BUFFALO BILL'S DESPERATE DOZEN
OR THE RAIDERS OF ROUND-ROBIN RANCH

Overhead flew the eagle, bearing aloft that shining skeleton. Cries of fright broke from the men; but Buffalo Bill only laughed. "It must be a joke," he said; "see!"
Buffalo Bill’s Desperate Dozen;

OR,

THE RAIDERS OF ROUND-ROBIN RANCH.

By the author of “BUFFALO BILL.”

CHAPTER I.

BUFFALO BILL’S MISSION.

Buffalo Bill drew rein and looked across the seve.

prairie at the group of low buildings of the Mossbank

Ranch.

Behind the buildings the hills rose, towering farther

on into small mountains.

Bunches of cattle were to be seen here and there, and

close by the buildings some swiftly moving horsemen

that he knew were cowboys.

As he thus sat, picturesque on his horse, the sunlight

tfalling on his splendid head of long hair, he presented

a most attractive picture, for the great border scout was

one of the handsomest of men, tall, well-proportioned—

an ideal specimen of physical manhood.

Presently he took from a pocket two letters, and read

them.

The first ran:

“My Dear Cody: You will find conditions particularly

perplexing and troublesome at the Mossbank Ranch, and

dangerous also. Cattle have been rustled by thieves, and

I understand that many lives have been lost. You are

hereby directed to look into it. Enclosed you will find a

letter from Sir John Culberson, which will give further

particulars. He is the owner of the ranch, and is an

Englishman not now in this country.

“With highest regards, I am, my dear Cody, your

friend,

J. C. TRAVIS,

“Colonel, Commanding the District of Dakota.”

The other letter was from the Englishman, Sir John

Culberson, and had been transmitted by Colonel Travis.

It was addressed to Travis:

“COLONEL J. C. TRAVIS, Commanding the District of

Dakota.

“My Dear Sir: I feel called on to direct your attention

to the cattle-stealing that is going on at the Moss-

bank Ranch, and which is proving a great loss to me, the

owner. My son is at present the ranch foreman. I can
get no satisfactory letters from him, but from another

source I learn that cattle-thieves have recently run off

over five thousand head of cattle, none of which have

been recovered. There is a good deal of mystery about

it, which hampers him. He wrote me that he is unable
to discover who the thieves are, or how they work. It

is reported, however, by the commander of the Canadian
Mounted Police that a big bunch of cattle bearing my brands were shipped from Moosejaw, on the Canadian Pacific Railroad, less than a month ago. Who shipped them, and got the money for them, I cannot yet discover. You will confer a great favor if you can do something to protect my interests within the district covered by your authority.

Respectfully yours,

"SIR JOHN CULBERSON,
"Proprietor of the Mossbank Ranch."

These letters will show at once the condition of things at the ranch which now lay before Buffalo Bill. Cattle were mysteriously missing—stolen, it was said, and the thieves could not be discovered, nor could the thieving be stopped.

Having read the letters, Buffalo Bill returned them to his pocket, set spurs to his horse, and rode on. His approach to the ranch created something of a stir of excitement, as he observed.

He saw cowboys galloping about with increasing haste. Then a slight figure, mounted on a magnificent roan horse, came galloping forth.

"I believe I have the pleasure of meeting Buffalo Bill?" said this rider, drawing rein in front of the scout. Buffalo Bill regarded the speaker closely. He saw a lithe young man, of slender build, and rather thin, pale face, who sat his horse with elegance and ease. The face of this young rider was unmistakably English.

"And I believe I have the pleasure of greeting the son of Sir John Culberson, foreman at present of this ranch?" returned the scout, lifting his big hat and smiling amiably.

"Yes, that is true," said the youth. "And I welcome you to Mossbank Ranch."

The speech and manner were gracious, yet something in them struck the scout as affected, or suspiciously false. Young Culberson turned his horse about and rode now at the scout’s side, toward the ranch-houses.

"I had a letter from my father, Sir John Culberson, intimating that the colonel of the district would probably send some men here, and only yesterday one of my employees brought word that you were the man. I cannot tell you how pleased I am to have your assistance at this time."

"And I am pleased to be here," returned the great scout, studying this youthful rider, who puzzled him in more ways than one.

"You want enlightenment first, of course," said the latter.

"Yes, naturally."

"You shall have it. I hadn’t been here a week when a big bunch of our cattle disappeared. They were being held by a single cowboy over on the Lenoire. The cowboy we found dead, and the cattle gone."

"And you have not recovered them?"

"Not likely to, it seems."

"There were other losses?" questioned the scout.

"Two weeks ago another big bunch was stolen; and last week another."

"Both were held in the same way?"

"In the same way, but not in the same place. The cowboys were found dead, and their herds were gone."

"You trailed the herds?"

"We tried to."

"The country must be difficult, if you couldn’t follow a large number of cattle?"

"It is; very difficult. We tried to follow them; but each time a sand-storm came up on the wide reaches of the Salt Plains, and the blowing sand and dust covered the tracks. We could do nothing."

"And are doing nothing now?"

"Only waiting."

He smiled. The loss of the cattle seemed not to set heavily on his mind.

"But another trouble has come now," he continued. "The cowboys at the ranch seem to be in a mutinous mood."

"What have they done?" the scout asked in surprise.

"Nothing, openly; but I can see them muttering and talking. When I go up to them they stop talking, and as soon as they can they move away."

"Do you suspect some of these cowboys of belonging to the cattle-thieves?"

"Frankly, I do."

"Ah! Then perhaps we have a point to work from!"

"I think we may have."

"Is there any cowboy you wish to name?" the scout asked.

"Jonas Berl, the acting foreman, is the chief one that I suspect."

"The foreman! That is bad. You haven’t thought to dismiss him?"

"Not yet."

"I must see this foreman. What sort of a man is he?"

"Very bull-headed and stubborn, and very annoying to me."

"Why didn’t you dismiss him at once?"

"I was waiting to hear first from my father. I have written to him about it."

"I’ll see this foreman as soon as we reach the ranch. He is there?"

"Yes, he is there. You can see him now, sitting on his horse out by the corral gate."

CHAPTER II.

THE ROUND-ROBIN.

Buffalo Bill gave a close scrutiny to that horseman as he rode nearer.

When he arrived in front of the ranch-houses, this man
rode to meet him, and was then introduced by the youth, who had given his own name as Sidney Culberson.

Jonas Berl was the typical cowboy, lean and gaunt, his face tanned to a deep brown by wind and sun, his hair and mustache long; while his flannel shirt, and his leather overalls, called "chaps," were such as cowboys wear.

 Though his face looked gaunt and hard, his blue eyes were good, met the beholder squarely, and spoke of intelligence.

 On the whole, Buffalo Bill was rather impressed by the qualities of Jonas Berl, who was a better-looking man than he had expected to see; and he held out his hand to the cowboy foreman, who gave it a firm clasp, as of man to man.

 Some other cowboys came riding up, as if drawn by curiosity.

 "We'd like to see you in the house, Mr. Culberson," said Berl, a flush coming to his tanned face and an uneasiness to his manner.

 Young Culberson gave him a quick, sharp look.

 "Very well," he consented.

 "And him, too," said Berl, indicating the scout.

 Buffalo Bill swung out of his deep saddle, tied his horse to a post of the corral, and went with Culberson and Berl into the ranch-house.

 As he did so, he took some note of its appearance, finding it a widely extended series of low buildings set in the midst of the flat plain, with the near-by hills for a background. Close by it were stables, and corrals, and other out-buildings and enclosures, such as are to be found on the Western ranches.

 On entering the house the scout caught a glimpse of one or two women servants, who poked heads from windows and looked their curiosity. Also, he found within the house a man servant or two.

 Culberson led the way directly to a large, low-ceiled room, which held some shelves of books, and which was called the library.

 Here were a desk and some chairs and lounges. There was a rug on the floor, antlers and the heads of game animals on the walls, together with some weapons, two of them being modern sporting rifles.

 All this Buffalo Bill noted at a glance as he passed through the doorway, stooping because the door was rather low for him, though it was high enough to permit the other men to walk erect as they entered.

 Into this room followed the cowboys, who had gathered outside, nearly a dozen of them, all resembling in their attire and general appearance the acting ranch foreman.

 Buffalo Bill looked them over, and noted the same air of uneasiness he had observed in the face of the foreman.

 As for Culberson, his cheeks had flushed, and a feverish light was in his eyes, though he maintained an air of cool outward calm.

 Apparently, he suspected that something unpleasant would result from the entrance into the room of the uninvited cowboys.

 "They seemed to be nerves themselves for a disagreeable interview.

 It came at once.

 "Mr. Culberson," said Berl, taking from his pocket a written paper, "the boys has put on me a disagreeable duty, and one which I expect will git my discharge fer me instanter; but, jes' ther same, sense they ask me ter present this to you, I has to do so, and stands by it likewise, myself."

 He handed the paper to Culberson.

 As the latter glanced at it his face became red as fire and his light-blue eyes blazed with sudden anger.

 Then he broke into harsh and disagreeable laughter.

 "This insult for me!" he said, glaring at the men, and particularly at the foreman.

 He flung the paper to the scout.

 "Read it," he cried. "And say what should be done to men who so insult me?"

 The scout read the paper, which was as follows:

 "Mr. Culberson: We hates to say what is in our minds, and fer it we all expects to be turned adrift by you; but here is our say, live er die, come wet er come dry. And it is jest this: We thinks that you air the man yourself what run off them cattle, and we have some evidence in sayin' it. We think you're wrong, somehow, though we don't know how. You've been chargin' us with doin' that stealin'; and now we give it back to ye, and say that you air the man."

 The signatures were in the form of a round-robin; which is to say, they were arranged in a circle, so that no name should appear first and no man bear the brunt of the blame which this act would call down on them.

 Buffalo Bill looked at Culberson.

 The young man was leaning back in his chair and rolling a cigarette, which he now coolly proceeded to light.

 "Cody," he cried, nevertheless, unable to conceal his rage, though he tried to speak with an affectation of lightness, "what should be done to men who so insult the son of the owner of this ranch?"

 He laughed, and set the light of the match to his cigarette.

 "Cody," said Berl, facing the scout with determined air, yet with some uneasiness of manner, "what is writ there the boys believes. Mr. Culberson kin laugh about it, but they stands by it. They're ready to leave the ranch to-morrer, er to-day; but they stands by that writin'."

 "Of course, you can insult me," said Culberson, taking out his cigarette, "because I am one man against a dozen and cannot fight you. And you think I'm helpless, for
if you leave there is no one to run the ranch. But I shall discharge every man whose name is on that paper, if every hoof of cattle goes to the devil to-morrow."

He dropped back, laughing that strange laugh again, and, sucking at the cigarette, breathed the smoke through his nostrils as if he sought calmness in that way.

The great scout looked at Berl, the foreman.

"Berl, what ground have you for these charges?" he asked. "I was sent here by Colonel Travis, to investigate the loss of cattle from this ranch; and here I meet a strange state of affairs—the foreman and the cowboys accusing the son of the ranch-owner with stealing the cattle himself. That, of course, means that he had help, and that he and those who helped him murdered the cowboys who had charge of the cattle that are gone."

"Jes' so," said Berl; "it's a serious thing. One reason we have fer thinkin' it is that he"—he shook his finger at young Culberson—"has been gamblin' in the town and losin' money like water; and another is that a handkerchief, which we know was his, was found where one of the cattle bunched was rustled, and that at the time he wasn't here at the ranch-house, nor in the town. We've looked up them points. And we found a track there that was shore made by the heel of his boot. If he'll show you his boot-heel you'll see that it is rubber, and has in the middle a star and a crown as the stamp of the maker. Well, we found them marks as plain as print, in the sand; and if they ain't covered over we kin show 'em to you yit. Now——?"

"Stop there!" shouted Culberson, shaking with rage. "This is scoundrelly—this is cowardly. Do I wear all the boots that have heels like that?"

"No; of course not."

"That handkerchief I lost while we were out there looking for the trail, and——"

"Cody," interrupted Berl, "we're givin' you the facts. I reckon you want to understand the situation here jes' as 'is?"

"I do."

"We're tryin' ter make it clear to you. And now we're ready ter quit ther ranch. You're here, to do whatever you want to. There air other ranches where we can git work, and we stand ready to go. I reckon, really, after this, it wouldn't be polite and proper fer us to stay. So we serve notice that we're quitlin', and we git out jes' as soon as Mr. Culberson pays the wages that's comin' to us."

"I'll never pay you a dollar!" roared Culberson.

He waved the cigarette angrily.

"And if there is any law to protect a man from slander in this beastly, blooming country I'll have that law on you—every one of you!"

When he dropped back, after the outburst, he laughed again, hysterically, as if his nerves were going to pieces.

Buffalo Bill passed back to him the round-robin.

Culberson kicked at it, and it fell to the floor.

"Take it away!" he cried. "Do I want to keep an insulting thing like that?"

He straightened up in his chair, his eyes again blazing.

"You—you!" He shook his hand at Berl: "You are the scoundrel who did that cattle-lifting, and I know it; and you try to throw suspicion on me in this way! I don't doubt that half the men backing you know it, and were in with you. I'll have this thing investigated to the bottom, by competent men, and I'll see that every mother's son of you gets the penalty of the law for cattle-stealing and murder. You may fool Cody, who doesn't know you, and doesn't know me; but I see through your damnable scheme to prejudice him against me as soon as he lands here."

He seemed to want to leap at them, so great was his anger.

"And now get out of my presence—out of my sight!" he commanded. "You're dismissed from the ranch, every one of you whose name is on that paper; and as for wages, I'll see you hanged before I'll pay one of you a cent. Get out—clear out!"

Berl turned toward the door, his big hat in his hands; and the other men imitated his example.

"Do all of you stand with that scoundrel in this?" roared Culberson.

No one answered.

"Clear out," Culberson yelled, "before I'm tempted to shoot one of you. You are an offense to my sight."

They filed out of the room, leaving Culberson and the scout together there alone.

CHAPTER III.

Mysterious Culberson.

"What do you think of it?" said young Culberson to the scout, when the cowboys were out of the room.

"They are mistaken, of course; but honest in their belief."

"Do you think that?"

