BUFFALO BILL IN THE DEATH DESERT
OR
THE WORSHIP OF THE PHANTOM FLOWER

With the queen in his arms Buffalo Bill leaped down the gravel bank, and, standing upright, slid swiftly to the bottom of the gorge.
Buffalo Bill in the Death Desert;

OR,

THE WORSHIP OF THE PHANTOM FLOWER.

CHAPTER I.
THE PHANTOM FLOWER.

Left bare-limbed and shivering when winter’s mantle had melted, kind spring had flung a beautiful, parti-colored slumber-robe over the whole great valley and the mountain slopes that defended it. The well-watered vale was an oasis in a broad-spread territory of sand-hills and scrub-timber and poor pastures—so poor that even the buffalo came that way only when the hunters troubled them sore, and then only in small herds. To the north was a veritable desert—a solemn, deserted, gray waste, over which even the birds did not fly, and the heart of which was not even known to the red hunter.

This valley, however, was beautiful on this, the first hot day of the brief spring. It brought the old men and old women out of their lodges, and they squatted in the sun, reveling in the warmth and in the smell of the good earth, and of the balsam from the wooded slopes. There were a number of ancients in the broadly flung Kickapoo village, which had been established here for some years now.

Some of the squaws were taking down the skin lodges that had sheltered the families from the snow and sleet of winter, and were building tepees of branches and lighter materials. The time of booths was at hand. The red man needs little to shelter him from the dew of heaven.

It was a time of much activity. The winter had been hard—bitter hard! Snow had heaped the mountain passes full; the rivers had frozen to the bottom; the Kickapoos had been shut in by these hills, which shouldered each other about their valley. Beyond there might have been no world at all remaining, for all they knew, when the spring freshets came.

Not that they minded this at all. There was but one thing troubled the old men and the young bucks alike. Would the food supply hold out?

And by the blessing—aye, a miracle!—of the Great Spirit, when their larder was lowest food came to them. Warapoka, daughter of the great chief who had last ruled them in peace, and who now claimed the right to rule in her father’s stead, had found in a ravine a herd of cari-
bou that had lived in this sheltered spot, existing on
grasses, and buds, and other plant-life that even the In-
dian ponies might have scorned.

They were not so fat as in the fall, but their flesh was
meat, and in their bones was sweet marrow, which
warmed the hearts of the old and filled the bellies of the
half-naked babies. Those who had feared the coming of
the walkheaps, or the pony soldiers, to drive the Kick-
apoos back to the lean lands of the South, from which
they had run away, had left over crooning that tune. The
winter was passed; spring had come; summer and the
long-hunting-days were at hand. The Kickapoos were
indeed favored. And Wapahoka, the beautiful “White
Queen,” as those who were not her friends called her,
was looked upon by many as almost a goddess, because
of her success in saving the people from starvation.

The Kickapoos’ wanderings during the last hundred and
fifty years have taken them from the upper valley of the
Mississippi to the State of Guerrero, Old Mexico. Of the
great Algonquin family, they resisted the coming of the
whites, following Tecumseh and other able Indian gen-
erals, until, when the Civil War broke out, they numbered
few more than a thousand souls. Taking advantage at
that time of the fact that the Federal government had all
it could do to handle the seceding Southern States, the
Kickapoos fled to Mexico, where they settled in the Santa
Rosa Valley and raided over the border into United
States territory—to the undoubted satisfaction of the
Mexican government.

After the Civil War, when the Federal government had
time to look after its red charges, Mexico was made to
give up the Kickapoos, the majority of whom were re-
turned to the reservation in Kansas. Those that were
left were removed by the Mexican government to the
State of Guerrero, 1,200 miles south of Santa Rosa, but
at present writing they have mostly drifted back to the
border, and are very peaceful and successful rancheros.

The Kickapoos returned to their reservation, joined
with those who had never left United States territory,
making altogether upward of eight or nine hundred souls.
They were not contented, however, and suddenly more
than half of the tribe left their lands and raided north-
ward until they reached this verdant valley in which we
now see them—this oasis, surrounded by desert lands and
sand-hills, untravelled before by either white men or red.

The fall before this, the opening of our story, the
medicine chief, Nakona, who had turned against the
chief’s daughter, had sought to reestablish himself in
complete power over the tribe by securing what was be-
lieved by them to be strong “medicine,” or magic, from
the specter deer which had frequently been seen by their
young men and their hunters. This was, in truth, a
gigantic caribou of a gray color—an old outcast from his
tribe—that inhabited the woods and marshes far to the
westward of the Kickapoo encampment.

This beast the medicine-man had followed with a hound
which he had always declared to his superstitious brethren
possessed more than natural powers. Nakona and his
hound had run up against a certain white wolf-hunter,
who objected strongly to the Kickapoo and his hound
scaring away the game from what he considered to be his
hunting grounds. Wolfer Joe therefore shot the hound,
held up the medicine-man, took away his weapons, and
turned him adrift to seek his tribe, shamed and disgraced.

But old Nakona bided his time, followed the overconfi-
dent wolfer, overpowered him, and came near to causing
his death. But the wolfer was rescued by an old com-
panion in arms, and the two whites followed the Indian
magician, in turn. They fell upon Nakona and the
specter deer together. The deer was shot in trying to
climb the bank of a river, and Nakona was crippled for
life by its huge body falling upon him as he, too, tried to
crawl out of the flood and escape his white enemies.

At this time William F. Cody, better known through-
out the great West as Buffalo Bill, the Border King, was
acting as chief of scouts at Fort Challis, in the Black
Hills. It was he who had helped Wolfer Joe run the In-
dian medicine-man down. Buffalo Bill had been sent out
to learn all he could of the runaway Kickapoos, and their
numbers and condition. He saw in this injury to Nakona
an opportunity of getting into the Kickapoo camp without
raising the redskins’ suspicions.

So, instead of finishing and scalping the injured red, as
Wolfer Joe wished, the two whites had laboriously car-
rried Nakona to the Kickapoo encampment. The informa-
tion that the scout had here obtained, however, and had
taken back to the commander of Fort Challis, did not
bear fruit. The elements themselves that winter were
against any march of the pony soldiers and walkheaps—
infantry—into the wilderness to round up half a hun-
dred redskins and drive them southward. Aside from the
sufferings of such a course upon the soldiers themselves,
it would have undoubtedly occasioned the death of half
the tribe. So the Kickapoos had been left in peace.

Internally, however, there was little peace in the tribe.
Wapahoka’s good luck in finding the herd of caribou had
gained her friends—but friends of the unreasonable,
superstitious order.

Although weak and crippled in body, the mind of the
wily Nakona was as clear and as bitter as ever. Indeed,
his bodily affliction had increased Nakona’s ability to
hate. He had never loved many but himself, but now he
hated with a soul on fire.

Among those who crept into the sun on this warm day
was Nakona, the magician. He walked on all fours, like
a wolf. Never again would he stand erect like other
men, for his spine had been tortured as though wrung in
the rack of the Inquisition. The specter deer—which was
no specter at all!—did that in falling on him.

But his lean, black face, and his beadlike eyes were
vitaly alive. They could express feeling that, in his most masterful days of Indian oratory, he had not known.

To hide his twisted frame, he wore a beaded blanket—a rich and gaudy cloak, for the medicine-men are the rich men of the red tribes. Like religion in all ages when joined with the state, the Indian’s religious guides have proved themselves parasites and an injury to the people at large. Here is joined the two professions of theology and medicine; and, in awe of both, the red man bows to the fakers who set up their claims as medicine-men. Of late, the United States government, through its Indian Commission, is taking steps to curtail the powers of the medicine-men of all the tribes.

Nakona allowed none to see his crippled body, knowing that its helplessness might detract from the influence his mind still held over the tribe. Old Man-e-na, an ancient witch who, of all his squaws, did not desert him when ill-fortune befell Nakona, helped him now to squat in the sun, and wrapped more closely the blanket about his shivered limbs. Out of these wrappings rose the old man’s head, like that of an idol in some ancient Hindu temple—only no engraver could have carved such a countenance of hate and malice as stood upon old Nakona’s shoulders.

And this sudden expression was caused by the approach of a party of young squaws from the other end of the village. There was a strange matter at work among these Kickapoos. Finding that the bucks either desired to wed her and share her power, or to enslave her and put some smaller chief over the tribe, Wapahoka, the chief’s daughter, had turned her back upon the men of the Kickapoos, selected a body-guard of maidens of near her own age, and had trained them for war and chase. These red Amazons were never far from the White Queen.

Out upon the open plain, where the new grass was coming in, green and tender, grazed the herds of half-wild Indian ponies. Their leader was a great, high-headed, red-nostriled, eager-eyed range-horse—a stallion as wild as when on his native hills. To one person in the world this beast showed submission. He acknowledged Wapahoka as his mistress. The young squaws at whom Nakona scowled so bitterly this morning were going out to the herd to rope their ponies.

These were not dressed like the slavish squaws who were humped over the fires, or over their needle-work. They were lithe, graceful young women, dressed in a half-mannish costume of pliable doeskin, fringed and beaded, and they carried implements of war—befeathered spears, bows and arrows, and even war-clubs and tomahawks. Before them came Wapahoka herself, with the walk of a princess, haughtiness enthroned upon her brow.

She was indeed beautiful. Even Buffalo Bill, or Long Hair, as the Indians called him, had acknowledged her beauty. Upon a certain young protegé of the great scout—Arthur Mirrivale, an Englishman then working a gold claim at Pink Butte, in the Black Hills—Wapahoka had made a deep impression. And perhaps the handsome, yellow-haired young giant, with his frank face and keen, blue eyes, had ruffled the heretofore stagnant waters of the Kickapoo maiden’s heart as well. She wore at all times, pendant from a chain about her throat, a yellow diamond that had been lent her by Mirrivale. It was, indeed, a sort of pledge between them; yet the Indian maid was true to her people and to her religion, and would have refused to espouse the Englishman had he wooed her.

It was upon Wapahoka, indeed, more than upon the other maidens, that Nakona now cast his baleful glance. The queen’s guards shrunk before the old magician as one would shrink before the “evil eye.” But Wapahoka gave look for look, holding herself proudly.

Her beauty was striking. Her hair was purple-black, bound with a fillet of gold, in which was stuck a single eagle-feather; the hair flowed in waves to her waist, and had a luster all its own. The blood which coursed so generously in her veins painted the flower of health upon her cheeks; it tinged, indeed, her whole brunette complexion until her countenance, her throat, and her symmetrical arms, bare to the shoulders, were of a beautiful, glowing, bronze color. Her eyes were black as night, and flashing; yet they might soften on occasion.

As the queen and her maidens drew nearer, Nakona’s harsh voice stayed them:

“And where journeys the maiden, Wapahoka, this day?”

In the Indian tongue the same word may mean several things, the meaning being intimated by the inflection. There is more than one way of saying “maidens” in Kickapo. One pronunciation is a term of reproach—meaning one that cannot obtain a husband, and so graduate from the single state. Wapahoka was considered of ample age to marry.

The queen’s face flushed darkly, and her eyes sparkled with rage.

“I go where the great Nakona will never go again. I go to the hunt,” she said bitterly, knowing that a reminder of his helplessness would be the keenest dart she could send in return for his insult.

“And will none of the Kickapoo braves follow their queen in the chase?” snarled Nakona. “Must she find only unblanketed squaws to follow her?”

“Wapahoka and her maidens saved the Kickapoos from the Great Death while Nakona crouched in his hut, and shivered. Our hunting is good hunting. The Kickapoos are glad to eat of the flesh we find.”

“The evil spirits work for thee, Wapahoka!” panted the old man.

“And there must have been a great evil spirit in Nakona when the specter deer he chased fell upon and killed
his body, leaving only his spirit to dwell in mortal torment.

The whole hidden body of the man writhed under the lash of her tongue. His face worked with rage, but he could not speak for the moment, while Man-e-na spat venom at the proud girl. "Daughter of the paleface, be gone!" she snarled, lifting her skinny arm and clenched fist and shaking them at Wapahoka.

"You are old, and you are mad, Man-e-na, or I would command you to be whipped. Take the toothless wolf into his lodge or the dogs will worry him."

The convulsive workings of old Nakona's countenance were awful to behold. He burst out rhapsingly:

"May the evil spirits light upon thee, Wapahoka! Forget not my power! The spirits that attend on me—"

"Were not as strong as the spirits that attended upon the Long Hair, the white magician, when he came here and tried issue with thee, completed Wapahoka sharply.

Again the old man's face writhed under her scorn. The memory of Buffalo Bill's belittling of him before his tribe, many months before, was still keen in the medicine-man's bosom. It rankled like a barbed dart.

Suddenly the old medicine-man's face blanched. His eyes had been lifted, and he gazed over Wapahoka's head—over the tops of the lodges, in fact, and away toward the north. A murmur of awed voices rose at the other end of the village, and a dog howled portentously.

Man-e-na uttered a shrill scream and crouched down beside the magician. She, poor creature, believed that what she saw was raised by the power of Nakona, but before even she turned to behold the wonder Wapahoka had read nothing but fear in the medicine-man's face.

Groans and cries of terror—fanatical moanings—rose upon the air. The Kickapoos ran from their lodges, and faced toward the north.

The eyes of the white queen were fixed upon the strange, fantastic vision which unfolded before their eyes. In mid-air it hung, and at first it was like a cloud—then the formation changed, and it became a small valley, seemingly encircled by steep rocks, but all hanging in the air. Indeed, the atmosphere seemed to palpitate about it so that the eyes were almost dazzled.

"It was so before!" hissed Nakona at last. "So it appeared before the chief, your father, Wapahoka, died! Death follows the blooming of the phantom flower."

One of the girl's few supporters—an old chief—stood near. He said sternly:

"Be still, O Nakona, of evil tongue! It is the vision—aye, it is the vision. But the flower has not bloomed."

Wapahoka gasped. Her color, which had disappeared, came back into her cheeks.

"Why should I fear?" she cried. "The flower has not bloomed."

"Wait!" shrieked old Nakona, his crippled body writhing again under his blanket like that of a scathed snake. "Wait! See! See! All is not done in a moment."

A change was passing over the mirage which had so frightened the Kickapoos upon each occasion of its appearance.

The murmur of voices rose. A strong shudder shook the queen, and she began to sink and crouch until her head was between her knees and she squatted on the ground.

"It blooms!" yelled the cracked voice of Nakona again.

But Wapahoka did not look. Her black hair was falling about her face, which she covered as though in mourning. Moans issued from the lips of the stricken girl.

Meanwhile, every other pair of eyes in the village were affixed upon the mirage. In the middle of the pictured valley there had risen something suddenly like a huge stem—the trunk of a great tree. If the valley was really of the size it seemed, this stem must have been yards in circumference.

Then there burst from the summit of this pillarlike formation, which had been forced up many, many feet from its base, from the level of the valley, a spreading, umbrella-shaped figure. This spread and expanded like the opening of some great bud. The flower bloomed, and then suddenly—more quickly than it had originally appeared—the whole mirage seemed to fall together like a house of cards and there remained—a pile of fleecy clouds, and that was all!

A low chant rose from the superstitious Indians. All their faces were turned toward the north, and so they remained for some minutes after the mirage disappeared.

