done. Nothing but pirates, anyhow. Talk with old Tetzcatl? Oh, yes. No harm in that."

"I'd kind o' like a ride into Mexico," remarked Bowie, thoughtfully, "if it was only to know the country. Somehow I feel half inclined to try it on, if we can take the right kind with us."

A ringing, sarcastic laugh answered from behind him, and with it came the derisive voice of another speaker.

"Not for Davy Crockett," he said. "I'd ruther be in Congress any day than south o' the Rio Grande. Why, colonel, that part o' Mexico isn't ours, and we don't keer to annex it. What we want to do is to stretch out west-'ard. But we're spread, now, like a hen a-settin' onto a hundred eggs, and some on 'em 'll spile."

There was sharper derision in his face than in his words, aided greatly by his somewhat peaked nose and a satirical flash in his blue-gray eyes. It was curious, indeed, that so much rough fun could find a place in a countenance so deeply marked by lines of iron determination.

Very different was the still, set look upon the face of Colonel James Bowie. The celebrated hand-to-hand fighter seemed to be a man who could not laugh, or even smile, very easily.

Colonel Travis was in a position of official responsibility, and he was accustomed to dealing with the sensitive pride of Indians. He now turned and held out a hand to the evidently angry Comanche.

"Great Bear is a great chief," he said. "He is wise. He can count men. Let him look around him and count. How many rifles can his friend take away to go with the Comanches into Mexico?"

"Ugh!" said Great Bear. "Fort no good. Heap stone corral. Texan lie around. No fight. No hurt Mexican. Sit and look at big gun. Hide behind wall. Rabbit in hole."

He spoke scornfully enough, but the argument against him was a strong one.

"Great Bear," said Crockett, "you're a good Indian. When you come for my skelp, I'll be thar. But you can't have any Texans, just now."

The Comanche turned contemptuously away to speak to one of his own braves.

"Castro," said Travis, "it's of no use to say any more now, but you and I have got to talk things over. All of us are ready to strike at Santa Anna, but we must choose our own way. When the time comes, we can wipe him out."

"Wipe him out?" growled Bowie. "Of course we can. He and his ragamuffins 'll never get in as far as the Alamo."

"Colonel," replied Travis, "take it easy. It's a good thing for us if the tribes are out as our allies."

"Hitting us, too, every chance they git," remarked Crockett. "All except, it may be, Castro. We can handle the Greasers ourselves."

Other remarks were made by those around him, expressing liberal contempt for the Mexican general and his army. They seemed to have forgotten the old military maxim that the sure road to disaster is to despise your adversary.

Tetzcatl had heard all, but he had said no more. His singular face had all the while grown darker and more tigerish. The wild beast idea was yet more strongly suggested when he walked away with Great Bear. All his movements were lithe, cat-like, very different from the dignified pacing of his companion and of other Comanche chiefs who followed them.

In the outer edge of the group of notables there had been one listener who had hardly taken his eyes from the faces of the white leaders. He had glanced from one to another of them with manifestly strong admiration. It was the Lipan boy who had ridden to the post with Tetzcatl.

At this moment, however, his face had put on an expression of the fiercest hatred. He was looking at a man who wore the gaudy uniform of the Mexican cavalry. He was evidently an officer of high rank, and he had now strolled slowly away from the completed cock-fight, as if to exchange ceremonious greetings with Colonel Travis and his friends. They stepped forward to meet him with every appearance of formal courtesy, and no introduction was needed.

"Sí, señor," he replied, to an inquiry from the fort commander. "I have seen Señor Houston. I return to Matamoras to-morrow. Our Mexican birds have won this match. We will bring more game-cocks to amuse you before long."

His meaning was plain enough, however civilly it was spoken.

"You might win another match," responded Travis, "if all the Mexican birds were as game as General Bravo."

The Mexican bowed low and his face flushed with pride at receiving such a compliment from the daring leader of the Texan rangers.

"Thanks, señor," he said, as he raised his head. "I will show you some of them. I shall hope to meet you at the head of my own lancers."

"I know what they are," laughed Travis, "and you can handle them. But they can't ride over those walls. Likely as not Great Bear's Comanches 'll find you work enough at home. I'm afraid Santa Anna will have to conquer Texas without you."

General Bravo uttered a half-angry exclamation, but he added, —

"That's what I'm afraid of. They are our worst enemy. There is more danger in them than in the Lipans. Among them all, though, you must look out for your own scalp. You might lose it."

Travis laughed again in his not at all pleasant way, but he made no direct reply. It was said of him that he always went into a fight with that peculiar smile, and that it boded no good to the opposite party.

There seemed to be old acquaintance, if not personal friendship, between him and General Bravo, and neither of them said anything that was positively disagreeable.

Nevertheless, they talked on with a cool reserve of manner that was natural to men who expected to meet in combat shortly. The war for the independence of Texas had already been marked by ruthless blood-shedding. General Bravo, it appeared, was even now on his return from bearing important despatches, final demands from the President of Mexico to the as yet unacknowledged commander-in-chief of the rebellious province of Texas. He was therefore to be considered personally safe, of course, until he could recross the border into his own land.

For all that, he might not have been sure of getting home if some of the men who were watching him could have had their own way, and when he mounted his horse a dozen Texan rangers, sent along by Houston himself, rode with him as an escort.