"It seems to me so. And if I were you, I shouldn't rest until I had sifted this thing to the bottom and cleared myself of even the imputation."

The face of young Culberson flamed again, and hot words were on the point of being spoken by him, which, with an effort, he choked down.

"You are here to look into this matter," he said, beginning to roll another cigarette with fingers that shook.

"When you find the guilty parties, you will see how impossible it is for me to be what those men say. Of course, I've gambled some in the town, and have lost money; but what's that got to do with it? In the name of Heaven, can't a fellow lose something at cards with-
out being accused of thieving and murder? Suppose I
did lose some money that way? It was mine to lose."
"What are your plans?" said the scout, ignoring this.
"I haven't any."
He began to light and smoke the cigarette he had
rolled.
"You intend to do nothing?"
"I don't see what I can do."
"You have no cowboys, I understand, now that these
men are going away."
"They'll not go. Didn't you hear Berl say they
wouldn't go until they got the wages due them? They'll
wait for that money, I tell you. I'll pay it when I'm
ready."
"But they won't do any work, though they may hang
round here; and, in the meantime, the cattle will drift,
and the cattle-thieves will have chances to get more of
them."
The statement did not disturb young Culberson.
"Let 'em drift," he said. "What can I do about it?"
"You are willing to lead me to the place where that
last bunch of cattle was rustled? I mean the place where
they found the handkerchief and the heel-track."
Culberson looked at him with eyes opening widely.
"Do you believe that rot?" he cried.
"I believe they found your handkerchief, and a heel-
track. Of course, the track was made by another man,
who wore boots like yours. I thought I'd begin my
search there. Perhaps I can stumble upon something
they have missed, or even find that cattle-trail which they
lost."
Culberson hesitated, then said:
"Well, yes, I'll go with you, of course, after we've had
something to eat. Just stay here while I go and see the
cook and give orders."
He departed hastily, through a side door opening into
another room.
Buffalo Bill arose and lounged to the window.
He saw the cowboys gathered by the corral fence in a
knot of excited talkers.
"A queer situation," he mused.
He heard Culberson saying something to some one
in the house.
A little later he saw a man leave the house, get a
horse from the stables, and gallop away.
When Culberson came back the scout inquired about
that horseman.
"Oh, that fellow?" said Culberson. "That was Jim
Long, one of the servants here. We're out of certain
things in the way of provisions, and he's going to get
them. We don't want to starve you while you're here."
Yet it seemed a queer thing to the scout, for the town
was thirty miles away. Ordinarily, as he knew, in mak-
ing a trip for provisions a light wagon was taken.
"Now we'll feast," said Culberson, with a gay laugh,
yet with a nervous smile and a nervous manner. "Really,
what I've been through has given me an appetite. The
scoundrels! To charge me with stealing my own cattle.
The absurdity of it only equals their effrontery."
When the meal was ended—and it was a generous one,
with courses and wines—the scout excused himself, and
went out of the house.
He saw Berl, the hard-visaged foreman, out by the
stables.
Berl smiled when the scout approached him.
"Ah, Cody," he said, "we're in a mess here, and no
mistake!"
"I think I'll hear your story again," said the scout.
Berl drew him into the stables.
"We're all on a strike," he remarked quietly, "as you
must know. You don't believe what we said in that
note to Culberson, and I don't blame you for that; I
wouldn't believe it myself but for the proofs. Only I
want you to look into it, and you'll find it true. The
youngster has been gamblin'. I was told of his losin' in
one night ten thousand dollars, at the Gayhead gamblin'-
hall over there in Stillwater. We found his handkerchief,
and his boot-track, as we said; and one of the men told
me that he heard last trip to town hints that Culberson
was seen with a big bunch of cattle at the railway-
station at Jackson's Hole, no more than ten days ago, and
he shipped 'em from there East. Now, of course, Cul-
erson has a right to ship cattle, when he does it above-
board, and makes an accountin' of it; but he was dis-
guised then, and was callin' hisself Payson, or some name
like that. But, in spite of the disguise, the feller that
saw him recognized him."
"You didn't mention that in your round-robin letter," said
the scout.
"No, we thought it best not to, as it was hearsay.
To other things we knew ourselves."
"Tell me just where that heel-track was, and where
you found the handkerchief."
Berl gave him an accurate description of the loca-
tions.
"Nobody in this country wears boots with such heels," he
insisted. "They're English make, and he was wearin'
'em when he come here, a month ago. So we know
we can't be mistaken."
"He might have been there, and made the tracks, and
still not be guilty."
"But he denies bein' there. I see you don't believe
the thing, Cody, and I don't blame you."
He took down a currycomb and began to card one
of the horses. Apparently he had no more to say.
"You are going to stay here on the ranch?"
"Till we git our money, and no longer."
When Buffalo Bill returned to the house he saw that
his absence had not pleased young Culer.
The latter tried to hide the fact, though, and said he was ready to ride forth.

So they set out, each well-mounted and well-armed; and the sullen cowboys saw them go.

They skirted along the base of the hills, and then swung out into the plains.

"Here the Salt Plains begin," said Culberson, "and out there is where we always lost the trails of the stolen cattle. A sand-storm will kick up there whenever the wind comes down from the hills very strong, and when the sand is blowing good and hard a man can't see a steer a dozen feet from him. The sand is light and fills the air, so that it's impossible to travel in a straight line without a compass, for all landmarks are lost sight of soon in the blur."

The sandy plain was a desolate and desert region. Ridges of sand-hills ran through it. Between these hills were valleys of shifting sand. At intervals coarse grass and shrubs grew, these forming little wind-breaks where the sand lodged, thus forming the beginnings of new sand-hills.

"You will see how easy it is to lose a trail in here," said Culberson, as he and the scout entered this cheerless area.

"The trail, not only of the cattle missing, but of the horses of the men who had tried to follow it, had disappeared in the shifting sands.

"The scout and young Culberson visited the place where, it was claimed, Culberson's handkerchief had been found, and also that where the incriminating boot-heel had left its mark.

Yet there, as elsewhere, the sand lay deep, and whatever had once been visible was now deeply buried.

The day was nearing its close, as the scout and the youth returned ranchward across the level wastes.

As they drew near the hills the keen eyes of the scout detected a form scurry into the shadows of some rocks there.

He drew rein.

"What was that?" he said.

"I didn't see anything," Culberson answered. "It must have been a wolf."

"No, it was a man!"

Buffalo Bill shifted his rifle and laid it across the horn of his saddle.

"There's an ambush there, Culberson," he said, "and I don't propose to ride into it."

CHAPTER IV.

THE ATTACK OF THE MASKED HORSEMAN.

When Buffalo Bill, thus warned by the keenness of his eyesight, drew back into the sand plains, some horsemen popped up out of the covert of the hills, and came riding toward him and Culberson, waving their hands as signals.

The scout rode a little farther back into the sandy area, and there drew rein as one of the horsemen advanced to reconnoiter.

"The fellow is masked," said Culberson, in apparent surprise, as he noted that the man had some kind of cloth or handkerchief covering his face. The scout had noted the fact as soon as the man appeared.

"There was an ambush there," he said; "and when we didn't ride into it, the rascals adopted bolder tactics."

"Are they going to attack us?" Culberson asked, with apparent uneasiness.

"It looks it."

The horsemen swung out in long Indian file, so that they rode several yards apart, one right behind the other. As they thus rode, setting their horses at a swift gallop, they began to swing round Buffalo Bill and his companion in the segment of a circle, Indian fashion.

The one in the lead, and a wild-looking figure he was, fired at the two horsemen out in the Salt Plains, his bullet throwing up a little spurt of sand just under the nose of the animal ridden by the scout.

Having failed to draw Buffalo Bill into the trap set for him at the base of the hills, these men were boldly attacking in the Indian style.

Indians of the plains, when they encountered a foe, rode in a circle thus round him, shooting at him, trusting to the speed of their ponies to keep him from successfully returning the fire.

As soon as the leader of the masked white men opened with his rifle, every one of them threw himself over on the opposite side of his horse, and with the body of the horse shielding him shot at the two men from under the necks and the bellies of the rapidly moving horses.

It was a rare exhibition of horsemanship, yet not a feat accounted difficult by Indian horsemen, nor by cowboys, who are as fine riders as ever have been seen in the world.

The scout lifted his rifle and sent a bullet at the leader of the masked men.

The horse of the latter was moving so swiftly and the distance was still so considerable that the horse ran on, seemingly untouched.

The scout now sprang to the ground.

"Culberson," he said, "we've got to make a stand here. It's their lives or ours, it seems; and we'll have to give them battle. Get your horse down."

A sudden fear seemed to have struck through young Culberson. His face had become a ghastly white and his eyes looked big and bright. Yet the riflemen seemed not to be shooting at him, but at Buffalo Bill.

Seeing the scout kicking his horse on its legs and so compelling it to lie down, Culberson did the same.

The outlaws were beginning to yell, as well as shoot, though so far their shooting had been harmless.

Buffalo Bill dropped down behind his prostrate horse,
using its body as breastworks. Poking his rifle over its back, he pulled trigger.

One of the horses racing out there four or five hundred yards away, dropped stiffly, and the rider shot over its head, landing so heavily on the sand that for a time he lay there.

“Shoot, and shoot to kill!” commanded the scout, speaking to Culberson. “It is their lives, or ours.”

But Culberson did not use his rifle.

The two horses were lying close together, and between them crouched the scout, so that both in front and behind he was protected by the bodies of the horses. Culberson had dropped flat on the sand, some distance away.

But he began now to work his rifle, firing at the circling horsemen; yet he shot high, and without result. They moved so swiftly, and kept themselves so well concealed, that they presented difficult targets.

Buffalo Bill soon brought down another horse.

A minute later he toppled over one of the masked men.

The day had been hot, and now down from the hills the cool wind of approaching night began to blow, in sharp puffs.

As if it had been stimulated by the rifle-fire, the wind increased quickly, and soon was whirling the sand until the sky became gray and the horsemen seemed but shadowy figures.

The masked and desperate riders drew in closer, that they might see the horses and man they were shooting at.

Culberson’s horse was struck. Leaping up, it raced away, vanishing into the gray mist of whirling sand.

The masked riflemen fired more rapidly at the scout, and drew in still closer.

Buffalo Bill dropped another from his horse, and brought down another horse.

Then, what was the most singular thing of all occurred, just as the sand-storm broke in fuller force.

A wild, unearthly scream was heard; and in the gray mist above them the skeleton of a man was seen floating, apparently suspended in that gray mist between the earth and the sky.

Buffalo Bill was so amazed that he stared at it, forgetting to fire at the horsemen.

Loud and frightened cries were heard among the masked riders, and the wild assault stopped, to be followed by the sounds of horses galloping away.

That wild, strange scream came again, from above.

Again in the hazy air the skeleton was seen, swaying along as if it were flying. The scream rang out; and then the skeleton was lost to the scout’s sight in the haze.

Buffalo Bill stared, dumfounded, at the spot where it disappeared.

The sounds of hoofs became fainter and fainter.

The murderous attacking force was gone.

Sure of this, Buffalo Bill turned his attention to young Culberson, who lay unconscious, struck by a glancing bullet, though the riflemen had not seemed to shoot at him.

The scout saw a stain of blood on the youth’s garments, where a bullet had struck, and at once began efforts to revive him.

The result of those efforts was as stupifying as anything that had occurred since the scout’s arrival at the ranch which he now called the Round-Robin.

It was the discovery that Sidney Culberson was a woman!

The discovery was bewildering. What did it mean? While thus puzzled, the scout heard, out in the swirling sand, a faint cry for help.

He listened, and located it.

Apparently one of the men who had fallen before his rifle-fire was calling for assistance.

That he might be able to find the place again, the scout stuck his rifle in the sand at Culberson’s head, and placed on it his coat, thus making a mark that he hoped could be seen even in the sand-storm.

The sand blew in unpleasant puffs, that filled his hair and clothing with sand as fine as flour, and at times almost suffocated him, as he set forth.

But the scout found his way to the spot where, as he had suspected, one of the outlaws lay, badly wounded.

The man’s face was ash-gray, from its coating of sand and the death-pallor that had come to it.

His mask had fallen away, revealing his features.

With a start of surprise the scout saw that he was one of the men who had come into Culberson’s room at the ranch-house when the round-robin petition was presented.

“Can I help you?” he asked, as he knelt at the man’s side.

He tipped to the man’s lips the metal whisky-flask he always carried for emergencies.

The man gasped, but some of the liquor was forced down his throat.

He opened his eyes and stared blindly up at the scout.

“Do you know me?” Buffalo Bill asked.

“I’ve got it, Jim!” he gurgled weakly.

“Yes?” said the scout. “What is it?”

“Got it here,” said the man, indicating his wound.

“I’m goin’ on the long trip, Jim. I oughtn’t ter goin’ inter the thing. Drop it, er——”

He coughed, and his voice trailed away feebly.

“Yes,” said the scout, hoping for some confession which would be of service; for he saw that the man was mortally wounded and was not to last long. “I suppose you know me?”

“Yes, I know you, Jim. Git out of it, says I.”

“But I’m Cody—Buffalo Bill.”

“Yes, I knows him, too; and he kin shoot. He gimme this.”
"Haven't you some message? You can't live long, you know. Haven't you some message, or confession?"

It was a strange scene; the scout kneeling there by the dying man, while the gray sand was slowly powdering him over into the semblance of a gray statue.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm goin' over ther—ther divide, Jim. Goodby, Jim. Git outer the business. 'Tain't healthy. It gimme this. Git out of it."

"Who was your leader?" asked the scout, speaking loudly, so that the man might be aroused and would comprehend.

But the man's spirit was slipping away. He answered in rambling words that had no connection with the question.

Then his eyes closed again, after a staring start as if he saw some strange sight above him; and death came as quietly and gently as if he had fallen asleep.

"I'll find out later who he was," thought the scout, as he took his way back to the point where he had left the wounded young woman. "I can exhibit his body at the ranch and learn about him, in that way, and no doubt a good deal that will lighten this mysterious case. It begins to look as if that round-robin was a conspiracy. This man was certainly of the party that presented it. Appearances indicate that after we left the ranch those cowboys followed us, tried to ambush us there at the edge of the hills, and then boldly attacked us out here, disguising themselves with handkerchiefs and masks when they did it. Perhaps this young woman can open up some line of information when she sees that dead man. Sorry I had to shoot the fellow; but it was his life or mine."