All but Wapahoka. She crouched, with his face hidden. This phenomenon had first appeared to the Kickapoos when they came north on their escape from Kansas some months before. It had preceded the sudden death of Wapahoka's father. It had likewise been considered a signal from the Great Spirit forbidding them from going any farther in that direction. It undoubtedly saved them from falling into serious trouble with the Sioux, who lived beyond the desert.

A mirage was not an unknown thing to the tribe. Such appearances are frequently observed in the West, and must have been so from time immemorial. But one like this blooming of the phantom flower had never been told of in any of their legends. There was something of religious significance in this. When it appeared, the tribe worshiped.

And because it had preceded her father's death, Wapahoka believed it foretold injury to herself. Her people thought so, too. They looked upon her now, crouched in terror on the ground, in sympathy.
CHAPTER II.

THE DESERT.

For a week previous to this gloriously hot day the sky had been mantled in thick clouds, wind-driven and hateful, and through which the sun barely glimmered. In the mountains rain had fallen. On the flat, seemingly limitless plain there had been no moisture, but the winds had swooped down from the frowning heavens and had swept the sand-clouds in thick curtains hither and yon.

Whirlwinds of sand had danced here and there like whirling dervishes. Sometimes broad waves of dust would sweep along the surface of the desert, extending farther in either direction than the eye could see—even an eye not inflamed and sore with the grit blown into it! And all the time the windrows and sand-dunes were changing form and shifting, as though nature had grown suddenly sickle and was undecided in what shape to leave the surface of this barren horror.

This was the desert lying to the north of the beautiful valley occupied by the Kickapoo tribe. The boundaries of the sandy waste were so wide that even the blue lines of hills—like clouds marking the ranges—were beyond the vision of the single upright and living figure which stood upon the desert.

This was the gaunt and wavering shape of a man—a man who was young in years, and a few days before had been a vigorous, hearty, handsome fellow. At his feet lay the body of a horse, still caparisoned for riding. The sand had drifted over it till it was half covered. And the most awful thing about this dead horse to the man, at least, was the fact that the ravens had not found it, and it was still intact!

He was so deep in the desert that even the scavengers of the air had not marked the carrion, nor come to the feast. And there was no vermin to feed upon the carcass. The body, instead of decaying, was merely drying up.

"And this is the tenth time I’ve come around to you!" exclaimed the man, in a cracked, vacant voice. "I reckon ten times is enough. No use littering up this bally old desert any more than necessary. I’ll stay and the sand can bury us both in one mound. Save work for it, by George!"

And he was not an easily discouraged person, this man. Eight days before, to be exact, he had come down from the West and struck the edge of this desert of death. He had lost his way—or the trail over which he had twice traveled—twenty-four hours before. Somewhere to the south and east was the place for which he had started in bidding good-by to civilization, as marked by a Black Hills mining-camp, and he had believed what many another unfortunate has believed—that it would be easy to cut across a corner of the desert and so shorten the journey by many miles. Indeed, he could see the blue line of hills shouldering each other against the sky in that direc-

tion. How was he to know that these hills were a picture only of the real hills—miles and miles away under the horizon—a mirage of the ranges which bounded the desert on the south?

So, being well supplied with food and ill supplied with water, he spurred his horse down the barren slope and into the sand of the far-stretching desert. The horse sank to his fetlocks in the sand. Although the sun had already retreated under a cloud as though, from the start, to deny this victim the satisfaction of his presence—or else unwilling to view the sacrifice which was about to take place—the heat of the open space was abominable. When winter goes in this land, summer treads quickly on his heels. This spring weather seemed, to the wanderer, worthy of midsummer.

And then the wind arose. It swooped down upon the traveler, it drove him and the sand before it. After sixteen hours of a sand-storm, and with the overcast sky, the man did not know from which direction he had come, where he was going, or scarcely what his name was!

Water? That was gone long ago! He had used the last not for himself, but to sponge the nostrils of his suffering mount. He had depended upon the animal to find the way out of the desert. He trusted in that much overrated instinct. A wild horse may possess it to some perfection; but some domesticated horses lack this faculty. This mount of the unfortunate traveler was no exception. He was a thoroughbred Kentucky and Canadian cross—a fine horse for power and endurance. A range-horse, or a wild Indian pony, might have found its way out of the sand and brought its owner, too. But this beast traveled in a circle until it dropped. Then its master traveled in a similar way. As he said, this was the tenth time he had come around to the dead body of his mount in the last six days!

Six days! It had been seven full days since he had tasted his last drop of water. His food had lasted longer. He chewed bits of dried buffalo flesh, as tasteless as leather, and the saliva thus engendered had moistened his mouth and throat to some degree. Later he had sliced off bits of his saddle curtains and chewed them. But finally his throat seemed to swell up; the saliva would not come; his body was actually drying up.

Oddly enough, although his bodily weakness was great, his mind had not given way. Usually the victim of desert thirst dies within thirty-six hours, or goes mad.

He realized that he had lost enormously in weight; every particle of moisture had dried out of his skin; he was in positive pain because of the gnawing of his stom-
ach.

Somewhere he had read that there were five important phases of the awful desert thirst. Those who have suffered some, or all, of these degrees of horror, have lent some assistance to science in cataloguing them.

First comes the clamorous, cotton-mouth phase—the
same feeling that one may have in the morning after a drinking bout the night before; that feverish, over-mustering desire to pour something liquid and cooling down the parched throat—that feeling that would set a tired man running a mile for a drink if he saw a lake at that distance and there was no other water near! This wanderer had suffered that, and the memory of its intense agony was with him still.

He remembered clearly that scientists claimed that the second stage of thirst was that of the shriveled tongue. The tongue actually dries and recedes into the mouth; speech is scarcely possible. Yet even now he could manage to croak aloud—though, perhaps, nobody aside from himself could have fully understood what he said!

The subsequent stages of this awful suffering, including the sweating of blood and the positive drying up of the internal organs, ending in a state of living death after which nothing in science can save the victim, were yet to be experienced. He felt now that he was not far from the end. The sun had finally, on this eighth morning of his journey in the desert, come forth and driven away all the clouds excepting a few pleasant, fleecy ones. This added now to his sufferings. He could not take advantage of the sun to gain the correct direction by which to travel to the boundary of the desert. Indeed, he could not even think which was the right direction!

And now he could walk no farther. It seemed to him as though his last tramp around the mysterious circle, which had brought him again to the dead horse, had occupied him two days. He looked at his watch—he had kept that going by force of habit—and the position of the hands amazed him.

“What!” croaked he. “But the quarter to twelve—almost high noon?”

Then he thought deeply, seating himself languidly on the sand mound that partly covered the dead horse. “At ten o'clock I was here before. Yes! at ten o'clock. That was yesterday morning? Of course! Then, why is not the watch run down? I had not wound it for a long time then, and have not had it out of my pocket since—not if my mind is still clear. Perhaps it has stopped!”

He put it to his ear. It ticked vigorously.

“Well! this is a mystery!”

He tried the stem, gave it a few slow turns, and found it wound up tightly!

“By George!” This ejaculation was whispered, and was not an ejaculation only in words and intention. His voice was so languid that he drewled the words.

“By George! that is strange. I clearly remember winding the watch yesterday morning—not long before I left this place on this fearful last tramp. Ha! I'm a fool!” he continued, his mutterings so low and uncertain. “This is not possible. I have not slept since being here. I left at ten or thereabout; it is not now twelve. What has seemed like hours—twenty-four long, long hours—a whole day—has really been but from ten till noon! How slow we die!”

And this man was young! He was rich, he was yet to see his thirtieth year, and he should have had a long life before him. But he sat there on the mound of sand, beside the dead horse, and calmly waited for death.

Suddenly his vagrant gaze turned from the sand at his feet, and he looked toward the north. He had probably not looked in that direction since the sun had burst its mask of clouds. He had given up trying to see any boundary to this waste of sand.

But on this instant he started. It was no boundary he saw, however. It was something in the sky—rather hanging betwixt sky and earth.

There, shining like a great jewel in the sunlight, was a sweet green vale, in which the trees waved and the shadows wandered to and fro. So distinct was the picture that he could see the long grasses bow and bow again as the wind swept over them. It was a most attractive picture to the unfortunate victim on the desert.

But, above all, there was a pool, or a pond, or, perhaps, it was a river running through this valley in the air. The water was a patch of sparkling blue!

The man groaned and staggered to his feet.

He stood wavering there for a minute before he got his equilibrium. Then he looked with all his poor, blood-shot eyes upon the vision.

“This is torment!” he croaked. “I've heard of it. It tempts me. It is a vision only—it is not real! I must resist this, or it will drag me off across the desert and my state will be worse. It is a temptation of the devil!”

This he told himself to try and fight down the unlawful hope that found lodgment and grew in his heart.

Then the mirage changed. Out of the pool shot a column—a tree—a white pillar in which the reflected sunlight danced in rainbow hues. It shot upward, spread like a fountain—a gorgeous riot of color, and then—it faded in a flash, and there was nothing where it had been in the air but a light cloud floating!

“A mirage!” gasped the tortured man.

They are common in the desert; common sense told him that. Merely he had not chanced to see one before. His unhealthy mind had not conjured up such a vision before. He had up to this point kept his brain and thought steady. Now he was losing his grip.

Hope still burned in his soul. His mind worked slowly.

“That was not all fancy,” he murmured. “I really saw the valley. If I saw it—or its representation—there must be an original of it somewhere. A mirage must have some foundation; it is merely a picture of what really exists. Now, where is the real valley, the photograph of which was flung upon those clouds?”

He started up with sudden strength. His eyes swept the northern horizon. He ran—so it seemed to him;
in reality he staggered like a drunken man—to a high mound some few yards away. To the top of this he climbed—or crawled; he found himself on his hands and knees when he reached the top. His mind and determination were much stouter than his poor body.

There, once more on his feet, with his legs wide astride to establish himself, he gazed again northerly. There was a patch of blue there that was neither smoke nor clouds!

“There are hills! The valley lies hidden in them. It is there!”

He thought he shouted it. The truth was his cracked whisper could not have been heard ten yards away.

With that gasping cry he flung sanity to the winds! His mind gave way. He had fought against hallucinations until now. In an instant all his will-power was swept away and he believed that what he saw was real. The blue haze was hills; amid the hills was the pleasant and watered valley that he had seen pictured on the clouds.

This belief gave him unnatural strength—the strength of the maniac. He went back to the dead horse. He slashed through the sun-dried hide to the flesh beneath. He tore off a huge slice, and from this cut small bits which he conveyed to his mouth. Meanwhile, he started doggedly to walk northward. He could see that faint blue haze whenever he raised his eyes from the sands. He walked toward it.

He was much stronger than before. Insanity lent him this physical ability. It had sapped his mind, but given him renewed bodily vigor.

With the sun beating down upon him he still walked on. Sometimes he fell; but he rose again and continued in the same direction. To his mind the blue hills grew in size. He drew nearer to them.

The sun sank in the west. This man, who had become an automaton rather than a human being, staggered on. Twilight—then darkness—fell upon the desert. Only the dim starlight bathed the plain. The one moving figure on the vast and dreary expanse was that of the madman, moving steadily northward toward the eminences which he still believed he saw.

It was early morning, and the ravine was cold at the bottom where the cabin sat. In the winter the walls of the ravine had sheltered the cabin from the winds and storms; but now the rising sun touched only the uplands and left the bottom of the narrow gorge damp and chill. The occupant of the cabin, therefore, had a roaring fire on the hearth, and smoke and sparks whirled upward from the stick and clay chimney.

He was a lanky, grimy man, dressed in frowsy furs, with a skin cap and beardskin moccasins. In one corner of his cabin was a heap of dirty blankets and furze which served as his bed. The rest of the room, excepting a narrow space about the fire and hearth, was littered with skins—mostly pelts stripped from the huge timber wolves that infested the country thereabout.

The stench of the half-cured hides, and the smell of assafetida used to attract the animals, and the odor of strychnine used in curing the skins, made the interior of the cabin unbearable to the ordinary person. Its occupant was used to these perfumes from long years of familiarity with them. He had been a wolfer season after season—that breed of hunter and trapper so loathed by the larger run of backwoodsmen.

It was evident that the wolfer had been on a journey. Two mules stood, lop-eared, before the cabin, still weighted down by packs which he had brought from some distant cache. The man had not yet released them of their burdens before building his fire and preparing breakfast.

But in the midst of these preparations he had suddenly caught sight of a paper tucked by a huge thorn to the wall over his fireplace.

“Jumping Jerusha!” he exclaimed, in amazement and satisfaction; “I knew I couldn’t be mistook. Somebody’s been here.”

He tore down the paper and took it outside to read. There was light enough for that in the ravine, and the firelight inside the cabin was flickering and uncertain. The wolf-hunter squinted at the few lines on the sheet and made them out by spelling, for his education was limited.

“I have sold out at Pink Butte. Made a good spec, and it’s banked. I learned something three days ago that makes me believe that there is trouble in the wind for you know who. It is said that a large force of cavalry have been added to the garrison of Fort Challis, and that there will be a big party marching east before long. I would not communicate with Cody for fear any request I might make would interfere with his duty. But I can depend on you, I know. I have waited two days for you to return, and dare wait no longer. Follow me if you can, for I am not altogether sure of the trail, and you, I know, are perfectly acquainted with it. Help me if you can.

A. M.”

“Jumping Jerusha!” ejaculated the wolfer, staring at the paper as though there were something really dangerous in the writing. “What can the boy be thinking
off? If he's gone to them derned redskins tuh play a lone hand—

"Huh! that means I've got tuh drop things here an' foller him. He'll like enough lose his blessed self in these hills. Of course, he ain't shore o' the' way—hu'!

"Ah! that's like these young fools. And a gal in it! She's red, but that don't make no difference. What does he think he can do with the little spitfire? And the blue-coats are comin', air they?—an' Buffler?"

He turned his eyes suddenly to the heights. Down one wall of the gorge wound a steep and narrow path. It was originally begirt by wild creatures making their way down to the water. The pool beside which the cabin stood had long been a drinking-place for the people of the wilds.

What the wolf-saw at the head of the path now made him start and snort:

"Dern my hide! Speakin' of th' devil an' yuh'll smell brimstone. Here's Buffler now!"

Just beginning the descent of the steep path was a big bay horse, rather fancifully caparisoned, though the steed was worthy of the finest outfit its master could put upon him. That master himself was jauntily dressed, too. He sat in his saddle like a centaur—a broad-shouldered, handsome man, ruddy of countenance, with keen, searching glance, and a manner alert and body supple as a snake's. The military mustache and goatee he wore lent distinction to his features; the garb in which he was dressed adorned his handsome form. The dress consisted of a coat of buckskin, ornamented with fringe and Indian beadwork, tight-fitting trousers with a broad cavalry stripe, and polished riding boots that extended half up his upper leg to the thigh. His spurs were of silver, his saddle was of Mexican workmanship and silver mounted, and the broad sombrero he wore was ornamented likewise with a silver cord.

