COWBOY CHRIS, THE DESERT CENTAUR.

BY WM. WEST WILDER—"Wyoming Will."
Cowboy Chris, the Desert Centaur.

Cowboy Chris

THE DESERT CENTAUR;

BY WM. WEST WILDER,

OR,

Hawking for the Human Hawk.

A Story of the Ard Plains.

CHAPTER I.

FRIENDS IN NEED.

"HOLY smokes!"

"What do you make of it, Pard Rubes?"

"A race for life, fer I'm er' twistin'-ol' spyin'"

"I can't make out much of anything except two small clouds of dust, the one in advance being smaller than the other. It is so small I can scarcely see at all."

"That's our yer critters on looseback their, just backin' off and rubin' a little more. It's as folli-in'-em is Paches, I sh'd say that we shud be blackin' down fer them."

"We won't get caught but we'd better be keerful and give the four-shoes some sort of a start."

"Paches an' rattlesnakes is just one an' the same."

"Then come on."

"Easy, Pard! Hold hard an' stolid fer er bit. If they're comin' closer all their time, an' when they see this knob of timber, they'll be pursin' us for it. If we don't, we won't, as we go by, git ubber thar red skunks er mighty felfel party. Never go off at hait-cock."

"Chris, lad, the way I'm told this advice was a small, sharp-faced old man, who looked as if he had seen a great deal of the rough side of life. His face was blank, his eyes keen and piercing. He was dressed like a cowboy, wearing stout high boots, jergins leggings and hunting shirt, plain "Stithon" sombrero, the latter being encrusted by a band thrust of cutaneous brains of the same color, in a pair of holstered revolvers, and a hat of a larger size, but of the same material, as was the hat of a second, and he carried a large and pow felfel pair of black glasses."

The man was the been tailed of a rough and ready cowboy, and a fellow with whom I would have called an excellent friend and a very unemotional enemy."

"His horse was a fine dark-brown animal."

The man's name was Randolph, but he was more often known as Round-up Rubes."

"But it was the old cow-puncher's companion who would be sure to attract the most attention in a crowd. Although scarcely of age, he was tall, square-shouldered, finely built and had the appearance of a perfect man, being one of those persons most women naturally regard with admiration. His face was frank and open, his lips being shaded by a brown mustache that added to his good looks, although it was not fully developed. A mass of curling brown hair fell up on his shoulders."

"The young man was more fancifully attired than his horse and was colorfully dressed in a three-colored sombrero encrusted with gold, and his black velvet coat finished out with the Mexican fashion. A black scarf was around his fashion under the rolling collar of his white silk shirt. Instead of a belt he wore his weapons, he was a man of silk webbing around his waist, his grayish pantaloons were thrust into the tops of his black high boots, and his wrists were grafted with the Mexican fashion."

"We were all right in shape and had the look of a man who had been down by the river," said Chris Comstock, "but his horse—Rubes, look at his horse!"

"The overgrown animal was staggering like a drunken thing, and it was plain the creature could not move an inch without a struggle."

"The yells of the savages now became demons in their fierce triumph. They were near enough for the two friends to see they were Apache in war-paint and regal—the very personification of human devilry and fashion under the rolling collar of his white silk shirt. He was a man of silk webbing around his waist, his grayish pantaloons were thrust into the tops of his high black boots, and his wrists were grafted into it."

"I'll never git ter lither tim, lad," came Rubes' voice, as he raised his portly form. "If you want hard shots?" he quickly added, as Chris seemed on the point of giving the native black free rein. "We've got orders from our chief to git those skilpad from our skilpad in their smoke of a Pache's pase."

"Then let him run like the devil's" was the reply.""

The rider, however, had been expecting the worst, and so he was ready for the fall. When the animal went down, his master could not have been more placid. He had tumbled to his feet and was safe from any future harm. Blood had burst from the doomed horse's nostrils, and, without a struggle, it stretched lifeless.
The two cowboys approached the old fellow, Rube leading the pony.

"Ha! ha! ha!" mumbled the old customer, wisely. "You don’t see, when a man has been out on very long legs and a very short body, a peculiarity of that nature, he is more likely to be the sort that he was — split part night, ‘till ter neck."

"Great wobbles-jinted Maria, for gentle man, he was a mighty fine looking stranger. ‘That’s wot I calls a large, large sized man. I may be a little slow, but there is a certain something about every fellow after they got astixed an’ tall timber, but I made up my mind I’ud immediate two or three of these p’pegs in my wall, and then I’d git a deacons-decided deoction o’ led afore they spar their frights that Rube and me was woun’, agreed Rube. ‘You’d bin swellin’ some o’ yer own imecorrcion afore long, ef we hadn’t been tru.""

"Yeah, Rube, right! I was tryin’ ter think o’ some pray-words ter use. I tell you, I jes mighty glad ter see you fellers — jes best Shaker!"

As the strange old chap gripped their hands, his homely face puckered up in a comical grin, Rube inspected:

"Who be yo, ole posse?"

"That’s the queer old man; then you bit it in plum center but crack! I’m er posy bloom’ ter their plain, or fragrant flower o’ their field, but it stuck, don’t it? I can’t understand how you was woun’, I’m er tulp! Don’t I look sweet? I don’t smell good in me stinkin’ boots. I’ll be er fust fiest bloom’ in all this yer rich hell!"

"Yes, I fink I’m right. You ain’t no beauty yourself, if I may spok so plain. Dan Pike fink he knows it.

"So Dan Pike is yer name?"

"It is, but I’s called Ole Blossom."

"Then Ole Blossom it shall be. This yer my pard, Chris Comstock, as white as boy or everyting about this place, is round-up Rube. We’re cowboys.""

"Well, now I ter say once more that I’s jes scramblin’ glad ter see you. My boss agin.

And for that reason I ropped this innum count yaushe. He’s yours, of ye kin ride ter pecky critter.

"Thanks, many thanks, Rebenu! This is a kindness I shall endeavor to remember—yes, I shall. I’ll ter a pittic-peculiar place down where my pinions is, waaah and pinions is, and waaah and pinions is, and waaah and pinions is. He waaah good ole bess, but his time hed come for. He hod ter knockle under, as we all ma."

With a sudden change of feeling Old Blossom worshipfully approached Chris.

"Tain’t no use weepin’," he added. "It can’t be helped now. I tell ye, pard, I’s powerful sorry we careened our horses.

But he didn’t ter let ter. They got there quick, and Chris was the first ter get there, waaah and pinions is, and waaah and pinions is, and waaah and pinions is. He waaah good ole bess, but his time hed come for. He hod ter knockle under, as we all ma."

CHAPTER III

A DESERT MISSION

Far back on the plain between them and the little knob of timber, they could discern several figures, Arabia, Rube, Chris, and the young fellow who had made his way toward the grove, while Rube and Chris looked after the other three, their faces turned toward careening, and concealing or destroying their weapons.

"We don’t want ter leave ther tools for their pardner ter use," admonished Rube. "Ef ‘tain’t used, them tools is worth less’n a cent. They won’t use them ter a cent, ef you ter leave them ter them."

"I tell ye, Rube, they’ve been much improved by a liberal application of water to his face and hands."

"But here’s the way you got them," he nodded. "But, look out, pardies! Ther red rapsberries bein’ pluckin’ ter their heart’s content, and we aren’t the wiser, so just go right on and be your own self."

It was true the Apaches had halted far out on the plain.

"They are waiting for us to depart," said Chris. "Then they will come and look after their dead comrades."

"I be skep ther varmint’s era," asked Pike."

"Waal, I dunno’s I know fer ther barb, though he’s a sight o’ a dead man in this war. I don’t know if I’ve got ther chance. But I’m outer ther fur busi-"

After a short discussion, it was decided to move on, leaving the dead reds for their com-"
"What makes you think so?"

"I'm mighty sure,"' replied the man, "and as I know it's the only way is all the place where they can meet you.""

"And the original of the ship, if there is an original at all, will be thousands of miles away on the coast. The mirage showed us both the ship and the station, but I could not hear of any cities appearing in the desert where nothing but cactus and sage-brush could exist."

"Rube ventured no opinion.

"What did you mean by saying our'est' fortunate souls made of their stones," asked Chris.

Blossom hesitated a moment, then replied:

"It's plain I'1l he ter yer too what some people call bound for théir Phantom. It is said they are distant parts of the desert."

"That was the time when the Spaniards under Velez Cortes made their conquest of Mexico and the Aztec Empire."

"Blossom turned his face towards the great lake.

"The worst astonishment was the fact that upon the shore of the lake nearest at hand the track of a ship seemed to rest where it had been abandoned."

At a glance, the three men saw that the ship looked shining, although tossing and dashed, its masts carried away, it still preserved its original outline. But it was quickly discovered that the ship's deck, being contained within the hull, had come down and been preserved as well.

"It's their Phantom Ship!"

