Ellis Edward Sylvester

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CHAPTER I
OUT LATE AT NIGHT

"How is it, Nat? Any light yet?"

"Not the least sign of one, and it's my opinion it will be a long time before we see another."

"What! you haven't given up all hopes of reaching the camp? I hope not, as I don't relish the idea of camping out to-night."

"Nor I either; but I'm thinking it will come to that sooner or later."

"Well, there are several hours yet, in which we must plod onward," I added, trudging wearily behind my companion.

Before going further, I may as well introduce my friend and myself. My companion answered to the name of Nathan Todd, and was a native of Maine. He was a tall, lank individual, with long, attentuated limbs and an awkward appearance generally. He was very meager and muscular, and when roused to a heat of passion, as quick and powerful as the panther. His gait was an ungainly, straddling one, and he was seemingly capable of anything but speed; but on one or two occasions since leaving the States, he had shown a fleetness of foot which was truly wonderful. He was a good, open-hearted fellow, and one who, when driven to the wall, would be a dangerous enemy. Once or twice, however, he had shown the white feather, and his natural timidity would often evince itself. As a consequence, Nat was not, perhaps, the safest companion in the hour of danger; but, for all that, there was no one in our party whose presence I would have preferred upon the night in which I introduce him to notice. There was no imminent peril threatening us, and Nat was a capital companion, who could while-away the hours, if he chose, with his inexhaustible store of anecdote and humor. I knew he entertained a warm affection for me, and would brave almost any danger rather than be suspected of his only deficiency. A single intimation would decide his course in a moment.

Nat wore a singular dress – half savage and half civilized. The pants and shoes were such as are fashionable in the enlightened world; but a capacious hunting-shirt encased his body, secured around the waist by a heavy band, and much the same as are worn by the hunters and natives of the Far West at the present day. The most striking part of his dress, however, was the hat. This he had brought with him from Maine, and it really seemed indestructible. It was a gray color, and having lost its band a long time before, had acquired the shape of a cone. When it rested on his head, the edge reached the shoulders behind, and the eyebrows in front, and the pointed peak was far off above the crown.

Nathan Todd's face was full of shrewdness and good humor. He had a large, curved nose, broad mouth, and a fine blue eye. The chin was retreating; but this drawback was modified partly by a long tuft of yellow hair, the only signs of beard upon his face, except a shadowy mustache. The hair was long and sandy, and harmonized well with the rest of his countenance. There was ever a contraction of the eyebrows – a sort of unspoken question – so often seen in persons from "down east," which indicated a prying, curious disposition.

As for myself, my name is William Relmond, and I hail from one of the middle States. Shortly after the announcement of the discovery of gold in California, I was seized with the lunacy that was carrying its thousands to the Pacific coast. I was well situated in life at home, but that was not considered. I must go and fish up a fabulous fortune also. I had one brother and several sisters, but our parents had been dead for some years, and we were residing with an uncle, the guardian of each, until maturity. A favorable opportunity offering I had made some preparation for the legal profession; but

I was never inclined to Coke, and had no intention of pursuing the practice of the law in after life. At the age of twenty, then, without a settled purpose in life, I determined to make a journey to the El Dorado of the New World. I was not influenced solely by the love of gain, in taking this step, but the love of adventure urged me irresistibly on. I had heard wonderful stories of the boundless prairies, of the wandering hordes of Indians, their millions of buffaloes and horses, and the vast, billowy ocean of verdure and sunshine, and the Far West seemed the paradise of the world to me.

I was provided with an ample outfit at home, and departed amid the tears of my good uncle and affectionate sisters. I proceeded by the usual route to Independence, Missouri, where I made inquiries of the trains which were constantly leaving the point for Oregon and California. In my wanderings, I stumbled upon Nat Todd, my present companion. He had just arrived from his distant home, where he had left a widowed mother and a disconsolate sweetheart. But he said he was going to return, in just two years from the day he left, with a "rousing heap" of money, and intended to buy "Squire Hunt's farm," take Alminy down there, and live the rest of his life. His frankness and humor impressed me favorably; and, after a short conversation, we grasped hands, and swore to remain by each other till our adventures were terminated by death or a happy *dénouement*.

We engaged places in a train which left the next day. This company numbered nigh two hundred persons, and was composed of all kinds of characters, except females. There were French *voyageurs*, Irishmen, and an agent of one of the western fur companies, and the majority of the rest were those just from the plow or the workshop. They had secured the services of an experienced guide, and were well equipped for the perilous journey before them.

The overland route, at this time, was so alive with passing emigrants, that few depredations were committed by the Indians. The savages sometimes hung around companies, but as there were almost always other whites in sight, they rarely ventured upon any greater crime than pilfering. Nothing worthy of note occurred upon the journey for a length of time. We experienced the usual mishaps and trials of emigrants, but nothing more startling. We sometimes lost a part of our baggage and provisions in crossing the rivers, and were greatly discomforted by the terrific storms which often rage in these regions. Then, again, we traveled mile after mile, and hour after hour upon the dry, monotonous, glistening rolling prairie, so wearied and tired of the scene that we hardly exchanged a syllable for hours at a stretch.

At last, the plains of Kansas were reached. On the day in which I introduce my friend and myself to notice, we had descried a solitary antelope at a great distance upon the prairie, and set out to bring it down. We left our horses behind, hoping to reach the animal by stratagem. I approached it near enough to wound it, when it made off with the speed of the wind. Expecting to see it give out each moment, we followed it mile after mile, until gathering darkness warned us that night was at hand, when we halted in alarm, and were compelled to allow the antelope to escape, while we endeavored to retrace our steps. The caravan was nowhere in sight, and we doubted not that it had disappeared hours before. We left the train about noon, and had been warned that they would not halt or wait for us, and should we lose them, they would take no pains to hunt us up. But we heeded not this, as we expected to keep them constantly in view, and have the antelope cooked for our supper.

But I have shown how widely we were mistaken. We were compelled to see the night shut down around us, without bringing us any hope of spending it with our friends; and at a late hour we were still plodding aimlessly over the prairie.

"No light yet, Nat?" I asked, for the twentieth time.

"Well, I should think you had asked that question about often enough, to be suited with my answer."

"I expect to ask it a dozen times more."

"Then I'll just answer at once for all, so I won't be troubled agin with talkin'. *No!* there's the answer."

"I don't know but what you are right, Nat. We must have come a long distance, utterly unconscious of it, in our eagerness to get that plaguey antelope, and it is useless to hope to reach camp again before morning."

"That's my opinion, exactly. That camp, I opine, is a good dozen miles off yet."