This handsome apparition saw the old fellow in his skin clothing below and waved his hand. Oddly enough, neither of them spoke until the bay horse had come carefully down the steep and was within a few yards of the cabin. Then they could speak in ordinary tones. Both were too cautious woodsmen to shout their greetings in a wilderness which might hide some red enemy.

"Waal, Buffler!" said the wolf-hunter.

"Well, you old reprobate! So the wolves didn't get you this winter, eh?"

The wolf-saw grimmed, showing his ragged stubs of teeth, and shook his head.

"'T'other way round, Buffler. I never got so many of their scalps and hides. And I kin thank you for a part of them—helpin' me that time last fall."

"That's good. I rather reckoned I'd see you again during the winter, but it didn't pan out."

"So I understand."

"Oh, you kept track of matters? I remember hearing tell you were at Pink Butte once."

"Yep."

"Arthur told me."

"He was here."

"When?"

"Waal, th' first time, eh?" repeated Cody, understanding from the man's manner that there was something behind his words.

"Yep."

"Is he here now?"

"Nope."

"Well, hang it all, Joe! what d'ye mean?"

"Why, Buffler, he seems to think you might interfere with a little plan he has on hand, and, not meanin' any offense, you gotter tell me what yuh doin' here before I tell you anything more about that boy."

Cody broke into a round laugh.

"I can see through you, Joe, like a plate-glass window!"

Wolf-saw snorted, but said nothing.

"You don't mean to say that boy has any quixotic idea of trying to interfere with the United States Government?"

Wolf-saw merely winked, worked his own arm up and down like a pump, and shook his head.

"'Eh?" said Cody, somewhat puzzled.

"No use, Buffler."

"What's no use?"

"Your pumping."

"'Eh?"

"The well's run dry, I tell yuh."

"Ha! ha! ha!" cried the scout. "I'll let you pump me first, then."

"Go ahead," said Wolf-saw. "What you doing here? What's under foot over tuh Fort Challis?"

"When I left Colonel Hasbrouck was preparing in person to lead an expedition in this direction."

"Jumping Jerusha! That's what the boy says."

"I guess he's got it right."

"And you have come ahead to spy out the land, Buffler?"

"That's it. And more than that. I am going to try to influence that girl and her people to give up and come in sensibly. This winter must have been a hard one on them. I'm mistaken if we find half of them alive."

"The Kickapoos?"

"Yes."

"Waal, that's tough on the red scamps. It has been a hard winter, I allow."

"We haven't heard a word from them, of course, as yet."

"And the colonel is going to round 'em up anyway, and send 'em South?"
"If they won't go peaceably they must be made to go."
"Oh, they must, heh?"
"That's it. But I'm going to do my best alone first. Colonel Hasbrouck won't start from the post for two weeks yet."
"Oh, ho! waal, that's better," said Wolfer Joe, with satisfaction.
"Why do you say that?"
"Because the boy has got some plan of his own, and he wants to put it into use without any interference."
"I'll soon get that foolishness out of him."
"Oh, yuh will?" grinned Wolfer Joe.
"Come! he's too fine a fellow to be mixed up with a red squaw."
"He's a man grown."
"Hang it all, Joe! you've always half-backed him up in this foolish interest he has in Wapahoka. Where is he?"
"Who?"
"Miriwale."
"Oh, him! Why he ain't here," drawled the wolf-hunter.
"Thunder! I thought you said he was."
"I never. I said he'd been here."
"Twice?"
"Yep."
"When was he here last?"
"Why, I've been off nigh a fortnight. Jest got back this morning. He's been here while I was gone."
"And gone?"
"That he has."
"How did you know all this, then?"
"He writ me."
"And where's he gone now?"
"Why, Buffler, if I ain't much mistook, he's sot out for the Kickapoo village—an', by th' etalium! he'll git thar ahead o' yuh!" and Wolfer Joe ended in a cackling laugh.
"You don't mean that, Joe?"
"I shore do."
"But he doesn't know what he's about."
"He writ sensible enough."
"He may do untold damage."
"Reckon not."
"He may get into trouble with the department. Those Injuns have got to go back to their reservation, and that's all there is to it."
"I reckon he won't keer how soon yuh take 'em back—all but one."
"Fool! fool!" exclaimed the scout. "He's putting his neck in a noose. Let's see that letter he wrote you, Joe."
The wolf-hunter complied with this request.
"The boy is crazy!" muttered Cody.

"Jumping Jerusha!" exclaimed the old man. "You don't r'ally believe he'll git intuh danger, do yuh?"
"How do we know what he'll do—a young fool enamored of a girl as beautiful as she is—for, by Heaven! she is beautiful, whether she's red or not!" and the scout said it impulsively.
"Waal, Buffler, I couldn't help it. Don't blame me, for I warn't to home when he come."
"And we don't know how long since he was here."
"Might ha' been ten days ago for all I know."
"For some moments Cody was silent, thinking deeply. Finally he said:
"Has it rained in these hills of late?"
"It's been threatenin'—but 'tain't rained much as I knows on."
"Sure?"
"Yep. No signs of it as I come erlong."
"We'll look for his trail, then," said Cody decidedly.
"We'll have breakfast first, by thunder!" exclaimed Wolfer Joe, and he went about it in a hurry.
"You can do that," said Cody gravely. "I'll look about."

A trail possibly ten days old, even if there has been no rain, is not an easy matter to trace. But, in the first place, it transpired that Arthur Mirriwale, the young Englishman that they were both so fond of, rode a horse that was peculiarly marked. It had a split hoof, or something of the kind, and there was a peculiar horseshoe on its off forefoot. This made the trail, wherever visible, plain enough to the practised eyes of the scout. When Joe called him to breakfast he had made sure of the direction, Arthur Mirriwale had followed on leaving the wolfers' cabin.

These two old trailers were not to be easily befuddled; especially when Mirriwale had done nothing at all to guard against being followed. They managed to travel at a good, sharp pace, Cody on his bay stallion and the wolf on his saddle mule.

Finally—and this was before very long, too—they remarked that Mirriwale had not taken the right direction if he was going directly to the Kickapoo camp. He had borne off to the northward, and soon the trailers came out through the hills and struck the edge of the desert, far to the north of the Kickapoo valley.

They could behold a goodly stretch of the desert from the hillside on which their horses had stopped. They stood at the exit of the pass through which Arthur Mirriwale's trail had led them, and, after looking over the utterly empty plain, the two companions at arms looked at each other.

"Jumping Jerusha, Buffler!" gasped Wolfer Joe.
"This derned trail seems tuh lead jest erbout tuh nowhere!"

Cody shook his head. It was a moment or two before he spoke.
“Old man, it comes nearer to leading to death than anything else,” he said earnestly.

CHAPTER IV.
THE SCAREGOAT.

“Aw, yuh foolin’, Buffer!” cried Wolfie Joe. “That boy wouldn’t be durned enough to set out across this desert.”

“It don’t look so bad from up here—only to them that know.”

“I can’t believe it!”

“Let’s follow down the trail and see what he really did do.”

They went down to the very edge of the desert—to where the loose sand had blown to and fro and covered long since every trace of the man and horse they followed. He had plunged into the desert; no doubt of that!

“Waal, I didn’t re’lly think th’ cuss was such a bobcat!” grunted Wolfie Joe, in disgust.

“It don’t look so bad to the uninitiated, you know,” Cody returned gravely. “Probably he started to cut off a corner of it—”

“Go cat-a-cornered, eh?”

“Yes. Rather than go back through the pass and go down the other valley. Of course, he knew he’d got too far north the minute he struck this sand plain.”

“An’ the Lord only knows where he is now!” groaned the old hunter, who had really come to think a great deal of young Mirrival.

“We’ve got to find that out, old man. We can’t let the matter drift.”

“But you’ve got to get down to them Kickapooos, Buffer.”

“I’m going to find out what has become of this poor fellow first—if possible.”

“By the eternal, Buffer!” exclaimed Joe. “This is no evenin’ soiree you’re a-plannin’. D’yuh know that?”

“Backin’ out?”

“Shut up!” roared Wolfie Joe. “I wonder I don’t put a ball through you some day for intermatin’ that I’m white-livered!”

“I know,” said Cody, smiling.

“Huh!”

“Because, like the redskins, you don’t believe the bullet is cast that will kill me.”

“Mebbe that’s so,” admitted the waiter.

A little discussion on the joint issue brought the decision—coincided by both men—that Arthur Mirrival’s direction in starting to cross the desert must have been toward the southeast. But when Wolfie Joe was for starting in that very direction to find the fellow, Cody objected.

“If he got across the sand and reached the hills down there—all well and good. But Joe, I don’t believe he did it!” declared the scout.

“Jumpin’ Jerusha! we dunno re’lly what he did, Buffer. Mebbe he’s all right, arter all.”

“If I had any idea of it, I’d go back through yonder pass and keep on for the Kickapoo encampment, now I tell you!”

“Huh!”

“I can’t help knowing that the boy must be lost—or dead! It’s been overcast for some days. By thunder! this is the first bright day in a week.”

“And it’s hot to-day,” grunted Joe.

“What kind of a horse did Arthur ride?” asked Cody suddenly.

“A mighty fine one. He bought it of Alex Prevoost—that red roan.”

“No!”

“Yes, I tell you. A durned good horse.”

“Not even acclimated,” groaned Cody.

“The hoss had bottom and speed.”

“What good will that do on this sand heap?” demanded the scout sharply. “Give me a pony, or a wild mustang for such work. Ha!”

“Oh, I suppose you’re right, Buffer. You always be!”

“Now, that horse wouldn’t last long in this desert.”

“I suppose not. But the boy has pluck, anyway.”

“Come! we’ll cut straight across the place. I’ve a good compass. There’s water back there, Joe. We’ll fill everything we’ve got that will carry liquid—and let the critters drink their fill.”

“Was you ever across here?”

“Not I! But I’ve talked with men that have seen it—a little.”

“It’s a durned big place, I reckon.”

“Big enough to get lost in—especially for a tender-foot.”

“Arthur isn’t just a tenderfoot.”

“He certainly doesn’t know anything about traveling in this territory,” grunted Cody. “Come on! Let’s get the water and make a start.”

“But isn’t there any water in the place at all?”

“Why, I hear there is a spot in the middle somewhere that is not sand. I talked with an old Indian once who had been through and through the desert. It’s bad medicine, he says. You don’t catch the Sioux venturing into it much.”

“They’re sharp, all right.”

“Well, this old beggar, it seems, was once caught in a sand-storm and lost. He declared to me he found a place in the middle of the expanse where there was water and trees and pasture.”

“Pooh! how could that be?” With the sand blowing about?

“There are oases in the Desert of Sahara, they say.”

“Dunno Sarah’s desert—where is it?” grunted Joe.
“That’s a good way off,” laughed Cody.

“Well, let’s git back tuh this one. What else did the redskin say?”

“Well, he had rather a rambling tale to tell. I reckon the old boy pretty near went off his nut from thirst and exposure. He says that somewhere in the desert is a great heap of rocks. These rocks completely surround a place where the grass is green, and the trees are pleasant, and there is an abundance of water. Only a narrow opening from the desert admits you to this valley.”

“Pooh!” grunted Wolfer Joe. “Some o’ their lies.”

“I admit it sounds so. Besides, the old fellow seemed to be afraid to tell me much about it. He declares a god, or a spirit of evil, dwells in this mysterious oasis.”

“Huh! Allus the way. Can’t b’lieve a word they say.”

“I think he was probably touched in the head, as I say, from suffering so much. But, anyway, he had been lost in the desert, and stayed a month——”

“A month!”

“So his people say.”

“But a man couldn’t live that long without food and water, Buffle!”

“That’s exactly it. I think it is well understood that he was lost all of four weeks.”

“Then—by the eternal, Buffle! There may be sthinn’ in it.”

“In the desert?”

“In his story of there being an oyster there.”

“What you talking about?” demanded Cody. “An oyster?”

“Didn’t you call it an oyster—what you said they have in this Sarah’s desert?”

“Oh, thunder! an oasis.”

“That’s it! A place where there’s trees an’ water, eh?”

“Ah! well, it does look as though the old beggar must have got water and food somehow.”

“Then, by the eternal! I feel better,” declared Wolfer Joe.

“You feel better?”

“Shore. Arthur may have found that place, too.”

“If he’s still out there,” Cody said gravely, with a sweeping gesture toward the gray east, “let us hope he has found a well and food. Otherwise——”

He did not complete the sentence. It was not necessary. The wolf-hunter understood his meaning well enough.

They turned their horses’ noses to the plain before high noon. They rode as rapidly as possible, and on a straight-away easterly course. Cody believed that, if Mirrivale had lost his way, he would gradually circle to the east and north. That would be his natural direction, for, if he lost his horse and went afoot, his right foot would take a longer stride than his left and gradually bring him in a circle.

These two old plainsmen, however, knew well how to keep a straight line on the desert. It is true Cody looked at his needle once or twice; but he struck out across the sand plain firmly and made no doubt of their direction.

All that day they traveled without seeing a sign of the missing man. But this was no surety that, somewhere, they had not crossed his trail of wanderings. Merely the shifting sands had covered all impression of his foot.

“If he’s been a week in this desert without getting out, what hope is there for him, old man?” Cody asked gloomily, as they camped that night with nothing but the star-sprinkled sky above them and the sand beneath.

“We’d much better be about our other business.”

“Jumping Jerusha! Never say die! I won’t believe the boy dead. Folks have lived longer than that without water.”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes, they have! I knowed a feller once that had been a sailor. He’d been wrecked at sea... He and his pards lived on a raft without a thing tuh drink for two weeks.”

“That’s different, old man. Being thirsty at sea isn’t like being thirsty on a sand-pile.”

“How’s that?”

“At sea there is moisture. One can jump into the sea and let the water soak into the pores and so relieve some of the desire of the body for moisture. But here——”

“Waal!” grunted Wolfer Joe gloomily, and said nothing more.

The moon came up—rather pale and watery; but by its light the two went on again. Their steeds, having had nothing to eat and little water, were willing enough to make a night march. At noon the next day they reached the edge of the desert on the east. Twenty hours of severe traveling altogether, with the bay stallion and the saddle mule pretty nearly done up.

They decided not to risk going straight across the sands again, but followed along the edge—after waiting a day—and making little excursions into the desert to see if they could pick up any stray trace of the lost man.

But both had lost hope after a time. They kept on, because they were really going in the general direction of Cody’s errand—toward the Kickapoo’s village. And when they came in sight of a pass that they knew led through the mountains into that pleasant valley which the tribe had preempted for its own, the bordermen came upon a strange sight, and one that quite nonplused both for the time being. Therefore, I shall be obliged to explain the matter here:

Fearful as he had been made by the wonderful mirage and the “blooming of the phantom flower,” as the redskins called the mystery, old Nakona had seized upon
the chance to play it as a trump card. He declared the
mirage was a warning to Wapahoka herself.

"The Great Spirit is not pleased with his children,
the Kickapoos," declared the wily old snake. "He looks
down and sees them guided by a squaw. Now he warns
Wapahoka that her time has come. The phantom flower
has budded and bloomed for her. She must go to her
place. The Kickapoos have been troubled because of
her, and have been made poor. It is the end!"