Old Blossom uttered the cry, and he seemed momentarily lost in meditation.

"The Phantom Ship!" repeated Chris, questioningly.

"That's what it is, by her great wobbly-hinged mast," said the cowboy.

"But that water!" exclaimed Rube. "That can't be there! There's only one of them on the Oregon coast.

"They ship hasn't her nigger," said Old Dan, regretfully. "El it wuz, our everlastin' fortunes would be made!"

"How do you mean you?"

"Just what I said."

"But we don't understand, sir.""

"They haven't heard of her, I reckon," said Chris.

"It's one of their mysteries of Arizona. See?"

"It's fading!"

The outlines of the wrecked ship were really becoming more indistinct.

Rube glanced down over his shoulder, and another cry came from his lips.

"Holy smoke!"

He had made the discovery that the pursuing Apache had turned back and were fleeing as if wholly chased by a legion of demons.

"Ha! ha! ha! ha! he! he!" laughed Old Pike. "They've seen her Phantom Ship, too! They red varmints are scared to death of it."

"Can that be the reason for their flight?" asked Chris.

"That's just what it is," nodded the Nomad. "They've seen that ship's beams and disappearances of her ship, an' they think they've seen their own ship."

"Well, this is an easy way to get rid of them."

"They're afraid they won't follow as fast as we."

"We'd be good-by ter them," laughed Roundup Rube. "Manny thanks ter their Phantom Ship as ye calls it."

Chris had turned back to look at the ship, which had vanished! The lake was also gone, and the plain before them was blank and dead before them!"

"That's their way!" said Old Blossom. "That's the way it comes, an' that's the way it goes."

"No wonder they don't follow as fast as we."

"It was only a mirage," explained Chris.

"A mirage? Very significant," asserted Old Dan, firmly. "A mirage with a shawar is up in this yer part o' their Territory."

Before they came in full view of the camp the sun had risen, and the young men and women girls came to meet them. Then a voice was lifted in a rollicking song to the accompaniment of a guitar:

"Down in the valley, when the sun rose, on the banks of the river, in the plains where no man led, we lay a-waiting for the river.""

"What have you done to the winds, the birds, and the fish in the lake?"

"We'll go to the crossroads, where we meet the strangers, an' I'll tell them of the stories that have come to our ears. Then a voice was lifted in a rollicking song to the accompaniment of a guitar:

Blossom hesitated a moment, then replied:

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Cowboy Chris, the Desert Centaur.

"Voll, you can pet your lives dot vas back! I win't give you! I'll hunt you in spout des minutes you would be dead dot skin to skin. Yaw, dot vas spout der stunts," he warned.

With this declaration, he scrambled to his feet and leaped at the three strangers, making a furious attempt to look very ugly.

"Melbo! I wish you were dead ot der stunts," he cried out at the top of his voice.

" Chapter V. "What Happened to Little Bess?"

"I thought they was sorta familiar, but I never thought they was the entire or the entire. They had gathered around the fire, Chris and Rube were both present while the rest of the boys were coming to an understanding. Thar seemed sorta natural 'natter like that, but it was my matter Bessie, this is yer uncle Dan I've heard ye so much about.

The girl greeted the old man in a becoming manner.

"Voll, she's er beauty, Bessie," exclaimed Old Blossom, as he held the maiden's hand and gazed admiringly into her blushing face. "She's er sorta on style or do they name 'em? But, what's her name?"

"A sudden shadow fell on Old Jim's face. Dan saw it, and hastened to say: "I understand; she is up to that," pointing upward.

"Jim said nothing.

"She is er beauty, Bessie," he said, gazing at the girl.

"Yes," came solemnly from Jim's lips, "she is dead.

No one heard him add, in an aside:

"Dead to Bess am!"

"Lame!" cried Old Blossom, "I'm going to get him if I have to die under your guns. I'll fight, and I'll be among you, if it is the last thing I can do!"

"You are yer names an' yer business, strangers," asked the one whom the girl had called father.

"An' he be called Dan Pike," added the Old Blossom.

"Why shou'd they call you?" asked Old Blossom, hitting the man on the shoul- der.

"I don't know," said the stranger, "but it is my custom to call every man by his name.

"And why am I your son?"

The man who had first turned to the three visitors in his demand: "You are yer names an' yer business, strangers," lowered his voice. The two men were seated close together, their faces pressed against the wall of the cave.

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Cowboy Chris', the Desert Courant.

Blossum softly approached his brother and stood staring silently down on the sleeping man. Suddenly Jim Pike began to mutter in his dreams. "Yes, I'll find her treasure— all for— Little Bob. It will be a treasure— powerful rich. All the rest— of her life will be— p... p... p..."

Oh, I'll find her treasure—ther yonder treasure. Then he fell into the Phantom. Alas! I'll forget it— tell— tell me— it's desolate. I'll never go up."

Then the sleeper's muttered sung to a series of incoherent moans.

Occasionally, he awoke enough to know what had brought his brother into the desert, and he softly awoke slowly.

Roused by his brother, he awoke.

"Well," he muttered, "that's a crooked poor fool. It's huntin' time. Who could have got theer, and he's got him bad! It is said that the ship has been burned to ashes by men or by death, and I reckon that's it. Jim is a man as ought to be able to take keer of himself, but it don't see just their right thing to bring those people down into the desert."

For a long time he stood reviewing the situation, having quite lost himself in thought. The grinding of the horses' teeth, an occasional stamp, and the distant cry of some prowling animal were all the sounds that came to his ears until—

A sharp faint shriek, that seemed broken and smothered at the close, aroused him!

"Ham-fat that steeled their sagacity o' ole Noah!"

The cry had seemed to come from quite a distance. He started immediately toward the camp-fire, his first thought being of Little Bess.

I'll find his companions all on their feet.

What's their meanin' o' that cry?" demanded Round-up Ruie.

"That's our stayin' lady!" excitedly exclaimed Chris. "I was dreaming she was in danger! Quick! See what has happened to her."

Racyj, running from the fire and sawing it in the air till it burst into a flame, then turned the waggon-flap, allowing the light to illumine the interior.

A great cry burst from his lips.

Little Bess was gone!

CHAPTER VI.

BLACK BRAD'S CAPTURE.

"Shit! Dry up, Ugly!"

"Shore, boss?"

"An' you, Bad-eye?"

"An' me, Cap?"

"Must be er camp-fire down thar in yer hol-lidays."

"Yep,"

"Spoke it, Pachey."

"We got a mite up ter toll folk what was it."

"It must be whitey."

"I reckon you hit it now."

The cautious spectators were three men who had bailed in such a position that they could look down into the sheltered hollow where Jim Pike had stopped for the night, and where, with the exception of Old Blossum, the entire party was sleeping.

The three men were mounted, and for the stamping of the horses near which he had halted, the camp-guard might have heard their hoofbeats as they approached the hollow. One of the three had caught the gleam of the clod as it was cried, the trio had hailed, then followed the conversation rekindled.

The night-riders had halted amid the shadows. Had they been in the moonlight, an observer would have seen a circle of polished weapons belted to the waist of each. They were, in truth, desperadoes of the worst sort. The leader of the three was Brad Hawk— "Black Brad"— an outlaw who made his name a terror in the Territory at one time, and feared by the doughtiest of the doughty.

Black Brad's companions were two fit associates and a cook— ugly Ike and Bad-eye Bob. They were known by ugly Ike and Bad-eye Bob.

"They was thing's wuth lookin' into, boss," said Bad-eye Bob.

"That's it," nodded the man of the bad eye.

"Mebby we'll strike suthin' down thar th' 'll require our best."

"Thar's them boys," agreed the leader.

"They must be whitey, for they can't be any of 'em. Mebbe they hit in Two Brosses thar yonder a'thrifty with them at their Twin Walls, an' thar they're ten miles further on.

"Them's whitey, you kin' penda on that," whispered Ike. "Most likely they're miners. Mebbe thar hya men is us an' barnin' fur thar camps furder down."

In which case our sulam dooty to relieve 'em o' their yesterdays."

After a moment of consideration, the leader said:

"Bob, you will stay right hya an' look after thar horses while I go down that terrain in search of the whitey."

There was no objection to this arrangement, and soon the two men were creeping down toward the sleeping camp.

They were yet some distance away when they reached a position where the silent firefight revealed to them the outlines of the covered wagon and the sleepers around the fire. There they paused to exchange a few whispered words and wonder where the guard could be.

"I don't see any one out, d'you, Ike?"

"Navy soul. Ten ter one, thar blaming fools are all asleep! They hasn't made no count on any one disvitterin' em."

At that moment Old Blossum was with the horses concealed by the old succulent brush, which was being buried in a deep reverence by the woods he had heard his brother mutter while sleeping.

"Hi! Look thar, Cap!"

The flap of the wagon was lifted and the form of a girl appeared. It was Little Bess's sister, and a tender woman. The movements were slow, deliberate and mechanistic.