"Bravo may come back," said Bowie, looking after him, "but all the lancers in Mexico can never take the Alamo."

The iron-faced, iron-framed borderer turned away to take sudden note of a pair of very keen, black eyes which were staring, not so much at him as at something in his belt.

"You young red wolf!" he exclaimed. "What are you looking at?"

"Ugh! Heap boy Red Wolf! Good!" loudly repeated the Lipan war-chief Castro, standing a few paces behind his son.

Ugh! Ugh! Ugh! followed in quick succession, for every Indian who heard knew that the boy had then and there received from the great pale-face warrior the name by which he was thenceforth to be known, according to established Indian custom.

"Big Knife," said the boy himself, still staring at the belt, but uttering the words by which the white hero was designated by the red men of many tribes, north and south. "Red Wolf look at heap knife."

"Oh," said the colonel. "You want to see Bowie's old toothpick? Well, I guess all sorts of redskins have made me pull it out."

"Heap medicine knife," remarked Castro. "Kill a heap. Boy see."

Bowie's own eyes wore a peculiar expression as he drew out the long, glittering blade and handed it to his young admirer.

It was a terrible weapon, even to look at, and more so for its history. Originally, its metal had been only a large, broad, horse-shoer's file, sharpened at the point and on one edge. After its owner had won renown with it, a skilful smith had taken it and had refinished it with a slight curve, putting on, also, a strong buck-horn haft. It was now a long, keen-edged, brightly polished piece of steel-work, superior in all respects to the knives which had heretofore been common on the American frontier.

"Ugh!" said Red Wolf again, handling it respectfully. "Heap knife."

He passed it to his father, and it went from hand to hand among the warriors, treated by each in turn as if it were a special privilege to become acquainted with it, or as if it were a kind of enchanted weapon, capable of doing its own killing.

"Bowie, knife!" said Castro, when he at last returned it to its owner, unintentionally using the very term that was thenceforward to be given to all blades of that pattern.

"All right," said the colonel, but he turned to call out to his two friends, —

"Travis? Crockett? Come along. I want a full talk with Tetzcatl. There's more than you think in a scout across the Rio Grande. Let's go on into the fort."

"I'm willing," said Travis; and on they went toward the Alamo convent, the citadel, and they were followed by Castro and the white-headed Tlascalan.

Red Wolf was not expected to join a council of great chiefs, but he looked after them earnestly, saying to himself, —

"Ugh! Heap war-path! Red Wolf go!"

CHAPTER III.

THE DREAM OF THE NEW EMPIRE

Neither of the two stories of the solid, ancient-looking convent was very high. Both were cut up into rooms, large below and smaller above. The convent roof was nearly flat, with a parapet of stone, and it was one hundred and ninety-one feet long by eighteen wide.

In one of the upper rooms, at the southerly corner of the building, sat a sort of frontier Committee of Ways and Means, having very important affairs of state and war under discussion.

The session of the committee began with a general statement by ex-Congressman David Crockett of the condition of things both in Texas and in Mexico.

"You see how it is," he said, in conclusion. "The United States can't let us in without openin' a wide gate for a war with Mexico. Some o' the folks want it. More of 'em hold back. The trouble with 'em is that sech a scrimmage would cost a pile of money. I don't reckon that most o' the politicians keer much for the rights of it, nor for how many fellers might git knocked on the head."

That was the longest speech yet made by anybody, but the next was short.

"Ugh!" said Great Bear.

"Ugh!" said Castro, also; but he added, "Heap far away. No care much. Stay home. Boil kettle. No fight."

The next speaker was the old Tlascalan. He did not try to express any interest in either Texas or the United States, for he was a single-minded man. He declared plainly that he had come to stir up recruits for his life-long war with Mexico, regarded by him only as a continuation of Spain, and with Santa Anna as a successor of Hernando Cortez. The white rangers and the red warriors were all alike to him. Their value consisted in their known faculty for killing their enemies.

"It's all very well," remarked Travis, at the end of the old man's talk, "but we've enough to care for at home. We haven't a man to spare."

The Big Knife had been stretching his tremendously muscular frame upon a low couch, and he now sat up with a half-dreamy look upon his face.

"I'm kind o' lookin' beyond this fight," he said. "We don't want any United States fingers in our affairs. What we want is the old idea of Aaron Burr. He knew what he was about. He planned the republic of the South-west. He wanted all the land that borders the Gulf of Mexico. We want it, too. Then we want to strike right across the continent to the Pacific Ocean. I've been to California and into the upper Mexican states on that side. We'll take 'em all. That 'll be a country worth while to fight for. Texas is only a beginning."

"Just you wait," said Crockett. "It's no use to kill a herd of buffler when you can't tote the beef. You're in too much of a hurry. The time hasn't come."

"I don't agree with you," said Travis, with energy. "What we want is Uncle Sam and a hundred thousand settlers."

"No! no!" interrupted Tetzcatl. "Gold! Show gold. Talk gold. Bring all the men from all lands beyond the salt sea."

"About that thar spelter," replied Crockett, "I'll hear ye. Tell the whole story. I've only heard part of it. Biggest yarn! Spin it!"