"Then we may have a chance of reaching it still before morning, as this bright moon favors us."

The moon, full and clear, had arisen an hour before, and its light illumined the prairie for a great distance around. Far away, on every hand, we could discern the blue outline of the horizon, while the prairie seemed to roll up against it like the dark boundaries of a mighty ocean. Everything was as silent and motionless as though we were treading a region of death.

Mile after mile, we trudged on, beguiling the time by conversation. The ground was dry and hard, and the vegetation scarce and stunted. The day had been quite warm, and there was a delicious coolness about the evening air that made it pleasant to walk an hour or so; but as more than double that time had expired since we commenced, it had long been exceedingly wearisome to us.

"I wonder whether those fellows will go a foot out of the way to pick us up," muttered Nat, half to himself.

"I don't believe they will. They told us they wouldn't and they value their time too highly to waste it for a couple who are of no account to them, especially since we can fall in with other trains."

"I reckon they're of some account to us, being they have got both our horses and considerable of our traveling apparatus."

"That is too true, Nat. In fact, since we have been walking here, I have persuaded myself that those fellows would, just as likely as not, turn something out of the way to get rid of us."

"Somehow or other, I've felt just the same for a week."

"Then, if we value our property, we mustn't let them slip."

"No; I'll be shot, if we must!" exclaimed Nat, half angrily, striking at once into a more rapid walk. "If they run off with my mare, I'll – I'll – " and again he strode faster over the prairie.

Long – long, we journeyed in silence. Nat's apprehensions had been aroused, and he was willing to walk the whole night to come up with those in whose honesty he had so little faith. Now and then he would mutter incoherently to himself and shoot ahead, keeping me almost on a run to maintain my place beside him. Suddenly he halted, and turned upon me with an expression I shall never forget. I could see his eyes expanded to twice their usual size, and his whole face aglow beneath his monstrous hat, as he asked in a cold whisper:

"Wonder if there's Injins about to-night."

I laughed outright.

"Why, Nat, you ain't afraid, are you?"

"Who said I was afraid? I just asked a question."

"What possessed you to ask such a question?"

"Don't know; just come into my mind. Do you s'pose there are any Injins roving round the country to-night?"

"I am sure I cannot tell, but I think it extremely probable. Are you fearful that there are some upon our trail?"

"There might be! No; I was thinking if we should come across any of them, they might be able to tell us whether any of them chaps think we're lost, and have run off with my mare."

"Should we meet a lot of those savages, no doubt they would tell us something else besides that."

"I expect so," and he wheeled around and strode ahead again. It was now getting near midnight, and I was completely worn out. It was out of the question to reach the camp that night, and we might as well submit to our fate at once, so I spoke rather decidedly.

"I'm tired of this."

Nat turned and looked at me a second, and then answered:

"So am I. We've to camp out to-night, and there's no use in waiting till morning afore we do it. Ain't it lucky you brought your blanket with you? It would go hard to do without that to-night."

"I brought it with me by merest chance, not thinking I should need it. It was indeed fortunate; and now let us prepare to use it."

There was not much choice on the hard but warm earth. My blanket was ample and sufficient for us both. After some search, a small depression was selected, and in this I spread my heavy blanket. We then stretched ourselves upon it, pulled the ends over us, being sure to inclose our rifles in its folds, and resigned ourselves to sleep. In that lone hour, I forgot not that there was one arm upon which I could rely, and One only who could watch over me until morning, and to that protection I appealed.

Ere the sun was fairly above the horizon, we were up and upon our way. Knowing the company would not be in motion for several hours, we hoped to reach them before they breakfasted, and have a laugh over our night's adventure. Nat led the way, and took long, rapid strides over the ground, seemingly oblivious of the existence of any one else. I kept beside him, now and then venturing a remark, but receiving no answer or intimation that I was heard.

Suddenly, my friend came to a dead halt, dropped the butt of his rifle to the earth with a ringing clamp, and wheeled upon me with one of those indescribable looks. I had seen these before, so that I knew something unusual was agitating him.

"What's the trouble now?"

"It's no use; we'll never see that company agin."

"What makes you think thus?"

"I know so. I had a dream last night that my mare was gone for ever and ever, and I know she is. Don't you remember that fur agent told us they'd change the direction they's traveling some time yesterday? They hadn't done it when we left them, and they done it as soon as we got out of sight, I warrant."

I now remembered hearing our guide remark, as also did the fur agent with us, that the trail we were following made an abrupt bend some miles ahead. We were traveling northeast at that time, and the contemplated change was nearly due southwest. This fact had entirely escaped our minds, until it now occurred to Nat, and we had, consequently, been proceeding in a wrong direction. By referring to the sun, we found we had gone far too much to the east in order to intercept the train, which was now in all probability many leagues to the southwest.

This was a discovery which was overwhelming. We had then been journeying in a direction which had brought us not a foot nearer the company than if we had remained motionless; and it was certain that the party was irrecoverably lost.

"This is a pleasant discovery, Nat."

"Very."

"I see no hope for your mare. She is probably a good day's journey distant, and we do not know what direction to take to reach her."

"That's it," replied Nat, ill-humoredly; "if I knowed sure what way to tramp to find her, I wouldn't stop till I'd laid my hands on her for a certainty; but this trudging along, and just as like as not going away from her all the time, isn't the thing."

"I see no course left then, but to proceed south, in the hope of falling in with some emigrant train, or in striking the Oregon trail, north, and getting into California ahead of them."

"The Oregon trail will have to be our destination, then. If these fellows find they've got the start of us, they won't give us a chance to come up again, and we might as well try to catch the whirlwind as to follow them. No; we must try the ready for them when they come. How far is the trail off?"

"It can't be more than a day's journey; the trail follows the Platte through Nebraska, and I'm pretty sure we can reach it by nightfall, if we proceed pretty steadily and rapidly."

The day was clear and pleasant, and the sky devoid of the least signs of threatening storm. There were two or three white clouds straggling off in the western horizon, but the sky was of a

deep clear blue. We were now proceeding in a northward direction, intending to strike the Platte at the nearest point. South, east, and west the small waving hills of the prairie stretched, unrelieved by the slightest object, except in the west the far-off outline of some mountain-peak was just visible, resembling a slight pointed cloud against the blue sky. This disappeared at noon, and we were again like wanderers upon the illimitable sea. A short time after, Nat's keen vision detected a number of black, moving specks far to the westward.

"An emigrant train, perhaps," I suggested.

"They're Pawnee Injins as sure as the world, and we'd better give them a wide berth."