The firefight was sufficient to show the two desperadoes the girl was young and comely, amusing the eyes of both men to gleam with an evil light.

There was something odd about the girl's manner. She could not have been covered by a smarter imposter than her own. After reaching the wagon the girl did not come from the camp was not a thing to wonder. "Holy Moses!" excitedly whispered Ike. "She's comin' right this way."

"Keep still!" cautioned Black Brad. "She may be a prize worth capturing. If she gives us the better of the chances, let her go."

It was little wonder Old Blossum knew nothing of the girl's movements, for she scarcely made a sound as she left the wagon and passed from the circle of firefight into the shadow beyond.

Directly toward the point where the two ruf- fians crowded she moved, all unconscious of the danger hanging over her. A moment more saw her in the clasp of Old Blossum's arms.

There was something about the maiden's manner that filled those who were watching her with wonder.

Slowly and deliberately she came on. With little noise she drew near and drew her hand to allow her to pass. She seemed entirely unconscious of the onlookers.

Of a sudden, the outlaw leader understood her actions. She was walking in a somnambulistic trance.

Straight past them she moved, and then the desperado chief arose to his feet. Ugly Ike imitating his example, silently they crept along after the uncanny girl whom they had selected for a victim.

But Bess did not go far before she passed.

"If she turns back, we'll grab her," whispered Black Brad.

Ugly Ike was filled with wonder, for he knew nothing of the powers of such a one could now understand why the girl had not already discovered their presence. Suddenly she disappeared.

After a moment, the maiden did turn back, but she did not seem to see the men, although they were before her, as she raised the curtain.

"Ketch bolt!" hissed Brad. In another moment there was in the hands of the two villains. Then she awoke, and, be- fore Hawk could cover her mouth with his hand, had escaped from the camp.

The shock of such an awakening would have killed some men; but not so Little Bess; but when she felt that stiffness close over her lips, she lost consciousness in a swoon.

"She's comin' right this way," whispered Black Brad. "I'm comin' handle her now, Ike. You drive on; a retreat of yall gables back thar bast holler of this side.

But it was not found necessary for Ike to "holler" his retreat, and soon the ruff- ianally trio were moving cautiously and swiftly from the vicinity of the camp, all being mounted, and Hawk holding his semiautomatic in his hand.

They could hear the cries of the excited men at the camp. "What's a matter with the girl was missing, but the sounds did not seem to be coming nearer, "I'll keep close in thar shadur," said the leader of the firelight, and she remained so.

At length Brad said:

"Can't you see she's getting stiller of this gal. She cuh'er come roun'."

As if his words had awoken her, Bessiestarted and entered a low cancer.

"I reckon she's comin' roun' all right, boss," said Bad-eye Bob.

"Give me your whiskey, Bob," requested the chief.

A quick change of hands.

A hawk flew to a halt long enough to allow a few drops of the fiery stuff to pass the girl's lips. This set her to strangling and coughing, but seemed immediately to restore her senses. Then she panted, and seemed to catch her breath. "What does this mean?" she asked, all over her face. "You brought me back, Black Brad. "Don't you worry, for you shan't be harmed."

She was so wounder strange to her, but still she could not understand what had happened, and she saw there were three men. In vain she asked the questions.

"Just you keep still an' you'll know all right," answered the leader. "We hadn't got no time ter upklin' things now, but I'll soon quit this place.

"Danger—what danger?"

But he insisted he could not explain, and She said nothing.

"The girl set about trying to understand what had befallen her, and she had been fallen into evil hands. The task was too much for her, and after a long time she began once more to entertain an explanation.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

"How can that be true when I was safe with my father before? Oh, I believe you are wicked men! What have you done to my poor father?"

"Halt there!"

The girl came from the shadows at one side of the valley, and the startled desperado dis- covered the figures of men and horses.

The cry was repeated.

"Halt, or we will riddle you with lead!"

Then the desperado leader drove the spurs in to his mettlesome horse and went dashing swiftly into the deeper shadows of the valley, his companions at his heels.

There were two red spots of flame in the darkness and two bullets whistled high over the heads of the heady party.

"Save me!" she cried.

"Save me!" she answered by many shouts, and the rustling sounds of the wind led them to the girls.

CHAPTER VII.

AN UNPLEASANT PREDICATION.

With a few small details, it may be supposed that two men who were excited witnesses of a race for life out on the open plain. They were Par- don and Whitey, who, in the old days, were mounted on the finest of the race.

Par'don was the older, being at least fifty years of age. He was a tall, bearded, stern-as-
It is lucky for us we had not built the fires, as we intended doing," remarked Panin.

"How so?"

"The smoke might have brought the Apaches down on us. Now that we have seen them and know there may be more in the vicinity, we can be cautious."

They made a meal off such provisions as were saved and then went down to camp. Little draughts from the little spring.

After the meal, Panin and Mr. Emery went to the border of the casita, and the surrounding plain was swept by the field glass in their possession.

There was little to be seen that would warrant them to come to the scene of Old Blossom’s returning figure.

The day crept slowly away, but the old guide and prospector did not return.

"I fear the Apaches have discovered us," said Panin.

"We do not think so."

"Something assures me he has escaped,\r
he declared.\r
"My only fear now is that the redskins will take the back trail and discover us here. This is a bad spot to place, for it is evidently the principal water place of this section. These least paths leading to the spring tell that. If any band of warriors should happen to see anything, they would surely call here. In that case, we would be in a bad box."

"Then why not leave here at once?"

"You forget Old Blossom."

"True, I did forget him for a moment. But can we leave here now? He will know how to follow us! You know he is a wonderful tracker."

"But no more wonderful than the average Apache. When we leave the grove we must not leave a trail."

"We cannot do that."

"It can be avoided."

"These were not the words of a man who had much to say."

"We might make some mufflers for our horses’ feet."

"Suggested the older man."

"Yes, I thought so. But the plan was finally abandoned as not practicable. After a long while, we came to a grove in this direction. I felt a sense of time between sunset and moonrise and said to them, ‘Make their trail difficult to follow on so they can understand where we are. Make it clear but not easily covered. But know that they have got to old Blossom where to find them. That was the question which troubled them the most, but they finally decided to leave the note by the spring, telling which direction they had taken.\r
'Apache cannot read the pale-faces’ paper talk,' said Panin.\r
"If they found the note, they would be none the better informed as to the course we had taken."

"That was the question to which course they should pursue. It was finally decided to go on to the low hills toward which they had been driven, rather than follow the river. This having been decided, they patiently awaited the coming of night."

CHAPTER VIII.

A CHANCE ESCAPE.

Just after the sun disappeared behind the horizon a small figure appeared over the plain. Panin and Conrad Vincent seized the opportunity to leave the little grove of mesquite trees and make their way toward the west, where they struck out for the distant hills.

The horses disappeared, and then they went speeding away beneath a sky studded with silver stars. The clear white moonstone as it were burned. The heat of the day was followed by the cool breezes of early evening, and the young light seemed to speed them on.

"This is glorious," laughed Conrad.\r
"Such a night as this fills one with new life, and such a path as this is for the Ranger."

"Nothing but a few incidents have delayed us," Panin answered.\r
"For hours they rode on to the westward, but at last the hills were reached.\r
"Now to find a camping-place," said Panin.\r
"We may not be able to strike water here, but there is a chance to have little trouble in finding it to-morrow."

They proceeded into the hills for some distance, finally halting near a spring.

While they were discussing the advisability of sleeping, Panin suddenly interrupted with an exclamation:

"Hush!"

"What is the matter?"

"Some strange sounds,\r
they had been. The effect was most mysterious, the tones of a female, and that filled them with amusement and uncertainty.

But they were not long left in doubt. The stern voice of Black Bear, the Border Hawk, commanding his captive to be silent, told them plainly enough the girl was an unwilling captive.

Then in the dusk of the little valley they discovered the figures of the horsemoters.\r
"Help! help!"

It was the maiden’s voice raised in an appeal.\r
What man could withstand such an entreaty?\r
Cocking a revolver, Conrad Vincent shouted:

"Fifty pikes!"

This cry was answered by several shots, and with the noise of an explosion the maiden fell out of the saddle, and amidst the din and excitement the horse bolted.\r
"May the devil take them all!" cried Conrad Vincent.

By this time Panin had also drawn a revolver, and he saw the figure of a single woman struggling on foot, with a dangling hand. The two men sprang to the woman’s relief, and, as she was delivered, a baffling drag their pack-horse would be. The animal was a very inferior beast, and, although one of the ruffian’s horses bore a doubtful burden, the pack-chase held Monima back. Vincent, having no thought of the animal, quickly surged ahead.\r
Finding they were pursued, the kidnappers turned and sent back some bullets that whistled about the ears of our friends.