A great many other people had heard the old legend, or parts of it. It was an historical record that Cortez had been accused before the King of Spain of having himself secreted part of the plunder, won during his campaigns against the Aztecs and other tribes. It had brought him into a great deal of trouble, but, after all, the fact that he had seemed to prove his innocence did but tend to build up and afterwards to sustain quite another explanation of the absence of the reported gold and silver. It

had never been found, and therefore every ounce of it was now lying hidden somewhere, only waiting the arrival of a discoverer.

Tetzcatl was not an eloquent man, and he spoke English imperfectly, but he was nevertheless a persuasive talker. Somehow or other a pebble as large as a dollar had wandered into that room, and he put it down upon the floor, declaring it to be the City of Mexico. He evidently expected them, after that, to imagine about a square yard around it to be a kind of map, with the Rio Grande at its northern edge and Texas beyond. He proceeded then as if he had all the mountains and passes marked out, but he had not gone far before Crockett broke in.

"Hullo," he said. "I see. Cortez didn't find the stuff in the city, because it wasn't thar. It was up nearer whar it was placered out, hundreds of miles away."

"I never thought of that," remarked Travis. "There's sense in it."

"Bully!" said Bowie. "And all they had to do was to cart it farther."

"No carts," said Crockett. "No mules, either. Not a pony among them."

"That makes no difference," replied Bowie. "Those Indian carriers can tote the biggest loads you ever saw. One of 'em can back a man right up a mountain."

"That's it," said Crockett. "A thousand dollars' worth of gold weighs three pounds. Sixty pounds is twenty thousand. A hundred men could tote two millions. That's what I want."

"All right," laughed Travis, "but only part of it was gold. Part of it was silver. But, then, Guatamoczin could send a thousand carriers and keep 'em going till 'twas all loaded into his cave."

Tetzcatl understood them, and he not only nodded assent, but went on to describe the process of transportation very much as if he had been there. According to him, moreover, the largest deposit was within a few days' ride of what was now the Texan border. A great deal of it, he said, had not come from the south at all, but from the north, from California, New Mexico, and Arizona.

They could not dispute him, but at that day all the world was still in ignorance of the gold placers of the Pacific coast. California was as yet nothing more than a fine country for fruit, game, and cattle-ranches.

"I've heard enough," said Travis, at last. "It's as good as a novel. But I guess I won't go."

"I think I'll take a ride with Castro, anyhow," replied Bowie. "If it's only for the fun of it. Great Bear and his Comanches can have a hunt after Bravo's lancers. But it's awfully hot in here. I'm going to have a siesta."

That meant a sleepy swing in a hammock slung in one of the lower rooms, and the other white men were willing to follow his example.

It was pretty well understood that the proposed raid into Mexico was to be joined by several paleface warriors. Castro wore a half-contented face, but the great war-chief of the Comanches stalked out of the building uttering words of bitter disappointment and anger. He had hoped for hundreds of riflemen, with whose aid he could have swept on across a whole Mexican state, plundering, burning, scalping.

The Lipans and Comanches were not at peace with each other. They never had been, and nothing but a prospect of fighting their common enemy, the Mexicans, could have brought them together.

During all this time, however, one Lipan, and a proud one, had been very busy. Red Wolf, with a name of his own that any Indian boy might envy him, did not need a siesta. He had a whole fort to roam around in, and there were all sorts of new things to arouse his curiosity.

The walls themselves, particularly those of the fort and the church, were wonders. So were the cannon, and he peered long and curiously into the gaping mouth of the solitary eighteen-pounder that stood in the middle of the enclosure, ready to be whirled away to its embrasure. It was a tremendous affair, and he remarked "heap gun" over it again and again.

He was having a red-letter day. At last, however, he was compelled to give up sightseeing, and he marched out through the sentried gate with his father toward the place where their ponies had been picketed.

Great Bear and his chiefs also left the fort, but they went in an opposite direction. If there had been any thought of a temporary alliance between them and their old enemies, the Lipans, for Mexican raiding purposes, it had disappeared in the up-stairs council. Of course they parted peaceably, for even according to Indian ideas the fort and its neighborhood was "treaty ground," on which there could be no scalp-taking. Besides that, there were the rangers ready to act as police.

As for Tetzcatl, he and his mule were nowhere to be seen.

Siestas were the order of the day inside the walls of the Alamo, but one man was not inclined to sleep.

Out by the eighteen-pounder stood the tall form of Colonel Travis, and he was glancing slowly around him with a smile that had anxiety in it.

Near a door of one of the lower rooms of the convent swung the hammock that contained Davy Crockett. He was lazily smoking a Mexican cigarette, but he was not asleep. He could see a great many things through the open door, and he was a man who did a great deal of thinking.

"What's the matter with Travis?" he asked. "What's got him out thar? Reckon I'll go and find out if there's anything up."

In half a minute more the two celebrated borderers were leaning against the gun, side by side, and there was a strong contrast between them.

Travis was not without a certain polish and elegance of manner, for he was a man of education and had travelled. If, however, Crockett was said to have killed more bears than any other man living, Travis was believed to have been in more hard fights than any other, unless, it might be, Bowie. Utterly fearless as he was, he nevertheless commanded the Alamo, and he could feel his military burdens.

"What's the matter with me?" he replied to Crockett's question. "Look at this fort. If I had five hundred men I could hold it against the whole Mexican army. That is, unless they had heavy guns. But I've less than a hundred just now. We couldn't work the guns nor keep men at all the loop-holes."