"Pawnee Indians! How do you know that? You never have been in this section before?"

"That's true, but you don't s'pose I started out here without first larning something 'bout the country and folks, do you? If you do, you're mighty mistaken. Just let me know in what part of the country we are, and I'll let you know what sights you will see, that is, if we are going to see any at all. But let's keep to the east; I don't want to keep them Pawnees in sight."

"The Pawnee Indians are reported friendly to the whites."

"Exactly; but have they been reported honest? If they should come upon us and take a fancy to our rifles, what is there to prevent them from taking them? And," added Nat, with a shrewd shake of his head. "I've not faith enough in their good intentions to want 'em in sight at this particular time."

There was a great deal of reason in his remarks, and it was not unwillingly that I turned my face more to the northeast, and soon saw them disappear from view.

Some time toward the middle of the afternoon we descried a solitary buffalo ahead. He had apparently left his friends and wandered about as though entirely lost. After considerable difficulty we approached nigh enough to bring him down. He was quite poor, and his flesh was strong and Oregon trail, and get into California first, and be tough; but we were glad enough to get it, such as it was. He was thrown on his face, with his knees bent under him, a keen knife run along the spine with just sufficient force to penetrate the skin, which was then pulled down each side. This done, we cut the choice portions out. Nat reserved the buffalo-skin for his blanket, and the rest was thrown away. We made a hearty meal, and about the middle of the afternoon again set forward, hoping to accomplish quite a distance ere nightfall.

Just at dark we reached a stream of considerable size, which I afterward learned was the Republican Fork of Nebraska. The point at which we struck it, was about where it leaves the territory of Kansas and enters Nebraska. Although no considerable stream, we concluded not to cross it before morning, and we made arrangements for passing the night upon its banks. There was considerable timber at different points, and a goodly quantity of driftwood lay scattered along its banks. As the river was quite low, we gathered several armfuls, and had a fire soon started. We had brought some meat of the slain buffalo with us, but concluded not to cook supper, as our appetites were satiated.

Seated round our fire, half-hidden in a depression in the river bottom, with the dark, glistening stream flowing silently by, and smoking our pipes, we naturally fell into an easy conversation.

"We can't be far from the 'trail,' can we?" asked Nat.

"Farther than I suspected," I answered. "The Republican Fork, which I am convinced is the stream out there, is over fifty miles from the Platte, which, with several other streams must be crossed before the trail is reached."

"Fudge! I don't believe I can head off them fellows after all, and my old mare and overcoat will go to thunder."

"They will go *somewhere* where you will never see them again."

"I *know* I'm bound to lose 'em, and I shan't think any more about them."

"That's the best plan, Nat. They are no great loss."

"I sh'd like to know whether that greaser or fur agent took them though," interrupted my friend, earnestly.

After this he fell into a fit of musing, and we remained silent for some time. When the fire had burnt low, I arose and replenished it. Nat looked anxiously at the roaring blaze, carrying ashes and cinders high in the air, and reflecting far out upon the dark river, and he remarked:

"Wonder if some Injins won't see that."

"I guess not. We are so low down the bank that I think it can be visible for no considerable distance upon the prairie, and the bend in the river fortunately saves us from view up or down the stream. The only point from which it would attract attention is directly across from us."

"And it looks suspicious enough there," repeated Nat, in a whisper, removing his pipe and gazing across the river.

It did indeed look gloomy, forbidding, and threatening. Our fire was nearly on the level with the water, which rolled darkly and noisily at our very feet; and when its crackling blaze arose higher than usual, the low face of the opposite shore was struck by the light. At such times I could not help reflecting what favorable chances were afforded any foe who might be lurking opposite. I involuntarily shrunk from the fire, and felt relieved when the shore blended with the darkness.

It began to grow quite late, the fire had smoldered low, when Nat, removing his cap, turned upon me with:

"What do you think of our journey to California?"

I was at a loss to comprehend his meaning, and looked at him for an explanation.

"I mean to ask whether you feel in such a hurry to get to mines as you did when we were in Independence?"

Now, to confess the truth, the experience of the last week or two, and especially of the last two days, had done much toward dampening the ardor which I once thought could never leave me; and I believe, had I possessed moral courage enough, I should have seized the first opportunity to return to the comforts of a home, where I possessed enough to satisfy any sensible person's ambition. Still I hesitated to commit myself.

"I cannot say that I am; but what induced you to – "

"I'm sick of this business," interrupted Nat, lengthening his legs with a spiteful jerk, and looking disgustedly into the fire.

"What has come over you?" I asked, half-amused at his manner.

"Well there's that mare – "

"But you promised not to think of her."

"How can I help it, I should like to know? She's gone sure, and there's that overcoat, that cost me four dollars and a half in Lubec; and Alminy made a big pocket in it on purpose for me to fill full of gold chunks; and I should like to know how I am going to do it, when a Greaser has got it."

"I am afraid that that would not be the only difficulty you would be likely to experience, Nat, in getting it filled."

"And my jack-knife was in the coat-pocket, I declare!" exclaimed he, suddenly starting up and pinching alternately one pocket and then another. "Yes, sir, that's gone, too; that's worse than all the rest," he added, despairingly, falling upon his elbow, and gazing abstractedly into the fire.

"That's a trifling loss, surely, as you have your hunting-knife."

"I've a good notion to get up and go back now," he added, not heeding my remark. "I'm sick of this business. It's bad enough to lose the mare, but when the knife is gone I can't stand it."

I knew this was but a momentary despondency with my friend, and for the sake of whiling away the time before sleep, I was inclined to humor it.

"But what will you do for that gold that you was going to buy Deacon Hunt's farm with for your Alminy?"

"Let her go without it," he answered, gruffly, without removing his gaze from the fire. "She can get along without it. I believe she only coaxed me to go off to Californy to get me out of the

way, so that mean Bill Hawkins might take my place. If he does come any such game, he'll catch it when I get back."

I laughed deeply, but silently, as I witnessed his appearance at these remarks. It was so earnest and feeling, that it was impossible to resist its ludicrousness.

"Nat," said I, after a moment's thought, in which my mind had taken an altogether different channel, "I am free to own that I have little faith in our success in California. I left home in a flush of excitement, without considering the consequences of such a rash step, and they are now beginning to present themselves. I propose that we seek our fortune elsewhere. The fact that gold exists in California is now known all over the world, and we know there is not the remotest corner of her territory which is not swarming with hundreds who leave no means untried to amass their fortunes. I have no desire to wrangle and grope with them, and would much rather seek wealth elsewhere."

"But where else?"