He walked on until he thought he had gone far enough, and then looked about.

The young woman who had called herself Sidney Culberson was not there.

CHAPTER V.

THE SKELETON IN THE NIGHT SKY.

The fact that he could not find Culberson, or, rather, the young woman, whom he had left wounded and lying on the sand, startled the scout, it was so unexpected.

With her disappearance had disappeared, also, the scout's coat, gun, and horse.

Buffalo Bill stood staring into the gray sand-mist, perplexed by this hint of treachery.

Culberson was not Culberson at all; or, at least, was not the young man represented, but was a woman.

Here was mystery, and a suggestion of treachery.

Who was this woman?

The letter from Sir John Culberson had stated that his son was at the ranch, and was its foreman. Where was this son of Sir John?

Were the cowboys also deceived? Apparently so, the scout concluded, as he recalled that round-robin letter. But if the cowboys were honest, what meant the finding of the wounded masked rider, who was one of the cowboys presenting that round-robin letter?

Buffalo Bill's head spun round almost dizzyly, as these things confronted him, all demanding solution at once.

"Perhaps I have missed the spot?" he thought, as he looked about, searching.

The sand was flying thickly. The near-by hills and the more distant sky-line could not be seen. The scout could not even see the dead outlaw he had left but a minute before.

He began to look for tracks, hoping that, though the sand was flying and drifting, tracks made so recently would still be uncovered.

But he saw that his own footprints were filled in almost as soon as they were made.

He had a bewildering feeling that in the obscuring sand he had gone in the wrong direction, and that the reason he could not find the woman, the horse, the gun, and coat, was simply because he had not returned to the place where he had left them.

This seemed almost proved, when, in trying to return to the dead outlaw, he could not find the outlaw's body.

In the midst of this confusion and uncertainty, with the conviction coming that he was turned about and lost, there sounded again that wild scream from overhead.

Looking up, Buffalo Bill fancied that again he beheld a skeleton figure float across the sky; but the flying sand obscured and made the vision indistinct.

If he had been superstitious, this thing would have troubled him. But he was sure the mystery had some very reasonable explanation, if only he knew what it was.

The blur of flying sand and the coming of night increased the scout's difficulties.

He continued his search for the woman, feeling that if he had missed returning to her by reason of the sand the fault was his, and that she might die there, for she was wounded.

But he could not find her; and he was troubled by the mental vision of her body being slowly covered and buried beneath the sand.

He redoubled his energies. Soon he was sure he was but wandering in a circle, uselessly; and, that in doing so, with night at hand, he was imperiling his own life.

"I don't wonder at the inability of the cowboys to follow the stolen cattle," was his thought. "It would have been a marvel if they had followed them."

This suggested to him that possibly the cattle had not been stolen at all, but had wandered away, after the death, or murder, of the herder, who had been placed over them, and that they had been lost after crossing the Salt Plains.

The scout now tried to return to the hills, to escape the flying sand.
Already, with the coming of night, the wind was
dying; but the gray-sand cloud still filled the air and
obscured the sky.

Buffalo Bill knew he was turned about and bewildered,
when he did not soon reach the hills.

He could not tell but that he was going away from
them, as he had no compass. Hence, when the hills did
not appear, he stopped his efforts, and camped down in
the sand as well as he could.

After an hour or two the sky became clear, and the
stars shone out, the wind having fallen long before.

It was easy now for the scout to get a correct course
and follow it, by observations of the stars.

He headed toward the hills. When he saw their out-
lines before him, and noted a familiar landmark, he
skirted their base until he came to the point where he
and the woman had turned into the sand plains.

In this manner he found his way back to the spot where
he had left his horse, his gun, and coat.

The gun and coat were there, showing that in his first
attempt to find them he had gone wrong in the dust-
cloud; but the disguised woman and the horse were gone.

There was no use to search for them in the night.

With his coat and rifle, Buffalo Bill turned back to the
hills.

As he did so, he became aware that mounted men were
there.

He was seen by them before he could retreat, and they
hailed him.

One of them was the acting ranch foreman, Jonas Berl.
Berl rode out to meet the scout, as the latter now ad-
vanced.

“Oh, is that you, Cody?” he called.

“Yes,” the scout answered.

“Where’s your hoss?”

“He wandered away in the sand-storm.”

“And Sid Culberson—who’s he? He went with ye?”

Apparently, these men did not know that “Sidney Cul-
berson” was a woman.

Soon the scout was in the midst of the horsemen, and
found that all were cowboys of the ranch, under Berl,
and that they had come out there professedly to watch for
cattle-thieves.

“Sense we ain’t any longer workin’ on the ranch, we
thought we’d try ter look a bit into this thing, and get
some proofs that we needed. Sense Culberson has left
Ye, and you don’t know where he is, we don’t mind
sayin’ that we was expectin’ ter watch him, fer we’re
shore he’s at the head of all this cattle-stealin’.”

Buffalo Bill wondered what these men would say could
they know of his discovery that “Culberson” was a
woman.

He was tempted to tell them.

Yet he hesitated, and did not, for really he knew very
little about these men; and to tell them ‘might be a
blunder.

“What’s yer plans?” said Berl.

“I thought of returning to the ranch, to get ano-
other horse; for I shall want to look for mine as soon as day-
light comes. Did you hear shooting out here?”

“We did,” said Berl frankly; “and that was another
reason why we come out. It’s a good distance from the
ranch-house, but we heard shootin’, and it seemed to
come from this way; but sense we’re out here we can’t
find nothin’ wrong.”

Buffalo Bill thought he wanted a look into the face of
Berl and these men as they talked; therefore, he sug-
gested that a fire should be built, saying that he was
hungry and would like to cook something, if any one
there had food.

A fire was built, and about it the men sat, talking and
smoking.

There were many things the scout wanted to talk about,
and he asked questions and conversed with these men,
wondering all the while if it could be possible that they
were the men who, disguised, had attacked him and
“Culberson.”

If so, they were good at keeping the secret. They
“wondered” who had done the shooting they heard, and
what it had meant. Not once was a word dropped, show-
ing that they really knew anything about it.

As they thus talked, Buffalo Bill again heard that wild
erscream from the sky.

Some of the men started up in alarm, when, overhead,
was seen a skeleton floating, borne apparently by an eagle,
or some other large bird.

Overhead flew the bird of evil omen, croaking, bear-
ing aloft that shining skeleton. Cries of fright broke
from the men. But Buffalo Bill only laughed.

“It must be a joke,” he said: “see?”

The scream of the eagle sounded again. Then, the
skeleton apparently held in its claws, drifted on, and was
lost to sight.

The men sat staring open-eyed at each other, their
faces ashy, their limbs trembling.

“It was an eagle, carrying a skeleton,” said the scout.

“Nothing to be frightened about.”

“I reckon you’ve seen that as a common thing?” said
Berl, almost with a sneer. “That was the skeleton of a
man, apparently, or of a boy, or mebbe a child; but
how’d an eagle git it, and why does the durned bird try
ter skeer people with it? Answer me them questions,
if you kin.”

Some of the other men were inclined not to believe that
it was a real eagle, or a real skeleton, but a specter of
some sort, and that seeing it thus over their camp was a
portent of ill.

“Somethin’s goin’ ter happen, and that before mornin’,”
one of them declared. “You can’t make me believe that
was real. How could even a big eagle carry a skeleton? And if it could, where would it git the skeleton? And why would it do it? No, that wasn't no eagle, and it wasn't no skeleton."

The men were excited, superstitious, and anxious. They kicked the fire asunder, to put out its light.

"We'll be attacked before mornin'," said the Jeremiah whose prophecies had already been so lugubrious. "See if we ain't. And I'll bet some of us will be wiped out."

"Who would attack you?" asked the scout.

"Why, the cattle-thieves, o' course. It was a fool trick to start a fire here, as I said when it was proposed."

He looked at the scout as if he distrusted him.

"You didn't have no queer thoughts of any kind when you said ter start that fire?" he asked, his voice quavering with suspicion.

The scout understood him; the man was questioning if the scout did not want the fire started so that enemies of these men might be brought upon them.

"Don't be foolish," he said, in answer.

"Well, you come out here with Culberson, and now where's Culberson? We don't know!"

The man dropped a hand to his revolver, to be ready if the scout took offense at this.

But Buffalo Bill only laughed.

"That skeleton and the eagle have turned your head," he said. "I'm no more anxious to have this party attacked than you are, as at present I'm a member of it, and as likely to get a bullet as any one."

"I move we go back to the ranch," said one of the men.

This accorded with the thought of all.

They were really half-afraid to stay longer there in the shadows of the hills, where the mysterious Salt Plains stretched so strangely before them, and they wanted to get away.

"Listen!"

One of them held up his hand.

"There she goes ag'in!" he said.

It was the distant scream of the eagle.

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CHAPTER VI.

FRIENDS.

When Buffalo Bill returned to the ranch-house with these men, he found there Wild Bill, Texas Jack, and old Nick Nomad, the latter mounted on that rack-of-bones horse he called "Nebuchadnezzar."

They greeted him warmly.

"Glad to see all of you," he said, "though I was looking for only Wild Bill to come here."

"It war jes' a chance, BUFFLER," said Nomad. "Me and Texas ther happened to stumble agin' Wild Bill over in Stillwater, and then we come on wi' him. Didn't know, 'fore he told us, that you war over hyar."

He cackled his glee; then called attention to his "wonderful" horse.

"Looky thar at Nebby, Buffler. J'ever see his like? Thar ain't his beat on this planet. He knows ye; shore he knows ye!"

The shaggy, heavy-headed horse was staring at the scout; and when the scout advanced and passed his hand over Nebby's neck, it did seem that the old horse remembered him.

Nomad's delight was unbounded.

"Wonderfullest hoss ye ever see, Buffler," he declared over and over.

"What have you found out?" Wild Bill asked the scout at the first opportunity.

"I really don't know anything, Hickok," was the answer. "But I'll tell you what I've seen and heard, and I'll see what you make of it."

They had walked away from the house, that they might talk unmolested.

"You know that I was sent here by the colonel, who had received a letter from Culberson, the Englishman, saying that cattle were being stolen in large numbers from his ranch; and that Culberson's son was here as the ranch foreman."

"I came here, and found, as I supposed, young Culberson. The cowboys accused him, by a round-robin letter, with having run off the cattle himself, in order to get money to pay his gambling debts. They claimed to have found certain evidences, one being his heel-track at a place near where the cattle were stolen, when he had claimed to be elsewhere at the time."

"I rode forth with him to try to find that track, and also to investigate other matters. We were attacked out in the edge of the Salt Plains by a masked band. One of these masked men I shot, and he was one of the cowboys who had accused the young fellow."

"Which shows," interrupted Wild Bill, "that in accusing him they were simply trying to throw dust in your eyes, so that you would not think them guilty; and afterward, in attacking you, they apparently feared you, and hoped to wipe you out."

"But listen," said Buffalo Bill; "listen to this! Culberson was wounded in that fight; and then I discovered that this supposed young man was a young woman!"

Wild Bill was for the moment too astonished to speak.

"Not Culberson?" he said. "Not a man, but a woman! Cody, that puzzles me. What do you make of it?"

"I was going to ask you that. What do you make of it?"

"I've got to think first. I don't make anything of it at all yet; it simply muddles me."

"And it has muddled me."

"Where is this wounded young woman?" asked Wild Bill.

"That I don't know. A sand-storm came up during
the fight. I went over through it to where the outlaw
I had shot had fallen, finding, as I said, that the supposed
outlaw was one of the cowboys who had made the writ-
ten accusations. The cowboy was dying. I spent some
minutes trying to get information out of him before he
died; and then when I went back and looked for the
girl and my horse, gun, and coat, that I had left there
the girl was not to be found.

"Scared, and slipped out!"

"I don't know: I couldn't find her; but I thought per-
haps the reason was that I had got turned round in the
sand-storm. Later, I found my coat and gun, but neither
the horse nor the girl."

Wild Bill whistled to indicate his amazement.

"About the fellow you shot, and thought he was an
outlaw? What have the cowboys here to say about
that?"

"I have hesitated to say anything to them about him
yet."

"He is out there in the Salt Plain?"

"He is dead, and his body is out there, I suppose."

"I'd tell them; so that they can get out and get the
body, or bury it. And I'd like to see what they'll say
about it now. There goes Berl. Why not tell him?"

Buffalo Bill called to Jonas Berl; and when Berl came
up he told him of the attack made by the masked men,
of the shooting of one of them, and of his discovery that
the fellow-shot was one of the cowboys of the ranch.

Berl's tanned face flushed strangely.

"It must have been Tom Jenkins," he said. "He's been
missin'. And I know what you're thinkin': that we
was the fellers that made that attack, with our faces
covered up; but you're mistaken, Cody. I didn't know
anything about it."

"Some of the cowboys might have been in it?" said the
scout.

"One was in it," said Wild Bill grimly; "as is proved
by the fact that he swallowed one of Cody's little lead
pills, and failed to survive the effect."

"Some of 'em might have been in it, besides Jenkins,
if 'twas Jenkins," Berl admitted slowly.

"You could guess who those cowboys were?" the scout
asked.

"Three or four of 'em has been pretty thick with Jen-
kins. If any of 'em it might have been them."

"Better tell the cowboys that one of their number is
dead out in the Salt Plains; and tell them why I didn't
report it sooner," the scout requested.

A clatter of hoofs was heard.

Berl looked up, and his face flushed again.

"Hello!" he said. "Here comes Sid Culberson!"

The scout and Wild Bill also saw "Sid Culberson," who
came riding toward them now, through the bright star-
light, mounted on the scout's missing horse.

The young woman who had called herself "Sidney
Culberson" wore the masculine clothing she had on when
the scout first saw her. Her face was paler than before,
as they saw when she came into the light, and her left
arm was held in a handkerchief sling. On the handker-
chief were some bloody stains.

She looked at the scout calmly.