"That's so," said Crockett. "The Greasers could swarm over in onto ye. But Sam Houston could throw in men if Santa Anna should cross into Texas. I don't reckon he'd try to haul heavy cannon across country. He'd only leave 'em in the sloughs if he did."

"That's so," said Travis. "But he's coming some day. I want to be here when he comes. I want you and Bowie and all our old crowd."

"I'll be fifin' 'round," said Crockett; "but just now I've got to go and blow my whistle in Washington. Durned long trip to make, too."

"Come back as soon as you can," replied Travis, with unusual earnestness. "I've a job on hand. Houston has ordered me to scout along the Nueces. I'll only take a squad, but it weakens the garrison. Bowie has made up his mind to take a ride with Castro. Some of the men that are not enlisted yet will go with him, most likely."

"Let him go," said Crockett. "He'll learn a heap of things. He kind o' gets me as crazy as he is about our new Southwest enterprise. Tell you what! Just a smell o' gold 'd fetch the immigrants in like blazes. Prairie fire's nothin' to it."

"He won't smell any," laughed Travis; but they had turned away from the gun, and were pausing half-way between the Alamo and the church. They were glancing around them as if to take a view of the military situation.

It was quiet enough now, and there was no prophet standing by to tell them of the future. What their cool judgment now told them as entirely possible was surely to come. From beside that very gun they were to see the "Greasers," as they called the soldiers of Santa Anna, come swarming over the too thinly guarded wall. There, at the left, by the four-pounder, was Travis to fall across the gun, shot through the head. Here, on the spot where he now stood, was Crockett to go down, fighting to

the last and killing as he fell. In the upper corner room of the Alamo, where the conference with Tetzcatl and the chiefs had been held, was Bowie himself to perish, like a wounded lion at bay, the last man in the Alamo.

CHAPTER IV. THE RACE FOR THE CHAPARRAL

It was a bugle and not a drum that summoned the garrison to answer at their morning roll-call.

"Bowie," said Colonel Travis, just after he had dismissed the men, "I don't want to ask too much. You're not under my orders, but I wish you'd take a pretty strong patrol and scout off southerly. The Lipans camped off toward San Antonio, but I'd like to feel sure that Great Bear kept his promise and rode straight away. He isn't heavy on promise-keeping."

"Not where scalps are in it," said Bowie. "He's in bad humor. I'll go."

"You bet," remarked Crockett. "Castro hasn't many braves with him. He'll be bare-headed before night if the Comanches can light onto him."

"All right," said Bowie; "but they won't strike us just now. I don't want Castro wiped out. We're old friends."

"Mount your men well," said Travis to Bowie. "You may have hard riding. Don't fight either tribe if you can help it. I must be off on Houston's orders as soon as I can get away."

"I'll take a dozen," replied Bowie. "The fort 'll be safe enough just now."

No further orders were given, but he picked both his men and his horses, and he seemed to know them all.

They were good ones, the riders especially. They were all veterans, trained and tried and hardened in Indian warfare, and ready for anything that might turn up. They went into their saddles at the word of command as if they were setting out for a merry-making, and the little column passed through the gate-way two abreast, followed a minute later by their temporary commander.

The Texan rangers were armed as well as was possible at that date. The Colt's revolver had but just been invented, and the first specimens of that deadly weapon found their way to Texas a few months later. Barely two small six-shooters came in 1836, but these opened the market, and there was a full supply, large pattern, sent on in 1837.

Just now, however, each man had horse-pistols in holsters at the saddle. In each man's belt were smaller weapons, of various shapes and sizes, and not one of them failed to carry a first-rate rifle. All had sabres as well as knives, but they were not lancers. On the contrary, they were inclined to despise the favorite weapon of the plains red men and of the Mexican cavalry.

Bowie was now at the front, and he appeared to have some reason of his own for making haste.

No such indication was given, however, by an entirely different body of horsemen, five times as numerous, which was at that hour riding across the prairie, several miles to the southeastward. These, too, seemed to have a well-understood errand.

Their leader was about two hundred yards in advance of the main body, and he paused upon the crest of every "rising ground" as he went, to take swift, searching glances in all directions.

"Great Bear is a great chief!" he loudly declared. "He will teach Castro and the Lipan dogs a lesson. They have set Travis against the Comanches. Castro shall not ride into Chihuahua. I will hang his scalp to dry in my own lodge. I will strike the Mexicans. Ugh!"

He spoke in his own tongue, and then he seemed to be inclined to repeat himself in Spanish, for he was an angry man that day. It was not at all likely that he would prove over-particular whether his next victims were red or white, and he evidently did not consider himself any longer within neutral territory.

Suddenly the Comanche war-chief straightened in his saddle, turned his head, and sent back to his warriors a prolonged, ear-piercing whoop.

A chorus of fierce yells answered him, and the slow movement of the wild-looking array changed into a swift, pell-mell gallop.

It had been a whoop of discovery. At no great distance from the knoll upon which Great Bear had sounded his war-cry a voice as shrill and as fierce, although not as powerful, replied to him with the battle-yell of the Lipans. In another instant, the wiry mustang which carried an Indian boy was springing away at his best pace eastward. Probably it was well for his rider that the race before him was to be run with a light weight.