And much more to the same purpose spoke the old
medicine-man, and so inspired his people to believe. The
friends Wapahoka had gained because of her success in
saving the tribe from starvation, fell away from her.
And she, herself, could not combat this enmity of the
old magician.

She was broken. Superstition had laid hold upon her.
She had lost her courage, and her fastest friends lost
theirs. They believed with her that the vision that had
appeared so shortly before her father's death, had now
come to warn her of her departure. Fatalism was bred
in the very bone of the beautiful queen of the Kickapoos.
She believed she was marked for death.

Stirring his people to a wild and religious zeal, Na-
konza had himself borne up the valley, through the pass,
and out upon the barren slope of the mountains that faced
the desert. The tribe, in sorrow and fear, went with him.
They were not in war-dress, the two whites, and
Cody knew that some mysterious Indian rite was to be
performed. He had no idea what it was, however, until
Wapahoka appeared. She came of her own volition;
but it was because the medicine chief said she must. It
was demanded of her. The Great Spirit was, without
doubt, angry with her people, and she must be sacrificed.

She came shorn of her brilliant plumage. There was
no band about her head, no feather in her hair, no gay
heading on her dress. All she wore was the chain about
her neck with the yellow diamond pendant to it. That
she had clung to, and the medicine-man was afraid of
the white man's charm, anyway, and would not touch it.

Like the scapegoat of the old Hebrew-tribes, which
was sent into the wilderness supposedly loaded with the
sins of the people once a year, so Wapahoka came down
the hillside while her people chanted the song of the
dead, and with empty arms, without food, water, or
weapons, entered the death desert to bear in her own
person the punishment of the crimes of her people.

And old Nakona, crippled and malevolent, at last
had accomplished his desire. The thorn in his flesh was
removed. Nobody now balked his influence with the
Kickapoos.

CHAPTER V.

THE MAN IN THE MIRAGE.

The two whites had fortunately obtained a shelter
without being seen by the redskins. For, although the
Kickapoos had not brought arms to this place where
Wapahoka was cast adrift, they would have pounced
upon Cody and his partner in a moment. Indians do not
favor the presence of palefaces at their real religious
ceremonies.

The "ghost-dance" and such that are held on the re-
ervation, and to which curious whites go as they would
go to the play or opera, are not the real thing. In fact,
frequently they are held for the express purpose of at-
tracting visitors, who are sure to leave lassess behind
them, and to buy beadwork, and baskets, and such truck
of the old squaws.

Here Cody and Wolfer Joe had an opportunity of
viewing a real and unmistakable religious ceremony.
And, although they did not understand its full signifi-
cance, they saw that Wapahoka, whom the whites had
hoped would finally gain complete control of her people,
was really cast out by them.

"Jumping Jerusha!" muttered the old wolf-hunter.
"What's this bein' done th' gal?"

"I don't just understand it," admitted the scout.
"Don't see Arthur there. 'Tain't nawthin' erbout him,
I s'pose?"

"We'll hope not."

"Where's the gal going?"

"I can see that plain enough—and so ought you."

"By th' eternal! I kin see she's started afoot into the
desert—more fool she!"

"They've driven her out."

"What!"

"Sure. She has been cast out of the tribe for some
reason."

"The poor gal! Is that what the red devils do?—and
to a gal?"

"You never fancied redskins were particularly gentle
creatures, did you?"

The old man looked on him with scorn.

"What's eatin' yuh?" he demanded.

"Turning a girl adrift in the desert isn't anything to
them. It's mild."

"I'd rather be tied to the stake."

"Perhaps she had."

"She makes no bones of it."

"Oh, she appears joyous and happy to you, does she?"
demanded Cody, in disgust.

"Jumping Jerusha! How can I see what she looks
like—with her head down like that? Ha! Buffalo, then
red are goin' back."

The girl had walked now more than half a mile into
the desert. She was walking straight north, and she
did not look back or to either side. Her eyes were on
the ground at her feet.

"If they skin out, she can come back," said Wolfer
Joe shrewdly.

"If she would!"
“She’d not be such a fool as to commit suicide if she didn’t rather, would she?”

“You can’t never tell what an Injun will do. But you watch. All the red scoundrels won’t go—yet.”

And Cody was right on that point. Old Nakona left no gap or loophole in his plan. Whether Wapahoka’s pride and courage would have given way, and she been tempted to escape from the awful death that faced her, the old medicine chief did not leave her unwatched. As the day lengthened the white men saw that a dozen savages and what appeared to be a heap of blankets—that was old Nakona himself—remained on the hillside to watch the departure of the unfortunate girl.

She kept on into the north. She did not falter or once look back. Her figure grew smaller and smaller, while the sun rapidly dropped toward the western hills. By and by his flaming face disappeared altogether. The cool twilight came to bless the desert. Shadows crept across it and blot out the moving figure from even the keen eyes of the savages above on the mountainside.

At this time Cody, who had long been silent, moved and whispered:

“Wait here. I’ll be back in a jiff.”

Before Wofler Joe could ask questions he was gone, and he remained away for the better part of an hour. When he slipped back into the gully in which they had been hidden all day, he seemed peculiarly eager.

“All right! the coast’s clear,” he said to his partner.

“What coast?”

“The Injuns have gone—every last one of them.”

“From up yonder?”

“Yes. Now we can go.”

“I say, Buffer,” said Wofler Joe slowly. “Yuh ain’t re’ly goin’ on an’ leave—an’ leave——”

“Leave what?”

“Why, it seems derned tough—out there on the desert—nothin’ to eat or drink——”

“Joe! Haven’t you given up Mirrivale yet?”

“I’m afraid I have, Bill,” and the old man shook his head. “But the gal?”

“Oh! that’s who I’m after, old man! Got the cans full of water? No! we’ll leave the critters. They’re hobbled and we’re better off without ‘em on the desert. It’s Wapahoka’s trail I mean to take up. Come on!”

There was no moon this night—as yet; but the stars smiled mildly down upon the waste they entered so boldly. They found the light footprints of the poor girl who had been ostracized of her people. They followed them with ease, knowing that she had gone straight ahead. She was, of course, long since out of their sight.

Wofler Joe was more used to walking than Cody; but the scout had been wise enough before he deserted his horse to remove his long boots, with their high heels and spurs, and put on an extra pair of moccasins with which old Joe was never without.

Most of their packs had been left with their steeds; but they carried meat and coffee. There might be a little grease-wood or sage-brush in the desert which would make a fire possible, and a cup of coffee is more heartening than stagnant water. How far they would go before overtaking Wapahoka they did not know. That depended upon whether the girl kept on walking when night overtook her.

And it was quite certain she had. Midnight passed, and still the two white men were hurrying on across the sands, every few minutes making sure that the small prints of the girl’s feet continued. Hour after hour passed; it was a lonely, eerie night. Not a bird’s note, or even a coyote’s cry, broke the stillness. They were in a waste land, and none of the beasts of the field or fowls of the air troubled it!

This loneliness was far more marked when it came on toward dawn. The stars seemed to fade and the arch of heaven grew black before even the eastern horizon blushed gray. It was as though the night were tired and worn waiting for daybreak to appear.

Elsewhere, to herald the birth of a new day, there are the chirping of drowsy birds, the croaking of frogs in the swamp, the disappointed meows of the cat tribe that may have hunted all night without result, and a thousand little sounds, and rustlings. The air cools suddenly, too—the new, fresh breath of the coming day.

Not so here on the desert. To the men trudging on over the still hot sand there was little warning of the change to come. The stars seemed to glimmer more faintly, and some of them entirely disappeared. The vault of heaven was cloudless and grew blacker at the zenith. Suddenly, like a giant painter dashing his brush across the full breadth of the eastern sky, the summits of the hills there were picked out with a line of grayish white. It made them look ghostly.

But quickly the gray turned to pearl, and a mottled streak spread upward to the zenith. Then a flash of pink appeared above those eastern hills. Like the changing colors of a kaleidoscope—and all as mechanical and as hard—the pink changed to deep red, the deep red to crimson, the crimson was quenched in a burst of fire out of and up from which leaped a round, angry ball; and at once the whole desert glared with its reflected rays and those walking over the sands were scorched with its heat.

It was not the right birth of a new day. It was more like a tableau change in some fiendish pantomime.

“We ought to see the girl pretty soon, old man,” said Cody, first to break the silence for a long time.

“By the eternal! she’s a plucky one, and that’s all there be to it, Buffer. Who’d ha’ thought of her trapsein’ so fur intill this place?”

“Poor girl! there’s something of moment the matter with her. I don’t understand these actions at all.”
That durned Nakona is at the bottom of it, I bet.”

“I did not think he would ever have much influence with the tribe again.”

“I’d oughter stamped th’ life out o’ him last fall,” grunted Wolfe Joe. “This is what comes of bein’ tender-hearted. His scalp belonged tuh me, and I’d oughter have it tied ter my bridle now. We’ve got suthin’ to do besides follerin’ an’ Injun squaw intuh this sand heap.”

“That’s so, Joe. But we can’t leave her here to die. And, perhaps, she knows something about Arthur. It’s a chance.”

“It’s a chance he’s not lying dead himself here, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“We’ve wasted several days and nights, then, and the young scamp needs a good hiding if he’s alive and all right.”

But, although Wolfe Joe so grumbled, he was as eager as Cody—if not more so—to follow even the faintest clue to Mirtville’s whereabouts. Suddenly he shouted aloud and tossed up his hands.

“See thar, Buffalo!”

“What is it, old man?” asked the scout.

“Yonder—sittin’ down thar. Don’t yuh see?”

“It’s a carrion crow!”

“So are you!”

“It’s not a man?!”

“The gal—shore,” declared Wolfe Joe vigorously. They hurried on, hearing off toward the speck that the wolf had observed first. As they approached his wisdom was proven. The Indian maiden was sitting on a low hammock of sand, her face still turned in a northerly direction. She remained so seated, although they hailed her; she did not even turn her head.

“The girl isn’t dead, is she?” gasped Buffalo Bill, beginning to run.

“Ah, Buffalo! so you’re some interested in her, be yuh?” grunted the wolf-hunter, in a low voice, as he followed the scout at a fast trot.

Cody knew what fancies and stoics these Indians were. And the sex of this unfortunate scapegoat made the case all the more moving. The scout reached the girl in a very few minutes, and some distance ahead of the wolf.

“Wapahoka!” he exclaimed, seizing the statuelike girl by the shoulder.

She shrank from him for a moment, looking up into his face first in terror, and then in wonderment.

“It is Pa-e-has-ka—the Long Hair,” she murmured at last.

“Of course it is. Don’t you know me?”

“I know thee now, Long Hair,” said Wapahoka, in her own tongue.

“And didn’t you hear us shout to you?”

“I thought it was the spirits of the desert—the evil spirits whom poor Wapahoka has come to satisfy for her people’s sins,” murmured the girl.

“Get out!” roared Wolfe Joe suddenly. “They ain’t no seck thing! Jumping Jerusha! who d’yuh think is a-goin’ tah hurt yuh, gal?”

Wapahoka spread her hands abroad.

“It is not for long. The devils of thirst already grip me. I am enhungered. It is not for long.”

“See here, girl,” Cody said, in English. “You aren’t going to throw your life away for a mess of ignorant and ungrateful redskins.”

“They are my people.”

“Haven’t they turned you out of the tribe?”

“It is the will of the Great Spirit,” declared the girl, slowly shaking her head. “I have been warned—as the Great Chief was warned.”

“Huh? what’s that?” demanded the wolf.

“You are overwrought. You are not yourself,” said Cody kindly. “You know I proved to you once that all that old magician’s magic was fake.”

“Aye! he is a devil. That I know,” admitted the girl, for the first time speaking in English. “But it is not he.”

“What’s the matter, then?”

In a few broken words, she explained the vision the tribe had seen of the phantom flower. Cody made out immediately that the vision itself must have been a mirage; but he did not understand the blooming of the so-called phantom flower any more than did the Kickapoos.

“Did you ever hear such a tale, Joe?” he demanded of the old hunter.

But the latter had been suddenly attracted to the mound on which the girl was sitting—or, rather, to what the mound partly covered.

“By the eternal, Buffalo!” he exclaimed. “Looker yere!”

“What’s up now?”

“See what’s under this sand, old feller!”

“By thunder! A burial place.”

“Suthin’ buried, shore enough,” and Wolfe Joe began to kick away the sand.

“A man, Joe?”

“No, by jingo! it’s a hoss!” declared the wolf.

“Whew! I say, it’s been under the sand some time.”

“Nop. I would be more dried up. See! Somebody’s cut a steak out o’ th’ haunch o’ th’ critter.”

“Joe!” gasped the scout. “Can it be—”

“Jumping Jerusha, Buffalo! If it is—”

“Arthur!” they both shouted now.

“It’s a red-roan,” Cody cried.

“It’s his hoss,” said Wolfe Joe. “Here’s a part of the saddle. I’ll swear to it.”

The girl’s attention was drawn by these exclamations and the white men’s overpowering excitement.

“What is it, Long Hair?”
THE BUFFALO BILL STORIES.

Cody believed he saw a way to arouse the girl from her apathy. He looked at her straight and said:
"Why do you suppose we are here, Wapahoka?"
"In the desert of death?"
"Yes."
"It is a mystery—beyond the powers of poor Wapahoka's imagination."

"We saw you driven into the desert yesterday and waited until your people had gone from the mountain, and so followed to save you." (He had already given her his own flask with which to quench her thirst, and Wolfe Joe had given her meat.) "But we had been searching the desert for another."

"Another!"
"Aye. And one you know. The young white brave whose jewel you wear at your neck, Wapahoka, is lost in this waste of sand."

The girl sprang up suddenly. The words seemed to inspire her with life and action.
"The paleface warrior speaks true?" she demanded.
"True indeed, Wapahoka."
"Tell me!"
"Tell you what?"
"How the young man came to be here?"

"Aha! Wapahoka," said Cody, drawing a bit on his imagination, yet for a good purpose—"or he saw that the girl had been shaken out of her torpor by this. "Aye, I will tell you. He was coming, I believe, to your village."

"Coming to the encampment of the Kickapous?"
"He was, indeed. He feared you were in some danger—or had been left destitute by the hard winter. As soon as the snow faded and the rivers were freed again, and the grasses sprang, he set out for your lodge."

The girl trembled all over, and she panted, her sad face suddenly blushing hotly. Cody was rather amazed by her emotion. He had not realized how deep was the attachment between this chief's daughter and Arthur Mirrivale.

But the scout went on quietly, still watching the girl's beautiful face.
"He came alone; his knowledge of the country is not like that of the Kickapous, or of the Long Hair and his friend who wears fur. No. He wandered out upon this sand waste, and this is his horse. The man who wears fur knows it. The horse dropped here and died."

"Then is the young brave dead likewise," muttered Wapahoka.

"Of that we are not sure. We have searched for him three days and more."

"He has gone on before—he is in the hunting-grounds of the paleface. Wapahoka will never see him again, for his God is not the God of the Kickapous, and Wapahoka's spirit and that of the good young warrior will never meet."

"Jumping Jerusha!" exclaimed Wolfe Joe, who understood all this. "Don't talk that way, gall! I ain't give up Arthur Mirrivale as dead yet."