"Mr. Cody," she said, "after I was shot out there you
seemed to have abandoned me. At any rate, when I
came to myself I found you gone; and, though I called,
I got no answer, probably because the wind carried away
the sound of my voice. I discovered that you had done
something for my wounded shoulder. But as I couldn't
find you, I took your horse. I got turned round in the
storm and much delayed. And now, when I arrive at
home, here you are ahead of me."

She looked curiously at Wild Bill.

The scout hesitated for a moment, as to the form he
should use in introducing his friend to this woman.

Then he said:

"Mr. Culberson, let me make you acquainted with my
good friend, William Hickok, better known as Wild
Bill."

The young woman's eyes opened a trifle.

Wild Bill lifted his big hat cavalierly.

"Pleased to meet you," he said, in a tone that was non
committal; but he eyed this masquerading girl sharply.

The girl turned her horse and rode on toward the
house; and there dismounted and entered.

"What do you make of it?" said Buffalo Bill to his
friend.

"Cody, I'm up a stump!" Wild Bill confessed. "I ask
for your enlightenment. That's a handsome girl,
though, as far as I could tell, if her face wasn't so pale
and her eyes a trifle bright. She can't be young Culber-
son, of course. So, who in the dickens is she? And
what has become of Culberson?"

CHAPTER VII.

SOME PLAIN WORDS.

The girl who was masquerading as young Culberson
sent Buffalo Bill's horse to the stable, and ordered an-
other to be saddled and bridled and left standing in front
of the door.

This was proof that she did not intend to remain long
in the house.

"Hickok, I think it's time to ask her some pointed
questions," said Buffalo Bill to his old pard, "and I'll re-
quest you to go with me, so that you may hear what she
says."

"Ride ahead," was the response. "I'm with you.
Somewhere, that woman fascinates me."

"Most pretty women do," remarked the scout, laugh-
ing.
“She isn’t particularly pretty,” said Hickok. “The mystery of what she is doing fascinates me. So, I’ll be happy to hear you question her. What are you going to say to her?”

“Come, and hear me.”
Together they entered the house.
They found her emerging into the big well-lighted hall, as if about to depart.

“Mr. Culberson,” said Buffalo Bill, “we’ve come to have a bit of talk with you.”
She looked up at him, as if startled, her eyes big and questioning; and they could see now how pale her face was.

“Yes?” she said. “I was just going to ride away again.”

“I saw that; and I thought we’d better talk over some matters before you go, in view of the fact that I am here really at the request of Sir John Culberson.”

With some apparent hesitation she turned into a room; and the scouts followed her in.

“What is it?” she said, when the three were in the room, and the door leading into the hall was closed.

Her face was very pale, which might have been due to the wound in her shoulder; but she drew herself up with a certain stern rigidity, and her eyes were bright and suspicious.

“Just this,” said the scout, almost bluntly, “I discovered when you lay wounded there on the Salt Plains that you are an impostor. You are not young Culberson; for you can’t be, as you are a woman. Now, what is the meaning of this?”

The blood rushed in a wave into her face.
But she held her ground, and was not as startled as they expected she would be.

“I suspected as much,” she said. “And how, what does it amount to—your discovery? I am not the son of Sir John Culberson, but I am his daughter. He had his own reasons for writing that I was his son, and for sending me here in man’s clothing. He has no son; but he wanted me to come out here and see how affairs were prospering. It is a wild country, filled with wild men. We thought I should be safer if I donned men’s clothing and passed myself off as a man. So your great discovery, Mr. Cody, resolves itself into just that. Sir John Culberson sent his daughter here, and she wears men’s clothing, and passes as a man, because she feels that she is safer while so doing. Does that satisfy you?”

“It ought to,” said Wild Will, who was pleased with her quick and spirited reply.

“Whether it does, or does not, you have heard the truth,” she declared. “I suppose you will feel called on to disbelieve it. That doesn’t matter to me. Only, I hope you won’t tell this to the cowboys. I request you as gentlemen to withhold this knowledge from them.”

She passed out of the room, and on through the hall to the front door.

“Was that a lie, or the truth?” said Buffalo Bill to his pard.

“By my soul, Cody, it sounded true; and she looked really handsome when she said it. I make it a rule never to disbelieve what any pretty woman says. And it really is reasonable. This is a wild country, and she is safer here by wearing men’s clothes and passing herself off as a man than she would be otherwise.”

They heard the girl leave the house; and soon after she rode away alone.

“The wound in her shoulder must have weakened her, but one would never know it,” said Wild Bill.

She passed from sight behind some of the outer buildings and disappeared.

Berl came to the scout as the latter and Wild Bill emerged from the house.

“Cody,” said Berl, “that cowboy who was shot was Jenkins, as I thought; at least, that’s the sure belief, as Jenkins is missin’. As soon as it’s light I’m goin’ to ride out there and look for the body, and then I can tell who ‘twas, if it’s there yet. Wolves may’ve got it, or the sand-storm may have buried it.”

As soon as it was light most of the cowboys, including Berl, had departed.

A few of them remained, and the servants were still in the house. The remaining cowboys kept out by the stables and the corrals.

The ranch was thus neglected, nothing was being done. Buffalo Bill installed himself and his friends in a room in the big house, the room to which he had been shown on his arrival there.

“It’s a queer state of affairs,” he said, speaking to his friends. “Here we are, practically in charge of the ranch. The girl foreman is gone, and so are most of the cowboys. And we are simply in a puzzling maze of discoveries that may prove not to be discoveries at all, or of no importance.”

“We’ll jes’ camp down hyar, Buffler, till there’s a turn in ther sitivation, and, in ther meantime, keep our eyes and ears open,” suggested old Nick Nomad. “Jes’ as I does, Buffler, sometimes, when I gits a b’ar holed up and can’t see him. I sets ther and waits fer ther b’ar to make a move, and then I meets it.”

Nothing happened throughout the day.

Night came, dark and gloomy.

“I think we’d better keep an eye on those fellows at the stables,” suggested Wild Bill. “We don’t know them, and they certainly are up to deviltry.”

“An’ I been thinkin’ ’bout ole Nebby,” said Nomad. “If anything shud happen ter that thar vallybe animile I dunno what’d become of this hyar pilgrim. I shore vallys him highly. And he’s out thar. Then men mout cut his tail off, ye know, and so splice his beauty,”
THE BUFFALO BILL STORIES.

His little eyes twinkled, for he considered this a joke. The "beauty" of Nebuchadnezzar was like the snakes of Ireland—non-existent.

The four pard's, Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill, Texas Jack, and old Nick Nomad, left the ranch-house quietly, in the darkness, and went out to the stables.

They found the cowboys there, sitting in a small room attached to the stables, which was used as a smoking and lounging-room.

Jonas Berl, the foreman, was speaking of the eagle and the skeleton when the scouts made their appearance.

The manners of the cowboys indicated uneasiness.

"Come in," said Berl, cordially enough; but Buffalo Bill thought some of the other cowboys were not particularly pleased.

Yet they made way for the scouts, who took seats with them.

Nomad fished out his old pipe, "borrowed" some tobacco of a cowboy, and began to smoke.

"Speakin' o' skillettin,'" he said; "did ye ever see my old hoss?"

He was interrupted by a roar of laughter, for Nebuchadnezzar was notoriously a "rack of bones."

"Waal, what is it?" he demanded, looking about.

"He's a smart hoss, and I was goin' ter tell ye 'bout ther time when Nebby come upon a skillett on a man over in Snake River Valley, and——"

He began to smoke again, as they continued to laugh.

"Waal," he drawled, "ef yer don't want ter hear about it I ain't keerin'."

"That thar skeleton wasn't flyin' about in the air?" said one.

"No. He was layin' on the ground, good and dead; and he war the skillett of an Injun what had been killed by another Injun."

They wanted to talk of the skeleton that had been floating round in the air, apparently borne by an eagle.

Suddenly there was an interruption, and a knock on the door.

"Is Buffal Bill in there?" asked a voice from outside.

"Yes," was answered.

"We'd like to see him."

"All right," said the scout, rising.

But the cowboy nearest the door rose and opened it.

Instantly there was a flash and a report in the darkness, and the cowboy staggered back from the door, shot through the heart.

There could be no doubt that the cowardly assassin had intended to slay Buffalo Bill.

Berl and some others, accompanied by Buffalo Bill and his friends, rushed outside, daring the danger.

They saw no man, and heard nothing.

But while they continued their search a patter of rifle-shots swept across the open space before the stables, and two of the cowboys dropped.

This sputter of rifles was followed by a volley, which, however, did no harm.

"Into the stables," shouted Berl.

Buffalo Bill caught up one of the wounded cowboys, and Wild Bill the other, and they ran into the room from which they had emerged, followed by a shower of rifle-bullets, that pattered against the door and the heavy timbers.

One dead man on the floor, and two wounded, made the little room look like a slaughter-pen.

Berl stood up, his eyes flashing.

"Cody," he said, "that first chunk of lead was meant for you, and Bill got it. Who sent it?"

"I don't know," was the answer. "But it was meant for me, sure."

"It sounded ter me like the voice of Culberson, made heavy and hoarse fer the occasion," one of the cowboys declared.

Buffalo Bill had thought that, also, but had not spoken of it.

"One thing is clear," he said, "and that is, they discovered when we ran that they had killed the wrong man; and that caused them to open fire on us, thinking to get me in that way."

He showed his coat and hat, where bullets had cut through, thus proving that the rifle-fire had been chiefly directed against him.

He did not talk further, but turned his attention to the wounded men.

Berl and the other cowboys assisted, as well as the scout's friends.

"I'd like to set my eyes on the devil that shot Bill," said Berl angrily. "That was coward's work."

Buffalo Bill was beginning to believe that Berl and those who stayed with him were honest and honorable; but that the other cowboys, who had separated from them, were not.

"The murderer ought to be captured," he said quietly; "and I think we ought to try for it as soon as possible."

"We're with ye!" said Berl. "Jes' lead on, and you'll find us backin' ye."

Buffalo Bill looked about the crowded room.

Himself and his friends, with Berl and the cowboys uninjured, numbered just a dozen.

"We'll make the effort," he said, "and right now, before the scoundrelly murderers out there have time to retreat."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DESPERATE DOZEN.

The report of a rifle, and the striking of the bullet against the stable, told that the men who had made their dastardly attack were still outside.
Bill Dineen, the dead man, had been wrapped in a blanket, and lay in a corner of the room; the wounded occupied the lounge that rested against the farther wall.

One of the wounded, Sam Martin, was not much hurt, his arm having been cut slightly by a ball.

"Tell ye what," he said, showing thereby heroic stuff. "I'll jes' open fire through the winder as lively as I kin, and fool 'em inter thinkin' that all o' ye air remainin' in byer. Under cover of it ye kin git out by t'other stable door, and maybe come on 'em in a way ter s'prise 'em."

It was a good suggestion.

The maker of it crawled with repeating rifle and revolvers to the small window, and opened fire, blazing away into the darkness, working the weapons rapidly.

Led by Berl and Buffalo Bill, the others slipped from the room, passed through a narrow passage, and emerged from the stables by a small door known to Berl.

The riflemen out in the darkness were replying sharply to the fire of the wounded cowboy.

Having located the riflemen, the desperate dozen charged them boldly, cheering and shooting as they charged.

The riflemen broke from their cover, made a dash, and gained the open door of the ranch-house, where, apparently, they had associates, who opened the door for them.

In this little skirmish Berl received a bullet-wound in his right wrist, but was as plucky as ever, and fielded his revolver with his left hand.

A blaze of rifle-fire came from the door of the ranch-house, and drove Buffalo Bill and his men back.

"We'll drag 'em out of there," yelled Texas Jack, his courage equal to any emergency.

Berl was as anxious.

"Surround the house," said the scout, "so that none can get away; and then we'll make a rush for the door."

There were but four men left for that rush, when the house had been surrounded.

To capture the murderers in the house, offered a solution of some of the mysteries which had annoyed the scout; and he determined to make the desperate attempt.

If the woman who had called herself Sidney Culberson was in there, she could be taken, and no doubt she could be forced to make a confession; and others might be captured who would talk.

That the scout's presence on the ranch was greatly feared had been shown by the attempt which had been made to assassinate him.

With three men—Wild Bill, Texas Jack, and Berl—Buffalo Bill advanced through the darkness toward the front door of the house.

They had a log of wood, with which they hoped to break the door down.

"Now, give it to them!" Buffalo Bill whispered.

He fired his revolver as a signal to the men who had been set round the house, and then he and his three comrades dashed for the door with the log.

They struck the door with such force that it was splintered and torn from its hinges.

At the same moment the men who had surrounded the house began to shoot and yell, and hammered with logs on the other doors, creating a wild confusion which was likely to make those within think the attacking force was particularly strong.

As the scout and those with him charged over the fallen door into the house they were met by a rifle-fire that tumbled Berl forward on his face, a bullet having grazed his head.

But the others rushed on, pistoling the riflemen, and crying out to all within to surrender.

The lights had gone out, and the house was in darkness, except for the intermittent gleams of spouting revolvers which gave but poor illumination.

After that first stand, broken by the rush of the desperate men led by the scout, the defenders fled.

Buffalo Bill and his companions heard them racing through the rooms and halls, and leaping through the windows with much crashing of glass and breaking of window-panes.

Buffalo Bill's assistants outside yelled and fired their rifles, and there was much confusion of running feet.

Then Buffalo Bill went down, stumbling over a body on the floor.

"There he goes!" he heard Texas Jack yell.

"Don't shoot!" Wild Bill was heard to shout. "I believe it's the girl."

But whether it was the girl or a man, she, or he, vanished, breaking through a door which the pursuers did not know about, and slipping thus out into the darkness.

The scout gathered himself up from the floor and shouted for a light.

There was nothing to be gained by headlong plunges in the darkness.

Finding a lamp by the light of a match, the scout lighted it.

On the floor was the body he had fallen over.

The man was dead; he had been one of the ranch cowboys, of the number that had withdrawn from Berl.

One other cowboy was found dead in the house, and one outside.

The others, wounded or not, had all escaped; and if the girl had been of their number she, too, had got away.

Nor had it been a bloodless victory.

Berl was wounded; and of the Desperate Dozen who had made that wild attack two had been killed.