"If gold exists in one spot on the Pacific coast, it is right to suppose it exists in many others, and what is to prevent our finding it?"

"Have you thought of any place?"

"It seems to me that in Oregon, among the spurs of the Rocky Mountains, there must be fabulous quantities of the precious metal."

"But why hasn't it been found?"

"Oregon is thinly settled, and no suspicion has led them to search for it."

"Well, let us dream upon it."

A few more fagots were forthwith heaped upon the fire, and then we lay down for the night's rest.

My companion had lain but a minute, when he suddenly sprang to his feet, and exclaimed:

"Hurrah for Oregon!"

"Be careful," I admonished; "your indiscretion may be fatal. That wall of darkness across the river looks gloomy and threatening enough to me."

"It does – hello! I'm shot – no, I ain't, neither."

That instant the report of a rifle burst from the other bank, and the bullet whizzed within an inch of my companion's face.

"Heavens! are we attacked!" I ejaculated, starting back from the fire.

"I believe so," replied Nat, cowering behind me.

We listened silently and fearfully, but heard no more. The fire smoldered to embers, the river grew darker, and the night, moonless and cold, settled upon us. But no sleep visited my eyelids that night. Till the gray dawn of morning I listened, but heard no more.

CHAPTER II.
A NEW FRIEND

As the light of morning overspread the stream and prairie, I felt an unspeakable sense of relief. Not a moment of sleep had visited me that night, although Nat's extreme fear toward midnight gave way to his drowsiness, and he slept long and heavily.

"Come, wake up, Nat!" said I, shaking him as soon as I saw that day was at hand.

"How? what's the matter?" said he, rubbing his eyes, and gaping confusedly about him.

"Day is at hand, and we must be on our way to Oregon."

He hastily rose, and we commenced our simple preparations. I ran up the river bank, and swept the prairie to the south of us to satisfy myself that no wandering Indians were in sight. The whole plain was visible, and with a feeling akin to joy, I reported the fact to Nat. He, however, was not satisfied with my survey, as he had more than once before detected objects that had escaped my vision, and he ascended a high roll in the bank, some distance up, and took a long, careful, scrutinizing sweep of the whole horizon. Feeling satisfied that he would be no more rewarded for his pains than I was, I started the fire, and commenced cooking some of our buffalo, I had been engaged in this for a minute or so, when I heard Nat call, in a hoarse, anxious, half-whisper:

"Come here, quick!"

I hurried to his side and eagerly asked him the cause of agitation.

"Why, just look yonder, if that ain't enough to agitate one, then I don't know what is."

He pointed across the river, out upon the prairie; and following the direction of his finger, I saw not more than a mile or two away a single horseman proceeding leisurely from us.

"Who can that be?" I asked half to myself, still watching the receding figure.

"Why he's the one that sent that bullet across the water after us, and I'm thinking it's lucky for him, he's going another way. If I should get my hands on him, he would remember the time."

And Nat extended his arms energetically, and shook his head spitefully by way of emphasizing his remark.

I continued gazing after the unknown person. At first I supposed it was an Indian, but at that distance, and with his back toward us, it was almost impossible to judge accurately. A moment's thought convinced me that it was a white man. I could make out the hunting-cap of the trapper, and was soon satisfied he belonged to that class. His horse was walking leisurely along, and he seemed totally unaware of the proximity of strangers.

But who could it be? Was it he who had fired the well-nigh fatal shot? And what meant his actions in thus willfully leaving us? These and similar questions I asked myself, without taking my eyes from him, or heeding the numerous questions and remarks my companion was uttering. But, of course, I could give no satisfactory solution, and when his figure had grown to be but a dim speck in the distance, I turned to Nat.

"We may see him again; but, if I don't know him, I know one thing, I'm wonderfully hungry just now."

We partook of a hearty breakfast, my appetite for which was considerably weakened by the occurrence just narrated. Without much difficulty we forded the Republican Fork, being compelled only to swim a few strokes in the channel, and reached the opposite side, with dry powder and food.

Here we made a careful search of the shore, and ascertained enough to settle beyond a doubt the identity of the horseman with the would-be assassin of the night before. His footprints could be seen, and the place where he had slept upon the ground, together with the scraps of meat. By examining the tracks of his horse, we discovered that both hind feet were shod; this decided our question of his being a white man; and although it cleared up one doubt, left us in a greater one. He could not have

avoided the knowledge that we were of the same blood, and what demoniacal wish could lead him to seek the life of two harmless wanderers? Be he who he might, it was with no very Christian feelings toward him that we took the trail of his horse, and pursued it.

Our course after the first five miles, swerved considerably to the northwest. From the actions of the stranger, it was evident he understood the character of the country, and we judged the shortest way of reaching the Oregon trail would be by following him. The footprints of his animal were distinctly marked, and we had no difficulty in keeping them.

At noon we forded a stream, and shortly after another, both considerably less than the Republican Fork. On the northern bank of the latter, were the still glowing coals of the stranger's camp-fire, and we judged he could be at no great distance. The country here was of a slightly different character from the rolling prairie over which we had journeyed thus far. There were hills quite elevated, and, now and then, groves of timber. In the river bottoms were numerous cottonwoods and elder; these natural causes so obstructed our view, that we might approach our unknown enemy very nigh without knowing it. Nat was quite nervous, and invariably sheered off from the forbidding groves of timber, striking the trail upon the opposite side at a safe distance.

In this way we traveled onward through the entire day. No signs of Indians were seen, and we anticipated little trouble from them, as they were friendly at this time, and the most they would do would be to rob us of some of our trinkets or rifles.

At sundown we left our guiding trail and struck off toward a small stream to camp for the night. When we reached it, and decided upon the spot, Nat remarked seriously:

"I say, Relmond, that feller might be near enough to give us another shot afore morning, and I'm going to see whether his trail crosses the brook out there or not."

So saying, he wheeled and ran back to the spot where we had left it. It was still bright enough to follow it, and bending his head down to keep it in view, he continued upon a rapid run. I was upon the point of warning him against thus running into danger, but not feeling much apprehension for his safety, I turned my back toward him. A minute after, I heard his footsteps again, and, looking up, saw him coming with full speed toward me, his eyes dilated to their utmost extent, and with every appearance of terror.

"He's there!" he exclaimed.

"Where?" I asked, catching his excitement.

"Just across the stream up there; I liked to have run right into him afore I knowed it. See there!"

As Nat spoke, I saw the glimmering of a fire through the trees, and heard the whinny of a horse.

"Didn't he see you?"

"Yes, I know he did. When I splashed into the water like a fool, he looked up at me and grunted; I seen him pick up his rifle, and then I put, expecting each moment to feel a ball in me."