"Why not?" demanded Cody gloomily.
"A feller like him won't give up an' die in a hurry."

"How do you know where he went from here—or if he went at all?" demanded Cody quickly.

"Cos he ain't under this heap o' sand—for one thing."

"Well?"

"And becos I see what he started off right from this yere spot—see that!"

He yelled this out delightedly. He ran forward for some yards and stopped beside a stretch of hard-packed sand. Across it was a line of footprints, leading directly north. Cody saw it, too, and so did Wapahoka; both had hurried after the excited wolfers.

"It's his trail, by the eternal!" yelped Wolfe Joe.
"Well, now! what the devil set him afoot in that direction?" demanded Cody in disgust.

"And he walking strong, too." muttered Wolfe Joe. "Those footprints don't seem to be those of a very weak man, eh?" cried the scout quickly.

"But I bet they ain't three days old!"

"Just the same, he had plenty of sun to lay his course by three days ago."

Suddenly they looked at Wapahoka. The girl was standing erect and looking with steady vision toward the north. The emotion that expressed itself in her features disturbed the white men.

"What ails her?" Buffalo Bill demanded.
"What th'—"

Suddenly Wolfe Joe wheeled. Then he uttered a shout.

"Looker thar, Buffalo!"

The scout followed the direction of the gaze of both his companions. In the hazy distance, and directly north of where they stood, a strange cloud formation was apparent in the sky. And yet, it did not look like a cloud, but as though, high up in the air, the sun suddenly had revealed the side of a mountain—as though a curtain had been whisked away...

The view was of a rather oval glen, surrounded by apparently steep rocks which were wooded at their base but rose to some height and were at their tops utterly barren. The vale between, however, was a garden spot, and the atmospheric conditions were such that the observers seemed to be looking through a magnifying-glass, so distinct was every landmark.

"Waal, don't that beat the Dutch—an' they say th' Dutch beat th' devil!" ejaculated Wolfe Joe. "Why, Buffalo, that's th' greatest mirage I ever seen."

"It is a mirage," muttered the scout.

"Of course it is. What did yuh think?"

"I never saw one so sharply defined—Thunder and Mars, Joe! look at that!"
“It’s a man!” roared the old wolver.

The two gazed in amazement at the figure which, as plain as life, they saw walking across the glen in the sky—picture. Then suddenly the vision began to fade, and in a few seconds they saw nothing but a few hazy clouds in that portion of the sky.

The men heard a low moan from the lips of the Indian maiden. They looked at her quickly. Wapahoka had sunk down in a crouching position and had covered her face with her hands.

CHAPTER VI.

THE VOICE OF THE SPIRIT.

“See here!” muttered Cody to his partner. “What’s the matter with the girl?”

“She was tellin’ yuh suthin’ erabout this same mirage, wasn’t she?”

“Here!” cried the scout, shaking Wapahoka by the shoulder. “You don’t want to be scared of that thing! You’ve seen such pictures in the sky before, haven’t you?”

“It is the birth of the phantom flower,” declared the girl, in Kickapoo. “I know it. It is a command to me. I shall go and meet the spirit that commands.”

“Th’ deuce you will!” ejaculated Cody.

“What does she mean by the phantom flower? Thar warn’t no flower erabout that. It was the mirage of a place that must be in this yere desert, Buffler.”

“I believe you’re right, old man! Remember the story I told you about the old Injun who was lost up this way?”

“Betcher!”

“And that man in it—Joe! that was Arthur Mirrivale!” cried the scout.

“Shore it was. Don’t yuh s’pose I seed that? Couldn’t be nobody else, could it?”

The girl slowly raised her head. She listened to this discussion and finally said:

“The paleface warriors are children. That is a vision. It appeared before my father, the Great Chief, was called to the happy hunting-grounds. It foretold his death. It foretells mine. The spirit calls me to that place—where the phantom flower blooms.”

“There warn’t no bloomin’ flower,” declared Wolfer Joe doggedly. “All we saw in that valley was a man.”

“The white man’s eyes are not keen!” exclaimed Wapahoka, in English, and in some vexation.

“You kin bet your boots they be keen!” declared Joe emphatically.

Cody had already started off toward the higher mound—the very sand-hill from which Arthur Mirrivale had searched the north for the cloudy heights which he believed were revealed to him there. And, oddly enough, as soon as Cody had mounted to this elevation he took off his hat and cheered. He saw the blue heights, too!
faces might take her northward. In that direction fate drove her, anyway. But the gloom which had come over her spirit was but slightly lifted.

To Cody’s remarks anent the possibility of Arthur Mirrivale’s appearance in that distant valley, she only said that—if it were so—then it was the young man’s spirit. He had passed on before, and it was merely hiswrath they had seen in the vision.

“What’s the odds what she believes, Buffer?” whispered Joe, who came back in time to hear this. “Come on! Let’s be on our tups. Nothin’ tuh be gained by waitin’ yere.”

Thus urged, the trio began their journey northward from the dead horse mound. The girl was much refreshed, for she had rested a good bit; the two white men were indomitable. Nothing fazed them; they plodded on as though a tramp across this barren and forsaken plain were as much to their taste as a walk in the wildwood would have been!

The red sun dropped slowly to the summit of the western hills, and there seemed to hesitate, as though unwilling to give over the burning desert to the cool shades of night. His final rays seemed to the plodding wayfarers more scorching than his earlier beams.

The travelers ate but sparingly. They feared that their food might encourage their thirst. And, although they allowed but a few drops of water to trickle down their throats at a time, the precious liquid was fast depleted.

By and by the glaring light which so hurt their eyes became subdued; but it was hours before any appreciable coolness swept the desert. The stars had come out then and the darkening fringe of cloud about the horizon hid the rocks toward which they were traveling. Secretly the two men began to fear that they suffered from hallucinations, for the hazy eminences seemed just as far away from them at sunset as ever!

While the light had lasted they saw no more marks of Arthur Mirrivale’s boots; they went on without further encouragement of that nature. As the moon did not rise until late doubts grew apace in the minds of the two white men.

The clouds which masked the horizon hid the outlines of the high rocks—if such they had really seen. They were walking northward without a sign to encourage them, and the hour rolled on to midnight.

Suddenly a faint murmur reached their ears, although there was absolutely no breeze to bring it. This made its direction all the more difficult of discovery. It grew in volume without revealing in the slightest the direction of its birth. It seemed all about them—a sound breathed into the air and gradually swelling to a mighty roar.

Yet it was distant and seemed more to promise its volume than to rend their hearing with it. Wherever the sound arose, there it must be fairly deafening; but that spot was certainly far, far away.

Perhaps it lasted for five minutes. The white men looked at each other curiously; the Indian maiden shook with terror.

“Waal, did yuh ever hear th’ like o’ that?” demanded Wolfer Joe, the first to find his breath and speech.

“What do you reckon it is, Joe?”

“Blam’f’lknow!” ejaculated the old man, making the denial all one word.

“Well, it certainly isn’t anything to be afraid of,” Cody declared, recovering himself and seeing how the Indian girl was terrified.

“It’s mebbe a earthquake. I’ve hearn tell of sech things.”

“No tremble to the earth. Only the air shook.”

“You don’t reckon it’s a cyclone a-comin’?”

“Not a bit! No sign of a storm.”

“I agree with yuh there, Buffer. Then it must be a volcano.”

“So are you!” exclaimed the scout, laughing. “This is a nice piece of country in which to look for volca-noes.”

“Give it up, then.”

“It needn’t keep you standing here all night,” said Cody, with another squint at the stars. “Come on. We’re bearing off a leetle too far to the eastward.”

The men took the girl between them. Her moccasins had worn so thin that the hot sun on the sands had blistered her feet before either of the whites were aware of the fact. Wolfer Joe, who first caught her limping, at once demanded to see the hurt feet, and he made her sit down while he put salve on them and bound them up in clothes from his pouch. Over these bandages he fastened another pair of moccasins of his own—the man seemed to pack about him in various pockets and hide-outs in his clothes, supplies for a regiment!—and then Wapa-hoka could travel better. But she was dog-tired by this time, and was glad of the support of the white men on either side of her.

By the way, the outfit of Wolfer Joe, early as it was in the spring, seemed most unseasonable for this desert. Here the sand held the heat, and, even now at midnight, it was unpleasantly warm to the touch. Joe’s outfit was of various skins, some cured with the fur on them, and on an ordinary man would have been considered a sore burden. But it really did seem as though clothing made not the least difference to the old wolf-hunter. He seemed impregnable to weather conditions and changes.

On and on they went until another dawn on the desert approached. Then as the sky gradually lightened and the stars faded the eyes of the three travelers, peering earnestly to the northward, suddenly beheld that which they had almost given up hope of seeing again. The rocks they had viewed in the mirage were there!

The tumbled group of chimneys and cliffs were still far distant—the air of the desert was exceeding rare, and
they had observed the rocks many, many miles away—but all three were convinced that they suffered from no hallucination. Even Wapahoka plucked up courage—in a measure. She suffered so from thirst and weariness now that even the fact that an evil spirit might dwell in this mysterious heap of rocks, she was still anxious to get there!

... Before dawn they had all lain down and slept for two hours. There was no need of keeping watch, as there was absolutely no danger of either wild beasts or wild men on the sand-waste. So, as the sun arose they hobbled on somewhat refreshed, and gladly encouraging each other because of the nearness of the rocky pile.

To look at the heap one would never imagine that somewhere in its heart lay a deep and fertile vale—a beautiful glen of grass, and trees, and water. But Buffalo Bill was convinced that this was the place the old Indian had told him of. Besides, he and Wolfie Joe believed implicitly in the fact that they had seen the glen pictured in the sky, with Arthur Mirrival walking therein. And they encouraged each other, therefore, and their talk could not fail to impress Wapahoka.

The last few drops of water Cody forced upon the Indian maiden. Wolfie Joe made a wry face and muttered something about it's being "a shame t'waste good water on a redskin"; yet the scout knew that the last of the liquid in Wolfie Joe's own flasks had gone the same way. Both men, having so long hated and fought the red men, were rather ashamed to openly show tenderness to one of the accursed race. Yet, as the hours passed and their sufferings increased, they began to forget that she was a redskin and remember only her sex.

The clouds which had been gathering all night suddenly shot up to the zenith when the sun rose. The orb of day became merely a round, glowing eye in the sky. The clouds grew brazen, and the wind rose sharply.

Then up sprang the sand—a whirling mass of cutting needle-points—and swirled about them in eddies, dashing against them, trying to turn them off the track, fighting, as it seemed, with devil-inspired rage to hold them back. Wapahoka sank under this; she could go no farther.

"Bad business, Buffler!" grunted Wolfie Joe, looking at the drooping figure of the girl who had sunk between them.

"We'll have to carry her, old man," declared Cody.

For the first time Wapahoka showed some gratitude for what they had already done for her, and likewise a bit of unselfishness.


"Git out!" exclaimed Wolfie Joe. "We'll all stick together.

"No. White men lose their lives, too."

"Pooh! you're a long way from dead yet," declared Cody.

"Long Hair says that to cheer me. I am doomed," said the girl, in her own tongue, and speaking with difficulty.

"We'll take you between us. We'll not desert you here," cried Cody. "Come! one more effort, Wapahoka!"

At the moment of his speech Wolfie Joe leaped to his feet and gazed toward the rocks. A sudden sound shook the air. It was the growing roar which had before disturbed them. It was easy to believe now that the noise issued from that pile of rocks. It grew, and grew, rising in tier above tier of sound, until they were fain to clasp their hands to their ears to save their eardrums from bursting.

The sound of the sea breaking on the beach after a storm, the rumble of a multitude of gun-carriages over a plain laid with wooden blocks, or planks, an unending fall of coal down the chutes into the coal-pockets—all these and many other noises might be compared with this sound; but none equalled it, or are just like it.

On the men the noise exercised no little effect. They paled and stared at one another. But to Wapahoka the mystery was terrifying in the extreme. She leaped up, her frantic fear overcoming her utterly bodily exhaustion.

"The voice of the spirit! It is the voice!" she gasped. "It calls me! it commands me! I am accused of my race, and I must obey!"

And so crying in her own language, the beautiful and unfortunate girl set out on a staggering run toward the distant rocks!

CHAPTER VII.

THE GUARDIAN OF THE GATE.

"What th' eternal does she mean, Buffler?" demanded Wolfie Joe, as soon as the sound had died away into intermittent echoes.

"Poor girl! poor girl!" muttered the scout. "It will be a wonder if her mind does not give way entirely under this strain."

"Her legs will, shore enough!" grunted Wolfie Joe. "She can skurrce tollel erlong now."

"Better to let her go——"

"She's down! I told yuh!" exclaimed the hunter, and he started on the run for the fallen Wapahoka.

Cody came after him more leisurely. He cudgeled his mind meanwhile to remember all the Indian maid had told him regarding the mirage as the Indians had first seen it, and the final decision of Nakona and the old men that this reappearance of the picture in the sky demanded the girl as a sacrifice to the phantom flower. When he and Wolfie Joe had seen the mirage there
had been merely the quiet valley, and the man walking across it. In the rambling tale told by Wapahoka in her own language, Cody remembered that the Indians had seen some great transformations take place in the picture of the hidden valley. This mysterious change they called the blooming of the phantom flower; Wapahoka had been unable to explain its nature to him so that the scout understood it. He was greatly disturbed now by the strange sounds which certainly emanated from the pile of rocks before them. Some convulsion of nature was going on there, and this might have much to do with the wonder which the Kickapoos had seen. But just the nature of the mystery Cody could not imagine.

When he reached Wolfer Joe and the girl he found the latter unconscious, lying on the hot sand with her head upon the old man's knee.

"It's a shame, Buffler!" exclaimed the wolfer. "She's done up—complete!"

"We'll have to carry her, then, old man."

"Wish I had a little more water."

"While she's unconscious she won't suffer so much. Come on, old boy! we'll pick her up between us and get on."

"Toward that blamed rock-heap?"

"Where else?"

"I dunno as I fancy it so much, Buffler."

"Pray tell me what we'll do if we don't go on to it?"

"Derned if I know."

"Then don't talk foolishly."

"But what d'ye s'pose that noise is that comes out o' it?"

"Ask me something easier, old man."

"Say! You're as careless as the deuce about it!" exclaimed Wolfer Joe. "Don't you ever feel a chill run up an' down yuh spinal column? 'Waal, I do!'"

"Bless you!" exclaimed Cody, "I am quite as squeamish about this place as you are. But we've got to go on! There's nothing else to do."

"No matter what sort of a critter is shut up in them rocks, we're to enter 'em, are we?" cried the wolfer, with a grin.

"I reckon you're as ignorant and superstitious as these Injuns."

"Huh!"

"What kind of a fabulous creature do you suppose could roar like that?"

"Dunno," grunted Joe.

"Some antediluvian monster, I s'pose."

"No use callin' a man hard names, Buffler. I don't understand 'em, nohow!"

"That's right, too. I'm wasting my breath on you. But do you believe for one minute that we'll find any dangerous animals out here in the middle of this dashed desert?"

"Can't most allus sometimes tell!"

"Oh, you can't, ch? For instance, what would they live on?"

"What do they live on anywhere?" demanded the old hunter. "On each other."