But the scout had learned one thing: The cowboys of the ranch could be divided into two parties—those who had stood with Berl, and those who had withdrawn from him; and of the latter, it began to seem they must
have guilty knowledge of the mysterious thefts of the cattle.

At any rate, those cowboys had some good reason to make them wish to slay Buffalo Bill, the man who had come to the ranch to investigate the cattle-stealing.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MESSAGE OF THE SKELETON.

The battle at the ranch-house was hardly ended when the scream of the mysterious eagle was heard, and again it was dimly seen, with the gleaming white skeleton.

The appearance of this singular phenomenon at important times began to make the superstitious among the cowboys believe that it surely portended evil.

Some of them declared that it knew men had been killed, and was there because of it.

Others, even more superstitious, stated, in nervous tones, their opinion that it was not an eagle at all, nor was the thing seen with it a skeleton, but both were the queer shapes taken by some malevolent spirit, or ghost, whose going and coming could not be understood, but whose presence was certainly a thing to be shuddered at and feared.

Of course, Buffalo Bill and his friends, with the single exception of old Nomad, scoffed at these preposterous notions.

But old Nomad shook his grizzled head.

"I've seen and heerd many cur'us things, endurin' of my long life in ther mountains, Buff'er," he declared; "things which, if I should tell ye, you'd laugh at as reedic'lus. Yit I seen and heerd 'em.

"Onc', in ther Bitter Root Mountains, on a night about like this hyar, I heerd a sing'lar howlin'. I knows ther voices of about every animile an' bird that's ever seen in them parts, but it wasn't none of 'em. It seemed a woman screamin'; and a week later ther body of a drowned Shoshone squaw war found nigh thar in ther river. Now, what d'yer make of that?"

"Likely you heard the squaw when she fell into the water, or jumped in."

"But ther river war below me, and the sounds I heerd come from outer the air over my head."

"I should say, then, that what you heard was an echo of her screams thrown back to you by the rocky walls of the mountains, so that they seemed to come from above you."

The old man shook his head.

"You're that splendiferous in reasonin', Buff'er, that I admires you, but you ain't convincin' wuth a cent; that warn't any rocky mountain walls that."

"There was some reasonable explanation, you may be sure."

"Waal, ther only thing 't I could hit on, after a good deal of consideration, Buff'er, war that ther spirit of the woman screamed in the air after her death; er that some other spirit, knowing of her death, that it was comin', war tryin' ter warn her."

The eagle and the skeleton having disappeared, and the mysterious men who had taken refuge in the ranch-house having been driven to flight, the scout gave much attention to Belr, whose injuries were not as severe as was thought at first.

At the same time the scout was planning what further he should do.

The first thing, apparently, was to try to trail the fleeing men, in the morning.

To venture forth in the darkness would only subject himself, and those with him, to the danger of being shot from ambush.

Patrols were established about the ranch-house and stables, and the night was passed in constant expectation of an attack.

None came.

The morning dawned fair, with the promise of one of those blistering hot days which were so commonly followed in the late afternoon by sand-storms out on the Salt Plains.

Buffalo Bill, with his field-glasses, was sweeping the lighted prairies as the sun rose, when he saw, surprisingly near, the woman who had been in his mind through all the hours of the night—the woman who had called herself Sidney Cuberson, and wore men's clothing.

She was mounted, and had apparently advanced from the direction of the hills.

As Buffalo Bill scrutinized her through the glass, Wild Bill, who stood at his side, uttered an exclamation.

"That skeleton again!" he said. "And the bird carrying it!"

Buffalo Bill dropped the glasses and followed the direction of the gaze of his pard.

He saw a large bird, undoubtedly an eagle, flying from the direction of the hills so that it would cross near the ranch buildings.

The woman beheld the bird also. She was spurring her horse as if anxious to intercept its flight.

Nomad, who had stepped up, shouted:

"By ther great tarantulas, that feller's runnin' frum it; and I don't wonder! Ef I war out ther on ole Nubby that hoss couldn't fly fast enought to git distance between me and that thing."

"No," said Wild Bill, "that woman is riding to put herself beneath the bird."

The swiftness of the eagle's flight was so great that the woman had not accomplished her purpose when the bird passed over the spot for which she had been riding.

They saw her leap down.

Then a puff of smoke came from the rifle she carried.
She had fired quickly at the eagle, but with aim so true that the big bird lurched, and then, on sailing wings, slanted downward to the ground, striking heavily.

The woman did not remount her horse, but ran on foot toward the fallen king of the sky, carrying her rifle.

"A wonderful shot!" said Wild Bill, with admiration.

"Cody, I’m ready to take a back seat in shooting. That was a rifle-shot worth talking about."

“And now is our time to get to her, and capture her if necessary,” said the scout.

He ran from the room, the others running with him.

There was hurried saddling and mounting of horses.

Texas Jack joined them.

The four pardns rode away over the level lands toward the point where the mysterious woman had brought down the eagle.

As they did so, they were given another surprise.

She had built a fire, and seemed to be feeding it with sticks, which she was breaking up.

"By the Lord Harry," cried Texas Jack, "she’s burning the skeleton!"

Seemingly, that was what she was doing.

"Here goes to stop her, whatever she is doing!" cried Buffalo Bill.

He drove the spurs into his horse and raced at wild speed toward the woman.

Their rapid approach produced in her a flutter of agitation and activity. She thrust the remaining portions of the skeleton into the fire, and stirred up the fire to make it burn more rapidly.

Buffalo Bill shouted to her.

She turned toward him, lifting her rifle.

They were near now, so near that the scout and his companions could see the smile on her face; though to see that it was a smile which masked uneasiness, required a still closer inspection.

"Stop it!" Buffalo Bill shouted to her.

She lowered her rifle.

"What is it?" she asked, in apparent surprise.

They galloped up to her.

"What does this mean?" Buffalo Bill demanded.

"I don’t understand you," she said sweetly.

He leaped down, and with a lunge of his boot he kicked the fire asunder and scattered it.

As he did so he saw that the skeleton was a fake one, made of bits of light board, painted white with a crude whitewash.

The dead eagle lay near on the grass; to one claw was still attached a cord made of twisted clothing of some kind.

Evidently the skeleton had been tied to the eagle by that twisted string; and it had carried the shining thing about simply because it could not get rid of it.

The woman’s face was already hotly flushed, and her eyes filled now with even greater uneasiness.

“What does this mean?” Buffalo Bill demanded again.

“I don’t think I understand you,” she said.

“You had some reason for shooting that eagle and burning this wooden skeleton. What was it?"

“Mere superstition,” she said lightly. “I think it has brought me had luck. Everything has gone wrong since it made its first appearance. And now you hold me up just as if I were a highwayman, and make me, answer your silly questions.”

“We think you may be one,” was the scout’s blunt statement.

“Another thing,” said Nomad, “which is extremely rilin’ up my curiosity is: Why did yer lead them dad-blamed assassins last night, when they called up Buffler at the stable, and then shot dead ther man that answered fer him and opened ther door? It’s important that we shu’d know about that, seems ter me. I heard yer voice then, and I’m sw’arin’ ter it.”

She looked at him with contempt and indignation.

“Do I have to answer the fool questions of every fool that asks them?” she demanded. “Well, then, I wasn’t there, and I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.”

“I’m talkin’ erbout ther shootin’, last night, before ther fight at the ranch; erbout ther shootin’ when ther cowboy war killed in mistake fer Buffler. I’m believin’, in spite of yer in’cent face, that it war yer rifle that slung ther lead. Ef ther lead is still in that dead eagle, I’m goin’ ter dig it out and compare it with ther bullet that killed ther cowboy. And yer needn’t make vinegary faces at me erbout it, muther, fer I don’t keer fer ’em, nohow. You’re a female woman, I’ll allow, even if you have hogg’d out in men’s clo’es, but female women has got ter do right as well as other folkses.”

He stepped over to the eagle.

As he did so he looked keenly at the blackened bits of wood that remained of the wooden skeleton.

He stooped and looked closer.

“Buffler,” he cried “come hyar!”

Buffalo Bill obeyed.

“Looky hyar,” said Nomad, holding up a piece of the wood that had represented a thigh-bone.

It was the largest and least injured of the pieces of the skeleton. Most of the others were burned and blackened so that they seemed but charred sticks. This had not been badly touched by the fire, though if Buffalo Bill had not interfered just as he did it would soon have suffered the fate of the others.

What had attracted the old man’s attention, and which he now pointed out, was that there were letters, writing, on the flat surface of the wood.

Apparently these letters had been written with a lead-pencil, and where the fire had touched they could not be seen, or were well-nigh indiscernible.

The discovery was surprising and suggestive. The fact that the young woman had tried to destroy the
skeleton seemed to indicate that she knew of the writing and had tried to get it out of existence.

Buffalo Bill scanned the letters.

This is what he saw:

"We are walled in . . . at . . . and we . . . help."

The rest of the writing had been obliterated by the burning.

The scout's quick mind tried to piece out the sentences.

He spoke to Wild Bill and Texas Jack, who were looking at him.

"Nomad seems to have made a singular discovery here. There is writing on this wood."

He began to search among the other burned pieces of the skeleton.

Here and there he found the outline of a letter, or a word or two, but not enough to be of use in deciphering what he had first read.

He turned to the woman.

There was a strange look on her face, which he interpreted as a sneer of defiance.

"Perhaps you can tell me what this means?" he said.

He pointed out to her the writing.

"I'm sure I know nothing about it," was her answer.

"You did not know anything was written here?"

"No. How could I have known?"

Her face flushed red and her eyes snapped.

"See here," he said, yet spoke calmly, "we might as well have some plain words. We know, in the first place, that you are masquerading, and are not what you represent yourself to be—the son of Sir John Culberson."

"I've told you I am his daughter; and that as for my masquerading, as you call it, we thought there was good reason for it. I still think so."

Her manner was defiant.

"You shot that eagle, and tried to burn this wooden skeleton. The facts indicate that you knew there was a message on the skeleton, which you did not want seen, and you shot the eagle and sought to burn the skeleton to destroy that message. It looks that way. Perhaps you have a better explanation."

"I shot the bird just for the sport of it; which is to say, that I wanted to see if I could bring him down with my rifle. I fancied it would be a difficult shot. I burned the skeleton, because as I tried to explain, I had a superstitious feeling concerning it."

"You saw that the skeleton was tied to the leg of the bird?"

"I saw that, yes; but didn't understand it."

He looked at her sharply.

"Some one heard that voice last night at the ranch stables declare it was your voice disguised. Have you anything to say to that?"

"Except to deny it, and brand it as a foolish notion, I have nothing to say."

"You will pardon me," he added, "when I say to you that I think we must hold you until further investigations can be made. You know why I am here, and——"

"I know you are no gentleman!" she burst out.

"Anyway, we shall have to hold you; and I now ask you to go with us back to the ranch-house. Or, perhaps, you were going there yourself?"

She looked rebellious, glancing at her horse, which stood near, and at the prairies, as if she were estimating the chances for and against her if she made an effort to get away on her horse.

"You intend to hold me as a prisoner?" she asked sharply and with seeming indignation.

"We shall not be rough with you, and will give you all possible freedom," said the scout; "but we think we must keep you close. I am not satisfied with your explanation of the killing of the eagle and the burning of the skeleton. As you can see from the few words still readable, somebody calling themselves 'we' are in trouble; they say they are walled in. That has an ugly sound. They seem to have made an effort to get a message from their prison by writing it on that skeleton."

"A likely story!" she said, sneering again.

"It seems preposterous; yet here are the proofs. You say you know nothing of the message. We must know—intend to know; and will begin work along that line at once."

Her anger blazed out.

"I am the daughter of Sir John Culberson, the owner of this ranch, sent here by him; and you dare to insult me as you do, and place me under arrest! I wish I were the man these clothes falsely proclaim me to be. If I were I should challenge you to meet me as a man, and I would cram your miserable, scandalous lies down your throat."

Old Nick Nomad stared at this outbreak, his little gray eyes rounding until they showed their whites in circles.

"Whew!" he whispered to himself. "Ef she ain't a reg'lar rip-snorter, then I never seed one yet. And I'm bettin' doughnuts to dollars she war in that shootin' mix-up las' night, and mebbe she slug ther lead that laid out that cowboy. I wouldn't put it past her. My experence is that a shemale wildcat is a good deal wasser fer fightin' and gin'ral meanness than a male one is. And I reckon that when you git a woman started it's about ther same way."

Though the woman resented the scout's declaration that he meant to hold her, at one moment seeming inclined to resist with revolvers and rifle, and at the next moment seeming about to run to her horse and try to ride away, she finally rode with the four friends back to the ranch-house; though she protested every step of
the way, and declared herself to be a much injured and abused woman.
When the house was reached she subsided, and submitted without further violent protest.
She was placed in one of the rooms, and the key was turned on her.
“I dislike to do this very much,” said Buffalo Bill, speaking to her. “Only a feeling that I must do it forces me.”
Fifteen minutes later he went back to have a further talk with her.
The room was vacant, and the woman was gone.
As he made this amazing discovery, and was about to question old Nick Nomad, who had been left on guard in the big hall, the scout heard an outcry at the stables.
Running to the window and looking out, he saw that the woman had gained the stables, secured a horse, and was now galloping wildly across the open lands for the hills.
Some of the cowboys had rushed out into the yard and were staring at her as she made this flight, and from them had come the cries.
“What a fool I’ve been!” was the scout’s thought, as he hurried to get his own horse, thinking of pursuit.
“Some one here has opened a door in the rear of the room, or perhaps a window, and so has let her out. She has friends, it seems, even among our Desperate Dozen.”
But the scout’s attempt to pursue her was too late to be satisfactory.
The woman gained the hills before half the distance to them could be covered by those who rode after her.
The wind was beginning to blow again in whirling gusts round the base of the hills, stirring up the sand there. It was as certain as anything could be that in a little while the tracks of her horse would be concealed by the sand.

CHAPTER X.

TREACHERY.