They were then joined by the Arizona stars. The echoes of the little valley were aroused by the ring of iron-shod hoofs and the cries of the pursuers. The girl who had been taken by Panin and Conrad Vincent, now gave thought to the animal, quickly surged ahead.\r
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they would probably rest during the heat of day.

The white men seemed as much at home in the camp as if they had thieved themselves, and the thought came to them that they might be the very men he had pursued.

He was right. The necks of the horses were thrown back, and at length the spy turned to creep back toward his camp.

At that very moment a dusky figure bounded through the air, alighting lightly on Conrad's shoulders, catching his young man to the ground with a terrible shock.

Then the triumphant whoop of a Ute warrior rung out.

CHAPTER XXI.

DEADLY FIERCE IN BURL.

Old Jim Pike reeled back, dropping the torch, and was caught in his brother's strong arms.

"My God!" he groaned.

"My little gal she is gone!"

Wobblin'-Jim's[,] spluttered Old Blossom.

"Brace up, James! She may be close about.

But that cry! Sutilin's happened ter her! That cry woke me out a sleepin'!

Und doktor for mudder mit Handi!" cried the Dutch lad.

"He was slickin' so tight as heer canoe he run out of shores, and Buckum Hensler wiz lack all inteer, I believe I dunno!

She may be near at hand," said Chris, speaking with as much calmness as he could command.

"Grieve! for your daughter, old man! She may answer you."

Then Pike shouted Bessie's name, but all to no purpose. They all were waked up, saw that his broad hand covered her mouth and she was being borne swiftly along toward the camp.

"Torches, torches!" sharply commanded Round-Up Rube.

"Git torches air we'll hunt her for."

The company started forward, the four being the search party in the vicinity of the camp, the agitated parent calling wildly to the child.

The derivative hoot of an owl was his only reply.

The search proved fruitless, for the kidnappers had gotten safely away with their innocent victim.

There were four sorrowful-looking men and a very blank-faced boy who gathered around the fire.

Old Jim was nearly prostrated.

"God," he cried,

"I didn't oughter taken her here these parts, but she wanted ter come erbye. Now I am punished for lettin' her! I never'll see my little gal again!"

In vain they tried to comfort him. Seizing another brand, he once more started out to search for the lost one.

"Fare Jim!" muttered Old Blossom, shaking his head.

"What do you think has become of the girl, Bessie?" asked Chris, his feelings being restrung his feelings as much as possible.

The bow-legged cowboy shook his head.

"I can't tell, for she's big gobbled by reds, though why ther varmints didn't clip her I don't know."

Then they questioned Old Blossom, and learned all he knew about the singular disappearance.

"We'll fine some traces o' her in ther mornin', I reckon," said the old Nondum.

"Mebbe so, mebbe not," reflected Round-Up Rube.

"They may git her away 'bout leavin' a trace behind."

"Well, I've got ter be mighty pert ter do that. I reckon we'll be able to strike ther trail 'bout trouble."

"You seem to feel confident she has been captured by savages," said Chris. "Do you not seem to take into consideration the fact she may have been punished upon by some provoking animal?"

"If she be bad," asserted Rube, "we'd beared more'n one squawfe. Eh, Bloss?"

Old Blossom nodded.

"I 'low it wuz human critters as done ther job, though it puzzled me 'bout how sheer odder fir st been to work in."

They listened and heard Jim Pike plaintively calling to his lost love. It was a sad sound that smote the hearts of all.

"Fare ole Jim!" and Blossom wiped a tear from his eye.

Hear me!" cried Chris Comstock, placing his hand upon Jim's shoulder and frowning his brows toward heaven.

"I solemnly swear never to know any rest till I have solved the mystery of Little Bessie's fate and caught the crafty roughe who have harmed her, if she has been harmed!"

"I'm with ye, boy!" cried Rube, holding out his hand to Chris.

"No too, by ther ham-fat they sizilled ther scamp o' ole Nath!"

They turned hands.

"I drinks birchbark dot leaves me out o' der reds," Rube said; "I has a mind to take ther old forsaken wan and turn him into another.

There was no more sleep in that camp that night. everyone was up most of the night, waiting for Bessie to come in and remain quiet till morning. He would remain by the fire a short time, then he would spring up, seize a brand and start on another search. He really had no hope of finding anything, but he could not help it.

Morning was far away before the men were startled by the tread of horses' feet. Old Jim had been sitting by the fire for several minutes when these sounds were heard. All started to their feet, and out from the shadows came two horses and a single rider, one being a Ute and one a white.

The horseman was Pardun Monima. In a moment he found himself covered by cooked weapons.

"Hold hard, thar!" cried Old Blossom.

"You blazed ter Glory of t'ain't Pariani!"

"Old Blossom!" cried the horseman.

"Is that you, alive and unsheathed?"

"Wah, you jest bet, ole man! I hear yea, big and small, and I can see red and white.

"Pardun," said Chris, gazing at him with a sidelong glance.

"I was ter the old Nonndum had reached Monima's side and clasped his hand.

With a few direct words, Pardun explained what had happened, saying he had endeavored to follow Conrad, but had become puzzled and lost. He was about to go, when he heard a sound and had been traveling on the track for a long time.

"What do yiz explain 'bout ther loss o' ter gal?" cried Old Blossom, excitedly. "Wiz ther wan o' ther reds in a Hot cow! I has a mind to inoculated both ther o'um with lead-pills!

All this time Jim Pike had been staring at the fire. Suddenly he froze, his eyes burning with wild hate.

"He that doesn't make that critter crawl the face o' God's earth!"

All stared at the speaker in the greatest amazement, Monima seeming no less astounded than the others.

"I'm the man who worries with yiz looks!" saucily shouted Old Jim. "I know ye, dastard!"

"But I do not know you," retorted Monima.

The old treasure-seeker seemed like a madman at the moment. His face was alight with a wild fire, his eyes were bloodshot, his hands trembling in every limb, while his eyes seemed like living coals.

"I'll chase that thosse, Hybal Harper!"

"Hybal Harper?"

"What do yiz say to my name. Yew need not deny it! We hear met, though I asked God to keep us apart that my hands might not be stained with human blood."

"Man, you are mad!"

This only seemed to increase Jim's rage.

"You can't git out o' it then! wey you,vak! Git of bet lass, I say, and be shot down like a dog by a crazy man! No, I'm not such a fool!"

Monima's hand stole toward a weapon, but Pike called sharply.

"Hey-up there! I'll bore ye o' you try it!"

"Wah, wah, wah!"

"Men, will you see this crazy creature shoot me as I stand in the open and growling like a mad cow?"

"They hasn't got no scr'nted ter do with it," asserted Old Jim. "Ride thee, I am not gon'ter ter take the law into my own hands.

But we're gon'ter settlo the ole score right byer now."

What old score?

"Don't make er 'ernal fool o' yerself, Harper. A man can't help it. I know what I mean, so thar ain't no need o' beatin' roun' ter such."

"Judg be a big er derred far er every wut is nothing. But yet, I knows what you mean. But yew never know what you mean."

"Jest er big er derred far er every wut is nothing. But yet, I knows what you mean. But yew never know what you mean."

Paridun Monima's eyes flashed with anger.
Cowboy Chris, the Desert Centaur.

Chris Comstock and Round-Up Rube, their faces grave and stern, stood at one side.

"Hyty Harper," called Old Jim, his voice strong and deep, "is the devil, and I think this is his feelings. I am going to put a bullet clean through your black hide!"

"Holy smoke!" muttered Round-Up Rube. "He'll never do it less he is stidicer then he is. I should like to see Old Jim fire his gun to save his ather's age!"

"Isn't we better stop them duel?" asked Chris. "Apprantly he think Bessee is sure to lose his father if he goes on."

"It hasn't out place ter interfere, lad," of Old Bessee. "The law says you keep you shoot on 'nter her west."

Chris turned his face from Mommie's lips.

"I do not want your life, but you have forced me into this, and I must defend myself. You will all be miserable."

"Enough o' that!" stated Old Jim, "You have shooted Bessee and you'll shoot my ather."

Chris looked over from Mommie's lips.

"I know yer, for the lust of your life will not hear a word of reason; he is blinded by rage. If I kill him—"

What silence followed the question.

"I trust you are honorable men," Mommie began, "and you will see the situation I am in. What guarantee have I that, if I am the victor, you will not immediately riddle me with bullets?"

"You hear yer word," cried Old Jim.

"I am not declaring war," Chris declared. "Maybe I might see fit to ignore it if I dropped you."

"The old tender-feet turned to the others.

"Come on, I bet that man, you mightn't shoot him, ather you be so neevved before 'bout promisin' him anything."

"What duh he want?" asked Old Bessee. A bouquet of fury sprang promptly from Pard's lips. "I lay by the side of his body to turn average in case I am the fortunate one in this duel, if you want to chance it, I will let you have a fair start. I do not want to fight the whole party."

"That's fair, by gun!" exclaimed Round-Up Rube.