"But how big do you fancy this valley is?"

"Accordin' tuh my eye," returned the other, squinting carefully at the rocks which reared their heads so high from the sands ahead it may be a mile or more long an' ha'f as wide."

"Get out!"

"I tell yuh yes. I'm not foolin'. This is bigger than yuh think. There's a heap o' rock thar."

"I don't believe——"

"Hi!" interrupted Wolfer Joe eagerly, "thar's a bird! Thar's sure birds thar if thar ain't anywhere else on this eternal old sand-heap!"

"Right!" admitted Cody.

"And where there are birds there should be other animal life."

"But cougars, or bears, or deer, or wolves, can't fly."

"This valley would make a mighty good place for 'em tuh hive up in th' winter—right in the middle of this dry, hot sand. Trust th' beasts for findin' their way here."

"Well, we've got our pistols, that's one comfort; and plenty of ammunition for them. If that was a man we saw in that mirage, then there is surely one human being there before us. Reckon the animals aren't so dangerous. Pick up the girl, Joe, and let's be moving."

They did this—these two men who were well-nigh done up themselves by now—and staggered over the plain, upon which the rising sun was now blazing, with the Indian girl carried in a sort of chair made by their hands and arms. And this was not for a few hundred yards. They were still several miles from the heap of rockwork, and every rod grew longer to their wearied feet.

But the scout and the wolf-hunter had been used all their lives to enduring pain and exhaustion, exposure, hunger, and thirst. Cody, since his eleventh year, when he went to work for the Leavenworth freighter, and did a man's work for a man's wage, had endured his frame to resisting those blows of mishance that would have broken down a less robust man. As for the wolfer, he was sun-dried, wind-cured, and weather-seasoned in every atom of his bony frame. "Tough as a pine knot" he called himself, and so he was.

Those few miles, however, were the hardest of the whole journey in the death desert. And it was high noon ere they drew near enough to really closely examine the outlines of the pile of rocks. The girl lay as though dead in their arms. Their own eyes were nigh burned from their sockets. They staggered along with fainting souls and scarcely able to speak to each other.

But they did not stop. For three solid hours they persevered, making but little more than a mile in each dragging sixty minutes, and in their weakness leaving a
WAKE AS CROOKED AS A DRUNKARD'S. THEN THEY CAME WITHIN THE LINE OF SHADOW CAST BY THE ROCKS, FOR THE SUN WAS THEN SLOPING TOWARD THE WEST.

There they fell, with the girl still between them, and it is unlikely that either of the trio realized much of what went on, or of their surroundings, until twilight itself had fallen.

The sand immediately surrounding the hill was not so impregnated with the heat as out in the open. The shadow, which moved slowly around the heap of rocks, helped to make the sand cooler. And as the sunlight departed and night approached there was really a faint breath of air breathing across the waste.

Cody sat up with a groan and gazed up at the shadowy outline of the eminence. In interstices of the rocks trees —scrubby fellows, yet well-leaved—were growing. There must be moisture there. Indeed, as he sat there, either his imagination conjured the sound, or he actually heard the drip, drip, drip of water.

A thirst and desperate as he was, the scout thought little of his comrades for the moment. On all fours he dragged himself toward that heavenly sound. He could not walk erect. In half an hour—it seemed an eternity, and had he been himself he could have walked it in three minutes—he came to a place where there was some moisture and much grass at the foot of the rocks. In a sort of grotto was the splash of water falling through the rocks into a basin. But the overflow of the basin, although the spring was inexhaustible, sank into the thirsty sand and was lost within three yards of the rock.

He crept into this shelter and fairly fell into the water. He laved the upper part of his body, without removing his coat or shirt, in the pool. He drank slowly the delicious liquid.

He was revived at once. He was likewise spurred to wisdom. He must not imbibe too much of the water at once. He did, however, remove all his garments, and washed the sand and grit out of his pores and bathed his swollen, burning feet. This refreshed him far more than had his single "swig" of the generous water.

Then he scooped out all the water from the rocky pool and washed it out, and, after filling his two canteens from the ever-dripping stream, he left the rock-pool to fill again, while he went back to his two comrades in distress.

Wolver Joe was aroused by then. Cody handed the old man one of his canteens, and then forced a few drops between the clenched teeth of Wapahoka. The water trickling over her swollen tongue and down her gullet made the girl gasp. The scout continued the reviving process, and she began to hicough.

"By the eternal, Buffalo!" whispered Wolfer Joe. "She's alive yet."

"Of course she is," declared Cody cheerfully.

"I'd given her up—for shore I had I" croaked the other.

"You ain't dead yourself yet, are you?"

"Jumping Jerusha! I would ha' been soon. Oh! this water!"

He stopped his own mouth with the mouth of the flask and drank again.

"Easy, old man!" advised the scout. "Don't drink too much of that at once."

"Isn't there any more?" gasped Wolfer Joe, in sudden fright.

"A living spring where that came from."

"Huh! Yuh scared me," and again he drank. After a time the girl opened her eyes; but she was not really conscious. Cody's strength was so renewed that he could pick her up in his arms after a hit and carry her nearer to the grotto where the water fell. There he laid her down and bathed her face and hands, and, later, removed the bandages from her feet and bathed them.

There was a little food left, for Wolfer Joe had been husbanding the last of it. This was divided about midnight, and then the three travelers, who had suffered so much and endured so bravely, sank down in peaceful sleep, and were not roused till the morning sun blazed upon them angrily.

Thus awakened and driven from their beds, they drank their fill again—never did water taste so sweet!—filled their flasks, and sought the shade upon the western side of the rocky hill. On the way Cody saw and shot a partridge, and they soon built a fire and roasted the bird and made coffee. Wapahoka had gathered her senses and her vital forces as well, and was vastly improved.

The fact that they had all arrived at the rocky center of the desert, and in comparative safety, encouraged the maid. Her terror of the Unknown—of the spirit's voice and of the evil beings which she had been taught to believe infested the desert—had subsided in some degree. The utter recklessness of the palefaces upon that point helped not a little in this change.

As soon as they had eaten, Joe was fired with the determination to find the entrance into the hidden valley—if entrance there was.

"That Injun you tell of must have got in somehow, and th' feller we seen, too," said the wolf hunter.

"Why, man! We're not dead sure that that mirage was a picture of this place, after all," objected the scout.

"Huh! Yuh ain't shore yuh granny wore spectacles—but I'll bet she did!" sneered the other, with despatch.

"Shore this is the place? Couldn't help being."

But they searched till mid afternoon before they found an opening that promised a direct entrance into the heart of the hill. Several ravines and gorges were mere pockets. They saw that this hill was of far greater size than they had first imagined.

The promising passway was around on the northern side of the heap. It was a grass-bottomed, sloping ravine,
with steep rocky sides and many turns and corners in it. There were, too, a series of cavities hollowed out of the softer strata of rock in either wall, as though, in some past age, this passage had been the bed of a turbulent and powerful river. As all these deserts of the great West were once sea bottoms, so it might well be that in some dim, past time, a great well of water had sprung from the heart of this mountain—a spring which had fallen into the sea. But when the sea's bottom had been heaved up and the sea had disappeared, so the mountainous island had shrunk and sunken and the well had died.

The trio of explorers, however, had little thought for these mysteries of nature. They had reached a haven of refuge, and aside from their own safety and success they thought most of the possibility of finding Arthur Mrrivale here. Even Wapahoka had flung aside her superstitious fears for the moment and talked only of this possibility.

Suddenly, as the walls grew higher and the depths of the ravine cooler, the trio were startled by a ferocious roaring. At first they believed that the horrid, deafening sound they had heard twice before had broken forth at nearer quarters; but in a moment that fear was dispersed.

"That's Ole Ephraim!" exclaimed Wolfer Joe, snatching out both his pistols.

Cody followed suit, twirling the cylinders to make sure his guns were in good condition, and thrusting Wapahoka behind him.

In a moment Wolfer Joe's words were proven true. Out upon them, from a cavity under an overhanging rock, leaped a monster of a bear—gray, fierce-eyed, lean, and hungry! At best the grizzly is not a pleasant beast to meet; just after the end of its hibernation, with empty maw and ravenous appetite, it threatens more peril than almost any other creature in existence.

This beast, roaring again, plunged down the slanting passway, with every intention of flinging itself upon the white men and their companion.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GENI OF THE VALLEY.

Now, meeting a charging grizzly with nothing but pop-guns is no small joke. Cody made sure that the girl had run back out of the way. As she went she snatched the bowie from the scout's belt; but he had both his cavalry six-shooters, and he could not begrudge her the knife. Besides, he placed himself directly in the path of the bear as though saying by his action: "You'll only get by, sir, over my body!"

As for Wolfer Joe, he sprang as agilely as a cricket to a rocky ledge beside the path. This placed him just out of the way of the bear's glance, and made it impossible for he and Cody to shoot each other.

"Give him what yuh got for him, Buffler!" he yelled. "I'll wait till yuh empty an' then pitch in; it'll turn his attention."

And the old man was right. Shrewdly did he plan this campaign, and Cody gave in to it. When the bear was some yards away the scout began to fire, and emptied one pistol before bruin had arrived at the stand-up stage. But without apparently affecting the beast in the least, the bullets entered its thick hide like the stings of hornets and exasperated, but did not seriously wound, the beast.

Then the grizzly stood up, roaring and gnashing its teeth. It displayed its breast bared to the scout. The latter dodged a terrific swing of the paw, and, running in, emptied his second pistol at close quarters. Blood now spurted from its throat and breast, and it came down heavily upon all four feet with a snarl of rage and agony. It had been hit seriously at last.

At this Wolfer Joe, seeing Cody had emptied his weapons, started in from the ledge above. Unfortunately with the bear on its four legs the wolf could only shoot into its flanks or back. And to try to break the backbone of a huge beast like this grizzly with pistol-balls was a task that was rendered almost impossible by the beast's thick fur and hide. The layer of fat which lies next the skin, and which might have been two or three inches thick in the fall, had been absorbed into the bear's system during the winter, or there would have been no hope of the pistol-balls doing a bit of damage.

The roaring guardian of the gate, feeling the shots peppering him from above, rose up again and staggered toward the shelf to which Wolfer Joe had leaped. And in this case the old hunter had not bethought him of the ancient maxim: "Look before you leap." He had jumped to the shelf which was scarcely as high as a man's head, and now that he was in turn attacked by the bear, he found that he had made no preparation for escape.

The ledge was a foot and a half wide and five or six feet long. The wall of rock above it was sheer as a house-wall. There was no other higher ledge—or no other ledge at all, in fact—within reach. He was marooned here, and the big grizzly, standing on its hind legs, could sweep the old man off his refuge with its front paws.

The cunning brain of the grizzly understood this at once. It hung waveringly to the edge of the shelf with one paw, the blood pouring from its throat and mouth, and smashed at the man with its other huge arm—a terrific, sweeping blow!

Cody, who was loading a pistol as quickly as mortal man could load, cried out in fear. Wolfer Joe did not utter a word, but he leaped into the air, and the great paw passed under him. He had no time to load his own weapons. He flung away his guns and seized his knife. And he watched that swinging paw of the beast like a terrier at a rat-hole.
Once more the bear struck with all its venom and muscular strength. The hunter leaped again, but did not quite escape. One of the grizzly’s saberlike claws caught in the leg of Joe’s skin trousers, slit it down, and tore the moccasin from his foot, leaving a deep and painful scratch in the man’s flesh, from which the blood ran at once.

Suddenly there shot past Cody a lithe figure from down the pass. It was that of Wapahoka, and she bore in her two strong, firm hands a long staff, to the end of which she had in those few moments bound Cody’s bowie with a band of deerskin. Delicate as the girl’s frame was, she possessed as much strength as courage. While the two men emptied their pistols into the great carcass of the bear she had made this spear—a weapon which an Indian always knows how to use with good effect—and now she charged the grizzly with it.

As the beast made his second swipe at Wolfert Joe—and caught him—the girl dashed in, almost under the great swinging arm of the grizzly, and buried the knife-blade to the handle in the animal’s side.

With a roar, which dwarfed his other vocal expressions, the grizzly fairly whirled about on his hind legs. Both arms swung like huge flails, and one might have caught Wapahoka before she could leap back, had not the knife-point reached and severed the heart of the beast. Following his roar, he crumpled up like a wet rag and dropped to the ground. The staff of the spear snapped in Wapahoka’s hand, and she fell back against Cody, who caught her on his left arm and saved her from falling.

“Is she hurt?” bawled Wolfert Joe, leaping down from the shelf and hopping toward the couple on one foot, while he nursed his other bleeding one. “Cody! I’ll never forgive myself if that gal is hurt.”

Such changes of feeling do time and circumstances breed!

“She’s all right, I guess,” said the scout. “How is it, Wapahoka?”

“The paleface old man need not fear. Wapahoka is not hurt,” gasped the girl.

Then she writhed out of Buffalo Bill’s grasp and went down on her knees before the wolfers, who had dropped to a rock with a groan. She insisted in bathing and dressing the long scratch. They had to repair his moccasin, too, before he could wear it again. Then the trio moved on up the pass, after Cody had removed the bear’s pelt and cut off some of the better parts of the flesh for food.

Wapahoka walked beside Wolfert Joe and insisted that he lean upon her shoulder as he hobbled on. Cody looked on with twinkling eyes, for he saw that the old fellow liked her attentions; and as for the Indian maid herself, all the instinctive maternal feelings of the creature had come to the surface. She petted him and domineered over him just as a white girl would have done under similar circumstances.

The ravine broadened as they went up, and there were trees along the foot of the rocky walls. A narrow brook trickled by, too, disappearing under a huge boulder, its fall sounding musically in their ears. At first sight of this running water all three were smitten with the same desire. They hurried forward, fell on their faces, and drank deeply of the blessed liquid.

“Jumpin’ Jerusha! seems ez though I couldn’t never parse water ag’in without swiggin’ more than is good for me!” gasped Wolfert Joe. “I’m suh full o’ swash now that if I dropped a fish intuh my stomick it would swim! Yet I’m jest as thirsty as ever.”

He crudely expressed the feeling that they all three possessed. Running water was a blessed sight to their eyes.

They came soon to the end of the passage, and the hidden valley was spread before their vision. It was the glen of the mirage—no doubt of that. Oval, fully a mile and a half long, well wooded along the sides, and with heavily grassed meadows between. In the center was a clear, sky-blue, mirrorlike lake. Around the glen the steep rocks were impassable excepting in this place through which they had come.

“Where is he?” whispered Wapahoka eagerly, clinging to both Cody and the wolfers.

“Ah-ha!” exclaimed Buffalo Bill. “So you have changed your mind, Wapahoka? You reckon somebody besides evil spirits may dwell in this valley?”

“It is so beautiful!” whispered the girl, hanging her head. “And then,” she added quickly, “the palefaces say they saw him here.”

“We said we saw somebody here.”

“And it was Arthur, all right,” grunted Wolfert Joe.

“I’ll swear to that.”

“Well——”

Cody began doubtfully, and the old man turned on him.

“Git out! Don’t be throwin’ cold water on everything. Arthur Mirrival is here.”