Who of the cowboys had released the woman, or if she had escaped by her own ingenuity, could not be determined.
However, the scout determined to follow her.
Berl, though wounded, was not so seriously injured that he could not ride a horse; and Berl was for following her. The scout had told him that this pretended “Sidney Culberson” was a woman, who claimed now to be Sir John Culberson’s daughter.
When the woman gained the hills, Buffalo Bill returned to the ranch-house.
He showed there, to Berl and others, the words found on the piece of wooden skeleton, and inquired if the handwriting was familiar to any of them.
He had already exhibited the dead eagle, which he had brought to the house.
Those cowboys who were most superstitious, and had declared the eagle and the skeleton were spirit manifestations, looked extremely foolish when they saw what the things really were.
Yet the puzzle was not removed—it had but taken another form.
“Have any of you ever seen handwriting like that?” was the scout’s question.
Berl and the other cowboys looked at it closely, some of them sticking their tongues ludicrously into their cheeks, as if that helped their ignorance in making out the words.
None of them had seen handwriting like it.
“Some things, however,” said the scout, “are as plain now as sunlight.”
“Nuthin’ ain’t so very clear ter me,” avowed old Nick Nomad. “Ther sun may be shinin’ plain enough, but I’m like ther owl settin’ in it, ther durned brightness of it blinds me till I can’t see nuthin’.”
He laughed at his own figure of speech.
“It’s plain as sunlight,” Buffalo Bill went on, “that some one wrote those words on that wooden skeleton. Whether the truth is told there or not, the writing says that more than one person is walled in somewhere.
Read the words.”
He pointed them out:
“We are walled in at and we need help.”
Thus the words read, when run together, the gaps in the sentences being eliminated.
“Who does it mean?” said the scout. “Perhaps some of you know where such a prison can be; a prison that can be walled in, or walled up?”
“It beats me,” admitted Berl, scratching his head. “I dunno of any place that seems likely.”
“No one seen round here recently has disappeared?” asked the scout.
“No; no more than you knows about yerself.”
“Then I’ll give my theory. Perhaps I’m far off. It is, that the real son of Sir John Culberson is walled in somewhere in this section of country, and that some one is walled in there with him.
“If we had the whole of the message, instead of this mere scrap of it, we should doubtless know just where to look for this prison, and would know who the ‘we’ is.
“The woman who has escaped knew, or knows, of that imprisonment; perhaps she had a hand in it, or did it; and took young Culberson’s place here afterward. Likely it was for the purpose of starting this cattle-stealing. These are wild guesses, I know; but has any one better ones?”
He looked about.
His theories were startling enough, yet they were plausible.
“So, now,” he went on, “we’ve got to make a search for the ‘we’ spoken of here; and find that prison, if it is a prison, and also capture the woman who has just escaped.”

He studied the faces of the cowboys as he talked.

With the two who had been killed, they represented the twelve men he had called his Desperate Dozen; yet one at least of them, if indications went for anything, was traitorous.

They stood his scrutiny well. All seemed honest-faced cowboys.

And they declared themselves ready to follow him in the searching he proposed to begin.

They had signed the round-robin petition, and had declared they did not believe in the honesty of the “Sidney Culberson” they had thus denounced.

The best of the horses in the stables and corrals were brought out now for use.

By a strange series of events Buffalo Bill had become the man in charge of the Mossbank Ranch. The cowboys, who had resigned, were willing to follow his lead in trying to ferret out the mysteries that had developed.

“Buffler,” said Nomad, when the horses were being chosen, “you kin take yer pick of ’em, and welcome; but I wouldn’t trade off ole Nobby hyar fer ther hull burned caboodle. He’s ther wonderfulest hoss, Buffler, that ever et grass.”

As if he understood and appreciated this, or, perhaps, seeing the unintentional humor of it, Nebuchadnezer elevated his shaggy head, and gave vent to a loud whinny that sounded marvelous like sceptical laughter.

“He approves it, Buffler,” cried Nomad, amused, and not abashed.

When they had secured the horses and mounted, the party, led by Buffalo Bill, set out for the hills.

Along the base of these hills little dust-clouds were dancing and gyrating.

“It’s worse than trying the proverbial hunt for a needle in a haystack,” remarked Texas Jack. “But I’ve confidence in you, Cody; if the thing can be done, you’ll do it.”

They rode straight to the point where the woman had disappeared.

As they had anticipated, the sand had covered over the tracks of her horse.

A long time was spent in efforts to get the direction of her flight, and to figure out by guesswork the probable direction of the place from which the skeleton had been sent.

It was reasonably sure, according to the scout’s ideas, that the persons “walled in” had whistled the skeleton out of some timber they found in their prison, and then had captured an eagle and tied the skeleton to it, hoping that so singular an object as a skeleton being carried about by an eagle would attract attention, and the bird would be shot, thus giving the message to some one.

Night came while the unsuccessful search was being made.

Though near the point where on a previous occasion the skeleton had been seen, the most superstitious of the men of that time were brave enough now, for the eagle had been killed and the nature of the skeleton discovered; so they talked about it, with jokes, and denied that they had been in the least superstitious or afraid.

They did not build fires; but they lighted and smoked their pipes, under the cover of the shadows and the darkness, and talked much of the mysteries of the ranch, and of what they hoped to accomplish under the leadership of Buffalo Bill.

“Put only friends on guard,” said Washington, at one time.

Buffalo Bill used that saying as his motto that night, sure almost that some of these men were treacherous.

He stood guard himself, with his other friends taking turns.

At two o’clock in the morning Buffalo Bill lay down to get some rest, letting Texas Jack take his place at guard-duty.

There were other guards on, of the cowboy members, for it was not wise to rouse the suspicions of any of them by discriminating entirely against them even in guard-duty.

The scout was so tired that he soon fell asleep, though at such times he was ever a light sleeper.

Because he did not sleep more heavily, he was aroused, some time afterward, by the touch of a hand on his wrist.

He did not awake thoroughly at once, but dreamed that he had been captured by Sioux and that they were tying his arms.

Then he opened his eyes fully and knew that some one was slipping cords over his wrists.

He sprang instantly at this man, shouting for help; but he found the cord jerked tightly about his wrists, thus pinioning them. When he tried to get on his feet, he found cords on his ankles, tripping him so that he fell.

The man who had thus been tying him lunged at him with a knife.

Buffalo Bill squirmed to one side, and the knife was driven deeply into the sand.

He yelled again for help, and to arouse the camp to the danger of treachery, which this indicated.

He tried to tear his hands apart.

The man drew the knife out of the sand and lifted it.

Though his ankles were tied together, the scout sprang into the air, and succeeded in delivering a kick that sent the knife flying.
The man started to run, and the scout was not able to stop him.

The camp had been aroused by his outcries.
Men came hurrying to him, one of them being Texas Jack, who had been on guard.
“Kindle a fire,” the scout commanded, as Texas Jack cut the cords binding him.
A campfire was hastily built.
“Where is Wild Bill?” the scout questioned.
He was answered by a groan.
An investigation showed that both Wild Bill and old Nick Nomad had been tied, and that Wild Bill had been gagged.

The great Western scout and dead shot was chagrined by that, and explained:
“Cody, I don’t know how it was done. I must have slept like the seven sleepers. The first thing I knew somebody had me by the throat. I think there were two of them; for I was choked pretty bad, and while I writhed round I was hit a clip on the head that made me see stars; then I found these cords on me, and that gag in my mouth.”

Nomad had been tied up, but he had not known it, the thing was done so deftly, until he was awakened by the uproar, and found cords on his wrists and ankles.
Berl was also tied and so were some of the other cowboys.
The strangest thing to the scout, where all was so strange, was that when the fire flashed up, and he looked round to discover what cowboys were missing, he found them all there; and he had thought the dastardly work had been treacherously done by some of these men.
Apparently the clever workmen, or workman, had come from beyond the camp.

Yet, after thinking the matter over and discussing it with his friends, Buffalo Bill reached the conclusion that there were traitorous spirits in this band of cowboys who had done this thing.

CHAPTER XI.
A STRANGE YOUNG WOMAN.

What seemed proof positive that some of the cowboys were traitorous was revealed in the morning, when three of them were found missing from the camp.
They had slipped away in the night, and not even Berl had known of their going. Apparently they had feared detection and punishment, and they were believed to be the guilty ones.
Their trail was followed for awhile in the sand at the base of the hills, a task taken up by Buffalo Bill as soon after daybreak as possible.
If the men could be overtaken, he believed he could force from them a confession that would lighten the mysteries that now troubled him.

While he and his little company made this search, they came suddenly on a young woman, who came running toward them as soon as she saw them.
Her face was pale, her clothing torn, and she was in much mental and physical distress.
“Thank Heaven for the sight of human faces!” she gasped, as they met her.
Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill leaped down from their horses, asking her if they could do anything for her.
She looked into their faces earnestly, her eyes big and wild; and then looked as earnestly at the other men of the party.
“I hope I can trust you!” she panted. “I must trust some one. I have escaped from a horrible imprisonment, and have been trying to find my way out of these awful hills and get help.”
“We stand ready to aid you in any way,” said Wild Bill, touched by her distress.

Buffalo Bill and his friends, together with Berl and the cowboys, also declared that they were ready to aid her.
“You spoke of imprisonment?” said Buffalo Bill, his voice kindly, in an effort to reassure her and win her confidence.
“I am Miss Sybil Mantell,” she said, “and I came into this part of the country with Mr. Sidney Culberson, the son of Sir John Culberson, of England, who is the owner of Mossbank Ranch, which must be near here.”
The men crowded closer about her, for this was an astonishing and important statement.
“We set out from Stillwater for the ranch,” she went on, “but were captured by a band of masked men before we reached it; and they took us to a place in these hills, and there immured us. I escaped yesterday through the bars of the prison, and so got away; but Mr. Culberson could not get through, though he tried. He is wounded in the shoulder; for, when we were captured, we made resistance, and he was shot.
“I’ve been wandering about until I am exhausted; but if you are men you will go at once to the release of Mr. Culberson.”
“We’ll follow your trail back, unless you can lead us directly,” said Buffalo Bill, “and we will release Mr. Culberson without delay, we assure you. But you need food and rest.”
“A little food, yes; for we have been starving. We haven’t had a mouthful for two days; and before that time we had very little, for what was left with us we had to hoard to make it last.”
The men dismounted, and food was given her, together with water from the flasks; and the scout induced her, also, to swallow a little whisky, telling her it would strengthen her.
While she thus ate, seeming famished, they heard the further particulars of her story.
“One day an eagle flew into the opening where we
were, for the place is an old mining-shaft, I think, something like the mouth of a cave, very small, with strong bars set across it.

"The eagle came in between the bars, and Mr. Culberson knocked it down with a stick. We secured it, thinking we could eat it; but when he saw that it was really not injured a thought occurred to him—that perhaps we could send a message out that would bring help.

"There were some thin boards in the place, and with his knife he whittled out a skeleton imitation, and whitened it with some natural chalk we found there and water. He wrote his message on the skeleton with his lead-pencil, for we had no paper; and he thought that the sight of a skeleton carried by an eagle would cause the bird to be shot, and then the message would be seen and read, which might not have happened if we had sent out a message written on paper.

"So he wrote his message, tied the skeleton to the bird's claws, and then pushed it through the bars.

"It flew away, and after that for a time we had strong hopes; but nothing ever came of it. The eagle probably went into some part of the hills where it could not be seen by men."

She was astonished when Buffalo Bill informed her that the eagle had been shot, and a part of the message had been recovered.

Her astonishment became amazement when she knew the added facts concerning the one who had shot the eagle and had tried to destroy the skeleton.

"A woman, in man's clothing, and posing as Mr. Culberson! Why, that is astounding! Who can it be?"

"We hoped you might be able to tell us."

"I can't," she admitted. "I haven't the least idea."

Then she quickly added: "Oh, yes; it must have been the leader of the men who captured us. One of them I half-thought at the time was a woman, though he, or she, wore masculine clothing, and was masked. The form was that of a woman, I thought, and once I heard her voice, and I thought it sounded not just masculine. I spoke to Mr. Culberson about it, but he regarded it as just my fancy."

"Can you lead us to this place where Mr. Culberson is held?"

"I can try. I wandered about so that I'm afraid it will be difficult."

"Perhaps you could describe the outward appearance of the place, so that some of these men may be able to identify it; they are familiar with the country."

She looked eagerly at the curious cowboys, who were regarding her much as if she were some strange animal that had suddenly rushed into their midst.

"It is in a hill that is broken off at the top; and the hole, or opening of the mine—I think it is a mine-open-

ing—is near the base of the hill. But it is all grown round with bushes, and shows that the place has not been used of late. The hole is covered, as I said, with strong bars of wood. Mr. Culberson tried to cut through them. He cut one of the smaller ones away, and I got out through the hole; but in trying to enlarge the place, before I squeezed through, he broke his knife, and after that could do nothing. I wish I could describe the place more accurately."

There were many hills bearing a general resemblance to the one she sought to describe; so that her description did not enable any of the cowboys to recall it.

"We'll follow the trail you made," the scout. "And if you think you are strong enough to ride, you may take my horse, while I double up with my friend, Wild Bill. Or, if you aren't strong enough for the work of following the trail, we will undertake it alone, and I can send some of the man back to the ranch as your escort."

"No, I must help you to find Mr. Culberson. I think I should know that hill if I saw it again."

One of the cowboys gave her his horse, doubling up with a comrade.

As she still continued her revelations, they discovered that she was English, and was the affianced wife of young Culberson.

She had intended, being in America, to make a visit to the ranch with him. They had set out from Stillwater without escort; and this had been the result—their capture and imprisonment.

"You do not know of any one who would be likely to want to assume the name and position of Sidney Culberson?" the scout asked. She did not.

It was plain to the scout that whoever the mysterious woman was who had taken the name of Sidney Culberson, that she had either been the leader, or the inspiring spirit, of the outlaws who had captured Culberson and Miss Sibyl Mantell.

That Culberson was coming to the ranch had been known. This woman took his place, and put in operation the machinery which resulted in the stealing of many thousands of cattle.

Some of the cowboys had been her assistants. Others of the cowboys, like Belt, being honorable men, had not been taken into her confidence, and they had been ignorant of her duplicity; though what they had seen had made them suspicious, and had caused them to draw up and present that bold round-robin accusation.

Some of the mysteries were clearing away, and the scout did not doubt that all of them would soon find a solution.

The thing to do now was to find that hidden prison where Sidney Culberson languished.
CHAPTER XII.

THE TRAP IN THE SAND.