Red Wolf was all alone, but if Great Bear was hunting Lipans, they, on their part, were on the lookout for Comanches. Their cunning chief had read, as clearly as had Travis, the wrathful face of Great Bear. He had camped for one night in the comparatively secure vicinity of San Antonio. Shortly after he and his braves began their homeward ride that morning, he had given to his son and to several others orders which were accompanied by swift gesticulations that rendered many words needless. What he said to Red Wolf might have been translated, —

"We are to strike the chaparral on a due south line from the fort. Ride a mile to the west of our line of march. Keep your eye out for enemies. If you see any, get back to us full speed. Great Bear has sixty braves. Maybe more. We are only twenty. He would wipe us out."

Away went Red Wolf. He was only a scout, but he was a youngster doing warrior duty, and he felt as if the fate of the whole band depended upon him. It was another big thing to add to his remarkable experiences of the day before, — a fort, guns, a grand cock-fight, and the heroes of the border, — white chiefs who were famous among all the tribes. More than all, and he said so as he rode onward, he had been spoken to by the Big Knife of the palefaces, and he had not only seen but had handled the "heap medicine knife" itself. He was now almost a brave, with a name given him by the hero, his father's friend, and he was burning all over with a fever to do something worthy of the change in his circumstances.

He was well mounted, for he was the son of a chief, and there had been a drove of all sorts to select from. The mustang under him was a bright sorrel, — a real beauty, full of fire, and now and then showing that he possessed his full share of the high temper belonging to his half-wild pedigree.

Mile after mile went by at an easy gait, and the watchful scout had seen nothing more dangerous than a rabbit or a deer. He was beginning to feel disappointed, as if his luck were leaving him. It was hard upon a fellow who was so tremendously ready for an adventure if none was to be had. He even grew less persistently busy with his eyes, and let his thoughts go back to the fort.

"Heap big gun," he was remarking to himself. "Kill a heap. Shoot away off."

At that instant his pony sprang forward with a nervous bound, for his quick ears had caught the first notes of Great Bear's thrilling war-whoop. Red Wolf went with him as if he were part of him, while he drew the rein hard and sent back his shrill reply.

"Great Bear!" he exclaimed. "Catch Red Wolf? Ugh! No! Take heap Comanche hair."

The other warriors were not yet in sight, but there was a great deal of "boy" in his boastful threat, considering the known prowess of their leader.

The sorrel pony was having his own way, and the horse carrying Great Bear must have been not only fast but strong, or he would have been left behind in short order. It was not so, however; and now, as higher rolls of the prairie were reached and climbed, the entire yelling band were now and then seen by the young Lipan.

"Poor pony!" he remarked of some of them, for their line was drawing out longer as the better animals raced to the front and the slower fell to the rear. All were doing their best, and some were even catching up with Great Bear. It would, therefore, be really of no use for Red Wolf to stop and kill him, unless he were ready, also, to take in hand and scalp a number of other warriors.

"What Red Wolf do now? Ugh!"

It was a question which was running through his mind hot-footed, and it was not at first easy to shape a satisfactory answer.

A white boy would have been likely to have let it answer itself. He would have ridden as straight as he could to rejoin the band of Lipans and to tell his father that the Comanches were coming. He would have thought only of getting them to help him in his proposed fight with Great Bear.

Red Wolf was an Indian boy. All his life, thus far, he had been getting lessons in Indian war-methods. He had heard the talks and tales of chiefs and noted braves in their camps and councils. He had, therefore, been taught in a redskin academy of the best kind, and he was a credit to his professors.

"Ugh! No!" he exclaimed, at last. "Comanche find chaparral. No find Lipan."

He had no need to urge his pony, but he rode southward, not eastward. Already, in the distance, he could see the endless, ragged border of the chaparral. It began with scattered trees and bushes out on the prairie. These increased in number and in closeness to each other, until they thickened into the dense, many-pathed labyrinth. The pursuers also could see, and they could understand that if the fugitive they were following was leading them toward Castro's party, they must close up to him now or never.

The whoops which burst from them as they dashed along were loud, but short, sharp, excited.

"Whoop big!" shouted Red Wolf. "Heap yell! Castro hear whoop."

He had noted that the wind was blowing in the right direction. It could carry a sound upon its wings far away to the eastward, but two very different kinds of human ears received and understood the fierce music the chasers were making.

"Forward! Gallop!" rang from the heavily-bearded lips of the commander of horsemen coming from the northward.

"Comanches! Colonel Bowie!" shouted a grizzled veteran behind him. "That's Great Bear's band, you bet!"

Another whoop swept by them on the wind as Bowie replied to him, —

"And they've struck the Lipans, I'm afraid. We must try and get into it before too much mischief's done. On, boys! We'll give him a lesson."

Silence followed, but the men looked at the locks of their rifles and felt of their belt pistols as they went forward. It was no light matter to act as police, or even as peacemakers, in that part of the world.

The other listeners were nearer and could hear more distinctly, but no sound was uttered by the warriors with Castro when their chief drew his rein and held up a hand. Every man of them knew, or thought he knew, just what it all meant, but more news was coming.

One brave who had been some distance in their rear, as a lookout in that direction, came on at full speed, followed by another whose duties had detailed him more to the westward. Both brought the same errand, for the first exclaimed, as he came within speaking range, —

"Ugh! Heap Texan," and the other, whose eyes may have been sharper, added, "Big Knife! Many rifle?"