As he spoke Wapahoka’s grip on their arms suddenly tightened. In an instant their own interest was strained by what had shocked her attention. From seemingly the earth beneath their feet a low, grumbling noise burst forth.

It is true that Wapahoka’s courage all evaporated at this. She would have turned and fled had not Cody seized her and held her close. Whatever was coming upon them, the scout did not propose that they three should be separated.

“By the eternal, Buffalo!” gasped Wolfert Joe. “We’re in for it!”

“In for what?” muttered the scout.

“Ahl that’s the question,” said the old man, shaking his head.
And after that it was useless to speak at all. The distant, thunderous rumbling grew suddenly near at hand. It was as though the whole valley filled with the sound. All three of the spectators shrieked aloud; but their voices were unheard. Their vision had at the same time discovered the same fact.

The almost circular lake in the middle of the valley was agitated—and by no breeze, for the air seemed dead. It was moved in the strangest way. Instead of rippling in broadening circles, or in lines of gentle wavelets, the surface of the water was expanded upward in great, uneven bubbles, as though gas or air rose from the bottom of the pool. These bubbles rose higher and higher, and increased in number till the whole surface of the lake was pimpled with them. But none of them burst.

And, meanwhile, the rumbling sound quite deafened them. A thousand rolling-mills and boiler-factories rolled into one would not have made half as fiendish a roar and clatter. The trio clapped their hands to their ears, while they cowered at the entrance to the valley, their eyes still fixed upon the boiling pool.

Of a sudden there was a change in the appearance of the water. Many of the excrescences ran together, and then, slowly, from the middle of the lake, a column of water rose straight into the air. It was not the mere spurt of a fountain, but it rose in a tumbling, boiling column of white liquid, which looked as solid as molten silver!

Up, up it rose, its circumference growing bigger and its height greater each second. Then, with a burst of sound which capped all that had gone before, the column shot up to a hundred feet or more and there the force behind it receded, the top burst with another report, the water spread out like an open umbrella, or a mushroom, and down it all fell—hundreds upon hundreds of tons of water—and, in falling, whipped the lake into a miniature sea!

Suddenly the trio of amazed and speechless observers discovered that the only sound now vibrating in the air was the swash of the waves in the basin of the geyser. The internal rumbling had seized. The paroxysm of nature which spewed up the great mass of liquid was over; in a few moments the surface of the lake was calm again, and it was all as though the shooting of the geyser had not been!

Cody’s speech came first; this time Wolfer Joe was quenched beyond the power of expression.

“Well, that’s all right, then!” the old scout exclaimed. “I’m glad to know what the thundering business is. And it’s a wonder!”

Wapahoka was still shaking and sobbing. She had quite broken down under what, in a white girl, would have been considered hysterics.

“Come, come!” exclaimed Cody. “Pluck up your spirit, girl. You see, there’s nothing supernatural about this after all.”

But she had never seen or heard of a geyser before, and the sight had frightened her, about as much as though, instead of a column of water, a genie had leaped up from the pool.

“That’s what you reds meant by your ‘phantom flower.’ And it must have looked strange in a mirage. Come, girl, brace up! No harm can befall you from that. Don’t you see it yourself?”

Wolfer Joe finally fetched a long sigh, and burst into the scout’s monologue:

“By the eternal! I never was so flabbergasted in all my life—I never was! Jumping Jerusha, Buffler! no wonder th’ gal’s scared. I be myself. I’m scared all up an’ down my spinal column. I got goose-flesh on the bottoms of my feet! Did ever yuh see such a dumb basted thing in all your bawn days?”

“I’ve seen geysers—yes.”

“But like this yere one—that makes a noise like as though the very earth was crackin’ open?”

“It is rather noisy,” admitted Cody.

“Rather noisy’ says he!”

“Well, there’s no danger. What’s the matter with you?”

“Can’t a feller be surprised?” demanded the old man.

“I wonder I got my breath ag’in.”

As he spoke they were all startled by an entirely different sound. It was that of a human voice—a scream of fear and agony. Then, on its heels, they heard, from the forest up the glen, a human voice shrieking:

“Help! help!”

“We shore ain’t alone here, Buffler!” shouted Wolfer Joe, and, forgetting his fear of the moment before, the old hunter pulled one of his pistols and started up the vale at a sharp run.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BACK TRACK.

Now, the outburst of the geyser that had so startled Cody and his companions had played a different game with a different character of our story. In a thicket some distance away from the entrance to this hidden valley there was a camp—the glowing embers of a fire, the bones of a pair of birds, a heap of broken boughs for a bed, and on the bed a man lying in dreamless slumber.

This individual had been, for forty-eight hours, the sole human occupant of this valley. He had reached it in a most miraculous manner. He would never, did he live to equal Methuselah’s age, be able to explain how he had traveled the last few miles across the desert until reaching the mouth of the pass which led into the glen. He had been for the time out of his head from thirst and starvation.
After viewing the blue-limned rocks from afar, he had tramped on over the sands for quite an eternity—so it seemed; yet his indomitable pluck had kept him going long after his mind had become a blank. Indeed, he did not awaken to a knowledge of his situation until the oblique rays of a setting sun shone hotly upon him, and he found himself lying under the rocky eminence, on its western side, and with his battered water-can filled with sweet water beside him.

Whether he had been about the hill a few hours, or a week, he could not tell. His watch had finally stopped and his mind was still dazed. But, while it was a blank, he had reached the shadow of the rocks, found a spring, undoubtedly drank from it, and filled his canteen. Driven from his bed by the descending sun, he went around the hill, came upon the entrance to the valley almost at once, and went through it undisturbed by the guardian that later had witnessed the coming of Buffalo Bill and his two companions.

Without thought for any danger lying in the valley, almost willing to believe himself saved by a miracle, or really in paradise instead of upon this terrestrial ball, he found this thicket and lay down peacefully for the night. In the morning he fortunately shot two birds—so there were, at least, small game in the place, he was thankful to see—cooked them, made his camp more comfortable, and lay down again.

He had already had occasion to learn the meaning of the mysterious change he had noticed in the sky-picture. He had heard the sound and seen the geyser. Just the same when it began to rumble and spout again he was awakened. And thankful he had reason to be that the natural phenomenon had occurred.

For after the noise had subsided the man, lying on the bed of boughs, chanced to turn his eyes upward and there, upon a huge limb hanging over his head, he beheld the lithe, muscular body of a cougar!

The noise of the geyser had not disturbed this creature’s poise. It had crept nearer and nearer its prey, and was now ready to drop down upon the man.

As Wolfer Joe had suggested, this hidden glen in the middle of the desert offered sanctuary to many animals. It was warm here in the dead of winter, and, although little rain or snow ever fell, the living springs and the overflow of the geyser itself kept the vegetation green.

The cougar and the grizzly—perhaps outcasts from their several tribes—found many small creatures here. Their hunting brought food, such as it was. But now the great feline had within leaping distance a man!

With a snarl it dropped upon the bed of boughs! But in that moment the man came to himself and moved. He rolled over with a muffled cry of terror, and the great cat did not touch him.

As he rolled, too, the victim snatched the knife from its sheath at his belt, and, as the disappointed beast rose up and struck again at him, he buried the blade under his antagonist’s forearm.

The knife-blade did not reach a vital spot, however. It made a painful, not a dangerous, wound. In a moment the creature’s paw knocked the knife a score of feet away and then tore the man’s clothing to the skin—and tore that, too—from his throat to his waist! Had that reach been a little longer, the man would have bled to death, or most of his vitals would have been laid bare.

He shrieked aloud, sprang up, and actually leaped over the cat and burst through the thicket. Again and again he screamed—yet his cry was a mere senseless shout for help when he had every reason to believe that no other soul was in the valley.

His screaming and running disturbed the cat for awhile. It did not follow him at once, and so the unfortunate fellow broke through the brush and reached the open valley, his clothing in tatters, himself bleeding and beside himself with fear. He was too disturbed, indeed, to hear a shout from down the vale or to see Wolfer Joe, drawn gun in hand, running like the wind, and forgetting his own wound in so doing.

With a roar the cougar suddenly leaped from the thicket, and before the running victim. It had sneaked along under cover of the brush and outfooted him.

“Down! down, man!” yelled Wolfer Joe, plunging on toward him. “Down, or how can I shoot?”

Fortunately the victim understood—although he far from understood the appearance of another human being in this spot, and did not at all recognize the wolfish. He was more inclined to believe him a supernatural being!

But either he understood enough to fall on his face, or in weakness tripped and did so just as the cat sprang at him again. The pistol Wolfer Joe held exploded once—twice.

There was a yowl from the cat. It overleaped its victim, but the instant it landed—and with two stinging pellets of lead in it—the cougar whirled and crouched for another spring.

Its victim, panting and sobbing, was striving to crawl away from the vicinity of the cat. Wolfer Joe came on, firing again. But he was so far away that the bullets in his first pistol either went wild or did little harm. And, like the grizzly, the huge cat was hungry.

So it was not ready to easily give up its prey. It leaped and came down with a ferocious snarl right upon the writhing body of the victim. He uttered a yell which threw the beast’s own vocal exercises in the shade. And at that instant Wolfer Joe, who had flung aside his first pistol emptied, pulled the other, and, taking careful aim, sent a ball into the cougar’s throat.

Ah! that was a shot that told. Although it did not leave its victim, the cat stood up and coughed a torrent of blood from its jaws.

Crack!
THE BUFFALO BILL STORIES.

Again the revolver exploded, and the cougar leaped into the air, its hind paws only touching the ground. There it spun around and finally fell with a grunt across the now senseless body of its prey, a bullet through its own brain!

Wolfer Joe had been ahead of his companions in this fracas; but Cody started up the valley, too, when he saw what the trouble was. However, a third figure rushed by him like the wind, and even before the wolfer reached the victim and the dead cat, this lithe figure threw itself on its knees, rolled the cougar's body off the senseless human being beneath, and had that person's head in her arms ere either of the white men came to the spot!

"'Tis Arthur! I told yuh so!" yelled the wolfer.

"It's Mirrivale—poor fellow!" muttered Cody.

But Wapahoka looked up, rocking the apparently dead form of the young man in her arms, and in broken English and rapid Kickapoo begged Long Hair and the old man who wore skins to save their young friend.

"His is not dead! He cannot be dead!" she cried.

"The evil spirits of the desert had no power to harm him. See! he came here in safety. Then why should a mere beast have the power to kill him?"

At this statement, absurd as it sounded, Wolfer Joe caught hope.

"Shore! Buffer, he can't be dead. It don't stand to reason."

"If there's any reason at all in it, he is dead," muttered Cody again.

But he stooped, pushed aside the young fellow's torn clothing, mopped up some of the blood, and saw that the scratch, though painful and bleeding freely, was not deep.

"Ha! that's not so bad."

"Of course it isn't. He's better than ten dead men yet," cried the wolf-hunter, patting Wapahoka on the hand to encourage her—and speaking to encourage himself.

Cody felt of Mirrivale's heart; it beat strongly, but not regularly.

"All right! He's coming round. Joe, run get some water."

The girl, however, laid the young man down the instant she learned that he was not really dead, and, motionsg the old man back, caught up a canteen and ran for the water herself. That her fear of the geyser was less than her fear for Mirrivale's safety was proven by the fact that she dashed down to the edge of the pool out of which the column of water had spouted, filled the canteen, and ran back to the group near the woods without a thought of her former terror!

Cody properly sprinkled the young fellow's face with water, while Wapahoka bathed his wound and the old wolfer supplied the salve to put upon the latter. Soon the water, or the smart of the scratch, brought Arthur Mirrivale to. He stared in utter wonder into the scout's face, there into Wolfer Joe's. The Indian girl shrank back.

"By George!" muttered the Englishman. "Now I know I am dead!"

"You're dead, all right, youner," chuckled Wolfer Joe.

"Or you were so near it that yuh might as well have been."

"His very voice!" panted the young man, trying to struggle up.

"Reckon yuh oughter know it," said Joe.

"And Cody!" cried Mirrivale weakly.

"The same," said the scout. "Feeling better, Mr. Mirrivale?"

"Oh!" groaned the injured youth. "I guess this is all imagination. Ah! that cougar!"

"Is dead," said Cody briefly.

"I killed him," said the wolfer, with satisfaction.

"I—remember of hearing the gun go off," stammered Mirrivale. "But—but—Wasn't there anybody with you? Are you both real, boys?"

"We're pretty real—such as is left of us."

"But I dreamed—I thought—"


"Ah! I thought that two-thirds of my dream could not have been true and a whole third missing," sighed Mirrivale.

The Indian girl came rather unwillingly into sight. Her face was stolid now and showed no expression but one of calm indifference. Mirrivale's own countenance fell.

"I—I thought she was here," he muttered. "Wapahoka, I was coming to see you when I wandered upon this horrid desert."

"Paleface better not go to Kickapoo camp. Trouble there," muttered the girl.

"But I was going to see you."

"Wapahoka no longer Queen of the Kickapoos."

"Ah!" exclaimed Arthur, and his face lighted up suddenly.

"They've run her out—the red scamps," said Wolfer Joe. "Set her adrift on the desert without food, or water, or as much as a bow and arrow."

Arthur Mirrivale sat up with remarkable suddenness and showed renewed strength and energy.

"Then, by George! if they've turned you out, we'll find friends for you—eh, Cody?"

Buffalo Bill looked rather disturbed. He spoke slowly:

"The government may have something to say about Wapahoka being turned out of the tribe. It is only that crippled devil, Nakona, and the general superstition of the tribe, that has done it."

"Who can make the Kickapoos have a queen they do not want?" demanded the girl, with some laughliness.

"Why, I'll tell you, Wapahoka. You'd better be sensible about this and learn who your real friends are. The Kickapoos will be rounded up inside of ten days and driven south. The Great Father at Washington isn't willing to have them fooling around up here any longer off their reservation. Back they must go—and it's likely that you will be asked to take your rightful place over them."

"You mean that the pony-soldiers and the walkaheaps are coming to fight the Kickapoos?" demanded the girl, her bosom swelling and her eyes sparkling.
“No; not to fight. They’ll come in such numbers that the Kickapoos—even old Nakona—won’t be fools enough to fight.”

“Ah! but they will.”

“Not if you are wise enough to accept the soldiers as your friends and go back and tell your people that they have no chance against the Great Father at Washington.”

“They would kill me if I came again to the encampment,” cried the girl.

“Not much they won’t,” said Cody earnestly. “I’ll be with you, and I guarantee they won’t touch you.”

“The Long Hair is brave, but he is not brave enough to set Nakona and the whole tribe at defiance.”

“You see if I’m not,” said Cody. “Just come along back with me. I’ll show you.”

“I am outcast,” mumbled Wapahoka.

“But you needn’t be. You can beat Nakona yet,” said Buffalo Bill, knowing well how to play on the right chords. “Look here! He’s turned you out—swore the Great Spirit was against you—had you checked out into the desert. Now, make him out the liar he is. Go back. Tell your people what you have done—that you came to this place and discovered the secret of the phantom flower; that it is nothing to be worshiped or be afraid of, only a work of nature like the rain, and the sunshine, and the wind. See? You’ll have it all your own way, and Nakona will be in a hole.”