Miss Sibyl Mantell was a very efficient help in following her trail backward; for on several occasions, when it was lost in the sand and could not be found readily, she was able to point out some landmark she recalled, and so lead the way to the picking up again of the trail.

It led into the hills, but she had so wavered and wandered about in her efforts to get out of them that the trail was a maze way indeed.

Often, without knowing it, she had crossed her own tracks, doubling like a fox.

But there came a time when, the trail being lost in the shifting sand, she could not discover any landmark she remembered.

It became necessary, to economize time, for the party to break up, that the ground might be covered more rapidly; for already the day was waning, and many hours had been spent.

It came about thus that Buffalo Bill found himself alone with Miss Mantell, near the base of a peculiar- looking hill.

Miss Mantell drew his attention to certain characteristics of the hill, stating that but for its peculiar top, which was split and peaked, she might think it the hill which contained the singular prison.

This led the scout to believe that it might be the hill, but that its top, being viewed from a different point, did not look the same as when she had before seen it.

To discover if this were so, he and the girl rode along the base, trying to get some other view-points which might cause her to recall the hill, if it were the right one.

As they thus rode along, studying the top of the hill, they found themselves suddenly in a trap.

The place where they were was open, and was sandy, with bushes here and there, the wind causing the sand to drift constantly.

There was no cover near in which assassins could lurk, and for these reasons the scout was not looking for a trap.

Yet it yawned suddenly right beneath the feet of the horses, and they plunged forward into it.

The character of the trap was at once seen, when it was too late.

A big hole had been dug there, and its top laid over with weeds and brush, like a roof, this being covered with sand.

The drifting sand had soon made it seem but a part of the sandy area, undisturbed by the hand of man.

Yet it was a trap of the most dangerous kind.

The girl was flung from the saddle, falling heavily; and her horse, in its fall, broke a leg.

The scout's horse fell quite as hard as did the other, but the scout drew his feet out of the stirrups as he went down, and landed without personal injury, other than a shaking up.

He went at once to the girl's assistance, as his horse floundered to its feet, and found that she was stunned and half-unconscious.

Her horse staggered up, dangling a broken leg.

The scout's revolver came out, and a bullet through the horse's head put it instantly out of pain.

As that revolver sounded, the scout heard running feet.

Looking about, he saw men advancing, and rifles covering him.

"Cody," said a not unfamiliar voice, "we know you're a fighter, and that you don't count the cost; but we want to say to you that on your actions now depend the life of that girl. We've got her covered, as well as you; and at the first move you make we'll shoot her."

The scout's hand dropped away from his revolver. He faced defiantly toward the rifles.

"Who are you who speaks to me?" he demanded.

"Who is the coward that threatens not me, but the life of this woman?"

"Ah, Cody, I see that you don't know me! That's because I have as many voices as an echo. But it doesn't matter; we mean what we say, and if you value the life of the girl don't try to pull a gun. If you try it, we'll kill her."

The speaker, masked, was the woman who had called herself Sidney Culberson.

"I observe that a woman can be as big a villain, at times, as a man," he said bitterly.

"Perhaps a bigger one, Cody."

The woman laughed in cool insolence.

The girl who had fallen with Buffalo Bill into the pit opened her eyes.

The scout bent over her anxiously.

"A pretty girl," said the woman, who was still advancing. "Don't lose your heart to her, Cody, for she is promised in marriage to my very dear friend, Sidney Culberson; and it would be such a pity to disappoint him."

There was the very bitterness of gall in her tones when she said that. So much did her feelings show in her voice that the scout wondered.

"Ah, this woman is jealous!" was his instant conclusion. "Perhaps, when the tangle is unraveled, jealousy will be found to be one of the strings in it."

He turned again to the woman.

"What do you want?" he demanded, irritated, because he saw how at a disadvantage he was placed.

"Cody, six rifles cover this hole, and they are held by men who will shoot the instant I tell them to. I have no desire to kill either you or Miss Mantell. You see I know her, and I know her lover only too well,
You came here for a purpose, which I feel called on to block."

She walked up to the mouth of the sand-pit.

"I knew if you came searching for that prison-pen you would have to ride along this way, and I prepared a half-dozen or more traps out here for you, sure you would tumble into one of them."

"Ah! then the prison of Sidney Culberson is near-by?" he cried.

"I didn't say so. But I'll admit that it is, since you seem to be well informed about him. That girl has told you everything, of course. Let me tell you a few things, and then perhaps you'll be willing to go your way and let me go mine."

"I came here for two things—one was revenge, and the other was money. I tried to get the money by having the cattle driven off and sold. I have another big herd gathered now, which I am about ready to move."

"You can interfere with my plans and block me from moving those cattle. If you will promise to take the back track, I'll agree to release Sidney Culberson at the end of the week, after I've got the cattle out of the country and disposed of. If you refuse—"

"If I refuse, what?"

"I shall hold you and the girl prisoners until I can work out my plans."

"Who are you?" he demanded hoarsely.

"That's not to the point. Do you consent? Will you drop this business and get out of the country? You can take that girl with you if you wish."

"You will release Sidney Culberson?"

"At the end of the week."

"But not now?"

"No, not now."

Her voice was hard, and showed the bitterness of old hatred.

The girl returned to consciousness, and she screamed when she saw the woman in male attire standing on the edge of the pit, and the dead horse in the pit beside the scout and herself.

"There!" she cried hysterically. "There is the person I am sure was at the head of the masked outlaws who attacked us!"

"My dear girl, you are a good guesser!" came in cool tones. "I have just been asking your friend there to leave the country at once with you. Otherwise, you and he go to that prison where you have been for some days, to starve there awhile. If he removes himself and you from this place at once, taking his men, Culberson shall not be hurt, but will be released at the end of the week. If he refuses—"

"Hold her!" cried Miss Mantell. "Hold her, for she must know where that prison is."

"Don't be a silly goose!" said the mysterious woman. "If you will look up here you will see the black muzzles of some rifles that are pointed at you, and know that if I give the order you'll get their bullets. So, be good; tell Mr. Cody that if he is wise he'll draw off his forces and get out of the country. He understands why I ask it."

"No, no!"

Miss Mantell scrambled to her feet and rushed toward the woman, holding out her hands.

Buffalo Bill, still hesitant, dropped his hand toward his revolver.

A rifle flashed as he did so.

He had the feeling that the top of his head was shot away, and he fell in a heap, unconscious.

The men leaped forward, and rushing upon Miss Mantell, they secured her in spite of her frantic efforts, and she was again a prisoner.

The gallant and heroic scout lay at the bottom of the treacherous sand-pit, without motion or apparent life.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE PRISON.

When Buffalo Bill recovered consciousness he found himself in some dark place that seemed wall-enclosed, and he could not imagine at first where he was, nor recall what had befallen him.

Then like a flash memory returned.

He was a prisoner!

He recalled the flash of the rifle, but did not remember hearing the report, for he had fallen senseless, with the sensation that he had been struck a blow on the top of his head that caved his skull in.

He put his hand to his head.

It was bandaged.

He knew that the bullet had cut along the top of his head.

He roused himself, wondering where the woman was who had called herself Sibyl Mantell, and where that other woman was who had masqueraded as Sidney Culberson.

Then he heard a voice near at hand:

"Hello, friend! Feeling better?"

Buffalo Bill sat up with difficulty, putting his back against the rock there, and stared about.

Before him he saw a criss-cross of bars that let in a feeble light. He was to know soon that the criss-cross represented the bars of his prison.

"Feeling better?" the voice repeated, and a man came crawling toward him in the darkness.

Buffalo Bill stared at this man.

"Yes," he said. "Who are you?"

Then another voice sounded—the voice of a woman—and he discovered that Sibyl Mantell was in that place.

"I'm Sidney Culberson," said the man.
The scout observed that he had one shoulder and arm bandaged.

Sidney Culberson!
The few lingering foggy wisps that had been in the scout’s mind were banished by that name.

He knew where he was now; in the secret prison, where Culberson had been held, the prison for which Buffalo Bill and his party had sought.

Ah, well, he had found it! He was a prisoner in it! “I understand now, I think,” he said.

He sat up straighter, putting his back more firmly against the rock.

“I was captured, after I was shot there in that sand-pit, and was brought here; and Miss Mantell, if I judge right, was brought here, also.”

“I am very sorry that is so, Mr. Cody,” came in the voice of the girl.

She advanced now out of the deeper darkness, and he could see her fairly well in the faint starlight that came through the bars.

“What is beyond there?” he asked, staring into the gloom from which she seemed to have emerged.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing at all?”

“There is a sort of cavernlike place there,” said young Culberson. “I think a mine-tunnel was started, as it shows blasting; but it doesn’t go far. This is the mine entrance before us, and it has been barred, to make a prison, as you see. The bars are of new, strong wood, and haven’t been in place long; so I think the prison idea was put into operation here about the time I fell into the hands of the outlaws.”

“Of course, you have tried in every way to dig out, or burrow out, and to search for openings back there?” said the scout, fascinated by the darkness of that hole.

“Yes, we’ve tried everything.”

“Who is the woman who captured you?” the scout asked abruptly.

“I have not seen her, but Miss Mantell has been telling me about her.”

The scout lay back, thinking.

“I suppose the wound on my head is of no consequence?”

“We thought it was fatal, at first; and so did the outlaws,” answered Miss Mantell. “It seemed there was one particularly fine marksman among them, and that man had been instructed to ‘crease’ you.”

“Ah! I know what that is. I have creased wild horses, and captured them while they were stunned by the grazing of the bullet.”

“Doesn’t it make you feel sorry for the wild horses? Well, that is what this man tried to do; but he came near overdoing it, and I heard that awful woman tongue-lashing him when she thought you had been killed.”

“She didn’t want me killed?”

“No; she thought if she held you as a prisoner she would have a club to use against the officers, if she should be captured. She meant to hold you, and have you exchanged for herself, if needed, or for one of her men. Those men, it seems, belonged to the Mossbank Ranch.”

“I guessed as much as that some time ago. Some of the rascals were in my party, which I thought a picked one, and called the Desperate Dozen.”

He stared out into the starlight, drawing himself close up to the bars.

“Hopeless to try to get out through here?” he said.

“Of course it is; but I believe you squeezed through, Miss Mantell?”

“The bars have been repaired and strengthened, and we haven’t a weapon of any kind now. Everything was taken from us.”

“You don’t know where this woman is?”

“No; I haven’t seen her for hours. We—you and I were brought here soon after you were shot. Some of the men who were with her accompanied us, and they repaired the bars. Then she and they left about dark and disappeared.”

“And no sign of the men of my party?”

“Nothing.”

“The devils are treating us better than before, though,” said young Culberson. “They have left us something to eat; so we shall not starve. Perhaps you would like something. It is not much—stale crackers and stale meat—but it will support life.”

Buffalo Bill felt weak, but he was not hungry.

They continued to talk, and he learned all that these young people had to tell him; hearing in detail of their coming to America, and then of their traveling to Stillwater, and journeying out toward the ranch.

Sir John Culberson believed that his son had arrived safely at the ranch.

He had not known that Miss Mantell was accompanying her lover.

Apparently, the woman who was masquerading as the son of Sir John had been able, by letters, to deceive him; but he had heard of the mysterious losses of cattle, as shown by the letter he had written to Colonel Travis.

The mystery of the identity of this strange woman was the puzzling thing now in the situation, preventing the scout from understanding it.

Toward morning, as his strength returned, Buffalo Bill began an inspection of his prison, going over it carefully, under the guidance of the former occupants.

They showed him all the little holes and crevices they had explored so well.

He reexamined them, tapping the walls carefully and listening to the sounds, in the hope of finding a hidden door, or thin walls.
"They went out through the barred opening," he said, "and we might force it, even if it is blocked, or nailed from the outside."

"It is nailed and bolted from the outside," had been the girl's statement; and that was why she had been able to do nothing with it, anxious as she had been to release her lover.

The examination of the prison did not leave the scout in a hopeful mood.

He saw, though, as it seemed, that the woman who had charge of the cattle-thieves did not intend to take his life, but merely to hold him there with Culberson and Miss Mantell until the ranch could be wrecked and all the cattle taken.

It was as bold and daring a scheme as he had ever encountered; and it seemed the more remarkable because it was engineered by a woman.

"Unless we can break out, and the chances seem against that," said the scout, "our only hope is in being found by my friends. There are no better man-hunters in the West, and I believe they can find me here in spite of every difficulty."

In that hope he took courage.

CHAPTER XIV.

FOLLOWING A DIFFICULT TRAIL.

Not until the failure of Buffalo Bill to appear at the rendezvous appointed warned them that something was wrong, did Buffalo Bill's friends begin to search for him.

It was sunset before they struck his trail and followed it to the "trap."

The sand had been blowing, and the "trap" was half-filled; yet they were able to make out its character, and were convinced that here was where the scout had fallen into trouble.

But when they tried to follow the trail from that point on, they met with difficulties from the drifting sand, and soon were hampered, and then stopped, by the coming of darkness.

Some of the men, particularly Berl, were of the opinion now that the young woman who had come to them proclaiming herself Miss Mantell was but a decoy, bent on luring them to destruction; and that, in accompanying her, and believing in her, the scout had been cruelly deceived, and had come to this.

Nomad was much wrought up. Buffalo Bill was his highest conception of a man and a friend. The scout's peril distressed him as much as if it had been his own.

He, with Wild Bill and Texas Jack, aided by Berl, tried to do something with the blind trail by using torches.

But they had to give it up later on.

When the effort had been abandoned, Nomad sat by the hidden fire, which was covered with stones, lumping himself into a doleful knot, and gazing reproachfully at the flying sand.

As a usual thing the winds from the hills only blew with gusty strength about sunset, and a little before and after, dying entirely away with the coming of darkness, unless there was a storm.

On this night the wind continued to blow, piping mournfully over the sandy wastes of the Salt Plains, and singing and sighing through the hills.

"Cuss ye!" grated old Nomad, speaking to the wind. "Seems ter me I c'u'd wish that that warn't never any wind any more. Ye blow all the time, and kick up sand and dust jes' as ef ye couldn't be in better bizness."

It was an anxious night that the friends of Buffalo Bill passed.