"Comanche! Great Bear!" roared Castro, in a deep-toned, wrathful voice. "Red Wolf lose hair! Ugh! Chaparral!"

He knew that his son must in some way have been the immediate cause of that whooping, but his first duty as a leader was to save his party, letting his vengeance wait for a better opportunity. He led on, therefore, toward the only possible refuge, muttering as he went.

"Ugh!" he said. "Heap boy. Run against Comanche! Young chief! Ugh! Go to bushes. No good wait for Big Knife. Not enough Texan. Too many Comanche."

He might well be anxious concerning his promising son, but Red Wolf's hair was yet upon his head, for the wind tossed it well as his fleet mustang carried him past the outermost clump of mesquit-bushes.

"Whoop!" he yelled. "Red Wolf beat Great Bear! All Lipans get away. Ugh!"

He had not beaten his pursuer by more than two hundred yards, however, and several other Comanches were now as near as was their chief.

Could there be such a thing as an escape from all of them? Would not the entire swarm go in after him and surely find him, no matter what path he might take? The situation looked awfully doubtful in spite of the moderate advantage which he had thus far maintained.

Closer grew the trees. Nearer to each other were the thick "tow-heads" of bushes. On went Red Wolf, veering to the left around each successive cover, but seeming to push directly into the chaparral. It was a complete cover now, and he was well hidden at the next sharp, sudden turn that he made to the eastward.

Paths, paths, paths, fan-like, but that none of them were straight, and fan-like was the spreading out of the wily Comanches. Or perhaps they were more like a lot of mounted, lance-bearing spiders, that were going in to catch a young Lipan fly in that web.

As for him, he had whooped his very loudest just before he reached the chaparral, and a gust of wind had helped him like a brother. Again Castro had raised a hand, but now he shouted fiercely, — "Hear heap boy! Red Wolf! No lose hair yet. Ugh! Whoop!"

For all he knew, nevertheless, he may have been listening to the last battle-cry of his brave son. He and his braves were at that moment riding in among the bushes, while more than half a mile away, upon the prairie, galloped Bowie and his riflemen.

"Reckon we'll git thar jest about in time to see 'em count the skelps," remarked one ranger.

"Reckon not," replied another. "Those Lipans are as safe as jack-rabbits if once they kin fetch the chaparral."

Red Wolf had reached it, but he was by no means safe. Great Bear himself had dashed in so recklessly that he and his first handful of fast racers were galloping upon the wrong paths. They discovered their error, or thought they did, in a minute or so, but a minute was of importance just then. They lost it before a kind of instinct told them to wheel eastward if they expected to find the Lipans.

That had been the direction taken by one of their best-mounted comrades on entering the chaparral, and the soft thud of his horse's hoofs had now reached the quick ears of Red Wolf.

"Ugh!" he exclaimed. "One!"

He had pulled in his panting pony, and he now unslung his bow and put an arrow on the string.

"Red Wolf young chief!" he said. "Wait for Comanche! Tell Big Knife!"

It was not altogether imprudence or bad management to let his hard-pushed mustang breathe for a few moments. It might be called cunning to let his enemies go by him if they would. But stronger than any cunning, or than any prudence concerning his horse, was his burning ambition to do something that he could boast of afterwards. What is called Indian boasting is only the white man's love of fame in another form. Each red hero is his own newspaper, and has to do his own reporting of his feats of arms.

The hoof-beats came nearer, swiftly, upon a path which crossed his own at the bushes behind which he had halted.

Twang went the bow, the arrow sped, and a screeching death-whoop followed. The Lipan boy did but prove himself altogether a son of Castro when he sprang to the ground and secured his bloody war-trophy at the risk of his life. The pony and the weapons of the fallen brave were also taken. Then once more Red Wolf was on the sorrel dashing onward, while behind him rose the angry yells of the Comanches, who had heard the death-cry and knew that one of their number had "gone under."

"Ugh! Heap boy! Save hair!" was the hoarse-toned greeting given to his son by Castro three minutes later.

"Comanche!" said Red Wolf, holding up his gory prize. "Great Bear come. Not many braves right away. Too many pretty soon. Heap run. Ugh!"

Castro understood the situation well enough without much explanation, and his prospects did not seem to be very good. He and his braves were too few to win a pitched battle and too many for concealment.

"Ugh!" he replied to Red Wolf. "Great chief no run. Die hard. Heap fight."

The one thing in his favor was the first mistake made by Great Bear. It had kept him from being in person among the next half-dozen of the braves who had gone to the left, so very close upon the heels of Red Wolf. Even their wrath for the fate of their foremost man did but send them on the more recklessly to avenge him. They whooped savagely as they galloped past his body at the crossing of the paths. They still believed they had only one Lipan to deal with, but they were terribly undeceived, for their blind rush into the presence of Castro and his warriors was as if they had fallen into a skilfully set ambush. They were taken by surprise, outnumbered, almost helpless, and down they went, not one of them escaping.

Away behind them, the fast-arriving main body of the Comanches listened to the death-shouts and to the Lipan whoops of triumph, and they obeyed the astonished yell with which their leader summoned them to gather to him at the spot where he had halted.