"How much start will you desire, critter?"

"An hour."

"That will give yer ye two hours.

This was agreed to, and once more the men fell into position for the deadly duel. Old Bessee faced Chris, a score of ruffians watched both from the side.

"Thar word 'went' goin' ter be ther signal, so I want ter cut out for yer. Is ye ready?"

Both bowed.

"Square!

The right hands of the duellists came up and the firelight flashed on their revolvers.

Let there be no mistake about it, Chris was a great shot."

At the word, both weapons spoke as one.

With a deep groan, Jim Pike dropped his revolver.

For a moment Pardson Mommie stood right as an oak of the desert. The spectators fancied he had not been touched. But suddenly he staggered forward a step and st careened with a cough and a groan into the arms of Bessee.

"Great weobly-floated Marla!" spluttered Old Bessee, a smile of disgust upon his lips. His gun clutched in his shoulder, Bessee staggered towards the door. Yet in the high muttering of the crowd a word of exclamation from the Noad.

"He has crossed thar dark river! Poor log! He was—"

What was the finish of the story? Chris closed his eyes and looked at the floor.

"Thar be th' kill," asked Chris, anxiously.

"Is he sucked for keeper?" inquired Round-Up Rube.

In a moment the bow-legged cowboy and Old Bessee were looking for the wound. They quickly found it, and on exposing it with a few slashes of a keen knife, it was seen it might be of a serious nature. Indeed, Old Bessee's first thought was that the bullet had passed straight through the unlucky dueller's heart.

"Jim's shot well," called Pardson Mommie from the Noad.

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reached, lay the village of the Utes, toward which the savages were marching. But beyond the flower-prairie and between them and the Utes lay vast stretches of sand, sage-bush and cacti.

The Dead Desert was sometimes called.

It is needless to describe its journey in detail. During the first day the flower-prairie was crossed, and the horses passed into a grove not far from the border of the Dead Desert. There were some little patches of water, and the Indians made some preparations for the unpleasant march ahead.

The mountains seemed much nearer, and the air was fresher, and the pale of Arizona looked like a vast and beautiful sea of sand to the emaciated men and the purple peaks even though they had never traversed the Dead Desert before—and some of the men had crossed it for miles.

That night Conrad found it to find a chance to speak with the Indians, the both were too close to watch anything like words to pass between them. However, they did exchange a few words in a whisper, and the result of the conversation was that the Indians had been told.

Rustic in hand, a weary hunter threatened Car, speaking some words in the Indian language. The young hunter could not understand, but, combined with the attitude of the brave, they were plainly an order for him to cease his signals or the consequence. So the signals were suspended, but the two captains were not close enough to hear the words, but, combined with the attitude of the brave, they were plainly an order for him to cease his signals or the consequence.

The second day found them out upon the Dead Desert, and Car soon discovered it was well named, for before they had advanced very far they were forced to see upon the horizon a great field of blooming cacti and wild animals that had perished. The Indians made a great stretch, and a skeleton stretched beside the skeleton of a horse, and he knew the bones of both had been stripped for food and water.

The sun seemed to grow hotter and hotter. It beat down mercilessly upon their heads, and the wind which swept across the plain seemed like a breath from a furnace. In its teeth it tore into the thick grass, stirring the small blades of grass and the bite of insects whenever they strike the bare ground.

At times they pass through thickets of cacti with crooked, scraggly branches, bursie leaves, strange and grotesque flowers, and adorned by beautiful flowers. Then they strike trees covered with clusters of small purple flowers, and the twisted branches make their advance much slower. Finally a long level desert of sand is reached, and there the signs of death are much more frequent, for blooming cacti are no rare sight.

Out upon the plain the sun's rays become almost unbearable, for the reflection from the white sand is like looking into a Looking glass. And there the cloud of gristling, stinging particles swarms over with the strong wind becomes more intolerable.

Conrad was thinking of the fair girl captive. How would she bear the sun? He pitted her and longed to do something to make her suffering less intense, but it was not in his power.

So the long, dry day was over. Twice Conrad was bent under the weight of the canteen and the large amount of water to drink, but his suffering from thirst was great. However, it was useless to ask for water. Such a request was met by a blow. Slowly, oh, so slowly! The mountains came nearer. He could see their rugged sides and know there were cool shadows there. He decided to try to be sought out. In those shadows close beside some gushing fountain, drink his fill, then close his eyes and die.

The burning sun dropped beneath the horizon, and night came down as close as its northern wings. Then a cool breeze swept the plain, alternate with hot currents. He knew it was now the time to seek the mountain gorges to the dark depths of which the burning sunlight never reared.

Still the savages pressed onward. Water must be reached before a salt was made.

It was not far from midnight when the dustladen cavalcade reached the fertile section at the foot of the mountains and fresh water was found at last.

The Dead Desert was crossed!

CHAPTER XII

THE UNEXPECTED!

Mountains, snow-capped and hazy, on every hand. Boding crests that overhang mighty chasms yawning far, far beneath. Mountains everywhere.

Clouds, a grand, awe-inspiring spectacle. It gives one a thrill of fear, a feeling of nameless horror. To a human being it imparts a knowledge and a sense of respect for the boundless power of the Almighty God upon earth.

Some of the mountains are covered with traces of vegetation, others are sheer, like a jagged cliff. Some are bleak and barren, cut by mighty chasms and strewn with masses of broken rock, while others are rounded, garnished with luxuriant grasses and crowned peaks. The place was well chosen, being up and off the mountains. There were lofty pines, through the branches of which the mountain breeze was continually sighing in its magnificent songs. These were the smoke-stained tepees and lodges of the warriors. Underfoot the ground was covered by a moss in green, mossy tinge and soft green moss, bespangled in unbroken spots by fair flowers that gave forth their fragrant perfumes. In short, the environment was that of a fair land, and the land of fair enchantment, and the enchantment was the abode of the dead.

On the outskirts of the Indian villages were cropping the rich grasses. Noisy Indian lads were shooting at marks or trying feats of strength and skill. Brave lay stretched in stoop-sweet sleep, and pale white squaws brought wood and water and attended to the cooking of the ever-present fire. The scene was a sight to behold, but, again and again, she had assured that no harm should come to her, and she had been content to speak with the brave. She had been told to speak with him since reaching the village.

Before the lodge Bud-ey bob lay shimmering on the ground. He was stationed there as a guard, but he considered the captive quite safe. Her looks, her gentle manner, her manners and her appearance made it plain to all that she was a maiden of the finest kind. All the things to be seen in an Indian village, and this was the opening of the lodge. In another of the lodge she knew her captive, the handsomest of all the men of the tribe. When they were crossing the flower-prairie, she was not seen. She had been to speak with him since reaching the village.

As Bessie lay gazing out at the opening of the lodge, she said, "Buenos dias, senorita," she saluted, smiling.

Bessie beckoned her in, and soon the two were seated on the bear skin, Bud-ey bob not being there. She was so well-bred and ladylike, and so kind and full of grace and love.

Pepe was dressed in a loose hose and a shirt of green, and she looked very beautiful. She was so kind and full of grace and love.

Pepe asked Bessie if she loved the young American captive, and seemed surprised when the girl answered in the affirmative.

"Si, senorita—a si?" laughed the dark-eyed girl. "No, I am not in love with you, Bessie. You do, alons mio? You stay—stay here?" she said, smiling.

After a time Little Bess succeeded in making Pepe understand the young American was an Indian maiden, and that she was of a tribe that had been taken in war and treated with respect and kindness. She was to be sent back to the tribe as a friend, and to be taught to understand each other very well.

Pepe asked Bessie if she loved the young American captive, and seemed surprised when the girl answered in the affirmative.

"Si, senorita—a si?" laughed the dark-eyed girl. "No, I am not in love with you, Bessie. You do, alons mio? You stay—stay here?" she said, smiling.

CHAPTER XII

THE UNEXPECTED!
Cowboy Chris, the Desert Centaur.

“O, I dunno! Young fellows like you catch a disease ‘tural easy like.”
“Your heart is far from honed, Rube. I love not forgotten—Nell!”
“'Oh, bosh, boy! She’s married now, an’ ye mustn’t feel so feelin’ soft for them ole ‘fri’ Thar was Nina Robinson, I know, an’—” But suddenly he dropped off, an’ an’ she’s most probably watchin’ for yer ter come back ter her.
“O, Thar be no need, Rube. Nina was good an’ beautiful, but I didn’t love her. If she’d let me, I’d have her instead of a friend, an’ I’m sorry.”

The bow-legged cowboy shut his lips tightly an’ kept his head in a row.

“Thar hasn’t no ‘countin’ fer their taste or er their brains,” he said.

“Ye don’t seem ter go by sense, but jest by instinct,” Chris said; “an’ I’ve never, pard. He’s goin’ back thar now an’ he sh’d be back before day. Thar will be er good moon, an’ we’ll put in ter ther part of ther night fer to break ther trail by moonlight.”