The wind hilled and died out completely before morning.

At the earliest dawn the scouts were astir, had eaten their frugal breakfast, and had set about finding the lost trail.

It seemed a hopeless task now; the sand had drifted badly through the night, and even their own trail which they had made to that point was obliterated.

"Tain't no sort of a country fer anybody ter be in," said Nomad, in disgust. "Why people don't keep ef'ar of it, and keep their cattle out of it, is a wonder ter me."

In their attempts to follow the trail, they missed it wholly, and passed on by the hill which held the mine prison; and then went farther on, until they came to a wide valley, which lay like an emerald in a cup of the sandy hills.

To the astonishment of Berl, this green valley held thousands of cattle, which he knew at once belonged to the Mossbank Ranch.

"There's a herder in there with them," said Wild Bill, pointing him out. "He hasn't seen us yet. Better keep back."

They drew back, and by peeping over the tops of the bushes all could see the herder riding slowly among the cattle.

They began to plan for his surprise and capture.

"Maybe we can git somethin' out of him," said Berl. "I dunno whether he's one of our boys er not, but it's likely he is. I never dreamed we hed sich a lot of scamps in the bunch."

A trick by which the herder might be lured from among the cattle was finally hit on.

"All's fair in love and war," said Wild Bill. "This is war. We'll try it."

One of the men had a blanketlike robe made of wolf-skin.

Wild Bill took this, wrapped it round himself, and then, getting down on all fours, he crept from a little pass out among the cattle there.

By jumping and leaping, he contrived to frighten them, and then, when he saw he had attracted the attention of the herder, he scurried back into the pass, disappearing from the herder's sight.
The lure was successful.
Believing that a wolf had emerged from the hills and threatened the cattle, the herder rode over to that side of the valley.
He held his rifle ready for a shot, and after looking at the ground slowed his pace and peered into the pass. Seeing nothing, he rode his horse farther in, looking for the supposed wolf.
He had not progressed far when he found himself covered by rifles.
"Hands up!" sang the voice of Wild Bill.
Taken completely by surprise, and believing that if he tried to flee or resist he would be shot down, the herder surrendered.
No man was ever more chagrined than he when he understood how he had been fooled, and beheld the wolf robe with which the trick had been done.
Berl and the cowboys knew him, for he had been one of their number, joining them, as they now recalled, at about the time the false Sidney Culberson made his appearance at the ranch.
"I surrender!" had been his cry.
He was humble enough, being thoroughly frightened.
"Now, my gay lark, you'll sing your song, or stop singing forever on this earth," said Wild Bill, pointing a revolver at him. "You have some information that we are aching to acquire. Out with it. What are you doing here, tending these cattle? Who put you here, and who drove the cattle to this place, and why are they so held?"
Crushed by his fears, the fellow was willing, even eager, to talk.
"Miss Scarlett ordered the cattle drive here, and ordered me to hold 'em here; they're to be driven to some station on the Canadian Pacific, and sold there, for her."
"Miss Scarlett?"
"Yes, the foreman—the boss; the woman that you thought was Culberson."
"Oh! I didn't know her name. What about her? All you know."
"Well, I don't know any too much. She's English, and she's a cousin or somethin' of Culberson. She wanted..."...

"Yet you served her!"
He cringed.
"She paid well, as I said," he apologized.
"You know where this prison is?" Wild Bill demanded.
"I don't. I only know the things I heard her say. She seemed afraid..."...

"He's dead," said Berl; "he was one of the cowboys killed."
The prisoner opened his eyes.
"Jim dead?"
"Dead as a door-nail."
"Well, so far as I know, he's the only one of the boys that knew where that place is. He told her about it, and fixed it up. If any others knows it, she's told 'em sense I was put here to watch these cattle."
"Did that fiendish woman follow young Culberson from England?" asked Wild Bill, putting the question through curiosity.
"I dunno, but I think she did; or else she came ahead of him, knowin' he was comin'. And she planned to trap him, git revenge on him, git all the money she could by ruinin' the ranch, and then skip."
"And you, villain, were aiding her, and now boldly confess it!"
The man cringed and shrugged his shoulders.
"I reckon I've got to talk, when you p'int a pistol at me and order me to," he protested.

CHAPTER XV.

BUFFALO BILL'S INGENUITY.

There was nothing Buffalo Bill more regretted than that in starting out to investigate affairs at the Moss-bank Ranch he had neglected to do a thing which frequently he had done of late, prepare for such a contingency as the present, by slipping a little saw into the rim of his big hat, and some other things, of patterns used by burglars and individuals, which he often carried in the heels of his shoes.

He regarded his neglect now as little less than criminal folly.

With such a saw as he sometimes carried he could have cut through those wooden bars and opened up quickly a path to liberty.

He spoke of the omission with regret.

Then his native wit and ingenuity suggested a possible substitute.

From his clothing he drew some strong threads, which he twisted into a cord.

This cord he contrived to loop over one of the bars, with the two ends of it in the prison, in such a way that by holding these two ends he could rub the cord back and forth across the bar.

But a simple cord could not of itself be expected to cut through a strong wooden bar, no matter how diligently it was sawed to and fro.

To give the string "teeth" and make a saw of it, the scout wet it in the pool of water the prison afforded, and then dipped the wet string in sand, the sand adhering by reason of the wetting.

Sand was also thrown on the wood at the point where the cutting was to be tried.
The scout discovered with satisfaction that this saw would work, and, though it could cut but slowly, the fact that it ate into the wood even a little was very promising.

The string had to be kept wet, and had to be renewed, for it wore out quickly.

The hope that this gave so stirred the hearts of the young man and woman that they were eager to take turns at this novel attempt to cut the bars of their prison cage.

The woman raveled strong threads from her own clothing, which she twisted into cords, and had ready, several at once, to be used when the others failed.

An hour's hard work cut one of the bars a third through.

"At that rate," said the scout, with grim satisfaction, "we can cut this bar in three hours. Six hours will enable us to cut two of them. The cutting of one will let Miss Mantell out, but more than one bar will have to be severed before either Culberson or I can squeeze through."

He was as hopeful as the others.

Thus working, time did not drag in so wearisome a way as before.

Daylight came, but they still toiled on.

Within a little over three hours the scout and his companions had cut through the bar, and succeeded in breaking it from its end fastenings.

The two pieces they drew into the hole, and found that they would do well for weapons if they should be forced to defend themselves there.

These sections of the broken bar offered to the quick-minded scout a still further suggestion.

They had been on the point of helping Miss Mantell to squeeze through the opening made by the removal of the bar, when the scout began to act on the suggestion.

"Help me here, Culberson," he requested.

He put an end of the piece he held against the other bar, making a pivot of the wall, and the piece of bar a lever.

"If it will stand the strain," he said, "we may be able to force an end of this other bar."

Culberson lent him aid, and the girl also threw her strength upon this improvised lever.

The bar strained and cracked, but did not yield.

Time and again they threw their strength into the effort.

With a snapping sound, the end of the bar they were trying to force flew at length from its fastenings.

The scout wanted to shout, but wisely contained himself.

Miss Mantell burst into tears of joy, as she saw this promise of relief.

"Now I hope we can all get out," said the scout, his voice cheery. "It will still be a tight fit for me, but I believe I can do it."

Miss Mantell crawled through, finding the opening now ample to admit of her body.

She was hardly through, when she became greatly excited, and uttered a startled exclamation.

"They are coming!" she cried, with breathless fear.

"Who are coming?" asked Culberson.

He had climbed up to the opening and was about to try to go through.

"I think it is that woman, and some men are with her. They are on horses, and are coming this way. Oh, we can't get away!"

The discovery threw Culberson into quite as excited a state as the girl.

He tried to go through the hole, jammed his wounded shoulder, and stuck fast.

"Oh, they're coming," the girl panted; "coming fast!"

From the outside she was trying to help Culberson through, while from within the scout was pushing him.

"I'm stuck!" Culberson groaned. "I can't do anything."

"Oh, we're lost—lost!" wailed the girl.

"Push!" shouted Culberson desperately to the scout. "Break my shoulder, if necessary; I've got to go through."

"Just slip back; here, I'll pull you back. No need to ruin your shoulder."

Buffalo Bill was trying to remain calm, though his pulse was jumping.

He drew heavily on Culberson, and with this aid the young man was able to release himself somewhat.

When he tried again, with the help of the scout and the girl, he got his wounded shoulder past the obstruction that had troubled him, and then slipped through and dropped to the ground outside.

"They're nearly here," the girl whispered. "Now you, Mr. Cody!"

"Leave me, if necessary," said the heroic scout.

He had mounted to the opening, and was pushing his head and shoulders through.

"No; here, we'll help you!" "All together!" said Culberson, aiding as much as he could.

It was a tight fit, tighter even than that of Culberson.

The girl, seeing she could do nothing stood outside, telling of the advance of the riders, whose ominous approach she had heralded.

"Oh, hurry! hurry!" she begged. "They're almost here!"

The scout stuck fast, then squirmed, broke loose, and popped out through the hole, fairly dragged out by young Culberson.

He heard, some distance away, the patter of hoofs on the grass and sand.

He glanced about.

He saw that he and his companions were as yet undiscovered by the advancing foes.

"This way!" he whispered.

He took the girl by the arm.

"Come!" he said to Culberson.

Then the three ran along the side of the hill, and burrowed into the bushes beyond.

The scout led the way rapidly, helping the girl, and now and then helping Culberson, who was hampered by his injured shoulder.

They covered several yards, and got some high rocks between themselves and the opening of the tunnel from which they had escaped.

Then they heard the horsemen draw rein, and heard a loud outcry, as the broken bars of the prison were seen by them.

"Come!" the scout whispered. "We must get on!"

He drew the girl on, still crawling through the bushes, with Culberson following.
As soon as possible the scout turned sharply to the left, and found a little gullylike pass, which he entered.
Here the way was open.
"Now, we must run!" he said.

He led the way, and so frightened the others that they were able to follow right at his heels, fast as he went.

Another rocky slope, bush-covered, was gained, and beyond this a thicket of aspens and small trees.

Into this they hurried.

Once within it the scout found there a game trail, which he took, and hastened on as fast and as silently as he could, cautioning those behind him to silence.

"Unless they've got expert trailers with them we'll baffle them yet," he declared.

The girl was shaking like a leaf, but her courage was still good. Cuberson, apparently, had forgotten that he had a wounded shoulder, for he assisted her over difficult places and pushed aside bushes for her.

Thus hurrying, the hill containing the tunnel prison was left behind.

But they soon had evidence that they were being pursued.

The prison had been found empty, and the horses who had come to it were now trying to follow the trail of the fugitives.

They went at it rashly and hurriedly, evidently believing that the escaping prisoners were not far off.

They dashed along a near-by pass at a gallop, and thus went on ahead of the fleeing scout and his companions.

But soon he heard them returning.

"They're going at it in haphazard fashion, and that will help us," he said hopefully. "They're losing time."

He followed the game trail until it opened upon a barren plateau-like surface, mostly of rock, and led the way at a good gait across that.

He was not trying to keep any particular direction, but only to put distance between himself and the border wolves he feared.

But he heard again the trample of horses' hoofs, and then a crashing in the aspens through which they had come.

The pursuit was being pushed vigorously.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

Wild Bill, Texas Jack, Nomad, Berl, and others, were still in the green valley where the big herd of cattle had been discovered.

Suddenly they beheld a sight that astonished them.

Out into the valley, and along its margin, came three wild and hurling figures.

They were Buffalo Bill, Cuberson, and Miss Mantell, fleeing from their pursuers.

"Buffler fererfer!" said old Nomad.

"Sh!" said Wild Bill. "They're being pursued, don't you see! Now, who is pursuing them? I judge we'll soon see."

He and Texas Jack rode out a short distance into the open area, and by waving their hands attracted the attention of the fugitives.

As soon as Buffalo Bill saw these friends he changed his course, and came straight toward them.

The fleeing girl stumbled and fell from weakness, for she had run far and fast.

The scout caught her as she fell; and, carrying her in his arms, he ran on, with young Culberson hobbing by his side, the young fellow being pretty well spent by this time.

Miss Scarlett and the treacherous cowboys who were aiding her had pursued so closely that, but for the cleverness and dodging abilities of Buffalo Bill, they would have overtaken the fugitives long before.

They were not far behind now, and, having once lately sighted the fugitives, felt confident of success.

They came riding out of a gap in the hills, as Buffalo Bill caught up the half-fainting girl and turned toward his friends.

The pursuers did not see Wild Bill and his party, for Wild Bill cautiously drew himself and his men back when he thoroughly understood the situation.

So Miss Scarlett, riding like an Amazon, came on, leading her following of ruffian cowboys, sure now she could soon catch the fleeing trio.

She became aware, when too late, that Buffalo Bill's friends were just within the shadows of the hills.

She drew rein, staring, her face flushed, her eyes bright.

She did not see all of Wild Bill's followers.

A desperate determination shook her slight form.

"Charge them!" she cried, fury blazing in her eyes.

"Take them, and shoot down those men!"

She led her desperate followers with such wild desperation that they were ashamed to lag behind.

Then came a flash and crash of rifles from the shadows where Wild Bill had stationed himself and his men; a blaze of death that roared over the heads of the panting fugitives, and emptied saddles beyond them.

One of the emptied saddles had held the strange woman who had masqueraded as Sidney Culberson, and had shown herself at this moment to be a female Amazon and fiend.

The cowboys there who were not brought down jerked their horses round and rode wildly away, hardly stopping to look back.

They knew they had met their Waterloo.

"It was Miss Scarlett!" said young Culberson, when he looked into the dead face of the woman who had tried to wreck the Mossbank Ranch and revenge herself on him. "She claimed that I promised to marry her. I was a fool in my attitude toward her, perhaps, but I did not promise that. She swore she would have her revenge; but I never dreamed it would lead her so far, and produce such a series of desperate adventures."

The end had come for the misguided woman; and the charitable reader may believe, as the scout and his friends believed, that she had become insane through brooding over her fancied wrongs, and because of that insanity she was not really responsible for all the things she did.

The Mossbank Ranch was not wholly ruined, though many cattle were gone.

It was restocked the next year; and young Culberson and his bride took possession of it, and made of it a happy home.

THE END.

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