"Too many Lipan," he said, to a brave who rode in with a kind of report. "Castro great chief. Heap snake. No let him catch Great Bear in chaparral trap. Wait. Comanche fool. Lose hair for nothing. Red Wolf heap young brave. Kill him dead."

That was indeed fame for the young Lipan warrior. Not only had he been recognized by his pursuer, but the great war-chief of the Comanches believed that the son of his old enemy was proving himself another Castro, as courageous and as cunning as his father. A mere boy, not yet sixteen, had become of such importance that he must be killed off, if possible, to prevent the future harm that he would be likely to do.

Red Wolf's ambush had not been of his own planning, but he had performed his accidental part of it remarkably well.

"Red Wolf, young chief! Son of Castro!" said his father, proudly. "Big Knife good medicine. Saw boy. Old friend tell name. Ugh! Good!"

To his mind, therefore, Colonel Bowie had been a kind of war-prophet, declaring the capacity of the boy he had named, giving him "good medicine," or tremendous good luck, and now his correctness as a prophet had been unexpectedly established. So said more than one of the Lipans who had been at the fort and had witnessed the performance with the wonderful medicine knife.

Now, during a number of minutes, all the chaparral was still, for even the wild creatures were hiding and the human beings talked by motions and not by spoken words. Not one of the latter, on either side, could as yet shape for himself a trustworthy idea concerning the numbers or the precise locality of his enemies. All had dismounted, however, and the hard-ridden horses had a chance to recover their wind. No less than seven of them, that had been very good Comanche ponies that morning, had now changed their tribe and had become Lipans, whether they would or not.

CHAPTER V. AMONG THE BUSHES

The Texan rangers had arrived just in time to see the finish of a very fine race. They had not actually seen Red Wolf win it, but they were in no doubt as to why his pursuers made such a frantic dash into the chaparral.

"Not after the Comanches!" shouted Bowie. "Into the cover and find the Lipans! Charge!"

They went in at a point that was nearer than were Great Bear and his braves, to the spot where the Lipans worked their unintentional ambush. They heard all that whooping, and the stillness which followed it did not puzzle old Indian fighters.

"There's been a sharp brush."

"Those were scalp-whoops."

"We're in for it, boys. Shoot quick if you've got to, but hold your fire to the last minute. There are none too many of us."

Those were their orders, but there was no shooting to be done right away.

Hardly had Bowie pulled in, calling a halt, in some doubt as to which path, if any, it was best for him to follow, before a sorrel mustang came out in an opening before him, somewhat as if he had been dropped like an acorn from one of the scrub oaks.

"Red Wolf!" exclaimed Bowie. "Where is Castro?"

"Big Knife, come!" replied Red Wolf, pointing rapidly. "Castro there. Great Bear there. Heap Comanches. Young chief take hair! Ugh!"

He was holding up, with intense pride, his proof that he had been a victor in a single-handed fight. To the mind of any man of Bowie's experience it was entirely correct, and he said so.

"All right," he told his young friend. "Go ahead. Be a chief some day. Now I must see your father short order. Go ahead."

It was but a few minutes after that that the Lipan chief and Big Knife were shaking hands, but their questions and answers were few.

"Glad I got here before things were any worse," said Bowie. "I can make Great Bear pretend to give it up as soon as he knows I'm here."

"Ugh!" replied Castro. "Great Bear heap lie. Say go home. Then kill horse to catch Lipan."

"Just so," said Bowie. "Of course he will. Chief, hear old friend. Do as I say."

"Ugh!" came back assentingly. "Big Knife talk. Chief hear."

"I'll keep him back while you get a good start," said Bowie. "But do you and your braves ride for the Rio Grande. Ride fast. Get back to your lodges by that way. I'll follow to-morrow with a squad."

"Ugh!" said Castro, doubtfully. "No go to lodge now. Rio long water. Where wait for Big Knife? Bravo there, along river."

"I don't exactly know just where to say," began Bowie.

"Hacienda Dolores!" sounded gruffly out of one of the bushes near them. "Across the river. Tetzcatl."

Castro almost set free a whoop in his surprise, but he checked it in time, and only exclaimed, — "Black Panther hide deep. Good. No let Comanche see him. How Big Knife find hacienda?"

"All right," said Bowie. "I know. It's the abandoned ranch on the other side. Pretty good buildings, too. Just as good a place as any, if I can get there with a whole skin. Reckon I can."

"Red Wolf lead horse to hacienda for Big Knife," said his father; but the voice from the bushes added, "Tetzcatl."

"That's it," said Bowie. "I'll get there. You and the youngster meet me and my men at about this place to-morrow any time I can get here. Say it 'll probably be toward noon. Now I must have a talk with Great Bear."

A chorus of friendly grunts responded to him from the Lipans who had gathered around, and they seemed to follow his instructions at once. Even Red Wolf and his pony had already disappeared.

There was a bugle among the varied outfit of the rangers, and now it was unslung by its bearer. He really knew what to do with it. As the band of white men rode cautiously forward in the direction given them, the martial music sounded again and again at short intervals. It was an announcement to the Comanches that they had more than Lipans to deal with, and it was also a plain invitation to a parley.

Just how many red foemen he might have in front of him Great Bear did not know. Neither had he any count of the white riflemen, but their presence settled his mind.

"Great Bear no fight Texan now!" was his immediate declaration to his warriors. "Heap fool Big Knife. Put him in Alamo. No see through wall. Then find Castro in bushes. No let Lipan get away."