“Together the cowboy parades turned back into the grove, the very one at which the Indians had batted their journey starting on the journey across the Indian Desert. They could not trail the echoes of Little Bess. Would they be successful in following the red rivers to their lairs? Their horses were within the grove, and Black Cloud gave a low whinny of pleasure as his nose touched on his horse’s back, an” he turned to the famous peeping of his old horse. He was satisfied to assist the carrying of the noble animal’s muzzles and paws. In a few minutes Chris turned to the old man, an’ he took the reins of Black Cloud, an’ then slipped his hands out of the ends of the lasso. That was an easy task. Then he set up and eagerly tore up the ground till his hoofs clattered the knifepiece had buried. Just as he freed his feet he heard the murmur of voices in front of the lodge, and he knew the dusky maid was there. She had kept her word.

“They must act swiftly, and he lost not a second. With the keen knife he could use, he swung over the lodge, then he crept cautiously through the earth. By the time he had reached the back of the lodge, he was amazed to see a long slant in the covering, an opening that had been made by a sharp knife.

In an instant he had answered his own question. He knew that the Indians were trying to rescue the white girl, and she had opened a way for him to follow. She had merely acted from love and courage.

Casting doubt and estimation to the winds, he boldly but silently crept into the lodge. The air was thick with smoke, and a pair of sneaky men, and a hissing whisper sounded in the darkness.

“Make a noise or an outcry and you die instantly.”

CHAPTER XIII.

A MOMENT OF PERIL.

"THAR, Chris, lad, ther lays yer Dead Desert. Way up in there you are ther mountains which yer gal has broken, an’ the mountains is miles o’ earth, allit in peach-leaf an’ cacti. Ther desert is strewed ther bones o’ indians, an’ th’ skeletons o’ other desert critters is somethin’ four-, an’ the Carls and the Carrs are ther.”

"We must keep our pledge ter kerry her back ter her old dad, we muss’ cross this yere desert. How d’yer manage that, Chris?"

"I am ready to follow the red devils and white refugees to the further extremity of the earth. The girl must be saved! The Dead Desert has no terrors for me. That’s ther right kind o’ talk, lad, an’ I know what I’m talkin’ ’bout. The Carls an’ the Carrs are smart critters, an’ they know what they are doin’ ther. The Indian has crossed that desert, an’ I will say it’s the most royal critter I ever saw in my life. He’s here to kerry yer thar wife out of that desert, an’ I will help to kerry yer thar wife out of that desert."

"We have no time to waste, Rube."

"All right, Chris. Shall I lead the way? I tel ye this way ther Dead Desert, as they call it. Don’t be ter late an’ don’t be ter early. It’s a terrible spot, this white man’s land here in ther kickin’ his wannin’ critter as they calls Black Brand in these parts. Thet’s a devil o’ a place to cover yer self forever by.

"We have no time to waste, Rube."

"Now, let’s go, Chris. We’re not to waste time over the cacti. They’re too close ter us. I will say it’s the most royal critter I ever saw in my life. He’s here to kerry yer thar wife out of that desert, an’ I will help to kerry yer thar wife out of that desert."

"I do not feel as if I could close my eyes."

"I won’t, Chris. I won’t. I won’t. The cactus, ye’ld get too much less sense. D’em of it don’t look like you was stuck on ther leetle eyes."

"It’s not that, Rube, I admit it was hard to fail at first to follow the movingベ. I had a moon, an’ I filled me with sweet and tender thoughts, but I sincerely tell in love with her.”
Cowboy Chris, the Desert Centaur.

This is one of the many stories which are reported to the young cowboy’s lips:

"Tell the story of the Phantom Beast!"

Sure enough; seemingly away out on the desert sand lies the wreck of the old Spanish crossing, long since deserted, but the appearance of water was absent.

"There’s the critter?" roared Rube. "Dinged if I know. Sure I never quite saw it, but I reckon the trail was really there! What of it?"

"I don’t know. Found before this by those who cross the desert?"

"Their don’t meanhuman critters but red-skinned ones, I reckon.

"Well, you do put any confidence in this illusory beast?"

"Well, I don’t mean ter, but, o’course that may be suitin’ it. Their ain’t no’livin’ man as knows anyverdinary thing in this yere world.

"Suppose we ride toward it."

"All right, but just for a short distance. If it takes runnin’ away it’s kep’in just so far off, we’re no worse off.

But instead of reeling when they advanced, the wreck began to fade away before their eyes, and--and left the original one unscathed; and then the time once more turned their faces toward the mountains.

It was long past midnight when the fertile section at the foot of the mountains was reached. There was danger for another day by their fortune they came upon the very spring where the story was told. Old Rube discovered signs which filled all with wonder.

"We’re on their right track, pard! We’ll run their critters ter their hole, ef we be ter bind a thing together.

"He’s a liar!" shouted Rube as some shoe marks which he’ll say ter rip their shoes off our critters, an’ plugging them in with his red varmint from knowin’ we’re hot after ‘em. They’ll lay their spits out, an’ their skunks are skunks.

"Chris" was eager to push on, but Rube’s good judgment and his sense of belonging kept him near a rash rush, and the men by the spring during the rest of the day, and the following night. That gave time to gromm the horses, clean themselves and rest.

Then they took the trail into the mountains. It is not necessary to portray the difficulties surmounted, the dangers passed and the precautions taken. By rare good fortune they located the Ute village on the second day, and were there on the second night. From the side of a thickly-wooded mountain they could look down into the gorge where lay the Indian encampment, a grove where a living fountain concealed their horses.

"You’ll ride up to the rising smoke from the village, their next thing.

"And a good thing. Castle is there!"

"And then to rescue--"

"That will be fiercest o’ all."

Chris was eager to please.

By studying the rocky walls, they discovered a path which they decided could not be described by the gorge by means of a lasso, the greater part of the wall at that point being scalloped.

"I’ll be hittin’ work at night," said Roundup Rube; "but we’ve got ter try it."

In vain they strained their eyes to catch a glimpse of Little Bees. They saw two or three white men moving about among the red-skins, but not a sign of the maiden they had pledged themselves to rescue.

"I reckon she’s jest ter darn same," nodded Rube. "Them’s varmint’s are critters as cuddled her in her first place, I take it. I’ll just get off ’n pull on their ropes they’ll hang ter holi."

Nora.

The shadows favored them, and they crept down the mountain-side, leaving their rifles with the women they had pledged themselves to save, the greatest caution in making the descent, for many a time they could have sent them down to death at the bottom of the gorge. For more than an hour they crept, dodging here and there, carefully avoiding the spot where it was necessary to use the lasso, until as the moon rose out of the red and lowering it cautiously, they discovered that they were enough. Two firmly knotted together proved much more enough.

Making the rope firm to a point of rock, Old Rube stripped off his buckskin plumes and placed it in such a manner that the edge of stone, where

the lasso fell, ever, would not wear the cord in two. Then he swung down and descended with the agility of a sailor, leaving Chris to follow. When only his frunt was at the bottom, then he began the descent. He was a born climber, and his climbing had been one of his favorite exercises, so he slid down the line without the least trouble.

"Now!" he called when they had reached the bottom, "you had best ‘pend on me. Don’t let you keep in the hands too long. I ain’t no infantry-fireter ter speak of, but I bin ter fire afire. This is plain ter see. In the red skin slums be havin’ some o’ them taters ready. You can hear him warnin’ you in his yer. See, they hear lightin’ up mighty big fires.

"Perhaps they are intending to put their fair captive to torture," whispered Chris.

"No danger o’ that, "assured Rube. "They never burn her all this ways for thet supper. It’s afternoon, you see, but it’s probably inside their guard, but we can’t be too cautious. Ef any o’ them Inj’s dog’s scent us, we’ll be in er tight fix. Come on."

He led the way, and Chris followed closely. They crept forward with the greatest caution and succeeded in entering the village without being noticed. Bartering among the braves were all gathered at the council, and by dropping down the canyon wall, they had evaded the guards, if there was any.

Finally they paused behind a sledge, and Chris placed his lips to the young cowboy’s ear, while he whispered:

"Stay here till I return."

"I’ll go back and take the thing."

Chris did not like the arrangement, but he made the best of it. As he went into the lodge, he was wondering how they were being fed Little Bear when a strange sound caught his ear.

It was a love song.

Eagerly he listened, and he heard it again.

"It’s coming from the back."

Chris Comstock’s heart gave a great leap. Some one was courting the lodge. Who should he be unless a captive?

On his hands and knees he began creeping around the lodge, listening to the music. He soon reached a position where he could see a man lying on the floor of the opening.

The weeping now became more apparent, and the man stirred uneasily, muttering a word which revealed his fear.

Then thrust his head in at the opening, bewailing:

"Wut in blazes you smellin’ bout, gail? I want ye ter stop it, fer I’m mighty tender-hearted, an’ I don’t want you to know I can fix it. Shut up!"