"I thought you intended laying hands on him if an opportunity offered," I remarked, with a laugh.

"I declare, I forgot that," he replied, somewhat crestfallen.

After some further conversation, I decided to make the acquaintance of the person who had occupied so much of our thoughts. Nat opposed this, and urged me to get farther from him; but a meaning hint changed his views at once, and he readily acquiesced. He would not be prevailed upon, however, to accompany me, but promised to come to my aid if I should need help during the interview. So leaving him, I started boldly up the stream.

When I reached the point opposite the stranger's camp-fire, I stumbled and coughed so as to attract his attention. I saw him raise his eyes and hurriedly scan me, but he gave no further evidence of anxiety, and I unhesitatingly sprang across the stream, and made my way toward him. Before I halted, I saw that he was a trapper. He was reclining upon the ground, before a small fire, and smoking a short black pipe, in a sort of dreamy reverie.

"Good evening, my friend," I said, cheerfully, approaching within a few feet of him. He raised his eyes a moment, and then suffered them lazily to fall again, and continue their vacant stare into the fire. "Quite a pleasant evening," I continued, seating myself near him.

"Umph!" he grunted, removing his pipe, and rising to the upright position. He looked at me a second with a pair of eyes of sharp, glittering blackness, and then asked: "Chaw, stranger?"

"I sometimes use the weed, but not in that form," I replied, handing a piece to him. He wrenched off a huge mouthful with a vigorous twist of his head, and returned it without a word. This done, he sank back to his former position and reverie.

"Excuse me, friend," said I, moving rather impatiently, and determined to force a conversation upon him, "but I hope you will permit a few questions?"

"Go ahead, stranger," he answered, gruffly.

"Are you traveling alone in this section?"

"I reckon I ar', 'cept the hoss which 'ar a team."

"Follow trapping and hunting, I presume?"

"What's yer handle, stranger?" he suddenly asked, as he came to the upright position, and looking at me with more interest.

"William Relmond, from New Jersey."

"Whar's that place?"

"It is one of the Middle States, quite a distance from here."

"What mought you be doin' in these parts?"

"I and my friend out yonder are on our way to Oregon."

"Umph! you're pretty green 'uns."

"Now I suppose you will have no objection to giving me your name."

"My handle's Bill Biddon, and I'm on my way to trappin'-grounds up country."

"How far distant?"

"A heap; somewhar up 'bove the Yallerstone."

"Do you generally go upon these journeys alone?"

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"Sometimes I does, and sometimes I doesn't."

I ceased my questions for a few moments, for fear of provoking him. As his route, as far as it extended, would be in our direction, I determined to keep his company if I could gain his consent. He was a splendid specimen of the physical man. He was rather short, but heavy and thick-set, with a compactness of frame that showed a terrible strength slumbering in his muscles. His face was broad, covered by a thin, straggling beard of grizzled gray, and several ridged scars were visible in different parts of it. His brows were beetling and lowering, and beneath them a couple of black eyes fairly snapt at times with electric fire. His mouth was broad, and though one could plainly see a whirlwind of terrific passion might be called into life within his breast, yet there was, also in his face, the index of a heart alive to good humor and frankness. I saw that, if approached skillfully, his heart could be reached. He was evidently the creature of odd whims and fancies and caprice, feeling as well satisfied without the society of his fellow-man as with it – one of those strange beings, a hero of a hundred perils, who was satisfied to lose his life in the mighty wilderness of the Far West, without a single one suspecting or caring for his fate.

"Would you have any objections to my friend and myself accompanying you, that is, as far as you should proceed in our direction?"

He looked steadily at me a moment, and answered, "You kin go with me ef you wants; but I knows as how you're green, and yer needn't s'pose I'm goin' to hold in fur yer. Yers as never does that thing."

"Oh, I shouldn't expect you to. Of course, we will make it a point not to interfere in the least with your plans and movements."

"Whar is yer other chap? S'pose it war him what come peakin' through yer a while ago; had a notion of spilin' his picter fur his imperdence."

"I will go bring him," I answered, rising and moving off. But as I stepped across the stream, I discerned the top of Nat's white hat, just above a small box-elder; and moving on, saw his eye fixed with an eager stare upon the trapper.

"Don't he look savage?" he whispered, as I came to him.

"Not very. Are you afraid of him?"

"No; but I wonder whether he – whether he knows anything about the old mare and my knife."

"Perhaps so; come and see. He just now asked for you."

"Asked for me?" repeated Nat, stepping back. "What does he want of me?"

"Nothing in particular. I just mentioned your name, and he asked where you were. Come along; I hope you ain't afraid?"

"Afraid! I should like to see the man I'm afraid of!" exclaimed my companion in an almost inaudible whisper, as he tremblingly followed me across the brook, and to the spot where Biddon, the trapper, was lying.

"My friend, Nathan Todd, Biddon."

"How are you? Very happy to make your acquaintance," and Nat nervously extended his hand.

"How're yer?" grunted Biddon, with a slight jerk of his head, and not noticing the proffered hand.

"Been a most exceedingly beautiful day," ventured Nat, quickly and nervously.

I saw the trapper was not particularly impressed with him, and I took up the conversation. I made several unimportant inquiries, and learned in the course of them, that our friend, Bill Biddon, was about forty years of age, and had followed trapping and hunting for over twenty years. He was a native of Missouri, and Westport was the depot for his peltries. For the last two or three years he had made all his excursions alone. He was quite a famous trapper, and the fur company which he patronized gave him a fine outfit and paid him well for his skins. He possessed a magnificently-mounted rifle, and his horse, he informed me, had few superiors among the fleetest mustangs of the south. Both of these were presented him by the company mentioned.

"Why ain't you got horses?" he asked, looking toward me.

"They were both stolen from us."

"I don't s'pose you've seen anything of a company with a mare, short-tailed, that limped a little, and an overcoat that had a knife in the pocket?" asked Nat, eagerly.

"Not that I knows on," answered Biddon, with a twinkle of humor.

I gave the particulars of our loss, and then asked, without due thought:

"Did you not camp upon the banks of the Republican Fork last night?"

"Yas; what'd yer want to know fur?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing," quickly answered Nat.

I believe the trapper understood my allusion, and I hoped he would give an explanation of his act; but he made no reference to it, and, after further conversation, we all lay down in slumber.

CHAPTER III.
THE TRAPPER'S STORY

I was aroused from my slumber, before it was yet light, by Biddon shaking me and calling in my ear:

"Come, you chaps, you've got only two minutes to swaller yer feed in."