His next business, therefore, was to ride forward, with a cunning semblance of friendly frankness, to talk with Bowie and send him back to the fort, leaving the bushes clear of rifles. Not even then did the rangers expose themselves unduly, and Great Bear knew that he was covered by more than one unerring marksman while he was shaking hands so heartily.

"Heap friend," he said. "Great Bear glad Texan come. Glad to see Big Knife. Lipan kill Comanche. Gone now."

"Great Bear lie a heap," returned Bowie, coldly. "Said he would go home to his lodge. Break word. Stay and fight Lipan."

"Ugh!" returned Great Bear, insolently. "Great Bear chief! What for Big Knife ride in bushes? Hunt Lipan dog? Take Castro hair? Shut mouth. No talk hard. Go to fort. Go sleep!"

"Heap bad talk," said Bowie, with steady firmness. "Great Bear is in a trap. Better get out. Lose all his braves. This isn't your land. Go to lodge."

The chief again spoke boastfully, and Bowie became argumentative. One of his present objects was to use up time in talk, and he was quite willing to stir Great Bear's vanity to all sorts of assertions of the right and power of himself and his tribe to fight their enemies wherever they could be found.

He was succeeding very well, and every minute was of importance to the Lipans, who were now threading their southward way through the chaparral with all the speed they could reasonably make. With the sun overhead to guide by, they could dispense with a compass. Here and there, moreover, some of them, who seemed to have been there before, found marks upon tree-trunks and branches which may have meant more to their eyes than to those of other people.

"Great Bear is a great chief," said Bowie, at last, looking at the subtle Comanche steadily. "He has talked enough. What does he say? Will he fight now, or will he go to his lodge? – Bugle, ready!"

The bugler raised to his lips his hollow twist of brass, but a storm of "Ughs" broke out among the Comanche warriors.

Most of them had been near enough to hear the conversation. They were on dangerous ground and were becoming altogether willing to get out of it. At this moment they saw rifles cocked and half lifted. They knew that every white man before them was a dead shot, and none of them felt any desire to hear a bugle blow or a rifle crack.

The chief himself considered that he had talked long enough, and that he had been sufficiently insolent to preserve his dignity. He could therefore pretend to yield the required point.

"Good!" he replied. "Great chief go. Big Knife ride to fort. Lipan dogs run away. Save hair. Comanches take all some day. Not now. Texan heap friend. Shut mouth. Ugh!"

He offered his hand, and Bowie took it, but after that he and his rangers sat upon their horses in grim, menacing silence, while the Comanche warriors rode out of the chaparral. They did so glumly enough, for they had been outwitted and they had lost some of their best braves.

"Now, men," said Bowie, "it was touch and go. They were too many for us if it was a fight. We're out of it this time, but they won't forget or forgive it."

"You bet they won't," replied a ranger; "but I had a sure bead on Great Bear's throat medal, and he knew it. He'd ha' jumped jest once."

"Back to the Alamo," said Bowie. "We must make good time."

Away they went, and in an instant the appearance of military discipline had vanished. The leader and his hard-fighting comrades were once more fellow-frontiersmen rather than "soldiers." Differences of rank, indeed, were but faintly marked upon the dress or trappings of any of them.

There were no epaulets or sashes, but at no moment of time could an observer have been in doubt as to who was in command. The roughest and freest spoken of them all showed marked deference whenever he addressed or even came near to the man whom Great Bear himself, with all his pride, had acknowledged to be his superior.

"Jim," said Bowie to a tall horseman who was at his side when they came out into the open prairie, "have you made up your mind to go with me into Chihuahua?"

"Go!" exclaimed Jim. "Why, colonel, I ain't enlisted. Travis can't stop me. Of course I'll go. Wouldn't miss it for a pile. It 'll be as good as a spree."

So said more than one of the other rangers when opportunity came to ask them the same question. To each the romantic legend of the hidden treasures of the Aztec kings had been mentioned confidentially. No doubt it acted as a bait, but every way as attractive, apparently, was the prospect of a raid into Mexico, a prolonged hunting and scouting expedition, and a fair chance for brushes with Bravo's lancers.

"A Comanche or Lipan is worth two of 'em," they said, "and one American's worth four. We shall outnumber any lot of Greasers we're at all likely to run against."

There was a great deal too much of arrogance and overbearing self-confidence among the men of the Texas border, and at no distant day they were to pay for it bitterly.

They had gone and the chaparral seemed to be deserted, but it was not entirely without inhabitants.

"Tetzcatl!"

"Ugh! Red Wolf!"

There they sat, once more confronting each other, the young Lipan on his pony and the old tiger on his mule.

"Boy heap fool," said Tetzcatl. "Comanches in chaparral. Castro gone."

"Ugh!" said Red Wolf. "See one Comanche ride away. Keep arrow."

Tetzcatl's eyes were angry. Part of his disappointment had been the renewal of the feud between the tribes. He had hoped for their joint help in working out his own revenges. Nevertheless he now listened to a further explanation, and learned that a noted Comanche warrior had no use for bow or lance just then, because of an arrow that was yet sticking through his right arm above the elbow. Red Wolf could not follow him, but he had captured a dropped lance, which he was now somewhat boastfully exhibiting.

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