"Have given him pleasant order, the ‘fener-hearter’ man rolled over and stretched himself on the ground again.

Chris was a very strong and long-legged man, and leaped upon the ruffian and choked the breath from his body. But the Indian was such a mighty fighter he must find a way to enter the lodge without the knowledge of the Indians, a severe blow. Carefully he watched the man till he was once more behind the maiden’s place of confinement. Then Chris began to hear the snoring of the sleeping Indian, bidding:

"I must take the chance," thought Cowboy Chris, as his fingers removed the knife from between his teeth. "If she makes an outcry, it will cook my goose."

He seemed to forget Roundup Rube for the time. Pressing the point of the keen knife against the covering which served as the back wall of the lodge, he cut a long straight slit, dodging with it all the caution and silence he could command.

More than half expected to hear an explanation or an outcry from the girl, but in this he was happily disappointed. Not a sound came from within the lodge.

After waiting a moment, he crept slowly in, not daring to approach a girl in a whisper. It was dark within the lodge.

When he had fairly passed through the opening, he began to search with his hands. Suddenly he touched something soft and warm, and, with a thrill which made all other fingers chapped by cold and trembling ones.

Hed found Little Bees.

He did not say a word toward the opening; he could escape from the lodge without arousing a suspicion, they might get away easily.

But just as he was about to creep forth, a startling thing occurred. His head and shoulders were thrust in at the opening, and some one was creeping slowly into the lodge.

Who was it?

The moment was fraught with deadly peril!
"That shows you are not acquainted with Round-up Rubie."

"Their best men will follow till those ponies are recovered, as you have seen," said Chris. "It's the way we do things here."

"Rubie will give them a long chase. I reckon that's the reason why we have not seen anything of him, although I had not thought of it before. He is keeping the red trailers at a hot pace, and he'd give them time to escape Old Rubie knows his size!"

"So, trusting to Chris Comstock's judgment, they rode out upon the plain in the broad glare of dawn."

They had ridden about four miles when Chris, who had been gazing back toward the mountains, uttered a quick exclamation of surprise and dismay.

"By Jove! we are dogged!" he cried.

"I was afraid of it," said Con. "How many are there?"

"I am unable to make out but three. It is probable there were not horses for more."

When they had ridden farther, Chris observed:

"Ranged if I see those red-skins anyway.""Whites!"

"Reckon,"

"They are following you!"

"Sure,"

"Then when they must be Black Brad and his men!" exclaimed Little Bess, in alarm.

"I hear them more than the Indians."

"That is good news, I care! I believe!" cried Conrad, after perusing the three figures in pursuance.

"That explains why we are pursued," declared Chris. "Those men do not ride Indian ponies, and it is my opinion that they are not with the herd Old Rubie stampled on.""

"Well, we can hope," added Con. "For then if they press us!" grunted Con. "We are both armed, for I have this rifle that belongs to your partner."

"And Rubie's rifle is a good one. He will not carry anything but a superior weapon."

It was plain the three outlaws had decided to "press the game," for they were overtaking our friends rapidly. Indeed, Bessie was eager to hurry on, but Chris told her not to be alarmed.

"I will give them a little set-back when they got too near," he said. "They will learn to keep their distance, and we cannot afford to use a doubled hardy browned horse by rushing him beneath this escorting sun."

When the outlaws had approached as near as he wished them to, Chris fell back, allowing the others to ride on in advance. Then he stopped his horse and signaled for the outlaws to turn about.

Their answer was a shout of derision.

"With," muttered Chris, "it is plain I have to teach this dodge. It may be pretty severe one, for I cannot do fancy shooting at this distance.

Throwing his rifle to his shoulder, cocking it as it rose, he touched the trigger.

There was a small splash in the water, and the clear white-click of crack of a Winchester."

The outlaws, who was fast as a rabbit, saw one of the outlaws start and reed in the saddle. The man did not fall, but it was plain he had hit this one.

Uttering a clear, ringing yell, the young ctitian wheeled his magnificent horse and galloped after Conrad and Bessie.

"I marked one of them," he laughed, as he reached the others. "I scarcely believe they will be so anxious about overtaking us after this."

Looking back, it was seen the three men, still mounted, were gathered close together.

"Two of them were black this time of the third," said Chris. "I had no desire to kill those fellows, but that distance was too great for me to attempt to wing him. I was forced to fire straight at him and let it go at that."

Little Bess was transferred from Old Rubie's horse to the side saddle, although she declared Conrad seemed reluctant to allow the precious charge to leave his steady steeds. Having a mind to give amusingly to a noble steed not seeming to mind the saddle, she lay down on him as rapidly as possible.

For some time the outlaws remained where they had halted after Chris Comstock's shot, but finally they moved on. The pursuit once more renewed. However, they did not press our friends very closely, plainly to avoid losing what they had not paid.

"They have settled down to dog us across the desert," said Chris. "They are going to watch for a chance to get in their work."
Cowboy Chris, the Desert Centaur.

entered the grove, or they have sunk into the ground. I cannot understand it, and it gives me a feeling of uneasiness.

For several moments he was silent, then once more he spoke, his thoughts aloud.

"What ought I to do, and what is this man who calls himself Monima? That is another puzzle for you, Chris. I don't mean his name, but he is a friend of Vincent's. Beside must not dream how he has come in the world. I know nothing about it in her presence, and I think there is no danger of the man speaking of it. If I say anything, it will only be to you, for you are the only one able to understand his story.

"I believe Vincent is in love with Little Bessie, for I have seen it in his eyes. Well, I do not wonder. She is sweet and innocent. Even I have loved her, possibly I might have learned to love her, but I have held love out of my heart now for seven years. I have been the tools for something tells me they were made for each other, and I want no second disappointment to make me bitter and cynical. If I see she cares nothing for Vincent, then—"

"Well, what then? Love is not a thing that will come at one's bidding. I might not love her after all. She is a dear little creature for whose sake I would make any sacrifice, but that is no reason why I should desire to make her my wife. My wife! Ha! ha! Ha! I will not marry for years—if ever. I am beginning to taste the sweets of a rolling life, and I shall not settle down for some time to come!"

Once more carefully surveying the open plain and the surrounding hills of the outlaws, he turned back into the grove. He found the trio gathered around the little fire.

"I shall keep your eyes open for the Border Hawk," cautioned Chris. "The coveys are pretty scarce, and I can see nothing of them.

"Instantly Monima spoke up:

"I have you when you entered the grove. The moment you were within the sight of the three, you turned to the right and rode as if Satan himself were after thee. I did not watch to see what became of them, but I can see no one's figure in the plain," said Chris; "although I cannot understand the man.

"By getting out of your sight they can make movements of which you know nothing. Probably they mean to deceive you in some way."

"That must be, but they will not succeed if we keep our eyes open. I am going back to the edge of the grove, and you must not relax your vigilance for a moment. If by any chance Black Badger should get the best of us, I should be ready to die of shame and rage."

Carried by the young cowboy returned to his watch.

Fardam and Conrad were discussing how they could be separated. Beside was placed on the blanket spread beside the fire, but there was a freshness to his face that almost caused him to forget the constant watch. Pardam Monima's face. Sure! The man was almost an exact counterpart of Black Badger, but Beside was the smaller man, and he stirred uneasily.

"You're not understanding with your friends, Conrad looked after the horses, Monima assisting him in this. The young man was de-lighted at the prospect of being away from the mules which was forced on Little Bessie, although she protested.

"You must eat it, Besie," said Conrad, softly.

"Remember, you must keep your strength as much for our sake as for your own.

"But what will you eat?"

"We shall probably be able to kill some game with the coming of day, for we are now in a fertile section. The desert is passed, and here game abounds."

After a time he succeeded in inducing her to eat.

It now was Pardam Monima's turn to secretly watch the girl. She seemed to fascinate him. As she stood beside him, not appearing to notice how she shrunk from him. With some difficulty he succeeded in drawing her into conversation, although he was talking about the greater part of the talking. Gradually he led her on to the topic of the young stranger, and she confided in him. At this, a shadow crossed her face."

"My mother is dead," she replied.

"Do you remember her?"

"Yes, a little more than two years of age when she died. I cannot remember nothing of her."

"Does your father often speak of her?"

"Strange!"

"Strange?" With a peculiar look. "I do not understand how it is strange. She is dead, it makes him sad to speak of her—it makes a dark cloud come over him. Sometimes I used to ask him to tell me of her, but he would always put me off. I did not know why. Once he asked me to tell him how it distressed him, I was ever after careful to give him back the answer in such a way that he could not hear me."

"He snapped suddenly, and sat herself for having spoken so much, but he still left her on.

"Have you often visited your mother's grave?"

"No, answered, sharply.

"Never! How is that?"