Nat was already moving about, and I sprang to my feet, determined to continue in my friend's good graces, if such a thing were possible, by a cheerful acquiescence in all his reasonable wishes. Our fire was kindled, a hasty breakfast swallowed, and just as the sun made its appearance above the prairie, we moved off toward the north.

Long before noon we reached the Platte, and forded it at the point where Fort Grattan now stands. The Platte, during the winter months, is a boisterous stream of great width, but in summer it is very shallow (from which circumstance it derives its name), and at the dry season it almost ceases running, and dwindles down to an innumerable number of stagnant pools. As it was now the summer season, we walked over without more than merely wetting our shoes. The Oregon trail follows the northern shore of this stream to Washington Territory, or to what was Oregon at the time of which I write. Leaving the Platte, we shaped our course toward the northwest, so as to strike the southern spur of the Black Hills. From Biddon's conversation, I found that his destination was the neighborhood of the head-waters of the Tongue or Powder River, which have their cañons in the Black Hills.

As he allowed his horse to proceed upon a moderate walk, we had no trouble in keeping him company. We generally started at the first indication of morning, halting now and then to slake our thirst in the numerous streams which crossed our path, and resting an hour at noon. At sunset we struck camp upon some small stream, cooked our evening meal, spent an hour or two in smoking and conversation, and turned in for the night.

The country over which we now journeyed was much better timbered than any through which we had yet passed. For an entire day after crossing the Platte, we met with thousands of the ash, elm, walnut, and cottonwood trees. The bark of the latter, I was surprised to observe, was greatly relished by the trapper's horse, he often preferring it to the rich, succulent grass which so abounds in this region. Besides this there were signs of the buffalo, antelope, and hundreds of other animals.

One night we halted upon the bank of a large stream some miles north of the Platte, which emptied into the Missouri. It was quite broad and rapid, and near the center of the channel a small, sandy island was visible. We passed over this while fording the stream, and I noticed that Biddon walked around it, and surveyed several spots with more than common interest. I did not question him then, but at night, when we were stretched before the fire, with our soothing pipes, I ventured the inquiry.

"I seed sights on that chunk of mud one time," said he, with a dark frown.

"What was it? – what was it?" asked Nat, eagerly.

"Here's as what don't like to think of that time, augh!" he answered, seeming still unwilling to refer to it.

"Why not?" I asked, beginning to partake of Nat's curiosity.

"It makes a feller's blood bile; but, howsomever," he added, brightening up, "if you wants to hear it, yer kin."

"We do by all means; please give it."

"Yas, that ar' war' a time of general wipin' out, and this yer water that now looks as black as a wolf's mouth, *run red* that night! It war' nigh onto ten year ago that it happened. I was down in Westport one day in the summer when a feller slapped me on the shoulder and axed me ef I wanted a job. I tole him I didn't care much, but if he's a mind to fork over, and it wan't desprit hard, and too

much like work, I's his man. He said as how thar' war' a lot of fellers camped out on the prairie, as war gwine to start for Oregon, and as wanted a guide; and heerin' me spoken on as suthin' extronnery, why he like to know ef I wouldn't go; he'd make the pay all right. I cut around the stump awhile and at last 'cluded to go. I went out onto the perarie, and seed the company. They were men, women, and children, 'specially the last ones. I seed they wanted good watchin', and I kinder hinted they'd find trouble afore they'd reach Oregon.

"There weren't many folks trampin' these parts then, and them as did go, had to make up thar minds to see fight and ha'r-raisin'. B'ars and beavers, they did! The reds war the same then all over, arter you get clear of the States, and no feller's ha'r war his own till he'd lost it.

"We started the next day, and struck the Platte afore night. There war but twenty good men, an' I made half of 'em stand watch that night just to get their hands in. In course they didn't see nothin', 'cept one straddlin' chap, like this feller yer that is called Nat. He said as how he seed wonders, he did, and thar war a hundred reds crawlin' round the camp all night.

"We went purty slow, as it weren't best to hurry the teams; but we hadn't been two days on the way afore the fools got into the all-firedest scrabble I ever seed. I don't know what it come 'bout, but it war so big, they split company, and part of 'em crossed over and camped on t'other side the Platte. I tole 'em they'd see stars purty soon, if they didn't splice agin, but they's too rearin' to do it, and I said if they's a mind to be sich fools, they mought be fur all me, and I'd let 'em go on alone. Howsomever, the smallest party hung on fur me not to leave 'em, and I 'cluded to stay with 'em as I knowed purty well they'd need me all the time.

"The biggest company as had crossed the Platte, kept on by it, and so the others said they'd leave it and cut across fur Oregon. I tole 'em this war the best way, and so we left 'em. Them I war with war a heap the smallest, and had but three or four men and five or six women and children. What made things look wuss, I seed 'signs' when we parted, and I knowed purty well the reds smelt what war goin' on. And 'bout a dozen times in the afternoon I could see 'em off on the perarie stealin' long and dodgin' through cover. I knowed that the imps were follerin' us, seein' the other war a heap more powerful nor us.

"Things got so dubersome afore night, I said to the men ef they'd take the advice of a feller as knowed what he war 'bout, they'd turn round and never stop till they cotched the others; for ef they didn't, they'd cotch it at night; reds war 'bout them as thick as flies. They said how ef I's *'fraid I m*ought go back, but as for them they*'d go* through fire and blazes 'fore they would. I felt riled 'nough at this to leave 'em, and I would ef it hadn't been fur them poor women; they looked so sorrerful I made up my mind to stick to 'em fur thar sake.

"We reached the stream just as it war growing dark, and the reds had got so sassy, that five or six of 'em stood a little ways off and watched us. This scart the women and men, and they axed me what war to be done? The women cried and wanted to coax the Injins up to give 'em sunkthin' to get thar good will, but they war cross and sulky, and didn't say much.

"After some talk and a heap of cryin', we 'cluded to camp on that piece of sand in the river. The teams war drew over and we follered. The water war some deeper nor now, and it took us a long time to land; but we got over at last. As soon as we war clean over, I commenced fixing up things fur the reds. We didn't build no fire, but put the teams together near the middle, and the women inside 'em. There war four men without me, and I set 'em round the place to watch fur sign. I made 'em all squat flat down on the mud close to the water, and told 'em to blaze away at anything they seed, ef it war a beaver or otter, and gave 'em pertickler orders not to wink both eyes at a time. I seed they's skerish, and there weren't no danger of thar snoozin' on watch.