“But you ask me to give my people up to the soldiers on ponies.”

“Better than that to see them shot down,” declared Cody. “Think it over, girl. We’ll give you time.”

He and the wolf dragged the cat into the shade of the trees, and, while one skinned the beast, the other made a fire and prepared a great dinner of bear steaks. Meanwhile, the Englishman forgot his weariness and weakness while he spoke seriously to the girl. What he said—and he was earnest and insistent—brought no response of kind from Wapahoka. She merely shook her head, and her eyes and face were downcast.

“Come, girl, you must see how uncertain is your position,” the young man said softly. “Remember your own people have outcast you. If they refuse to receive you—”

“Yet am I still a Kickapoo,” she said softly.

“That is, so am I a paleface. Or, better, I am an Englishman. But if we—”

“No, no!” she exclaimed suddenly, and looking at him now with earnest gaze, and speaking at last vehemently; “no, no! It cannot be. You are fair to me, and much do I think of you by day and night. See!” and she touched the great diamond sparkling at her throat. “It never leaves me. When they took away my other ornaments, this I did save and wear always.”

“But Wapahoka’s people are not thy people, nor is her God your God; oh, paleface with the yellow hair. When we are dead and go to the great beyond we shall not be in the same place, oh, no! You can never be a Kickapoo; and Wapahoka may never be a paleface.”

Cody desired to see what effect the reappearance of Wapahoka would have upon Nakona and the Kickapoos. The scout was ready to play a bold game, and he had two reasons for playing it. One was that he wished to frighten the tribe, if possible, into peaceably returning to their reservation and so save bloodshed. The second was to follow a suspicion to its source and learn what Nakona, and the old hag, Man-e-na, knew about the girl herself.

Therefore he encouraged his companions to eat well, sleep well, and recuperate as quickly as possible. So eager were they all to get out of the desert and on safe ground again and away from the gysers, that in forty-eight hours they took the back track, passed through the ravine, encircled the hill of rags, and set forth boldly toward the south, braving again the sand and heat of the desert of death.

CHAPTER X.

WAPAHOKA IS CAST OUT.

A quartet of dusty figures in single file and drooping to exhaustion came across the last mile stretch of barren sand toward the gully where—more than a week before—Buffalo Bill and Wolfer Joe had left their mounts and the bulk of their camp paraphernalia. The two older men walked ahead; the final figure was that of Arthur Mirrivale, barely able to drag one foot behind the other. Oft and again Wapahoka turned and urged him on either by a whispered word, or by dragging upon his shirt-sleeve.

Although they had started at sunset of one evening and traveled that first night at a rapid pace, the heat and sand had well-nigh got the best of them in this return march. After their former exposure the death desert told on them quicker, and now they could barely cover the last lap and reach the shelter of the gully.

Cody’s bay knew its master was coming, and neighed high and loud. The scout paid no more attention to the welcome, however, than did either of his companions. They did not even look at either the horse or the mule—both of whom were well and fat—but they all four went straight to the water-hole, fell upon their faces, and drank. Then they remained lying about where they fell and slept until sunset. Their minds as well as their bodies were completely exhausted, and they did not even think of the danger of wild beasts and wilder men!

But Cody, when he was himself again, had a very well-defined plan for their future movements. Mirrivale was badly done up—worse than any of them. His previous wanderings in the desert had quite drained his system, and the scout could not depend upon him at present for assistance.

But the old wolf was as tough as himself. Cody took Joe into his confidence, explained to him what he wanted, and finally turned to Wapahoka. The girl was plainly much excited upon their approach to the valley occupied by her people. Cody had encouraged her to believe that there was a chance of her getting back her influence over the tribe, and she was game to try it.

Therefore, she fell in with the plan as Cody had formulated it. Cody had awakened just at dusk and had killed a jack-rabbit with his pistol. This they cooked over a fire of dry twigs, and ate of it heartily. Mirrivale was ready to roll over and sleep again, but Buffalo Bill told him that if he awoke and found Wolfer Joe and himself gone he was not to be disturbed, but to wait where he was for their return. He said nothing about Wapahoka, but after the young man was asleep all three made preparations for leaving the gully.

Cody and Wolfer Joe got their rifles and thoroughly oiled and cleaned them. They prepared their pistols, too,
and filled their cartridge-belts and pouches. It was midnight before they were ready to start up the mountain.

Cody awoke Wapahoka.

"Are you game for it, girl?" he asked her earnestly.

"The Long Hair may lead; he will find Wapahoka near at hand," she replied sternly.

But she was last to leave the camp. Looking back the two old hunters saw her bending over the sleeping Mirri- vale. She hooved them but a moment, however; then she took up the trail and followed quickly in the wake of Cody and Wolfie Joe. The two white men suspected that she had been bidding a silent farewell to Mirrivale; they knew it when she came near, and they saw that the yellow diamond was no longer sparkling at her throat.

But they respected her sorrow and said naught to her.

Wolver Joe did not agree with Cody regarding the inadmissibility of a mixture of the bloods; but he said nothing at this time. The girl had given Mirrivale up of her own accord.

Cody led the way up the mountainside and into the pass through which the tribe had come to view Wapahoka's driving forth as the scepagoat into the desert waste. This was some miles from the encampment in the fertile valley, and they were until nearly daylight getting through the pass, down into the valley, and across it and near the Kickapoop camp.

They passed the herd of ponies—greatly depleted by the severe winter that had passed—and these beasts would have stumped at the smell of the white men had not Wapahoka gone among them.

Their herd leader—the great black stallion that the girl always ridden—was not there. Wapahoka gritted her teeth and laid its absence to Nakona.

It was toward Nakona's lodge, on the very outskirts of the camp, that they made their way. This was still called the medicine-lodge, although the crippled magician could not make much medicine now.

There were sentinels riding around the camp as usual; but only a few thus circled the tepees. The Kickapoos were evidently convinced that, by following Nakona's advice and driving out the White Queen, peace would remain with the tribe.

Cody and his two companions lay in hiding as the east turned gray, and counted these sentinels and timed their passage. It was possible for them to run in between two of the sleepy riders, and they did so. They reached the rear of the medicine-lodge.

The scout waited for nothing. His bowie was in his hand, and at once he slit the taut hide of the tent wall from a place some four feet up, to the ground. Like shadows the three slipped in, and Wolfie Joe pulled the slit hide together and fastened it with thorns so that the passing sentinels would not notice the hole.

Cody stepped forward and crouched near the middle of the hut. He had given a lucifer match to Wapahoka, and a small stone.

"Now!" he whispered.

"Scr-r-ratch!" went the match.

The blue flame sprang up, and the stench of brimstone was strong. The unhallowed flame shone upon the girl's drawn and haggard face.

There was an eerie scream from the corner, and Cody sprang like a wildcat and seized a writhing figure by the throat. Wolfie Joe turned hastily, heard a movement near the door, and made a spring himself. He caught a creature like a dog, or a wolf, trying to creep through the opening. He bore it down; it fought and spit like a dumb brute, but when the yellow light of the full flaming match flared up, the wolfie saw that he had gripped the crippled body of Nakona.

"Here's the old high devil himself," whispered Joe.

"And this is the hog I've got," grunted Cody.

Neither of the captives spoke, for very good reasons. The pressure of the white men's hands upon their throats made speech impossible.

"Better let me squeeze this cuss' gizzard a little harder, Buffler," said Joe. "He owes me his scalp, anyway."

"Not yet," said Cody. "Bring him here. Put out the light, Wapahoka. Now, Nakona—and you, Man-e-na," he added, in Kickapoop. "Take heed to the words of Long Hair, for in his power is life or death—for you!"

"Loosen up on the old man's throttle a bit, Joe."

"All right; but I'll kill him instant if he squeals as loud as a field mouse."

"He understands that—don't you, Nakona?" queried Cody.

Out of the darkness came a husky whisper:

"The paleface devils have the power at present."

"And we're going to keep it," said Cody, in English.

"Do you know whom we have brought back with us?" Man-e-na began to shake again, and groaned. She evidently believed Wapahoka was a wraith.

"The Kickapoos have dared turn their old chief's daughter out of the tribe. They have reviled against her, and you led them, Nakona. Now you will be punished for this, and the tribe itself will be punished sorely."

"The Kickapoos have sent forth none of their blood," muttered Nakona gloomily.

"A lie!" hissed Wapahoka, from her corner.

"Ah! there speaks the White Queen," sneered the medicine-man.

"Hush!" commanded Cody. "Listen to the Long Hair. It is from Man-e-na that Nakona has learned to malign the blood of the great chief."

"Ha!" whispered the old woman. "Blood of a dog—of a white dog. Wapahoka is not of the Kickapoos people."

"Tell that to one who did not know the great chief," said Cody. "Wapahoka was his favorite child—and the daughter of his favorite squaw."

"She is outcast and not of our blood," declared Nakona, in a snarl like that of an angry dog. "Man-e-na! Tell thy tale—and know, oh, Long Hair, that it is true and has been proved before the council of old men. Wapahoka, inspired of evil spirits, has come here at her peril!"

"Be still, yuh old catamarami!" growled Joe, and increased the pressure on the medicine-man's throat.

"Speak, Man-e-na!" commanded Cody.

"It is as the great Nakona says," whispered the old woman. "I was with the squaw of the old chief at the birth of the child. It was a weakling. In a week, perhaps longer, perhaps shorter, I saw it dying. Nothing could save it. The White Fox, a paleface who lived in camp, had a babe as well. It was a strong, healthy infant. The White Fox and the squaw of the old chief were much together before the birth of their children. The squaw of the old chief desired much to present him with a child. Suddenly I find beside the chief's squaw a strong, healthy child. The child of the White Fox is dead. Then they put me out of the lodge, but the White Fox came in and took my place. The chief's squaw grew ill and died, and the White Fox nursed the other babe. It was her own, but the old chief do not know. That is
all. I have said what I know to be true. The proofs are with the council. I have spoken."
Cody had listened in some surprise, but with growing satisfaction. Then he suddenly heard a sob in the far
corner of the lodge. It was from Wapahoka. Would a true Indian have sobbed? No, no! The scout believed.
"It is well," he said quietly. "I have suspected that Wapahoka was not a full-blood all along."
"She is no Kickapoos, the girl Nakoma." "She—"
"She ain't off, Joe!" whispered Cody.
The medicine-man subsided with a gurgle. But there was
a sudden uproar outside in the village. Somebody came to the door of Nakoma's lodge and pushed back the flap.

With the bound of a tiger Cody leaped to his feet and
drove his fist into the face of the spy. The buck went
down with a grunt—knocked out completely.
"Quick! this is no place for us!" hissed Cody.

Man-e-na had scrambled out of the way in the gloom, and
now she shrieked something in a high key. The scout
could not stop to punish her. He burst open the sit-
place at the back and then turned to speak.
"Wapahoka! Come with us!"

"My people—"
"Are your people no longer. They will kill you. You
are not a Kickapoos, but a white. You are as white as
Arthur Mirrivate!"

At that name the girl uttered a low cry and groped
her way to him. The scout pulled her through, and
Wolfer Joe came after. He had choked his prisoner into
insensibility.
The dawn was breaking, and the fugitives could see a
bit about them. Staked near the medicine-man's lodge
—evidently claimed as his property—was a big black
stallion. It whinnied loudly, and Wapahoka ran toward him.

"This way, Long Hair—and the old man in skins," she
cried. "He will carry us all."

"He can't do that," said Cody. "But you and Joe get
up. Joe's lame, anyway. I'll run beside."
The girl unrolled the prancing beast. She held him
while Wolfer Joe, despite the horse's squealing, climbed
on his back. Then the girl leaped up before him. They
started across the plain, Cody resting one hand on Wolfer
Joe's knee, and helped along vastly by the pace of the
stallion.

But now the Indians came pouring out of the camp like
angry bees out of the hive. It was still dusky in the low-
lands, and it was some time before they made out the
two white men and the girl escaping toward the pass.
Then they caught ponies and set out in pursuit, with
wild whoops.
The fugitives made their best time in the valley. When
they mounted the wide pass the Kickapoos began to gain.
And the black stallion grew unruly, too. Wapahoka was
sobbing and crying, and had lost all her masterfulness of
old time. The horse seemed to feel that his mistress had
changed.

Finally he ended by throwing both her and Wolfer Joe.
The girl struck her head on a stone and became uncon-
scious, while the horse ran back toward the coming Kicka-
poos. This was the final desertion of her old friends, but
fortuitously Wapahoka did not know of it at the time.
Cody caught her up in his arms and ran on, but she
hampered him, and even the lame wolfer, hobbling on,
distanced him. They came to a place where they could see
down into the gully where they had left Arthur Mirri-
vale with the bay horse and the saddle-mule.

"This is our chance; Joe; down with you!" roared
Cody.

The Kickapoos were near. They did not offer to shoot
the whites; they evidently hoped to capture them and re-
serve them for torture.

Wolfer Joe went over the brink of the bank in an
instant, and when he struck bottom staggered up and
turned to cover Cody's retreat with his rifle, to which he
had clung through thick and thin. With the girl in his
arms Buffalo Bill leaped down the gravel bank, and,
standing upright, slid swiftly, and safely, to the bottom of
the gorge.

Before he struck bottom the Indians appeared at the
summit of the bank, and Wolfer Joe opened fire. As an
echo to his first shot there was the clear sound of a bugle
along the pass. Then again it sounded, and the rattle of
accouterments and the thunder of shot feet came plainly
to their ears.

"Colonel Hashbrouck, for a farm!" yelled Cody, with
delight.
He was right. Up the pass swept the cavalry from
Fort Challis, and the infantry and a couple of mountain
howitzers were right behind them. The Kickapoos gave
back in confusion, and aside from a few snap shots there
was no firing.

The expedition sent out by the Department of the West
to round up the Kickapoos came in from two ends of the
valley and held the Kickapoos like a rat in a trap. After
a little foolish dumbshow on the part of the young bus-
ks, the old men met Colonel Hashbrouck and Cody, and the
red's gave in to superior force, if not to superior numbers.
In ten days they had gathered their chatelets and were on
the way south with Hashbrouck's column as escort.

Meanwhile, Wolfer Joe had guided Mirrivate and
Wapahoka out of the fuss. The girl, almost heart-
broken at first to learn that she was not of the people
whom she had led and loved all her life, gradually became
reconciled to her fate—the fate of being a white girl! And
Mirrivate, of course, had the most to do with bring-
ing about this change of heart and feeling.

At least, before Wolfer Joe got them to Fort Challis
 she was wearing the yellow diamond again, and it is
likely that, on state occasions, she wears it now—in Eng-
land.

For Mirrivate, having sold his claims for a handsome
sum, married her in time and took her home. They do
not know there that she was ever called the White Queen
of the Kickapoos, and she has learned ere this to prefer
white blood to red.

The government has had little trouble with the Kicka-
poos since those days. They have begun to die out very
rapidly, and many of them have sold their recent allot-
ments of land and gone to Mexico to join the fragment
of their tribe left there.

As for William F. Cody, Buffalo Bill, and his queer
pard, Wolfer Joe, they returned to their several purs-
tsuits until necessity or mischance should bring them into
similar activities in connection with their red neighbors.

THE END.

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