"I know not what it is. Sometimes papa talked strangely; it seems he said her grave was in his heart. I could not understand him. There she was buried.

After talking with the girl a few seconds longer, Monima arose and beckoned Conrad aside. When they were both easy a co-ey-shot of the girl, the bearded man said:

"Vincent, I have something to tell you—something that concerns that girl back there. The very girls we were separated I met her father."

"Well?"

"His name is Pike, and Old Blossom is his brother. Blossom was with him, and also were this young cowboy and his sharpen-eyed companion. Pike took love for some one else—a man to whom he was almost devoted. That child's mother yonder thinks her mother is dead. Well, she may be, but, if so, the girl's father knows nothing about it. A man cannot desert his husband but abandoned her child to fly with an unfriendly love. That man must have looked like me, for Pike thought I was the father. She thought him then, but since talking with the girl, I have changed my mind. Anyhow, he forced me into a duel."

"A duel?"

"Yes, we stood face to face, armed with our revolvers. I knew he meant to have my life, and I was not ready to die, for, I too, have a mission. I'm sworn to perform. In a duel, and I am not his life or mine, and being forced into the affair, believed it right to defend myself. Therefore!"

"Killed him?"

"Perhaps so. At least, I dropped him in his tracks. He was so excited he fainted, and when I saw him fall, I knew I must resort to strategy if I escaped. Therefore, I fell also, and when they were examining his injuries, I arose, sprang on my horse and dashed away."

"Conrad drove back from Monima, uttering an exclamation of horror.

"If you have killed her father, he cried--if you have killed her father."

"But words failed him.

"During those moments they had not one glance toward Little Bessie. Suddenly they were startled by hearing her utter a shrill cry as if she wanted to see in the arms of a strong man who was bounding toward Pardam Monima's horse. Before they could make any movement one of the animal the picket pin from the ground, flung the girl across her horse with uncouthly on creature."

With a wild yell of exertion, Black Badger struck his spurs into the horse's sides and plunged toward the southern border of the grove, carrying a semi-conscious captive with him.

The dove had fallen into the talons of the Hawk once more.

CHAPTER XVII.

In some manner the outlaw had crept into the group without being seen, and when Monima called Conrad, he did not hear. Black Badger had never had so good an opportunity as he had been looking for. With the daring of a desperate man, he sprang upon the girl and carried her to the horse. As the Border Hawk leaped upon the horse's back, Pardam Monima threw up his right hand holding a revolver. Conrad saw the move and knew the young man must die.

"Stop!" he screamed. "You may hit the girl."

He thrust Pardam's hand upward just as the weapon exploded, and the bullet went whistling high over Black Badger's head. With another yell of defiance, the outlaw disappeared with his captive.

The two men faced toward the horses, but before they could reach them, Chris Comstock, in a片刻, no question of taking him, but the chief had found a way to

Like a cyclone the black horse and its rider disappeared.

The rosy light of dawn was in the East; a sweet, solemn, solitary, noble as the dawn of another perfect day was about to be born.

Southward, south, Black Hawk dashed out upon the plain, moving fast toward his far fair captive. His bearded lips parted to give a shrill laugh. He could not hide in; they knew not that in it could almost to the grove without being detected. If they the other hawk. For them, Oh, they need not bust against Black Badger.

Looking over his shoulder, he saw Chris Comstock come bursting from the grove, mounted on the black horse. Man and horse seemed as one, and a fine picture they made as they dash-

Out the grove. The Chief: Great Scot! I think your wrong critter, I thought I had that horse."

Monima's horse was nearly the same color as that belonging to the young cowboy, and the chief had his horse in the shadow of the trees.

For a moment the man had dropped the very branch of the borderer, speaking the name of some person of education, but the rogh landing, he resorted to use when.

Bitterly Black Badger blamed the lucky for his error.

"On that horse I'd be able to "heaped" him, if I'd have done it even. They critter had been useless, but I was able to deny it, for I knew that in the dark I had some use for the guard of any one.

As it in answer to his question, two men and three horses seemed to rise up out of the plain. They were Bad-eye and Uké Ike. They uttered yells of delight as they saw their chief had been successful, spurring to join him when he was allowed to the left to avoid the figures near.

"Harry, boss!" yelled Ike, as the two reached their chief. "Gimme the gal and let me fas-en her ter this yer loose."

Black Brad shook his head.

"Let me see your critter, A'll shift fer this horse or rest if I'm too hard pressed. You twail fer her. If we can reach the yellow in time, I made me mistress in houses, though I dunno what this amnulkey king from. Reckon it's er place to ride.

With his own horse as a led-animal, the outlaw chief forged ahead, his two satellites falling back.

By this time the sun was creeping up in view.

Suddenly Cowboy Chris was pressing after the captor of Little Bessie, determination written on his face.

Still further back came another horse bearing a double burden. The animal belonged to Con-

Riding out, and his chief, and he never don't, he apt ter knock us out. He kin shoot, you bet!"

"No."

"Then I've got you."

"I am afraid the fire at the determined Cowboy, till at last Chris was seen making motions as if he meant to return to burial."

"Don't dare him!" snarled Ike. "I don't want ter get an

"But you bet he'llter cruise us?" cried Bob.

"Spur up! spur up! I don't want ter get another

Black Brad had forced quite a little scheme. There is no knowing if we take him, but the chief had found a way to
Believing it meant life or death, the outlaw made a fierce effort. But he was no match for the infuriated young cowboy, and Chris hurled the charge and felled the ground with such violence that Hawk was stunned.

"Give me the cords and I will make him fast," said Chris.

CHRISTIAN VII

AS UNLOVED MYSTERY

Old Jim Pike, sometimes called Round-up Rube, was a cross of a man, as the saying goes. He was always in trouble, and so was his horse. But this man seemed to be in more danger than usual.

"Ain't you gentry, Rube?" he said. "I ain't no gentleman." But Round-up Rube came rushing up a few moments after the Border Hawk had been made secure.

"Hawke, Chris, lads!" shouted the old fellow, as he leaped from the sled, a fierce look in his eyes. "Have you seen my parson?"

"It's you enough! I wasn't jest arin' ye!" cried the old man. "I'd got away from the parson; I'd got away from Miss Beebe all right, and got up on a little hill and called. I see they're comin'; I ain't got with them yet, but I hope they do me no good and I'll get away and they won't find me."

With a few words, the old man explained:

"Wain, we've done with this warrant," said Rube and explained the outlaw's body with his foot. "I reckon he'll steal any more guns.

By this time Little Ben was on her feet and eager to go, and the latch was opened, and the black buggy was driven along.

The fat landlord was dancing with delight.

"Oh, das vos some signs vor some eyes!" he laughed. "I see the parson and Miss Beebe all right and got up on a little hill and called. I see they're comin'; I ain't had with them yet, but I hope they do me no good and I'll get away and they won't find me."

"Take me to papa!" cried Benicia.

Hawke led the way, and the girl followed, leaning on Chris Comstock's arm.

Old Jim had heard the sounds and was coming to meet them, for all of his wound.

"Old man," said Chris, "we've brought back your child, as we promised." Then father and daughter were clasped in each other's arms, the parent quite forgetting his injury.

It was an affecting meeting.

Old Blossom and Round-up Rube came bearing the bedraggled Benicia. As the bed was placed on the ground, Jim Pike caught sight of it and uttered an examination of amazement.

"Hy-Ahaa!" he cried. "I'm a benicia!"

In another moment Benicia's outlaws' bullet had struck her down, but, seeing he could reach the timber, he still pressed on.

Before the grove was reached he could hear the third—third of the cowboy's horse, and knew Chris was pressing him hard. He looked to his revolvers, and prepared to use them the instant he let the saddle.

The timber was reached.

At that very instant a figure leaped out before the outlaw, and his horse was brought by a bullet through his heart, an instant possession of the gun. The bullet struck the pine, and with every moment the filling pursuer was shortening the distance between them. As he reached the Border, almost forlorn he could see the deadly glean in the eye of the man on the horse.

He dropped the horse, and began to draw rain and make battle on the open plains, using her the time she had for protection from his bullets with which she was loaded, but, not being able to reach the timber, he still pressed on.

The sharp crack of two revolvers sounded through the grove.

There was a moment's silence. After a sufficient length of time for the survivors to return, and hearing to sound, Chris, Rube and Old Blossom hurried to the spot where the dead had taken place.

They found both men lying dead on the ground, revolvers clasped in their right hands.

"Whatever black bird's crime against Hy-Ahaa!" was all Chris said, "it will forever remain an unsolved mystery to us."

The crowd was arranged, and the friends watched the two deadly foes as they walked away together. Hawk's hands still being bound, he was led into the timber, and the little party sat down to listen and wait.

The ghostly tine of the voice of one then the other, Old Blossom soberly declared:

"I believe they were brothers!"

The entire party turned their faces southward, and they were not molested on their journey back to the "Wild Horse."