"I's pretty sartin the reds would come some of thar tricks, and come down the river; so I went up to the upper part of the thing, and laid in the mud myself to watch fur 'em. I knowed, too, they wouldn't be 'bout 'fore purty late, so I took a short nap as I laid in the mud. When I woke up the moon war up in the sky, and the river had riz so my pegs war in the water. I flapped out, but didn't

see nothin' yet. I sneaked down round by t'other fellers, and found 'em all wide awake; and they said, too, as how they hadn't seen nothin' 'cept the river war gettin' higher, which they kinder thought the Injins mought 've done. Jist as I war going back I heard some of the purtiest singin' in the world. Fust, I thought it war an Injin, ef it hadn't been so nice; then I 'cluded it must be an angel. I listened, and found it came from the wagons. I crept up and seed two little girls all 'lone clus by the wagons, a singin' sunkthin'. Shoot me! ef it didn't make me feel watery to see them. The moon war shinin' down through the flyin' clouds, right out on 'em. They sot with their arms round each other and war bare-headed, and ef I hadn't knowed 'em I'd swore they were angels sure. I axed what they were singin' for, and they said the Injins war goin' to come after 'em that night, and they war singin' to their mother in heaven to keep 'em away. Shoot me! when one of 'em throwed her little white arms round my neck and kissed my ugly meat-trap, I couldn't stand it. I went up to my place again and lad down in the mud.

"It was gettin' colder, and the wind comin' up, drew the white clouds 'fore the moon, makin' it all black. But when it come out agin I seed sunkthin' comin' down the river that looked like a log. I dug down deeper into the mud, and set my peepers on it, fur I knowed thar war sunkthin' else thar, too. It come right on and struck the mud a little ways from me. I didn't stir 'cept to kinder loose my knife. The log stuck a minute, and then swung round and went down the river. I knowed the boys would see it, and I didn't leave my place. Thinkin' as how this war only sent down to see what we'd do, I war lookin' fur other things, when I heard a noise in the water, and, shoot me, ef a sneakin' red didn't come up out of the water, and commence crawlin' toward whar the gals war singin'. (Jist put a little fodder on the fire.)"

I sprang up and threw on some fagots, and then seated myself and anxiously awaited the rest of his story. He put away his pipe, filled his mouth with tobacco, and, after several annoying delays, resumed:

"Thar weren't no time to lose. I crept 'long behind him mighty sly, and afore he knowed it, come down *spank* onto him. I didn't make no noise nor he either. I jist grabbed his gullet and finished him with my knife. I then crawled back agin, and, shoot me, ef I didn't see forty logs comin' down on us; the river war full of 'em.

"I jumped up and hollered to the other fellers to look out. They came up aside me and stood ready, but it weren't no use. 'Fore we knowed it, I seed over forty of 'em 'long 'side us. We blazed into 'em and went to usin' our knives, but I knowed it wouldn't do. They set up a yell and pitched fur the wagons, while 'bout a dozen went at us. The fust thing I knowed the whole four boys were down and thar ha'r raised, and the women screechin' murder. It made me desprit, and I reckon I done some tall work that night. Most these beauty spots on my mug come from that scrimmage. I seed a red dart by me with that little gal as was singin', and cotched a dead red's gun and let drive at him; but the gun weren't loaded, and so the devil run off with her.

"The oxes war bellerin', the horses snortin', and the tomahawks stoppin' the women's screams; the redskins war howlin' and yellin' like all mad, and as I had got some big cuts and knocks, I 'cluded it best to move quarters. So I made a jump for the stream, took a long dive, and swam for the shore. I come up 'bout whar you're setting, and I made a heap of tracks 'fore daylight come."

"And did you never hear anything of the children captured upon that night?"

"I never seed 'em agin; but I come 'cross a chap at Fort Laramie when I went down agin, what said he'd seen a gal 'mong some the redskins up in these parts, and I've thought p'r'aps it mought be one of 'em, and agin it moughtn't."

"Did you say that all happened out there?" asked Nat, jerking his thumb toward the island mentioned, without turning his face.

"I reckon I did."

"Bet there's a lot of Injins there now!" exclaimed he, turning his head in that direction.

"Jist as like as not," returned Biddon, with a sly look at me.

"I'm goin' to sleep then," and rolling himself up in his buffalo-blanket, all but his feet, disappeared from view.

"It's 'bout time to snooze, I think," remarked the trapper, in a lower tone, turning toward me.

"I think so, but I suppose there need be no apprehension of molestation from Injins, need there?"

Biddon looked at me a moment; then one side of his mouth expanded into a broad grin, and he quietly remarked:

"Times are different from what they used to war."

"Biddon," said I, after a moment's silence, "before we saw you we camped upon one side of a stream while you were upon the other. Now, I do not suppose you would willfully harm a stranger; but since I have met you, I have a great desire to know why you fired that shot at Nat. You supposed we were Indians, I presume?"

A quiet smile illumined the trapper's swarthy visage; and, after waiting a moment, he answered:

"The way on it war this: I seed you and Nat camping there, and I s'pected you war gwine to tramp these parts. I watched you awhile, and was gwine to sing out for you to come over. Then said I, 'Biddon, you dog, ain't there a chance to give them a powerful scare.' First I drawed bead on you, but when that Nat jumped up, I let fly at him, and he kerflummuxed splendid. Howsumever, it's time to snooze, and I'm in for it."

With this, we wrapped our blankets around us, and in a few moments were asleep.

On a clear summer morning, we sallied out upon the broad, open prairie again. The trapper now struck a direction nearly due northwest toward the Black Hills, and we proceeded with greater speed than before. The face of the country began to change materially. Vast groves of timber met the eye, and the soil became rich and productive. At noon we encountered the most immense drove of buffaloes that I ever witnessed. They were to the west of us, and proceeding in a southern direction, cropping the grass clean as they went. Far away, as far as the vision could reach, nothing but a sea of black moving bodies could be distinguished. I mounted a small knoll to ascertain the size of the drove; but only gained a clearer idea of their enormous number. The whole western horizon, from the extreme northwest to the southwest, was occupied solely by them, and nothing else met the eye. They were not under way, and yet the whole mass was moving slowly onward. The head buffaloes would seize a mouthful of grass, and then move on a few feet and grasp another. Those behind did the same, and the whole number were proceeding in this manner. This constant change of their position gave an appearance to them, as viewed from my standing-point, similar to the long heaving of the sea after a violent storm. It was truly a magnificent spectacle.

We approached within a short distance. They were more scattered upon the outside, and with a little trouble the trapper managed to insinuate himself among them. His object was to drive off a cow which had a couple of half-grown calves by her side, but they took the alarm too soon, and rushed off into the drove. We then prepared to bring down one apiece. I selected an enormous bull, and sighted for his head. I approached nigh enough to make my aim sure, and fired. The animal raised his head, his mouth full of grass, and glaring at me a moment, gave a snort of alarm and plunged headlong away into the droves. At the same instant I [Pg 61][Pg 62][Pg 63]heard Nat's rifle beside me, and a moment after that of the trapper. This gave the alarm to the herd. Those near us uttered a series of snorts, and dropping their bushy heads, bowled off at a terrific rate. The motion was rapidly communicated to the others, and in a few seconds the whole eastern side was rolling simultaneously onward, like the violent countercurrent of the sea. The air was filled with such a vast cloud of dust that the sun's light was darkened, and for a time it seemed we should suffocate. We remained in our places for over an hour, when the last of these prairie monsters thundered by. A strong wind carried the dust off to the west, and we were at last in clear air again. Yet our appearance was materially changed, for a thin veil of yellow dust had settled over and completely enveloped us, and we were like walking figures of clay.

I looked away in the direction of the herd, expecting to see my buffalo's lifeless form, but was considerably chagrined at my disappointment, as was also Nat at his. The trapper's was a dozen yards from where it had been struck.

"'Pears to me," said he with a sly smile, "I heer'n your dogs bark, but I don't see nothin' of no buffaloes, ogh!"

"I *hit* mine," I answered quickly; "I am sure of it."

"Whereabouts?"

"In the head, plump and square."

"Whar'd you sight yourn, Greeny?"

"Just back the horns, and I hit him too. If he hasn't dropped before this, I'll bet he'll have the headache for a week."

"B'ars and beavers, you! Them bufflers didn't mind your shots more nor a couple of hailstones. Do you see whar I picked mine?" asked the trapper, pulling the buffalo's fore-leg forward, and disclosing the track of the bullet behind it.

"Isn't a shot in the head fatal?" I asked in astonishment.

"You might hit 'em thar with a cannon-ball, and they'd git up and run agin, and ef you'd pepper 'em all day whar you did yourn, you'd pick the bullets out thar ha'r and they wouldn't mind it."

This I afterward found to be true. No shot, however well aimed, can reach the seat of life in the buffalo through the head, unless it enter the eye, fair front.[1]

The trapper's buffalo was thrown forward upon his face, his legs bent beneath him, and dressed after the usual fashion. He was in good condition, and we had a rich feast upon his carcass. The trapper selected a few choice portions from the inside, relished only by himself, and cutting several huge pieces for future use, the rest was left for the beasts of prey.

We proceeded but a few miles further, and encamped upon the banks of the Dry Fork. This is a small stream, a few miles south of the Black Hills. There was but a foot or two of sluggish water, and in the hot season it was often perfectly dry. Here for the first time I was made aware of the changeable character of the climate in this latitude. The weather, thus far, had been remarkably clear and fine, and at noon we found the weather sometimes oppressively warm. Toward night the wind veered around to the northwest, and grew colder. At nightfall, when we kindled our fire, the air was so chilly and cutting that Nat and I were in a shiver. Had it not been for our blankets we should have suffered considerably, though Biddon did not call his into requisition. There were a number of cottonwood trees near at hand, which served partly to screen us from the blast.

After our evening meal had been cooked, Biddon remarked:

"The fire must go out, boys."

"Why? Do you apprehend danger?" I asked.

"Don't know as I do; I hain't seed signs, but we're gittin' into parts whar we've got to be summat skeerish."

"I suppose it's about time for the Indians to come?" remarked Nat interrogatively, with a look of fear toward the trapper.

"They're 'bout these parts. Me'n Jack Javin once got into a scrimmage yer with 'em, when we didn't 'spect it, and jist 'cause we let our fire burn while we snoozed. I'd seen sign though then, and wanted to put it out, but he wan't afeared."

"Let's have ours out then," exclaimed Nat excitedly, springing up and scattering the brands around.

"Needn't mind 'bout that; it'll go out soon enough."

As Nat reseated himself, Biddon continued:

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[1] I may further remark, that the buffalo slain by us when lost upon the prairie, was shot in the side as he wheeled, to run from us, without our suspecting it was the only place in which we could have given him a mortal wound.

"You see, Jarsey, them reds kin smell a white man's fire a good way off, and on sich a night as this, ef they're 'bout they'll be bound to give him a call. You needn't be afeared, howsumever, to snooze, 'cause they won't be 'bout."

It was too cold to enjoy our pipes, and we all bundled up for the night's rest. In a few moments I heard the trapper's deep breathing, and shortly after Nat joined him in sleep. But I found it impossible to get to sleep myself. The ground was so cold that my blanket could not protect me, and the cutting wind was terrible. I used every means that I could devise, but it was of no use, and I feared I should be compelled to either build the fire again, or to continue walking all night to prevent freezing to death.

I chose the latter expedient. It was quite dark, yet I had noticed our situation well enough, I judged, not to lose it. So grasping my blanket in my hand, I started on a rapid run directly over the prairie. I continued a long distance, until pretty well exhausted. I turned to retrace my steps. My blood was warming with the exercise, and I hurried forward, counting upon sound sleep for the remainder of the night.

I continued my run for a full half hour, and then stopped in amazement, as I saw no signs of my companions. Thinking I must have passed the spot where they were lying, I carefully walked back again, but still without discovering the men. I had lost them in the darkness, and it was useless to hunt them at night. So I concluded to wait till morning, feeling sure that they could be at no great distance. I now commenced searching for a suitable place for myself, and at last hit upon a small depression in the prairie. There was a large stone imbedded in the earth on one side, which served to protect me from the chilling wind. As I nestled down, beside this, such a feeling of warmth and comfort came over me that I congratulated myself upon what at first seemed a misfortune.

Lying thus, just on the verge of sleep, my nerves painfully alive to the slightest sound, I suddenly felt a trembling of the ground. At first it seemed a dream; but, as I became fully awake, I started in terror and listened. I raised my head, but heard no sound, and still in the most perplexing wonder sank down again, hoping it would shortly cease. But there was a steady, regular increase, and presently I distinguished millions of faint tremblings, like the distant mutterings of thunder. Gradually these grew plainer and more distinct, and finally I could distinguish sounds like the tread of innumerable feet upon the prairie. Still at a loss to account for this strange occurrence, I listened, every nerve in my body strung to its highest tension. Still louder and louder grew the approaching thunder, and every second the jar of the earth became more perceptible. Suddenly the truth flashed upon me —*a herd of buffaloes were approaching*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.